

TALES OF

Fear and Fantasy

R. CHETWYND-HAYES



TALES OF FEAR AND FANTASY

MANDERVILLE

The needle went into Paul's arm like a blunt knife being forced through teak. He screamed very loudly as the pump began to draw off his life essence. The splash-splash in the bucket was a terrifying sound. It seemed that they would never stop, but go on pumping, pumping until he was a lump of lard-white flesh, fit only for a hole in the ground. He lay limp on the bed, staring at the ceiling through a red roaring mist.

"They have taken too much" – the words ran across his brain like frightened carrion rats . . .

Available in Fontana by the same author

The Night Ghouls

Edited by R. Chetwynd-Hayes

The 8th Fontana Book of Great Ghost Stories

The 9th Fontana Book of Great Ghost Stories

The 10th Fontana Book of Great Ghost Stories

The 11th Fontana Book of Great Ghost Stories

The 12th Fontana Book of Great Ghost Stories

Cornish Tales of Terror

Gaslight Tales of Terror

Tales of Terror from Outer Space

Welsh Tales of Terror

Tales of Fear and Fantasy

R. CHETWYND-HAYES

Fontana/Collins

First published by Fontana Books 1977

© R. Chetwynd-Hayes 1977

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

CONDITIONS OF SALE

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

CONTENTS

Manderville	7
The Day of the Underdog	31
The Headless Footman of Hadleigh	49
The Cost of Dying	82
The Resurrectionist	100
The Sale of the Century	120
The Changeling	148

MANDERVILLE

Manderville is somewhere between Wickham and Tichfield in Hampshire and is approached—so far as it is approached at all—by means of a long lane, which runs from the Portsmouth-Fareham road to an almost uninhabited place called Tapnage. The explorer must proceed about three-quarters of a mile up the lane, pass between two houses which face each other from either side of the road, and there—on the right—is a large wood. That, so far as I can define, is the site of Manderville.

A place of tall trees which loom over the railway line to the right, where deep ruts mark the passage of woodcutters' trucks and rabbits play hide and seek under the deep undergrowth. Do not be deceived by the quiet which is only disturbed by birdsong, but on the other hand, do not walk the leaf-carpeted glades with dread in your heart, for your chance of stumbling into the main street of the lost village is very remote indeed.

The student of the macabre will find reference to Manderville in Conrad von Holstein's *Unnatural Enmities and Their Disposal*. I quote:

Manderville (or Mun de Vale) was a place accursed by God, where the inhabitants did follow the path of evil, and did call upon that which doth walk the moors in moonlight. And each and everyone did become foul demons that can never die and they hid their foulness under a fair mask.

Then the holy monks of Tichfield came with loud chanting and carrying crucifixes made from the wood of the rowan tree and surrounded the village. And although their pious prayers and incantations prevailed not against the mighty evil, the village was blotted out, and has not been seen by mortal man from that day to this.

Blotted out. The forest of Bere took back the fields, planted its trees where the houses once stood, and as the centuries spread their mists along the avenues of time, Manderville was forgotten by man.

But it still existed. Hidden from mortal sight in a labyrinth of shifting light-planes, composed of atoms that had been

speeded up into a mass of unseeable, unfeelable, unhearable vibrations, it was still a compact, living unit: part of a world controlled by a code of different natural laws.

Paul Wheatley went into the woods to die.

The reasons for his decision to depart from this world were manifold, but they could be summed up by one word. Disillusion. The dreams of his youth had been strangled by the rough hand of experience. When the time came for him to choose a wife, he had clothed her in the flame-coloured drapes of romance, and she had torn them to shreds with the cruel knife of waspish commonsense. In the field of commerce he had directed his envious gaze at the managerial throne, but had never been able even to find the steps that led up to that elevated position.

Then, during the course of one short week, disaster struck with a twin-pointed spear. Dismissal and desertion. In other words—at the age of forty-five—he was sacked from his job and his wife left him. Depression became monomania, oblivion preferable to pain, so he armed himself with sleeping pills and a bottle of water and went forth to meet the all-consuming darkness.

He was of course reverting to the natural instinct that comes to any wounded animal that wanders into some lonely place and lays down to die. Even now his romantic dream-demon had not entirely deserted him, for he visualized a comfortable falling to sleep, and a nice, clean decomposition under a blanket of brown, crisp leaves where he could rest undisturbed for all eternity.

He stumbled along the ruts, passed the rusting corpse of an abandoned car, then moved into the semi-gloom that lurked under the trees. He wandered for a long while looking for the place, the dying zone, the leaf-lined grove, and once he blundered into a clearing and saw a neat wooden structure that could have been a summerhouse or a shelter for woodsmen. This caused him some alarm for it suggested the possibility of residents—persons who did not just visit or work in the woods but actually lived there, even if for a limited time. He turned and ran, crashed his way through brambles, tripped over fallen branches and finally came to rest under a large tree.

This must be the place. A bed of dead leaves was waiting, the trees murmured their sympathy with myriad green tongues,

and there was no earthly reason to linger. Paul sat down, pulled his one large, one small bottle from his pocket and prepared for departure.

The pills slipped down his throat easily enough; three at a time, washed down by a mouthful of water, but when the small brown bottle, with its label which read: IT IS DANGEROUS TO EXCEED THE PRESCRIBED DOSE, was empty, his stomach felt as if it were stuffed with cotton-wool. For a while his senses were fully alert, and he suddenly seemed full of energy, as though his body was now, belatedly, announcing its willingness to carry him on into a brighter future. Then unconsciousness came upon him in a single thought-killing leap. At one moment he was—at the next—he was not. He lay on his bed of crisp, brown leaves, his sightless eyes looking up at the shimmering green canopy above; a casualty on a battlefield, a runner who had dropped out of the race.

Paul came up from the depths of a black sea, then crashed out into the blazing reality of mind-searing awareness. For a while he lay perfectly still and waited for memory to crawl back on to her tottering throne. He had swallowed twenty-four sleeping pills and should be dead—but he was not. His body was a dull mass that was without strength, but the aches and general stiffness told him it was still very much alive.

Then the brain permitted him to take note of the immediate surroundings. An open space. A green lush plain that stretched out to a range of rolling hills. To his left was a village, a jumble of cottages that crouched like sleeping bears on either side of a broad, cobbled street. But of more importance were the people who stood around him; a cluster of men and women in strange clothing. The men wore doublets and hose, the women long dresses cut low in front, a few off the shoulders, and loosely laced together under the breasts.

They all looked unsophisticated, clean, kindly of expression, and blessed with radiant health. In fact Paul had never seen such outer signs of well-being before. Both young and middle-aged—he could see no old person in the vicinity—had clear, almost transparent skins and sparkling eyes, and to the women this lent a fresh, natural beauty, that had nothing to do with regularity of features. A plump, matronly

woman bent over him and asked in a soft, compassionate voice: 'How do you feel, sir? Gave us quite a turn, finding you laid out like that.'

He managed to sit upright and instantly strong arms were around his shoulders assisting him to rise; faces that wore a benign expression smiled at him. The glimmer of white teeth, the flash of clear eyes, murmured words of sympathy – he was a man who has been on a long and fatiguing journey and has now come home. They led him into the village and he stared at the neat, snug cottages, and the thought could not be suppressed that this might indeed be heaven. He put the thought into words.

'Perhaps I died after all. But I never really believed in heaven.'

A tall, grey-haired man, with the face of a work-a-day St Peter laughed softly.

'Why, curse yer 'eart, sir, this ain't 'eaven. Least ways, not that you'd notice. This is Manderville. A tidy little village, all things being considered, but it 'as its fair share of tribulations. Now, sir, if you'd accept me 'ospitality, the wife and me would consider it a great 'onour. Ain't that so, Martha?'

The plump, matronly woman nodded and took a firm hold of Paul's left arm. 'That we would. Just say the word, sir, and I'll make up the bed in the spare room.'

'And 'er cooking,' the grey-haired man rubbed his well-padded stomach, 'be not 'alf bad. Put some meat on yer bones, which, if you'll pardon the liberty, are a bit lacking in that respect.'

'You are very kind,' Paul said, aware that he was now surrounded by a sea of anxious faces.

'Then – you'll accept?'

'Of course. But really, I don't know how to thank you.'

There was a groan of disappointment from the remainder of the group as Martha and her husband led Paul away to the first cottage on the left. The blue-painted door had a handle but no lock, and beyond lay a bright little passage that divided the house into two compact halves. Paul was ushered into a homely parlour: well padded chairs with chintz covers, a walnut cabinet with gleaming panels behind which a pink-rose pattern china tea-service was displayed in neat rows. Paul was pushed into a chair, had his feet lifted up on to a footstool, a cushion placed behind his head, and

his stammered thanks were brushed aside as pennies offered to a rich man.

'Please, sir, we are 'onoured and proud to serve you. That my 'ouse, out of all the others in the village, should be the one to give you substance, is a priv-i-lege, sir. Ain't that so, Martha?'

Martha nodded slowly. 'Yes, Jem, and we must give thanks to the Galloping One.'

Jem bowed his head three times, then stared reverently at the floor. 'Don't fret yerself, me darling, I will. Now you'd best be looking to the victuals, for the gentleman be starved. Then I expects 'e'd like to get 'is 'ead down, being poorly and all.'

Martha bustled away to the kitchen and Jem lowered himself into a chair where he sat bolt upright, staring at his guest with enraptured eyes. Paul had now recovered sufficiently to ask some pertinent questions.

'How did I get here? I remember – falling asleep – in some woods . . . And you say this place is called . . .'

'Manderville, sir. A tidy little village that 'as a nice set of people as you'd 'ope to meet. Nothing fancy about 'em, sir. Just straightforward, Satan-fearing folk, who work 'ard six days a week, and go to Black Mass on the seventh.'

Paul communed with his soul. His soul was not all that keen to consider the import of certain words – not then – and the vital question had still to be answered.

'But how did I get here?'

Jem scratched his head. 'That be a bit difficult to answer, sir, me being a simple fellow and not 'aving much in the way of ed-u-cation, if you follow me meaning. Let's say, you lay down in a patch of darkness, having first walked round a spot of sunlight. Simple, sir, ain't it?'

Paul did not really think it was simple at all, but he was very weak and hungry, and he supposed that they must have carried him here – there could not on reflection be any other explanation.

'Well, anyway, it was very nice of you all to make me feel so much at home. Do you treat all strangers like this?'

Jem smiled. It was a smile such as might adorn the face of a curate who has been asked if he would like to become a vicar. But at the same time it was a kindly smile, even a patronizing smile.

'A stranger 'ere, sir, is a gift that must be cherished and fed and bedded down and given all its little 'eart desires, sir. Because they're so rare, sir. As rare as a cussing parson, you might say. Why, damn yer liver, sir, if Martha and me 'adn't got in sharp like, there'd 'ave been a free for all as to who was to 'ave the 'onour – great 'onour – of feeding and bedding you down, sir.'

Paul said: 'Goodness gracious,' an expression that was entirely out of character, but it seemed to adequately sum up the situation. Then Martha bustled into the room, all smiles and glowing with hospitality.

'Victuals be on table. Please come before they grows cold.'

They went into the dining-room, and there indeed was a table covered with a white cloth and all but groaning under the weight of good things. A mighty H-bone of beef sat beside a dish of crisp roast potatoes; a plate of yellow-brown Yorkshire pudding was a close companion to a basin of brussels sprouts; while a jug of rich gravy, green peas, a loaf of home-baked bread, a crock of fresh butter and a gigantic jug of cider all combined to present a picture of domestic gluttony. Jem rubbed his hands, nodded with anticipatory satisfaction, then waved his guest to the nearest chair.

'Sit ye down, sir. You 'ave to agree my missus lays a good table. Feed the inner man and the outer will look after hisself.'

They were soon seated, Paul in the centre with his host and hostess at the head and bottom of the table; and then the plate filling began. A thick layer of sliced beef covered the plate from rim to rim; five roast potatoes, a pile of brussels sprouts, a wedge of sizzling Yorkshire pudding, a small mountain of green peas, all swimming in rich, brown gravy. A tankard of cider stood invitingly to one side.

'Get it all down,' Jem instructed, 'but leave a corner for a good hunk of the missus's apple pie.'

'Don't forget to say grace,' Martha reminded him, 'or the thanksgiving for the gentleman being delivered to us safe and sound.'

Jem shook his head in mock horror. 'What a woman! Do I ever forget to render thanks to 'IM that is below, or THAT which do gallop across the moors?'

And he closed his eyes, folded his hands and began to intone an impromptu grace in a loud and rather pompous voice.

'Dark One, who 'as given us eternal life and the joy of living together in strife and discord in our little com-mun-ity, we 'umbly thank you for the victuals you've seen fit to lay before us. May we eat 'ale and 'earty, so as to be strong to work 'ard in your un'oly service. B-men.'

Martha said: 'B-men. Ballelujah.'

After a pause, Jem again raised his voice.

'Galloping One, who do 'aunt the moors and cry out when the moon paints the 'eather with silver, accept our 'umble thanks for the stranger who now sits at my table. May 'is bones be covered with fat and his blood be enriched with goodness, so that in the fullness of time your badness be served. B-men.'

Then they both opened their eyes and beamed upon the more than slightly disconcerted Paul.

'I 'opes,' Jem said softly, 'you don't take exception to our simple, but 'eartfelt piousness, sir. We're common, country folk, without much book learning, but the old-time religion means a lot to our 'umble 'earts.'

Paul said: 'I quite understand,' even though he was really quite confused. Then dinner began in earnest. They both ate with considerable appetite, but never for one moment did their attention lag as to his needs.

'A slice more beef, sir? A couple more roast spuds? What about some more Yorkshire pud?'

'Jem, what be ye thinking of? The gentleman's tankard is empty.'

Twenty minutes later found Paul gorged and more than slightly tipsy and his feeble protests as each helping was shovelled on to his plate were disintegrating into despairing groans. The apple pie was all it should be: pastry that melted in the mouth, apple that was flavoured with cloves, thick cream that oiled the tongue—and now there was a glass of cider to wash it down.

Paul lost touch with consciousness mid way through the third helping.

He woke up in a bed that had surely been made in heaven.

A thick feather mattress in which his body had dug a deep, warm nest. An immense pillow that all but engulfed his head and a wonderful, pink eiderdown that was so light it seemed to float, but at the same time weighed him down with a cosy, protecting warmth. He blinked, became aware

of a slight headache and a twinge of indigestion that was more than compensated by his sense of well-being.

He had awakened to the birth of a cloudless day. The infant sun was sending its first feeble rays through the undraped window, highlighting the heavy, old-fashioned furniture and the wallpaper which had a pattern of tiny pink roses. This—in some inexplicable way—was comforting and added to his feeling of well-being. It was the kind of wallpaper that might be found in a rarely used cupboard, or be revealed when a brash, modern covering has been torn away. It made Paul think of his long-dead childhood years.

Gradually the village came to life. A cock crowed, a dog barked, a door was opened, and from the street below came the sound of the slow clip-clod of a passing horse. Then came calls, early morning greetings, the creaking rumble of a cart, the clank of milk churns—and suddenly the day was on its feet, beginning the uneventful journey to another sunset.

The sounds merged together and created a 'just right' atmosphere. There was no stress here, every simple task fitted into a time-hallowed background; here wives would never think of leaving their husbands; men could not be sacked from their jobs, because labour and employment were one.

Paul got out of bed and instantly became aware that he was attired in a long, flannel nightgown. On a chair was his suit which had been neatly cleaned and pressed. Also, his underclothes and shirt had been washed and ironed. Martha, with the primitive means at her disposal, must have worked into the small hours to perform this minor miracle. As he dressed his attention was drawn to an illuminated text which hung on the wall over his bed. It was made from a piece of varnished cardboard and the beautifully executed copper-plate script was comprised of red and blue letters. It proclaimed simply:

THE GALLOPER WANTS BLOOD.
ONLY BLOOD
AND NOTHING BUT BLOOD. B-MEN.

There was a little red star at the top and a blue one at the bottom. Apart from the wording, the text card could have adorned a bedroom in any religiously inclined household.

Paul allowed the words to go tripping over his brain. *The galloper wants blood.* So the village, and his host in particular,

belonged to some obscure religious sect. That surely was not unusual in these out-of-the-way places. The blood of course was symbolic. There might even be some kind of ritual where the blood of an animal was offered to this mythical Galloper. Then he remembered the grace before dinner, the following prayer of thanksgiving for his arrival, and earlier mention of a Black Mass . . . He shrugged. It was no business of his. Man's spiritual bents were legion. What was insane profanity to one was the sacred voice of truth to another.

After a timid tap on the door, Jem entered carrying a can of hot water in one hand and a large towel in the other. He performed an odd little bow, then smiled with kindly concern.

'I 'ope, sir, you slept well and 'ave recovered from your nasty turn.'

'I fear your cider . . .'

'Was too much for your run-down con-sti-tu-tion—say no more, sir. The missus was up-set, sir. Jem, she said, you've made the poor gentleman ill with your rotten old cider. But not to worry—I can see you're as lively as a cricket this morning. I've brought the 'ot water, sir. You'll find one of me old razors on the washing-stand. Breakfast will be ready when you are.'

With a final smile and another perfunctory bow he ambled from the room and closed the door, leaving Paul with an easy mind and a growing appetite.

Breakfast was no less plentiful than dinner, and by the time Paul had worked his way through an enormous bowl of porridge, grilled kidneys, mushrooms, liver and bacon, buttered toast and a pint of tea, he was forced to loosen his belt and give vent to a series of belches that demanded an instant apology.

'Don't mention it, sir,' Jem reassured him. 'It's a poor belly that never rejoices. Just let it rip, sir.'

'Well, now,' Paul decided he must reveal an intention that had been troubling him for some time, 'you have done me proud. Your hospitality is something I will remember all my life.'

'Not a word, sir,' Jem objected.

'But I really must not impose on you any longer. May I say however that you have restored my faith in human goodness, and I will never again resort to the measure—that I took.'

Both man and wife seemed overcome with emotion and

Martha wiped away a tear on the corner of her white apron.

'So,' Paul came to the crux of the matter, 'it remains for me to repeat my heartfelt thanks – and leave.'

Husband looked at wife, then both turned wide-open eyes towards the would-be deserter.

'Leave!' Jem was quite unable to contain his astonishment. 'Where would you go, sir?'

'Back the way I came. To Wickham. Then catch a bus to Fareham.'

They tossed the names back and forth and astonishment was replaced by awe.

'Wickham!'

'Fareham!'

'Bus . . . !'

Paul frowned, assuming he was being subjected to a brand of rural ridicule. 'Yes, we can't be far from the main Portsmouth road. Will you kindly direct me?'

Jem shook his head with apparent bewilderment. 'It's easy to see you are an edu-cated gentleman, sir. You're able to rattle off the names of all these places, what I've never 'eard of. I've lived 'ere man and boy for nigh on . . . Well, as long as maybe, but I've never 'eard tell of a Fare-ham or a Wick-ham. Not in these parts.'

'Then perhaps you will tell me the name of the nearest town or village.'

A look of profound distaste passed over both of the faces opposite, and Paul had the impression that he had committed a well-nigh unforgivable social crime.

'You wouldn't want to go – there, sir,' Jem whispered. 'Not to – Loughville. Being an edu-cated gentleman, you must know it can be spelt in a different way.'

'Ghoul . . . ville,' Martha breathed. 'A nasty, low place. A pack of ill-mannered ghouls.'

'With feeding 'abits that don't bear thinking about,' Jem added.

Paul came to the conclusion that they were simple, kindly, but mad. He said: 'Good God,' quite loudly.

'Begging yer pardon, sir,' Jem said reproachfully, 'we'd be pleased if you didn't use that expression in this 'ouse.'

'It's not nice,' Martha stated. 'Not nice at all.'

Paul got up with the intention of being polite but firm. Jem also rose from his chair and his round, honest face wore an expression of quiet determination.

'Well, don't worry. I'll find my way somehow.'

'You still intend to - leave, sir?'

Paul nodded. 'Yes, I really must. So . . .'

They both spoke together. 'We couldn't allow that, sir.'

'Not no 'ow,' Martha said. 'It wouldn't do if you were to go and get contaminated by them common ghouls.'

'Besides,' Jem said gently, 'aving been bless-cursed with the gift of a stranger, it would be downright ungrateful of us to let 'im go. If I make myself clear, sir.'

Paul could understand that there was little point in wasting further words, so he turned and walked quickly towards the door, satisfied that the dictates of common politeness had been observed, and he could now leave with an easy conscience. It is unfortunate that he did not look back, for he had scarcely placed one foot in the passage, when something very heavy struck him on the back of the head and he plunged down into a pit of roaring darkness.

Paul Wheatley came back to consciousness and was instantly aware of an aching head, darkness and the sound of chanting voices. He lay still for some little time and marshalled these unpleasant facts into an unavoidable conclusion. He was a prisoner.

He was lying on the bed, the window had been boarded up, and down in the main street the inhabitants of Mander-ville were rejoicing over his predicament. There could be no manner of doubt, for the chanted words were most distinct.

'Stranger 'e be shut in 'ouse,

Jem got 'im trapped like mouse.

Feed 'im up and make 'e fat,

So Galloper can lap 'is blood like cat.'

He told himself that they were all mad, but that was no consolation. He moved his right leg and a chain rattled. After paying full respect to his aching head, he sat up and stretched out an enquiring hand. There was a manacle round his right ankle, and to this was attached a chain which was padlocked to the bedpost. Undoubtedly this was hospitality carried to the extreme and a bit beyond. Paul fell back on the bed and tried to curb his fevered imagination.

Jem and Martha came bearing a lamp and a tray of food, and it was as though nothing out of the ordinary had happened; that the practice of knocking a guest over the head and chaining him to the bed was not worthy of discussion. Jem

placed the lamp on a bedside table and Martha laid the tray on Paul's lap, and they both beamed with solicitous goodwill.

'There we are, sir,' Jem said, 'a nice steak and kidney pud, with some new taters and a good 'elping of greens. Get that down yer, and there be nought to worry about. Be careful of yer chain, sir. It's a bit painful if it gets wrapped round yer ankle.'

'There's suet pudding to follow,' Martha said proudly. 'Nothing like suet pudding to keep the cold out.'

Paul had a ridiculous feeling it would be extremely ill-mannered of him to mention the little matter of bodily assault, but at the same time he could hardly let it pass without some comment.

'Look here—you didn't have to do—what you did.'

'Don't let the pudden grow cold,' Martha pleaded.

'And I demand you remove this chain.'

'A drop of pepper on yer spuds,' Jem suggested.

'If you let me go now, I promise that no further action will be taken. I'm not an unreasonable man, and quite understand that your—forcible conduct—was the result of a temporary aberration.'

'Don't 'e talk nice,' Martha exclaimed. 'Such jaw-cracking words.'

'Edu-cation is a great thing,' Jem remarked ponderously. 'The Galloper will be that pleased to lap from a wordy gent. Do you remember the last Gift?'

Martha set her mouth into a thin line of disapproval. 'Indeed I do. I'm glad that Sarah Jenkins had 'im and not us. The language was such as to try the patience of a devil. Coarse, 'e was. More fit company for a ghou! than a Satan-fearing woman.'

Jem chuckled. 'Kept shouting 'e did: "You're all bloody mad . . ."'

'Jem Broadwick, mind your tongue. What will the gentleman think of you? And 'im about to be lapped by the Galloper.'

Jem touched his forelock, an action that Paul had often read about, but had never seen before.

'Beg pardon, sir. I'd forgotten your delicate ears, sir. Now me and the missus will leave you to it. We'll bring up the suet pud so soon as yer ready. Just rattle yer chain.'

Paul ate his steak and kidney pudding, and really enjoyed the suet pudding and treacle which followed. This was sur-

prising as the circumstances of his confinement were not conducive to a good appetite, but the food was there, and eating helped to pass the time. In the meanwhile the chanting had ceased and had been replaced by a strange, oppressive silence that was not broken by so much as a footstep, dog bark, or even the wind. Paul realized that he had never experienced total silence before. When he moved his foot and the chain rattled, the sound was like a thunder-clap. There was an almost overwhelming urge to shout, scream, throw the empty plate against the wall—anything to fill the silent void which surrounded him.

Time passed—perhaps an hour—and presently he did call out, a frail, plaintive shout that was instantly swallowed by the hungry silence, and no one answered. He was alone in the house—perhaps in the village—and were it not for the chain, this would be an excellent opportunity for him to escape. He pulled, kicked the bedpost, hit the padlock with his fist—all to no avail. The sacrificial lamb was securely tethered and it could only bleat and try not to conjecture on its probable fate.

At last the silence was broken. At first a faraway pounding, like the rapid beating of a giant drum, then it quickly emerged into the sound of galloping hoofs. But the crashing impact, which became more pronounced as the sound drew nearer, was clearly being made by a creature of gigantic proportions. The shuddering thud-thud began to build up into a thundering roar that made windows and doors rattle and caused Paul to tremble on his bed. And all the normal sounds were suddenly released; dogs barked furiously, the wind sprang into howling, chimney-rumbling life, a nearby chicken community sent out a storm of protesting cackles and from somewhere just outside the village a chorus of voices chanted a fearful dirge.

‘The Galloper has come to Manderville,
Straight from his cave under Deadman’s Hill.
The Dark One gave him life in days of old,
Now must we feed him on blood that’s not cold.
The stranger’s a vat filled to the brim,
His body’s not fat, but his eyes are not dim.
He’s plenty to give and lots to spare,
The Galloper of the moors will enjoy fine fare.’

The chanting died away, the wind sank to a moaning sigh, and the galloping feet slowed down to a lumbering walk. Paul heard them enter the main street. Suddenly a lone voice rose up and rang out across the village, like that of a priest trying to appease some hungry, enraged god.

'Gallop, Brother Jem and Sister Martha have a gift which will make your belly rumble, your mouth water and fill your heart with fire. Accept our offering we beg of you, so that we may continue to be and exist in the spirit of discord and harmony that has been ours for centuries past. For we are Satan-fearing, simple folk, oh Galloper. So let thy great nose smell; let thy taste buds quiver, and permit us to bring forth the black bucket in which will bubble that which will be thine. B-men.'

A veritable fusillade of B-men's put the stamp of approval on this simple, impromptu prayer, although the reason for its recital was tugging at a chain, fired by a completely hopeless desire to get under the bed. The earth-shaking footsteps were approaching very slowly down the street, and with them came a sound that resembled a steam engine that is working under full pressure. It took some time for Paul to realize that this must be caused by air being inhaled and expelled by a pair of monstrous lungs.

The footsteps stopped just beyond the shuttered window, and were quickly succeeded by a terrifying sniffing; an extravagant snuffling that suggested a mammoth with a bad head cold. Little trails of yellow mist seeped round the shutters, and as they drifted across the room Paul was enveloped in an overwhelming stench and a limb-paralysing coldness. He screamed and the thing behind the window answered by an ear-shattering roar before moving away and breaking into the former pounding gallop. The sound ceased just beyond the confines of the village and Paul had a mental picture of something huge, monstrous, standing waiting with a great red tongue lolling down over its drooling jaws. The solitary voice was again raised in prayer.

'Have patience we beg of you, oh Galloper. The black bucket stands ready, all that is needful is prepared, and the vat – the thrice bless-cursed vat – is full to overflowing.'

They all broke into a run. Paul could hear them racing down the road, some shouting, a few singing, one was cursing with remarkable fluency – but clearly speed was considered to be of the utmost importance. Paul heard the front door

crash open, then many and heavy feet ascending the stairs. Jem's voice called out.

'Old yer 'orses, I've got the key, ain't I? Elder, 'ave you bucket and appar-ratus?'

A deep voice that Paul recognized as belonging to the composer of impromptu prayers said: 'Aye, that I 'ave. Get move on, 'e be that frisky tonight. The sooner 'is whistle be wetted the better.'

The door opened and they came in. All dressed in white robes, with hooded cowls that almost hid their faces, they might have been monks gathering round the bed of a sick layman—but they were not. A huge, gaunt-faced old man, with bristling grey eyebrows and hairs growing out of his nostrils, peered down at Paul, then rubbed his hands with sombre approval.

'Galloper 'as drunk from worse I wouldn't say 'e's what you might call bloated—but not bad.' He called back over one shoulder. 'The black bucket and the appar-ratus.'

The bucket, old, made of iron, was most certainly black, dented in several places, and was unnecessarily large. The 'appar-ratus' proved to be a length of rubber tubing, something that appeared to be a kind of primitive pump, and a needle of alarming size and bluntness. The Elder had large hands, but they were not particularly steady.

'Old 'im down, else 'ow am I going to get the needle in? 'E do thresh about, don't 'e? I don't want to thump 'im over the 'ead. That's it . . .'

Martha was seated on Paul's legs, two eager volunteers were pressing down on his shoulders, while Jem took a firm grip of his left arm. His voice was soothing—respectful.

'Don't fret yerself, sir. Just a drop to wet Galloper's whistle. Mind you—'e's got a mighty big whistle. Now, don't carry on so, sir. 'Twas only me 'umour. Won't be more than a couple of pints—more or less. And we'll feed you up afterwards.'

The needle went into his arm like a blunt knife being forced through teak, and he screamed very loudly when the pump began to draw off his life essence. The splash-splash in the black bucket was a terrifying sound, and it seemed that they would never stop—go on pumping—pumping, until he was a lump of lard-white flesh, fit only for a hole in the ground. Even in the midst of his grey, red-tinted terror, he realized how strange it was that he, who so recently had

tried to end his life, was now desperately afraid lest it be drained away. The pumping ceased and the Elder peered anxiously into the bucket. 'Think that be enough? Galloper 'as a rare old thirst and if 'e thinks 'e's not getting 'is whack, there's no telling what 'e'll do.'

Jem nodded gently and looked at his neighbours with an air of pious wisdom. 'Galloper ain't like us, friends. 'E understands and will forgive our caution. 'E knows the well isn't bottomless, and if overmuch is taken today, there'll be nought for tomorrow. All praise to Galloper.'

Everyone murmured 'B-men' as the Elder snatched up the bucket and led his flock from the room—not before time, if the ferocious roar from the end of the street was any criterion. Paul lay limp on the bed, staring up at the clean, white ceiling through a red roaring mist. 'They have taken too much,' the words ran across his mind like frightened carrion rats. 'I'm going to die because they took too much.' Then because he was so weak, he began to cry. To die once was a tragedy—to die twice was stupidity.

Paul Wheatley did not die, and in fact recovered very quickly from his loss. This afforded him a mixture of gratitude and amazement, and caused him to overcome his recently acquired repugnance for Jem and Martha and ask a simple question.

'Why?'

Jem scratched his head and Martha added another spoonful of strawberry jam to the rice pudding. 'That be a question, sir. Maybe it's the air. 'Tain't be the same since them monks did something 'orrible back in olden times. Death ain't welcome 'ere, sir, and well 'e knows it. Why, curse yer 'eart, sir, there ain't been a laying out in Manderville since old Amos fell in the threshing machine. Then 'e was in so many bits, the Black One 'imself couldn't 'ave put 'im back together again. Now, get that rice pud down yer, and later—just maybe—I'll take you out for a walk.'

'On a long chain,' Martha added.

Hope came out of hiding and raised a tremulous head. A walk! They were going to allow him out of the house—albeit on the end of a long chain—and surely somewhere along the route, even if it were only the length of the street, he would find an opportunity to escape. He had to. The prospect of an endless life spent in giving his all to a

galloping divinity could not—would not—be tolerated. He actually managed to conjure up a smile.

‘That would be nice,’ he said.

The sun was setting and transforming the window into a golden screen, when Martha entered with a bowl of hot water and proceeded to prepare him for the proposed outing.

‘Can’t ’ave the neighbours seeing you in a mess,’ she said, while scrubbing his face with a coarse flannel. ‘We won’t worry about the whiskers, a beard isn’t such a bad thing. Now, bend yer ’ead to one side, sir, so I can get to yer ears. That’s it. Now the other one. My—we’re looking better already. A good rub with a towel . . .’

‘Really, I can manage myself,’ Paul protested.

Martha took up a large comb and began to disentangle his matted hair. ‘Fudge and fiddlesticks, sir. You’ve been poorly and it’s only proper that someone do little jobs for you. That’s what men are for—to be made a fuss of. Now . . .’ She stood back and creased her face into a beam of complete satisfaction. ‘Don’t we look a picture? No one would believe that we ’ad given two and a half pints of the best. Shows what good food will do.’

Paul said he was very grateful, deciding that a certain amount of lip service was necessary if only to assure them of his complete submission. It was then that Jem entered carrying a large leather collar and a long chain. He stopped just inside the doorway and allowed himself to be overcome by joyful admiration.

‘Don’t ’e look grand! Don’t ’e just! I can’t wait to show ’im off to them Wilkins lot down the road. Never believe he’d given three pints.’

‘Was it three pints?’ Martha asked. ‘I thought it was only two and a half.’

‘We took a drop more for good measure. You know something? I think ’e’s good for four next time. Set up a record. You’d like to set up a record, wouldn’t you, sir?’

Paul gave them to understand that such an honour was in keeping with his innermost desires. Jem approached with the leather collar, which to Paul’s alarm was equipped with a large padlock.

‘Duck yer ’ead down, sir. That’s it. Comfy? Then we’ll be on our way. Just a trot round the ’ouses and maybe a little run across the moors. Back in about an hour, Martha.’

Martha flicked a speck of dust from the chain with a towel. 'Mutton broth and dumplings for supper,' she promised.

Like a trained bear with its keeper, Paul went forth into the main street of Manderville and its inhabitants were there, standing at gates, leaning against doorposts, to watch and admire. The Elder, tall, gaunt, overflowing with pious ill-intentions, stalked with majestic gait down the centre of the road and looked upon the chained stranger with gleaming eyes.

'So, Brother Jem, you are taking the Gift for an airing! 'Tis well. For does not the bad book say: "Treat well that which I send you, for a well-polished tap brings forth clean water." All praise to Galloper.'

Jem bowed his head and spoke in a hushed voice. 'Will you give us your unholy cursing, Elder?'

The Elder nodded and raised his right hand with the first two fingers parted in a back to front V sign. He then closed his eyes and spoke in a loud voice.

'Go forth along the dark path, flaunt not your sinfulness before men, frown not upon the good-doer, but rather try to turn him from his ways, and be assured of the Black One's benign malevolence for all eternity. B-men.'

The Elder opened his eyes and after smiling sweetly upon the enraptured audience, clenched his fist and punched Jem violently in the stomach. The big man grunted, then wiped away a solitary tear. 'Thank you, Elder,' he said in a choking voice, 'you're a wonderful, bad example to us all.'

The walk began in earnest. With slack chain clanking behind him, Paul ambled past a line of gently cursing Mandervillites, who sometimes broke off this pious exercise to slap each other's faces, kick the odd ankle, punch a jutting chin; one short person of clearly more than usual piousness was uprooting the sweet peas in a nearby front garden, much to its owner's joy.

At last the village limits were reached and Paul strode purposely out on to the moors, which rippled by the wind, painted gold by the dying sun, stretched out their wide arms to the distant hills. It was all so natural, so matter-of-fact, and Paul would have dismissed the village which lay behind him as a particularly unpleasant dream, had not Jem suddenly tightened the chain and jerked him back into the realms of unreality.

"Old it. No need to overdo it on the first day. A little stroll and then back to Martha's broth and dumplings."

Paul slackened his pace and eyed his guard with growing disquiet. He was certainly a formidable customer; a mass of bone and muscle, that would require hitting hard and possibly often with a heavy object before escape could be an even remote possibility. He looked around for a likely weapon, and was not encouraged by the absence of sizeable stick or stone that might have been utilized. Fortunately Jem drew his attention to the obvious.

"I 'ope, sir, that chain be not too 'eavy. I favours a bit of rope meself, but the Elder is fair gone on a length of chain."

The chain was made of thick, wrought-iron links, and would without doubt incapacitate the most muscle-bound person, if wielded with vigour and accuracy. Paul fell back until he was walking level with his host. Jem treated this manoeuvre as a friendly gesture.

"Now, sir, I calls that darn-right con-de-scending of you, to walk alongside me like this. It does me 'eart good, sir."

"Not at all," Paul murmured, gathering up a length of chain in his right hand.

"No, sir, I'm what you might call moved. And if I can ever do you an ill-turn and so push you down the ladder to glorious, eternal damnation—then you can rely on me. Darn me best breeches, if you can't."

And he began to sing. 'There's a burning rock waiting for me on that smokey shore,' when Paul hit him over the head with a doubled-up length of chain. The blow was delivered with all the frenzy of a man who has never hit anyone before, and lacks the assurance that he is capable of inflicting injury. Jem said: 'Oh, my devil,' and went down like a dynamited oak-tree. Then he turned over and while rubbing his head, looked up at Paul with becoming gratitude and admiration.

"You've become a convert, sir. You've been saved from eternal blissitude. May the Galloper be praised. Never thought you'd do me such an unexpected ill-turn."

He removed his hand from his head and was about to get up, when Paul struck again. This time the chain bounced on the thick skull, and Jem after murmuring: "E's pouring 'is badness upon me," temporarily lost contact with the world of awareness.

It took a lot more courage than Paul had hitherto realized he possessed, to search the person of the strenuously breathing

man, who was displaying marked signs of a not very distant recovery. To his horror Jem's pockets were empty. No money, no means of identification – no key. At last, terrified lest Jem wake up and repay ill-turn by well-intentioned mayhem, he gathered up his chain and ran.

He ran without thought, he ran without consideration; he just ran until his lungs croaked their protest and his heart thudded a dire warning. Then he slowed down to a rapid walk and dared to look back in the direction of Manderville. The village was hidden by a fold in the moors and he was lost in a sea of heather; stranded in the middle of a sunlit nightmare that must soon be blanketed by the cloak of night. But – and hope, encouraged by freedom, flared up into a feeble flame – surely if he were to keep walking, civilization, represented by motor roads, electric light, and interested policemen, must lie somewhere ahead. Life, liberty and the pursuit of urban misery, existed without any possible doubt beyond those glowering hills. True, they were a long way off, but now he had a goal to strive for, a reason for walking – even – heaven forbid – running, and would not stop until he was in a friendly lighted room, drinking hot tea, and pouring out his story into sympathetic, if somewhat incredulous ears.

Paul Wheatley walked through the orange haze cast by the setting sun; and all the while his ears strained for the sounds of pursuing footsteps, the shout of triumphant voices, but all he heard was the cry of the screech-owl that was expressing its sombre pleasure over the slowly expiring day. As he passed, small fauna that only come to real, pulsating, fear-tinted life during the hours of darkness peered up at him from their own private jungle of tangled summer-grass, then scampered away to give warning that a giant monster was loose on the moors.

The sun went down into a golden sea of flame and was shortly extinguished by the cold hands of night. Then the moon crept up from behind the hills and real terror came to Paul Wheatley. The sun had set to his immediate left – the moon was rising only a few degrees to the right. As the darkness deepened, the stars, like flickering candles on a Christmas tree, sprang into being, and he knew they were all wrong . . . wrong . . . wrong. Too big, in the wrong places, brighter, moving too fast; a diamond-studded canopy that belonged to another time-level – for all he knew, another planet system. Hope fled before the whining wind of despair,

and he sank down into the purple heather and cried.

The night reached maturity; the great moon, its mountains standing out like monstrous carbuncles, raced across the velvet sky, and presently there was almost total darkness, broken only by the ever-moving stars. It is possible that Paul's mind, unwilling to face the awful reality of the unreal, withdrew for a spell, and he had retreated into a thought-empty void that cannot be reached by any of the five senses. But, if so, he was wrenched back into the world of the rudely awakened, by a flickering, eye-searing light.

He was surrounded by a group of men, each one holding a flaming torch. Eyes had to be rubbed, lids blinked, mind cleared of all thought, then the first impressions carefully dissected before panic came howling across the brain.

Firstly, the men had not come from Manderville. Of that Paul was certain. The Mandervillites had—whatever their religious peculiarities—kindly, and above all—human faces. Those that now looked down at him were neither kindly nor particularly human. Long, white faces with pointed chins, and flanked by ears that might have been liver-coloured wings; watery eyes that seemed on the point of spilling down over the shrunken cheeks; black teeth that dimpled the slaver-ing lips. All appeared to have been hastily aroused from an unsavoury bed. Stained pyjamas, grimy nightgowns, tattered winding-sheets: one—a dandy with some pride in his appearance—had a dead lily thrust through a button-hole in his pyjama jacket. They gurgled, grunted, wheezed, bubbled, sniffed, rumbled—and one spoke.

'It be a stranger. Worms, maggots and all things nice—it be a warm-blooded stranger.'

Gurgles, rumbles, bubbles, wheezes and grunts emerged into words.

'Ah, it be a tender piece.'

'Tearable!'

'Ripable!'

'Eatable!'

'Should ripen a treat.'

Paul ventured to ask a question. 'Who are you?'

Something in soiled green pyjamas looked wonderingly at a thing in a stained winding-sheet. 'E wants know oo we be?'

Stained Winding-Sheet nodded with awful solemnity. 'Ah, that 'e do. Reckon 'e never 'eard of the ghouls of Loughville.'

A cold wind came whistling across the moors and ruffled

the matted hair, stirred the stained night-attire, and made Paul shiver. He suddenly felt homesick for Manderville. How wonderful it would be to wake up in his cosy bed, see Martha with a tray of wholesome steak and kidney pudding, and know . . . know . . . know . . . there were no such creatures as ghouls, who pilfered their rotting rags from broken coffins. He tried so hard to scream when They moved in; baring their teeth, dribbling, crooning, reaching out skeletal hands, that plucked at his clothing, patted his face and wriggled into his hair. Then – That – which wore the dead lily – the overseer, the foreman, the chief? – rumbled a warning.

‘Don’t ’arm ’im, lads. No tearing ’til ’e be dead. Furst ’e must be planted, then when ’e’s nice and ripe, dug up, for the great eating.’

‘There be chain for dragging ’e along,’ observed something in a flannel nightgown.

They pulled and tugged, passing the chain from hand to hand, and Paul was dragged to his feet and led away while emitting a half-strangled scream which rang across the moor as a terror-born cry for help. Dead-Lily urged his grisly crew onwards with encouraging grunts, interposed with the occasional jocular remark.

‘Pull ’earty, me graveyard nibblers. A well-run corpse makes an easy burying.’

He was being pulled up the lower slopes of the towering hills, and his shadow writhed and danced in the bright moonlight and seemed to flinch away when other black shapes came slithering back. He was walking in the silver-tinted land that lies buried in the dark loam of dead childhood. This was the dream that brings the child screaming up from its pillow; makes the mother come hurrying . . . hurrying . . . hurrying . . . into the dimly-lit room. All the four dimensions of the universe were jumbled together as he lurched up the hillside: the past, the present, the side-past, the side-present – but no future. That was being eaten up by the insatiable maw of *now*. Flaming torches intermingled with the glaring headlights of a car; the towering hills were a backcloth for a house high up on a grassy bank; the grotesque moon fought for supremacy with the rising sun. For a terrifyingly lucid moment Paul Wheatley knew all the secrets of time and space; understood why a face looked round the edge of an open door; how a dead man could smile across a crowded

room; comprehend why a foul-faced demon should walk down an empty road. Then all this knowledge fled like a mouse startled by an opening door and he was again a sweating carcass that housed a screaming soul.

The pounding hoofs came from far, far away.

At first Paul dismissed them as the furious beating of his heart, but the ghouls knew them for what they were. They stopped, dropped the chain and stared with glistening, watery eyes, towards the east—the graveyard of the sun—the cradle of the racing moon. Pound . . . pound . . . pound. The drumming vibrations drew swiftly nearer—the earth trembled, small shapes went scurrying through the heather, and something immense gradually took on corporate form and came galloping—galloping—galloping—towards the hills.

The ghouls gathered together into a gibbering, hand-wringing, head-nodding, shivering group, then as the drumming hoofs grew into a furious crescendo, turned and became a number of pale fluttering forms fleeing up the hillside. Presently all that Paul could see were wind-rocked, moon-whitened gorsebushes that had their roots in There, but waved their flowers in Here.

He turned to face the night-monster—the Galloper of the Moors. A few shreds of knowledge remained and he knew it for what it was. Manufactured from the excrement of the human mind, given life by superstition and black fear, shaped by the horror-dreams of long-dead ancestors—it was a Frankenstein creation that had always roamed the wild hinterlands that lay just beyond the frontiers of sanity. Twenty feet tall, scaled body, long tapering tail, a black face that was both beautiful and repellent, large, bright and so very intelligent eyes. Two well-shaped legs in the front, a pair of short, grotesquely thick ones in the rear—the hoofs were black and appeared to be highly polished. Just below the jutting breast were two long arms that terminated in beautiful white hands. It was the epitome of all that man most desired. Beauty, intelligence, speed and fear. And the greatest of these was fear. Paul could do no more than fall to his knees and worship.

All the inhabitants of Manderville came trooping up the hill, with Jem and Martha well to the front and the Elder not far behind. The chanting voices were not unpleasant, for they soothed, had the right and proper note of worshipful respect, and were completely free from fear. Martha and

Jem helped Paul to his feet, then looked up at Galloper.

'We would like to thank 'ee, Galloper,' Jem said with great sincerity, 'for saving the Gift from them common old ghouls. And I speak for all of us when I say you will not lose by this night's work. Martha and me will feed 'im up, so that in no time at all, blood will squirt out of 'is ears. You'll 'ave many a bucketful, that yer will. B-men.'

'I've got a nice 'ot-pot on the stove now,' Martha stated proudly. 'And there's a big jam sponge to follow.'

Galloper laid back his head and roared, and a host of grey shapes rose up from the heather and went floating out across the moor. The Elder apparently decided that his was the official voice and as such, must be heard. He approached Galloper and tilted his head back as far as it would go.

'Galloper, I 'opes that you will forgive Brother Jem for speaking out of turn, but 'e was right put out lest the Gift be tore and eaten by them ghouls. But I'm sure you'll be pleased to know the Gift is coming along nicely – it bashed Jem over the 'ead with its chain, which shows as proper a spirit of pious vin-dic-tiveness as anyone could 'ope for. That's all I got to say. B-men.'

Galloper seemed to think that this was highly satisfactory, for he roared once again and flattened the Elder into the ground by a single movement of his right front hoof. Everyone (Paul excepted) cheered very loudly at this act of divine approval, and Jem hugged Paul in his powerful arms and did a little dance of pure joy.

'I'm going to make you a promise, sir, and old Jem ain't one to make a promise lightly. When Galloper – praise be 'is name – 'as sort of slaked 'is thirst – then by jingo – I'll personally see to it 'e does the same to you. Bashes you into red-'ot glory, sir, by flattening you into strawberry jam. You've got my word, sir.'

'Ain't that nice?' Martha said, her face one big smile. 'Something to look forward to.'

It was then that a ghost appeared. A tall man in a new raincoat, with a black bag in his left hand, suddenly appeared immediately to Paul's front. He peered into his eyes, felt his forehead, then said quietly: 'Poor fellow, extensive brain damage. Often happens with these would-be suicides. Better put him in a strait-jacket.' He then disappeared and no one but Paul seemed to have noticed either his arrival or departure.

Of course the new acting Elder – a mean, suspicious fellow

—insisted that the Gift be securely tied by a stout rope, and it was rather like a crudely wrapped parcel that Paul was carried down the hill, away from the motionless Galloper and back along the way to Manderville. As he was jolted, nudged, patted, talked about by kindly if excited voices, the thought came unbidden into his brain, and expressed itself in low, but distinctly spoken words.

'If I only knew how—I could make all this disappear.'

But of course he never did.

Ever.

THE DAY OF THE UNDERDOG

Arthur Collins had always been oppressed.

But, he had never been a happy underdog, or even a resigned underdog, and forever dreamed of the day—a glorious tomorrow that kept receding into the future—when he would miraculously grow fangs and bite his oppressors.

For, to your true underdog, the world is populated by oppressors. During childhood they take the form of school-teachers, playground bullies and parents. On the battlefield of adolescence their number is reinforced by the majority of all adults over thirty. But it is not until middle age has wiped its clammy fingers across forehead and silvering temples, that the true oppressors stand out like snarling wolves on a treeless plain.

Arthur knew who his were—and they knew him. They were—in order of seniority—his managing director, his sales manager, and last, but by no stretch of imagination, least, his wife. Every one of these people, each in his or her individual way, contrived to and mostly succeeded in oppressing Arthur Collins.

Mr Rowe, the sales manager, conducted his oppressive campaign without the slightest pretence of respect, but the maximum of sarcasm.

'Made a muck-up again, Collins? Dropped the proverbial clanger, have we? Have to pull our socks up, won't we?' Then with a nasty, gloating leer, 'The old man wants to see you.'

Mr Carrington-Jones, for such was the managing director's

name, had, over the years, developed a very nice line in veiled threats, interposed with caustic humour, delivered in a low, husky voice.

'Been with us twenty-two years, aye, Collins? Can't see you making twenty-three. No place for slackers. Find yourself with a slack sack. Eh!' Then after taking a deep breath, rather like a rhinoceros that has made up its mind to charge, Mr Carrington-Jones raised his voice to a full-throated roar. 'Wake up, man. Get stuck-in - pull the stops out. Improve or remove.'

Ethel - the wife who had taken him to her bed and board some twenty years earlier - conducted her battle of domestic aggression with the time-honoured weapons of ridicule and rhetoric.

'Call yourself a man? Do you! The cat has more go in him than you have. I must have been mad when I married you. Stark, raving mad. When I think that Mark Manby was mine for the taking, and now he's top man in Gresham Supermarket. When are you going to have a rise? I suppose that Mr Carrington-Jones doesn't think you're worth any more, and I can't say I blame him, but it's a bit hard on me. I said, it's a bit hard on me . . .'

So, it can be quite clearly understood, that Arthur Collins was indeed sorely oppressed, and was prepared to accept help from any source, and use any weapons against his enemies that came to hand. It was perhaps providential that on the day when he had been subjected to a three-pronged attack - to wit: sales manager, managing director, and wife: he stumbled over an old woman who was quietly dying on the pavement.

She was nothing more than a bundle of skin and bones, wrapped in a cocoon of old rags. She was furthermore wrinkled, dirty, smelly, had no teeth worth mentioning, and insisted on clutching Arthur's ankle when he attempted to run for assistance. When he bent down an awful-looking claw of a hand came up to grab his shoulder. Her voice sounded like a worn-out foghorn on a windy night.

'Don't want nobody . . . get me upstairs . . . die in me own bed . . .'

Another claw crept out from beneath the rags and pointed to an open doorway, and Arthur, who had been trained from childhood to do what he was told, promptly slid an arm

under her shoulders and raised the barely living scarecrow to its feet. Together, two of the world's underdogs ascended three flights of dimly-lit stairs, and presently came up on to a really evil-looking landing, that had damp, crumbling walls on three sides and a cracked, dirt-grimed door on the fourth. Arthur's companion, who by now was groaning in a most blood-curdling fashion, somehow found strength to push a key into a tarnished Yale-lock, before collapsing over his supporting left arm. Arthur unlocked the door, pushed it open, then entered the room beyond. He had expected the worst and was not disappointed.

An unwholesome couch that apparently served as a bed lay under a dirt-fogged window. A sideboard on which was piled a collection of white bones, two skulls, a large leather-bound book and numerous bottles that contained blue or red powder appeared to prop up one wall. On a plastic clothes-line, which was slung from one wall to another, hung a gruesome array of mummified frogs, bats, rats, and to Arthur's disgust, snakes. A huge rusty cauldron sat on top of an ancient gas-stove, while bunches of dried herbs were piled on the plate-rack. For the rest, there was a sagging not-to-be-trusted armchair, a small wooden table, and a three-legged milking stool.

Arthur deposited his burden on to the bed, then tried to make up his mind as to what he should do next. His mind was wandering towards 999, police, ambulance and doctors, when the old woman opened her eyes and announced her return to consciousness by a loud groan. He approached the bed and stood looking down at the hideously wrinkled face, with the repugnance of the healthy in close proximity with the unsavoury sick. He made sympathetic noises.

'How do you feel? Would you like me to fetch a doctor?'

The lips twisted, the tongue flickered and the voice croaked: 'Don't want no doctor. Put me in 'ospital. You look after me.'

Arthur started like a rabbit that has stumbled in on a stoats' convention.

'Really, I'm afraid that would not be at all possible.'

'Only two days,' the old woman pleaded. 'Make it worth yer while. When I'm gone . . . treasure beyond price. No one to leave it to . . .'

Now, it is a well-known fact that there is no such animal as a rich underdog. Arthur could remember hearing stories

of dirty, presumably poverty-stricken old women who had a fortune concealed under the floorboards or mattress. As any well-informed person is aware, every large city simply teems with these rag-clad misers, who are waiting to enrich the kindly Samaritan. When the old woman moved, Arthur would have sworn that he heard the sound of rustling bank-notes.

'Anything I can do . . .'

'A drop of the 'ard stuff to wet me lips, and make sure me bones are burned. I wouldn't like to be up and about after the earth has been shovelled in. Me grandmother started wandering, and they 'ad to stake 'er down before she'd rest. You'll find a bottle in the oven.'

Arthur opened the gas-oven door and peered hopefully into the grease-coated interior. There was no pile of hoarded bank-notes, only a half-filled bottle of whisky and a chipped teacup. The croaking voice was tinted by an impatient undertone.

'Don't 'ang about. I wants me nourishment. Won't do for me to go down into the dark lands, before I've made me will.'

Arthur hastily grabbed the bottle and teacup and all but ran back to the bed. He half filled the cup with whisky, then looked enquiringly at the patient, who shook her head.

'Never allowed water to touch me lips or skin. Against nature, that's what it is. Let's get at it.'

The whisky did seem to do her a lot of good. She licked her one remaining tooth, smacked her black lips, then cackled her enjoyment.

'That's the stuff to warm the stummick. So long as I gets me ration regular like, I'll last for days.'

Arthur was struck by a sudden thought, but found it somewhat embarrassing to put into words.

'I really think you should see a doctor . . .'

'Don't want no doctor.'

'But . . . there is the little matter of a certificate . . . the death certificate.'

The old woman examined the whisky bottle with some anxiety, then turned her glittering little eyes in Arthur's direction.

'Better bring another bottle tomorrow. Death certificate, aye? Hadn't thought of that.'

'I fear there will be an inquest, unless a doctor has been in attendance . . .'

The old woman gave a squeal of terror and shook her head violently. 'Mustn't cut me open. Never know what they might find. Must be burned in one piece. Get a doctor. There's one round the corner in Angel Street.'

The doctor proved to be young, somewhat cynical, and the possessor of a black sense of humour. He felt the old woman's pulse, listened to her heartbeat, then pushed Arthur out on to the landing.

'You a relative?'

'No. A sort of . . . friend.'

'Go on! Well, your friend is on her way out. In fact I can't imagine how she manages to hang on. Good grief, how old is she?'

'I don't know. Eighty?'

'I'd say more like a hundred and eighty. She has a pulse beat of a hundred and thirty, and her liver and kidneys must have packed it in ages ago. I can get her into hospital if you like, although I doubt if it is worth the bother.'

'She doesn't want to go to hospital.'

The doctor looked round the landing with every indication of marked disgust before picking up his bag.

'Give me a call when she stops breathing and I'll come round and sign the certificate. By the way, what does she do with all that stuff in there? All those bones and skulls?'

'I don't know. Perhaps she collects them. You know, like stamps or bus tickets.'

The doctor ran down the first flight of stairs, then paused and stood looking up at Arthur.

'Mind she doesn't put a dying curse on you. She looks as if she was quite capable.'

Arthur brought a form from a stationer's, and uncomfortably aware of her sardonic smirk, sat down by the old woman's bedside, to make out her last will and testament. With surprising clarity, she dictated her wishes and kept snatching the document from Arthur's hand, so as to make sure he had written every word correctly. He read the completed will aloud.

'I, Tabitha Holbrook, being of sound mind, do hereby revoke all Wills heretofore made by me at any time and declare this to be my last Will and Testament.

'I give all my estate and effects and everything that I can give or dispose to Arthur George Collins of 24 Rampling Road, London, E.C.4,

'I hope and trust that he will live to enjoy all that I leave him, in particular the Great Treasure.

Signed. Tabitha Holbrook.'

Next day the young doctor witnessed the boldly written signature, and irritated Arthur by unnecessarily raised eyebrows and knowing smile. But finally the document that was to transform the underdog into the well-fleshed wolf was deposited in Arthur's bank, and he took a week off from work, so as to be on hand when his bread was returned unto him – hopefully – a hundredfold.

The old woman died three days later.

Needless to say, Arthur Collins did not wait for the will to be proved; for letters of administration, or any nonsense of that kind. Barely had the corpse been sent on its way to the local mortuary, than he was ripping the noisome mattress to pieces with a carving-knife, determined to lose no time in getting his hands on the 'great treasure'. His harvest consisted of a collection of rusty springs, a pile of flock and an army of blood-seeking insects that invaded his person with promptitude and tenacity. But no treasure.

He flung bones on to the floor, peered into skulls, wrecked the sideboard, prised up floorboards, tore what paper remained from the walls, opened the leather-bound book and shook it violently – but not so much as a bent sixpence to reward his efforts. The dream of saluting Mr Carrington-Jones with two raised fingers melted like snow in sunlight. The underdog collapsed under a burden of bitter disappointment and became a doormat.

Arthur went out and for the first time in his life, got drunk.

Mrs Collins – a lady with a long neck and a short temper – greeted Arthur on his return home from the office with a scowl and a statement.

'A vanman delivered a load of bones and rubbish this afternoon.'

Arthur hung his hat on the hall-stand and looked upon that which he liked to describe in his more jocular moments, as his worse-half, with some astonishment. Three months had passed since the remains of Tabitha Holbrook had been surrendered to the flames, and he had almost forgotten the entire unfortunate proceedings.

'Old bones . . . rubbish!'

'Yes.' His lady sniffed and watched her husband with grave suspicion. 'Bones, skulls and lots of other things that don't bear talking about. The vanman was most insolent and wouldn't take them away. So I told him to pile the lot in the garage. Good job we can't afford a car. Never get it in there.'

Arthur hurried to the garage, and there, sure enough, was a degutted mattress, a smashed sideboard, a chair, a milk-stool, an untidy pile of bones, two skulls, assorted dried toads, bats, rats, snakes, to say nothing of glass jars of coloured powder. And of course, there was the leather-bound book. It lay half buried in the gaping entrails of the mattress. Arthur said, 'Oh, my God,' and wondered how his inheritance was going to be explained to a wife who never believed what she was told.

He prodded a skull and it rolled off the ruined sideboard and went clattering across the floor. He fingered a thigh-bone, then dropped it with a cry of disgust. Finally he picked up the leather-bound book and turned back the front cover. The title page stared up at him and sent little thought-storms thundering across his brain.

YE GRATE TREASURE BOOK OF SPELLES

Both Big and Smalle.

So this was the old woman's great treasure. A book of spells. Arthur flicked the pages over and despite his scepticism began to experience a growing sense of excitement. Spell one was headed TO SOUR MILK ON A COLDE DAY AND DRIE UP A COWE SO SHE GIVETH NO MOOR. This act of unkindness was apparently accomplished by mixing: *One measure of drie batt with two measures of extrac of drie sirpent, stirr wel til ye powder is greene and mix with ye blud of ratt . . .*

Arthur shuddered and turned the page over, only to find himself reading YE WAYES AND MEENS OF CAUSING THY NAYBOUR TO BREAKE OUT IN SPOTS. But it was not until he reached spell twenty-two, that his interest was really aroused. He read it from beginning to end.

YE SHORE WAYE OF QUIETING A SCOLDING WIFE

Take one finger-length of her hare; ye clippings of her nails. Plaice in a vesel, then add sirpent powder, toad-eye and stirr with finger-bone. Take ye micture out into ye churchyard and burie in old grave when moon is behind steepel and chant ye spelle.

*Curst wife who can but scold,
Who du not wat she been told.*

Now I give yu unpaid bill.

May thy tunge bee er still.

Arthur closed the book and returned – thoughtfully – to the house.

There could be no doubt, Ethel Collins was the prime candidate for the year's most scolding wife. Even while she dished up the baked beans and charred sausages, she poured out a torrent of abuse, that ably expressed her opinion of Arthur's past crimes, his present misdemeanours and his future prospects.

'Me mother always warned me. He's useless, she said. Dead useless and bone idle . . . no go . . . them were her very words . . . and how true . . . as I stand here . . . how true. You're worse now . . . mad . . . that's what you are . . . filling the garage with bones and skulls and goodness knows what . . . other men don't fill their garages with bones . . . finish up in a mad-house, that's what you'll do . . . did you hear what I said? Finish up in a mad-house . . . but don't think I'm coming with you . . .'

Arthur came to a decision.

Obtaining a finger-length of Ethel's hair presented no great problem. He cut it off with a pair of kitchen-scissors while she was asleep. Finger-nail clippings was another matter.

'What do you mean, isn't it about time I cut me nails?'

Arthur tore his eyes away from the large, blunt-fingered hand and looked longingly at the nail-scissors that he had thoughtfully laid on the table.

'You have such pretty hands and it would be a pity it they were spoilt by long nails.'

'You trying to be funny? Eh! Taking the mickey, are you?'

'Oh, no. But I thought . . .'

'Don't. Thinking is not your strong point. You aren't equipped for it.'

But that night when Arthur went into the bathroom, he found nail-clippings all over the wash-basin, and he was able to wrap them carefully in the face-flannel. The other ingredients he – after many stomach-turning experiments – obtained from his inheritance, and the end result was stirred together by what he hoped was a finger-bone in one of Ethel's pudding-basins.

At two o'clock the following morning, he carried his basin of spell-binding mixture to St James's churchyard, and there

solemnly buried it in a small hole which he carved out with a trowel on a suitably old grave. Then after looking round to ensure that he was not being watched, he chanted the memorized verse to the moon that was obligingly peering at him from behind the church steeple.

Later, as he crept upstairs to the matrimonial bedroom, he told himself what a fool he was to believe for one moment that a spell in an old book could possibly stop his wife from talking. Once back in the double bed, Ethel seemed to reinforce these doubts, for she muttered unendingly in her sleep, and once shouted: 'I should have married Harry Potter,' a regret that Arthur unreservedly shared.

The spell had not worked by breakfast time. Arthur was given a running commentary on his inability to do a simple domestic repair, paint the house front, cut the lawn ('it's a disgrace, I don't know what the neighbours think'), save enough money to buy a car ('not that you'd have the gump-tion to drive it'), and fit a new washer to the leaking tap. If he remained silent and allowed the storm to pass over him, he was told to stop sulking; when he said, 'Yes, dear' or, 'No, dear,' he was instructed not to answer back.

Without interrupting her tirade, Ethel collected the used plates and retired to the kitchen, where she raised her voice so that Arthur should not miss a single word. She had just reached the part he knew so well; the evergreen statement, which ran: 'The worst day's work that I ever did, was when I . . .', when she suddenly stopped. Arthur waited for the word 'married', but it never came. Instead, after a hopeful, but very anxious pause, a strange sound emerged from beyond the kitchen door. It was reminiscent of a pig that has found a brick in its feeding trough. This was explained when Ethel staggered out of the kitchen, clutching her throat with one hand, while she pointed to her mouth with the other. She repeated the sound: 'Ugh . . . ugh . . .'

Realization dawned and dispelled the dark clouds of doubt. Assisted by a few basic ingredients, Arthur Collins had performed one of the great miracles of modern times. Even now he could scarcely believe.

'Do you mean . . . you can't talk!'

Ethel again pointed to her mouth and repeated the 'Ugh . . . ugh' sound several times. Arthur did a little dance and expressed his proper gratitude by raising his eyes ceiling-ward, then remembering that such favours do not usually

come from that direction, stared earnestly at the floor instead. 'Thank you . . . thank you. She can't talk. Please may it be permanent.'

Ethel's distress did not appear to be alleviated by this demonstration of thanksgiving, for she raised her guttural cries to a higher level and pounded the breakfast table with her clenched fists. It was then that Arthur realized that he had—to say the least—been guilty of committing an act of discourtesy, and did his very best to apologize. It was unfortunate that his best was not very convincing, for his face would persist in grinning, and the consoling words were interposed by an occasional gurgling chuckle.

'I say—I am sorry. It must be awful for you . . . Ye gods, you can't talk . . . What on earth will you do now?'

Ethel could not talk, but she could still communicate, for after running to a small bureau, she grabbed a sheet of paper and a ball-point pen, and scribbled furiously. Arthur read the message.

'Get doctor, you heartless, ungrateful, unnatural bastard.'

He shook his head in pretended sadness over the example of rhetoric prose, but decided to ignore the uncalled-for abuse.

'I do think it would be better if I took you straight to hospital. I mean to say, your case must be rather unique, and I should imagine—Oh, boy—they'll want to keep you in for observation.'

Despite his wife's protesting grunts, he rang for a taxi, then thoughtfully packed an overnight bag, to which he added—with cheerful optimism—a copy of *War and Peace*.

Ethel's predicament caused a great deal of interest at the local hospital. Several doctors took turns in peering down her throat; others felt it with exploring fingers, and one middle-aged surgeon took the apparently sorrowing husband to one side.

'You say she was *suddenly* struck dumb?'

Arthur nodded. 'In mid-sentence.'

The surgeon looked from left to right, then asked in a low, but anxious whisper: 'If I got *my* wife to pay your good lady a visit—you don't suppose it might be catching?'

'You're the doctor,' Arthur pointed out.

The surgeon looked very thoughtful indeed, then asked softly: 'Do you wish your wife admitted as a private patient or . . .?'

'National Health. Absolutely.'

The surgeon permitted himself a pale smile.

'We have a little industrial trouble. Nothing serious, but the cooking . . .'

Arthur could see in which direction the ball was travelling and quickly returned it to the surgeon's court.

'My wife is a small eater. I leave her in your capable hands.'

They gravely shook hands.

Mr Rowe was particularly offensive the following morning, and the soul of Arthur Collins positively trembled for joy. A reformed, courteous Mr Rowe would have been a great disappointment. The sales manager stalked up to Arthur's desk with the soft-footed approach of a man-eating tiger.

'We haven't seen much of you lately, Mr Collins. Wondered if you had decided to make an early retirement.'

'Sickness,' Arthur replied with calm simplicity.

The sales manager assumed an expression of grave concern.

'Sickness! Nothing serious I hope. Nothing to blunt that knife-sharp brain, and disrupt your well-known efficiency. Because if that happened,' Mr Rowe thumbed through a pile of papers he was carrying, 'you might make another balls-up. And we wouldn't want that, would we?'

'Anything wrong?' Arthur enquired, with breathtaking unconcern.

Mr Rowe smiled bitterly. 'Good heavens no. Of course, this contract for Danby and McCloud - there are one or two little errors - wrong date, wrong price - rather misleading wording - which does rather give the impression that we have to pay them, instead of the other way round. But I wouldn't say there was actually anything wrong. Just the usual muck-up we have come to expect from our senior clerk.'

Arthur inclined his head. 'Thank you.'

'Senior in age - not rank.'

'If,' Arthur said slowly, as though explaining a not very difficult problem to a backward child, 'there was not a loud-mouthed ignoramus constantly shouting down the back of my neck, I would be less inclined to make mistakes. Kindly leave the contract with me and I will correct it in due course.'

One might have supposed that Mr Rowe was a film mogul whose 'yes' man had suddenly said 'no'. His florid face assumed an even deeper shade of red, and his voice rose to a minor shout.

'Saucy, are we? Got a bit above ourselves—what? Well, let me tell you something. Something you won't like. Are you listening? When Mr Carrington-Jones comes back to-morrow, I'm going to have a few words with him. And when I have—we won't see your arse for dust.'

'We will see,' Arthur commented.

Mr Rowe nodded violently. 'Indeed we will. Oh, yes, when I've said what I'm going to say, we'll see all right. Make no mistake about that.'

Arthur grinned in a most irritating fashion and had the cool effrontery to light a cigarette and blow smoke into his superior's face.

During the course of the day he had occasion to see Mr Rowe's eyes watching him from behind the partly open office door. Once he waved and the resulting slam was like a clap of thunder on a clear night.

Spell thirty-one was more than enough to take care of Mr Rowe. Arthur, free now from any wifely interference, read the instructions carefully.

CAUSING PAINE IN YE GUTTS FOR ANY THAT DU SPEAKE

ILLE AGAINST YEW

Take ye likeness of him who is to bee afflicted and boor hol in that that du depict his stumach and fill same with blud from forefinger of left hand. Then burn likeness in fire and chant ye spelle.

*Wen yew speake ille of me,
Belly full of paine bee,
Screem, yell, clutch gutt,
From now on keep mouth shut.*

Mr Rowe's likeness was close to hand. A group photograph, taken at the last office Christmas party, had the sales manager standing well to the foreground, with a glass in one hand and a toy trumpet in the other. Arthur derived great satisfaction from driving one of Ethel's knitting needles into the likeness of Mr Rowe's protruding stomach, which more than compensated for the minor discomfort of cutting his forefinger with a dessert knife and filling the small hole with a modicum of blood. He then burned the photograph in the kitchen boiler, while loudly chanting the required spell, and was not in the least alarmed when a blue ball of fire shot up to the ceiling, where it exploded with a loud bang. Instead, he went early to bed and dreamed that Ethel was chasing

Mr Rowe with a large knitting-needle.

Arthur sat at his desk and waited for retribution to strike down his second oppressor. Mr Rowe entered his small office at nine-thirty. Mr Carrington-Jones, in keeping with his august status, drifted into his large one at eleven o'clock. Ten minutes later Mr Rowe came out into the main office, gave Arthur one ominous glare, then tapped on the great man's door. A loud grunt was correctly translated as permission to enter and the sales manager went in unto the presence, with a smile on his face and a gleam in his eye. Arthur looked at his wrist-watch and counted fifteen seconds before he received confirmation that spell thirty-one was living up to its promise and a little to spare.

The loud groan became a scream, which in turn rose to an ear-piercing shriek. Mr Rowe's 'paine in ye gutt' must have been one of extreme severity, for not only was the sales manager vocally expressing his agony, but, judging by the accompanying sounds, jumping up and down as well. Presently Mr Carrington-Jones opened the door and called for assistance.

'Will someone . . .' he turned his head as a fresh outburst from the invisible Mr Rowe made it impossible for his voice to be heard. 'For heaven's sake, shut up, man. It can't be as bad as all that.' He again addressed the office staff. 'Will someone fetch a doctor—Mr Rowe appears to be having a nasty turn.'

For a little while Arthur was power drunk. He watched Mr Rowe, his eyes bulging, his mouth gaping, brought forth from the managerial office; saw him laid out on the floor, while Miss Hammond from accounts, who was the proud possessor of a first-aid certificate, applied a cold compress to his forehead, and poured hot, sweet tea down his throat. A doctor never did arrive—no one knew where to find one—but after a while the patient was sufficiently recovered to go home in a taxi. The general consensus of opinion was, that Mr Rowe had been drinking cold beer on a hot stomach, a failing to which, apparently, the sales manager was much addicted.

Next morning he was back, none the worse for his mysterious attack, which he explained to an interested audience was the result of wind round the kidneys. But his doctor had given him some blue tablets, which had cleared up the matter

in no time, and would without doubt prevent any re-occurrence. To Arthur's great annoyance he was ignored for the entire morning, and was forced to make a face at his immediate superior before he could obtain a resumption of his retributive action. Mr Rowe smiled – a nasty little sadistic smirk – and said: 'Oh, I had almost forgotten,' before hurrying to the font of managerial justice.

Twenty minutes later Arthur had the intense satisfaction of seeing his writhing, screaming oppressor carried away on a stretcher. Mr Rowe was about to join Ethel in the hospital for observation.

The crushing of Mr Carrington-Jones needed much thought.

As managing director and chairman of several large companies, he clearly could not be dismissed with a mere '*paine in ye gutt*', or as for that a '*ye shore waye of quieting a scolding employer*', beneficial as these treatments might be. Arthur pored over *Ye Grate Book of Spelles*, and at last decided the great man was worthy of spell fifty-four.

He had to admit that it was an unsettling spell – from everyone's point of view. Several times he was on the verge of discarding it for something more simple, as for example FOR MAKING UNSEEMLY GROUTHS ON YE FACE, which sounded rather jolly. There again MAKING THE MARSTER PASS CONSTANT AND VIOLENT WIND WEN IN POLITE COMPANEE had much to commend it. But these were but schoolboy japes when compared with the awesome spell fifty-four. The heading was very impressive.

FOR YE RAISING OF BLACK AND MOST MALICSUS DAMON
WICH WILL GO IN UNTO HIM HOO YU HATETH AND WILL
TAKE HIS SOLE INTO HELL

The prospect of Mr Carrington-Jones being carried off to hell by a black and malicious demon was most pleasing. Arthur wasted no time in gathering together the list of ingredients which, due possibly to the necessary potency of the spell, was both lengthy and rather messy.

There was little trouble in obtaining *intrals of ye chicken*, but *iye-balls of ye catt* presented untold difficulties. Fortunately for Arthur a black tom from down the road came off second best after an encounter with a passing lorry and he was able to secure the corpse before the bereft owner was aware of his loss. *Blud from a goodlie man*, was provided by the vicar, who, when he called to console the parishioner with

a speechless wife, was prevailed upon to open a tin of baked beans. *Hair from ye chest of a fresh corpse*, had Arthur gnawing his nails for three days, and would never have been obtained, had not old Mr Kempton from Number 24 suddenly decided that this was a convenient time to be gathered to his forefathers. When Arthur was invited to pay his respects, he went armed with a pair of scissors and a paper bag.

The remainder of the ingredients came from stock. Arthur – assisted by a hammer and mallet – ground a thigh-bone to powder, atomized rat-legs with a cheese-grater, minced bats, chopped snakes, then dumped the lot into the iron cauldron, added water, and simmered the evil-smelling stew for three hours on a low gas. Then he sat on the floor, crossed his legs and chanted the incantation.

*Cum up from helle, oh damon black,
And du my bidding without alack.
Carry him that I du name,
Down to torment and to flame.
Burne his vitals, eat his heart,
And rip his very sole apart.*

The stew seethed, bubbled and finally gave forth a plume of black smoke that drifted across the kitchen and made Arthur cough. Suddenly a strange cold wind sprang up in the vicinity of the sink – came up from the plug-hole, so far as a startled Arthur could ascertain – and went howling across the room. Then there was a loud bang, a flash of light – and something very nasty was standing by the gas-stove.

Black, pulsating, roughly human-shaped, with a horrible little white face that was unpleasantly familiar. The voice that sounded as if it were coming from a far distant and empty hall, had a cackling quality that once heard, could never be forgotten. It said: 'We meet again, ducky.'

Arthur gasped and exclaimed: 'No, it can't be!' but without much conviction, for when he came to think about it, this was the natural conclusion. The voice, not to mention the face, which was twisted up into a mocking grin, soon erased any lingering doubt.

'Oh, yes. Old Tabby is back. Very kind of you to call me up – but I thought you would. Never be able to resist me old Treasure Book.'

It was then that he realized that all the fun and sense of power had gone. He was like a man who has been allowed

to purchase a number of goods at a bargain price, and must now give his all for the special item. He would have cancelled his contract if that had been at all possible, but the shade of Tabitha Holbrook was waiting.

'What little job would you like me to do, deary? Who's to be done dirt?'

'I don't want to trouble you,' Arthur protested. 'Perhaps it wasn't such a good idea. After all, Mr Carrington-Jones can't help being an old misery . . .'

The voice took on a threatening tone and the white face gleamed like a new tombstone in moonlight.

'Come off it, ducky. Once we're called up, we wants our meat, and if one joint isn't to hand - well, there's usually another one nearby. Get the message? So let's have no more argy-bargy - take me to 'im. NOW.'

'But it's late and the office will be empty . . .'

'But *he* is bound to be there,' the voice insisted. 'The top brass always work overtime. Don't they?'

Mr Carrington-Jones certainly did, and had loudly proclaimed the fact to the staff on numerous occasions. He made a fetish of working late, and had often expressed an ill-founded hope that his employees would follow his example.

The black shape glided forward and Arthur retreated.

'Let's be on our way, deary,' the voice said. 'I rather fancy a nice fat managing director. Set me up with the Black One. Don't worry - no one will see me - except you and 'im - when the time comes.'

Arthur Collins went forth and his demon went with him.

He boarded a bus and the shape became a black ball that nestled down on the seat beside him. On the tube train it was a dark shadow that wrapped itself round homeward-bound passengers, and seemed to grow denser when shoulders twitched and faces looked anxiously from left to right.

When Arthur entered the office building, he was followed by a black shadow-snake that writhed and coiled its long length over tiled floor and up stone stairs - for the lifts were no longer working - and went undulating along the carpeted corridors. Night cleaners looked up as the little man with the frightened face went by, but not one glanced down and saw the twisting black streak.

The main office was still lit, but deserted. Cover-shrouded typewriters lurked on neat desks; files, ledgers, stacks of papers, all made Arthur think of an abandoned world. The

door leading to the managing director's office was a white square of frosted light, on which was inscribed in thick black letters H. CARRINGTON-JONES. A name to be respected, hated, even feared. It looked well on cheques and letter-headings, and when written with a felt-pen made an awesome signature. Now, Arthur Collins, a miserable little middle-aged clerk whom no one respected, hated or feared, was going to destroy the bearer of that distinguished name. Burn the sanity from his mind, tear the soul from his body, and transform a big flesh and blood machine into an atom of quivering consciousness. He would have given much for the gift of free will, but terror stood in front of his desk and pointed a shadow arm towards the lighted door.

'I'm going in now, deary. When you hear 'im shriek, you'll know we're on our way. I hope you've got a strong stomach, for what will be left, won't be pretty. Not pretty at all.'

She - It - glided between desks and approached the lighted door. It shimmered - became thicker - blacker - sprouted long thin arms that appeared to terminate in gleaming knobs - then It merged into and through the door, like a cloud of smoke drawn into a funnel. Arthur waited while long seconds crept out over a vast sea of time, before erupting into an explosive minute. From beyond the office door there came a scream, a flash of light and a loud bang. Then, for a long while - nothing. Arthur could only sit at his familiar desk and wait for the strength to return to his legs before departing and hiding himself in a darkened room.

But just as he was about to rise, the impossible happened.

From within the office came the sound of a chair being pushed back, and slow footsteps crossing the floor. The door opened and Mr Carrington-Jones came out and looked enquiringly along the row of desks. He smiled when his glance alighted on Arthur; an amused smile that made him look benign - rather like an indulgent father whose small son has contrived an unsuccessful booby-trap. He walked between the avenue of desks and seated himself opposite his senior clerk.

'There you are, Collins. Thought you must be nearby. How are you?'

Arthur said: 'Fine, thank you, sir,' before he realized what he was saying.

Mr Carrington-Jones sighed. 'I wish I could say the same. Frankly, getting shot of a top-grade, soul-snatching enmity,

takes it out of me these days. Never thought you would bring one of those up, Collins. Of course I knew you had stumbled across some sort of power, when your wife was struck dumb and poor old Rowe had those awful pains in his tummy. But raising a Black – I do congratulate you.'

Arthur's mind was clouded by the mists of confusion, but he still retained a spark of understanding.

'You mean, sir – that you can . . . ?'

Mr Carrington-Jones chuckled. 'I've been a master of the seventh circle for years. How do you suppose I've got where I am? Hard work and long hours? All my opposition is either in the hot place or stark, raving mad.'

Arthur did not comment on this statement. There did not seem much point. Mr Carrington-Jones sighed again.

'Pity about you. But still, it can't be helped. You've guessed what happens next, I suppose?'

Arthur shook his head, although he had a faint suspicion.

'Well, it's like this. You called up a soul-snatching Black and promised it a nice juicy tit-bit. Me. I turned out to be a member of the top management – if I might so describe myself – and knocked it for six with a defensive spell. Now – it can't go back empty handed. See what I mean?'

Arthur did, but was not at all keen to say so. Mr Carrington-Jones frowned and tapped his fingers impatiently on the desk.

'Oh, come now. Do I have to *spell* it out? If Blackie can't have the meat, it must eat the butcher. I would say you've got about twenty-four hours.'

Arthur's face turned white, then assumed a shade of pale-green. Mr Carrington-Jones rose and looked down upon his unfortunate employee with cold, stern eyes.

'Of course, I cannot continue to employ a man who keeps such low company. You will receive one month's pay in lieu of notice, plus whatever sums of money to which you are entitled. Kindly vacate the premises at once.'

Arthur – once again the underdog – crept out of the office, with his allegorical tail between his trembling legs, and ran through long corridors that smelled of detergent and disinfectant. Once out into the street, every shadow was a menace and every face a mocking mask.

The Treasure Book of Spelles contained not one word of comfort or the smallest shred of hope. Arthur could find no spell for putting down a black demon. But he did his poor best,

He drew a chalk circle on the dining-room floor; stole holy water from the Roman Catholic church; purchased crucifixes and Bibles by the dozen and added a score of prayer books for good measure.

The holy books made a wall round his circle, and he placed the crucifixes and cups of holy water on top, then knelt in his little fortress and tried to pray. But his thoughts kept straying to the room that lay beyond the frail wall, and his fear-sharp eyes darted from wall to wall, to rolled-up carpet, to chairs, table, curtained window, closed door – waiting for black terror to take on shape and assail his untested ramparts – blow upon his paper castle. But the room remained as smug and as innocent as a church hall at Christmas time.

Then – just as he was beginning to relax, to unclench his teeth, to breathe a little deeper – there came from behind him a tiny, cackling giggle. He could not move, let alone look round, and there was really no need – he knew who was there. The giggle died and a harsh, terrible voice whispered in his left ear.

‘How cosy, deary. Just the two of us – inside.’

THE HEADLESS FOOTMAN OF HADLEIGH

*From the casebook of the world's only practising psychic
detective*

Lord Camtree was a portly man with a well-developed sense of his own importance, plus the knowledge that he was inferior to few and superior to many. He clearly regarded Francis St Clare and his assistant Frederica Masters to be among the latter. He looked enquiringly round the untidy room, raised his eyebrows at the rows of unusual photographs that lined the walls, then transferred his gaze back to the elegant young man and the beautiful, if rather unconventionally dressed girl who were seated behind the large desk.

‘You have an excellent reputation in your – eh – particular field,’ he murmured, as though trying to reassure himself.

Francis St Clare waved a gold cigarette holder and assumed an air of dignified modesty.

'I lead - those follow who can.'

'He's brilliant,' Fred stated, 'but doesn't like to say so.'

Lord Camtree stared at her with cold disapproval. He decided she did not look respectable. The mauve blouse revealed more than it should; the rounded face was too pretty by half; the large blue eyes mocked, the full lips were parted in a tantalizing smile. He was aware of an uncomfortable urge to see the doubtlessly magnificent legs that were hidden by the desk, and tried to regain self-confidence by raising his voice.

'I take it you know who I am? My position and so forth?'

The psychic detective nodded. 'Rags to riches Camtree. A finger in lots of rich pies, including those with an oily filling.'

'Estimated thirty lovely million,' Fred added, her eyes sparkling. 'One town house, one country estate. Respectably married and no fun and games. Made a life peer in last year's honours list. People say you're an old misery, but I'm sure you're not.'

'She's a genius,' Francis explained. 'We lesser mortals have to overlook a certain amount of rudeness. I gather you have need of my professional services?'

Lord Camtree finding his indignant glare was returned by a dazzling smile, returned his attention to the psychic detective and spoke in a lower tone of voice.

'Yes. The situation is unique in my experience and as you were strongly recommended by no less a person than Sir William Bamberfield . . .'

'The case of the Limping Pirate,' Fred interrupted.

' . . . I assumed you might be able to help. What are your fees?'

'One hundred pounds a day and all expenses.'

'You price your services highly,' the millionaire commented dryly.

Francis smiled. 'Naturally. But I have yet to decide if I will take your case.'

A short silence followed and it seemed for a while that the millionaire might get up and leave. Then he sighed heavily and said:

'Very well. Something must be done - and I suppose you may be the person to do it. This is the situation. I have recently purchased Hadleigh Hall, an old country mansion in Essex. The place has cost me a fortune to modernize and

so forth and I moved in with my family and staff last month.' Lord Camtree paused, then exploded into a fit of fear-inspired rage. 'Almost from the first day, the damn thing made my life a hell. When I tell you . . .'

The psychic detective raised his hand. 'Please – no details.' 'But . . .'

'It's a firm rule that I know nothing of the phenomenon, until I experience it for myself. Eye-witnesses rarely give an accurate account, and I prefer to take on a case with an open mind.'

Lord Camtree nodded with reluctant approval. 'I suppose you're right. Will you take my case?'

Francis consulted his assistant. 'What do you think, Fred?'

Fred shrugged her shapely shoulders. 'I don't mind a bit of high living.'

The psychic detective grinned across the desk at the anxious millionaire. 'Right. How do we get to Hadleigh Hall?'

Lord Camtree rose from his chair. 'I'll send a car round for you at six o'clock this evening. Anything else?'

Francis St Clare almost succeeded in looking embarrassed. 'My retaining fee. A hundred pounds in advance. Refundable if I do not get results – of one kind or another.'

Hadleigh Hall was a very large mansion which appeared to have been long ago dumped down in the Essex countryside and left to fend for itself. Gleaming windows glared over surrounding lawns and neatly laid out gardens, and seemed to ignore the coat of white cement-wash that had transformed the house into the likeness of a grotesquely shaped wedding cake.

Fred swung her nylon-clad legs out of the car, then looked up at the white walls and glaring windows. She shuddered.

'Francis, I don't like this set-up. The place stinks.'

Francis watched six large suitcases being taken out of the car boot by a liveried footman and the chauffeur. One was his.

'Nasty atmosphere?' he enquired in a low voice.

'Saturated,' she murmured. 'Lord Thingy may be a smart lad in the City, but he must have the sensitivity of a drunk rhinoceros not to spot there was something wrong with this place when he bought it. How the hell do they keep servants?'

In the vast hall Francis stopped, looked around and said: 'Crikey!' that being his favourite expression on those rare

occasions when he succumbed to astonishment. This was such an occasion.

Lord Camtree's conception of a baronial hall undoubtedly owed much to the worse efforts of a Hollywood film producer. Bleached oak panelling reached from floor to ceiling; a stained glass window illuminated the double staircase and open landing; suits of armour made from bright oxidized brass stood like sentries at regular intervals along the wall. An iron brazier with electric pseudo-smouldering logs flickered softly from the centre of the floor. A giant cut-glass chandelier hung like a multi-pointed icicle from the high ceiling.

'Cost every penny of two thousand pounds.'

Lord Camtree was standing a few feet away, his plump face transformed by a smile of artistic pride. Francis sounded as if he were overcome by admiration.

'Stunning.'

'And the hall – the renovation cost me ten thousand.'

'I've never seen anything like it.'

Fred pointed to the chandelier. 'I'd have that thing down for a start. I've known nasties who would loosen the screws or whatever keeps it up – and crash – somebody is strawberry jam.'

Lord Camtree's familiar cold stare was back and he directed it at Fred, who retaliated by a look of complete surprise.

'What have I said now?' she asked Francis.

The psychic detective ignored her and addressed his client. 'I suppose you pulled the place about a bit? Ripped out old panelling and so forth?'

Lord Camtree nodded. 'Yes. There was a lot of old stuff. I had that out and replaced by what you see now. Then up there,' he pointed to the stained glass window, 'there was a dreadful old thing with small lead panes.'

'And your troubles started shortly afterwards,' Francis said quietly. 'Rebuilding – removing long-established fittings often opens up the gateway and allows dark wanderers to come in.'

Lord Camtree grunted. 'Does it now? Well, let's hope I'm not wasting me money and you can get shot of it. When I tell you my lady wife packed her bags and went back to town this morning, you'll realize that the matter is no joke.'

The psychic detective and his assistant followed their host across the hall and up the left-hand staircase. They crossed the landing, then turned left into a thickly carpeted corridor with large windows overlooking a courtyard on one side and

a row of doors on the other. Lord Camtree opened one and looked enquiringly at Francis.

'I have placed you in separate rooms. I take it you don't ... ?'

'Only on alternate Sundays,' Fred stated gravely.

'That being the case, this is your room, Miss Masters. Yours, St Clare, is next door.'

Fred performed a little curtsey and went into her room, and Francis followed his host a few yards down the corridor and preceded him into the next. He looked round at the luxurious fittings, grinned, then sank into the nearest chair.

'This will be very comfortable.'

'By the way,' the millionaire said sharply, 'I know you do not wish to be told of the nature of the haunting – but I must say this – apart from the major horror, there are often smaller, isolated occurrences that have no rational explanation. It would be well if you took nothing for granted.'

Francis stretched out his long legs. 'I never do. You told me that your wife has departed – are there any other members of your family in the house?'

Lord Camtree frowned. 'Yes. My son and daughter. They treat the matter with certain levity, that I find to be both misplaced and irritating.'

'Youth,' said Francis pompously, 'has replaced the shudder by a giggle and the scream by a snigger.'

'Dinner will be served at seven o'clock,' Lord Camtree announced, while he opened the door. 'The bathrooms are situated at the far end of the corridor.'

He departed, a morose, unhappy man, Francis decided, who found little joy in his wealth. A footman brought in his suitcase and was immediately followed by a tall, white-haired individual, who performed a little old-fashioned bow and introduced himself.

'I am Carruthers – the butler. Is everything to your satisfaction, sir?'

Francis watched the man through narrowed eyes. 'Yes, thank you. Tell me – are you short staffed?'

Carruthers sighed. 'Indeed yes, sir. But we are coping.'

'You know why I am here?'

The butler inclined his head. 'I understand, sir, you have been engaged to clear up our trouble.'

Francis smiled. 'You strike me as being a level-headed chap. Do you believe in ghosts?'

Carruthers raised an elegant eyebrow. 'Most old houses have some kind of psychic phenomenon, sir, and indeed, I would go so far as to say, that the best families are incomplete without one or more ghosts. I well recall that when I was in service with the Earl of Byfleet, a white lady was often seen wandering the corridors. I had the honour of meeting her ladyship myself and I may say, it is a memory that I will always treasure.'

Francis's eyes danced with mischievous joy. 'Without going into details—will you also treasure the memory of what you have seen in this house?'

The butler permitted himself a slight frown.

'Let me put it this way, sir. I believe in moderation in all things. The phenomenon I have witnessed in *this* house has strayed beyond the frontiers of moderation. I trust, sir, that you and the young lady will be able to—to clear the matter up.'

'And if I fail?' Francis asked.

'Then, sir . . .' For a while it seemed that the butler was considering the propriety of proceeding further, then he completed the sentence in a quick flurry of words. '. . . I would gravely suggest setting fire to the house and all it contains. Now, if you will excuse me, I have duties to perform.'

Francis bathed in a vast, sunken bath, then went back to that luxurious bedroom, where he found his case had been unpacked and his dinner jacket laid out.

He was fully dressed when there came a tap on the door, and he called out: 'Come in, whoever you are.' The tapping was repeated, only now it was longer—more insistent. He walked over to the door, flung it open and stared down at the young girl who stood in the corridor. She was very young—probably not more than thirteen years of age—and was attired in a long white dress. Francis scrutinized the pale face, the black hair that hung down to her shoulders, and the dark-blue eyes that looked up at him with a gleam of amusement.

'Hullo!' The voice was soft. 'May I come in?'

Francis stood to one side. 'If you feel you must.'

She entered the room with quick, graceful steps, then swung round so that the long dress twirled about her slim form. Again Francis heard that young voice; soft, pronouncing each word with precision.

'I saw you arrive. You and that pretty girl. Is she your sweetheart?'

'No.' Francis sank down in the armchair and watched the child with strangely alert eyes. 'No, she's my assistant.'

She kept moving round the room, looking at the furniture, peering behind the curtains, like a graceful black and white cat exploring a strange house. 'I see. I've never been in this room before. Do you like it?'

Francis nodded very slowly. 'Very much. Have you lived in this house long?'

She perched on the edge of the bed and swung her legs back and forth. She looked sweet and demure.

'I've been here for ages and ages. They call me a dreadful child. But I'm not.'

'I'm sure you're not,' Francis agreed.

She laughed. A soft, silvery sound. 'I mean - I'm not a child. But I can be pretty dreadful when people upset me. You will not upset me, will you?'

'I certainly will try not to,' Francis promised. 'But of course I have a job to do - and if you get in the way - make a nuisance of yourself, well . . .'

Her eyes watched him with an unblinking stare; the pale face was grave, the thin lips slightly parted. Presently she spoke again.

'You may call me Dora. What is your name?'

'Francis.'

'You are very good looking.'

'Thank you.'

'And that girl - your assistant - she is very beautiful. I have always wanted to be beautiful. And I could be . . .'

The door opened and Fred, attired in a dress that revealed more than it hid, entered. She gave the visitor one startled glance, then moved over to Francis and stood by his chair.

'Fred,' he said, rather too loudly, 'this is Dora. She just popped in to say how-do.'

A subtle change came over Dora. Her eyes glittered and her long fingers moved up and down her thighs. Fred's voice rose to just above a whisper.

'Francis - you do know that's a nasty?'

'I know,' he replied softly. 'No reflection in the mirror. But it's as solid as a 27 bus. See the indent on the bed.'

'It's a very nasty nasty,' Fred went on. 'It's trying to do things to my mind.'

'Then you'd better shut down.'

Fred's smile might have been carved into her face.

'I have. And it's not happy. Get ready for an explosion.'

Dora stood up and began to tip-toe across the room. The effect was most horrible as her dress began to writhe; each crease and fold seemingly endowed with a life of its own. Her face became lean and spiteful, and she pointed a quivering forefinger at Fred, who promptly grabbed Francis's arm. The voice was no longer soft – it rose to a shriek.

'Clever. Miss Clever-Dick. But I'll make you jump . . . you see . . . jump you will . . . right out of your skin. Like this-s-s-s-s . . .'

The slim, child figure elongated, then collapsed on to the floor and became a black and white coiled snake. A diamond-shaped head with dark-blue eyes swayed from side to side, and from the gaping mouth came a hissing sound that was merely a continuation of the final word 'this'.

'Francis,' Fred whispered, 'I'm not all that happy. Not really.'

The psychic detective patted her gently on the shoulder.

'Don't be silly. That thing can't harm us. Transformation wastes power. It will evaporate any moment now.'

In fact even while he was speaking the ele-snake began to disintegrate. The hissing sank to a fast dying whisper, the coils merged one into the other, then there was only a mass of pulsating black smoke that sank down through the thick carpet. Francis expelled his breath as a vast sigh of relief.

'That was a nice welcome. This place must be soaked with power to enable an elemental to take on such a convincing shape. How do you feel?'

Fred dabbed her pale face with a handkerchief.

'Drained. Some of that power was coming from me. What the hell is all this in aid of?'

Francis shrugged. 'I'd say this house was built on a gap in the astral borderline. Borley Rectory was another such example. But someone has smashed a ruddy great hole in the barrier. Something pretty dreadful must have happened here in the past. Come on, we had better go downstairs. Dinner must be ready.'

Fred swept into the dining-room with the grace of a miniature frigate under full sail. Lord Camtree was standing by the fireplace and he glanced pointedly at his wrist watch before moving to the head of the table.

'Ah, here you are – at last.' He waved his hand towards

the young man and girl who were already seated. 'This is my daughter Penny and my son Giles. Eh - Miss Masters and Mr St Clare.'

Penelope Camtree was perhaps eighteen years of age, and had a round, freckled face, framed by long red hair and enhanced by large brown eyes. She waved her hand and said: 'Hi.' Giles could have been two or three years older, and he was tall and lean, with bowed shoulders and a mane of black, untidy hair that was possibly longer than his sister's. He nodded to Francis, but gave Fred a long, calculated stare, his deep-set eyes glittering with peculiar intensity. Fred wrinkled her nose, then walked round the table and seated herself on the first chair, where she sat, wearing an expression of keen expectancy.

'She's hungry,' Francis explained. 'She eats a lot.'

'Sure do,' Fred retorted shortly. 'Francis, are you going to tell Lord What's-his-name about Hissing-Thingy?'

Francis sat down beside her. 'In good time. Let's wait and see, possibly hear - then talk.'

A footman served the soup, while Carruthers transferred various dishes on to the sideboard from a large food trolley. Presently Lord Camtree snapped: 'All right - get out. We'll serve ourselves.'

The meal progressed in almost total silence, broken only by Penelope who got up and fetched the meat course from the sideboard. Her father ate greedily and with more sound than Francis considered necessary; Penelope daintily and Giles hardly at all. At last Francis sent words drifting across the table.

'Penny - Giles - how is it that you young people have remained in this house? Don't you find the manifestations alarming?'

Penelope shook her head. 'No. Why should we? It's all experience, isn't it? And after all, doesn't it prove there must be some form of life after death. I think that's awfully important.'

'And you, Giles?' The psychic detective looked thoughtfully at the young man. 'Is that the way you feel?'

The dark intense eyes came round and blinked twice.

'What?'

'Don't you find whatever walks, floats or screams through this hallowed pile alarming?'

Giles Camtree nodded slowly. 'Yes, but I like being fright-

ened. It's the only time I really come alive. Every sense becomes razor sharp; my brain red hot.'

Fred laid her knife and fork down and looked expectantly at the closed door. 'Then you'd better get it stoked up right now, for something very fearful is on its way.'

'Malignant?' enquired Francis, cutting himself a wedge of cheese.

Fred shook her blonde head. 'No, I don't think so. But it's not nice. I feel a neck condition.'

Francis sniffed his portion of cheese, then gazed upon it with grave suspicion. 'What the hell is that supposed to mean? Neck condition! Elucidate, woman.'

'Elucidate yourself. A numbness round the neck . . .'

At that moment she was interrupted by a discreet tap on the door, which shortly opened to admit a slightly agitated Carruthers. He advanced a few steps into the room, then to Francis's delight, performed his little bow.

'I beg your pardon, my lord, but it's . . . it's approaching along the eastern corridor.'

Lord Camtree sank back in his chair and only the keen eye of Francis noted the faint tremor which shook the peer's left hand.

'Is it! Well, St Clare, now's your chance. It—the thing you did not want described, will soon be in this room. Explain to me how the trick works and I will pay you one thousand pounds over and above your fee.'

But the psychic detective had only eyes for his assistant.

'Atmosphere, Fred. Put out mental fingers—feel it—taste it.'

The girl had her eyes closed and the uninformed might have thought she was listening for an expected sound. Her voice was barely above a whisper.

'I've been shut up in a dark place. Dark and cold.' She shivered and hugged her hands under her armpits. 'Yes . . . cold . . . cold. Now . . . I'm looking . . . searching . . .'

She opened her eyes and stared with almost pathetic intensity at Francis. 'It's awful . . . the loneliness.'

Footsteps suddenly came into being, were born as slow pacing, echoing thuds, that grew louder as they approached the open doorway. The butler was now a frightened old man who still attempted to hold the tatters of his former dignity about him like a moth-eaten royal robe. Giles and Penelope were gazing at the doorway with fever-bright eyes. Lord

Camtree sat huddled in his chair, fear and anger expressed in every line of his face.

IT entered the room and turning left approached the table. There it stopped and stood motionless. A slight figure, narrow of hip, broad of shoulder, dressed in a sky-blue cutaway jacket, white knee-breeches, with a once white cravat at the neck and silver buckles on the black shoes. A correctly attired footman from a past age. Faultless, save for one very important detail. There was no head.

The once white cravat was deep red; the slim neck had a ragged appearance and was rimmed with crusted blood. A fragment of fractured windpipe gleamed in the lamplight like a sliver of polished ivory. Francis St Clare sighed softly.

'Nasty,' he said. 'Very nasty.'

Lord Camtree half rose from his chair and pointed a shaking forefinger at the apparition. The veins on his forehead stood out as dark blue ridges. 'St Clare . . . St Clare . . . hear me, man. I want to know how that thing works. I know it's bloody trickery . . .'

'Shut up.' Francis did not remove his eyes from the grim shape, but his voice rang out like the crack of a whip. 'I can tell you how it works, but as yet I don't know why. But I will. I will.'

He got up and moved round the table until he stood a few feet from the headless footman. He slowly examined every item; the polished shoes with their silver buckles, the white knee-breeches, the blue jacket with its silver braid, the yellow waistcoat – and last of all the mutilated neck.

'Fred.'

'Present.'

'Got a notepad and pen?'

'In me boswam,' Fred replied brightly, inserting two fingers into the cleavage of her low-cut dress. 'Hold on. Got it.'

'Right.' Francis produced a small magnifying glass from his breast pocket. 'A few flecks of blood on the jacket and waistcoat. Cravat soaked.'

'Cravat soaked,' Fred repeated, writing laboriously. 'Go ahead.'

Francis moved to a position behind the figure and peered downwards. 'I'd say it took three blows to cut the head off. I don't think an axe was used. More likely a sword or even a large carving knife. Lord Camtree – perhaps you will tell me what happens next.'

Before the millionaire could speak, his daughter eagerly provided an answer. 'Sometimes it stands there for ten or fifteen minutes, then slowly fades away. Or it walks back the way it came and goes down into the cellars.'

'And no doubt you have followed it on occasion,' said Francis thoughtfully. 'I wonder—have I time for a little experiment? Fred, your ball-point pen.'

'You're not going to touch it, are you?' Penelope asked.

'Not with my hands. If it is charged with power, I could well burn my fingers.' He took the pen from Fred and gingerly jabbed the figure just below the right shoulder blade. The point went in about a quarter of an inch, then jammed. 'I'd say there's approximately seventy-five per cent solidarity. Little or no intelligence—just a build-up of water and energy that walks an erratic haunting path. Once we find out "why", it will disappear. In the meanwhile I will send it on its way. Fred—a napkin.'

Fred handed him a white table napkin and this he flapped several times across the yellow waistcoat. The immediate effect was startling. A cloud of mist began to creep out from the neck, wrists and stomach and quickly built up until the headless figure was hidden from view. Then this slowly dispersed and there was nothing left at all—save for a lingering sweetish smell of corruption. Francis returned to his chair.

'Most satisfactory,' he said. 'The best example of a semi-solid time-image that I've met in a long while.'

'The Gibbering Ghoul of Gamershal wasn't bad,' Fred remarked wistfully. 'But if you remember it started to come apart.'

'Come apart!' exclaimed Penelope, her eyes shining.

'Yep. A hand dropped into Frankie's lap and he sealed it in a plastic bag. But no joy. It turned to jelly and we had to flush it down the loo.'

Lord Camtree now spoke with a voice that was under super-control. 'I am waiting, St Clare, for an explanation. If that thing was solid, and you were able to puncture it with a ball-point pen, then it must have been faked. How?'

Francis smiled very gently. 'I do wish I could give you some shred of comfort. But if anyone can fake a semi-solid time-image, then I will eat Fred's bra, always supposing she wore one. No, that's yer actual, honest-to-goodness ghost, and no bones about it. I say, that was rather good. No bones about it.'

'He's waiting for laughter and applause,' Fred informed the grim-faced peer.

'Let me explain,' Francis fitted a cigarette into his gold holder. 'Some time in the distant past – I'd say early nineteenth century – a young footman was beheaded in this house and the body and head either buried or disposed of in two separate places. I mean it stands to reason – if both were buried together Charlie-boy would be carrying his head under his arm, or holding it out for your approval. Now, listen carefully.'

'He's going to blind you with science,' Fred explained.

The psychic detective blew out a neat smoke-ring and watched it float up to the ceiling. 'Any violent crime sends out powerful vibrations that never die. They soak into the woodwork, coat old walls, sometimes drift from room to room and create what is generally known as an atmosphere. Often they lie dormant for centuries and ninety-nine people out of a hundred never have reason to suspect their existence.'

'Unless some clot starts bashing the place about,' Fred interrupted.

'Allow the young master to have his moment of glory,' Francis pleaded.

'You're so long winded. I mean – that's the crack in the milk jug, isn't it? Somebody bashes the place about and all the bits and pieces are shook up and come together like minced beef in an Irish stew?'

'Crudely put,' Francis agreed, 'but true.'

'But,' Fred frowned, 'what about Dora? Where does she fit in?'

'You mean the young girl in the white dress?' Penelope enquired. 'I've seen her on several occasions. I thought she was rather sweet.'

'Ah!' Francis raised his eyebrows and glanced enquiringly round the table. 'Have you all had sight and words with sweet little Dora?'

'I have,' Giles confessed. 'I found her at the front door. She asked if it was all right to come in. I said yes.'

'Now that's interesting,' Francis nodded thoughtfully. 'And she asked if she could come into my room and I like a chump, said: "If you feel you must."'

'There are times when you're not very bright,' Fred pointed out.

Lord Camtree, who had been controlling his impatience

with some difficulty, finally expressed his disapproval.

'Look here, St Clare, you and your assistant appear to be treating this matter very light-heartedly. Allow me to assure you, it is no joke to me.'

'Would you care to move out until I can produce a clean bill of health?' Francis asked. 'It might be best. Fear is the key which unlocks the door of madness.'

The millionaire glared at him and clenched his fists.

'Who said anything about fear? I will not be driven from my own house.'

The psychic detective watched his host reflectively for a few moments, then shrugged.

'As you wish. I will require Fred to meet everyone in the house. Until we discover the source of power, little can be done.'

'Do what you want,' Lord Camtree growled, 'but get rid of this – this horror.'

'I will arrange for you to interview the servants,' Carruthers murmured.

They sat in the library, a place of old books with new covers, and there interviewed servants, who talked of things both weird and wonderful.

'Much more of this and I'm off,' said the short footman with the big nose. 'The 'eadless thing is bad enough – but that kid makes my blood run cold.'

'Imagination and codswallop,' announced the cook. 'I haven't seen or 'eard a thing, and what's more, neither has anyone else. Television and 'orror comics – that's to blame.'

'I wouldn't go down them stairs that leads to the cellars to save me life,' stated the scullery-maid. 'You can 'ear noises coming from down there sometimes. Honest you can.'

'I suppose I have something to do with it,' said Sarah the parlour-maid. 'I have always seen the other people.'

Francis exclaimed: 'Ah!' and Fred nodded and said: 'It can be pretty grim – can't it?'

The pale, pretty face was without expression and the slender shoulders were raised in a shrug.

'I don't know. You get used to it. My mother was the same and she taught me not to be afraid. Some people are different to others. That's life.'

She spoke with a faint northern accent that Francis found to be rather charming and displayed an air of unconcern that

was a little breath-taking.

'Would you like to tell us what happens?' Francis asked.

There was a slight pause and Fred quietly reassured the young girl. 'Don't worry, love. We won't tell. But we must know.'

'All right. Usually it happens just before I go to sleep. Something brown – like a shadow ball – comes out of the wall and reaches out for me.'

'How?' Francis demanded. 'Does it grow tentacles?'

'Sort of. Long thick things that touch me, only I don't feel anything. Then I go all sleepy and comfy. It's rather nice and I don't remember anything more until next morning, when I wake up feeling all drained.'

'So,' Francis smiled complacently, 'we have tracked down the source of supply. We must remove young Sarah to a safe distance and then sit back and wait. Things will certainly go bump in the night.'

'How would you like three weeks' holiday with pay?' Fred enquired.

Sarah shrugged again. It appeared to be her one and only gesture. 'Wouldn't mind.'

'Have you anywhere to stay?'

'I could go to me mother's place in Oldham.'

Francis got up, then yawned. 'Right, trot upstairs and pack your things. I'll have a word with Lord Camtree. And don't hang about. A nasty could pay you a sudden visit, get stored up with energy, then belt down here, before I'm ready for it. It has been known to happen.'

Fred nodded. 'I remember – The Strangling Dancer of Brentford.'

Francis lay on top of his bed fully dressed; his eyes closed, but every sense alert. Sarah – much to the cook's indignation – had been driven to the station and was by now well on her way to distant Oldham. Whatever the majority of the inhabitants were doing – sleeping, trying to sleep, or just trembling in beds that refused to become warm – the house did not sleep. Francis listened to the muted sounds and tried to determine their origin. The creak of a floorboard – or maybe a staircase banister – a soft moan, that might have been a wind-child trapped in a disused chimney-pot; an occasional harsh sigh that seemed to be part of the house, as though the very bricks were mourning the passing of tranquillity.

Francis opened his eyes and grinned at Fred who was seated in an armchair, surrounded by a silver pentagram, an invention of which the psychic detective was vastly proud. She glared at her employer and proceeded to express her ill-humour.

'Fine thing. There you are, taking your ease, while I sit on this bloody hard chair looking and feeling like an over-ripe onion.'

'Rank has its privileges,' he murmured.

'You do realize that when the nasties find they can't get their nourishment all hell will break loose?'

'Such is my earnest desire. With a succulent – and may I add shapely? – bundle of psychic energy tucked away behind the old pentagram, the opposition should come running. With a bit of luck we'll have a lively night.'

Fred poked her tongue out, then wriggled her nether portions into a more comfortable position. 'Thank you. Do you know something? I'm just a lump of bait that you dangle in front of any nasty that happens to drift along. It's always been the same. Do you remember . . . ?'

'Shut up,' Francis instructed.

'I won't shut up. You don't look upon me as a person . . .'

'Shut up and listen.'

They both became still, with heads turned towards the door, as approaching footsteps came tripping along the corridor then receded in the direction of the staircase. Francis sighed.

'I wonder who that was?'

Fred snorted. 'You know darn well who it was. Sweet little Dora wondering where the larder has got to. She'll be back.'

Francis nodded and reaching out took a vacuum jug from the bedside table. He poured hot coffee into a china mug and drank with every sign of satisfaction.

'What about me?' Fred enquired.

'You must keep your pretty little tummy empty. Yes, I agree that was Dora-child, but don't forget she doesn't feed straight from the bottle. Remember what Sarah told us? A round thing fed from her. No, I'd say the master has sent Dora out on a reconnoitring tour. If so . . .' He paused and a gleam lit his eyes. 'That is interesting.'

Fred frowned. 'Is it? I'm inclined to think it's bloody horrible. An awful child-cum-snake, a headless footman and *something* that takes the doings from innocent girls like

Sarah and me. I want some of that coffee with a swig o' brandy in it.'

'But don't you understand? Why does the unknown master – who we will call Nasty One – have to use a common or garden elemental and a built-up time-image to reconnoitre for him? Why doesn't he come himself?'

'Because, like you, he's bone idle. You're all the same, alive or dead. Look at you swilling coffee, while I . . .'

Francis interrupted by a loud cry and thumped his right knee with clenched fist. 'That's it! Truth from the mouth of babes and sucklings.'

Fred stared at him with wide-eyed astonishment. 'You don't mean to say, you're actually admitting to being bone idle?'

'No . . . no. Listen. We've cut off a valuable source of power by sending Sarah packing, and you, who could have been a more than adequate replacement, has been bunged behind a protective pentagram. You agree there must be alarm and despondency in certain quarters.'

Fred nodded. 'You're darn right there is. I can feel the entire house seething.'

'Then why doesn't Nasty One come out on the warpath himself?'

'Search me.'

'Because he's taken root. He can build up an elemental into an intelligent enmity – probably using the personality debris of a young girl who used to live in this house: construct a time-image from the disturbed atmosphere. Feed from a gifted servant girl. But he can't move around himself.'

Fred shrugged. 'All very well, but what's it all in aid of? And if Nasty One is stuck in one place – where is it?'

The psychic detective beamed at her and rubbed his hands. 'If in doubt – try the cellars. Deep, deep down. The surrounding earth would be necessary for the storing of stolen energy.'

Fred grimaced. 'And I suppose you want to go down there?'

'You have keen perception.'

'But not now? Not this very minute?'

'Time and nasties wait for no man. And if the worst should happen – well . . .'

Fred stepped reluctantly over the silver pentagram.

'Well, what?'

'White hair will suit you.'

'Pig. Sadistic, heartless pig.'

'I have many virtues,' he agreed.

Having led his assistant down three flights of stairs and finally switching on a number of cobweb-obscured lights that illuminated a seemingly endless combination of cellars, the world's only practising psychic detective made a profound statement.

'If truth lies at the bottom of a well, potential horror is coiled round the walls of every cellar.'

'I wish you'd shut up,' Fred protested, eyeing the damp-varnished walls with fearful expectancy. 'I'm only down here because I'm too scared to go back.'

'It stands to reason,' Francis went on, pulling a bottle of wine from a rack and examining the label with critical appraisal. 'Cellars, dungeons, basement-flats and like subterranean places are partly or wholly surrounded by earth, and therefore in direct line of contact with corpses, worms and other fear symbols that are apt to disturb the peace and sleep of man. Dead brains shed their last, lingering thought patterns and send them through the moist loam as cold, shimmering impulses, that do dreadful things to living spines and blunt the keen appetite of those who cannot – or will not – die.'

'Francis,' Fred pleaded, 'will you *please* stop that.'

He smiled and patted her on the head. 'Ignore my ramblings. I'm just getting in the mood. Just getting in the mood.'

Each cellar was connected to the next by a short passage, thus making a vast network of underground rooms that spread along the length and breadth of the house above. Those which were in constant use – the wine cellars, fuel storage – were lit by electricity, but many had no light of any kind; black, empty caverns, the home of rats that scampered away from the beam of Francis's pocket torch and brought a cry of disgusted protest from Fred.

'Atmosphere?' Francis asked.

'Stinking.'

'Stop playing the fool. Send out mental fingers – probe – taste and tell me what's cooking.'

Fred took a firm grip of his arm, then closed her eyes. Presently her voice spoke of things that are rarely seen – but are.

'There's nothing way out – yet. I can sense the thought waves of those long dead. A woman and child died here – oh

—years and years ago. She keeps saying she wants to be let out. Then there's an old man with a white beard—he's simply awful—crying and gibbering—trying to tear my dress . . .'

Francis quickly interrupted. 'You're only a substitute. Leave him.'

'Someone who looks like a kitchen maid—or something—she's very dirty . . . Ugh! She's sitting in the corner—over there—and eating some muck from a tin bowl. Wait a minute—a tall fellow—my he's big—dressed in a leather jerkin . . . Francis . . . it's all becoming muddled . . . like a bad dream. I can hear screams—shrieks—terrible—terrible fear. Frankie—get me out. GET ME OUT . . .'

Francis pulled the trembling girl into his arms and began to talk loudly—with frantic urgency—into her left ear.

'Close down. Do you hear me? Close down. You are surrounded by blue light and no one, no thing can harm you. And I'm here. I am here . . .'

Gradually the trembling subsided and she was clinging to him like a tired swimmer to a jutting rock. Francis pressed his lips into her hair and murmured:

'Forgive me. I should have known better.'

'Nonsense, you weren't to have known. There's nothing out of the ordinary until I start to dig. Then—oh, boy! The place is saturated with fear. It creeps up through the house. I could feel it upstairs—even outside—but it is here that it all begins.'

He directed the torch beam on to the side of her face, so that the pale features stood out in stark relief, without dazzling her eyes.

'Do you want to go on?'

'You want to—don't you?'

He answered without hesitation. 'Yes. I must find out why—and how. There are so many questions and so few answers. The unknown is all around us and our souls tremble if we catch so much as a tiny glimpse of it. The time-images you saw, they are in every house, but the shrieks, the fear—that is something else. Where must we go now?'

Fred nodded in the direction of an opening that was set in the far wall.

'In there. I'll have to close down really tight, because the fear is like a cold blast and I've no intention of going through that particular corner of hell again. But you'll be OK, having the sensitivity of a seventy-four bus.'

'Thank you for those kind words. Now, let us go forward with girded loins and upstanding knickers and trust all will be well.'

The torch beam was a silver streak that sliced a path through the darkness, revealing the thick carpet of grey dust, flinging a circle of light over slime-coated walls and finally dancing with cold unconcern into the low, arched passage. This was much longer than those that connected the other cellars and Francis—despite his experience and air of professional calm—suddenly felt a shiver of alarm run along his spine and set warning bells ringing in his brain.

He was pushing his way through a mass of barely distinguishable something—things—nebulous bodies: there was no substance, just a flow of energy that was sufficient to slow him down, to create mental pictures of a frantic crowd of people jammed in this narrow exit, all trying to flee from some horror which lay behind them. He asked quietly:

'You all right, Fred?'

Her voice was that of a child who is trying very hard not to appear frightened.

'Of course I'm all right. But—we've never had to face anything quite like this before. I'm shut down—tight as a miser's cash box—but some of it is still getting through. There's something horrible—and I mean horrible—not far away.'

'Put your trust in uncle, and when he runs make sure you're not far behind.'

They came out of the passage and found themselves in a small room that had solid doors set in the right- and left-hand walls, and a large cupboard built against the one at the far end. Francis handed the torch to Fred, then walked boldly towards this cobweb-covered structure and pulled its door open. It promptly parted company with its last rusty hinge and slipped down on to his right foot.

'Blast!' He heaved the slab of time-hardened oak up, then flung it to one side. 'Blast and damnation! Why the hell didn't you tell me to be careful?'

'Have you hurt yourself?' Fred enquired.

'No, I'm dancing for joy. And don't shine that bloody torch in my face.'

'Cassocks,' said Fred.

'And the same to you. Oh, I see what you mean.' He reached into the cupboard and brought out a long, black

velvet robe that was sadly impaired by moth-holes and an accumulation of dust. 'Well, I expected to find something like this. I'd say we've stumbled on the vestry. It was here, in days of yore, some bright lads got dressed up before indulging in some hanky-panky. The point is, which door do we open? Right or left?'

'Why not try the one with the light underneath?' Fred suggested.

'What!'

He jerked his head round and saw that indeed there was a strip of light that flickered like a faulty neon sign under the left-hand door. An almost ferocious grin parted his lips, as he growled: 'So – just as I suspected. Someone – somebodies are stirring the black stew. Who do you suppose it could be? The cook whipping something up for tomorrow's dinner? Carruthers wrestling with his soul, or old Camtree himself digging for ye old treasure?'

'Whoever it is must either be a grandmaster of the highest grade or have the sensitivity of a dead mule,' Fred observed as she shivered. 'This place reeks of evil. The bad lord below knows what it's like in there.'

'Well,' Francis squared his shoulders, 'as the doctored tom cat said to his girl-friend – let's find out.'

Francis first examined the door, took note of the large, strangely embossed handle, the long hinges that glistened with a coating of oil, and iron X sign that confronted him at eye-level. He then gripped the handle with his right hand and motioned Fred back with the left.

'Don't be so eager,' he whispered. 'Right – ready or not – in we go.'

He turned the handle and flung the door back. It crashed against the side wall and revealed a scene that was both bizarre and fascinating. The room was about twenty feet wide and approximately fifteen long. A narrow aisle was flanked on either side by high-backed pews, and at the far end, standing a little way out from the wall, was a plain stone altar on which burned a number of tall wax candles. The tattered remains of tapestry hung as filthy rags from the side walls and on the floor, just in front of the altar was a large 'X' cross with rusty manacles welded to the tip of each arm.

But it was the two people crouched in the far left-hand corner who attracted Francis's full attention, and his smile

lost its previous sinister aspect and became mocking. He walked down the aisle, then stopped a few feet from the iron cross and said pleasantly:

'So, Daddy was right after all! Of all things!'

Giles Camtree clambered to his feet, then assisted his sister to rise. He brushed dust from the moth-eaten black robe and managed to conjure up a grin. 'It's you! When we heard a noise outside, we thought . . . Well, it was something else.'

'I wonder,' observed Francis thoughtfully, 'what that "something" was?' Then his voice took on a steel undertone. 'What actually have you two been up to? Don't you realize what this place is?'

Penelope came shyly forward and looked up at the psychic detective from under long lashes. 'Please don't be angry. We were only investigating and experimenting.'

'Plumbing the depths of fear,' Giles stated. 'All emotions should be tasted to the full. Don't you agree?'

'I think you're both mad,' Francis replied shortly, 'but please—go on. How did you find this place?'

It was Giles who answered, his deep sunken eyes gleaming with fear-joy. 'We followed the headless footman. It is here the—haunting path do you call it?—begins. But he doesn't seem able to pass that cross thing. Then we found these robes and it seemed a good idea to—well—mess about.'

Francis groaned and repeated: 'Mess about!' and Fred accurately pronounced a rude word. Penelope took it upon herself to explain.

'We kneel on the cross and say the first thing that comes into our heads and the result is most extraordinary.' She giggled and Francis's hand itched. 'Giles sometimes gabbles away in Latin, and normally he can't say a word. Then I find myself shouting: "Beldaza awake," or something like it. And once the child-thing was sitting on the altar laughing at us . . .'

'And of course,' Fred interrupted, 'you were terrified?'

Brother and sister nodded.

'Petrified.'

'It has all been so soul awakening,' Penelope added.

It was some time before Francis could trust himself to speak.

'This is what you will do. Go upstairs, enter your respective bedrooms, there drop to your benighted knees and pray like hell. Pray that I can replace the lid on the vat of foulness, that you, in your crass stupidity, pulled off.'

'What did we do, that was so terrible?' Giles asked in an aggrieved voice. 'The damned house was haunted by that headless chap anyway. You said yourself that he was probably woken up when father had the place altered . . .'

'That was a normal haunting, that I could have laid within twenty-four hours,' Francis roared. 'But your "messaging about" now means that a fully fledged, top grade—something—is fully awake and crying for nourishment. Now—get out of here, or Daddy will be short of two offsprings.'

They went with much muttering and turning of heads, and when their hurrying footsteps had receded into the distance Francis sank down on to the nearest pew and expelled his breath in a vast sigh.

'Drugs,' he said sadly, 'I deplore. Free love I welcome. But modern youth plunging its sticky fingers into the murky unknown, makes my eyes bulge and my stomach heave. Fred, I assume you now have the picture complete. That all is now clear.'

She seated herself beside him and slipped her hand into his.

'No.'

'Your brain must be no larger than a shrivelled split pea.'

'Very true. But I am only the hired help.'

He sighed again. 'Very well. Open your lugholes and listen. Once upon a time there were some very nasty men. Now, like all nasty men they wanted lots of power, so they could order people about and make lots of lovely money.'

'Sounds just like you,' observed Fred, nestling her head on his shoulder.

'Silence, child, the young master is speaking. One day the nastiest of these nasty men found that if he did some really horrible things—I expect he read about them in a book, which you wouldn't be able to understand because it had no pictures . . .'

'Pig.'

' . . . he would be able to call up a simply frightful bogey-man, who would give them all the power they needed in return for some rather eye-popping presents . . .'

'Such as a footman's head,' Fred suggested.

'The child may be stupid, but she has moments of inspiration. Now, the bogey-man must have got very fat—in one way or another—and I expect the nasty men became very worried, as you would have been . . .'

'Am,' Fred corrected. 'Am very worried.'

'... and with good reason. For one day the bogey-man must have become fat and tried to eat all the nasty men up.'

'And they all ran away,' Fred said sleepily, 'and fell over each other in the passage. But why didn't the bogey-man come up into the house and eat them in the dining-room?'

'Because, my sweet, they were all quite clever, as all nasty men are, and made themselves a Holstein-seal, which is - guess what?'

Fred nodded: 'An iron cross that has its spikes embedded in the corpse of ...' She sat up, suddenly wide awake. 'In the corpse of a young girl.'

'Who could look very like our Dora. Now is the picture complete?'

But Fred was staring at the iron cross with marked distaste.

'You mean to say her - her remains are under that thing?'

Francis nodded. 'I'm afraid she's not the only thing under there.'

For a while there was a complete silence, then Fred whispered: 'What do you mean - she's not the only thing under there? You're not suggesting ...?'

Francis waved his hand in a gesture that embraced the entire room. 'Surely you do not imagine that this is It? We are in the showroom. A bit of nonsense to impress the uninitiated. The real McCoy is down below, and I fear, my angel, you and I have got to dig it out.'

Fred shuddered. 'I haven't brought me spade.'

'You won't need one. Have you examined that altar with intelligent interest? Of course you haven't. Allow me to point out one rather important fact ...'

'There's a quarter of an inch crack between its base and the floor,' Fred intervened. 'And your brilliant mind has deduced ...?'

'That the stone is held in position by a pivot and if we push one end with all our might and main, the entire business will swing round and reveal to your wondering eyes, a hole - perhaps a flight of stairs. Naturally your womanly curiosity will insist that we descend and discover what lies, crawls, or slithers below.'

Fred's eyes became as blue saucers, and her full-lipped mouth a neat round hole, from which issued two well-chosen words.

‘Must we?’

‘If we don’t, headless footmen will continue to walk, elementals looking like sweet young girls will drive old Camtree berserk, and you will never know what’s down there.’

‘I would be happy to bask in blissful ignorance.’

Francis put his back against the altar stone, and Fred made a pretty pretence of pushing with one hand while she patted her employer’s shoulder with the other. It was some time before their combined efforts were rewarded but presently there was a loud rasping sound, and the heavy lump of granite swung back revealing a rectangular opening that was the entrance to a flight of spiral stairs. Francis wiped his brow, then invited comment.

‘Just as I said – hole and stairs. Such brilliance is out of this world.’

‘There are times when you must frighten yourself,’ Fred agreed. ‘Look – are you certain we must go down there?’

‘Yes, but it might be as well if you opened up a wee bit and sort of sipped the atmosphere. I would like to have some idea what to expect.’

The girl closed her eyes and stood motionless for a full minute, then she said softly: ‘Not a bloody thing. Frankie, I don’t like this one bit. Everything has shut down. It’s as though we were in deep space where no one has been born or died. It just ain’t natural.’

For a while Francis did not answer, then he nodded as though coming to an irrevocable decision. ‘Right, let’s grab a candle each and go down into the inner darkness. He who dares not – learns nothing.’

The steps were steep and twisted round and round, descending through solid rock. Francis reinforced the flickering candle-light by the beam of his torch, then examined the smooth walls.

‘I wonder,’ he said, ‘what kind of tools were used to do work like this? And it’s not new by any means. I wouldn’t mind betting this well was sunk long before Stonehenge was raised. Whatever waits for us down below came into being before the so-called dawn of history. Our unknown nasty men were only discoverers, not inventors.’

The stairs terminated when the last step sloped down into a long, wide passage, where candle and torchlight created ragged yellow holes in the darkness and the cloying smell of dead centuries tainted the atmosphere. Francis St Clare

walked towards the unknown with every sense alert, hungry for knowledge and prepared to pay any price for it even though realization should come in the last, terror-ridden moment of earthly life. He could hear Fred's gently placed footsteps behind and the intermittent drip of water in front, but otherwise there was that awful silence which reigns in underground places. Gradually the passage widened, the walls on either side sloping away in a gentle curve, until they were standing in a vast circular chamber; a mighty expanse of darkness that seemed to retreat before the advancing candle-light with menacing reluctance. Suddenly Fred's harsh whisper shattered the silence.

'It's waking up! Oh, my God, it's waking up! The light, Francis – it hates the light.'

'Yes,' the psychic detective replied grimly, 'I expect it does. Are you all right?'

'I think so. I am trying to keep my mind tight shut, but I can feel the hate – the fear. It's nearby – just in front.'

As they walked forward the circle of light advanced and the blanket of darkness rolled slowly back, revealing another patch of stone-paved floor, the bright eyes of a startled rat, then – with almost terrifying abruptness – the base of the surrounding wall. Francis pressed his torch switch and swung the beam of light round to the left, illuminating the curving rock – and the collection of skulls that were strewn before it.

Old, dust-grimed, rat-gnawed, these macabre relics of a bygone age grinned up at the intruders and seemed to take fiendish delight in Fred's muted cry.

'The failures,' Francis murmured. 'Someone had a use for severed heads, but there must have been many trips back to the drawing-board.'

Fred gripped his arm. 'It's . . . it's over to the right.'

'Is it! Then hang on to your girdle.'

He began to direct the torch beam back along the wall; over to the right, while holding the guttering candle well above his head. Darkness is sometimes cruel, for it can feed imagination; at others it is kind – merciful – laying an impregnable veil over that which can shock – terrify – drive mad: send the soul screaming through the doorway of death, and out along the unexpected corridors of eternity. Licked by candle-light, stabbed by the silver knife of torchlight, the shadows writhed, contorted, then fell back. Now the eyes

could see, relay what they saw back to the brain, while a faltering tongue prayed for the blessed gift of disbelief.

From the wall—from a hole cut into the smooth rock surface—from the moist black earth beyond—grew a long snake-like, obscenely pink neck; thick as the average man's thigh, sparsely covered with thin grey hairs, and at the end—like a melon rammed between the lips of an elephant's trunk—was a human head. Thick blond hair, wide-open blue eyes, white cheeks faintly tinged with pink, the gaping mouth rimmed by full red lips—but the teeth had been ruined. Merely ragged stumps that jutted outwards, as though something hard had been ejected by the black tongue, using great force.

The neck was never still. It waved its ten-foot length from side to side; contracted—with much wrinkling of pink skin—elongated until the gaping mouth was a few inches from Francis's right arm, then reared up, looking like a monstrous giraffe.

A voice—a hissing sound that manufactured words—said: 'I'll . . . suck . . . you . . . dry . . .'

A slow ripple began just where the neck joined the moist earth, and undulated up the entire grotesque length; the head nodded slowly as though accepting a not particularly welcome gift, then yawned. Something brown, pliable—rather like a wad of bubble-gum—seeped from between the ruined teeth and dropped with a soft 'plop' sound on to the floor. It inflated, became as a large, wrinkled football and grew two waving—seeking—pink-veined tubes, complete with sucker-shaped mouths. Suddenly this essence-sucker—Francis could think of no better designation—rolled across the floor with incredible speed, became a brown spinning blur; and fastened a sucker on Fred's left ankle.

She screamed: 'Get it off . . . GET IT OFF,' as Francis kicked the rubbery substance, ground his heel into the squelching, pulsating shape, then finally jumped on it; pounding down both feet until all that remained was a pool of thick, green evil-smelling, glutinous liquid. He looked back over one shoulder. The long neck was undulating again—the mouth yawning.

'If in doubt,' he said quietly, 'run.'

Fred reached the passageway first, raced through it with a speed that aroused Francis's unstinted admiration, and did

not stop until she was half way up the stairs. Then she sank down on to a step and wiped congealing candle-grease from her right hand. Francis arrived a few seconds later, his assumed air of calm betrayed by a white face and a sheen of perspiration on his forehead.

'Are we safe now?' Fred asked.

'I wouldn't like to bet on it. Remember Sarah said a round thing with tubes appeared in her bedroom. In fact until we have uprooted the thing no one in this house is safe.'

'What on earth is it?'

'Some kind of ele-monster. I would say it has been there since the dawn of history, but has only been activated twice in the last one hundred and fifty years. Once by our unknown nasty men, and once by the goings-on of Giles and Penelope.'

'And now?'

Francis stared thoughtfully back along the shadow-haunted passage. 'My needs are simple. One pick-axe, something very sharp – a sword would be ideal – one or two lamps, and – oh, yes – a shopping bag.'

Fred said: 'Ugh!'

Lord Camtree, resplendent in a quilted dressing-gown, scowled and barked: 'You want what?'

Francis assumed his most winsome smile. 'One pick-axe, a sword with a sharp edge, one or two lamps, and most important – a shopping bag.'

'You wake me up in the middle of the night and . . .'

'Lord Camtree, if you knew what was under your cellars, I doubt very much if you would sleep at all.'

Penelope and her brother were standing a little behind their father, both wearing dressing-gowns and a surprised, not to mention, innocent expression, but Fred saw the anxious gleam in the young man's eyes. She said softly:

'I wouldn't ask for details, if I were you. Just give Francis what he requires, then hope, pray and put your trousers on. It's a bit chilly for a cross-country run in pyjamas.'

For a while it seemed as if the millionaire might argue, but perhaps it was the psychic detective's grim, white face, that finally made him say simply: 'Very well. I'll have Carruthers woken up and no doubt he will be able to provide the items you need.'

'Plus a length of wire flex,' Francis added. 'Good strong wire flex.'

Fred stroked her throat with not quite steady fingers.
'Francis, can't I go home?'

Fred carried a wicked-looking sabre in one hand, a pick-axe in the other, and had a six-foot length of thick wire flex slung round her neck. Francis walked in front carrying a torch and a leather shopping bag. His assistant raised her voice in protest.

'Now I'm a pack horse. A gentleman would carry the heavy stuff.'

'Ah—but I ain't no gentleman. Now, don't forget when we reach the circular room, there's to be no messing about. Straight for that bloody thing before it can vomit any more essence-suckers.'

'Must you express yourself so crudely? And don't walk so fast. Anyone would think you were eager to get there.'

'I am. There's no telling how long an essence-sucker can last without nourishment. I don't want to find a couple of hundred waiting for you.'

Fred stopped. 'That's it. I'm not going into that place again . . .'

'Don't be so bloody silly. Don't you trust the young master to see you're all right?'

'No.'

'All right—tell you what. You can stay in the passage until I've got the lamps going and got the ele-monster anchored down.'

Fred gave the matter her full consideration. 'Very fine. But suppose one of those essence-thingy's makes a bee-line for me?'

'I'll swipe it with me rib-tickler.'

'Suppose you miss?'

'My heart will bleed for you. Now, come on.'

The upper temple looked much as they had left it; the altar stone pushed back, the candle-flames gently fanned by an upward draught which came from the gaping hole. Francis reached into the shopping bag and produced three hurricane lamps, and after placing them on the floor, raised the glass chimneys and applied lighted match to wicks.

'There,' he said cheerfully, 'I will look like Florence Nightingale in drag. Now, let us go down and do battle.'

With the handles of three lanterns in one hand, gripping the sword hilt firmly in the other, the wire flex round his

neck, and leaving Fred to transport the remainder of their equipment, the psychic detective ran swiftly down the stairs and into the subterranean passage. When he reached a point where the walls began to slope outwards, he shouted:

'Fred, stay back, but come a-running when I yell.'

'Don't do anything stupid,' she pleaded.

'Do I ever?'

He crossed the open space more slowly, his eyes strained to catch a glimpse of the monstrosity that was rooted in the wall. Suddenly something came spinning across the floor, and instantly the sabre rose and fell, leaving a pool of green slime that seethed for a few moments before evaporating. Now Francis crept forward on the balls of his toes, his breathing controlled, his face devoid of all expression; looking like a lean, handsome panther stalking its prey.

The ele-monster appeared to be sleeping. The long neck was limp, the head resting on the floor, but the blue eyes were wide open, the mouth a pulsating hole where a black tongue licked ruined teeth.

'So,' Francis whispered, 'we appear to be a little tired. Not been getting our din-dins regularly and forced to indulge in wasteful manufacture.'

The neck stirred and came slowly upward, as Francis placed his hurricane lanterns in a neat row, each one about three feet from the other. Then he stood back and waited. Presently the familiar bulge came undulating along the neck, the mouth yawned and the brown balloon bounced on to the floor. Before it had time to inflate, Francis ran forward and punctured the skin with his sword tip, then jumped back as the head tried to fasten its lips on to his neck.

Three essence-suckers were dispatched in as many minutes, before the neck again became limp, the mouth opening and closing like that of an exhausted man. Francis nodded slowly, laid the sabre down, then after taking a deep breath, took a running jump – and landed on the neck.

He shouted: 'Fred – now,' as the pink, obscene length writhed, contorted and heaved in an effort to break free from the pair of feet that kept the head face down on the floor. Fred came running. She dropped the pick-axe and shopping bag, took in the scene with one quick glance and said: 'Ugh!'

'Sit on it,' Francis instructed.

'Not on your life.'

'SIT ON IT. As near my feet as you can get. I have to remove one foot so I can get the wire into position.'

With great reluctance, with little muted gasps, Fred lowered her shapely posterior down on to the heaving roundness, then sat still with arms clasped about her knees.

'You must understand,' Francis explained as he pulled the wire flex from around his neck, 'there are no muscles, certainly no bones. You are sitting on two folds of skin . . .'

'Oh, Lord - must you?'

' . . . and no more essence-suckers can get through. You are blocking their passage. Now, all I have to do . . .' He began to match action with words. ' . . . is remove the left foot. The head obligingly comes up and I slip the wire underneath . . . so . . . tighten . . . make a nice reef knot . . . and . . . Bob's your uncle.'

'Can I get up now?'

Francis removed his other foot and watched the head beat out a tattoo on the floor. 'Not on your life or mine. I've got an uprooting job to do before peace descends on the house and old Camtree can sleep the sleep of the unjust. Hang on to your knick-knacks.'

He took up the pick-axe, moved to a position that was roughly three feet from the circular patch of earth in which the base of the monster was embedded, then prepared to strike. Before he could raise the axe, a low whistle began from a little above floor level and quickly grew into an ear-splitting shriek. Suddenly Dora was standing just within the circle of light, a white, sinister figure, her eyes black pools of hate as the shriek reached its highest pitch, then died away. Francis St Clare lowered the pick-axe and shook his head in sad reproof.

'You really mustn't make a noise like that. It disturbs Fred.'

The child voice hissed the tortured words. 'You can't . . . do that. You . . . are . . . robbing . . . me . . . of . . . life . . . of . . . life.'

Francis took a fresh grip on the pick-axe handle.

'I cannot take life - only remove it to another place.'

He swung the axe up into a sudden whirl of movement; the sharp point struck the tightly packed earth, sank in to half of its length, then, under the pressure of Francis's wrist, levered free a few gouts of wet loam that fell to the floor with a soggy thud. Dora shrieked again, and the ele-monster inflated, became as a bloated tyre; arched its back and en-

deavoured to loop it round Francis's neck. He struck again and the earth fell away, revealing pink roots from which a sluggish stream of green liquid flowed in those places where they had been severed. As the pick-axe carved deeper and the earth turned to slimy mud, Dora's screams died to a despairing wail; a pathetic dirge for the passing of a borrowed life.

'What do I do if she turns into a ruddy snake?' Fred asked, while watching the digging operation with deep concern.

'Bash her with your shopping bag,' Francis instructed, dropping the pick-axe and spitting on his hands. 'Now for a bit of tug and pull. Are you all right down there?'

'Oh, I'm fine. Apart from sobbing Dora on my right, a heaving something underneath and Gawd-Knows-What-Going-On to me left - I've got nothing to worry about.'

'Well - it should be over any time now.'

Without hesitation he swung his right leg over the, by now, wrinkled trunk, gripped the coarse skin - and pulled. The ripping, sucking, squelching sounds were accompanied by a running commentary.

'Come out . . . pull 'em out and wave 'em around . . . ah . . . six more inches . . . now . . . foot on wall . . . tug . . . jerk . . . it's coming . . .'

'Don't fall back on me,' Fred interrupted. 'I don't want to land on that ruddy head.'

'Shut up, the young master's working. At last . . . pay-off . . . it's coming out . . . yards and yards of it.'

This was indeed true. A seemingly endless mass of interwoven roots, pink, with little gobbets of congealing green matter clinging to the broken ends - it slid from the loosened earth and formed an ever-growing pile in front of the red-faced psychic detective. He began to back away and eventually bumped into Fred, who at once voiced her objections.

'Eh, watch it! You've pushed me towards the head - and it's snapping.'

'Sit on it.'

'No way. Not for all the gold in Camtree's teeth.'

Francis continued his root gathering operation.

'Then stand up and put your foot on it. The thing's too weak now to do any damage. Wait a minute . . . Here comes the tap root.'

The 'tap root' was bright red, tapered down from the

thickness of a man's arm to a thin waving tip, and was possibly twelve feet or more in length. No sooner had it been jerked from its damp bed, than a strange blackness spread up the subsidiary roots; and the main body of the creature deflated, became slack folds of wrinkled skin that tore when Francis pulled them. He looked round as the head went rolling across the floor and came to rest in front of one hurricane lamp.

'So,' he said, 'one dead ele-monster, one free-lance head, and no Dora. Our work is almost done.'

'Almost!' Fred enquired. 'Not absolutely?'

He smiled and glanced down at grotesque remains. They already resembled a heap of burnt grass. 'You have forgotten headless Charlie. Catch hold of the shopping bag and open it wide.'

Fred grimaced. 'I say, this is a messy business - isn't it?'

Up in the warm, bright-lit house, in the corridor which led to the dining-room, the headless footman of Hadleigh walked slowly along his haunting path. He had performed about half of his ordained journey, when Francis St Clare stepped out of a doorway holding a leather shopping bag in one hand. Bending down he tipped out *that* which it contained, then straightening up said quietly:

'You need walk no more. That which you seek is here. Be complete and rest.'

The figure became still. A decapitated head stared up with sightless eyes at the shade of its long-dead body. Then Francis murmured: 'It will be buried in consecrated ground, I promise you.'

A little puff of mist rose up from the serrated neck; whirled like smoke disturbed by a breeze on a summer day, then took on the features of a pale young man. The full lips parted slightly and became a ghost of a ghostly smile, before the entire apparition vanished. Francis put his arm round Fred's shoulders.

'And that's all the thanks we get. Let's hope that old Camtree will be more forthcoming.'

'I suppose you've done a good job,' Lord Camtree said, lighting a cigar and leaning back in his chair. 'The place feels right. So long as that damned headless thing has gone - I'm satisfied.'

'I buried the head in one corner of the churchyard,' Francis said. 'I don't think you'll be bothered again. But have that iron cross taken up and the skeleton you'll find beneath either burnt or decently interred.'

The millionaire nodded. 'I'll give instructions to Carruthers. Anything else?'

'Only the bill. You'll be receiving it in due course.'

Lord Camtree looked down his long nose.

'I only wish I could make my money as easily.'

Fred opened her mouth and made a rude noise. Francis smiled down at his client.

'Sir, may you never meet yourself coming downstairs. Also, let us hope and pray I am worth every penny of my fee, and have not been careless. If the teeny-weenest root has been left behind – it could grow and grow . . . Then I would have to come back – and charge double.'

'What on earth are you talking about?' Lord Camtree demanded.

The world's only practising psychic detective bowed.

'Nonsense, sir. Utter nonsense – I hope.'

Fred nodded violently. 'Amen to that. Double amen.'

Together they went out and Francis gently closed the door behind them.

THE COST OF DYING

The man in the train – the individual on the opposite seat – had one of the most horrible faces that Hugh Carrington had ever seen.

In the first place he had no recollection of the fellow entering the carriage. He had happened to glance up – and there he was. An awful white face that was long and horse-like, with deep, sunken eyes that glared at him while a set of huge, yellow teeth were bared in a ferocious grin. The ears stood out on either side of the narrow head like tapering wings; the short, black hair was not unlike a stiff scrubbing brush; and the jutting beak of a nose would not have disgraced a carrion-crow.

The thin, round-shouldered body was dressed in a shabby black suit, and Hugh, who had an eye for such details, noted

it was buttoned the wrong way round. The woman's way – from right to left. It was a small point, but it helped to add to the fellow's oddness; accentuated the horror of that malignant face.

After a third, fascinated glance, Hugh again took refuge behind his newspaper, unpleasantly aware that the glaring eyes were studying him with a kind of unholy interest. Then a sound made him tremble, a kind of harsh, hissing noise which, after an interval of perhaps ten seconds, was repeated and Hugh, much against his will, was forced to come out of hiding.

The face was no less horrible, but now it wore an expression of grotesque affability. The mouth was twisted into a leer, and the eyes gleamed with a kind of obscene good humour, reminding Hugh of a slightly drunk commercial traveller who is burning with the urge to relate a particularly filthy story. Then the yellow teeth parted and a harsh, shouted whisper tortured his ears.

"Ere – you can see me – can't you?"

Hugh would have ignored the question had it been at all possible, but some inner urge made him answer. 'Yes, of course I can see you.'

A short barking laugh. A wagging, dirty talon of a forefinger came half way across the carriage, making Hugh shrink back in his seat.

"There ain't no "of course" about it, Cocky. I'd say there isn't one geezer in ten million that can see me. Means you and me 'ave something in common, that does.'

The idea was ridiculous, unthinkable, and Hugh lost some of his fear in the rising mist of anger. 'I doubt if we have anything in common. Anything at all.'

The leer deepened, and the narrow body shook with silent laughter. 'But we 'ave, Cocky, otherwise 'ow come you can see – and 'ear me? Aye? You see, I ain't got no substance.'

Hugh said: 'Oh!' and the full tidal wave of fear came roaring back, because it was obvious that the creature was mad, and to be alone with a madman in a fast-moving railway carriage was a very unsettling prospect. The mouth opened, a black tongue came out, the throat contorted and he heard a ripple of cackling giggles.

'Don't believe me, do yer? Come on – admit it – you don't believe I ain't got no substance.'

Again it would have been more comforting to remain

silent; to raise the newspaper and cut off all communication with this mad horror, but there was the fleeting thought that it might turn vicious if provoked. So Hugh said: 'Of course you have substance. We all have substance.'

'That's where you're wrong, Cocky. Damn yer liver and lights, stuck-up, go-to-church-on-Sunday, bath-every-day, and clean-underclothes-every-Friday, and kiss-me-arse-bowler-'at-wearer – that's where you're bloody wrong. 'Ere, I'll show yer.'

Thereupon the Thing – Hugh could think of no better definition – leaped to its feet, and after clenching its fists – drove its arms inwards.

The train went thumpy-thumpy, thumpy-thumpy, and the countryside flashed by the window, and from the next carriage came the sound of youthful laughter, and all the while Hugh Carrington stared with open mouth and bulging eyes at the impossible. Two thin, black-sleeved arms were plunged up to the elbows into a flat stomach. When the Thing turned round, a pair of hands waved to him from a position just above the meagre buttocks. Then the head twisted right round and grinned at him from over the bowed shoulders.

'What 'ave you got to say about that, then?'

Hugh did not say anything. He fainted.

Mrs Carrington had three children who sometimes needed her motherly attention. They were, arranged in chronological order, aged thirteen, seventeen and forty-eight, and perhaps it was the eldest who caused her the greatest anxiety. Hugh Carrington had been blessed – or cursed – with a mother who had supervised his underwear, diet, sleeping hours, his colds, headaches, nervous attacks, toothache, suspected rheumatism, sciatica and weak heart. She had also trimmed his hair and cut his toe-nails. The young Mrs Carrington had inherited these duties on the day of her marriage, and so well had the older woman chosen, instructed and trained, she actually appeared to enjoy them. Therefore, when Hugh staggered over the front doormat and made for the nearest chair, her mind automatically thought of bread-poultices, hot-lemon, aspirins, and a nice hot-water bottle for the feet. In the meanwhile, purely as a delaying measure, until the precise nature of the current ailment became apparent, she poured out a torrent of comforting words.

'Oh, dear, you do look poorly. Doing too much, that's the trouble. Is it your heart again? Or perhaps the old

tummy? Would you like me to get a hot-water bottle and put it under your waistcoat? My, you're all white and sweaty.'

Hugh waved his left hand in an impatient gesture. 'Nothing like that. I've had a ghastly experience. Man in the railway carriage . . .'

A gleam of interest lit Mrs Carrington's normally bovine eyes, for she was a regular reader of the *News of the World* and therefore was not completely devoid of education.

'No! Well I never! Who would have thought it? And at your age too . . .'

Hugh interrupted her with some abruptness, and had it not been for his extreme agitation, might have delivered a lecture on the general stupidity of women and his wife in particular. As it was he could only wave both hands as a demand for undivided attention, and continue with his disjointed narrative.

'An awful-looking fellow . . . face like a demented horse . . . said we had something in common . . .'

'Great heavens!' Mrs Carrington ejaculated.

'Then he got up . . . clenched his fists . . . and drove them through his stomach.'

Mrs Carrington collapsed back into her chair, and expelled her breath in one sigh of shocked horror.

'How disgraceful! What is the world coming to? In a railway carriage too.'

'Then,' Hugh went on, 'he turned round, and his hands waved to me from over the top of his - nether parts.'

Mrs Carrington's mind raced along at such a speed, her reasoning power was apt to take some little time to catch up - but sooner or later it did. Therefore, although she was aware some very strange events took place in the wide world that lay beyond her front door, she was at last forced to stop and take note of certain statements her husband had just made. Surprise and alarm came towards her in great leaps and bounds.

'Forgive me for doubting you, dear, but . . . Would you like me to get you some of that nice cooling medicine? You know - the pink stuff . . .'

'Medicine! What damn good will medicine do?'

Alarm made Mrs Carrington brave. 'Don't you think, dear, that your highly-strung nervous system is a bit over-strained? I mean to say, you are very clever - but you've never talked about men pushing their arms into their stomachs before.'

Hugh had been looking for a proverbial straw, and when one was thus tossed to him he grabbed it with all the desperation of a drowning man who had given up all hope of salvation.

'That must be it! My nerves! Why didn't I think of that?' He appealed to his wife who was pondering on the virtues of cod-liver oil and malt. 'You don't suppose my brain is sick? I mean, many people of my sensitivity have gone round the bend.'

'Nonsense. You must go to bed early, and I'll bring you some nice chicken broth, and later on you must take three vitamin B tablets, and that will build your nerves up. Then after a day or so in bed, you'll be your old self again.'

Hugh said that although she lacked his sensitivity, and moreover had not been over gifted with brains, she was nevertheless a comfort to him in critical times like these. This declaration made Mrs Carrington very happy, and she wiped away a tear before escorting him to bed, where he was fed, doctored, dosed, and given an extra blanket, before she, understanding that he must not be disturbed, retired to a makeshift bed in the dressing-room.

Hugh woke up and glanced at the bedside clock. To his disgust he saw it was but five minutes past two, and there was the dismal prospect of four or five sleepless hours before him. Also, a mixture of chicken broth, vitamin pills, and cod-liver oil and malt was having a violent disagreement with his digestion, and some kind of conciliatory measures were an absolute necessity.

For a while he toyed with the thought of rousing the sleeping Mrs Carrington, but she was a notoriously heavy sleeper, and on this occasion self-service might be advisable. So he got out of bed, put on his dressing-gown and trudged slowly into the bathroom.

From a vast collection of bottles Hugh chose one which had an artistic label proclaiming 'Doctor O'Reilly's Indigestion Mixture', and after shaking the bottle, took a deep swig. He was about to return to his bedroom, when he stopped in mid-step and all but fell over.

The little man with the horrible face was sitting on the lavatory pan. He bared his yellow teeth in that unmistakable leering grin, and said: 'Hullo, Cocky. Pleased to see me?'

Hugh could not tell a lie, and the expression on his face

spoke more eloquently than mere words. The little man shook his head.

'I'm 'urt, Cocky. I was 'oping you and me could be mates. Seeing that we've got something in common. You're the first geezer I've been able to chat-up in fifty years, and it don't seem right that I should be given the elbow.'

'How did you get in?' Hugh asked.

'Through the kitchen wall. 'Aving no substance I can get in anywhere. Now, you go back to beddie-byes and I'll come and sit beside you, and we'll 'ave a little 'eart to 'eart.'

'Go away,' Hugh pleaded. 'Go away, I want nothing to do with you.'

The little figure stood up, and Hugh had the impression that he was confronted by an undernourished, but blood-thirsty weasel. The leer became more pronounced.

'Is that nice, Cocky? Is that 'ospitable? Now, you get back to bed, unless you want me to take me 'ead off, and play football over yer nice carpet.'

Hugh went back to bed and his tormentor seated himself on the bedside chair and rubbed his claw-like hands.

'Well, now. Let's get down to it. I was topped.'

Hugh repeated the word, 'topped', in a voice that was only just above a whisper.

'Yep. Topped. Scragged. Turned off. 'Ung.'

It was only reasonable to ask why, and Hugh did.

'I 'ad a weakness for throats. Could never resist a nice, plump throat. Mind you, I wasn't all that particular how I tickled 'em. Knife, razor, a bit of clothesline—me 'ands. It was all the same to me.' Hugh detected a gleam of pride in the sunken eyes. 'Me total was fifty-three. Never been bettered.'

Hugh had to admit this number was worthy of consideration, but one question was clamouring for recognition.

'What do you want with me?'

The Thing rubbed its hands again, writhed, chuckled and generally behaved in a most revolting fashion.

'That's a thought, ain't it? Let's say I'd like to come out of retirement. For close on fifty years now, I've drifted over a ruddy great sea of lovely throats, and not one 'ave I been able to lay a finger on. It's been like letting a starving man loose in a cook shop, and shoving all the grub behind glass cases so 'e can't touch it. It's been bloody 'ell.'

Hugh thought it would be superfluous of him to comment, so he leaned back against the headboard and waited for

further revelations.

'So, then you came along, Cocky. A geezer that's on me wave-length, wot I can talk to and share me little 'obby with.'

Hugh groaned and said something that sounded like, 'Oh, no' and the narrow body shook with helpless laughter.

"Oo would suspect a respectable geezer like you of throat tickling? A go-to-church, Sunday-dinner-eater like you? And I bet you've got a natural ap-ti-tude for it – being on the same wave-length as me.'

There is a point when credibility is stretched to its maximum limit, and something – somewhere – has to give. Hugh gave – he screamed.

It was a harsh, horselike sound; a kind of high-pitched yell, and for someone who had never screamed before in his life, Hugh did it very well. The sound vibrated through the entire house, disturbed the cat who had been making short work of a mutton chop that had been left carelessly on the kitchen table, sent a marauding mouse scurrying back to its hole, and brought Mrs Carrington up from a deep sleep. A few moments later found her in the main bedroom, clad in bright-green pyjamas, and wearing an expression of polite enquiry.

'You called, dear?'

In the midst of his terror Hugh experienced a feeling of irritation. He pointed to the smirking face and shouted: 'Can't you see? He's here – the man from the train.'

Mrs Carrington looked anxiously at the chair and said: 'Oh, dear! Not again?' and sat down on the bottom of the bed. Hugh looked at her with speechless astonishment, and the Thing proceeded to enlighten him.

'She can't see me, can she? Not on me flipping wave-length, is she? At least – not yet. But I wouldn't be at all surprised ...'

Mrs Carrington recovered sufficiently to make a statement.

'I don't think you are at *all* well, dear. Please don't talk – I'll get you a bowl of nice rabbit stew, wrap your feet in red-flannel, and put a hot-water bottle on your tummy.'

'She ain't got a bad old throat,' said the Thing conversationally.

'Why don't you leave me alone?' Hugh shouted. 'Push off ... go back to where you came from. I'm not doing what you want, and that's flat.'

Mrs Carrington began to cry without tears, an accomplishment that was peculiarly her own, and poured out a flood of soft-coated words, which in the past had always damped down anger, if not extinguished it.

'I don't know why you speak to me like that, when I have always been, or at least tried to be a loving and dutiful wife, and as for going back to where I came from, you are well aware that my dear parents passed on twenty years ago, and I never wanted you to do anything that you don't want to do. Never . . . never . . . never.'

The Thing screwed up its eyes, then shook its head in mock sadness. 'I'd 'ave tickled 'er throat years ago. I wouldn't 'ave 'ad 'er rabbiting on like that. A length of rope round that there neck, and 'er eyes would 'ave popped out like ripe grapes.'

It was then that something very terrible happened.

Hugh was terrified, doubtful of his sanity, but as he listened to that harsh, whispering voice, a mental picture of his wife with a piece of cord embedded in her throat, with her eyes bulging and her mouth gaping, flashed across his brain – and it was not all that unpleasant. Before he could check the words, they came tumbling from his tongue, like coins from a fruit machine. 'I'd never get away with it.'

'I'm sure I don't know what you mean,' said Mrs Carrington. 'Why should you want to get away, is beyond my comprehension. You have a nice home, two beautiful children, who don't bother you now because they are away at school, not that I wanted them to go, but you insisted and I always bow to your wishes.'

'Go on,' the Thing whispered, 'ave a go. Get cracking with the curtain cord.'

'Shut up,' Hugh shouted.

'I won't say another word,' Mrs Carrington promised, rising to her feet, 'but nothing will stop me doing my wifely duty. I'm going to heat up the rabbit stew, and prepare the red flannel, then fetch the spare hot-water bottle from pussy's basket – and nothing you can say will stop me.'

'But something you could *do* would,' sneered the Thing.

Hugh waited until the door had closed behind his wife before he spoke again. A three-way conversation, with one participant disembodied and another mentally confused, was extremely tiring. He looked at the Thing and became aware that familiarity was blunting his fear, and that the creature's

unfortunate appearance – while it was no less revolting – was becoming more acceptable.

‘Look here, this has got to stop. To invade the privacy of my home is bad enough, but to dare suggest that I – well – dispose of my wife in the manner you have described – is perfectly disgraceful.’

‘Perhaps,’ observed the Thing thoughtfully, ‘it would be a bit too near ’ome. Take a bit of explaining away. But I can fit you up with a few outside jobs.’

‘Out of the question,’ Hugh protested. ‘I don’t want to hear another word.’

‘The pay’s good.’

‘The – the pay!’

The Thing drew nearer, its nightmare face was the really only vivid object in the room – all else was misty shadows, that had as much relationship to reality as a dream to the cold starkness of a winter’s morning. The whispering voice held the coaxing promise of red-coated joys, the fulfilment of deep buried desires, the rustle of crisp new banknotes, the popping of champagne corks, the closing of bedroom doors – the total freedom from conscience.

‘The labourer is worthy of ’is ’ire – don’t the good book say that? We pay well for services rendered – very well – and so long as you keep sending ’em over, anything that your little ’eart desires is yours. It was different in my day. I ’ad nobody ’igh up on the other side to look after me interests. Think of it – lots of lovely money . . .’

‘I’m not listening,’ Hugh protested. ‘I haven’t heard a word.’

‘All for tickling a few throats,’ the Thing went on, ignoring the interruption. ‘And it’s not as though you’d be found out. We look after our own. No little walk on a cold morning – no doing porridge. Just the world as yer little playground.’

The door crashed open and Mrs Carrington entered, carrying a tray, which contained a steaming bowl of rabbit stew, a hot-water bottle and a folded length of red-flannel. This she placed on the bedside table, and then gave Hugh a sad, long-suffering smile, thus informing him that all was forgiven, and she was prepared for the next series of insults.

But Hugh could only stare at the chair and rejoice at its complete emptiness.

‘He’s gone! He’s not there any more!’

‘That’s nice, dear.’ Mrs Carrington was rolling back the bedclothes. ‘That shows you’re feeling better. Now eat your

hot rabbit stew, while I wrap your feet in this red-flannel.'

Hugh did not eat the rabbit stew, his indigestion was bad enough as it was, but he watched his wife with a kind of baleful interest. Mrs Carrington was delighted to be regarded at all. So often she was simply ignored.

Four days later found Hugh Carrington motoring back from a small town in the north of England when his car, with the perversity of its kind, broke down. It needed but a simple adjustment, well within his mechanical know-how, but scarcely had the job been completed, the tools put away, when Hugh realized that he was parked outside a bus shelter and that someone was asleep inside.

The road was deserted, bordered on either side by dense woods, and the bus shelter was a small wooden hut open in the front and enclosed on three sides. Hugh crept up to the entrance and peered down upon the sleeper. A tramp—or what passed for a tramp in this day and age—a large, middle-aged man clad in a number of overcoats, red of face, bald of head, and gifted with a fat neck. His eyes were tight shut, his mouth wide open, and an empty wine bottle lay on the wooden bench beside him.

The Thing was sitting in the far corner, its hideous face half hidden by shadow.

'Lovely, ain't 'e, Cocky? All laid out for yer. Got it made, you 'ave.'

Hugh backed away, but at the same time there was an awful urge—a kind of inner demand—to do something dreadful to that fat neck. He said, 'No . . . no,' several times, but his hands would keep jerking out, his fingers curved into claws without any conscious orders from his brain, and the Thing was cackling away there in the corner as though he—Hugh—were a very funny comedian in an old film.

'Go on, Cocky, let the old thumbs find the windpipe, then squeeze 'til the eyes pop . . . that's it . . . that's the stuff to give the troops . . . look at 'is tongue and listen to 'im gurgle . . . music that is . . . better than any of yer sympathy orkers . . . ah . . . ah . . . bugger me liver and lights . . . that's good . . . good . . .'

Hugh found himself looking down at a purple face, bulging, glaring eyes, a protruding tongue that resembled a piece of chewed leather, before he released the soft, bruised neck. He jerked his head round and shouted at the gibbering shape

in the far corner.

'You did it. You . . . you . . . I couldn't commit a murder. Strangle a man who I had never laid eyes on before. Damn you, I never realized I was doing it.'

The Thing got up. Its face positively gleamed with unholy joy, and it was holding something between its cupped hands. Something white and misty, that seemed to flutter like a trapped moth. The harsh, whispering voice was the night-wind rejoicing over the downfall of a giant tree, or the whine of a starving wolf who sees a lone traveller sleeping under the stars.

'You did it, Cocky. You've always wanted to do it . . . and you'll go on until yer stomach can take no more. And I've got what matters. The kernel, the acorn . . . the precious little jewel.' A short pause, then: 'You'll get yer cheque next month.'

One second later found Hugh alone with a very nasty corpse and a screaming conscience. He ran to his car and drove swiftly away from the scene of clumsy murder.

Time laid its layer of dust over the mirror of memory, and Hugh Carrington began to think of that episode in the bus shelter as an event that he had witnessed, but in which he had not participated. The fact that he might have to witness other such horrific scenes was still a blood-chilling prospect, but not quite so unacceptable as once it had been. This was particularly so after he had received the brown envelope with the inscription 'Post Office' printed on the outside.

'How much did you say?' Mrs Carrington gasped.

'Seventy-five thousand pounds,' Hugh repeated for the third time. 'It is the top dividend from my premium bond. The one you gave me last Christmas, wrapped up in that dreadful scarf you knitted.'

'And you almost threw it on the fire,' sighed Mrs Carrington. 'What a good job you didn't.'

'I wonder,' Hugh was staring thoughtfully at the blazing, open fire, 'can it be the wages of sin is seventy-five thousand pounds a month?'

'I'm sure I don't know what you mean, dear,' said Mrs Carrington, arranging her normally placid features into an expression of simulated horror. 'A nice person like you is entitled to all the good fortune that life has to offer.'

His next assignment presented itself about four weeks later.

He was walking through Richmond Park, when he saw in the distance two figures sitting on a bench. He looked from left to right, then back over his left shoulder – there was no one else in sight, but it seemed as though every tree, every blade of grass, had suddenly acquired a pair of eyes and he was being watched by every one of them. A breeze sprang up and whispered in his ear; words went swimming across his brain, while way back in the dark cavern which lies somewhere behind the bottomless pool of the subconscious a quiet voice said: ‘Turn around and walk away.’

But the swimming words were shouted, and fear joined forces with joyful anticipation, and he was as powerless to control his feet as the wild beating of his heart.

As Hugh approached the bench the two figures, sitting so intimately side by side, gradually took on recognizable features and formed a picture that could never be forgotten. The one on the left was a pear-shaped little woman of perhaps fifty years of age, attired in a thick, dark-blue coat, a round, misshapen hat, and a pair of white ankle socks. Her plump, childlike face, which was adorned by large, horn-rimmed spectacles, wore an expression of intense concentration as she peeled an apple with a long and very sharp knife. The figure on the right needed no introduction.

‘Hullo, Cocky. Look what we’ve got ’ere. A nice little bit of ripe ’ow’s yer father, that’s brought ’er own throat tickler. Another cushy little number.’

Hugh sank down on the far end of the bench, and the pear-shaped lady gave him a beaming smile.

‘Good morning. Isn’t it beautiful out here?’

Hugh agreed that it was in a low, husky voice.

‘I always come here when the weather is fine and feed the birdies. They are all friends of mine, you know. Oh, yes, I chat to them, and let them know all my troubles, and they tell me all sorts of interesting things. Would you like a piece of apple?’

Hugh refused the offer with his customary politeness, and tried to ignore the leering face that was peering over the little woman’s bobbing head.

‘Are you sure? I’ve got another one in my bag. Now, I’m going to ask you a very strange question and you mustn’t laugh. Do you believe in fairies?’

Hugh stated emphatically that he did not, at least not in the story-book kind.

'That means you haven't got the sight. Because if you had, you would be able to see that little man with wings who is at this moment, mending that blade of grass.'

'Indeed!'

'Yes. You'd be surprised at the number of invisible beings that are all around us. But they all wish us well. All are bright spirits who are just *radiating* goodness and light and want us to be happy.'

Hugh flinched as the Thing made a horrible hooting noise and flapped its arms about, looking like a scarecrow having a fight with a high wind. He hastily brought the conversation down to essentials.

'That is a wicked-looking knife you have there.'

The pear-shaped lady simpered and held it out for his inspection. 'It belonged to my mother. She used it for all manner of things—chopping vegetables, scraping mud off Dadda's boots, cutting her corns . . . She used to say it was a lovely piece of steel.'

The Thing said: 'Yeah, man—yeah, man,' and ran its invisible fingers over the lady's throat.

'May I—may I see it?'

'Of course.' She handed him the knife, then went on nibbling her apple with the happy content of a child who spends the currency of life by the second. Hugh's forefinger caressed the keen edge, and little rivulets of fire ran up his arm and set light to his brain. Suddenly he was in a shrieking, roaring inferno of red glorious fire; and for a brief eternity of a single minute he was a god with the power of life and death. Then reality rushed in and laid its cold hands on his eyes—and he was a middle-aged man on a park bench who held a blood-stained knife in his hand.

The pear-shaped lady was slumped against the bench back; an awful plastic doll with two mouths. One small, from which a set of false teeth had been projected by a twisted tongue—another, much larger one, with broad scarlet lips which rimmed a wet, gaping cavern that was still ejecting a thick, glutinous stream.

The head, still wearing its round, misshapen hat, was lolling well back over the bench, for a scarce four inches of flesh anchored it to the parent body. Even as Hugh watched, a little more went; a delicate ripping, a gentle tilting of the chin, but it was doubtful if the head would actually fall to the ground. He could see certain sinews, beautifully tinted

muscles, even one or two thin bones.

The Thing was improperly appreciative.

'I'd say you've done a fine old job, there. A few more 'acks and you could 'ave taken the 'ead 'ome and put it on the old mantelpiece. You're a messy killer, though.'

This was very true. The pear-shaped lady had shared her blood with Hugh, to a generous degree. It matted his hair, clogged his ears, soaked the front of his overcoat and was even splashed down his trouser legs. When he moved his feet, they squelched. One question outweighed all others.

'How am I going to go home, looking like this?'

The Thing nodded and the pear-shaped lady twitched. 'You've got a problem, Cocky. I'd say you'll 'ave to use the old loaf.'

It held out its cupped hands and again Hugh saw the fluttering grey something, that might well have raised an interesting line of enquiry if the immediate problems had not been so pressing. 'But what am I going to do? If I am seen looking like this, people will remember - then I've had it.'

'Didn't I tell yer to use the old loaf? Wash your face and mits in that stream, then fold your overcoat inside out and carry it . . .'

'But my shirt front . . .'

'Tear the lining out of the overcoat - use it as a scarf. I don't know, where would you be if I weren't 'ere to do yer thinking for you?'

'The shoes . . . goodness gracious . . . they're clotted . . .'

'You can rub 'em, can't you? Grass . . . the old darling's petticoat . . . an 'andful of 'er 'air . . . Strike a light, there's plenty of gimping stuff about.'

'How do I look?' Hugh asked some five minutes later.

'Fresh as a daisy. You could go up to a copper, ask 'im the time, and 'e'd touch 'is 'elmet without blinking an eye. Now, I'd get cracking if I was you. Never know when some nosey parker is going to come belting along.'

They walked away together, and the pear-shaped lady seemed to regret their departure, for she slid down another six or seven inches, and her head slewed round and peered at them from under the top rail of the bench back-rest. Then the wind came leaping across the park, and it lingered in the vicinity of the bench; toyed with the straggling jet-black hair, removed the round, misshapen hat and sent it spinning into the narrow, nearby stream.

When Hugh looked back for the second and last time, he was reminded of a yo-yo on the end of a length of pink string.

'I don't know what made me do it,' Mrs Carrington confessed. 'But I thought that as you were so lucky with the Ernie bond, well—the football pools might be worth considering. I hope you're not cross with me. I did put your name on the form.'

Hugh looked at the cheque for seventy-five thousand pounds, then dropped it on the table as though the scrap of coloured paper had suddenly grown fangs.

'But how the hell did you manage to do it? You can't even write a cheque out correctly.'

Mrs Carrington was looking properly repentant, and tried to vindicate the enormity of her crime.

'I was only trying to help, dear. I mean to say—money is the most important thing there is—isn't it? One can't have too much. And as for filling the form in—a nice, but strange little man called—and he really was most helpful. Said he was from the Infernal Home Help Society. He told me where to put those funny little X's, and how to put your name and address on the back, and how to put a cross in the non-publicity box . . . You don't look well, dear.'

'*Strange-looking . . . little man! Called here . . . and you saw him?*'

'Please sit down, dear, and let me get you some nice hot bone-soup. You've not been yourself for some time, and you really should eat more—and get some rest. You're getting wasted-looking—scraggy round the neck . . .'

'Damnation, don't keep on about your bloody soup—who was this man? Describe him.'

Mrs Carrington did her best to comply. 'He had what my dear mother would have called—an unfortunate face. Sort of thin, hollow cheeks—I don't suppose he had anyone to make him some nice hot soup—and deep, sunken eyes, that were at times—well, a little unpleasant. But, as mother used to say, we mustn't judge a parcel by its wrapping, it's what's inside that counts. And I'm sure the gentleman had a kind heart.'

But Hugh was listening to the quiet inner voice, that had been trying to make itself heard for some time. It had some interesting and deeply disturbing things to say, of which not

least of them was: 'To walk on the edge of a precipice is one thing – to jump off is another.'

The Thing did not visit Hugh for three entire weeks, and during that period of respite he prepared for what can be best described as a reformation campaign. Therefore when the awful face and grotesque body materialized beside the television set. Hugh was filled with terror-tainted resolution. The Thing grinned.

'Watch yer, Cocky. Miss me 'ave yer? Or 'ave you been too busy counting the doings? One 'undred and fifty thousand nicker in two months – and all tax free. Makes yer think, don't it? Next time we'd better play the gee-gees.'

'There won't be a next time,' Hugh said quietly.

The Thing smirked and shook its head. 'Don't think I 'eard yer correctly. I could 'ave sworn you said – there weren't going to be a next time.'

'That's right.' Hugh walked resolutely over to his writing-bureau, and took out three objects. He turned and faced the Thing, then slowly raised a thick, black bible. 'See this?'

The face was twisted into an expression of profound distaste. 'Nasty. Very nasty.'

Hugh then held up a bottle of holy water, which had been procured at great expense from the black market. 'And this?'

'Orrible. I'm fair ashamed of you, Cocky.'

Hugh then produced his *pièce de résistance* – a gilt crucifix which he had bought from a stall in Berwick Market. The Thing gave a loud scream and went hurling back against the far wall, where it writhed, grimaced, gnashed its teeth and generally behaved in the fashion that one might expect from a foul demon that is confronted by the ultimate symbol. Hugh, much encouraged, went on to declare his intentions.

'I do hereby adjure you and your master and all his works, to get from hence, as I have no intention of carrying out your evil designs any more. So depart . . . Push off. Sling your hook . . .'

The Thing waved its hands frantically. 'All right . . . all right . . . I get the message. You don't 'ave to make a song and dance about it. There'll be no more little jobs. The partnership is dissolved.'

Hugh began to feel very worried, and he took a firmer grip of his crucifix. 'Where's the catch?'

The Thing spread wide its hands, and hunched its shoulders in an exaggerated shrug. 'Catch! There ain't no catch. You've

done two little jobs – you’ve been paid for them little jobs – now you don’t want to do any more. So! Where’s the fire? You goes your way – I goes mine. What could be fairer than that?’

Hugh began to feel a little easier in his mind. Then a nasty little snake of a suspicion began to uncoil and gradually clothed itself in words. ‘I say – you’re not going to . . . ?’

‘Grass on you? You’ve ’urt me feelings again. Whatever you might say about me and me mates, we ain’t squealers. The trouble with you, Cocky – you worry too much.’

‘Well – so long as there’s no hard feelings.’

The Thing widened its grin, hugged itself in a parody of unrestrained delight, then did a little dance. ‘No ’ard feelings, Cocky. You stay – I go.’

It disappeared. Went out like a suddenly extinguished light, and Hugh was left wondering if it had ever been. After some reflection he decided it had most certainly had been. There were two corpses, the ashes of one suit, one overcoat, a pair of shoes, and a new shirt, to prove that something, if not somebody, had made Hugh Carrington behave in a manner that was not in accordance with English middle-class morality. He sat down, and with the enthusiasm of the newly converted, began to list his shortcomings.

‘I’ve been a prig, a snob and a bully. The way I have treated my poor loving, ever-faithful wife, is unpardonable. And to think it took a demon and two murders to make me realize this. I must go downstairs at once and make the little woman happy.’

Hugh Carrington found Mrs Carrington in the kitchen. She was chopping a turnip up into thin slices with a large carving-knife. She looked up as he entered and gave him her usual, long-suffering smile. ‘Oh, it’s you! I thought that a nice veg and meat stew would go down well today.’

But Hugh had laid a gentle hand on her shoulder and was firmly pushing her down into a chair, while she still clutched the carving-knife in one hand and a half-demolished turnip in the other.

‘Listen, Doris . . .’

‘My name is Elizabeth.’

‘Listen, Elizabeth. In the past I’ve been a surly, ungrateful pig . . .’

‘Oh, you’ve never been surly or ungrateful . . .’

‘. . . and it took a horrible experience for me to realize

this, and what a wonderful gem of a wife I possess.'

'I'm sure I've done my duty, and if you have been a bit irritable at times, that was only to be expected.'

Hugh was beginning to feel irritable now. Somehow, the full importance of his sudden reformation did not seem to be getting across. He tried again. 'I've had a lot on my mind recently. A lot. And because of that worry, I've been ill-tempered, rude, and have not behaved as a loving husband should. But all that will change from now on. I intend to think of you, and be grateful for all you have done, and all that you are going to do for me in the future.'

Mrs Carrington burst into tears and waved a decapitated turnip at her repentant husband, which was the first angry gesture he had ever seen her make. 'How can you be so mean? Making things so difficult for me by being so nice...'

Hugh was not unmoved by the solemnity of the occasion, even while he pondered on the unpredictable moods of women, who smiled at insults and cried when they were happy. And Mrs Carrington - Elizabeth - how could he have forgotten such a beautiful name? - was surely happy. Otherwise why should she be sliding an arm up over his shoulders, and why should her soft, but strong hand, be taking such a firm grip on the back of his neck? And she was smiling up at him through a veil of tears, so that Hugh suddenly realized that his wife was not only stupid, loving, houseproud, and an awful cook - but beautiful as well. This was such a shock, that he totally ignored the words that were coming out of that - yes - there could be no doubt, lovely mouth. This was extremely unfortunate.

'I do love you, dear, and nothing . . . absolutely nothing in this world, would make me slit your darling throat - but money. But the strange little man with the unfortunate face did offer me a double fee. You understand, dear?'

'All that I understand,' said Hugh, his voice trembling with emotion, 'is that I love you.'

'That is nice,' said Mrs Carrington, pulling his head back with one hand, while she took a firmer grip on the carving-knife with the other. 'I've always wanted to be loved.'

She did a superb job. Hugh died happy, with hardly a murmur or a gasp, and under the circumstances there was very little mess. Mrs Carrington was busy with squeezy mop and bucket when the Thing came out of the broom cupboard.

'Lovely action, me little darling. Beau-ti-ful. The way you

carved through 'is windpipe was a treat to watch.'

But Mrs Carrington was gazing wistfully at the dismembered portions of her late husband which were piled up on the draining-board.

'That is all very well,' she said, 'but what am I going to do with all the nice soup?'

THE RESURRECTIONIST

Brian Howlett was in love with Pauline Allen.

It was, alas, an unrequited passion, for she had been dead for fifty years and the only record of her brief existence was a collection of old photographs and a weather-stained headstone in the local churchyard.

At seventeen, fifty years is a vast desert of time that stretches far beyond the frontiers of imagination, and Brian thought of that long-dead girl as one who had lived in a foreign country. She had been a cousin of his maternal grandmother, and had, so far as he could ascertain, died of some unspecified disease back in 1923.

The photographs—preserved in a family album—portrayed a slim, dark-haired girl with large beautiful eyes, and a sad haunting smile. Most of the pictures had been taken out of doors: standing against a background of full-bloomed flowers; sitting in a deckchair; standing on a hill, with her hair blown into a black, rumpled veil, while she laughed. The camera had frozen that laugh; captured the gleam of white teeth, the joy-bright eyes, the way her head was flung back. But one picture had her seated in the living-room in the very armchair that Brian's father still used, but now she was smiling gently, her eyes faintly mocking, as they looked down the long corridor of time.

Brian's mother laughed with fond indulgence: 'Gracious me, how you carry on. She died before I was born. Fifty years is a long time. I think she came here for visits during the summer months and your grandfather must have taken those photographs. My word, if she were alive today she'd be over seventy.'

'But she must have died in this house,' Brian pointed out, 'otherwise she wouldn't be buried in the local churchyard.'

'She did indeed,' Mrs Howlett agreed. 'My mother told me about it once. Funny—I've only just remembered. Your grandmother was seated in that very chair, when she said: "Pauline dropped dead in the garden, one summer's day." I expect she mentioned the funeral and lots of other things, but none of it sank in. I wasn't really interested, because after all, I had never met her.'

The headstone told him nothing, but the bold, simple facts.

PAULINE ALLEN
BORN MAY 30th 1903
DIED JULY 7th 1923

The grave had been sadly neglected and was now a mere hump of grass-covered earth that in a few years would disappear altogether. Brian did not attempt to cut the grass, or clean the headstone because it was the tenant he loved, not the house. But once in a while he would put some flowers in a jam-jar and plant it in a nest of tall grass; a simple tribute such as any young man might bring to his sweetheart. And passion fed upon itself and became an obsession.

Then one evening his dream world exploded.

They were seated round the dinner table and Mr Howlett was carving the roast beef, when he broke the momentous news.

'The new motorway—it's coming down Pilbeam Lane.'

Brian's mother stared at him with an expression of shocked dismay.

'No!'

He nodded. 'I said so, didn't I? The lane will be swallowed up and a goodish stretch of old Jarvis's fields as well. To say nothing of the churchyard.'

Mrs Howlett was now really shocked. 'The churchyard! What—will they do with the bodies?'

'Rebury 'em in the new part, I suppose. Most of the old tombstones will be used as paving stones. You see, no one has been buried in that part which borders the lane for nigh on forty years, so it's unlikely there'll be much fuss. Any case, there's nothing we can do. It's all been decided.'

Mrs Howlett said: 'I suppose not,' and got down to the immediate task of dishing up the roast potatoes. Mr Howlett dismissed the subject by saying: 'It's going to be noisy with all that traffic roaring by our front door. Still, I suppose it's progress.'

At first Brian was shocked, horrified and almost demented

by grief. Then came the great thought. Pauline Allen, after an absence of fifty years, was coming back. The body that had posed for photographs, sat in his father's chair and finally dropped dead in the garden was, by the grace of H.M. Ministry of Works, coming up from the grave. The exile was about to pay a fleeting visit to the country of her birth – and death – and thus present an opportunity for the lover to meet his beloved.

No general had ever planned his campaign as Brian devised and rehearsed the attack which must be made on the forces of the commonplace. He was there when the road gang began to demolish the low churchyard wall.

'Where will you put them?'

The large, friendly-looking labourer, leaned on his shovel, then spat with accomplished ease.

'You've got someone in there, 'ave you?'

Brian had his fiction well prepared.

'Yes, a grandmother.'

'You don't say so? Fancy that now. A grandmother is it? Don't fret yourself, 'er bones will be treated with as much reverence as though the Archbishop of Canterbury was 'anding them 'imself. See that long shed they're putting up in that field?' He pointed to a partly erected shed. 'That'll 'ouse 'em a treat, until such times as they can be reburied proper like.'

'Suppose the coffins are . . . ?'

'Broken up? All rotted to bits? Then they piles the bones in one respectful heap, and there won't be so much as a finger out of place. Take my word for it.'

Brian was always there. The foreman ordered him away on several occasions but he just disappeared from one place only to emerge in another, and by the third day he was accepted in an off-hand sort of way. There was something rather appealing about this slim, melancholy youth, who fetched their tea and cigarettes and always seemed to melt into the background whenever the works superintendent put in an appearance. In the meantime the work of raising the long-dead continued.

Forgotten graves were opened; bones that had not walked in the sun for the best part of a century glimmered like white shards on the lush, summer grass. Skulls – ivory orbs from which the divine spark of reason had long since fled – now grinned up at the cloud-flecked sky. Coffin-boards – earth-stained, weakened by damp-rot – were stacked into ragged

piles and burned. A heap of tarnished brass handles was examined with curiosity, then mysteriously disappeared.

On the fifth day they opened the grave of Pauline Allen.

Brian held his breath when he saw the coffin being raised, but anxiety turned to joy when he realized it was intact. No cracks, free from damp, it looked as solid as the day it had been lowered into the earth.

'Sandy soil—dry as a bone,' one workman explained to another. 'I bet she's just as complete inside this box. No air can get in, see.'

They carried Pauline Allen into the temporary mortuary, and Brian waited for nightfall.

A torch, a screwdriver and a lever; Brian Howlett needed little else when he went forth to meet his beloved.

She would be intact—the workman had said so—but there were disquieting stories that told how she would disintegrate once the coffin lid was raised. But would that matter? One glimpse of those features was all he required, and memory would create a picture that time would never erase.

It had not been thought necessary to take any strong security measures against a possible break-in. Who would want to steal a disinterred coffin or a heap of bleached bones? With a single protesting crack, the cheap rimlock surrendered to Brian's lever, and he was there—in the limbo which separated one grave from another. The travellers from this interrupted journey lay on narrow shelves; bones, skulls, broken coffins, the intact—his search took the best part of twenty minutes, but at last he found her. Pauline's coffin, with her name engraved on a small, tarnished brass plate, lay on the floor against the far wall.

The screws had corroded and their heads fell away at the first application of his screwdriver, so he was obliged to use the lever. A cracking, a series of pistol-shot sounds that must surely be heard by the night-watchman who sat by his fire on the far side of the churchyard. But no one came to investigate so he went back to work. Twice more he inserted the lever—then the lid was free and he was able to rest.

He must be calm. Damp down the fires of excitement and hope. Perhaps there was only a skeleton with a grinning skull and naked bones waiting to greet him under the loose lid. But if so, he must not give way to a storm of bitter disappointment. After all, the bones would be her bones, the

skull, her skull, and almost certainly, her hair would be there.

He laid the torch in such a position on a nearby shelf, so that its white beam was directed on to the coffin, then, after taking a deep breath, removed the lid. Five-ten seconds passed; then he sighed like one who has entered heaven against all expectations. The photographs had lied. They had depicted a very pretty girl - in fact she was beautiful.

The hair was not black, but auburn. The long white face, the sweet retroussé nose, the long eyelashes, the full lips - all combined to present a picture of soft, sensitive beauty. Brian held his breath. Would the air make her crumple into dust? How long before the apparent firm flesh disintegrated; the cheeks fall away, the red lips become seared rose-petals, the eyes yawning caverns? Every minute that passed was a bonus. The longer her image remained unimpaired, the deeper would her portrait be etched on his brain.

As the minutes passed he began to marvel at the freshness, the unexpected purity. The white nightgown might have been fresh from a washing-machine; her hair gleamed with a myriad of glittering lights; her skin was without blemish. Presently he dared to touch. The face was soft and - this must have been the result of his fevered imagination - warm, as though healthy blood still coursed through the long-dead veins.

He whispered: 'I wish . . . Oh, God, I wish . . .'

Her eyes opened. Cornflower blue; clear as a wind-swept sky; they moved slightly and looked up at him. The lips parted; a little pink tongue licked white teeth, then she whispered: 'Where am I? Who are you?'

Terror blended with joy and became ecstasy. A miracle! A freak of nature that was beyond his comprehension! Or had he in some unexplainable way, activated some forgotten law and given her life? There could be a thousand answers - or none at all. But whatever - however - it did not matter. She lived. She breathed, whispered and looked up at him with a shy, questioning glance. It was so easy to answer her. So natural.

'You are in your coffin. You died fifty years ago.'

She lay looking up at the gabled ceiling for a little while, as though pondering on this, not unexpected reply. Then: 'I remember. I was standing in the garden, and the sunlight was sending golden spears through the leaves of the elm tree. Do you ever think like that? Golden spears of light? A grey

curtain of mist? There was a great pain in my chest, and a mighty roaring in my ears. I remember thinking – I am hearing the waves of oblivion crashing over the rocks of eternity.'

'Now,' he said, 'you are alive again.'

'Yes, I am.' She tried to nod, but the weakness of the reborn did not permit movement. 'I wonder why? It seems only a moment ago since that summer day in the garden. But you say – fifty years have passed.'

'There is no such thing as time,' he said, 'only events surrounded by empty space. You died – now you live. One event cancels out the other. It is so simple.'

She managed to smile. 'You are so young, yet so profound. I feel weak and tired. I must sleep.'

A great fear flared up into a searing flame.

'If you sleep, you'll . . .'

Her eyes closed, but his straining ears caught the whispered words.

'I won't die again. You . . . won't . . . let . . . me.'

She slept. Peacefully, silently, with only the almost imperceptible rise and fall of her breast to tell him that the recaptured life had not departed. One fact was clear; she must not – could not – remain in this charnel-house.

It was such a delicate operation, requiring patience and much careful thought, for after fifty years, she must of a necessity be fragile. He slid one arm under her shoulders, and another under her knees, then – after a long, anxious pause – lifted her out of the coffin.

She was so light. He could have tossed that white body up into the air with no trouble at all, but of course the idea was unthinkable. He carried her out of the shed with the same care and solicitude as that of a mother bearing her first-born child. He walked down the empty, moonlit road with the proud step of a conqueror, the gay recklessness of an adventurer; for had he not snatched a prize from the black-taloned claws of King Death himself? Gone down into the dark places and looted the treasure house of Pluto and Proserpine? No one saw him carrying his precious burden under the star-speckled canopy of night, save for a screech-owl that squatted on the swaying bough of an oak-tree and watched the passing traveller with round, unblinking eyes. Just before he reached his father's house, Pauline awoke and whispered her soft enquiry into his ear.

'Where are you taking me?'

'Home. Where else? The place where you . . .'

'Died?' She laughed softly—a sweet silvery sound—and his love became as a red, full-bloomed flower. 'You must not be afraid to say that word. But will *they* understand? Will they believe? Called back to life after fifty years! A likely story! They will throw me out into the street.'

Why had he not thought of that? It was so true. He could imagine his mother's shocked face; his father's righteous anger. They would say he was mad; that this white shadow of a girl was a wanton, a refugee from respectability.

'I will hide you,' he said.

'Where?' The question was followed by a bubble of laughter, as if she knew a perfect solution to the problem, but doubted his ability to find one. 'You live in such a small house.'

'The attic.' He nodded slowly. 'Yes, that is it—the attic. No one goes up there now, and there is an old studio-couch. But you will have to be very quiet.'

'I will be as silent as death,' she promised.

Merciful God, how light she was. Even though he had been carrying her for almost a quarter of a mile, there was no feeling of fatigue, no straining of arm-muscles, no longing to put his burden down. When he opened the back door, he was able to hold her with one arm, while turning the handle with the other. She murmured: 'You are strong,' and a little bud of self-confidence opened its petals to a new-born sun.

The stairs had to be climbed one step at a time; and there was an anxious moment when he passed his parents' door, but he was permitted to continue up to the deserted attic without hearing a protesting call. He pressed a wall-switch and a naked electric bulb sprang into instant, eye-searing light.

Discarded furniture, heaps of forgotten books, old clothes, a tennis racket, a broken violin—they all silently proclaimed their allegiance to the dead years. Even the studio-couch, which lay like a forsaken altar under the dormer-window, seemed to be mourning for the long-departed visitor. It was on this that Brian laid his beloved: put a pillow under her head, covered her slim body with an old bedspread, then sat down to gaze upon the pale, smiling face.

'You must be tired, carrying me all that way,' she said.

'Not a bit. Can I talk to you for a while?'

'If you like. What do you want to talk about?'

'You. What was it like back in your world?'

She gave him a shy, questioning look, and he tried to remember time-shrouded dreams that had been lost in childhood.

'It was like living. Blackness, an occasional gleam of light; harsh sounds, that were sometimes broken by a chord of music. You were there—everyone who has ever lived was there.'

'You make it sound so ordinary.'

'It was ordinary. The disease called commonplace has afflicted every generation. Only exceptional people can find the one certain cure.'

He sipped from the tiny cup of happiness.

'I always wanted to know a girl who could talk like that. *You* are exceptional.'

Her hand made a movement as though to touch his, but due possibly to weakness, it slid back to its original position on the couch.

'I am whatever you believe I am.'

Doubts, black thoughts, thin shreds of knowledge, tumbled across his brain like dead leaves before a howling wind, but the solid reality of her presence, and the cool serenity in her eyes, enabled him to stabilize the trembling foundations of transformed reality.

'You are yourself—as you always have been.'

He did not see her eyes close, or actually notice the moment when her consciousness was cut off, but suddenly she was a still, silent figure, that looked so young, so defenceless; a waif that had been snatched from a foreign shore. He rearranged the bedspread, added an old overcoat in case she should become cold during the night, then tip-toed from the room.

Much later, when he finally fell asleep, he became lost in a maze of nightmares that became blurred memories the moment he awoke.

Next day the news sprang from mouth to mouth, then gathered itself up into a ball and became a gruesome story. When Mr Howlett came home at lunchtime, he could scarcely wait to close the door, before the words came pouring off his tongue.

'What do you know? Some nut has pinched a body from its coffin.'

'No!' Mrs Howlett sat down and allowed the wave of terrifying, but exhilarating excitement to overcome her. 'Well, I never!'

'And,' Brian's father delivered his second bombshell, 'you'll never guess whose coffin it was.'

Mrs Howlett's hand flew to her mouth.

'Not . . . ? Don't say . . .'

He nodded vigorously. 'I am going to say it. Pauline Thingumibob. The girl that was buried from this very house. What do you think of that?'

Brian trembled (she had been asleep when he popped in that morning) even while he wondered when he would be able to sneak some food up to the attic. Mrs Howlett was shaking her head.

'Who would have done such a thing?'

'Degenerates,' Mr Howlett stated. 'Black magic, devil worshippers and such like. Though what they want with a skeleton is beyond me.'

'That's right,' his wife agreed, 'stands to reason. After all this time, she must be a skeleton.'

Brian smiled and remembered the white body that was waiting for him in the attic.

'As we signed the forms,' his father went on, 'I guess she's our responsibility. But I can't think of anything we can do.'

'I wonder if she has any relatives still living?' Mrs Howlett asked thoughtfully. 'Surely there must be someone left.'

Brian was able to scrape together a meal when Mrs Howlett was out shopping. A portion of cold steak and kidney pie, some tinned peas, two cold potatoes and a glass of milk. More he dare not take for fear that it might be missed. He carried his offering up to the attic, and there found Pauline wide awake and prepared to reward him with a welcoming smile.

'I thought you were never coming. What have you got there?'

'Not much,' he confessed, 'but all I could manage under the circumstances. I hope you like it.'

'I'm not very hungry. Put it down somewhere and I'll eat it later. What have you been doing?'

'Listening to my father.' He sat down on a rickety dining-room chair. 'They found your empty coffin and there's an awful fuss. They think your body was stolen by devil-worshippers.'

'Oh, no! What a scream! I bet you could hardly stop

yourself laughing.'

'Actually, I was a bit scared. I mean to say, suppose they knew what really happened. I say, listen to this—Mother couldn't imagine what devil-worshippers would want with your body, because—wait for it—it would only be a skeleton.'

'Cheek! I ask you—do I look like a skeleton?'

'No, of course not. Do you feel stronger now?'

She frowned and began to flex her arms and wiggle her toes.

'Not really. Mind you, I feel fine. Absolutely top-rate. But I guess I'll be able to be up and about in a few days.'

'You'll feel much stronger when you have eaten,' Brian pointed out. 'You *must* be hungry.'

'Perhaps I've grown out of the habit of eating,' she suggested, 'but, just maybe, it will come back. I wouldn't know.' She giggled. 'I've never been brought back to life before.'

Before he could comment on this statement, there came from below the sound of a door being opened, and instantly Brian sprang to his feet, terrified lest his secret be discovered. As he ran to the attic door, Pauline laughed and intoned in a soft, mocking voice:

'Poor little boy, he's afraid of his mother,

And dreams all day of being a great lover.'

Mrs Howlett looked up as he entered the kitchen.

'Oh, there you are! I thought you were out.'

'I was upstairs.'

She filled the kettle and put it on the gas-stove.

'You'll never guess what I've been up to. You remember the girl whose remains were stolen? Pauline Allen? Well—I've found her brother.'

'Brother!' It was as though a bucket of cold water had been poured down his back. How could there be a living link between 'then' and 'now'? 'But it's such a long time ago. Fifty years.'

'There's lots of people who were alive fifty years ago, Silly. Of course, he's an old man—seventy-six or so. You see, I'd been thinking, and suddenly remembered a bundle of letters that had been left by my mother. I knew I hadn't thrown them away. And sure enough, I found them at the back of the dressing-table drawer. Two were from a Mr Henry Allen. Imagine, he still lives at the same address. He's in the telephone directory.'

'You . . . you rang him up?' Brian gasped.

'Of course. Why not? He's driving down this evening.'

Brian wanted to yell, shout at the top of his voice; let her know that this old man must not be allowed to tear the protecting veil from the time-scarred face of yesterday. Instead he said: 'Why? What does he want?'

Mrs Howlett looked at her son with shocked surprise.

'What does he want! Naturally he's concerned when some . . . some vandal desecrates his sister's coffin. Apart from which we are some kind of relatives. Funny, he never knew I existed.'

Then his father came in and there was much talk of 'ill-winds that blow no one any good', and dark hints as to 'the mysterious ways of providence', and Brian wanted to tell them to shut up and leave the sacred past alone.

'So you've found yourself a cousin,' exclaimed Mr Howlett for the third time.

Brian's mother giggled. 'Heaven above knows how many times removed. He tells me that he came here for the funeral. Fancy that! Now he's coming back for the first time in fifty years.'

'Pity it's not under more cheerful circumstances,' Mr Howlett remarked with suitable gravity.

'Well, he was only a young man at the time, and after all this time there can't be any real grief. Strange to think that she'd have been an old lady herself, if she had been spared.'

After a long and thoughtful silence, Mrs Howlett said: 'One thing - she never knew what it was like to grow old.'

Brian nodded and then began to smile.

Mr Henry Allen came at sunset.

A withered little dead moth of a man, dressed in a black suit and a white shirt with an old-fashioned, starched collar. He also favoured a black, wide-brimmed hat and a pair of gold-rimmed spectacles. He looked neat, well-washed and bone-dry. Mrs Howlett put him in the best armchair and Mr Howlett offered him a glass of sherry. His refusal was delivered in a strange, harsh, precise voice.

'I never wet my lips with alcoholic beverages.'

Mr Howlett hastily put the decanter back on the sideboard and pretended not to notice the implied rebuke.

'I see. How about a cup of tea or something?'

The gold-rimmed spectacles gave him a cold, gleaming stare.

'Thank you, no. I had my tea before I set out and I make it a habit not to indulge between meals.'

This second rebuff rather impeded the even flow of conversation, and for a while there was an embarrassed silence. Then the visitor enquired:

'Have they apprehended the miscreants yet?'

Mr Howlett frowned: 'The . . . ? I beg your pardon.'

'The monsters. The grave robbers. The ghouls.'

'Oh! No, I'm afraid not. The night-watchman heard and saw nothing.'

Mr Allen grunted deep down in his throat and Brian was reminded of an old and evil-tempered dog.

'Probably asleep. There's no sense of duty these days. No labourer worthy of his hire. What is your occupation, Brother Howlett?'

Surprise at the claim to close relationship seemed to temporarily paralyse Mr Howlett's tongue, but after a quick glance at his wife, he said: 'I am a storeman. A foreman storeman.'

'We all have our place in the vineyard,' Mr Allen stated, before turning his attention to Mrs Howlett. 'I understand that you never knew my sister.'

She shook her head. 'No. She died three years before I was born.'

'Is that so? Yet you are a woman well advanced into middle life. The Lord does snatch the years away before we have had time to taste them. Well, let me say here and now, you suffered no loss. Though we are told not to speak ill of the dead, I cannot do other than testify that she was an evil and Godless woman.'

Mrs Howlett murmured: 'Surely not,' and Mr Howlett looked deeply interested. Mr Allen raised a reproving finger.

'I am not a man to make unfounded statements, or to bear false witness against man or woman; but even after the lapse of fifty years I can still smell the stench of depravity and hear the laugh of blasphemous mockery.' He shook his head violently. 'It is terrifying to realize that even now her soul is burning in the unquenchable fires of hell . . .'

'You are wrong.'

The three words rang out across the room and had the effect of cutting Mr Allen off in mid-sentence, a form of indignity to which he was clearly not accustomed. He looked enquiringly at Brian's father.

'Do you permit the young to interrupt their elders without rebuke? I ask purely out of interest, as I am fully aware that the morals and behaviour of the present generation are such as to make a God-fearing man shudder. But I would have thought that common courtesy . . .'

'Of course you are absolutely right.' Mr Howlett glared at his son. 'Brian, you will apologize to Mr Allen at once. I can't think what has come over you.'

The boy hung his head and muttered a reluctant apology, that Mr Allen accepted by a grave inclination of his head. He then continued.

'I will not sully your ears with an account of the foul iniquities that she perpetrated during her short lifetime. Sufficient to say they were such as to send my parents to an early grave, and sour my soul into a lifelong distaste for the female sex. Verily is the scarlet woman an abomination before the Lord; and her beauty a mask that hides the running sores of corruption . . .'

Brian could sit and listen to no more. He sprang to his feet, and very near to tears, ran from the room. He ignored his father's angry shout, his mother's protesting cry; was aware only of a great, mind-shattering pain that was burning down the flimsy temples of youth.

As the boy ran down the main street and then out into the open fields, he tried so hard to evade the threat to his own, very private Arcadia. The girl from the photographs, whom he had always seen through the veils of purity and gentleness, would not even know the meaning of the words—depravity, evil, corruption—and was protected by the impregnable armour of innocence. He flung himself down on the ground and attempted to stem the encroaching stream of doubt.

'A twisted, bigoted old man . . . a hunter after evil . . . a religious maniac that had long ago lost touch with reality.' There was comfort in these assertions and a measure of reassurance. Then he remembered that Pauline Allen was at that very moment lying on a couch in the attic; waiting with childlike, unquestioning trust for him to come to her; and at once the insidious stream retreated.

When Brian Howlett rose, it was with the certain knowledge that the first battle had been won, but he would never be the same person again. In some strange way, he felt older.

Pauline was still reclining on the studio-couch when he

entered the attic that night. He sat down and looked reproachfully at the untouched food. She laughed and shook her head.

'I told you I wasn't hungry.'

In some subtle way, she too had altered. The face had become fuller, almost imperceptible lines were traced round the mouth; the eyes seemed brighter, and watched him with a sly, calculating expression.

'What has been happening?'

He hesitated for a moment. But she had to be told, if for no other reason than he wanted to hear her indignant denials.

'Your brother was here this evening,' he said quietly.

'Henry! Not really! Gosh, he must be an old man.'

'Over seventy, I believe.'

'Good heavens, who would have credited it!' She lay still and stared smilingly up at the ceiling. 'Poor little Henry. I remember him as a bespectacled – is that the right word? – go-to-church-on-Sunday young man. You know – a bible in one hand, and an umbrella in the other. He was I fear an awful bigot. Always looking for clouds in a clear sky.'

His own thoughts; his own wishes, were being echoed by that soft, young voice. He wallowed in a pool of spine-tingling happiness.

'I knew it. Old people don't suddenly become narrow-minded, stupid and cruel. They just grow worse as they get older.'

'That's very true. Did . . . did he say anything about me?'

Brian watched her through half-closed eyes.

'Yes. He said you were depraved, evil – a scarlet woman. I did not wait to hear any more, I ran out. My parents are still very annoyed.'

'Good for you. I can just imagine him saying those dreadful things.' Pauline screwed her face up into a forbidding scowl and imitated Henry's cold, precise voice. 'It is terrifying to remember that even now her soul is burning in the unquenchable fires of hell.'

'I say – those were his very words. How on earth did you know?'

The slender shoulders shrugged. 'I didn't. How could I? But he always talked like that. Limbs of Satan, scarlet woman, brazen hussies – there was no end to the list. Mind you, I was a bit mischievous.'

'You weren't!'

'I most certainly was.' Pauline tried to sit up, but the effort seemed to be beyond her powers. 'Listen to this. Henry was fond of taking cold baths – thought they were manly. Guess what? I put a long grass snake in his bath water. You should have heard him scream.'

Their subdued laughter merged and became a happy ripple of sound. Then, when silence had returned to the attic, Pauline asked:

'Have you ever played jokes on people?'

'No.'

'Why not? There's no harm.'

'I don't know. It never occurred to me.'

'You're scared. 'Fraid to take a chance.'

He was aware of a suggestion of scorn in her voice, plus an almost alarming glitter in her eyes, that watched him with an unblinking stare.

'I'm not. I'm not afraid of anything. You should know that.'

'But I don't know. It's easy to talk. Do something positive.'

She lay as motionless as a fallen statue in moonlight, and one part of him wanted to be far away in some lonely place, where that faintly mocking voice could not reach him. The other part was terrified of losing her regard.

'Such as?'

'Bring me your father's wallet.'

He jumped up, shaking his head in shocked denial. 'No. No, I couldn't do that.'

'See!' She smiled sadly. He might have been refusing to bring her a cool drink on a hot day. 'All talk, no do.'

'But,' he tried so hard to make her understand, 'that would be wrong. It would be stealing.'

Pauline sighed, and he felt an overwhelming wave of inadequacy – saw her slipping from him into a limbo of cold indifference. He made one more appeal.

'You can't be serious. You don't *really* want me to steal my father's wallet.'

The eyes closed, the pale face relaxed and became a beautiful mask. 'I do not *want* you to do anything. It's a matter of complete indifference to me *what* you do. Now go away, I am going to sleep.'

'Please – I'll do anything you say, but . . .'

'Go away, and don't come back until you know *what* you are and *what* you want to do.'

'You are cruel.'

The lips smiled. 'Am I? Shut the door quietly as you go out.'

Brian visited his beloved six times during the next three days, and she was as sparing with her words and as parsimonious with her smiles as a miser at Christmas time.

On the fourth day he took the wallet from his father's jacket pocket, and like a devotee placing an offering on the altar of his god laid it by Pauline's side. Her smile was the sun melting the ice on a moorland lake; her happy laugh the sound of music heard across the immense desert of space and time; her admiring approval, a rich reward for a trifling service.

'Wonderful! Gosh, I never thought you'd do it. My word, you are brave.'

He blushed and tried to pretend that his first act of petty larceny was of no account. But, in his heart he knew he had made a long journey in a very short time.

'You wanted me to do it,' he said. 'It was nothing really.'

'I didn't want you to do it,' she explained gently. 'I only *wanted* you to *want* to do it.'

'Well - I did it.'

'So you did. Let's see what's inside.'

The wallet's contents made a pathetic pile on the bed. Three business cards, a railway season ticket, a dentist's receipt, and twelve one-pound notes.

'What are you going to buy me?' Pauline asked. 'With all that money, you can afford something really nice.'

'But I never actually . . .'

'That's why you took the wallet, wasn't it? To buy me a present?'

'Well . . . I guess . . .'

'Then don't tell me what it will be. I want to be surprised.'

Next day he bought a gold-plated bracelet from the village store, then ran all the way home to place it on her slim wrist. She thanked him with a beautiful smile.

'My, you are growing up,' she said.

Mr Howlett shouted and his angry roar echoed through the house, making his wife tremble as she sat crying in the dining-room.

'You took it. Don't lie any more - I know. You spent eleven-fifty on a gold bracelet. Of all bloody things - a gold

bracelet. Mrs Catford at the store told me. Now, for the last time – who did you buy it for?’

The boy’s face was sullen and he stared blankly at the patterned table-cloth.

‘Nobody.’

‘Now look, I’ve taken just about as much as I can. For God’s sake, don’t tell me you bought a bracelet for yourself. It’s bad enough to know that my son is a thief, without him being a pansy . . .’

‘I bought it for a girl,’ Brian confessed.

‘At last we’re getting somewhere. All right, I’ll tell you what I propose to do. I’ll give you twenty-four hours to get it back. Whoever she is – tell her you want it back. Right? Then Mrs Catford will refund the money.’

Brian shook his head. ‘I can’t do that. It was a present.’

The man’s hand shot out and grabbed the boy’s coat lapels. He pulled him half way across the table and began to speak from between clenched teeth.

‘You *will* get that bloody bracelet back, or so help me, I’ll make you curse the day you were born.’

Brian took one more step forward. He began to hate his father.

Pauline was of the opinion that the older generation really were the giddy limit and completely lacking in sympathetic understanding.

‘People cease to be human after forty,’ she stated with sweet simplicity. ‘Imagine making all that fuss over a measly twelve quid.’

After some consideration, Brian had to admit there was much to be said for this point of view, and expressed the hope that he would have departed from this life before he reached the ripe old age of forty.

‘And he has the cheek to want my bracelet back!’ exclaimed Pauline. ‘He’s got a hope – I don’t think.’

‘But what am I going to do?’ Brian asked. ‘He says he’ll make me curse the day I was born, if I don’t bring it back.’

Her eyes widened with horror, and for the first time her hand touched his. It was but a fleeting movement; a feather-light brushing with the fingertips, but this intimate approach gave him a moment of pure joy.

‘You don’t mean – he would hurt you? Beat you?’

‘He never has – but he is very angry. But whatever happens,

I will never take back a present or tell him about you.'

'I am so glad. You are brave, loyal and true, and I am very lucky. I guess there is nothing you wouldn't do for me.'

Brian moved forward and passed another milestone; one more step and he would have reached the altar of complete surrender.

'Nothing . . . nothing . . . if only you would . . .'

A sly smile that did not reach those glittering, hungry eyes.

'If only I would - what?'

'Become really alive. You have not eaten the food I brought, or moved - or anything. Can't you even try to get up?'

The glittering eyes took on a dreamy expression, so that he was reminded of the sun shining through an early morning mist. Her voice was low; a harsh purr that caressed his ears and sent waves of purple fire rippling across his brain.

'To be together always - in a far-off lonely place where no one can interfere and tell us what we should do. That indeed would be heaven. But,' she sighed deeply, 'as you can see, I cannot move, and to regain my strength . . . But I must not talk of what cannot be. You are only a boy, and I could not expect you to perform an act from which the strongest man alive would shrink.'

She allowed him a glimpse of the seemingly unattainable; he saw it as a small blackbird that was swiftly flying towards a distant horizon. There was a great fear that he might never grasp it in his hands.

'I will do anything. Absolutely anything.'

She considered his words for a long time - or so it seemed - then nodded slowly.

'So be it. But you must take me into your arms so I can whisper in your ear. There are forces in the universe who would try to block the road to our happiness.'

Brian gathered up the light, slender form of his beloved, and her cheek was so cold when it was pressed to his. The whispered words filled his mind and smothered the fear-born thoughts.

'Remember Salome? She asked for something that gave her power to walk the earth forever. Eternally young, her beauty untouched by time. Remember?'

He did not answer for words could not live in the blazing inferno of his brain. Pauline went on, her whispering voice bridging the ravine which divides the land of revealing light

from the realm of horrific darkness.

'You must be very strong. Be able to forget such silly words as good, evil, light, dark, and replace them all by one all-powerful word. Love. Repeat after me—love excuses all.'

His tongue was permitted to speak:

'Love excuses all.'

'Well done. That wasn't difficult, was it? Now we come to the hard bit, because I am going to tell you what *must* be done. An act that can only be performed by a strong man who loves me. A *man* who wants above all else, to see me walk again. Are you ready?'

He nodded, then closed his eyes. Her fierce whisper smashed through the last frail barrier and freed him forever from the chains of conscience.

'Bring me your father's head on a silver tray.'

First to find the tools.

A carving-knife, a small tenon-saw, a hammer, then a silver tray from the dining-room sideboard.

Second to creep upstairs to his parents' bedroom.

The tools he wrapped in his mother's apron, for it was important that they did not rattle and so rouse from sleep those who must soon slumber forever. Then he mounted the stairs and moved like a drifting shadow to the bedroom door. His hand was steady; the handle turned and without so much as a protesting creak the door glided open. The curtains were drawn, moonlight bathed the room with a silver glow and clearly revealed two heads resting on pillows. It was perhaps unfortunate that his mother must also die, but without doubt, were she spared, there would be distressing screams, efforts to restrain him when *the* deed was done.

Third the *great act* that was to give his beloved eternal life and youth.

He silently unwrapped the tools and laid them out in a neat row on the floor. The hammer, the carving-knife, the saw and the tray. Then he walked softly over to the bed and examined the material on which he was to work.

Mr Howlett, as though to render his son's task easier, was lying on his stomach. One heavy blow from the hammer on the back of the neck, was all that would be needed. Mrs Howlett was even more accommodating, for she was flat on her back, and thus presented a plump throat for the carving-knife's ministrations.

Speed and accuracy were essential.

Of course his father must be dispatched first, for once he was awake, Brian would find it hard work to subdue him. In fact there was no difficulty at all. The hammer descended on to the back of the thick neck with a resounding thud, and although there was a muffled cry, followed by an unpleasant thrashing of arms and legs, it was probable that Mr Howlett never knew what – or who – hit him. But Mrs Howlett came up from her pillow, like a space-rocket from its pad, at the same time exclaiming: ‘Wassat . . . wassat,’ before Brian grabbed her hair and drew the carving-knife across her throat. The ill-formed words terminated in a gurgling scream which soon died and was succeeded by a blessed silence that was shortly broken by the drip-drip of an apparently never-ending stream of blood.

Then he got down to the *great act*.

Slice . . . cut . . . saw . . . lift the object from the bed . . . put it reverently on to the silver tray . . . cover what remained with a clean sheet. There was no need – or desire – to show disrespect. As he carried the loaded tray up to the attic, he was very, very happy.

Pauline was waiting for him – the blushing bride – the dream – the unattainable. She sat up and clapped her hands, looking so much more mature – even fatter – but just as desirable as ever. Her voice was huskier too, when she said:

‘You’ve got it! How wonderful! Bring it to me.’

He laid the tray on her lap, and she ran her fingers through the blood-matted hair, fingered the staring eyes, caressed the gaping mouth, and little diamond-bright tears ran down her cheeks.

‘Now I will live forever. Forever and ever and ever.’

‘And me?’

Her eyes widened with momentary astonishment, then she gave him a mocking smile.

‘You? Oh, of course. Well, you’ll be immortal too, but in a different sort of way. Long after your poor little body has rotted away in the churchyard, you’ll be remembered as the boy who murdered his mother and father. They’ll make a waxwork figure of you, and write songs about you, and I wouldn’t be at all surprised if someone doesn’t write a book about you. You know, a book with lots of long words.’

The muddy waters of disbelief surged over his head, but

he still sought for the non-existent straw.

'Stop talking like that. We love one another.'

She shook her lovely head and clutched that which had been the property of the late Mr Howlett to her breast.

'Singular. You love me, not I you. I never said anything of the sort.'

'You did.'

'I didn't. I didn't. I didn't. If you wish to take the desire for the deed, that is your silly fault. I asked you to do me a little favour—a small service—and you did—and I am very grateful. But a gentleman does not mistake gratitude for love.'

'You said we would be together forever.'

'So we will. You will always live in my heart.'

He struck the beautiful, mocking face, and her throat was clogged with unspoken words, and her eyes became blue butterflies that fluttered for a moment before disappearing into the darkness of unmeasured time. He put his hands round the white neck and squeezed and squeezed, then shook and shook—until her head fell off. Then he kicked and kicked, clawed, tore—flung a leg here, tossed an arm there: snapped brittle ribs, crunched the pelvis under his feet; dismembered with a mighty rattling and a crashing, before truth came screaming in on the wings of returning—but alas temporary—sanity.

He was surrounded by white, broken bones, and a grinning skull lay cheek by jowl with his father's severed head. In that last lucid moment—the final gleam of sunlight that seeped through the clouds of madness—he knew why, where and how. For sixty seconds he was permitted the gift of sight. He said slowly, as though to imprint the words on his soul for all eternity:

'The dreams of youth are painted doors. Open one—and a skeleton walks out.'

Then he screamed and screamed and screamed . . .

THE SALE OF THE CENTURY

Mr Dixon was a traveller in ladies' underwear.

That is to say he was sales representative for Matthews & Lock, manufacturers of fine lingerie, whose slogan, *You pro-*

vide the figure, we'll make the shape, was a source of hope for every woman who tipped the scales at nine stone and over.

Now, it must not be thought that Mr Dixon was one of your deluxe, streamlined commercials with a gleaming Austin car, an interesting expense account, and five thousand a year commission. He was not, alas, one of those enamel-bright young men that you see lunching their clients at the Penthouse Club, chock-full of confidence and Napoleon brandy. Mr Dixon was fifty-two, inclined to stoutness, suffered from bunions on both feet, was cursed with a sleep-murdering overdraft and did whatever entertaining was absolutely essential in the saloon bar. His company car was long overdue for replacement, and when he presented his meagre list of expenses it was greeted with dark suspicion and accusations of high living that were both ludicrous and hurtful.

Therefore, it can be easily understood, Mr Dixon was not happy with his chosen path through life. His sun was obscured by a mist of despondency; his air was tainted by the corruption of dead dreams and his feet hurt. He had also reached a stage where the best—such as it had been—lay behind, and the worst lay in front, and like Mr Micawber he could only wait for something to turn up.

As it so happened, something turned down. He was walking from the station—for the company car was out of action—and looking down at the pavement, when suddenly his eye spotted a piece of bright yellow paper. It measured some eight inches by two, and was covered by neat black writing. Mr Dixon's interest was instantly aroused, for he was not devoid of a certain healthy curiosity, and bending down he picked the paper up. He fumbled for his glasses and after adjusting them with fussy precision, began to read.

'DON'T READ THIS unless you are extremely ambitious. I am using this unusual method of advertising to find an unusual person who really wants to earn a very large sum of money in a very short time. If you **KNOW** you have abilities far above the common run, then ring Mr Cornelius 01.294.3758 between 18.00 to 20.00 hours, or do what 99% of unambitious people do **SCREW THIS UP AND THROW IT AWAY.'**

Mr Dixon chuckled, then folded the piece of paper up and put it into his wallet. He flattered himself he was no fool. Some racket no doubt, or more than likely a part-time job selling floor polish or encyclopaedias. Door-knocking and

irate housewives, to say nothing of leg-hungry dogs and outraged cats. No, he was too fly to be caught by such an obvious catchpenny ruse like this.

He mentioned the matter to Nora when she was dishing up the trifle (yellow cake with custard poured over it) and she grunted in a most derogatory fashion.

'Whatever it is, you'd make some money. Which is more than you're doing at the moment.'

He took the slip of paper from his wallet and read it again: '... who wants to earn a very large sum of money in a very short time ...' That did not sound like floor polish or encyclopaedias. Then again: '... If you know you have abilities far above the common run ...' Mr Dixon, now he came to give the matter his full consideration, was certain he had some very uncommon abilities, only those hidebound nincompoops at Matthews & Lock had never given him a chance to use them. By God, it would be marvellous if he could tell them just what his opinion was of the whole miserable set-up, then walk out. Then imagine Nora's face when he could mention casually: 'I've made five hundred this month—things are a little slack.'

He read the paper through three times, then got up and meandered with over-emphasized unconcern into the small back room that served him as an office. There, on a battered old desk, was the telephone; it looked like a little black animal that was waiting for him to mutter comforting words in its ear. It seemed to be daring him to make a momentous decision. To ring or not to ring.

'Can't do any harm,' he told himself. 'If I don't like what the fellow has to say, I can always hang up.'

294.3758 was a very awkward number to get. Twice it refused to be contacted and Mr Dixon was irritated by a silly buzzing sound, and once, due possibly to his fumbling fingers, he found himself talking to a bad-tempered old lady, who kept shouting, 'What ... what?' and he almost gave up. But on the fourth try there was a satisfactory ringing tone, and Mr Dixon sat back in his chair while he waited with thumping heart and dry mouth for someone to answer.

Suddenly there was silence. An awful termination of sound, that was broken by a quiet voice saying: 'Cornelius speaking,' and Mr Dixon found he needed a few moments' grace before he could answer. The voice held a tone of authoritarian calm: the kind of voice Napoleon might have used, or even possibly,

in his quieter moments, Henry the Eighth. One could not imagine such a voice ever shouting, or surrendering to the dictates of emotion. Mr Dixon took a deep breath, then said heartily—much too heartily: ‘Mr Dixon . . . my name is Dixon—I picked up—that is to say I found your advertisement.’

A long pause followed and Mr Dixon was beginning to wonder if perhaps *his* voice had proved most unsatisfactory, when Mr Cornelius said: ‘Yes?’

‘Well, I wondered if you could tell me more about it.’

The telephone relayed a small sigh, such as a very busy man might make who is being bothered by trivialities.

‘More about it! Really, Mr Dixon, I thought my little message was quite clear. I am looking for a man who has exceptional ability. Are you such a man?’

‘I . . . I think so.’

‘Think so!’ The voice sighed again. ‘If you are the kind of man I am looking for, you KNOW, Mr Dixon. Now, please give me a positive answer.’

‘Very well . . .’ Mr Dixon commanded his heart to cease its wild thumping, and put a note of iron into his voice: ‘Yes, I have exceptional ability.’

‘That’s much better. And, what is more, I am inclined to agree with you. And I am going to tell you why. That piece of paper that you picked up, was handed to someone, Mr Dixon. In fact my agents handed out two thousand such pieces of paper to two thousand men whom they thought, judging by appearances, might be the kind of person I am looking for. Can you imagine how many telephone calls I have received so far?’

‘I don’t . . .’ Mr Dixon began, then remembering that he must be positive, quickly amended his intended answer. ‘Hundreds.’

‘One,’ the quiet voice stated. ‘One and one only. Yours. Now, Mr Dixon, what does that make you?’

‘A . . . man of ability?’

‘More than that. Much more. It makes you, Mr Dixon, a man in two thousand. Frankly, I’m impressed.’

‘Oh, thank you . . .’

‘But not convinced.’ The last three words made Mr Dixon’s confidence, which had risen to an unprecedented level, slump to an all-time low. ‘You could be inspired purely by curiosity.’

‘I do assure you . . .’

'Tell me, what is your present occupation, Mr Dixon?'
'I am . . . I am sales representative for Matthews & Lock.'
'I see. How long have you been with that estimable firm?'
'Eh . . . thirty years.'

'Indeed, as long as that. That is interesting. Are you an ambitious man, Mr Dixon?'

'Oh, very.'

'And if I were to ask: how would you like to earn £4000 in one month? Would the prospect frighten you?'

Mr Dixon all but had a heart attack, but he answered bravely: 'No . . . not at all.'

'In other words you would like to be master of your own destiny?'

'Yes . . . yes, certainly. Every time.'

Mr Cornelius seemed to be lost in thought for some little while, and Mr Dixon began to wonder if he had failed to pass the test. Then came partial reassurance.

'Well, you have some of the qualifications I am looking for, but I must have a word with my colleagues before deciding if I wish to interview you. I will ring and announce my decision this time tomorrow night. You will be at home?'

'Absolutely. Yes . . . yes, indeed.'

The line was disconnected, the dialling tone came back into its own, and Mr Dixon prepared to spend a sleepless night.

Mr Dixon was back by the telephone the following evening, while the incredulous Nora insisted on occupying a seat opposite.

'Can't be much in it if he wants to see you,' she stated with humiliating lack of faith.

'Mr Cornelius seemed to think I had the qualifications he needed,' Mr Dixon protested.

'You haven't got any qualifications,' Nora said bitinglly. 'Selling ladies' drawers don't need any qualifications. At least none that you've got.'

And she began to laugh in a most unpleasant way while her husband sat watching the telephone as though he were afraid it might run away. The hall clock had just begun to strike the hour when the telephone rang. Its strident note was like the call of a banshee forecasting an imminent and extremely nasty death. Mr Dixon picked up the receiver and glued it to his ear.

'Mr . . . eh . . . Dixon speaking.'

'Ah, Mr Dixon,' the suave voice of Mr Cornelius was comforting, 'Cornelius here. With reference to our little talk last night—I have one more question to ask you. I do not think I exaggerate when I say your entire future may depend on your giving the right answer. Are you prepared to earn—and I mean earn—one hundred thousand pounds a year?'

'One hundred thousand . . .' Mr Dixon got no further, for Nora asked in a loud whisper: 'What's he say? One hundred thousand what?'

'Mr Dixon,' Mr Cornelius's voice instructed, 'please—be positive.'

'Yes . . . yes, most certainly I would like to earn one hundred thousand pounds a year.'

'Are you sure? Such an income carries a lot of responsibility.'

Mr Dixon nodded so hard, his sparse hair flopped over his eyes. 'Yes, Mr Cornelius, I'm quite prepared to assume the responsibility.'

'That is what I wanted to hear. Now, I'm a very busy man, and by this time tomorrow I will be on the other side of the world. I would like to see you at once. The time now is—let me see—eight-five. Can you be at my hotel—the Royal Carlton, Curzon Street, by ten o'clock?'

'Tonight!' Mr Dixon's newly acquired positiveness was quite unable to withstand the shock of such prompt action. 'Now?'

'Perhaps you did not hear me,' the voice held a note of reproof. 'Tomorrow I will be on the other side of the world. Surely you agree that the opportunity I am offering is worth a little effort?'

'Oh, yes. I'll be along straight away.'

'Very well, I'll look forward to seeing you.'

Mr Dixon replaced the telephone receiver, and assumed the expression of a man who is prepared to take the world over while Nora stared at him with growing concern.

'Here—what's all this about you going out again tonight?'

'Positive action, my dear. Mr Cornelius wants me at his hotel—the Royal Carlton, no less—by ten o'clock.'

'But you'll miss *The Generation Game*. It's on the telly at half past nine.'

'My dear, don't you understand, this is something big. He mentioned the figure of one hundred thousand pounds.'

'What – all at once?'

'No, a year. Do you realize that by the time I retire, I could be worth a million pounds?'

'A million quid! Doing what?'

Mr Dixon shrugged his shoulders with some impatience, and decided his lack of positiveness in the past, was due in no small measure to his wife's meagre encouragement. 'I don't know. That is what I am about to find out.'

'Don't sign anything,' she warned.

'I think you can rely on me to use my own judgement.'

Nora was not impressed. 'I don't know. You're daft enough to do anything.'

Mr Dixon treated this remark with the contempt it deserved and swept out into the hall in search of his hat and coat. His lady remained in a thoughtful attitude for a few minutes.

'It can't be murder,' she muttered. 'They wouldn't pay all that for simple murder.'

Mr Dixon arrived at the Royal Carlton Hotel at ten minutes to ten, and feeling rather like a mountaineer about to ascend Everest, entered the foyer. He approached the reception desk and made himself known to the black-coated individual who presided there.

'My name is Dixon. I have called to see a Mr Cornelius.'

The man smiled gravely. 'Oh, yes, Mr Dixon, Mr Cornelius has left word he is expecting you. He is in the Princess Alice suite. Kindly take the lift to the third floor.'

Henry George Dixon entered the lift and was whisked up to a world that to date he had only seen depicted on television and the local cinema screen. The Princess Alice suite was a place of thick carpets, shaded lights, and a slightly terrifying man-servant, who bowed, then murmured: 'Will you kindly come this way, sir.' When he arrived at a large, white painted door, he tapped, opened it and announced: 'Mr Dixon, sir.'

The man who got up from behind the vast mahogany desk, was tall, grey-haired, and had a pair of penetrating blue eyes. Mr Dixon thought he looked as if he were quite capable of throwing away a few hundred thousand pounds a year without thinking about it. He advanced towards the desk, trying to display all the positiveness of which he was capable. His hand was accepted, held for a moment, then released.

'So pleased you could come, Mr Dixon. Please take a seat.'

Mr Dixon sank down into a chair, that closed in about him, and threatened to put up stiff resistance should he try to leave it. Mr Cornelius pushed a silver box towards him.

'Help yourself to a cigar. I am not aware of your usual brand, but I have these made up specially.'

Mr Dixon took a cigar, clumsily clipped the end with a pair of silver cutters, and left the band on. Mr Cornelius presented a gold table lighter, and his guest took two deep puffs, and in consequence felt slightly sick.

'Now,' Mr Cornelius sank back, 'I expect you would like to hear something about me. Briefly, I control a world-wide organization. I have many irons in many fires, and without wishing to appear boastful I am today a very wealthy man. Do you know why?'

'Because you worked hard,' Mr Dixon suggested.

'Partly. Only partly. But mainly, because I am a judge of character. All my life I have been able to say: "There is the man I want. He has the potential." That is a great word, Mr Dixon. Potential.'

'Potential,' Mr Dixon repeated, then spilt cigar-ash down his shirt front.

'I am not going to flatter you,' Mr Cornelius went on, 'that is not my way. But the moment I heard your voice on the telephone, and the impressive way that you answered my questions, I said: "I believe." When you walked through that door, I said: "I know."'

'Extraordinary!' Mr Dixon ejaculated. "Pon my soul."

'Precisely. I pride myself there are few men in this world who have this gift. But I have, as has been proved, time and time again.'

Mr Dixon, whose head was swimming due to the cigar smoke he had been inhaling with more than customary gusto, said 'Marvellous,' and hoped he would not be sick over the beautiful carpet.

'Now, Mr Dixon, let us get down to essentials. I am going to put you on a month's probation. During that period I will guarantee you earn not less than two hundred pounds. If you receive more it is entirely in your hands. I will now show you the product.'

Mr Cornelius rose and walking over to a cupboard, unlocked it, and returned carrying an exceptionally ornate oil stove. It had a chromium-plated base, a little red window in front, and was finished in bright pink enamel. To say the

least it attracted the eye. Mr Cornelius placed it reverently before Mr Dixon, then returned to his desk.

'I am waiting for your reaction, Mr Dixon.'

'Absolutely marvellous.' Mr Dixon made himself glow with appreciation. 'I . . . I have never seen anything like it. I am certain it will sell very well.'

'Yes, but what is it?'

'An oil stove.'

'Wrong. An oil stove suggests an apparatus that produces an unpleasant smell and little heat. This, my dear sir, is the Bronson Miracle Room Heater. An invention that is already making the central heating people spend many sleepless nights.'

Mr Dixon said: 'Goodness gracious!'

'Furthermore, due to the precise angle of the flame, plus our super 294 filter, not only is there no smell, but there is a 95.72% more heat output than from any other stove on the market today.'

'Really, extraordinary,' Mr Dixon poured out his enthusiasm. 'I am most impressed. I can't wait to get out and go.'

'It is not my intention to sell this product through retailers,' Mr Cornelius stated. 'No, we intend to contact a limited number of private people. Literature has already been sent out and various houses have been canvassed. Your job, Mr Dixon, will be to go in and—if I may be permitted the expression—make the kill.'

'How much . . . ?' Mr Dixon began.

'The Miracle Heater retails for twenty pounds. Your commission will be 25%.'

'Thank you very much . . .'

'I will require your address so that a model of the Bronson Miracle Heater can be sent to your home, and in due course you will be notified of the prospective clients on whom you will be expected to call. Have you a card?'

Mr Dixon produced a card which gave details of his full name and address, and in return received a beautifully designed brochure in which was described by illustration and word the many virtues of the Bronson Miracle Heater. Mr Cornelius, after consulting a gold wrist watch, assumed the expression of a man who has spent too much time on a minor concern. He rose and held out his hand.

'It only remains for me to wish you the best of luck, and trust that this high opinion I have formed of your abilities, will not be misplaced.'

'I do assure you,' Mr Dixon endeavoured to grip the offered hand very sharply, as he had once been informed that this was a sure sign of intense mental power, 'I will do my utmost to forward . . .'

'Goodbye, Mr Dixon.'

Mr Cornelius dropped his hand, then sat down and became immersed in a pile of papers that lay before him. The manservant materialized so suddenly Mr Dixon had reason to wonder if he had sprung from the floor, and after another formal bow, conducted the newly appointed agent for the Bronson Miracle Heater to the door.

Mr Dixon walked to his car on cushioned feet.

The sample heater arrived two days later, and with it came an order book that had inscribed on each of its triplicate sheets:

THE BRONSON HEATING COMPANY,
25 Dymlock Buildings,
LONDON, E.C.4.

Sole agent for the United Kingdom. Mr H. G. Dixon

Mr Dixon was most gratified to see his name in print, and lost no time in showing the order book and Miracle Heater to Nora, whose cynical attitude continued to be a source of annoyance.

'Hideous,' she exclaimed, having viewed the pink and chrome apparatus from every angle. 'No one is going to pay twenty quid for that. Wouldn't give it house room.'

Mr Dixon gave a deep sigh and tried to bring light to the unconverted.

'If you had taken the trouble to read the brochure, you would realize that pink soothes the eye, calms the nerves, and prolongs life.'

Mrs Dixon said a very rude word, which only confirmed her husband's long-held opinion that he had married beneath him. Two days later a letter arrived giving him particulars of his first assignment. With a little thrill of excitement (not unmingled with some anxiety), he read his instructions.

Dear Sir,

We have received a communication from a Mr Ronald Carter, Brimstone Manor, Little Muddlington, Kent, that he is seriously considering purchasing a number of our Bronson Miracle Heaters.

A model has been in his possession for the past week, so that he could acquaint himself with its many virtues. We feel he may be persuaded to purchase up to one dozen heaters, and we will be well pleased should you effect such a sale.

Needless to say, we will be most impressed should an order be placed in excess of this number.

Wishing all good fortune,

Yours faithfully,

R. Simpson

Sales Manager.

P.S. Mr Carter will expect to meet you at 8.30 p.m. on Tuesday the 29th inst.

Brimstone Manor proved to be a small manor house set back in its own grounds, a red-bricked structure that looked as if it might have been a farmhouse at some period in its history. Mr Dixon, with it must be confessed a sinking heart, instantly formed the opinion that twelve Bronson Miracle Heaters would turn it into an oven and saw his road to fortune coming to a quick termination. He tapped on the weather-beaten door which was instantly opened by a bald-headed little man, with a most sinister cast of countenance. The forehead bulged, the cheeks were alarmingly hollow, the little blue eyes stared at the visitor from black-lined pits and the entire face was covered by loose, wrinkled skin. Then he grinned ferociously, revealing a set of china-white teeth, while he extended a tiny, clawlike hand.

'Mr Dixon, I'll be bound. Eh!'

The harsh voice was unexpectedly cultured; the hand felt like a mouse that had died from starvation.

'Yes . . . yes, you are . . . ?'

'Indeed I am. Come on in. We won't be disturbed. Don't believe in keeping servants down here. Too bloody nosey.'

The interior of the house resembled a deserted junk shop. The hall was littered with fishing rods, an assortment of boots, articles of clothing that seemed to have been dropped where their owner had discarded them, three or four grimy towels, and, to Mr Dixon's barely disguised horror, a stuffed boa-constrictor which was draped round a hat-stand.

With another ferocious grin Mr Carter opened a door and allowed his guest to precede him into a room that fulfilled the promise extended by the hall. Here a variety of chairs,

none of which were even distantly related, seemed to be chasing each other for right of place. A few fugitive tables had taken refuge near an ash-choked fireplace, and on one of these stood a gleaming Bronson Miracle Heater.

'Take a seat,' Mr Carter invited, causing a large and indignant tabby cat to vacate a chair, 'make yourself comfortable.'

'Thank you very much. Nice place you've got here.'

'Place is a pig-sty,' Mr Carter confessed, seating himself opposite the Bronson agent and crossing his alarmingly bony legs. 'Now, let's get one thing straight. I don't think for one moment, I'll find a use for your heater thing. The place is too big for one thing, and say what you like, there's bound to be a smell of paraffin. Wasted journey, I'm afraid, but then, I expect that's all in the day's work for you fellows. Can't win 'em all. Eh!'

It was like being dropped into a bath of icy-cold water. The shock made Mr Dixon all but gasp, and was worse than when Mr Frost of Cartwright's ladies' department had stated he had more bras than he knew what to do with, and wished to cancel his usual repeat order. But like a soldier who has nothing to lose but his life, he opened fire with his poorly equipped guns in an effort to stave off complete defeat.

'May I point out, Mr Carter, that one Bronson Miracle Heater will provide heat for two thousand cubic feet.'

Mr Carter grimaced, wrung his hands, then cracked his knuckles in a most disgusting way.

'Indeed! I had not thought of that. This room for example. How many heaters will it require?'

'Two?' suggested Mr Dixon with hope born from despair.

'You don't say so! As little as that. Now, this place has fourteen rooms of roughly this size. Therefore I would need...'

'Twenty-eight heaters,' Mr Dixon, whose morale had suddenly been given an unexpected boost, quickly supplied an answer. 'Twenty-eight would do very nicely.'

'And how much would they cost me?' Mr Carter enquired.

'Eh... five hundred and sixty pounds.'

Mr Carter, so far as his unfortunate cast of features would allow, looked thoughtful, then he murmured:

'There was a central heating chap here the other day. He wanted two thousand pounds to install a boiler and a lot of pipes and things.'

'It would be a great saving,' Mr Dixon agreed, 'and you would not have the inconvenience of workmen upsetting your house.'

Mr Carter continued to look thoughtful, then he raised his head and widened his ferocious grin.

'You're a damned persuasive fellow, Mr Dixon.'

'I am only thinking of your interests,' Mr Dixon stated with astonishing candour.

'And I appreciate it. Damn me, if I don't. It's a gratifying change to find someone who knows what he is talking about, and has his customer's interest at heart.'

'You are very kind.' Mr Dixon blushed and for the first time began to realize the full extent of his exceptional ability.

'Yes,' Mr Carter began to nod slowly, 'I'll take a chance.'

'You mean . . . ?'

'Yes, you've convinced me. I'll take the twenty-eight.'

The order book came out from the briefcase, Mr Dixon's pen was working furiously, when: 'Just a minute! What about the cellar?'

'The cellar!' Mr Dixon repeated dully.

'Yes, the place is like an ice-box. Look, make it a round thirty.'

The order form was amended; Mr Carter obligingly inscribed his signature, and a very happy Mr Dixon prepared to depart. Half way across the hall Mr Carter again assumed a thoughtful air.

'I have a place up north. A barn of a place . . . I was thinking . . .'

'Three hundred,' Mr Dixon shouted at his uncomprehending wife. 'I sold him three hundred heaters.'

'Good for you,' Nora said, as she put on her hat and coat, prior to attending the weekly bingo session. 'Just goes to show there are more suckers in this world than one realizes.'

'But one man bought three hundred,' Mr Dixon insisted. 'He didn't want to, but I made the sale.'

'You ought to be locked up,' Nora said, moving towards the door.

'But you don't understand. My commission will be one thousand, five hundred pounds.'

There was an impressive silence, then Nora turned slowly and stared at her husband with dawning wonderment.

'You're kidding?'

'No, I'm not. Fifteen hundred smackers on one sale.'

'That means we can have colour telly?'

'Yes.'

'And that fur coat you've been too mean to buy me up to now?'

'Yes . . . yes, I suppose so.'

Nora slowly removed her coat. 'There's no point in going to bingo now. The top divvy wasn't more than a hundred pounds.'

It has been said that behind every successful man stands an astonished mother-in-law. In the weeks that followed, a flabbergasted wife stood beside Henry George Dixon. He kept three appointments with seemingly reluctant would-be buyers, but after ten minutes or so subjection to his positive, not-to-be-resisted selling technique, they signed orders that brought his first monthly total up to one thousand, five hundred and ninety-two. A telegram arrived from Paris on the thirty-first of the month.

'Many congratulations. Be at my suite at 8.30. Wednesday next. Cornelius.'

The commission cheque arrived the following day.

'Not bad.' Mr Dixon was sitting back on the new sofa (Mrs Dixon had already begun to expand their credit horizon) and waving the cheque back and forth. 'Just under eight thousand pounds.'

It is to be regretted that Nora was not yet fully convinced as to her husband's positive, exceptional abilities.

'Hadn't you better pack it in before someone catches on?'

Mr Dixon gazed at his better half with mounting wrath.

'What on earth are you talking about?'

'Well, there must be a catch in it somewhere. What the hell are four people going to do with fifteen hundred oil stoves? Don't sound right to me. I bet they're all sent back before the month is out.'

This was in fact a secret fear that had been haunting Mr Dixon's dreams for some time, and he was not at all pleased to have it put into words. He scowled as he tried to pack wisdom into a very small space.

'You must learn to think big, Nora. Heavens above, now I have found my potential—realized, what I can now with due modesty call my exceptional ability—this sum,' he waved the

cheque again, 'is mere chicken feed. I'm going places.'

'Let's hope it's not Wormwood Scrubs,' his wife remarked with a foreboding shake of her head.

When Mr Dixon made his second visit to the Princess Alice suite at the Royal Carlton, he found that two personages had arrived before him. Mr Cornelius rose from behind the great desk and waved his hand as he made the introductions.

'Ah, Mr Dixon, this is Robert Simpson, our sales manager, and Nicholas Rumpkins who is in charge of production.'

Robert Simpson was a little man whose mousey-coloured hair stood up on end, and Nicholas Rumpkins was tall, lean, and inclined to squint. They both said, 'How do - delighted,' shook hands, then resumed their seats.

'Well, Mr Dixon,' Mr Cornelius permitted himself a pale smile, 'you've started well. I am pleased to see that my confidence was not misplaced.'

'Has it ever been, chief?' Robert Simpson enquired.

'Every time a winner,' Nicholas Rumpkins pronounced with awe-inspiring admiration.

'I therefore feel,' Mr Cornelius went on, ignoring these verbal tributes, 'that as you have made such an excellent start. I should advance you to a field of endeavour that will be more in keeping with your proven abilities.'

'Thank you,' Mr Dixon said. 'Thank you very much.'

'To begin, you are now promoted to our permanent staff, and may therefore resign from Matthews & Lock without delay. I would suggest that you pay them one month's salary in lieu of notice, which will of course be underwritten by this company.'

'Thank you . . .'

'Furthermore,' Mr Cornelius continued, 'as from next Monday, I will require you to make three calls a day, when you will promote our latest product.'

'A humdinger,' Robert Simpson said, winking at Mr Dixon.

'The greatest yet,' pronounced Mr Nicholas Rumpkins.

'Let us proceed to the demonstration room,' ordered Mr Cornelius, rising and walking with stern authority towards the door. 'Hurry, gentlemen, I have a twelve o'clock plane to catch.'

They crossed the hall and Mr Cornelius flung open another door and led the way into a room where the furniture had been pushed to one side so that a long, white-draped object

could be seen to advantage. He took up a position to the right of the veiled object, then waved his hand in an imperious gesture.

'Gather round, gentlemen. Mr Rumpkins, will you do the honours?'

Smirking like a nasty schoolboy who is about to let off a squib under his invalid aunt's chair, Mr Rumpkins lifted one edge of the sheet, then with a dramatic flourish jerked it away. Mr Dixon stared at the latest product he was expected to sell with open-mouthed astonishment. Standing on two trestles was a highly polished coffin.

He had to admit that as coffins went this was a fine example, and he would not, when his time came, be ashamed to lie in it. It was made of polished mahogany, was fitted with gleaming brass handles, and had a nice little brass plate on the lid. All it lacked was a suitable inscription. After allowing time for admiration, which was freely given by Robert Simpson, who kept murmuring, 'Stupendous, absolutely stupendous,' Nicholas Rumpkins reverently removed the lid, and Mr Dixon was able to take pleasure from the light blue interior padding and the white lace face cover.

'Mr Dixon,' Mr Cornelius snapped, 'kindly describe our latest product.'

By now Mr Dixon's positiveness had become fully developed, and he answered without hesitation.

'A coffin.'

'Wrong.' Mr Cornelius frowned, and his two executives hastily creased their brows in sympathy. 'Come, I expected better things from you. Try again.'

Mr Dixon concentrated all his powers; rallied all his exceptional abilities, and his brain suddenly produced the right answer. The only possible - positive - answer.

'A decorative casket,' he said.

The three men looked at each other, and Nicholas shook his head in disbelief.

'How do you do it, chief? How the hell do you do it?'

Robert Simpson was looking at Mr Dixon with open mouthed awe.

'A genius,' he said simply. 'I'm not given to extravagance, but that's the only word I can use. A genius.'

'Gentlemen,' Mr Cornelius raised his hand, 'it has recently become the custom to decry this country. To say we are behind the times, that our glories lie buried in the past. But,

I say this, and I say it with all sincerity: so long as we can produce men like our friend Dixon, there's not much wrong with Britain.'

Both Simpson and Rumpkins said: 'Hear, hear,' and took turns patting Mr Dixon's shoulder. But all became still when Mr Cornelius once again raised his hand.

'I wonder, Mr Dixon, if I could prevail upon you to tell us the possible use one could put a Mansfield Decorative Casket?'

Yesterday, Mr Dixon would have answered: 'Bury a body in it,' but today he knew better. There was only a moment's pause before he answered, 'Decorate the house with it. Beautify the basket with a Mansfield Decorative Casket.'

'Doesn't miss a trick,' murmured Robert Simpson. Even Mr Cornelius began to display signs of excitement.

'Gentlemen, I think you will agree that Mr Dixon's slogan is an improvement on Mr Rumpkins's: "Have a stiff's box in your domestic de-lox." Robert, I want the brochures amended at once.'

'Right, chief. Will do.'

'And see to it that Mr Dixon receives all the backing he needs. Circularize the trendy, well-heeled set. Car workers, crane drivers, policemen on overtime. Give him all the support you can.'

They supplied Mr Dixon with a new order book and a set of engraved cards, and fortified by self-esteem, filled to the brim with positive confidence, he went forth to sell Mansfield Decorative Caskets.

Climax Mansions was a block of new flats that had been built for the with-it and got-it generation that had somehow come into being during the post-war period. When Mr Dixon was admitted into flat number 69 he was faced with mauve, bizarre furniture, chamber pots that had been converted into flower-pot holders, bright paper lampshades, a large personality poster which depicted a very thin man sitting on a lavatory pan, a number of enamel candlesticks and a moth-eaten stuffed bear. He was also greeted by a young man with brittle blond hair and attired in a silver brocade dressing-gown. He kept jogging up and down in time to a tape-recording that was sending out a tuneless dirge.

'Yeah, what is it, man?'

'My name is Dixon. I've come about the Mansfield Decorative Casket.'

'Yeah, the stiff-box. Come on in, lower your arse on a leg-reliever. Let your hair down, man.'

Mr Dixon sat down on an iron-framed chair, trying to look as if he was perfectly at ease in his surroundings. A young girl wearing an unbuttoned housecoat and nothing else strolled languidly out of the bedroom and examined the visitor with embarrassing interest.

'He's groovy,' she said after a while. 'Probably got a complex, but groovy.'

'He's come about the stiff-box,' the young man explained.

'No kidding!' The girl wandered over to the Mansfield Decorative Casket, which was standing on end next to the stuffed bear. 'What do you know! When they delivered it last night I wondered what it was for. I mean, we've got no stiffs.'

'Now,' Mr Dixon thought it was about time he took charge of the situation, 'Mr . . . eh . . .'

'Humphrey, man. The chick's Lottie.'

'Well, Humphrey, the Mansfield Decorative Casket will be a welcome addition to your lovely home, and can be put to a number of uses.'

'Too cramped,' Lottie stated. 'No room to manoeuvre.'

'Why don't you shut up?' Humphrey asked. 'This boy shoots a good line. I want to listen, don't I? You go right ahead . . . Say, what's your label?'

'Dixon . . .'

'Don't give me that crap. What's your first name? What did the old Bible-basher call you?'

'Eh . . . Henry.'

'Well, Henry old son, you go right ahead and send the ball down the field. What goes with the old stiff-box?'

Mr Dixon had spent most of the past week trying to devise uses for an empty coffin, apart from the purpose for which it was intended. He now tried to present his meagre harvest as though it were a token show from a bumper crop.

'If I could make a few suggestions. Think how beautiful it would look on blue painted trestles and filled with flowers. There again, it would make a nice work box. The satin quilt padding could be utilized as a pin-cushion; cotton reels and darning wool would be very eye-catching if arranged in

patterns along the bottom, and then you could get some of those frilly pillow cases and drape them over the sides.'

'What's he talking about?' Lottie enquired.

'Shut up,' Humphrey instructed. 'The boy's coming over with the spiel, ain't he? Knocking the door. Keep going, dad.'

'I also thought it would make a nice cocktail cabinet . . .'

'That's good thinking, dad. Great.'

'I am sure your friends would find it a novel innovation to be served drinks from a coffin – I mean, from a Mansfield Decorative Casket. I would suggest you drape it with a tablecloth, so as not to scratch the varnish.'

'How much?'

'We are asking what I feel is a reasonable price of one hundred pounds a casket.'

'That's a lot of bread, man.'

Actually Mr Dixon thought it was too, but he managed to produce a smile of deprecation.

'It would be a wonderful investment. When your – sad time comes – the price of decorative caskets is bound to be astronomical. One should look to the future.'

'You've got all your marbles, dad.'

Lottie gave a little skip of excitement, thus providing Mr Dixon with a view he had not seen for twenty years.

'We could give stiff-box parties. One box for everybody. It would be the kinkiest scene in town.'

Humphrey was obviously a positive man. He nodded, grinned, slapped Lottie's rump and said: 'Right, Man-Henry, put me down for a dozen.'

A great man once said he could not look into a mirror without frightening himself: at that moment Mr Dixon became a little afraid of his own exceptional ability. To sell one decorative casket to someone who had no dead body handy could have been recorded as an achievement: to sell a dozen must be classified as an event that bordered on the superhuman. He could only gape and mutter: 'One dozen! Twelve?'

Humphrey chuckled, then nudged Lottie in the ribs with his elbow. 'Ain't he a caution? Right up there behind the ball. Never gives up. Right, dad, you win. Make it sixteen.'

With a deep sigh Mr Dixon reached for his order book.

During the next four weeks Mr Dixon called on thirty-six enquirers and took orders for two thousand, seven hundred

and ninety-two Mansfield Decorative Caskets. Then Mr Cornelius again summoned him to the Royal Carlton.

The three men were waiting for Mr Dixon in the Princess Alice suite, and it seemed that he had been a subject of discussion prior to his entry for they all rose and advanced with outstretched hands.

'Very many congratulations,' said Mr Cornelius.

'Stupendous,' said Nicholas Rumpkins.

'You're a bloody wonder,' said Robert Simpson.

Mr Dixon tried to look as modest as was possible under the circumstances but only succeeded in blushing, while mentally agreeing that all this was no more than his due. His hand was pumped up and down, while compliments flew faster than swallows in autumn and he was led unprotesting to a chair.

'Get our genius a drink,' instructed Mr Cornelius. 'What will you have, my dear fellow? Whisky, gin and tonic, sherry? Name it - it's yours.'

'A gin and tonic will do nicely. Thank you very much.'

'A cigar? You must let me send you a box.'

Soon Mr Dixon was seated, with a well-filled glass in one hand, and a cigar in the other, while his admirers watched him with unblinking eyes.

'Your drink all right?' Mr Cornelius enquired.

'Yes, fine. Thank you very much.'

'Splendid. I need hardly say you have surpassed my highest expectations. Really remarkable, and as a sign of my keen appreciation, you will receive a bonus cheque for one thousand pounds.'

'Thank you very . . .'

'No more than you deserve.' Mr Cornelius waved his hand impatiently. 'No more than you deserve. Not that a thousand pounds will mean much to you these days. Robert, how much commission is due to Mr Dixon for his Mansfield Decorative Casket sales?'

'Sixty-nine thousand, eight hundred pounds.'

Mr Cornelius nodded thoughtfully. 'Not bad. He is well on his way to the one hundred thousand a year target, and I would not be at all surprised if he does not double it. We'll soon be going to him for a sub. What?'

They all laughed loudly, bared their teeth, creased their faces; but the eyes remained watchful.

'Now for the next stage. I take it, Mr Dixon, you are eager to conquer new territories? Advance towards the ultimate?'

'Absolutely. Yes, indeed.'

'Good.' Mr Cornelius leaned back in his chair and crossed his hands over the back of his neck. 'What would you say is the next operation? You sold a large number of Bronson Miracle Heaters which warm the body: you have likewise sold an even larger number of Mansfield Decorative Caskets, whose basic purpose—let us be honest among ourselves—is to accommodate a body. Now, use that very exceptional ability of yours, Mr Dixon. What is the next step?'

Mr Dixon thought and such was his positive mental capacity these days, an immediate, but totally ridiculous, answer sprang to mind. He instantly dismissed it. Swept it away with a whisk of alarm.

'A bath?' he suggested.

Mr Cornelius's smile was a little strained.

'Not only have you exceptional ability, Mr Dixon, but you have a sense of humour as well. Try again.'

The ridiculous answer came creeping back and now it refused to be dismissed.

'A . . . a . . . a . . .'

'Let us go into the demonstration room,' said Mr Cornelius. The two trestles stood in the centre of the room, and on them, once again, lay something covered by a sheet. The sales manager was rubbing his hands.

'You're going to like this, Mr Dixon. My word, yes.'

'This is something the world has been waiting for,' announced Nicholas Rumpkins gravely.

Mr Cornelius frowned. 'Come, gentlemen. To business. Robert, do the honours.'

Robert Simpson once again took hold of one end of the sheet and after allowing for a dramatic pause, jerked it away. The corpse was that of a man in his early forties, with a fat, white face, gleaming black hair and dressed in a dinner-jacket. The face and hands shone as though they had been coated with varnish; the lips were bright red, the eyelids dark blue, and the cheeks enhanced by little, circular scarlet patches.

'The Hadley Home Companion,' said Mr Cornelius softly.

'Where do you get them?' asked Mr Dixon, whose positive, unflappable calm was under great strain.

'People leave them to us,' answered Mr Cornelius suavely.

‘Robert, kindly demonstrate.’

The sales manager grinned like a child preparing to show off his latest toy, and walked round to the far side of the Hadley Home Companion. He rolled up the sleeve of his right arm, and after much flexing of fingers, leaned over and pressed a gold stud which winked coyly from the white shirt front.

The effect was electrifying. The blue-tinted eyelids popped open; the Home Companion jerkily sat up; the arms were raised as though appealing for an embrace; the bright red lips parted, and a mechanical voice squeaked: ‘Mummy . . . mummy.’

‘The actual words can be adjusted for individual taste,’ Nicholas Rumpkins explained. ‘Whole speeches can be taped if necessary. We are prepared to be very broadminded.’

Having performed its demonstration, the Hadley Home Companion closed its mouth, lowered its eyelids, and sank back on to the trestle table. Three members of the audience sighed with satisfaction: one with incredulity. Mr Cornelius was as a man who has crystallized a dream and is now about to present it for vulgar gaze.

‘The Hadley Home Companion is a must for the discerning, civilized family. Need I say its usefulness has no limit? Should there be an empty chair at the dinner-table, who could fill it with more grace than an H.H.C.? If the children are bored, irritable, will not eat their porridge: all mother has to do, is push the golden stud, and their happy laughter will wile away the daylight hours. And don’t forget our special service, gentlemen. If a loved one is called away, then why not utilize his or her empty shell? Put them back in the sadly vacated chair, be it in home, car or boardroom. Adjusted to say a few well-chosen words, few people will realize they have ever been away.’

Nicholas Rumpkins was visibly affected, for he dabbed his eyes on a monogrammed pocket handkerchief, and then apologized for his unseemly emotion.

‘Sorry about that, chief – gentlemen. I know it’s silly of me, but those words were the most beautiful I have ever heard. Mr Dixon – Henry, old chap, you must be very proud that you have the opportunity, and the ability, to be of service to suffering humanity.’

‘I am.’ Mr Dixon was rather ashamed of his previous qualms, and now did his best to atone for them by expressing

his gratitude and confidence. 'Leave it to me, chief. I am very excited about this, and I am going to do my utmost. My unstinted utmost.'

The smile of Mr Cornelius was beautiful beyond description. He laid a hand on both of Mr Dixon's shoulders and cemented their cordial relationship for all time.

'Henry, this is the last operation before you step aboard the gravy-train. The ultimate is waiting. Do this well, and I can promise you an assignment that will earn you millions.'

'Millions,' breathed Mr Dixon. 'Cor!'

Among the enquirers that Mr Dixon called upon during the ensuing weeks was a certain highly placed prelate who resided in a new council house situated conveniently near Hammersmith underground station. He was conducted by a chaplain of stern visage into a small room overlooking the river and here he was greeted by the prelate, whose benign countenance displayed symptoms of grave anxiety.

'Pray, be seated, Mr . . . eh . . . Dixon. I gather you have called to discuss the advisability of my purchasing one or possibly more of your, eh . . . Hadley Home Companions.'

'Yes.' Mr Dixon nodded and rubbed his hands. 'I feel your grace . . . your lordship, will find them to be a great boon. The empty chair at the dinner-table, or one suitably attired in clerical dress at an ecclesiastical reception - there really is no limit to the uses they can be put to. They can also be great fun . . .'

'I was not thinking of the social or humorous aspect,' said the prelate, smiling sadly. 'No indeed.' He appeared to be lost in a maze of melancholy thoughts for a few minutes, then he looked up and said gently: 'I understand that when shops and places of business or entertainment fail to attract the public, persons are employed to stand around, so as to create the impression of commercial activity. The principle being that where a crowd congregates, a multitude will soon follow.'

'Yes,' Mr Dixon agreed, 'it is a common practice.'

The prelate stared out of the window and watched a small boy hit a little girl over the head with a ping-pong bat.

'Our churches and places of worship, are, I fear, sparsely attended these days. There is such a gap between worshippers, I have often toyed with the idea of supplying the sidesmen with bicycles.'

Mr Dixon giggled, then hastily assumed a grave expression when the churchman failed to smile.

'Of course,' the prelate was talking more to himself than to his interested visitor, 'the idea is not unique. The government have been using the animated dead for some time. But they have been using very complicated models, far too expensive, and conditioned for service rather than worship. They call them voters.' He turned his head and addressed Mr Dixon rather shyly. 'Would it be possible to adjust the . . . eh . . . Hadley Home Companion to say "Amen" at regular intervals?'

'Yes, indeed. Easily. No trouble at all.'

'And even possibly sing a few simple hymns?'

'I am sure it can be arranged.'

The prelate lowered his head and for a while it seemed that he might have fallen asleep. Then he looked up and pronounced his absolute, positive and irrevocable decision.

'I wish to place an order for an initial thousand. When can I expect delivery?'

Nora burst into the bedroom just as Mr Dixon was donning his new dinner-jacket. She had sticking plaster on the fingers of her right hand, and was clearly not in a good mood.

'I've dropped me diamond bracelet in the baked beans,' she announced.

'I have told you before,' Mr Dixon was having difficulty with his bow-tie, 'not to wear your jewellery when cooking. I almost broke a tooth last week when your ruby ring somehow got mixed up with the sausage and mash.'

'Where are you off to now?' Nora enquired. 'This is the third time you've missed *Opportunity Knocks*.'

'Nora, this is my big night. Having sold over four thousand Hadley Home Companions, Mr Cornelius is going to promote me to the ultimate. As from tomorrow we will be in the millionaire class.'

'What we're going to do with all this money, I should like to know,' Mrs Dixon complained. 'I've got all the dresses I'll ever wear; the dressing-table is chock-full of jewels, the fridge is full of food, and we've got three tellies you're never in to watch.'

'We could buy a larger house,' Mr Dixon suggested.

'What! After it's taken twenty years to pay off the mortgage on this one? I should cocoa.'

The bow-tie had finally been subdued to some kind of order, and Mr Dixon studied his reflection with great satisfaction.

'Ability without appearance is like a half-cooked pie,' he remarked sagely. 'How do I look?'

'Like a waiter on his night off,' said Mrs Dixon. 'Go on and enjoy yourself. Will you be back late?'

'I shouldn't think so. Mr Cornelius never spends long in explaining a new line.' He paused and then turned and looked thoughtfully at his wife. 'Do you know something?'

She brushed a fleck of dust from his coat sleeve. 'No. What?'

'I'm just a wee bit frightened. Just a bit.'

Mr Dixon stopped when he stood in the doorway of the demonstration room and looked round in astonishment. A small dais had been erected at the far end of the room; a raised carpeted area on which stood one small table, three chairs and a small draped something which aroused his sensitive curiosity. But the most alarming aspect was the number of people seated in armchairs. When he was pushed gently forward by the plainly excited Robert Simpson the faces of the assembly became visible and he was surprised, not to mention alarmed, to recognize many of his, it was to be hoped, satisfied customers. There was Mr Carter, looking more sinister than ever; Humphrey and Lottie were seated side by side and appeared to be enjoying a private joke, while the august prelate sat alone, only now he did not look at all benign, but gave Mr Dixon one cold, calculating stare.

'Up on the old stage,' Robert Simpson ordered. 'You're the star attraction tonight.'

He was pushed up on to the dais and seated to the right of the table, then the sales manager lowered himself on to the third chair. It cannot be stated that Mr Dixon was happy as he sat looking down upon the faces of his erstwhile customers, for he soon realized they were all present. Apart from the smirking Humphrey and Lottie, there was not a smile or a look of friendly recognition from any of them. Imagination shook hands with panic, and together they produced a vision of a deluge of letters which had resulted in this mass meeting of disgruntled clientele. Now he was going to be publicly shamed, and possibly made to pay back all his too easily acquired commission.

Presently a wave of awareness seemed to pass over the sea of watching faces, and Robert Simpson jumped to his feet and announced in a voice, vibrant with emotion: 'Ladies and gentlemen, your chairman and managing director.'

Everyone rose and stood strictly to attention as Mr Cornelius walked briskly in through the doorway, and mounting the stage, seated himself behind the table. The assembly promptly sat down, and now it seemed as if a switch had been pulled, or a curtain raised, for men coughed, voices murmured, and Mr Dixon for the time being ceased to be the focus for all eyes. Mr Cornelius leaned forward and addressed his sales manager.

'The sample arrive in time?'

Robert Simpson jerked his head in the direction of the draped object.

'Here and ready, chief.'

'Good. Then we might as well get started.'

Mr Cornelius rose and the immediate silence was either a compliment to his dynamic personality, or a tribute to the fear he inspired. When he spoke his voice was distinct without being loud, every word was pronounced with clear precision, and there was the occasional pause for dramatic emphasis.

'Friends . . . fellow shareholders, this is a momentous occasion. For long have we sought the MAN. The super-salesman, who had the ability . . . the drive . . . the incentive . . . to make the ultimate sale. Ladies and gentlemen, this is the time for rejoicing, for I am happy to say that man has been found.'

A few people called out: 'Hear, hear,' and there was a thunderous round of applause. Mr Cornelius raised his hand and the silence closed in like a fog bank round a mountain top.

'When that man first came to us, he was handicapped by non-positive scruples, a lamentable ignorance of his great potential; but ladies and gentlemen, I saw the spark that glimmered dimly in the dark corridors of his soul and at that moment hope was born. All of us have carefully nurtured that spark; fed it with the dry wood of self-esteem, reinforced it with the coals of achievement, fanned it with the bellows of greed. Now, we have an all-devouring flame; a mighty inferno that will destroy all barriers that stand between it and the ultimate sale. In short, dear friends, there is

now an insatiable lust for money.'

There was another round of applause in which Mr Dixon found himself taking part. Mr Cornelius laid a hand on his shoulder and made the announcement for which they had all been waiting.

'Shareholders . . . I give you Henry George Dixon, the world's greatest super-super salesman.'

They gave Mr Dixon a standing ovation. Blank faces, wildly clapping hands, mouths that opened and shut, eyes that gleamed like polished marbles, they might have been Hadley Home Companions that had been programmed to render applause. Mr Cornelius allowed this tribute to his super-salesman to go on for some three minutes, before switching it off with a wave of his hand.

'We now come to the ultimate sale.'

The assembly sat down and repeated the last two words in a loud, united voice. *'The ultimate sale.'*

'From this time forth,' Mr Cornelius went on, 'our talented, positive friend will be dealing with only one product and one client. Unlimited commission will be his.'

'Unlimited commission,' repeated the shareholders.

'Robert Simpson,' Mr Cornelius addressed his sales manager, 'do the honours.'

Robert Simpson rose and walked over to the draped object where, repeating his by now familiar ceremony, he gripped the sheet and jerked it away. Standing on a red painted box was an empty gin bottle. Empty that is to say so far as its original contents were concerned, but Mr Dixon detected a faint, whirling mist, that pulsed, contracted, and took on many weird shapes.

'The product,' Mr Cornelius announced.

'The product,' repeated the assembly.

'Henry George Dixon,' Mr Cornelius ordered in a loud voice, 'pray, describe the product.'

Mr Dixon once again called upon his positive, great ability and hit the allegorical nail squarely on the head.

'A gin bottle.'

Another round of applause rose, thundered round the room, then died away.

'And what do you see within the bottle?'

Mr Dixon presented the face of truth as he saw her.

'Whirling mist.'

'Wrong,' announced Mr Cornelius.

'Wrong,' groaned the assembly.

'Try again,' Mr Cornelius urged. 'Think very carefully. What would one expect to find in a gin bottle?'

There was only one answer, and Mr Dixon gave it.

'Spirits.'

The murmur of appreciation which greeted this demonstration of keen perception, gradually erupted into words. 'You're still on the ball, man,' shouted Humphrey. 'Bravo, well done,' proclaimed the prelate. 'Unbelievable,' Mr Carter said.

'Please,' Mr Cornelius smilingly restored order, 'no one stands in greater awe of our good friend's mental attributes than I but we really must get on. Henry, would you care to elaborate on the word - spirits?'

The light of comprehension seared the mind, blinded reason, threatened sanity, but it had to be faced.

'Souls,' said Mr Dixon.

Mr Cornelius's smile broadened into a grin of delight.

'The ultimate sale. The product you must present to the Ultimate Client. On the last analysis the asking price for a human soul was fifty thousand pounds. Stocks are unlimited. You should - I know you will do well.'

'But . . . souls . . . !' Mr Dixon began to protest.

'Be positive. Do not hesitate.'

'But . . . I can't . . .'

'There is no such word for the man who has arrived. Say, I will. I can.'

'I . . . I . . . I will . . .'

The applause was deafening. Confidence flowed in and swept away the frail barriers of doubt.

'I know . . . know . . . I can.'

Mr Cornelius placed an arm round his shoulders and his voice was the hum of bees on a hot day: the murmur of a breeze in a country garden: the whisper of temptation that creeps along the corridors of a monastery when the monks forget to pray.

'Well done, my son. The riches of the world shall be yours.'

Mr Dixon descended the steps which lead down to the underground station at Piccadilly Circus. He followed his nose which led him into a passage and finally to a small red door set in the wall just before the entrance to the gentlemen's public convenience. It is fair to say he would not have seen

this portal if he had not been looking for it. Opening the door, he walked into a dingy office where the exalted personage he had come to see was seated behind a blue plastic desk.

There was nothing alarming about His appearance. He was a little man with a tired face and white hair that had been brushed up to form pointed wings on either side of His narrow head, and His ears were perhaps inclined to be pointed. But otherwise, the uninformed would not have guessed His importance. He greeted Mr Dixon's entrance with an irritable frown.

'Now, look,' He spoke with a slight lisp, 'it's no use wasting my time or yours. There's a glut on the market these days, and I've more merchandise than I know what to do with. Leave your card, and I'll contact you if anything turns up.'

It was not an auspicious opening and a lesser man than Mr Dixon would have been discouraged. But he opened his sample bag, and slammed a commodity filled gin bottle down on the desk.

'But have you seen the quality of our merchandise, Sir? No rubbish. Not for us the petty sinner—the pop round the corner—a bit of adultery on Wednesday night, and go to confession on Thursday morning. No, Sir . . .'

'But the overheads.' He waved his hands and seemed on the point of tears. 'The cost of fuel, labour troubles, advertising rates . . . I can't afford to invest in any more stock.'

Mr Dixon rose and banged his fist down on the desk.

'Can you afford *not* to invest, Sir?'

'Well . . .'

'We can offer you a job lot of five hundred thousand, dyed-in-the-wool, hypocritical, red-handed, bloody-minded, cut-throat shysters . . .'

The sale of the century was under way.

THE CHANGELING

'Your mother will be coming at three o'clock this afternoon,' said Mumma.

Peter had long since learned to differentiate between 'Mumma' and 'Mother'. Mumma was old, wrinkled, had a mass of white hair; cooked, did housework, was often cross

with him, and turned into a bear every Friday night. Mother on the other hand, was young, pretty, had blonde hair, and came to see him at irregular intervals and usually brought a present with her. So far as Peter was aware, Mother did not turn into a bear on Friday nights.

'Wash your face,' Mumma instructed, 'put on your Sunday suit, then sit down and read *the* nice book. I want you smart and clean when she arrives.'

Peter said, 'Yes, Mumma,' and went upstairs to his bedroom, which was furnished with an iron bedstead, an ancient wardrobe that had to be supported by a piece of wood under its right bottom corner, and a wash-stand. The floor was innocent of covering, the walls were parting company with three layers of wallpaper, and the window was masked by a strip of grimy net curtain. Mumma did not waste time or money on rooms that visitors did not see.

Peter washed his face and hands in cold water, then emptied the bowl into a chipped enamel bucket. Then he changed into his one and only dark blue suit—a jersey and short knickers being considered all that was necessary for everyday wear—and after combing his thick, blond hair, went downstairs and seated himself in the front room.

This was the place where the dead were laid out. During Peter's seven years in the cottage many small corpses had been put on display in that little, red-wallpapered, damp-smelling room, and had received the respect that must be always accorded to the dead. For Mumma was a professional foster-mother; a taker-in and rearer of unwanted and often embarrassing infants. A succession of babies had come and gone over the years, each one the rightful property of a young and sometimes pretty mother but seemingly unblessed by a father. But all of these scraps of human driftwood died when they had reached the seeing-and-talking stage. All but one. Between Peter and Mumma was a bond of affection that could not be explained and most certainly was never demonstrated. He was shouted at, sometimes hit, was not by any means overfed, had never received a caress and few kind words, but Mumma was at all times the mother-figure. For her part the old woman strenuously fought any suggestion that he should be put away, even though she sometimes eyed him with a cold, wary look, and once muttered in his presence: 'The pretty cub into the ugly wolf must grow.'

He now sat in a heavy, sagging armchair, and opened *the*

nice book, which was always to hand whenever a visit from Mother was imminent. It was a very old book with faded red covers, and the leaves were yellow with age, the corners dog-eared, the pictures rather dim—for it was very much a picture-book, with the minimum number of words under each illustration. But those few words told the story.

Page one depicted a small boy with a very large mouth, and underneath was printed in big, easy-to-read letters: *Once upon a time there was a little boy who was looked after by a nice kind lady . . .* And on the opposite page was a picture of the nice, kind lady, who looked very much like Mumma. *But the little boy had a big-big mouth and would keep talking . . .* When Peter turned the page over, there sure enough was the little boy with his big mouth wide open, and clearly talking for all he was worth. *And he told outsiders things they should not know, which made the nice kind lady very cross indeed . . .* The next picture showed the nice, kind lady who looked so like Mumma, with an ugly frown on her face, shaking her fist at the big-mouth boy, who seemed in no way put out. *So do you know what she said? She called up a hadel-monster . . .* The hadel-monster was certainly worthy of consideration, for it was shown as a tall, lean thing, with a green snake-like head, completely covered with red scales, and equipped with long arms that terminated in curved, black talons. *And the monster put one hand inside the boy's mouth . . .* Picture of the now very alarmed boy with a set of talons gripping his tongue . . . *And pulled his tongue out by its roots . . .* Picture of boy with blood flowing down his chin, and the hadel-monster viewing the detached tongue with marked distaste. *And the little boy never . . . never . . . never . . . told tales again.* Peter yawned and turned the last page over. He had read the book so many times. On the last page was inscribed in large, red letters. *Shut mouth means safe tongue.*

The door opened and Mumma came in, closely followed by Agnes. Agnes was Mumma's daughter; a tall, lean woman not unlike the hadel-monster in appearance, and she wore thick horn-rimmed spectacles that so magnified her eyes, they looked like immense blue saucers with a speck of black in the centre. Both women sat on the sofa and stared at Peter, who promptly lowered his gaze and took a deep interest in the faded pattern on the carpet. Agnes was the first to speak and her voice was high-pitched, like that of a

person who has been accustomed to the company of the near deaf.

'Well, what are you going to say to your mother when she comes?'

The formula was simple and had been used for a long period. 'I will say - Mother, you are looking very well and I am pleased you could come.'

Mumma nodded, albeit reluctantly, and Agnes permitted herself a pale ghost of a smile. 'Good. And suppose she asks questions? About us?'

'You are very kind to me and very respectable and I am very happy here.'

Agnes looked at her mother and the old woman frowned.

'He's nigh word perfect, but it only needs a slip of the tongue. Me grandmother was betrayed by a girl, younger than he is . . .'

'But times have changed. Nobody believes now. The old wisdom has been forgotten.'

'That's as may be. I should have put him away when he was two . . . Dangerous . . . dangerous . . . Never let the heart rule the head.'

Agnes flashed an anxious glance at Peter, then nudged her mother with a bony elbow. 'You're talking too much. If you're that worried . . .' She leaned sideways and whispered in the old woman's ear, and for a brief instant Mumma's faded brown eyes glittered, then she shook her head. 'I couldn't do that . . . not unless I had to. Only if I really had to.'

It was then that Peter knew that Mumma actually liked him.

Mother came at five minutes to four. She had the prettiness of an expensive china doll; golden hair, rather vacant blue eyes, a little turned-up nose, full lips and a shapely body that was plump without being fat. She did not talk so much as bubble.

'Hullo, Mrs Tolbrook. Hullo, Miss Tolbrook. Hullo, funny-face. Sorry I'm late, but I fell asleep on the train, and did not wake up until it reached Staines. Can you imagine the state I was in? Fortunately a nice man gave me a lift in his car, or goodness knows how I would have got here. Well, how is everybody?'

Mumma said, 'Very well, thank you, mam,' and Agnes said, 'I am in excellent health,' and Peter said he was as well as

could be expected, an expression he had picked up from Mrs Dudley, an old woman who lived round the corner. Then Mother sat down on a chair and began to kiss him with all the ardour of a little girl for her pet, a course of action that met with Peter's full disapproval.

'Isn't he sweet! So handsome! Just like his father, who was without doubt the handsomest thing you ever did see. But shallow. As shallow as a puddle of water and just as wet. But you should see my latest friend. You really should. We're engaged you know. See the ring—a real diamond . . .' She stretched out her left hand and Mumma and Agnes examined the glittering stone with varying degrees of scepticism. 'We're going to get married as soon as his wife agrees to a divorce. But she's so selfish! Harold says she hangs on like a limpet. But that's enough about me. What has my beautiful little man to say for himself?'

Peter mouthed his lines with the practised ease of an actor in a long-running play. 'Mother, you are looking very well and I'm so pleased to see you.'

Mother put her hand over her mouth and giggled. 'Oh, isn't he something! Have you ever heard anything like it?'

'Agnes,' Mumma said in an emotion-choked voice, 'I should take the nice picture book from Peter. Mrs . . . eh . . . his mother may find it gets in her way.'

Agnes snatched the nice picture book from Peter's limp grip and took it over to the sideboard, where she locked it in a top drawer. Mother watched its departure with something like regret. 'Oh, I like picture books. Was it one about talking animals?'

'You could say so,' Mumma admitted grudgingly. 'Have you the doings, Mrs . . . eh . . . Mrs Danfield?'

Mother gasped, reached for her handbag which had been sitting on the floor, then, after some frantic fumbling, produced a handful of banknotes. 'Of course, what will you think of me? Let me see . . . five pounds a week . . . that's twenty pounds. There we are.'

Mumma took the four five-pound notes, tucked them in the top of her dress, then rose to her feet. 'I expect you'd like a cup of tea, and possibly want a few words with Peter. Me and Agnes will make ourselves scarce.' She shot Peter a meaningful glance. 'But we'll be on hand, so to speak.'

Mother assumed a startled expression, said, 'You really mustn't go,' and gave a sigh of relief when the door was

closed behind the departing mother and daughter. She screwed up her face into an expression of mock horror. 'What a pair! Honestly, they give me the willies. Are you sure, darling, that you like it here? I mean to say, apart from them, it's more than a bit grotty. The old girl isn't so bad, but that Agnes - she looks like a streak of cold bacon.'

Peter's practised eye saw what appeared to be a ball of grey fluff ease its way under the door and come rolling over the floor. He knew Agnes was responsible: that it was a seeing, hearing part of herself, and it was most important that he keep to his lines. 'They are both very kind and very respectable and I'm very happy here.'

Mother shrugged. 'If you say so. Do they give you enough to eat? What did you have for dinner today?'

The memory of burnt sausages and mashed potato was banished from the harsh light of reality, and a more interesting menu drawn from the delicately tinted gloom of fiction.

'Roast chicken, roast potatoes, green peas and stuffing, closely followed by apple pie and lots of cream.'

Mother clapped her hands and displayed all the signs of surprise and envy. 'My, they do do you proud! I never realized - no wonder you don't want to leave. Goodness - is this the kind of thing you have every day?'

The land of fiction has no frontiers.

'Sometimes I have roast pork, sometimes I have roast turkey, and last week I had Christmas pudding.'

Mother sighed and her beautiful eyes became a little wistful.

'Food is so important when you are young. I was always hungry when I was a child. In fact, I cannot remember a single day when I was not hungry. It was not until I was sixteen and . . . I got around . . . made my way in the world . . .' She giggled and seemed to be looking out over a pleasant and rather funny world. 'Then I had lots to eat . . . as much as I ever wanted.'

The ball of fluff (but it wasn't fluff of course) began to roll back towards the door. Peter watched it from the corner of his eye. 'Mother,' it was only a name, 'what do you do? Rodney Green, a boy I knew at school, his mother works in a factory, and Agnes is employed at Garridges, a big shop in London. What is . . .' he paused and fumbled among his limited stock of words, 'what is your occupation?'

A shrewd observer would have detected a hint of embarrassment in Mother's swiftly lowered eyes, but Peter was

still watching the ball of fluff which was now seeping back under the door. 'I'm a kind of entertainer, darling. A sort of model, I suppose you might say.'

'Oh!' He switched his gaze back to the pretty, unlined face, and the child's insatiable appetite for information flared up into a bright flame. 'What is an - inter-tainer?'

Mother's embarrassment grew, and the boy knew that she - like Mumma - had a secret that must not be revealed to outsiders. 'Well, darling, an entertainer - well - she tries to make people happy. Wears nice clothes . . .' She paused, then giggled. 'You might say I am a lamb among wolves.'

Peter's eyes grew round and he followed the path of knowledge to what must be its inevitable conclusion. 'You mean - the people who are inter-tained - turn into - wolves?'

Mother's giggle became a silvery girlish laugh. 'Indeed they do. Oh, yes, they turn into wolves all right. Great big hungry wolves.'

Far from considering this to be an alarming or even an interesting state of affairs, Mother seemed to think it was very funny, for she began to laugh and did not cease until tears were running down her face. Then she grabbed Peter and hugged him so tightly he cried out and struggled wildly in her arms. She released him and dabbed her eyes on a tiny lace handkerchief, and Peter realized that the laughter had somehow been drowned in a sea of tears and Mother was really very unhappy, or perhaps frightened. It was then that a daring, and up to now, unthinkable idea ran into his brain and took up residence like a stray cat who has finally found a warm and friendly home. Why not tell Mother about Mumma turning into a bear on Friday nights? Perhaps then she would not be frightened of the people who turned into wolves, and of course she would never tell the secret to outsiders, because she was - well - an outsider herself. He waited until the fit of crying had subsided, then tentatively (after a quick glance at the closed door) approached the forbidden subject.

'Are wolves as big as - bears?'

Mother was not really paying attention and she said softly, 'They come in all sizes and some are bigger than others.'

Peter tried to imagine a long line of wolves, some as tall as Mumma, others as small as Mrs Dudley's dog, and he envied Mother's unique experience. The ultimate revelation slid off his tongue as a low, thrilling whisper,

'Mumma turns into a bear every Friday night and I'm not a bit frightened.'

Mother said, 'What!' and stared at him with tear-bright eyes.

'Yes. Every Friday night they send me to bed early, and lots of people come in and sit down in this room. I always wait until the singing starts, before I creep downstairs and look through the keyhole. They all sing and take their clothes off, and Mumma turns into a bear. I think she knows I know, because she says I must never tell an outsider. But I've told you because of the wolves.'

The fatal deed was done. He had opened the door, let the cat out of the bag, broken the seal, arranged words in such a fashion that the secret had been spoken. The red wallpaper seemed to glow with rage, an irate bluebottle went buzzing across the room and a tiny green-scalded snake rose up from the aspidistra plant and glared at him with red, microscopic eyes. Then fear came and enveloped him in its cold, paralysing coils, and truth sat down beside him and unveiled her awful face. Agnes may have withdrawn her ball of fluff, but the others—Mrs Dudley, Mr Andrews the milkman, Miss Coldwell, all of them—had taken turns to watch him. In the classroom, out on the playground, walking, eating, sleeping—he had never been alone. Now the news of his betrayal was being flashed from brain to brain, anger must be building up into a mountain of white-hot hate, and plain, everyday, not-to-be-remembered-faces were changing into never-to-be-forgotten-masks. He clutched Mother's hand and tried to explain the unexplainable. 'I shouldn't have told you. You must go now and never come back. Never . . . never . . .'

But Mother was as a kitten that can only see the cobra's tail as a delightful toy; she giggled, ruffled his hair, kissed his forehead and said: 'What a wonderful imagination you have, darling. Turn into a bear! The old biddy looks as if she might at that.'

Peter could hear the sounds of moving footsteps in the kitchen, and way down the road a door slammed. 'It's true. The blowfly was a bit of Mumma and the green snake a bit of Agnes, or perhaps Mrs Dudley and they're watching . . .'

Mother's giggle became a gurgle of bubbling laughter, and she flung back her head so that he could see the white even teeth, the beautiful eyes which were now glittering blue pools, and the golden hair which had been lent a brighter hue by

the invading beams of the afternoon sun. The more he pleaded, the more she laughed, and it was not until Mumma and Agnes came into the room and stood watching her, that she captured her merriment and imprisoned it behind a mask of pretended gravity.

'I am so sorry, Mrs Tolbrook,' she said, 'but Peter has been so funny. He's got the most outrageous imagination. Perfectly outrageous. He said . . . honestly . . . it's so silly . . . you turn into a . . .' laughter had escaped and was trying to strangle the fatal words ' . . . into . . . a bear . . . every Friday night.'

Mumma said, 'Really!' and Agnes said, 'Did he!' and Mother nodded so that her hair danced like ripe corn caressed by the summer breeze.

'Yes, and a bit of you is a bluebottle and a bit of Miss Tolbrook is a green snake . . . that were watching us . . .' She stopped and looked up at the blank, so dead faces watching her. 'Wasn't that . . . funny?'

'Was it?' enquired Mumma.

'I am not laughing,' stated Agnes.

Mother's smile lost its brightness and began to die.

'Oh, come on. There's no need to take offence, for goodness' sake. He meant no harm. Gosh, when I was a child I used to make up all sorts of things, but no one took them seriously.'

Mumma seemed to be growing bigger, and she took no notice of the sound of the back door being opened and foot-steps tramping across the kitchen. 'But we cannot afford to take chances. The boy should not have spoken, but he did . . .'

They came in from the kitchen: Mrs Dudley, her grey little head shaking with disapproval; Mr Andrews the milkman with his crisp white apron; Miss Coldwell, who gave piano lessons in her front room; prim-faced Mr Joyce, who kept rabbits and washed his long woollen pants on Sunday mornings; Miss Makepiece, a bundle of lavender and old lace, who ran the village post office; all crowded into Mumma's front room and stared at white and gold Mother.

'I always said he should have been laid out on that floor years ago,' said Mrs Dudley, shaking her fist at Peter. 'Aye, that he should. But you wouldn't have it.'

'She's no more than a child herself,' observed Mr Joyce, glaring at Mother with bloodshot eyes, 'and she'll talk and talk.'

'Talking made the parrot a dead bird,' said Miss Makepiece.

'No more talk,' said Agnes harshly. 'What shall we do with her?'

'Transform her,' suggested Mrs Dudley.

'Turn her into a rat,' gasped Miss Makepiece, who was clearly very excited by the prospect. 'Turn her into a rat and let the dogs chase her.'

Mr Joyce was more original. 'Put out her sight, tear out her tongue, block up her ears and let her crawl to the grave on all-fours.'

'Why not shrink her,' suggested Mr Andrews, 'and put her into a bottle? Then throw the bottle into the river and let it float down . . . down . . . down to the eternal sea.'

Mrs Dudley, who was not too bright, began to object when Mumma said, 'Let her go,' but the others nodded. Peter watched the sea of nodding heads, all bobbing up and down like dying poppies on a windy day, and he at first did not understand. Then Mumma spoke again:

'Go, silly woman. Take your white flesh, your blue eyes and yellow hair; take your lusts, your weakness, your cloying sentiment – and go. Go.'

Mother rose unsteadily to her feet and her tiny hands flew like white moths to her mouth. 'You are all mad. Stark, raving crackers, that's what you are. I'm going . . . I'm going . . . and I'm taking Peter with me.'

'The boy stays,' said Mumma. 'I've taken a fancy to him, and here he stays. Stays forever and ever and ever.'

When Mother backed towards the front door (only opened for special visitors) all their heads swung round and watched her, and all the eyes were like yellow beads reflecting silver moonlight, and all their faces were grey-white, flecked with streaks of bright red, and Peter was reminded of rice pudding enhanced by a spoonful of strawberry jam.

Mother gasped: 'I'm going . . . but I'll come back . . . with someone . . . and we'll take Peter away . . .' before she pulled the front door open and ran into the street. Mumma closed the door, then turned to face the group of very close friends – the coven – the different shapes that had come out of the same mould. 'Let us form a circle,' she said, 'and concentrate. Speed is very important.'

They obeyed with shuffling feet and outstretched hands, and when the circle was completed, each head was bowed,

all eyes were closed, and Mumma, who, though she had not actually changed into a bear, was certainly taller, broader and bearlike, shouted: 'Full speed. Full speed.'

Then Agnes threw back her head, opened her mouth and made a running noise. Her tongue went, 'clip-clod . . . clip-clod,' very quickly, and it was as though someone was running very fast along a road. Mr Andrews threw back his head and made a sound like a fast-driven car; his throat contorted like a concertina and Peter heard the snarling engine, the hum of spinning tyres, the scream of hastily applied brakes, then a sickening thud. Mrs Dudley shrieked. A sudden shriek of pain and terror, that was cut off in mid-note and was succeeded by the velvet silence of death.

They all raised their heads and smiled.

'A good job well done,' said Miss Makepiece.

'Four wheels meet two legs,' observed Mr Andrews, 'and chattering tongue is still. Most satisfactory.'

'She would have made a lovely rabbit,' said Mr Joyce wistfully.

Peter came out of a sense-numbing coldness and instantly entered the black painted corridors of grief. Mother had only visited him once in a long while; she had been silly, uncaring, treated him as a toy, a playmate to pass away an occasional summer afternoon – but she was Mother. The silver cord, of which to that moment he was not aware existed, had been broken; the pretty, white and gold picture now lay on a sun-warm road.

He ran towards the front door, jerked it open, and was running . . . running down the garden path. Feet pounded the hard paving stones, arms swung back and forth, breath rasped in and out of labouring lungs, tongue lolled over gaping lips. Mother was there, lying in front of a gleaming car and people were gathering, flocking in like jackals to a succulent carcass, and voices were manufacturing words, explaining, excusing, stating, enjoying, and each mind gave off an atmosphere of terror-tinted excitement. Peter ran into the road and there was such a wide . . . wide . . . space for him to cross, for his legs were very short, and the world was suddenly a very large and frightening place.

He reached Mother and tried to caress her still, white face, nuzzle her golden hair, lick her limp, cold hand. But a great hand came down and slid under his stomach and he was lifted up . . . up . . . up until he was held against a shrunken

breast, his long floppy ears stroked, and his whimpering jaws trapped under a stinking armpit. Mumma's voice boomed out and filled the universe.

'Poor soul, she did not know what she was doing or where she was going. Grief, you see. Her little one had just passed away.'

The murmur of sympathy rose up and became a blue-tipped wave that washed over his shrieking brain.

'Yes,' Mumma went on, tickling his neck with an exploring forefinger, 'her heart was broken and that's a fact. And so is mine. Like me own son, he was.'

Mumma wept. Peter wriggled his head free and looked up in time to see two great pools of water come spilling out from the brown lakes that were Mumma's eyes, and come tumbling . . . tumbling down her wrinkled cheeks. He howled.

'He knows you know,' she informed an interested audience. 'What hurts them, hurts us.'

Agnes sobbed, Miss Makepiece dabbed her eyes with a lace handkerchief, Mr Joyce and Mr Andrews blew their noses. Presently Mumma carried Peter back to the cottage and made up a bed for him in the washing-basket.

Later, after the sun had set, a long-eared dog of doubtful ancestry raised its narrow head and peered over the washing-basket edge. The kitchen was a place of dark shadows that glided back against the walls when the moon, suddenly unveiled by a wind-chased cloud-bank, sent its cold, pale beams through the window. The dog whimpered, then placed its small paws on the rim of the basket and after an agonized struggle leaped down on to the floor.

Far away, across a desert of worn linoleum, fringed by a thin streak of light, stood the front-room door. The little dog padded under the towering archway that was the kitchen table, skirted a monstrous Windsor chair, then crept into the tiny space that served as a hall for the steep stairs and the front room.

The door was not even closed. Slightly ajar, it seemed to quiver against the flickering pale light that seeped out from the room beyond. When the little dog butted the door with his nose, the seldom-used hinges screeched a drawn-out protest, and little grey shapes went scurrying . . . scurrying across the room.

A coffin lay in front of the fireplace. A not very long

coffin, made of polished pine, fitted with gleaming brass handles, its newness, its sheen of splendour, was out of place in that drab room. Light was provided by tall wax candles which, rearing up from chipped saucers, were on mantelpiece and sideboard, their flames dancing like tormented ghosts.

The little dog looked into the coffin.

The boy's dead face was white marble, and his staring, wide-open eyes, blue slate that had been polished by the cold finger of death, and his hair was threads of virgin gold that had captured the dancing candlelight and transformed it into a myriad sparkling stars. He had been washed, combed, dressed in white linen; decorated, beautified and put on display. Tomorrow they would come—the good, the profane, the demonic—to stare, admire, mourn; to sigh, to weep, to regret; to chuckle, to know-why-and-how—to gloat.

The little dog laid back his head and howled.

From above—way over the cracked ceiling—came the sound of a deep, deep growl, and the thud-thud of heavy feet, followed by the creak-creak of time-shrunk floorboards, and the squeak-squeak of an opening door. The stair-treads groaned, the walls whispered as they were brushed by a hairy pelt, and the air rippled with the sound of growling, rasping breathing.

The little dog jerked its head round and stared with terror-bright eyes at the open door and waited for Bear-Mumma to come in.

THE DARK BLANKET OF FEAR...

**A village of flesh-eating
ghouls... The youth who fell
in love with a corpse... A
bleeding ghost in search of
its head... The salesman who
dealt in souls...**

**From the black night of the
soul, tales of blood and
gnawing horror – by a master
storyteller.**

U.K. 60p
Australia \$1.50*
New Zealand \$1.75*
Canada \$1.50

*recommended price

0 00 614678 3