

WHISPERS IN THE NIGHT

STORIES OF THE
MYSTERIOUS & MACABRE



BASIL COPPER

Trade edition \$27.00
Limited edition \$95.00

WHISPERS IN THE NIGHT

It is a distinct pleasure to share this new collection of Basil Copper's short fiction with his many admirers. An acknowledged master in horror, suspense, and macabre fiction, Mr. Copper's writing career has spanned many genres and more than four-score of books. We think that even the author would agree that his finest work has been in the macabre.

Of the eleven short stories and novellas that comprise this volume, eight are first publications, while the remainder have had appearances in British anthologies, so they will not be familiar to most American readers. The collection runs the gamut from contemporary suspense, to gothic horror and traditional supernatural fiction, all the way to science fiction.

British editor and anthologist, Stephen Jones, provides an affectionate introduction and appreciation of the author for this volume. The jacket and interior illustrations are by Stephen E. Fabian who has illustrated three previous volumes by Copper: *Necropolis*; *And Afterward, the Dark*; and *The House of the Wolf*.



photo by Eric Carlson

Basil Copper (b. 1924) is a former journalist and newspaper editor. Through his long career, he has written over eighty books, including non-fiction studies of werewolves and vampires, hard-boiled and Sherlockian mysteries, science fiction, and horror.

His work has appeared on both sides of the Atlantic, and has been translated into many languages from French to Finnish.

Copper is an avid collector of vintage films, especially the cinema of the macabre. He is a past chairman of the Crime Writers Association of Great Britain. He lives in Kent.

**Other books by Basil Copper published by
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The Exploits of Solar Pons

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a mystery novel by Basil Copper.



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WHISPERS IN THE NIGHT

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The Werewolf; In Legend, Fact and Art

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WHISPERS IN THE NIGHT

**Stories of the Mysterious
and Macabre**

BASIL COPPER

Illustrated by Stephen E. Fabian



Minneapolis, Minnesota
1999

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First Edition

All the novellas and short stories in this collection have never before been published, with the following exceptions:

“Wish You Were Here” was first published in *Horror For Christmas*, edited by Richard Dalby, Michael O’Mara Books 1992.

“Better Dead” was first published in *The Mammoth Book of Frankenstein*, edited by Stephen Jones, Robinson Books 1995.

“Reader, I Buried Him!” was first published in *The Vampire Omnibus*, edited by Peter Haining, Orion Books 1995.

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OUT OF THE FOG: Recollection

by Stephen Jones

I first met Basil Copper more than twenty years ago. Neither of us really remembers much about the encounter, which is probably a blessing.

I had almost certainly already read his story "The Spider" in Herbert van Thal's *The Fifth Pan Book of Horror Stories* (1964) while still a teenager, and I had admired Rod Serling's adaptation of his story "Camera Obscura" on TV's *Night Gallery* in the early 1970s; but at the time we first met I knew him best for his classic tale "Amber Print," which I had discovered in Peter Haining's anthology *Dr. Caligari's Black Book* (1968).

It was 1977, and I was attending Fantasycon 3 in Birmingham, England. Basil was the Guest of Honour that year and, according to the programme booklet that I have before me (for which, incidentally, I contributed the cover illustration), he gave an hour-long lecture on the Saturday afternoon. I know I was there (I used to attend all the programme items at conventions in those days—I was keen), but over two decades later the only memory of the entire weekend that I can recall is being in the same room party as Basil on the Saturday night, surrounded by crates of beer and a well-known book dealer dancing around with a pair of ladies knickers on his head!

I believe it was more than a decade before Basil was sufficiently recovered from the ordeal to attend another fantasy convention.

In the meantime I had become a big fan of his work. My shelf of Basil's books now included his two excellent collections for Arkham House, *From Evil's Pillow* (1973) and *And Afterward, the Dark* (1977), and the novels *Necropolis* (1980) and *The House of the Wolf* (1983). I had also managed to pick up a copy of his earlier novel, *The Curse of the Fleers* (1976), and our mutual friend at Arkham House, James Turner, had sent me some of Basil's Solar Pons collections as they were published in paperback by Pinnacle Books during the late 1970s.

I was going to say that our next meeting was under more sober circumstances, but that is not entirely true. It was in 1988, at the lunchtime opening of a new crime and mystery bookstore in London's West End. In the course of admiring the new shop fittings and drinking the indifferent white wine usually served at these occasions, we got to talking, and I think Basil was genuinely surprised to meet someone who was such a fan of his work and who could quote title and publication date from memory. Whatever the reason, when the party started to wind down, I suggested we move on to a small all-day drinking club I happened to know in Soho. Basil readily agreed. Over several hours—and many, many pints of strong bitter (me) and glasses of chablis (Basil)—we talked about the art of writing and bemoaned the state of the horror field (some things never change), and when we finally reeled out into the dark night to make our bleary journeys back to our homes, a lasting friendship had been forged over fine alcohol and good conversation.

In the decade since then we have met up on numerous occasions—often at conventions and gatherings on both sides of the Atlantic, sometimes sharing the same panel discussions, and I had the honour of interviewing him in depth about his fascinating life and career at Fantasycon XX in 1996. I have been his guest, and that of his beautiful French wife Annie, at their charming home in Kent. As an editor, I have been proud to work with Basil on many anthologies and non-fiction books, and I have even managed to fill several more of those gaps in my Basil Copper shelf as the years have passed.

I was therefore delighted when, in 1991, Fedogan and Bremer began its successful association with Basil by publishing his long-awaited novel *The Black Death*. They have followed it with two revised and corrected editions of his Solar Pons stories, with more to follow shortly, and now this original collection of mostly new novellas and short stories, beautifully illustrated by the incomparable Stephen Fabian (who, incidentally, also illustrated three of Basil's Arkham House books back in the late 1970s and early '80s).

Of the eleven tales included in *Whispers in the Night*, only three have previously appeared before—and those in anthologies compiled by Richard Dalby, Peter Haining and myself. The oldest story in the book is "The Grass," which was written in the early 1940s when the author was an apprentice journalist, aged around sixteen or seventeen. He worked on it in the newspaper office late at night as German bombers droned overhead and explosions sounded all around him. About the horror that overwhelms a pair of opportunists seeking a treasure of lost diamonds, the manuscript was put away and forgotten for years before being redis-

covered by Basil. It only needed a slight polishing before it was ready to see publication, more than half a century after it was first written.

The remaining stories are more contemporary works and their themes range from Gothic horror and dark fantasy to science fiction and murder mystery. Here you will discover a film buff's obsession with *Bride of Frankenstein*, parasitic vampire creatures planning world domination, a serial killer with an unusual *modus operandi*, a series of messages from a long-dead relative, ritual sacrifices performed by a Satanic cult, an 18th century chariot that casts a strange spell over an artist, a man haunted by a dream from the past, a curiously-shaped volume found in an old bookshop, the crew of a futuristic outpost forced to confront their greatest enemy, and a child's ingenious revenge for the murder of her mother.

It is an eclectic selection which ably conveys the range and power of Basil's skills as a writer. In fact, it is probably true to say that the author's work has never been more popular than it is today. With new stories regularly appearing in bestselling anthologies around the world, and Fedogan & Bremer's commitment to publishing his books in handsome and collectable hardcovers, Basil is now justly revered by his peers and his many fans as a master of the Mysterious and the Macabre, which just so happens to be the subtitle of this present volume.

With the passing of years, my memory of our first meeting may now be growing a little hazy, but to any new readers who are just discovering his work for the first time with this collection, I can guarantee that like me, you will find Basil Copper's fiction distinctly *unforgettable!*

—Stephen Jones,
London, England
April, 1998

WHISPERS IN THE NIGHT



BETTER DEAD

1

“BETTER DEAD!” said Robert exultantly as Boris pulled the lever.

The whole laboratory and watchtower exploded in dust and flames.

“Great!” said Robert, getting up to turn down the sound on the projector as the Universal end titles started coming up.

Joyce, who had just poked her head in at her husband’s specially built brick projection room, yawned, glancing at the hundreds of metal film cans that lined the interior of the thirty-foot-long auditorium, the metal shelving reflecting back the screen images in tiny flickering points of light. Normally Robert had the curtains drawn across his archive treasures but for some reason he had not bothered this evening. The room lights went on as the last foot of black trailer went through the machine.

“You must have seen *Bride of Frankenstein* a hundred times by now,” Joyce said wearily.

Robert’s eyes glowed.

“And I expect to see it another hundred times before the year’s out. The classics never stale.”

Joyce shook her head.

“Tea’s ready. Is there any chance of you cutting the lawn tonight?”

Robert gave her an expression of mock regret.

“Doubtful. I have two more film parcels to open yet.”

"I've had enough of the dead alive," his wife said, a steely undertone coming into her voice. "Film collecting will be the death of you."

Robert chuckled, his eyes vacantly fixed on two huge cardboard cartons on the bench near his canvas viewing chair.

"What a way to go!"

The outer door slamming cut off any further remarks he might have made and with a slightly crestfallen expression he switched off the mains electricity and made his way back to the house. The couple ate their tea in silence, Joyce's eyes fixed smoulderingly on his face. An attractive, dark-haired woman of thirty-six, she had to rein back the resentment within her at her husband's extravagant collecting habits, while she was forced to hold on to a boring secretarial job in order to help pay the bills.

Robert crumbled a piece of toast into his tea and ate it with satisfaction.

"I think *Night of the Living Dead* just turned up," he said at length. "We were looking forward to that one."

"You mean you were," his wife said pointedly.

She got up to clear her plate, the set of her shoulders indicating extreme displeasure.

She paused by the buffet, delicately cutting a slice of the cream gateau that they had started at lunch-time.

"I shan't be back until late this evening. I have a committee meeting and then I have some more typing to finish off at the office."

"Don't forget your key," said Robert absently, his mind still fixed on the parcels in his projection room at the bottom of the garden. He gazed fondly to where the roof showed through the top of the rose trellis outside the French windows. "I may be running stuff down there."

Joyce's eyes glinted with suppressed anger as she stood with the cake knife in one slim, well manicured hand.

"Do you want any of this?"

Robert shook his head.

"Just another cup of tea, if you'd be so kind."

There was an oppressive silence in the room as Joyce bent to pour, accentuated as the faint hum of a motor mower came faintly on the summer breeze.

"Incidentally," she said sourly. "Karloff never said, 'Better dead!' Even after all those viewings you can't remember the dialogue properly."

"Oh," said Robert.

He gave his wife a twisted smile. For the first time she realised how ugly and worn he was looking, even in his early forties.

"Well," he said eventually, with an air of quiet triumph. "If he didn't say it, he should have!"

Joyce turned her face away so that he should not see the expression on it. She put the teapot down on the metal stand with barely suppressed fury.

She left the room without saying goodbye. The phone rang as she was crossing the hall. She turned quickly, made sure the dining room door was firmly closed.

"Hullo, darling!"

The voice was unmistakable. She changed colour, put her hand quickly over the receiver.

"How many times have I told you, Conrad. Don't ring here!"

"Why, is he home?"

She smiled tautly at the alarm in the other's voice.

"Don't worry; he's having tea in the dining room. See you tonight as arranged."

She put the phone down quickly as Robert's footsteps sounded over the parquet. She was putting on her light raincoat in front of the mirror when he opened the door.

"Just the office," she said, answering his unspoken question.

She smiled maliciously.

"Hope you're not too disappointed. It wasn't one of your film dealer friends."

She went out quickly, slamming the front door before he had time to reply.

2

Light exploded, splitting the darkness with dazzling incandescence. Joyce, nude, got out of bed, revelling in the fact that the dark, strongly-built young man next to her was admiring her sinuous curves, softly explored by the bedside lamp. But she ignored the imploring look in his eyes, dressing quickly with the ease born of long practice in the dangerous game they were playing. She glanced at her wrist watch, noted it had only just turned ten P.M. There was plenty of time then.

"When will I see you?"

She shrugged.

"Soon, obviously. But we can't keep this pace up, Conrad. We're meeting too frequently."

"Nowhere near frequently enough for me!"

He rolled over quickly, reaching for her, as she sat cross-legged, one stocking half drawn on, but she skipped out of reach, laughing and sat down on the bedside stool to finish dressing. He lay and watched her

with the concentration she had often noticed; even when sated with sex men were never satisfied. As soon as the woman had dressed the mystery was there again, waiting to be revealed at the next encounter. She could not really understand the fascination, though she appreciated it in Conrad's case. She had never owned a man like him; the affair had begun two years earlier and he was a person of integrity, held to her by so many bonds of unswerving loyalty.

She deftly made up her mouth in the mirror, the ratchets of her mind clicking over hopelessly, as they had ever since the affair had begun. If there were only some way out that would make three people happy. If only Robert would find someone else. But that was not within his nature. He was so absorbed in his film collecting that he hardly noticed she was there; that being so, he would hardly turn his attention to another woman. And if he did not appreciate her attractions—and Conrad certainly did—things could go on as they were for ever if she and Conrad did not make some attempt to solve the problem.

"I can't understand him," Conrad said, as though he could read her mind.

"Who?"

Naturally, turning back from the mirror, she knew what he meant.

The dark-haired man in the bed shrugged impatiently.

"Your husband, of course. With all that under his roof he just doesn't seem interested."

Joyce smiled bitterly.

"You should be grateful, darling. People hardly ever value what they possess."

Conrad gave her a twisted smile in return.

"Until they've lost it . . ."

The sentence seemed to hang heavily in the scented air of the bedroom.

Joyce bent swiftly and kissed him gently on the brow.

"We'll see in due course," she said in a low voice. "We have to be patient."

"I thought we had been. For two long years."

Joyce did not answer, her emotions suddenly overcoming her. She turned to the mirror, only the faint trembling of her fingers as she put on the lightweight raincoat betraying her inmost feelings.

"I'll ring you," she said through tight lips. "Please don't ring the house again. It's too dangerous."

He did not answer and she went out without a backward glance, letting herself out the back door into the secluded garden. It was a

bright, starry night and she leaned against the wall, drinking in the fresh air until she had recovered herself. She drove home slowly, her mind still turning over useless prospects. It was still only a quarter to eleven when she got in. Lights burned in the dining room and the French windows were open to the lawn.

From the projection room at the end of the garden came the faint, tinny music. *The Night of the Living Dead* was under way. She sat down at the end of the dining room table, her emotions overcoming her. Slowly her head fell forward and she put her hands up to her face as she rested her elbows on the cold oak surface. Salt tears trickled through her fingers as the raucous music went on.

3

"It's alive! It's alive!"

There was a sudden burst of laughter from the other end of the dining room. Joyce shrank inwardly. The guests round the long table wore blank faces. Only Robert and his friend John at the head were laughing inanely.

"For God's sake, Robert," said Joyce irritably. "Can't you leave it alone for even a few hours?"

The nearest guests looked startled at the vehemence of her tones and John and Robert resembled figures congealed in a photo-flash picture. Joyce forced a smile, aware that she had made a social gaffe. John's wife was sitting next to her and she turned toward Isabel.

"I'm sorry about that, but this film collecting business is getting on my nerves."

The guests relaxed then, exchanging knowing smiles among themselves, and Joyce was inwardly gratified to see that both John and Robert wore chastened looks.

Isabel nodded, fixing her husband with a warning glance.

"Don't I know it, dear. John and I have no conversation at all nowadays unless it's about films."

She paused.

"Or, it's 'Pass the salt!'"

"We must split them up when we have coffee," Joyce said.

Isabel sighed.

"I've tried before," she said resignedly. "There's no stopping them once they get on that topic."

Joyce stabbed her silver fork into the remains of her dessert with an almost savage gesture.

"They're hardly ever off it."

The two women laughed uneasily and then Joyce was in command of herself again. A few minutes later, when she had ushered the last of the guests into the drawing room and she and Isabel had returned to the kitchen to make the coffee, they were silent, as though both were absorbed with weighty thoughts that they did not like to impart to the other.

That night, long after the guests had departed, Joyce was washing up in the kitchen, when she heard the back door slam. Robert had, of course, gone off with John somewhere, as soon as he could decently excuse himself. Now he had come in and, despite the lateness of the hour, had gone out to his projection room. A few minutes later, as she finished drying the glasses she could hear raucous music coming from the end of the garden. The nearest house to theirs was quite a long way off, so Robert had not bothered to completely sound-proof his private cinema.

Joyce paused; a sudden thought had come in to her mind. Robert's acquisitions had risen to an alarming total in the past few months. Alarming in the sense that his "hobby," if it could be called that, must be costing him a great deal. Costing them a great deal, she suddenly realised. She stood, her lips pursed, her flat stomach against the draining board, the last glass poised in her hand. She caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror opposite. She looked absurdly like Joan Crawford in one of her Warner Brothers melodramas, she felt. Then she angrily dismissed the thought. She was catching Robert's disease. She crossed the kitchen and took the last trayful of clean glasses back into the dining room.

Then she went swiftly along the corridor to Robert's study. She switched on the green-shaded desk lamp, making sure that the thick curtains were already drawn across the windows. Robert always kept his chequebooks and stubs in the top righthand drawer. She went through them quickly, her breath coming faster as she noted the sums. She got out a sheet of paper and a pencil and started jotting down the figures. Anger was growing like a dull fire within her. He had spent several thousand pounds in the last two months alone! She fought back the feeling as she completed her calculations. And Robert sometimes grumbled that she was careless with the housekeeping money . . . When she had finished, she replaced everything as she had found it, switched off the lamp and went back to the dining room.

She put the sheet with the notations at the bottom of her handbag and then replaced all the glasses in the big antique glass-fronted corner cupboard. She had just finished when she heard Robert come in, locking and bolting the back door behind him. He looked in at the open dining

room door, as though surprised to see her still working. He rubbed his hands with satisfaction.

"I think it all went very well, don't you?"

"Yes, very well," she said slowly.

She kept her eyes fixed steadily on his face. It was as if she were seeing him clearly for the first time.

4

It was hard work mowing the lawn. Joyce was perspiring and a savage resentment was building up. Robert had disappeared some hours earlier but she had no doubt where he was and her eyes wandered to his cinema building at the far side of the garden. Another two parcels of film had arrived that morning and that had added to her anger. The two had spoken very briefly; long silences were becoming the norm within the marriage and Joyce was conscious that things had deteriorated to a dangerous degree over the past two years. This was one of the factors which had driven her into another man's arms; the utter indifference of her partner to her needs both as a woman and a human being.

Joyce put the mower away in the small shed just beyond the cinema, aware all the time of the faint music issuing into that corner of the garden. She ate lunch alone and when she went out again to continue her gardening activities she was only vaguely conscious of the fact that the shadowy figure of Robert had passed briefly across her field of vision, presumably on his way to the kitchen where she had left a cold salad lunch for him.

It was late afternoon and the shadows were lengthening on the ground before Joyce had finished her current projects in the garden and when she went back indoors to make herself a much-needed cup of coffee, there was no sign of Robert. She went through all the rooms in turn but he was not there. Then she made a quick, cautious call to Conrad confirming their next meeting. Then she returned to the garden, sitting on a teak bench in a small arbour to finish her coffee and biscuits. It was almost dark by this time and leaving the coffee tray on the bench she collected her spade, intending to take it back to the garden shed.

She paused by the entrance to Robert's private cinema. Strangely enough, he did not seem to be there. Or at least there was no sound of films being projected this evening. She bent to the door, listening intently. Unless he was showing silent films . . . She made up her mind. It was time they had a serious talk. They could not go on in this manner. She was inside the vestibule now. Robert had constructed a small lobby

which featured glass cases containing film stills. Of very old films, of course; mainly from the twenties and thirties. There was an inner door leading to the cinema proper, with its archive material, constructed not only to muffle the sound when films were being projected, but to prevent light spill from the outside.

Very quietly Joyce opened the inner door and glanced through. Yes, there was a film showing, but it appeared to be silent. Then she saw it was one of the Frankenstein series. Odd that there was no sound. Unless Robert had it switched off for some reason. She could not see him for the moment as she had not yet adjusted to the light intensity in here. Her eyes were again directed to the screen; she suddenly felt dizzy and her heart had begun to thump uncontrollably. Was she ill or had she over-exerted herself in her gardening activities today?

Yes, it was *The Bride*. There was Elsa Lanchester in her incredible makeup as the monster's mate and the hysterical Colin Clive facing the sardonic Ernest Theisiger, both men in their white surgeon's smocks. And here came Karloff himself, clumping clumsily into the laboratory. Or was it Karloff! The screen image seemed to be going out of focus, wavering and insubstantial as mist. Joyce's breath caught in her throat and she stared incredulously at the burning rectangle before her. It was impossible but there was Robert's face up there on the screen with the other actors. Karloff's massive body and Robert's features! It was impossible but it was happening. And still the silent pantomime went on.

She must be ill. This could not be happening. She pressed the sharp point of her shoe against her right instep. There was pain certainly so she was wide awake and not dreaming. Instead she was enmeshed in a nightmare. She looked round desperately for the light switch, could not find it. Then her eyes were caught by something else. The reflected light from the screen was strobing across the floor and winking on the masses of film tins. Robert could not have drawn the curtains across them tonight as he usually did to avoid the reflections from the projector beam. Then thunderous music began, startling her so much that she almost fell.

The screen light was falling across Robert's figure now, hunched in a canvas chair at the back of the projection room, apparently intent on the drama being played out before him. Joyce took one step forward, then froze. It was not Robert; someone much taller and more massive, wearing a thick sheepskin coat. She screamed then as the reflected light from the projector made vivid bars across the flat skull and horrific features of Karloff's monster. The light glinted on the neck bolts and the metal clip on the skull as the leering mouth was turned toward her. Joyce moved

then, hardly realising that scream after scream was still being wrenched from her throat. The paralysis left her. She still had the spade in her hand, having apparently carried it in, though she had not been conscious of having done so.

She went forward rapidly, raining blow after blow on the hideous form of the monster in the chair. The music from the screen speakers dinned in her ears as the film came to its climax. Sick and trembling she at last found the light switch as the final leader of the film ran thrashing off the end of the spool. The noise went on until she pulled out the plug. The silence was thunderous as she turned to the crumpled form of the thing that had been watching the film. Rivers of blood, scarlet splashes on the spade she held in her hand. The face was almost unrecognisable. Joyce fell to her knees as she recognised the shattered remnants of the man who had once been Robert. She must have fainted then because her wrist watch showed that more than two hours had passed when she finally became aware of her surroundings.

Shaking uncontrollably she dragged herself to her feet. No, it had not been a mirage, but terrible reality. Her brain was working again now. Somehow she forced herself to look at her handiwork. Could the whole ghastly error have been an optical illusion? That somehow the mirror at the back of the hall and the reflection off the hundreds of film cans might have transposed her husband's image on to that of the screen? While the visage of Karloff had been superimposed on to her husband's features? Impossible, surely. And yet the deed was done. Wild thoughts passed through her head. Her first impulse was to ring the police. But how could she explain? No-one would believe her. It would mean years of prison at the least and the loss of all of her dreams of a shared future with Conrad. She forced herself into action, her mind made up.

The keys were on the side of the projection stand where they always were. She went out, her course of action clear. She switched off the light, locked the door, then washed the spade carefully under the garden tap. Cold water would remove all traces of blood, she had read somewhere. Not hot. That could be fatal. When the spade was absolutely clean she dried it thoroughly with a piece of sacking and then thrust it into the earth several times before replacing it in the garden shed. This she locked also. The garden was extremely secluded, with very high hedges and it was a bright moonlight night.

Back in the house, she locked and bolted the front door and poured herself a stiff brandy in the dining room. Fortified, she returned to the garden, procured a big tarpauling from the shed and then selected Robert's spade, which was much bigger than her own, and more suitable

for the night's work. She had already locked the back door of the house and bolted the side gate so no-one would disturb her and she had all night. The earth was very friable about eight feet from the hedge, in the spot she had chosen.

She and Robert had always planned to have a York stone terrace there. She would need to be careful. Fortunately, Robert had no living relatives but there would be questions, of course, from friends and neighbours. And after several weeks she would have to report his disappearance to the police. There would be problems, naturally, but they were not insurmountable. And in the course of time, when people's memories had faded, they would come to think that Robert had walked out after a row; or had found another woman. Both she and Conrad were still young and would be able to marry after the statutory period was over.

She breathed deeply as she walked toward the most remote part of the garden. The moon shone on serenely as she began to dig like a madwoman.

5

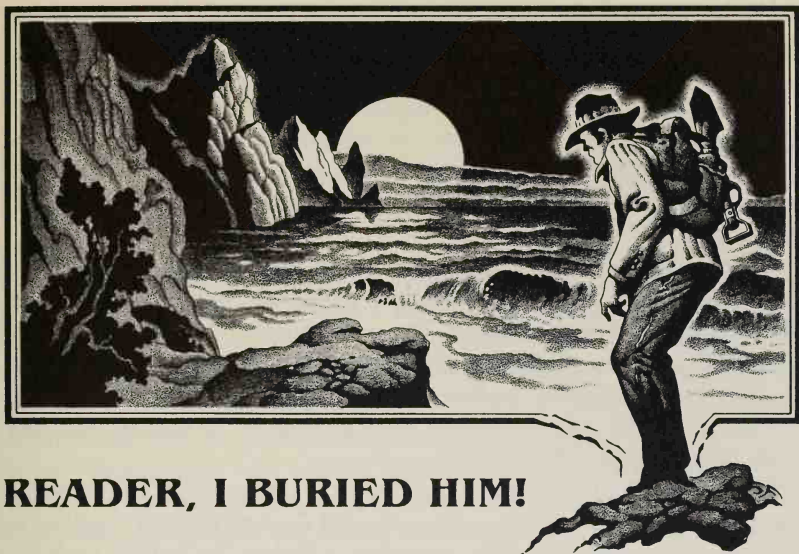
It was a bright, sunny morning when Joyce went down the front path to check the car. She was meeting Conrad in an hour and they would spend the next fortnight in the Cotswolds. She had told him that Robert was away on business, which frequently happened, and he had asked no questions. She had already telephoned the contractors about the work on the new terrace. She and Robert had often discussed establishing it there, so there was nothing untoward in the request. Especially as the builders already knew of their intentions.

The tarpaulin with its contents was a good eight feet down. Fortunately, the soil had been very easy to work, though it had taken her almost until dawn to accomplish the task. It would be several weeks before the earth would settle, but then the contractors would not arrive on the site until another month had passed, as they had a large number of commissions to fulfil. Joyce walked back to the house for a final check and then again toured the garden to see that everything was in order.

She noticed as she passed the spot where Robert lay that there was a slight mound of earth over the place. She tamped it down with one elegantly shod foot.

Her heart was light as she ran toward the front gate.

"Better dead!" she said.



READER, I BURIED HIM!

1

DR. IRVING is coming up tomorrow. That was all Renwick could think of. The epidemic was getting out of hand and he, as the Chief Medical Officer of the Outstation was baffled. He was grateful for Irving's agreement to come. He was the leading British specialist in blood disorders and the diseases connected therewith. Renwick adjusted the trim of the anglepoise lamp to give a better light on the paper before him and wiped his aching eyes with his handkerchief.

God, I'm tired, he thought. The situation in which he was involved seemed never-ending. He had not bargained for this when he had accepted the position in this remote outpost. With its chill winds and temperatures that froze one to the bone, it put the seal on what his predecessor had called one of the most God-forsaken places on earth.

Now he bent forward again, jotting his observations in the Station Logbook, which he was obliged by law to enter every day. The photocopies were faxed directly to the headquarters of the Central Committee, who could direct his activities within a few minutes, if an emergency arose. Renwick remembered the words of Cartwright, the former Director of the station, and his gaunt white face vanishing into the mist as the relief launch took him back to the mainland.

"You'll find things here, man, that are beyond belief."

He had paused, his grim jaw jutting out beneath the stem of his meerschaum pipe.

"And beyond all medical science," he had added.

He had spat philosophically overboard into the scummy water. His last words had been, "Pernicious anaemia, be damned! There's something far deeper and more sinister involved that would baffle the greatest medical scientists, let alone poor humble specialists like ourselves. Good luck to you!"

Renwick had been left with the impression of his glowing eyes and his white, tragic face that had rapidly been enveloped in the thick fog that always descended on the islands. Two months later he was dead; no-one knew the cause. In a letter received a few days before the news came through, he had confided to Renwick, "I am on the brink of something interesting. If not a breakthrough then at least an inkling of what we might be up against. More later."

But nothing had ever come and Renwick had been left with a great question mark. His inquiries of the Central Committee had resulted in no further data, and apparently, according to McIver, he had left no notes that made any sense. There was something weird about the whole set-up, Renwick realised. It was as though strange forces were at work to combat the researches of the Outstation.

Professor Quintain had been on to something as well. The island had been uninhabited for years, which was why the Central Committee had chosen it. It was untainted, unlike the mainland, and research could be carried out there, free from the constraints which obtained elsewhere. But the virus may have been airborne, for no sooner had the large number of scientists and ancillary staff been established there, than things resumed their old course.

It had taken some months, it was true. Quintain had been the first person to pinpoint it. He was a gigantic, bearded man, of Scandinavian extraction, and brilliant in his own field, which was that of virology. Almost alone among the personnel on the island, he had discounted the windborne virus theory. He felt the disease was spread by human contact and had directed his researches to that end. This was reinforced by the presence of the strange, sucker-like mark on the abdomen of each of the dead, which no-one could explain. He had come to Renwick some months earlier, when the wind was buffeting at the windows of the Outstation and dark storm clouds were scudding over the sullen sea.

His theory, which was fanciful in the extreme, was that some sort of vampiric influence was at work, attacking the victims and leaching their blood away; it was true that the victims became extremely emaciated

and their blood count low, but despite the strange abdominal markings, the theory was fantastic in the extreme, Renwick felt. He himself now clung to the notion that some rarer form of pernicious anaemia was at work, of which the abdominal wounds were the culmination, not the commencement. The most awful thing about it all—and Renwick, being a scientist, was not an emotional man—was that the symptoms, once appearing, rapidly developed and almost always ended in death of the most excruciating kind.

In the two years since the Outstation had been established, at least twenty of the personnel on site had died and their bodies had been cremated, lest others be contaminated. And of those cases with which Renwick was familiar, a number of medical people who had left the island, had later succumbed to the bizarre disease on the mainland. The most sensational and at the same time most promising development, had been some months ago, shortly after Quintain first came to see him. Since then he had further developed his theories and had noted something that had escaped the observations of the rest of the Outstation's staff.

There were large numbers of wild sheep on the island, which was of vast extent and largely unexplored. It was mountainous, inhospitable terrain and as the scientific establishment had obviously been built at the nearest point to the mainland, few people there had bothered to venture more than a mile or two from its perimeter, particularly as the level ground shortly ran out into steep hillsides covered with shale and boulders. But Quintain was a bold and adventurous man and his explorations often took him several miles inland and he would sometimes stay away one or even two nights, taking a small tent and iron rations with him.

What he had discovered and what his photographs confirmed was that some sort of creature hitherto unknown to science was at work in these barren wastes, findings which were beginning to erode Renwick's own feelings about the disease.

During his wanderings Quintain had discovered the bodies of a number of dead sheep scattered over an area several miles square, not only on a plateau but on the lower slopes of the foothills where these hardy beasts grazed. Renwick was about to point out that this was entirely normal and that sometimes the beasts lost their footing and could have fallen to their deaths or died from exposure or natural causes, but there was something about Quintain's manner that stopped the words in his throat.

"I have never come across anything like it," the latter said. "All these animals, which were otherwise healthy and well-nourished beasts, had

been entirely drained of blood, and what's more, on the bellies of each there was a large circular hole—a suction point revealing strange indentations, through which the life had been drained out of them. Some creature had stealthily crept beneath them and quietly and cautiously had leached the vital essence out of them until they were nothing more than lifeless husks! This might explain some of the strange marks on the stomachs of our dead colleagues.”

Despite his phlegmatic nature Renwick could not suppress a slight shudder at these last words, the nature of which had been reinforced by the bleakness of their surroundings, slightly distorted by the thick quartz windows of the laboratory. He had put forward a number of possibilities which Quintain had had no difficulty in dismissing out of hand and truth to tell Renwick himself felt his possible explanations to be thin and unconvincing. Nothing further was said and on parting Quintain had asked him to say nothing to any of the others. Renwick had kept his word and so far as he knew Quintain himself had not confided in anyone else. He had buried those sheep he had found, the ones nearest the Outstation, and his photographs and a number of sketchy notes on the phenomenon he had left with Renwick.

Perhaps he had a premonition for the last time the two had met, Quintain had expressed doubts about the future and when he had handed his material over to his companion he had urged him to put them in an anonymous brown envelope and keep them under lock and key. This he had done but afterward he could not forget Quintain's parting words. “It is my contention that we are up against some superhuman agency, that is perhaps taking over mankind for some purpose of which we are unaware.”

Renwick had smiled at this but shortly after, Quintain had disappeared on one of his expeditions. Some days later he was found dead on a remote hillside. Dr. Sanders, who carried out purely medical functions at the Outstation, had given the cause of death as heart failure, but Renwick was not satisfied. He had gone to the post-mortem room late at night with a purloined key. He was shocked at what he found. This great man was shrunken, his complexion dead white, his body obviously drained of blood. Renwick was used to death but he was staggered to the very core of his being when he saw in the centre of the corpse's stomach, a large circular indentation; a suction point which bore the marks of extremely tiny teeth.

He had seen nothing like it before; in the other examples it was as though an abscess had burst. Fortunately he kept this new knowledge to himself, replacing the key in secret. There was nothing of these findings

when he read Dr. Sanders' report and the next day cremation had taken place in the normal way. From that day forward Renwick was on his guard for he now regarded each of his colleagues as a possible source of evil.

2

Quintain used to say, "In this life you get only the label on the bottle. Nothing else." Meaning don't look for anything other than what you expected. He was right, of course. Only in this instance, it looked as though the label on the bottle indicated its contents as poison. But Renwick kept his own counsel and studied each of his more intimate colleagues searchingly, while at the same time trying to avoid any suspicion on their part that he was doing so. He was impatiently awaiting the arrival of Dr. Irving, who had been delayed, owing to some administrative difficulties with the Central Committee.

But eventually, some weeks after Quintain's death, the day arrived and Renwick was among the small party on the jetty awaiting the advent of the great man. Renwick's initial impression was disappointing. Despite his great height—Irving was just over six feet four inches tall—he was cadaverous in aspect, with a strong, square chin that gave him a prognathous aspect. His complexion was chalky white, but his eyes were a brilliant green and he was animated enough, inspiring confidence in those around him.

He was a fountain of ideas, spraying out instructions and observations to the laboratory staff, with most of whom he was soon on confidential terms. But something within Renwick held back; beneath his habitual reserve, there was something else; something on which he could not put his finger at the moment. It had crystallised around the figure of Dr. Sanders and the fact that he had reported nothing of the bizarre circumstances surrounding the death of Professor Quintain. If Renwick confided in Irving, then that would set the wheels in motion; the last thing he wanted was a confrontation with the latter. That would put him on his guard immediately.

No, all the sensitive antennae with which he was equipped, ruled against this. He must wait, bide his time, and strike when the moment was appropriate. Sanders must make a false move at some point; Renwick could see that Irving's arrival had caught him off balance and made him uneasy. He had only to wait; the time for conveying his suspicions to the newcomer was not yet. In the meantime, as the Chief Medical Officer, he was in Irving's confidence, and the two men had a number of

private meetings, in which they exchanged views on the plague—for it was nothing less—that was blighting the world.

Renwick in turn gained strength from Irving's confidence and authority. He was active from dawn to dusk; striding about the station; calling for private documents and reports; requesting information from the secret archives of the Central Committee; and actually going out on solitary expeditions among the bleak landscapes of the island, just as Quintain had done. Renwick was a little perturbed at these latter exercises but he kept his thoughts to himself, even accompanying Irving on one occasion, though he marvelled at the older man's energy and stamina.

He strode and scrambled across the rocky terrain at such a pace and with apparently undiminished vigour, that Renwick was hard put to keep up with him. But later, thinking over Quintain's comments, on many a lonely night watch, he wondered why Irving spent so much time out alone at night, which was completely contrary to the practice of the other members of the research staff. It was true Quintain had done the same thing, but he had a definite purpose in view. Renwick had said nothing to Irving of his suspicions, though naturally the two men had gone deeply into the medical problems involved in the treatment of the disease.

For month after month before Irving's arrival Renwick had spent long nights in the laboratory, examining the writhing organisms revealed by the powerful lenses of his microscopes. Now he had confided his medical theories to the newcomer and had made available to him the detailed notes that occupied the pages of three thick journals. These dealt, of course, with medical problems only, and were entirely different to the secret diaries to which Renwick confided his inmost thoughts and conjectures concerning the plague which had so afflicted his colleagues.

Gradually, his mind had been turned in a certain direction. The Outstation was the principal research unit which contained the finest brains which were currently exploring ways of combating the dreadful scourge. If it were a disease. But the Outstation, on an island supposedly free from the plague, was prey to some intelligence that was slowly and invisibly cutting down these fine minds. A human agency somewhere was determined to prevent the secret of the vampiric virus from being discovered. The premise was so simple and so obvious that Renwick had completely overlooked it in his calculations; now it came as a blinding ray of light into his consciousness.

He was torn in two directions; the imperative on the one hand was to confide in someone in higher authority so that proper steps could be taken. On the other, it was impossible, at this stage, for him to decide

whom to trust. In the end he compromised, as he had to. There was no other choice. He determined to keep close watch on both Irving and Sanders. If Sanders were involved he might try to make some attempt on Irving's life. But if Irving had his own suspicions and struck first, then Renwick must aid him with everything within his power. It needed a very fine judgment.

His opportunity was to come more quickly than he anticipated. One evening, as dusk was beginning to fall, Irving went out across the foothills. The big windows of Renwick's laboratory commanded the only entrance to the Outstation and all personnel had to pass in and out beneath these windows. Furthermore, a security light, which was controlled from the laboratory itself, burned there all night, so that anyone coming or going could be easily identified. About ten minutes later, Sanders himself went out, making for the rough ground of the low foothills in the same direction Irving had taken.

Renwick took only three seconds to make up his mind. His anorak was to hand on the peg near his desk; he thrust a sheath-knife into his right hand pocket and—he could not have said why—he picked up an emergency pack from a rack in the corridor outside the laboratory.

This contained a torch; handtools; a self-powered electric drill; and a short metal spade, its edge honed to maximum sharpness to combat the tough sea-grass which grew so profusely in these parts. He fixed it by the canvas straps to his back and in reply to questions from colleagues he met in the corridor, he merely muttered that he was routinely collecting some core samples from the soil.

No-one queried this and in another two minutes he was outside in the windy dusk, where white spume was being blown from the wave-tops down on the shore. Irving had long since disappeared but the thin form of Sanders was still visible on the furthest ridge. Then it too faded from sight. Renwick walked aimlessly at first, but in the general direction which he guessed Irving had taken. He had been with him once to a high, grassy plateau where the sheep grazed. He made his way up a steep ravine in the purple dusk, at a tangent to the route Sanders had taken, his breath hissing in his throat with the exertion on the precipitous slopes.

It was still light when he gained the plateau and there was no sign of either of the two men. But Renwick had a strange feeling this evening, and something impelled him to keep on walking in the same direction. A short while later he could make out the dark silhouettes of a number of sheep, fringed with the last traces of an angry red sunset. There was something else too; something so inexpressibly sinister that he could

not believe his eyes. He stopped quickly, and silently lowered the pack to the ground, eased out the spade and extended the metal handle to its full length before locking it in place.

What he saw was some sort of huge white slug slowly making its way across the grass, where it settled like some obscene incubus beneath the belly of the nearest sheep. Renwick's heart was thudding in his throat as he went forward, tightly clutching the metal spade . . .

3

From the secret diary of Dr. Donald Renwick. Section No. 46. Asylum No. 134:

They will not believe me. But now that I have had six months to think things over, I realise that Sanders could not take the risk of killing me. I knew too much, it was true, but what was that weighed against the stake these creatures were playing for? It was better to have me quietly removed to the mainland; then to spread reports and have people in high places—even those on the Central Committee—to sign documents, while doctors—so-called—processed the papers which eventually found me here, helpless and unable to warn anybody of the horrors awaiting mankind.

There had been too many deaths of high-ranking personnel on the island, you see, and they could not afford to eliminate the Chief Medical Officer. Better by far to say that the strain of my duties had unhinged my mind; that would account for the preposterous accusations I was about to make. But I am writing these notes in the hope that somewhere, some day, an incorruptible person in high authority will find them and bring the truth before unimpregnable Centralists while there is still time.

I reiterate again and again the same facts; it is gospel truth what I say, even though it may appear fantastic. Dr. Irving has never been seen since that night, of course. Should I, in fact, have brought back witnesses; have taken photographs; have tried in some way to alert the world to these vampiric horrors?

In the long run, I think not. It would have done no good and the menace that threatens mankind must be fought in the same subtle way that these creatures employ. They hold all the aces in the pack while they remain invisible, in the middle of society, yet unsuspecting. What I saw that night has been burned inexorably into my brain, and will remain with me until the day I die.

As I stepped forward with the spade I saw with a shudder of indescribable terror that the long, glistening slug-creature that undulated across the rough grass, its sickly white envelope glistening with some noxious fluid, bore the head of Dr. Irving whose eyes glared into mine as its sucker

mouth with its minute teeth were about to sink themselves into the underbelly of the sheep. The abomination writhed aside but I was too quick for the loathsome thing; I stepped forward swiftly and with the strength of desperation gripped the spade and sheared the head clean off the foul hybrid which went wriggling blindly across the grass.

I must have had the strength of ten men that night and I do not know how I found the courage to do what I did. They will never find the remains of Irving if they search for a thousand years; there are so many wild and secret places on the island. Did I do right? Who is to say? It was the most difficult decision of my life and as a medical man I should have ordered a full autopsy so that science could gain more knowledge of the darker secrets of this world.

And yet, and yet . . . There was so much horror and disgust; no-one but myself could realise the half of it. For the dismembered portions of this vile creature kept on living and wriggling in torment; there were vent-like mouths all along the slug body on either side.

And the disembodied head opened and closed its eyes, and the mouth was moving as though it were pleading with me. I was sick to my soul but I did what I had to do. He was still alive, as I say. But . . . Reader, I buried him!



ONE FOR THE POT

1

“DARJEELING!” said Miss Beale approvingly. “Excellent!”

The next minute passed in an agreeable atmosphere of clinking cups and tinkling spoons. Then the folded newspaper on their hostess’ chair brought Miss Beale back to reality.

“Did you see there had been another nasty murder in the neighbourhood?”

Miss Sturgess, who was giving her usual Wednesday afternoon tea-party, shuddered.

“I don’t know why you take such an interest in these horrors, Miss Beale,” she said in tones of gentle reproof. “The man must be mad.”

Mrs. Devigne, widowed for ten years now, looked at her brightly.

“I don’t see why. He’s being very clever, whoever he is.”

Miss Beale sipped her tea reflectively, savouring the taste.

“What makes you say that? And how do you know it’s a man? I thought poison was usually a woman’s prerogative.”

Their hostess stiffened perceptibly in her comfortable chair by the window.

Everyone who took part in Miss Sturgess’ little gatherings always sat in the same places.

"What about Landru?" she said triumphantly. "Dr. Petiot? Armstrong?" Miss Beale held up her hand, smiling.

"*Touché*," she said. "But I don't think these few examples disprove the rule."

No-one had any answer to that and an awkward silence descended on the sunlit room with its comfortable, chintzy furniture, bowls of carefully arranged flowers and the muted oil paintings on the walls.

Miss Beale decided to change the subject.

"What do you put in this tea that makes it taste so wonderful?" she asked, looking at the red Chinese lacquered caddy that stood next to the big Georgian silver teapot at their hostess' elbow. Miss Sturgess puckered up her lips, looking at little Miss Beamish conspiratorially. Miss Beamish hardly ever spoke but when she did break her silence her sentences were usually both pithy and pertinent.

"I thought you knew," she told Miss Beale now. "Some special herb from the East, isn't it?"

Miss Sturgess nodded. To Miss Beale it appeared as though she were discomfited.

"Yes," she said. "It's a secret, really."

She stared across at Miss Beale reproachfully, as though criticising her for bringing up the subject. "I'd rather keep it that way, if you don't mind."

Miss Beale, thwarted in that direction, rather defiantly returned to the forbidden subject.

"Money, wasn't it," she said casually. "These two murdered ladies, I mean. Both poisoned with some rare substance. Administered in their tea, according to the newspaper reports. Then the houses ransacked and cash and valuables taken."

Miss Sturgess opened her mouth to enunciate some reproof but Miss Beale found an unexpected ally in Mrs. Devigne.

"Yes," she said crisply. "Both victims distantly related, I believe. They lived over on Vine Park West, on the far side of the Common. You know, those big Edwardian houses that are so hard to keep up these days."

Miss Sturgess had a slightly malicious look in her eyes now.

"You'll be suspecting me next," she said with a thin laugh. "Putting substances in your tea, I mean."

She ignored the frozen look in the eyes of the other three ladies and hurried on.

"I mean, we have no living relatives, the four of us. And our tontine ensures that the survivor among us inherits the entire property and estates of the other three."

There was an embarrassing silence as the four occupants of the cheerful, sunlit room stared at one another.

"Do have another cup of tea, Mrs. Devigne," said the hostess. "You haven't yet tasted my second secret ingredient."

Her glance rested on the little blue lacquered caddy, that stood next to the red one on the silver tray. Her face looked grotesque and distorted in the convex reflection given back by the Georgian teapot.

"Try a little pinch from the second caddy!"

Miss Beale was the first to break into open laughter and then the others joined in.

"What an idea!" said Mrs. Devigne, with flushed cheeks, avoiding the hostess' eye and looking across at Miss Beamish. "But it does give one an inkling as to motive."

She picked up the newspaper from the small carved chair which stood empty at Miss Sturgess' side.

"You may be right, Miss Sturgess. A similar occurrence to the one you have just outlined."

She blinked round the room.

"Though your own suggestion was preposterous, of course."

Miss Sturgess' eyes were still on her, the former's hand with the silver spoon poised in the air, catching a dramatic ray of sunshine which made a speckled pattern in the far corner of the room.

"Certainly, Miss Sturgess. Just a pinch from the blue caddy, as you suggest."

The spell broken, the ladies chattered on desultorily for another half hour or so before the little gathering broke up. The hostess caught Mrs. Devigne by the elbow.

"If you could spare me a few extra minutes, Elsa."

She had dropped into a more intimate tone now that the others were leaving. When she returned from the front door the room seemed to have become quite sombre with the fading of the sunlight outside the windows. The afternoon was well advanced now and dark shadows were gathering in the corners. Mrs. Devigne sat rather awkwardly, her hands gathered primly in her lap, her faded blue eyes fixed on Miss Sturgess' face.

"I heard from the lawyers today. I thought you'd like to hear what they had to say. You'll have another? I'll make a fresh pot."

She busied herself at the silver kettle beneath which the spirit lamp burned. Mrs. Devigne continued silent while the grey-haired woman poured for her. She drank listlessly, conscious of a dull pain at the pit of her stomach. She hoped the tea would dispel the torpor that seemed to

be stealing over her. There was no sound from the street now and even the noises of passing cars seemed oddly muffled. She took only perfunctory interest in the documents Miss Sturgess produced from a thick manilla envelope.

Despite herself, her eyes were closing. With difficulty she focused on the blue glazeware of the tiny caddy on Miss Sturgess' tray. She started to struggle up, conscious of the strange look on the other woman's face.

"Are you ill?"

The voice seemed to come from the end of a long corridor, muffled as though by layers of felt. Then she was falling through boundless space as all consciousness left her.

2

The tall, thin man mounted the elaborate steps outside the trim villa with a slight feeling of discomfort. He had to ring the bell three times before there was any sign of movement. The neat gauze curtains at a side window twitched momentarily and then the wary features of Miss Sturgess appeared.

"Good afternoon."

"Good afternoon, Miss Sturgess. May I come in?"

He had already produced his warrant card and the grey-haired woman's eyes widened. She hesitated and then drew open the door.

"By all means, sergeant."

She ushered him into the comfortable drawing room where the things were already set out in preparation for tea. He had already heard of these Wednesday afternoon rituals. He had learned a good deal during his inquiries of the past weeks.

"Would you care for some tea, Mr. Gates," said Miss Sturgess, who seemed to have recovered her composure.

He hesitated, looking at his watch.

"Just one if you please, Miss Sturgess," he said stiffly.

This routine created a thirst he found and he had several more calls to fit in this afternoon.

Miss Sturgess was already pouring in the boiling water. She had the blue caddy open now and carefully measured half a spoonful into the sergeant's cup.

"My ladies are not due for another hour," she said comfortably. "Perhaps we should wait until we've had our tea before we discuss your business."

"As you wish, Miss Sturgess."

Gates felt quite at ease now. He was a shrewd judge of character and he felt he had the measure of the grey-haired woman. A rather stiff and formal lady but one capable of great self control. He leaned over and picked up his cup, Miss Sturgess' eyes never leaving his face. He made a surprised exclamation.

"Delicious! I don't think I've ever tasted tea quite like this."

"I thought you'd find it out of the ordinary, sergeant. It's the herbs, you see. They're rather special."

"I should think so."

The sergeant was about to smack his lips appreciatively but curbed his exuberance in time. He drained his cup and held it out for another at his hostess' gracious insistence.

"This isn't just a social call?" Miss Sturgess prompted at last.

He shook his head.

"It was two-fold, really. Firstly, I've just come from the hospital. As you know, your friend Mrs. Devigne has been seriously ill. In fact she was in a coma at one time. But now she's turned the corner and my Detective Inspector thought you'd like to know."

Miss Sturgess' face cleared.

"How kind of you, Mr. Gates. Have a macaroon."

The sergeant ploughed on. "Of course, with two murder inquiries on our hands we suspected the worst when Mrs. Devigne collapsed and you called an ambulance. It was a very obscure virus she picked up while abroad a few weeks ago but the doctors say she's out of danger now."

"Thank goodness," Miss Sturgess murmured, her face looking distorted and moon-like in the surface of the silver teapot.

"We couldn't take any chances, Miss Sturgess, which is why my colleagues had to ask you so many questions. And when you told us about the tontine . . ."

He screwed up his forehead.

"That made it even more complicated, if you see what I mean . . ."

"Naturally, Mr. Gates. There's no need to go on. I quite understand. But these dreadful murders . . ."

The sergeant's face cleared.

"That was the second thing. We've caught the man responsible. He was on licence from a mental institution. These two unfortunate ladies were sorry for him and employed him as a gardener."

Miss Sturgess bit her lip.

"That's what one gets for doing a kindness in this world."

There was a sudden ring at the door. The sergeant got up suddenly, his expression changing. He put a small screw of paper back in his pocket along with his notebook.

"Well, I must be getting along, Miss Sturgess. Just thought you'd like to know."

He was in such a hurry to leave that he almost collided with Miss Beale and Miss Beamish in the hall, half an hour early for once.

"Good afternoon, ladies."

"He seemed in a rush," said Miss Beale thoughtfully, as they went through into the drawing room.

"The police have much on their minds these days," said their hostess. She looked thoughtfully at the police car parked in the road outside the window, then at the small screw of paper by the plate of cakes. She opened it, sniffed suspiciously at the whitish powder. She thought dis-jointedly that her visitor could have gleaned all his information from the daily press.

"Have you seen tonight's paper?" said Miss Beale with what almost sounded like glee. "There's been another murder in the area. An old man this time. Five thousand pounds in notes was stolen. The police have a lead on this occasion. A tall, thin man who poses as a police sergeant with a stolen warrant card. Why, what's the matter; you look quite pale."

She glanced down at the spill of paper Miss Sturgess had dropped on the tablecloth.

"Another of your fancy herb mixtures? One for the pot?"

The three women stood frozen at the window as the heavy boots of the advancing uniformed police officers came menacingly up the front steps.



WISH YOU WERE HERE

1

THE CARDS started arriving early in October, long before Christmas. They were old-fashioned things, of the type Wilson had never seen before. He had inherited Hoddesden Old Hall from a wealthy aunt and it was his first winter in the place. It had been a vile autumn so far as weather was concerned, and a sulphurous yellow fog hung over the village and the marshes beyond.

But there was still a blaze of colour from the banked flowers in the garden and the neglected lawns were beginning to shape up under the scouring of the sit-on motor mower that Wilson had recently purchased. He was a writer who had previously lived in a cramped flat in London and he was expanding in the luxury of large beamed rooms and spacious attics. Though the grounds had been let run wild the interior of the house had been well kept up and the furnishings were in keeping with the age of the building; it dated from the sixteenth century in its oldest parts, and the paintings and the contents alone must be worth a fortune, Wilson thought.

Not that he had needed the money; a long run of successful books, despite his comparative youth—he was now thirty-five—had enabled him to live in some style—but as the Old Hall was only half an hour by fast train from London he had the best of both worlds, and he had decided

to keep the place. Currently he was sharing early days of renovation with a friend, Barry Clissold, a departmental head of one of the great London museums, who was coming down at weekends to give him a hand and who would be staying over Christmas.

But the two were not the final arbiters of where everything should go; that was up to Deirdre. She was Wilson's fiancée and she too was coming down at weekends to keep an eye on things. This was not, of course, the interpretation put upon it by people in the village. Not that they were narrow; they were remarkably broad-minded and up to date, in fact. Though Mrs. Savage, the lady who did daily cooking for him and some of the major cleaning jobs in the house, had relayed with relish some of the more amusing pieces of gossip that were going the rounds.

What it boiled down to was that Barry Clissold was imported at weekends to "add respectability to the arrangement." Wilson was amused in turn and so was Deirdre when she learned of it. She tossed one lock of blue-black hair back from her eyes and looked up at him, her strong, clear-minted face alive with impish humour. Wilson was at the top of a ladder at the time, trimming a mass of overgrown foliage away from trelliswork near the front door.

"They probably think we're very old-fashioned, John." She smiled again.

"But it's certainly an idea."

Wilson was so startled that he almost pitched from the ladder. Deirdre was an extraordinary girl; she held an important position in the design department of one of the biggest advertising agencies in London, and though her talk was racy and sometimes extremely risqué she had decided views about sex before marriage and Wilson was not inclined to press her on the point. She had a fantastic temper when roused and they were so deeply involved emotionally that he would never have risked turning her against him by transgressing their unspoken, unwritten rules.

It was a Friday today and Wilson was looking forward to the advent of the two in the early evening; Clissold would probably travel with Deirdre in her car; otherwise Wilson and his fiancée would collect him from the six o'clock train. The station was less than a mile from the house. He was still unpacking his books in the big study he was making for himself under the eaves; Deirdre had given him carte blanche over certain areas and she would decide later about decoration and colour schemes for the rest of the place.

After all, they were not to be married for almost another year and there was plenty of time to decide on these finer points. Wilson had

finished one huge segment of shelving next to the fireplace he had reserved for various editions of his own books and now he washed his hands and descended to the ground floor to seek out Mrs. Savage in the kitchen for his mid-morning coffee and biscuits.

She was in the hall as he descended the graceful oak staircase with its brightly polished treads and handrail, and the post had apparently just come for he could see Mr. Dunnett, their local postman, through the side window, walking back down the path to the front gate.

Mrs. Savage handed him the bundle of letters with a pleasant smile but she wrinkled up her nose as though something distasteful had happened.

"There's something musty," she said. "I can't quite place it. It wasn't there before Mr. Dunnett came. I hope it isn't dry rot."

Wilson gave her a wry look.

"So do I. You say the most cheerful things sometimes, Mrs. Savage."

The tall woman with the close-cropped iron-grey hair shook her head.

"I'm a realist, Mr. Wilson. Better to take these things in time."

She was right, Wilson thought, as he followed her out to the kitchen. He then realized he had put the bundle of letters down on the small demilune at the bottom of the stairs. It was a long way through to the entrance hall so he merely sipped his coffee, munched the sweet biscuits and engaged in chit-chat before again returning to the study.

He put the bundle of letters down on the surface of his green tooled-leather desk and finished arranging his own books in date order. There was an empty shelf at the bottom but he would leave that for future editions and reserve the other big bookcase in the further alcove for the same purpose. In the meantime Deirdre would fill in the empty spaces with ornaments and bowls of flowers. She was rather good at the latter, he had to admit.

When he had finished he sat down in the big leather swivel chair behind his desk and went through the mail. There was nothing of vital importance, though a couple of royalty statements and the accompanying cheques were a welcome bonus. There were still three or four large white envelopes but as he sifted them he became aware of their provenance from the printed originators at the tops of the envelopes. At the same moment he caught the musty smell of which Mrs. Savage had spoken and he realized it was emanating from the pile of correspondence on the desk. He went through the last two envelopes somewhat gingerly.

As he did so, a glossy brown card fell face uppermost. It was from this that the odour was coming. Wilson slid it round toward him with a hesitant forefinger. It was a postcard with a sepia view of Aberdeen

which must have been at least a hundred years old. The card had a deckle edge and there was some hand-tinting which gave the scene, depicting imposing granite buildings, gardens and a distant view of the sea, an almost ethereal quality.

Wilson at first thought it was one of the rather luxurious reproductions that some card manufacturers were now affecting but he soon realized his mistake. He turned the card over and saw by the mottled brown patches on the back that it was an original. And he understood something else; the odour was not only mustiness but was combined with another essence; something like a woman's stale perfume. It must have been some mistake, Wilson thought, but the card was addressed to him at the Old Hall, in a spidery writing he did not recognize. It looked as though it might be a woman's handwriting, though he was no expert on those things.

On the right hand side of the card, in the space reserved for messages, were just a couple of sentences. The ink was black and faded as though with time but that could not be, because the thing had just been delivered. The stamp at the top had been obliterated by a heavy postal franking die; the ink on that was so thick he could not make out the date or the office of origin. The message itself commenced abruptly, without any prefix or his name. It merely said: "*Enjoying the season and the band concerts immensely. Wish you were here.*" There was no signature, merely an initial, and that in such a distorted curlicue script that he could not make it out.

It must be some joke, surely. Perhaps one of his friends in London.

But his amusement soon gave way to exasperation. No-one he knew would send such a thing. Certainly not Deirdre, even as a joke. But for the fact that the card was addressed to him firmly and legibly at his new address he would have dismissed it out of hand.

Later he went down to the dining room for an excellent cold lunch Mrs. Savage had laid out. He took the card with him, propping it against a salt cellar near his plate, studying it with growing irritation as he poured himself a glass of chilled white wine. When Mrs. Savage came back with the dessert and coffee he pointed at the card, an object so banal and yet so mysterious.

"What do you make of that?"

Mrs. Savage took it delicately, using the edge of a tea-cloth to avoid contact with her fingers, he noticed. She sniffed delicately, her eyes wide.

"That was it, Mr. Wilson. The mustiness . . . Where did you get it?"

Wilson felt faint surprise.

"You gave it me," he said. "It came with the post this morning. It was in that bundle of letters."

The housekeeper slowly shook her head.

"Was it really? I didn't notice it. But surely not. This is a very old card. Like something they sell in those specialist dealers' shops for collectors. It might even be valuable."

"You surprise me," said Wilson dryly. "But it's addressed to me all right. And it certainly came through the post. Do read it, please. There's nothing personal and I can't make out the sender."

Mrs. Savage turned the card over and studied it with growing interest.

"A lady's perfume all right," she said at length. "Though stale. The mustiness comes from the card, of course. It's a very old one. And a lady's writing too."

She screwed up her faded blue eyes. Presently she pursed her lips and put the card down delicately near the edge of the dining table, still holding it by the napkin.

"Some sort of a joke, perhaps?"

Wilson shook his head.

"I don't think so, Mrs. Savage. That's why I'd value your opinion."

The tall woman shrugged, leaning forward to pour out the first measure of black coffee into the blue china cup.

"I'm afraid I shan't be much help. The stamp and office it's been posted from are obliterated by the franking. And the initial could be a C, perhaps."

"You have nothing to add, then?"

The tone of his voice momentarily roused her.

"I don't see we can take things much further, Mr. Wilson. But you could ask Mr. Dunnett about it when he delivers the post tomorrow morning, if you wish. He may have some ideas. And of course you may hear from this person again."

Wilson sat back in his chair and picked up his coffee cup. The brew was excellent, as always.

"That's a point, Mrs. Savage. It hadn't occurred to me. The post office may be able to trace its origin. I don't suppose it's very important really, but I must confess I was intrigued."

Mrs. Savage smiled mysteriously.

"Leave it to me, Mr. Wilson. And in the meantime please finish your sweet. It's getting cold and I took such trouble with it."

2

It was almost dark before Wilson heard the car; the days were beginning to draw in more noticeably now. Mrs. Savage was getting ready to leave but she came out of the kitchen to greet the arrivals as he left the study. He could hear Deirdre's high heels rat-tatting on the parquet of the entrance hall and then the sound of her voice as she greeted the house-keeper. Barry's more measured voice joined in a few seconds later. Wilson lingered at the stairhead until Mrs. Savage had left and the conversation died away. Apparently Clissold had gone back to the car because he could hear doors slamming.

Still Wilson stayed on in the gathering dusk of the massive staircase as the hall door again slammed echoingly and then the girl's footsteps, softer now, came swiftly up the stairs. They were locked in a deep embrace in front of the long gilt-framed mirror on the landing when there came a dry cough from the hall below.

"Haven't you any greeting for me?"

Clissold's eyes were wide and ironic as the two hastily broke away. Wilson gave the other an easy smile.

"Not in that way, my dear chap."

He went down a few steps as Clissold came up to meet him and the two men shook hands, Deirdre's suppressed giggle sounding behind them. She joined the two a moment later and put her arm affectionately round the writer's shoulders. Wilson was aware at that moment of his good fortune; to be young and comparatively well off; with a marvellous fiancée; good friends like Barry; and possession of a magnificent house. Life stretched unendingly before him in the rosy glow of the setting sun that came in from the big stained glass window at the stairhead.

The three went down the hall together, to where the luggage was piled in the centre of the silk Tabriz carpet that Deirdre had imported from London a week or two before. Again Wilson was conscious that he had with him the two people he most cared for in the world. He was an orphan, as was Deirdre, and like most engaged couples they felt that pre-ordained fate had brought them together to find happiness.

But he expressed nothing of all this, merely mouthing the banality, "Had a good trip down?"

Deirdre nodded, tossing a lock of blue-black hair from her eyes in the gesture with which the novelist had long become familiar.

"Not too bad. The traffic was awful, of course, until we cleared the suburbs. Anything to eat?"

Wilson laughed, leading the way across to the big pine door that led to the dining room.

"Never mind that. Let's have a drink first. Not too cold after the drive?"

Deirdre shook her head. Today she wore a smart tailored suit of some dark grey material and her face was shining with health and suppressed excitement. Barry Clissold had made a move toward the luggage but Wilson stopped him.

"Don't worry about that, Barry. I'll take the stuff up later. I hope you don't mind cold things tonight. Mrs. Savage leaves early on Fridays. And we'll eat out tomorrow, of course. I've found an excellent place about ten miles away."

Clissold shrugged and joined the others at the doorway. It was a big, long, low-ceilinged room with massive oak beams and a huge bressummer above the fireplace, in which a blazing fire of logs gave out a fierce heat. There was full central heating in the house but Wilson hadn't yet turned it on because the weather continued warm in the daytime. He poured large goblets of sherry from the decanter on the sideboard and shovelled in chunks of ice with the silver tongs. Deirdre watched him with detached amusement, her blue eyes pensive.

"What about the car?" she said.

"I'll take it round after we've eaten. Plenty of time."

The three sat sprawled in big leather armchairs ranged in a semi-circle round the fireplace. At the far end of the room, in an alcove overlooking the ruined garden, the Sheraton dining table, its surface reflecting the gleaming flames of the fire, was ready laid. It was a contented, luxurious world and Wilson reminded himself that he might find it more difficult to work here than he had in his London flat.

"How are things at the museum?" he asked.

Clissold shrugged.

"Booming. Just booming," he said. "Shoals of visitors. But pretty dead in some of the more esoteric departments."

"Not that again," Deirdre sighed.

She was used to Barry's dry sense of humour but his oblique references to mummies and Dead Sea scrolls were becoming a little wearing. Wilson looked at her in surprise and even Clissold stopped in the middle of his next sentence, which would have contained the punch-line, his dark brown eyes owl-like beneath the horn-rimmed spectacles he wore. His face looked a little hurt beneath his thick shock of reddish hair. With his stocky build and corduroy jacket and trousers he looked more like a

successful gentleman farmer than a scholar and authority on various obscure fields of learning.

"Oh, come on, Barry," said Wilson, getting up to replenish his friend's glass. "Deirdre was only joking. Weren't you, darling?"

The tall girl flushed.

"Sorry," she said shortly. "It's just that I've heard that one so often before."

Clissold got up from his chair, holding out his hand somewhat erratically for the proffered glass.

"Apology accepted," he said. "I promise not to crack that one again during the entire weekend."

He went over to stand by the fireplace.

"What's the drill for tomorrow? You want me to help you finish off filling up the study shelves?"

Wilson shook his head, aware that Deirdre's eyes were fixed upon him critically, as though she were annoyed at something. There was an atmosphere building up that he could not quite place. He decided to ignore it.

"I've something special prepared for you, Barry. You wouldn't know where the books go. I like to do those things myself. But we won't talk about it now. If you've had enough sherry, let's go and eat, shall we? Everything's prepared. I only have to fetch the stuff from the kitchen."

There was a long silence during the meal and it wasn't until Wilson had brought in the second course and opened another bottle of wine that general conversation resumed. They all agreed that Mrs. Savage was an excellent lady and that the wine had more than come up to expectation.

"What's been happening your end?" Barry asked as they reached the coffee and cognac stage. He knew that John and Deirdre spoke together on the phone almost every day and that she would be *au fait* with local happenings.

"I've been making pretty good progress," Wilson said slowly. "But something rather funny happened today."

He felt Deirdre's eyes upon him and plunged on.

"Trivial but quite curious all the same. It might be in your line, Barry."

Clissold sat back in his chair, savouring the bouquet of the cognac in his big balloon glass.

"How do you mean?"

"Collecting old postcards is one of your interests, isn't it?"

The eyes behind the thick lenses were absorbed now.

"Well?"

"I had a strange old card come in the mail this morning. It smelt musty and looked Victorian. It was a very old view of Aberdeen. It was addressed to me here and it had a banal but nevertheless cryptic message on it, written in a woman's spidery handwriting."

Clissold exchanged a satirical smile with Deirdre at the other side of the table.

"A woman, eh? This sounds exciting."

"I'll ignore that," Wilson said. "I didn't know the person or at least I couldn't place her. There was only an initial and I couldn't make it out."

Clissold put a finger up to the side of his nose.

"A mystery woman now. This is even better."

"Don't play the fool," said Wilson rather more sharply than he had intended. "I'm being serious now."

"This we had better see," Deirdre cut in. "Where is this mysterious missive?"

"Up in the study," Wilson said. "I'll fetch it when I've finished my coffee. Help yourself to more and there's plenty of cognac if you want a refill."

A few minutes later, as he gained the landing that led to the study, he was aware that there was a changed atmosphere between the three of them. All the old, familiar, jokey friendliness seemed to have been temporarily dispersed. Why, he couldn't think. It was as though some subtle form of invisible blind had been silently drawn between the three so that they had difficulty in communicating in the usual manner and when they did the little intimacies fell flat and intended jokes, long-established between the trio, merely irritated, instead of being greeted as cherished old friends.

Wilson abruptly brushed the thoughts away. This would not do. The weekend must not be spoiled. He saw Deirdre only for the two days, because she invariably returned to town on the Sunday night, having much work to prepare for her studio on the Monday. He resolved that when he returned downstairs he would do what he could to restore normal relations. He switched on the light, crossed to draw the curtains and then returned to the desk. The letters had been answered and they and the carbons of his replies had been filed away in the big indexed cabinets in the corner. He had left the postcard on the middle of the desk, together with a couple of circulars and the notice of a forthcoming village concert.

The card was not there. He bit his lip with vexation. He hunted around for several minutes, aware of the other two in the dining room,

listening to his muffled progress overhead. He heard Deirdre's footsteps in the hall as he descended the stairs.

"I can't find it anywhere . . ." he began.

Deirdre smiled.

"I don't wonder," she said drily. "You left it over there."

Wilson followed her pointing finger, and saw with another stab of irritation that the card was on the demilune at the bottom of the staircase. He had no recollection of bringing it down from the study and fought his rising irritability.

"I left it on my desk upstairs," he said stubbornly.

Deirdre looked nonplussed. Wilson was aware that Clissold was leaning easily against the jamb of the dining-room door, engrossed in their conversation.

"You can't have done," Deirdre persisted.

She had the card up now, her delicate nostrils wrinkling as she too caught the faint musty odour.

"Funny sort of thing," she added. "Perhaps Mrs. Savage brought it down during the day without you knowing."

"Yes, that must be it," said Wilson with relief. "See what you make of it, Barry."

The three went back into the dining-room and took seats by the fire. Clissold waited until Deirdre had finished her perusal of the card and then adjusted his glasses as Wilson handed it to him.

"Definitely a woman's writing," Deirdre said. "Subject to your expert opinion, Barry."

Clissold grinned. Somehow, Wilson felt, the atmosphere had lifted and the three of them were once again on the old easy terms.

"Certainly, Deirdre. No doubt about that. Mystery or no, this thing could be valuable."

"You don't mean it."

Clissold gave him an amused look.

"Oh, no, I don't mean your man in the street. I'm talking about the dealers and the dedicated collectors. Now, do you two know anything about the history of the postcard? Not to mention the Christmas card."

Wilson shook his head.

"No, and we don't want a learned dissertation from you now. We want to know about this particular card. Apparently it's been posted quite recently but to me that looks like an ancient franking mark."

Clissold held it up to the light, his eyes squinting ferociously beneath the glasses.

"You're right. This beats all."

He sat for a moment, the card in his left hand, the right raking through his red-tinged hair.

"And yet there is an element of doubt. This could be a joke, you know."

"What makes you think that?" Deirdre put in.

"For one thing the frank has obliterated the office of origin and the date."

"My thoughts exactly," said Wilson.

"And then," Clissold went on, his eyes dreamy and his voice far away, as though he hadn't heard the interruption, "there is the matter of the correct address, while the writer hides her identity by a single initial, so badly written that it's almost impossible to make out."

"I have my own thoughts about that," said Wilson.

"Let's hear them then, darling," Deirdre said. "I plump for C."

Clissold nodded.

"Good girl. I incline to that initial myself."

He turned back to Wilson.

"Have you got a powerful magnifying glass, John?"

"I believe there's one in the lounge," Wilson said. "I was trying to make out the detail of some of the panelling in there a couple of days ago. I'll go and get it."

When he returned the three stood together, Wilson holding the card under the overhead light while Clissold studied it beneath the magnifying lens. Presently he put it down with a baffled expression.

"What's the matter?" said Deirdre sharply.

Clissold stroked his chin.

"I'd rather not say for the moment," he returned enigmatically.

3

Wilson was about early the next morning and was in the garden burning a huge bonfire of rank weeds when the postman arrived. Dunnett was a wiry man in his fifties with a thick head of grey hair that looked like steel wool clustered to his scalp. Wilson took the small sheaf of letters from him, sifted through them quickly, with a suddenly heightened pulse rate. The postman was regarding him curiously.

"Something wrong, Mr. Wilson?"

The latter shook his head.

"It was only that I wanted to ask you something. Do you remember delivering an old postcard to me yesterday? It had a rather musty smell and looked Victorian somehow."

The postman was smiling now. He ran a thick finger through his mat of grey hair.

"Nothing that I can recall. But then the stuff is now bundled up in our sorting office and secured with an elastic band. So I wouldn't have seen it anyway. If there's any complaint . . ."

"No, no, Mr. Dunnett, of course not. Nothing like that. It was just curiosity on my part."

"If I could have a look at the card, perhaps I could recall something . . ."

"It's of no importance, really," Wilson said quickly. "Besides, it's right at the top of the house and I don't want to hold up your round."

The two men were on their way back to the front gate by now and Wilson thanked the postman again and walked slowly back to the bonfire. He went in to breakfast with Deirdre and Clissold with a certain resolution forming in his mind. Later, when the other two were in the garden, he went quickly up to the study. He took the postcard from the desk and brought it back downstairs and into the open air. There was no one about, though he could hear the voices of the others beyond the far hedge. He burned the card quickly in the glowing mass of the bonfire, somehow feeling guilty.

He said nothing to the others and the matter was not mentioned again during that weekend. Deirdre went back on the Sunday night and Clissold stayed on until the Monday evening as he had a day off from his duties at the museum on that occasion.

Several weeks passed and the subject of the postcard receded into the background, and it gradually faded from Wilson's mind, though occasionally he regretted his rash act in burning it. As Clissold had said, it had a certain historical value; perhaps he should have offered it to his friend for his private collection. However, it was too late now.

The even pattern of life at the Old Hall was resumed as the days advanced; workmen came and went, tackling the scheduled renovations with skill and competence. The weather was worsening now and Wilson had temporarily ceased operations in the garden. He was tackling the house from the ground floor upwards, sensibly filling the reception areas and first-floor bedrooms with his personal things, before proceeding to the more difficult and dilapidated rooms in the upper reaches. The attics and lumber rooms were in a horrific state and he was not really looking forward to that aspect. Though Clissold had offered to give up some of his annual winter leave on a concentrated effort, Wilson did not wish to impose too much.

It was early November now and the weather had closed in, though this particular morning, as sometimes happens in winter, an orange sun, low in the sky, cast a deceptively warm glow over the autumnal trees and the sheaves of golden leaves that strewn the garden, the village lanes and the surrounding fields. Mrs. Savage had lit big fires in the principal ground-floor rooms and the central heating, set low, was nicely warming the upper floors of the old house. Wilson was typing business letters this morning; the ribbon was growing faint and frayed and he found to his annoyance that he had used up the last one.

He decided to stroll down to the village to buy another at the local stationers; he called out his destination to the housekeeper and then set out down the lane, the breath smoking from his nostrils in the cold air. It really took one's breath away, and he huddled deeper into his thick, fleece-lined driving coat. Even though he had been in the neighbourhood some time he had hardly set foot in the village, so busy had he and Deirdre been in transferring his things from London and settling in.

A few hundred yards away was the old Norman church which was the most imposing public building in the village. It looked friendly and well-cared-for in the rich autumn light and the turf between the ancient gravestones had been recently mown. Certain thoughts had been forming in Wilson's mind and, on sudden impulse, he turned aside through the old lych-gate and walked up the path to the imposing main entrance. But instead of going in he turned along the gravel path to the left, skirting the church and eventually coming across the newer part of the graveyard where faded wreaths and sodden bunches of flowers denoted more recent burials.

He went down the newer gravestones, looking for a familiar name. He was crouching to read the inscription on one of the nearest when a sudden shadow falling across it momentarily startled him. He looked up to see a thickset man in his mid-forties, with a friendly face and wearing dark clothes with a clerical collar, advancing down the path toward him.

"Mr. Wilson? I thought I recognized you."

Wilson rose and shook the extended hand.

"I'm sorry. You have the advantage of me."

The cleric smiled, revealing strong, square teeth. He waited until the sudden clamour of rooks from a nearby coppice had ceased.

"Roger Anstey. Rector of this parish, for my sins. I left a card at the Old Hall when you first moved in, but I expect you've been far too busy . . ."

"Of course," Wilson said. "I'm sorry."

He realized he was repeating himself; the other laughed then.

"Please don't apologize. Most newcomers probably feel I'm soliciting for donations. But I have to do it. I'm a sort of general factotum around here. Though the people are good and very helpful when the church needs something, so I can't complain."

He stared enquiringly at Wilson.

"You were looking for something as I came down the path just now. Is it anything I can help with?"

Wilson felt momentarily awkward and at a loss.

"All this seems rather ridiculous, Rector."

The other laid a hand upon his arm.

"Call me Roger, please. Everyone else does. We don't stand on ceremony down here."

"I don't even know if she's buried here, of course, but I was looking for my aunt's grave. It sounds absurd but I know very little about her."

"We only met a few times when I was a very small child and after the death of my parents we lost touch. In fact I didn't even know where she lived until her solicitors contacted me."

A shadow had passed across the Rector's face and he turned back down the path, motioning the other to accompany him. As he remained silent Wilson prompted him.

"Miss Hollamby? My aunt, I mean."

Anstey cleared his throat.

"Ah, yes. Then you didn't know?"

Wilson was puzzled.

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

"Perhaps you'd like to come to the Rectory and join me in a glass of sherry? It's only across the field here."

The two men walked through another ancient gate and along another path which led to a large, tile-hung house, comfortably appointed and with elegant furniture as the writer saw as soon as his companion had opened the front door. A good-looking young woman, and a small boy who clung to his mother's hand, turned out to be the Rector's wife and son.

After the introductions were over and Mrs. Anstey had brought the decanter and glasses on a silver tray, she excused herself and left to resume her domestic duties. The big, book-lined room with its stone fireplace and crackling fire exuded a friendly, scholarly atmosphere but Wilson was aware that his companion seemed somewhat stiff and constrained as he poured the sherry into the big crystal goblets. But he sat down at last and the frank eyes in the strong face were very steady as he toasted his guest.

"So you know nothing about your aunt's circumstances?"

Wilson shook his head.

"The solicitors merely wrote me; said that she had left me the Hall. I called at their offices of course, and they read me the will and supplied me with the necessary documents. I was not curious. As I said, I had not met my aunt since I was about five years old and I'm afraid that I was so excited at getting such a splendid country house that I asked no particular questions about her circumstances; though I should imagine that was all spelled out in the mass of documentation they gave me."

Anstey nodded, tapping the rim of his glass with a broad, spatulate finger. Wilson noticed that his nails were a little ragged, as though he did a lot of manual work about the church and graveyard.

"The solicitors were in London, I presume? I know Miss Hollamby preferred that to leaving her affairs in local hands."

Wilson nodded and waited for the other to go on.

"The fact of the matter is that your aunt disappeared quite a few years ago. It was a great mystery at the time. She was seen in the garden one afternoon and after that, nothing. She had her own housekeeper then and a distant relative who visited her regularly but we in the village knew little of her relations or circumstances. The solicitors in charge of the estate kept up the house and garden on your aunt's behalf—there was a full-time housekeeper and gardener then."

He held up his hand before Wilson could interrupt.

"The police were called, of course, but nothing was ever discovered. And then her relative—a distant cousin, I believe—turned up and claimed the estate under the terms of the old lady's will. He took possession of the house. Some years ago he was found drowned in an old well in the garden. Apparently it was at ground level, covered with rotted boards, in a part of the grounds that had been left to run wild. Undergrowth had obscured it and the gentleman, whose name I can't recall—he was buried somewhere on the Sussex coast—went through the covering and must have been killed instantly. It was in all the local newspapers at the time."

Wilson was astonished. He had listened with growing apprehension as the Rector went on and now he had to clear his throat several times before he could speak.

"But I gained the impression that Miss Hollamby had died only a few months ago . . ."

Anstey shook his head.

"Oh, dear me, no. I should imagine the administrators of the estate had to wait a statutory number of years before the old lady could be

declared legally dead. And it may be that another will was then discovered. Perhaps an earlier one, which favoured you after the cousin. That man had visited Miss Hollamby frequently and had helped her in a number of ways. Probably the solicitors did not wish to rake up old scandals and gave you the impression that your aunt had died. You know how close-mouthed lawyers can be about these things."

"I quite see that," said Wilson, trying to put his thoughts together. "Where could I find out about all this?"

"We have an excellent local library. If the bound volumes of the newspapers have not been sent to the county library for storage you should be able to find everything you need there. Miss Gillespie is an excellent librarian. I think you will be able to get what you want locally. I understand they keep all the bound volumes for twenty years, until they take up too much space. They then go to county level."

Wilson kept his face turned down to the table as the kindly figure of the Rector refilled his glass.

"You have given me much to think about," he said. "Thank you for your frankness."

Anstey reseated himself opposite his guest, turning his face toward the study door as the excited shouts of his little son could be heard. Then the front door slammed and the child ran out excitedly into the garden.

"I'm afraid I have troubled you," the Rector continued. "Please forgive me, but when I first saw you in the churchyard I thought you were *au fait* with the history of the Old Hall."

"There is no need to apologize," Wilson said. "You have been extremely helpful. What do you think happened to my aunt? Could she herself have met with some accident about the grounds, such as that which later befell her cousin?"

The Rector shook his head, the yellow sunlight falling in at the window accentuating the strength of his clear-cut features.

"Very unlikely, Mr. Wilson. The police made extensive searches. And the well itself was dragged and concreted over after the accident to the cousin. Just to make sure . . ."

He was silent for a moment. Then he rose quickly and drained his glass.

"You ask me what happened to your aunt. Who knows? Old people are sometimes forgetful. Their minds wander or they become mentally confused. Perhaps she got some idea in her head and simply walked a long way away and died in an obscure place like an unfrequented wood. Or took a railway journey to the coast, walked into the sea and drowned. That is a common form of suicide."

"You have not considered the alternative," Wilson said.

"And what is that?" Anstey asked sharply.

"That she may still be alive somewhere," said Wilson.

He got up in his turn.

"But I am extremely grateful for what you have told me this morning, and I will certainly take your advice and look out those newspaper files."

4

It was very quiet in the library, only the ticking of the big cased clock against the opposite wall and the occasional rustle as someone turned the pages of a newspaper disturbing the silence of the reading room.

As the Rector had said, the librarian, Miss Gillespie, an attractive woman of about thirty, was very helpful and efficient. Wilson had three thick bound volumes of newspaper files in front of him, covering three consecutive years. It looked like being a long search but it still wanted two hours to lunch and he had only to collect his typewriter ribbon on his way home. He searched for half an hour before his meticulousness was rewarded. Anstey was right; it had been quite a few years back. He was first alerted by the large heading of the local newspaper which spoke, predictably, of an "Elderly Widow Missing".

But the facts were accurate enough, judging by the quotations from county police sources, and as Wilson slowly turned the yellowing pages a pattern began to emerge, hardly discernible, but clarifying as his search progressed. The police had certainly been diligent in their searches. There was a photograph of Miss Hollamby in the second report he unearthed but the lady bore no relation to the image he recalled from his childhood. But then that was to be expected. The cousin the Rector had mentioned, Edward Povey, had soon put in an appearance but he had been no more helpful than other local people; less so, in fact, as he lived a long way away on the Sussex coast.

Wilson became more fascinated as he worked his way through the thick volume and he soon had all the salient facts at his finger tips. He jotted down notes in a small pocket-book he always carried, in which he amplified story ideas as they came to him from time to time, but he hesitated as to whether to impart all his new-found information to Deirdre and Barry. He put a question mark against his notations and decided to leave it until later: he needed a few more days in which to sift the facts in his mind. Anstey's confidences had come as quite a shock, and he even noted that his fingertips were trembling slightly as he put the pencil down on the open page of the third volume.

He would go through the whole sequence in the afternoon, when he had finished a few more study improvements. There would be time enough. He closed the book and, after a short talk with Miss Gillespie, walked out into the bright sunshine of Hoddesden High Street. It wanted merely a quarter of an hour until one o'clock. Just time to reach the stationers and make the short walk back.

He had been puzzled by the first headline he had come across in the newspaper file; the fact that Miss Hollamby was a widow. But it emerged that the marriage, many years earlier, had not been a good one and there had been a divorce. Her former husband had later died and she had reverted to her maiden name before coming to live at the Old Hall. Wilson did not really know why he was going to all this trouble. But he was becoming intrigued by the shadowy figure of his benefactor and there were the faint stirrings of a plot for one of his novels. He was between books at the moment and embryonic ideas were beginning to take shape.

Mrs. Savage was desultorily clipping back foliage from the front door with a pair of secateurs.

"Lunch will be ready in ten minutes," she said as he came up the path.

"I'm just going up to wash my hands but I'll be down directly."

He thought the housekeeper had a subdued look on her face and she said somewhat jerkily, "There's more mail on the table inside."

He noticed the large bundle on the demilune as he went up the stairs and when he returned he took the letters and circulars into the dining-room with him to read over lunch. He was amused to find an early Christmas card among them, from a literary friend in Australia, but he was at the same time aware that Christmas would soon be on them and he and Deirdre had made no firm plans except that the two of them, together with Barry, were to celebrate their first yuletide in the house together. He hastily ripped open the letters, digested their contents briefly before passing on. He would try to reply to the more urgent ones in the afternoon before returning to his work on the house.

As he turned the penultimate letter over he saw there was another of the ancient postcards, still exuding the same musty smell. He now understood the strange expression on Mrs. Savage's face and the reason why she had left the dining-room so abruptly as she brought each course, without lingering to make her usual salty observations on life and local people. Wilson stared at the faded image of Edinburgh for a long moment before turning the card over. Again the same spidery writing and the illegible initial. The abrupt message this time read simply: "*Taking in the sights. Looking forward to seeing you again. Perhaps for Christmas?*"

Wilson felt a faint tightening in his chest and his lips were dry as he looked at the thing. So the woman knew him? Wilson racked his memory but could come up with nothing that made any sense. As on the previous occasion the heavy franking on the card made the date and postal details illegible, though he could make out the letters "Ed" which could only mean Edinburgh. Whoever she was, he did not want a stranger descending, especially at Christmas. A sudden thought struck him; perhaps this was an elaborate joke by one of his readers who thought well of his books.

Wilson had written a couple of highly regarded fantasy novels some years back, which had brought him a shoal of admiring letters at the time. Yes, that must be it. Though it would be a nuisance, he need only see the woman for an hour or so if she ever turned up at the house; he could sign a book or two for her and perhaps present her with a volume from his spare copy shelf. Much relieved, he finished his lunch and went up to his study.

But something had disturbed the tenor of the day and around four in the afternoon, when he had cleared the backlog of mail, he rang up Barry in London and told him the latest development.

"You may well be right, John. But that doesn't explain the antiquity of the cards."

He was being facetious now, Wilson knew, but he could not keep the irritation from his voice.

"I was relying on you for support. This thing is becoming a nuisance. Have you any ideas?"

He could imagine his friend in the big panelled curator's office in Kensington, the tranquil life of the great museum going on around him, and he felt a sudden stab of envy for the other's more ordered routine.

"I shouldn't worry about it," Clissold went on. "It will unravel itself in due course, no doubt. And if this woman should turn up I shall probably be there. We'll give her a quick glass of sherry and send her on her way."

Despite himself, Clissold's brisk dismissal of the minor mystery made him smile.

"Let's hope you're right."

"Art imitating life, old chap. You shouldn't grumble. May give you an idea or two for a new book."

"That's not the point, Barry."

"Well, we can discuss it at the weekend. I've got rather a lot of work on this afternoon and there's a Japanese party due in half an hour."

"Sorry to disturb you," Wilson said drily. "But I just thought you'd be interested."

"I'm certainly that. First thing is to compare the two cards and look for similar factors."

Wilson bit his lip.

"Afraid I can't do that, Barry. I threw the first one on the garden bonfire."

There was a muffled implosion of breath at the end of the line and then a long silence.

"Why on earth did you do that? I told you the thing could be valuable to a collector. That view of Aberdeen may have been unique. I haven't seen such an image in my life."

"I'm sorry," Wilson said. "I just got annoyed with the damn thing. I hate mysteries in real life."

"Oh, well, it can't be helped," Clissold said philosophically. "We'll discuss it in detail when I come down. Till tomorrow night then."

There was a click as he put the phone back and Wilson was left with a feeling of frustration and annoyance, though he could not have said why.

5

He put the half-empty teacup down in the saucer with a sharp clinking noise, sat back at the desk and went through his roughly pencilled notes. A pallid mist hovered at the window today, making the dim outlines of trees seem ghost-like and ethereal. But inside, the central heating—he had had a new boiler put in at Deirdre's insistence—creaked comfortably as the radiators gave out their warmth and the shaded lamps shone blandly down on every modern comfort, from the internal telephone system linked with almost every room to the latest in computers which sat on its own special desk near the window.

Though Wilson still preferred his heavy manual standard typewriter he had had the computer installed as Deirdre was expert in its use and had promised to key in and print out the typescripts of his books after they were married. It was an offer he had been unable to refuse. Now, he sat on at the desk, absorbing, as though by some subtle process of osmosis, the mysterious, not to say bizarre circumstances of his aunt's disappearance.

Not that there was a plethora of information. The county newspapers had made quite a running story of it, it appeared, but a friend of Wilson's in London who ran one of the capital's biggest cutting agencies had failed to find any reference to it in the national newspapers. Not surprising, really; one old woman's disappearance, which was almost a daily occurrence on a nationwide scale, would hardly be considered important

enough. Before he had left the library last week Wilson had taken the precaution of asking Miss Gillespie if she would run off photocopies of the items regarding his aunt and her cousin, and had given her the page numbers.

He had told her there was no hurry for them but as it had been several days ago he might look down there later and see if they were ready. He glanced at his watch quickly. Fridays seemed to come round with amazing speed and Barry and Deirdre would be there again tomorrow evening. It might be an idea to have the fresh information ready for them. He had, after all, decided to confide in them. They would both be interested, he knew, but there was a doubt growing at the back of his mind that the story might put Deirdre off the house altogether.

He would decide finally tomorrow. In the meantime the cuttings would fill out the story more satisfactorily and then he could spend time clearing up one or two of the rooms above the study. Incredibly, Hoddesden Old Hall had four storeys, if one counted the attics, which he had hardly penetrated, so full were they of old furniture and the debris of many years. There was nothing in the vaulted cellars but modern concrete floors; bunkers full of coal; and a very respectable collection of choice wines which he had been delighted to discover. The cellars were not, in any event, very extensive for a house of this size and he had plans to get rid of the coal and construct a small cinema and shelving on which to store his extensive archive of 16 mm film classics and erect suitable seating for himself and his guests, so that he could view the films in comfort.

With these and other thoughts coursing erratically through his mind he went swiftly through his pencilled notes; he did not think he had missed anything vital but the printed stories about his aunt, shorn of the journalistic verbiage and concocted melodrama, would fill in and add colour to the bare facts. Presently he got up from the desk, extinguished the lamps from a single switch at the door and went back downstairs to let Mrs. Savage know his movements.

The thin rain had stopped as he slammed the massive front door behind him but the mist lingered and it was difficult to make out the far edge of the garden through the thick swathes of vapour. He turned toward the village, keeping well back from the pavement because some of the cars crawling through the mist were behaving in an erratic manner. He reached the library within a quarter of an hour, relieved to find himself back in warm and comfortable surroundings. The sounds from the road outside were muffled now as though they were coming from the

far distance. Miss Gillespie was at the reception desk with her assistant and smiled brightly as he came up.

"Glad you looked in, Mr. Wilson. I was just going to ring you. I have that material ready for you."

She slid forward a large brown envelope which Wilson took with muttered thanks. He saw that she indicated the extracts and page numbers in red ink on the face of the envelope. She was certainly efficient.

"Many thanks, Miss Gillespie. What do I owe you?"

"Shall we say a pound?"

Wilson looked dubious.

"It doesn't seem very much. There's a lot of stuff here. Better make it two."

The smile on the smooth face beneath the dark braided hair widened.

"Many thanks, Mr. Wilson. We'll put the extra toward the tea money."

She took the coins from him and was placing them in a drawer when she caught sight of someone over Wilson's shoulder.

"I think there's a gentleman you should meet, Mr. Wilson. He's a mine of information on Hoddesden's affairs."

A tall, broad-shouldered man in his late sixties, with silver hair and a well-trimmed Vandyke beard, was greeting the librarian in a jocular and affectionate manner. He was dressed in something that looked like a green hunting jacket and he wore a green felt hat with a gamebird's feather in the band. Wilson was vaguely amused. The newcomer looked like a character out of *The Prisoner Of Zenda* but he kept the thought to himself.

"This is Dr. Broadbent. He's a distinguished historian and has written many books about historical subjects. Allow me to present Mr. John Wilson, a well-known writer himself and we have many of his books on our shelves. Mr. Wilson has just come to live at Hoddesden Old Hall."

"Indeed!"

The smile was open, genuine and welcoming.

"Delighted to meet you, Mr. Wilson! I must say I envy you your possession of the Old Hall. My humble dwelling is eighteenth-century but yours goes back to the mists of time. I must say I would love to look inside your house on some mutually convenient date. The timber construction there is most remarkable and there are two unique crownposts in the upper chambers."

Wilson returned the other's vigorous handshake, smiling in his turn. The doctor's enthusiasm was infectious.

"I should be delighted to invite you round for a meal one evening, doctor. Preferably when my fiancée and my good friend Barry Clissold, the museum curator, are in residence."

Broadbent's face expressed even greater pleasure.

"Ah! You are a friend of Mr. Clissold! Better than ever."

Wilson concealed his surprise.

"I didn't know you were acquainted with Barry."

The tall man in the rain-flecked garments wagged an admonitory finger.

"Kindred spirits, Mr. Wilson. Fellow scholars. I am a doctor of philosophy not a medical man. Call me mister! The world does though Miss Gillespie here—a very good friend, by the way—is meticulous about people's titles."

She had turned away by this time but Wilson could see her shoulders shaking with suppressed amusement. He was warming to this new acquaintance by the minute and he might be a source of useful information. The two men had moved back and were now in an odd corner of the library building where shallow steps led to a small balcony and book-stacks hemmed them in so that a *sotto voce* conversation would be unheard by others using the library premises. Another useful factor was that they could, from their raised vantage point, see if anyone was coming in their direction.

Wilson was not quite sure why he was being so secretive this morning but some inner voice was enjoining caution. He skirted the topic most heavily on his mind.

"You met Barry where, Mr. Broadbent, if I am not being too curious."

"Oh, by no means!"

The big man stood with one massive hand on the polished teak railing and casually surveyed the crowded shelves below them. His dark eyes were clouded and dreamy beneath his shaggy eyebrows but there was nothing dreamy or indeterminate about his manner.

"There is no secret, Mr. Wilson. I use his museum facilities in London a good deal and we naturally saw one another from time to time and a friendship developed. As I said, we share certain esoteric interests. We used to compare notes in the library there. He's an avid collector, like myself, as you must know."

Wilson nodded, deliberately keeping his voice casual.

"So you know the Old Hall."

"Not as much as I should like to. It's quite the oldest extant dwelling in the village but the previous owner did not exactly keep open house and I glimpsed the interior on only two occasions when she grudgingly

allowed the local historical society to look round certain selected rooms while one of our members gave a lecture."

His eyes were focused to sharp points now, as though recollecting the scene vividly.

"Yes, Miss Hollamby. A very strange woman, if I may say so."

"So I understand," said Wilson, as though he had heard the comment before. "I inherited the place, you know. She was my aunt."

Broadbent turned an embarrassed face to his new acquaintance.

"My dear sir, I had no idea! I offer you my abject apologies . . ."

Wilson began to laugh, waving aside the other's remarks.

"There is really no need, Mr. Broadbent. I never knew the lady and apart from a brief acquaintance when I was about five years old we had never met."

The other's features cleared.

"Oh, I see. Yes, well, that makes a difference. I take it I may speak quite freely, seeing that you intend to live there. And as you have a fiancée, I also presume you will make it your married home."

Wilson nodded, not quite sure what the antiquarian was getting at.

Broadbent lowered his voice, glancing around sharply once more.

"May I speak quite frankly?"

"I would be grateful if you would."

"Good."

The big man stroked his well-trimmed beard before proceeding.

"I meant nothing detrimental to Miss Hollamby, I can assure you. It was just that she was something of a recluse who kept apart from the life and activities of the village. Like most such people she was eccentric in her habits. Village gossip exaggerates, I know, but even allowing for that, some of her procedures were bizarre."

"Such as?"

"Well, she was morbidly afraid of disease and wore gloves at all times, even indoors, I believe. She rarely, if ever, went out, at least, when she was living at the Old Hall. Her gardener used to do the shopping for her on several afternoons a week. There were other stories but I won't go into them now."

Wilson deliberately kept his manner casual though he was extremely interested in what Broadbent was saying. He eased out the sheaf of photocopies from the envelope Miss Gillespie had given him.

"Yet her disappearance was curious, wasn't it? And perhaps in keeping with what you have been telling me?"

"Ah, you have been doing some research in our archives, Mr. Wilson. I approve of that."

His face had clouded over now and the two men stood as though in some spell for more than a minute while the gentle mumble of voices and the civilized background noises of the library lapped around them.

"Yes, it was strange," Broadbent resumed. "But then elderly ladies do do strange things from time to time, unfortunately."

"What do you make of that business of her nephew? That was somewhat bizarre too, I felt."

Broadbent turned to face him on the narrow balcony, his gaze fixed over the other's shoulder to the floor below.

"Hardly bizarre. Something that could have happened to anyone. I hope it will not detract from the charm of your new surroundings. So far as I know that is the only violent occurrence in all the Old Hall's long history."

Wilson joined in the other's smile.

"What was the cousin like?"

"Oh, Povey?"

For the first time Broadbent looked nonplussed.

"An unpleasant man, to put it no higher. His great good fortune did not seem to improve his manner or add to whatever happiness he got out of life. There was a lot of local gossip about him too. He lived here for only six months or so and that was quite a while back so I should not let these old newspaper reports cloud your coming, Mr. Wilson."

He tapped the bundle of photocopies which Wilson slipped back into the envelope.

"I hear you are making tasteful improvements up there. And with Christmas not so far away, the Hall should provide a charming background. Your fiancée will be there, I suppose."

Wilson felt a sudden access of warmth toward this big, capable man. He was oddly comforting and his brisk manner was dispelling the vague aura of discontent that had been seeping into the author's thoughts lately.

"Oh, yes. And perhaps you would like to join us for dinner on Christmas Eve if you have no other plans. But we will make arrangements to show you over the house long before that."

Again Broadbent looked embarrassed.

"I would be delighted, Mr. Wilson! It really is too generous and kind of you."

Wilson waved away his thanks.

"Think nothing of it. And as you are already an old friend of Barry's and I'm sure you will like Deirdre, you will be among friends."

The two men walked back down the steps to the ground floor, conversing in normal tones now, and when they parted near the reception desk it was with a firm understanding that Wilson would phone shortly and make an appointment for Broadbent to come to tea and to see over the house.

His mind was full of conflicting impressions as he walked back to the Old Hall.

6

There was a savage squall of rain in the afternoon and Wilson descended to the ground floor with the library cuttings. There was a fire burning in the great stone fireplace in the lounge, though the central heating was on, but, as Mrs. Savage said, the fire added cheer to the scene. Now he sat in a deep chair with his feet extended on the polished oak floor, which reflected the dancing shards of gold from the fire, and pondered his good fortune.

Mrs. Savage's teapot and the tea things with a large tin of biscuits stood at his elbow, and the sheaf of photocopies on his knee occupied him intensely as the gentle ticking of another big cased clock went on in the corner. He was not really concentrating at this moment in time, lulled by the comfort of his surroundings; the vague feeling that he ought to be making greater efforts with the work on the house; and that there were many things to do regarding his preparations for Christmas. He went on sifting through the old newspaper reports of his aunt's disappearance and gradually again felt his attention becoming focused.

He was now on to the inquest on the body of the cousin, Edward Povey, following its recovery from the well. There was an arresting exchange between the police surgeon, a Dr. Arnold Strang, and the coroner, Cedric Knowles, himself a medical man:

"The cause of death of Mr. Edward Povey was consistent with him having fallen through the rotten boarding of the well-cover."

The Coroner: "Yes, I have your post-mortem report here, doctor. Death due to severe head injuries, bodily contusions, shock following the impact, plus a broken neck. Almost any one of these injuries would have been enough to cause death. Yet there was something else implied in your report, Dr. Strang."

"There was something beyond that, sir. The expression on the deceased's face was one of great shock and horror."

The Coroner: "Surely anyone falling through a well-cover to his death would express on his features such shock and horror as you have described in your report?"

Dr. Strang went on to say that there was something beyond the normal. He continued, "I have carried out many such post-mortems during the past fifteen years and I have found in most cases of violent death, where that death was unexpected, that the victim showed surprise or mild shock. Usually the person is killed before he has had time to register such a realization upon his features."

The Coroner: "I do not follow you, doctor."

Dr. Strang: "Well, sir, it is difficult to describe."

The Coroner: "You are not implying that the deceased was pushed into the well or that there was any suspicion of foul play in your mind? Because, if so, there has been no evidence adduced at this inquest to support such a theory."

"I am not saying that in so many words, sir."

"Well, what exactly are you saying?"

"I am not, of course, suggesting murder. But there is something beyond my experience in this case. I can only say that I have never seen such a shocking expression on a dead person's face in all the years I have been performing post-mortems in cases of sudden death. It is just a feeling I have and I would like it to go on record. Perhaps we had better leave it at that."

The Coroner: "As you say, doctor, perhaps we had better leave it at that. But my clerk has it all on record."

There was a good deal more in the photocopied stories of Miss Hollamby's disappearance and Povey's sudden death where the inquiries had been conducted in a similar sober and civilized manner but Wilson put the sheaf of papers down and stared into the heart of the fire, only vaguely aware that a slightly sinister dusk had fallen in the shrouded, rain-swept garden outside the ancient, small-paned windows. The disquiet at the back of his mind had again returned, yet it was all so intangible; slightly less diaphanous than the mist outside the windows. He was now resolved to say no more about these matters to Deirdre.

Though he would discuss it fully with Barry when the pair arrived tomorrow evening, probably after Deirdre had retired for the night. He felt a certain guilt at this for Deirdre was a strong-minded, sensible girl and her refreshing common sense would no doubt have thrown cold water on some of Wilson's more fanciful suggestions. He was long familiar with her arguments; mainly based on the exotic imaginings of a writer, of course.

No doubt Wilson was allowing his imagination to run away with himself but he did not want to cast any shadows on their happiness, and he was determined that she should love and appreciate the old house as much as he did; he knew she was of that mind at the moment but she might not feel the same if he went into all this business of Miss Holmby and the sudden and tragic death of the cousin.

Wilson was anxious to get Barry's opinion on these topics, and his conversations with the Rector and then with Dr. Broadbent had reduced the trivial matters of the postcards to their proper level. He withdrew his eyes from the misty garden and got up abruptly to draw the curtains, aware of the sudden clatter of Mrs. Savage's activities in the kitchen, sanity again returning to the ancient beamed room with its atmosphere of comfort and culture.

He gathered up the cuttings and replaced them in the envelope. He would re-examine them again when he was in a less sombre mood. The weather did not help; the dreary atmosphere outside with the approach of winter was not conducive to cheerful thoughts. He wondered for a moment whether he was wise to bury himself in such a rural location. It was all very well in summer with London only half an hour away but what would it be like during the winter gales and, even more depressingly, when snow and ice made the roads impassable and he would be marooned down here? After all, life with Deirdre was almost a year away.

He finished his tea, ate another biscuit and took a turn or two about the room, his thoughts still slightly confused. He was interrupted by the entrance of Mrs. Savage.

"Post is late today," she said shortly.

She put the packet of letters down on the arm of Wilson's easy chair.

"Getting closer," she said enigmatically as she left the room.

Wilson soon saw what she meant for as he turned over the bundle, another of the old, musty-smelling cards fell out. He bit back the exclamation of annoyance that sprang to his lips and bent to retrieve it.

It was an ancient, tinted photograph of Carlisle and once again, with a quickening of the pulse, he saw that the postal details were obliterated and the initial indecipherable. The message was again short and cryptic: "*Still enjoying the sights and coming closer all the time.*" His first impulse was to throw the thing in the fire together with the previous card but Barry Clissold's advice stopped him. Instead, he took the thing up to his study and put it on the desk with the other, both secured by a heavy brass paperweight.

Irritating and incomprehensible as this series of cards was, they were thrust into the background by the conversations he had had with the

Rector and Broadbent; the material in the newspaper reports, much of which he had had no time to go through, had only emphasized his feelings. The thoughts they had engendered were beginning to tinge the whole atmosphere of the Old Hall with dark and shadowy forebodings and the damp, misty weather outside did not help.

But he was much cheered as he went in to dinner by Mrs. Savage whose down-to-earth common sense he was learning to cherish. Without being asked she herself broached the subject of the cards. He had asked her to take coffee and a cognac with him this evening before she cleared up and went home. She had obviously sensed his unease but was not aware of the reason for it.

"About those cards, Mr. Wilson," she said almost apologetically. "I shouldn't take them too seriously. Perhaps someone you know, who's a fellow collector of such old things as Mr. Clissold, is pulling your leg."

"I don't quite follow you, Mrs. Savage."

"Well, Mr. Wilson, perhaps it's someone in your life you've forgotten. A lady, perhaps, or possibly a man who's got a woman to help him."

"But to what purpose?"

The housekeeper pursed her lips as though she were dealing with a backward child.

"Perhaps some sort of a joke and eventually he or she will turn up at Christmas and you can both have a good laugh about it together."

"But would anybody spoil valuable old cards like that?"

Mrs. Savage sipped delicately at her coffee and put the cup down before replying.

"Mr. Clissold might feel they're valuable, but then he's a collector. I've seen such cards in boxes on market stalls and in London going quite cheaply. Anyone who knew about such things could obliterate postmarks and destinations."

"But then how do you explain the fact that there are no modern stamps on the cards, and that the postman seems to know nothing of them?"

"Ah, you have me there, Mr. Wilson. But there are ways . . ." She paused mysteriously. "I expect they will be more frequent now."

Again Wilson was nonplussed. But he had no need to put the question.

"Well, Mr. Wilson; Aberdeen is quite a long way away, isn't it? Edinburgh is nearer and Carlisle nearer still. So whoever is sending the cards is obviously travelling towards us!"

Wilson made no reply and Mrs. Savage got up with a quiet air of triumph and took her coffee cup and glass out to the kitchen. Wilson sat on, listening to the rain pattering against the window panes, quite up-

lifted. There was quite a lot in what she said but that still did not explain his last two points.

He shrugged and put the matter from him for the time being.

7

"Hmm. Interesting."

Barry Clissold put the magnifying glass down and looked enthusiastically across the table at the other two. Deirdre pushed back the recalcitrant lock of black hair from her eyes, and gave an elegant little sniff.

"In what way?"

"In lots of ways."

Clissold turned back to Wilson. It was Friday evening and the trio sat amid the debris of the dinner things. Clissold was quite a good cook and as a concession to the current cold weather he had provided his hosts with a hot main course. The rain still whispered at the windows but it was warm and luxurious in the dining room with its blazing fire and shaded lamps.

"Name one."

It was Deirdre again.

Clissold gave a stifled snort but his eyes were dancing with mischief.

"Mrs. Savage is right in her suppositions about distance and her theory of the sender coming closer, but that still doesn't explain those old postmarks and the lack of modern stamps. I'll swear these never came through the postal service. Maybe the person lives here in the village or hereabouts and is hand-delivering them as though they'd come from afar."

"The thought had occurred to me," Wilson admitted.

Deirdre looked incredulous.

"But what's the point?"

"Mrs. Savage thinks it may be someone I knew years ago and who wants to surprise me at Christmas time."

Deirdre shook her head impatiently.

"She's certainly baffling you. Not to mention us. But I just don't believe it. It's too preposterous for words."

"Well, let's leave it, shall we?" Clissold said. "In the meantime, I'd like to borrow these two cards."

"What for?" Deirdre demanded.

Tonight she wore a tight-fitting red sweater and white linen trousers, an outfit in which she looked boyish and at the same time infinitely desirable, Wilson thought. Perhaps she had read the expression in his

eyes because he noticed a slight heightening of her colour; though it may have been due to the wine and the heat of the room. Clissold reached over to pour himself another glass of the rosé.

"We've got a lab at the museum. I'd like to have an analysis made."

"By all means," Wilson said. "I'll be glad to see the back of the damn things."

Clissold shrugged, got up and went over to put the cards in the briefcase he'd left in a corner of the room when they'd first arrived.

"Talking of museums reminds me of something," Wilson continued when the other had reseated himself. "I met an old friend of yours at the local library yesterday."

Clissold gave him a sharp look.

"More old friends turning up," he said. "This sounds like an interesting village. Who was he?"

"It might have been a she," Deirdre put in impishly. She gave her fiancé a slow, secret smile which was, however, not lost on Clissold, though he said nothing.

"It was a he," Wilson said. "A Dr. Broadbent. A great historian and author of books on history. A big noise around here."

Clissold broke into a smile.

"Good God! I didn't know old Arnold lived here. I must hunt him up."

"No need," Wilson said. "I've invited him to have a look round the house soon. And he's coming to dine with us on Christmas Eve."

He looked at Deirdre apologetically. "I hope you don't mind, darling." She smiled brightly.

"Why should I? Mrs. Savage and Barry will be doing most of the catering and one more will make little difference."

Both men knew that Deirdre was an excellent cook but they also realized that she did a lot of cooking for herself and guests in London and did not want to be too closely involved with the catering arrangements at the Old Hall until she was mistress there. Wilson quite saw the point and had never pressed her on the matter.

"Good, that's settled then," Wilson said, ending the topic as he thought. But Deirdre missed very little and her eyes had never left his face the past few minutes.

"And what interesting things did he have to tell you about this house, John?"

Wilson shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

"Oh, its incredible age, the wealth of pargeting and that Hereward the Wake once ate toasted tea-cakes here," he lied humorously.

There was muffled laughter but Wilson could tell by Deirdre's face that she was only half-convinced of the truth of his earlier statement. He would have to be very careful in imparting what he had learned about his aunt and her cousin when speaking to Clissold later this evening. He changed the angle of the subject.

"Strange you not knowing Broadbent lived here."

Clissold made a deprecating little movement of his shoulders, his reddish hair glistening in the lamplight.

"There's no mystery about that either, John. We always met in London, at functions, various libraries and at the museum. I knew he lived in the country, of course, but I didn't know exactly where. I never had any reason to enquire."

The conversation drifted on to other things and it was almost midnight before the girl broke the silence which had fallen on them. The three were grouped round the fire in their armchairs as was their recent habit, and Wilson sipped appreciatively at the remainder of his second cognac in the big balloon glass, strangely content despite the events of the past few days.

Then Deirdre got up abruptly.

"Well, you can stay down here all night if you like. Don't forget the bricklayer is coming to do that repointing at eight in the morning and the carpenter wants to look at those attic floors."

Wilson got up too.

"I'd forgotten that. You're quite right, darling. Do you want me to see you to your room?"

Clissold gave a muffled snigger and Deirdre turned a laughing face to the two men.

"I think not," she said primly. "I know the way by now. And it might lead to complications. Don't forget to lock up."

Her moist mouth brushed Wilson's in a familiar way and he again felt the subtle erotic thrill of the contact. He went out with her to the hall on the pretence of locking up and they were glued together in a brief, hot embrace before she ran lithely up the stairs, her heels beating a brief rat-tat on the oak treads.

Wilson went on to secure the house for the night, feeling somewhat unsteady and he realized the sensation was not entirely due to the wine and cognac he had imbibed. He bolted the massive front door which was the only one of the three entries to the house not yet secured for the night, extinguished the main hall light and returned to where Clissold sprawled contentedly in front of the fire. He went to stand by the fireplace, looking down at his friend.

"You know, we soon ought to be making some firm plans regarding Christmas," he said. "I have to book several meals out and we don't want to spend all our time cooking."

"You've got lipstick all over your face," Clissold said irrelevantly, his eyes dancing.

Wilson made a mouth at him, scrubbing vigorously with his handkerchief.

"Never mind about that," he said. "It's only about six weeks away."

He went to sit down in one of the ancient seats actually inside the massive fireplace.

"You sure you've got the time off?"

Clissold stirred in his chair, fully opened his eyes.

"For Christmas? Of course. I've got a week's annual leave coming up and I've added three days to it, which will take us over into the New Year."

He looked in the direction Deirdre had taken.

"That is, if the two of you can put up with me that long?"

"Don't be silly," Wilson said. "You know we love to have you around. And where should we be when it comes to the heavier manual work?"

He got up from the fireplace, not quite sure how to start the conversation.

"Another cognac?"

Clissold looked over at the big cased clock in the corner.

"Why not? It's only twelve-fifteen now, and I shan't be around at eight for the bricklayers in the morning. Deirdre's promised to bring me tea and toast in bed."

Wilson raised his eyebrows.

"Really? As long as that's all she's providing."

The two young men laughed, the sound echoing sonorously round the silent room with its massive beams and the huge bressummer over the fireplace.

"She's a lovely girl," Barry said. "And you're a lucky devil. You certainly don't deserve her."

"I know that, old chap. But I do appreciate her."

"I'm sure you do," Clissold said warmly, taking the big balloon glass from him. He in his turn went to stand leaning against the fireplace while Wilson sank into a chair.

"Why don't you take the plunge too?" Wilson said after a bit, still looking for an opening.

Clissold frowned.

"What, get married? Never yet met the right girl. Lots of possibilities and I've been playing the field pretty heavily."

He laughed, showing strong white teeth.

"I notice you're not too much in a hurry, despite all the attractions lying in wait."

Wilson smiled.

"Well, that's really Deirdre's doing. I respect her wishes. And there is still a hell of a lot to do before we get this place looking exactly as we want it."

Clissold shrugged again.

"Well, don't leave it too late, that's all."

The other looked at him sharply.

"What exactly do you mean by that?"

"Nothing, really. Except that there are a lot of counter attractions in London, you know."

Wilson got up and joined the other so that they were both standing close to the fire.

"I take your point. But Deirdre's really not like that. If you knew her as I do . . ."

Clissold nodded, appreciatively tasting his cognac.

"Damned good stuff, this. I must make a note of the label."

"Take a bottle on Monday, if you like," Wilson said. "I've got another three or four down in the cellar. Part of the inheritance so I shan't miss one."

"I may take you up on it."

Clissold looked as though he were ready to go to bed but his host gently waved him down into a chair.

"Listen. I want your advice."

For the next ten minutes Wilson poured out his story, voicing some of his forebodings. Clissold sat silent and absorbed. He did not interrupt once but waited patiently until his friend had finished the history of the house as it concerned his aunt and her cousin. There was a long, brooding silence in the lamplit room as Wilson finished. Clissold said nothing for a while, his eyes absorbed and sombre. The firelight made a mottled mask of his face as he turned to the other.

"Well?" said Wilson impatiently.

"Interesting, John."

"But no more?"

"Perhaps. For the imaginative. But I shouldn't tell Deirdre if I were you."

Wilson bit his lip.

"Then you do think there's something bizarre about the house?"

Clissold got up, cracking his knuckles; the small reports in the shrouded silence of the room suddenly irritated Wilson, though it was a long-standing habit with his friend.

"Bizarre? About the house? No. No more than any other ancient building with a long and varied history. Povey's death was sudden and tragic, certainly, but as I've said before, these things do happen. You're surely not still worrying about those cards? A minor mystery but one that will probably be readily explained when the joker behind them eventually turns up."

Wilson stepped nearer.

"What do you really think, Barry?"

"I've just told you."

There were notes of fraying temper in Clissold's voice now.

"But why did you say not to tell Deirdre?"

Clissold had merely voiced Wilson's own thoughts but he could not resist pressing his friend.

"Just being circumspect. You know how sensitive and apprehensive women are about such matters. You don't want to put the girl off the house even before you're married, do you?"

Wilson's mood lifted and he put his hand on the other's arm.

"No, of course not. I expect you're right. And you know how I value your opinion. I'm not worried about those silly cards any more. I expect there will be a perfectly logical explanation in due course. But do let me know what your people find out at the museum."

"Of course." Clissold glanced at his watch. "My God! It's almost half past one. And we have a lot to do in the morning."

Wilson felt his mind greatly eased as he extinguished the lights and prepared for bed.

8

"Anyone for coffee?"

Deirdre's banging on the tin tray with a spoon as she put the things down on a low stone wall adjoining the terrace startled Wilson momentarily. Incredibly, it was a brilliantly sunny day today and winter seemed to have temporarily departed, though a faint misty haze still lingered. The bricklayer had turned up on time, had erected his scaffolding and was busy pointing brickwork on one of the ancient stacks.

He had smilingly declined the coffee, which he said gave him indigestion and had brought his own thermos flask of tea, which he would drink

aloft. Deirdre glanced up at him as he worked with the smooth precision born of long practice.

"You're lucky to get people to work on a Saturday down here, John. You wouldn't get that in London."

Clissold, who had been hacking at the undergrowth with a sickle, joined them on the terrace, wiping the perspiration from his forehead with a blue and white striped handkerchief.

"Too right, Deirdre. Only fools work on Saturdays."

The grin he gave the other two was infectious.

"You'll get your reward at Christmas, Barry," Wilson promised him. "Let's go farther down and I'll drag the teak seats out from the summer-house. It's too fine a day to waste."

The three were soon comfortably ensconced in an angle of the old house, where two walls met; it was quite a suntrap there and Wilson guessed that this had been a favourite summer spot of his aunt's. The three sat contentedly blinking at the sunlight and consuming the coffee and biscuits the girl had brought out, when she suddenly said, "That reminds me. Do you chaps realize Christmas will soon be on us and we haven't got any presents, cards or anything else sorted out yet."

"Don't bother us now," said Barry rudely. "I haven't finished with July."

Wilson screwed up his eyes against the sun.

"The girl has a point. What with all this work I haven't had much time to think about it."

"Well, it's about time you did," said Deirdre decisively. "After tea. It gets dark early now and we can make lists and things before supper."

Clissold groaned and Wilson himself screwed up his eyes again. Like most men, and Barry in particular, he didn't like being reminded of urgent tasks that needed doing when he was taking his ease.

"We'll sort something out," he said unconvincingly and Deirdre cast him a sudden glance of impish insight. She looked particularly enticing today, Wilson thought, with her blue jeans buckled in tightly against her flat stomach and a man's thick red sport shirt which only emphasized her tanned features beneath the mass of tangled black hair. He felt a sudden surge of joy and pride of possession.

"Don't forget the carpenter's coming at two o'clock to look at those attic floorboards," Clissold said warningly.

"An attic tragedy," said Deirdre, waiting for the groans which failed to come.

Wilson grinned wryly.

"It will be when the bill comes in," he said.

He had been clearing out junk from the summerhouse, preparatory to burning it on the bonfire and he reached the end of this task at about midday. Deirdre was busy somewhere inside the house and Barry was still attacking the undergrowth in the neglected part of the garden. It ran to about two acres with thickets of dark fir and sycamore on the boundaries and Wilson had privately decided to leave the area where the sealed well lay as wilderness. He did not want to be reminded of such things and he thought he would erect a high board fence there, isolating the spot from the rest of the grounds.

He was musing in this way as he opened the inner front door and in the glass he suddenly saw an image reflected. It was that of a man and as he glanced back over his shoulder he recognized the local postman,

Mr. Dunnett, disappearing down the drive. There were several letters lying on the mat. Among them was the familiar oblong of a postcard. Wilson turned it over.

Strangely enough, he was not worried about them now. This one showed a yellowed picture of the city walls in York. It appeared as though Mrs. Savage's suppositions had been right. And the cards had been coming at increasingly short intervals. Only a day in this case; or perhaps two as the one from Carlisle may have been posted some time earlier, though it had only arrived yesterday.

Wilson trembled slightly but outwardly his manner was unruffled as he took the rest of the mail over to the demilune at the foot of the stairs. He glanced at the message side of the card, saw that some of the delicately formed handwriting had been smeared and partly obliterated as though by rain or damp. But he made out the end of a sentence, which read: *"Interesting perambulations. Still coming in your direction. Hope to be in the neighbourhood by Christmas."*

He could hear Deirdre moving about in the kitchen; then he was startled to hear sudden footfalls in the hall behind him. But it was only Barry, coming in to clean up before lunch.

Wilson handed him the card.

"Add that to the collection for your analysis. And please don't mention it to Deirdre."

Clissold took the card without a change of expression.

"Right," he said laconically, and put it in the pocket of his jeans and went on rapidly up the stairs. Wilson then saw that Deirdre was in the doorway. He did not know how long she had been there but she had apparently just come through from the kitchen because she said, "Aren't you going to open your letters?"

"You do it, darling," Wilson said, handing them to her. "I don't think it's anything important."

He went into the downstairs cloakroom to wash his hands and tidy up and when he came out she was still by the table, glancing at the opened correspondence. She handed it to him.

"Royalty statement. Request to address a women's club. An invitation to sign books."

Wilson smiled.

"Routine stuff. But it's nice to be remembered. Royalty cheque reasonable?"

Deirdre smiled too, showing flawless teeth.

"More than reasonable. At least, I shan't be marrying a pauper."

"Mercenary wench."

They were locked in a fierce embrace when they heard Clissold hurrying back down the stairs. Deirdre tidied her blue-black hair in the oval mirror and shot him an amused but warning glance.

"I'm preparing a cold salad as the weather is so beautiful. I thought we could eat on the terrace. A bottle of chilled white wine and some of that angel cake from the village patisserie. I think I can just about manage coffee, too. All right?"

Barry had joined them now.

"More than all right. Eh, John?"

"Great. And there won't be too much clearing up to do before the carpenter comes."

A clattering noise from the half-open front door made Wilson jump. He realized his nerves were becoming a little on edge.

"What was that?"

Deirdre gave him a strange look.

"It's only the bricklayer knocking off for lunch. I expect he's going down to the pub."

A moment later they saw his grey-painted van glide past the end of the driveway.

"As long as he's in a fit condition to finish that stack afterwards," Wilson said. "I want to get the outside weatherproof before the winter sets in."

"Plenty of time," Clissold said. "How many pubs are there in Hoddesden anyway?"

"Five in the village itself," Deirdre said, turning back toward the kitchen. "We've sampled them all. Three are pretty good and the other two really excellent. I expect he's gone to the Red Lion. That's the nearest."

Clissold looked at the girl and then back to John.

"You two seem to have been making the rounds."

The girl laid a hand on his shoulder.

"We're here more often than you, that's all. You'll catch up in time."

"Perhaps we could try another some evening?" suggested Clissold. "I only know the two nearest, at the entrance to Hoddesden proper."

"Why not?" Wilson said. "You've worked hard. And I don't want to strain your good nature, Barry."

The strong teeth flashed in a ready smile.

"You'll never do that, John. But I must see this vast attic I've heard so much about."

Deirdre had gone back to the kitchen now and the two men were alone.

"Don't expect too much," Wilson said. "There's an incredible amount of junk up there. And it's really a series of long, interconnecting rooms. There are some magnificent hammer beams. Later, we could make some superb reception rooms up there. Just the place for dancing."

"Old Arnold will be interested," Clissold said, resting his chin on the ancient oak balustrade as Wilson started ascending the staircase. A thin shaft of sun coming in from the stairhead window turned his hair a reddish gold.

"You look like a crucified saint," said Wilson irreverently. Clissold laughed.

"Some hope of that! That's something Arnold won't be interested in. But returning to the subject of the attic, I can't understand why you don't put your cinema and film collection up there instead of the cellar."

Wilson paused on his way up.

"Well, for one thing the cellar is bone dry, with enormously thick walls. I'm a late bird as you know And if I use the attic I may disturb guests sleeping on the floors below, especially when I'm running late-night sound films. The attic rooms are far too good to waste in such a way, as you'll see after lunch."

"Well, it's your house, John. I'm going to have a pre-lunch drink and then join Deirdre in the kitchen. See you on the terrace."

Wilson was crossing the lounge after lunch when he heard the sound of the carpenter's van outside and he went to the front door to let him in. Tom Blake was a sturdy man in his thirties, with a mop of black curls and a frank, open manner.

"It will be nice to see The Old Hall in proper use again," he said, as the two ascended to the upper floors. "It had been badly neglected in Miss Hollamby's time."

The two men had paused outside Wilson's study and a sudden flush suffused the carpenter's cheeks.

"No offence, sir. Seeing that she was your aunt."

"That's all right," Wilson hurriedly assured him. "I'll just get the keys."

He quickly hunted out the bundle from his desk drawer and rejoined the other on the dusty landing half a flight up. The stairs grew narrower as they reached the third floor, which Wilson guessed had been formerly occupied by maids and other indoor servants. Wilson had been briefly over the top floors but nothing had yet been done here as he was anxious to get the main part of the house habitable first. Most of the rooms contained old furniture and china in tea-chests, together with bundles of books tied with string and slowly mouldering away; while the dozens of large sealed cardboard boxes contained God knew what, he told himself.

There were two bathrooms on this floor also but he was undecided as to whether to have all these rooms brought back into use. After all, there were eight bedrooms below, as well as three more bathrooms. A large wooden door with a latch barred the way to the attics and the smell of mould and the accumulated dust of years grew more oppressive as they ascended the final flight. There was electric light, fortunately, and the dusty bulbs, giving only half light, revealed a more melancholy scene with every step they took.

"What do you think of these treads?" Wilson asked.

Blake had brought a small case in with him which the writer guessed contained tape measures, set squares and other such instruments. Now the former bent to the treads with a sharp, appraising eye.

"Solid enough," he announced, going carefully up and down the narrow stair. "There are a couple of places in the corners there. I shall use inserts and strong bracing for those. All in matching oak, of course."

Wilson nodded absently, his thoughts elsewhere.

"I haven't spent much time up here, of course, since I moved in. Too busy elsewhere. But from a cursory glance I should think there would be much more for you to do in the attic itself. The boards seem quite rotten in several places, mostly in the corners."

They had come to the top landing now and Wilson was fumbling for the keys. Blake shifted from one foot to another, his massive frame seeming to burst out of his dark blue shirt and matching jeans.

"That would be damp and water penetration over the years. Probably leaky tiles and shrunken window frames. As you know, we've put everything to rights up aloft."

He was referring to the earlier work he had carried out with the co-operation of a larger firm. He was noted in the neighbourhood as a fine and conscientious craftsman with an excellent reputation in the surrounding area and Wilson was well pleased with his work so far. He put the key in the lock, turned it, tried another.

"There will be plenty more to do here," Wilson said to cover the awkward gap while he found the right key. "If you can spare the time." "Oh, I'll find the time, Mr. Wilson," said Blake easily. "You have only to phone and I'll always be up within a day or two to give you an estimate."

Wilson had the door open at last, stepped back as the smell of choking dust met him. It was hot up here under the eaves on such a sunny day and he asked his companion to open the small landing window. The two men were in the first of the big, shadowy attics and Wilson fumbled for the light switch. The illumination seemed to make the place darker as the only sunlight was filtering in through heavy green canvas blinds that appeared to be in the last stages of disintegration.

"I'll get those things down and the windows open," Wilson said. "Better let me do it because I've been up here before and know the bad places."

Blake stood to one side of the open door, slowly appraising the contents of the vast rooms; noting the sheeted piles of ancient furniture; the glass and chinaware heaped at crazy angles in their tea-chests; parcels, bundles, statuary, tarnished brass oil lamps, and piles of hundreds of leather-bound books, stained and shrunken, that had been sitting on the dusty oak boards for perhaps the past forty or fifty years.

"Phew, what a mess!" he couldn't help exclaiming.

"You now see what I mean," said Wilson, perspiration beading his forehead, as he wrestled with a rusted window catch. He'd torn the first blind down; it gave way with an ugly ripping noise and thick motes of dust danced in the shafts of strong yellow sunlight that only emphasized and reinforced the squalor of the place. He had the window open at last and relished the sweet afternoon air, with an undertone of autumn coolness that wafted in.

Blake had moved forward as the light increased.

"I see those places you mean. I'll take care."

He moved down the enormous length of the four great connecting rooms, whose doorways had long been removed, leaving just ancient beamed bracing helping to support the roof, and the two men tore down blinds and opened windows until the freshing breeze at that height danced through, flapping the stained edges of the pages of books and sending trailing cobwebs spinning and spiralling, to the startlement of

their owners. When they had finished, the two stood near the biggest central window as though deep in thought. From the corner of his eye, Wilson could see Clissold, a minute figure far below, crossing the garden on some errand. Wilson was the first to break the silence which had fallen between the two.

"What did you mean about Miss Hollamby earlier? You can speak your mind frankly. I never knew the lady, except very briefly when I was a small child."

The big man shrugged, his eyes drifting across the jumbled chaos around them.

"Nothing, really. I was only going on to say that she was one of the most eccentric people I'd ever come across. That's if only half the local stories are correct."

"So I've been told," Wilson said. "May I ask what else you may have heard?"

Blake paused and looked uncomfortable. The expression of unease on his face gave way to determination.

"Just gossip, really," he said slowly. "Some people said that the old lady's cousin had made away with her to get the inheritance. But that's only hearsay, you understand. You know what village people are and Povey was much disliked in Hoddesden. I must say some local people thought Miss Hollamby was in the well too. It's enormously deep and the police couldn't dredge it properly. They were only able to recover Povey's body because it had lodged against a big iron bracket near the surface. But I shouldn't repeat that in front of your young lady, Mr. Wilson. It would only make her uneasy. It was for your ears only."

"Of course," said Wilson, but the other's words had given him a strange feeling. "You don't think she is in the well?"

Blake shrugged. "If she is no one could ever find her there under thirty feet of rubble, topped by a three-foot concrete capping."

Wilson fought down his ragged nerves as he looked the other squarely in the eye.

"You're not implying that the cousin's death in the well was the old lady's revenge?"

The laughter of the two men echoed hollowly beneath the great rafters and beams of the roof and started echoes from the corners.

"I have heard it suggested," Blake chuckled. "But I don't hold with such rubbish myself. However, I'd better get on with your commission."

He got out the rule and a pencil and wandered about, testing the floorboards with a hammer and making notes in a small black book he produced from his hip pocket. Wilson noted the absorbed interest of the

professional and was careful not to disturb him. Instead, he walked up to the far end of the series of long rooms, thinking that it would take an enormous time to sift, sort and evaluate all this old furniture and other material. Much of it would have to go on the bonfire or out for the dustmen but from what he could see there would still be an enormous residue. Fortunate that there were all those empty or half-empty rooms on the floor below. Some of the stuff would go nicely there along with some halfway decent oil paintings stacked against the wall, far from the light of the windows. Clissold's opinion would come in useful in evaluating them.

"So there you are!"

Wilson jumped at both the voice and the sudden footfall that reverberated on the bare boards of the attic. It was Deirdre who thrust her smiling face round the shrouded bulk of an old chest of drawers. She pushed back the lock of hair from her forehead, leaving a faint cobwebby streak. Wilson guessed she had just brushed against something coming in.

"You look startled, John. Whom did you expect to see?"

Wilson laughed.

"It was nothing, Deirdre. I was just in a brown study, that's all. Thinking principally what a lot of work we're going to have to do before we're finished."

Deirdre gave a bright smile in the direction of Blake, who was dubiously testing the floor beneath one of the big windows.

"But it will be worth it, John. This could make a magnificent place when it's put in order. Even now we could clean some of this stuff and take it downstairs."

Wilson gave his fiancée a sceptical look.

"Such as what?"

"Well, those are genuine Georgian silver candlesticks in that box over there. They'll look beautiful once they're polished. In fact I think I'll take them down now."

"Hullo, hullo! Treasure-hunting already?"

It was Barry, who had crept up silently on rubber soles, hoping to catch them in some compromising situation, Wilson thought with an inward smile.

"Come in, Barry. You haven't been up here before."

Clissold looked round slowly, acknowledging the carpenter's greeting with a brief nod. His voice sounded weary when he replied.

"No, and I'd rather not come again, judging by this mess. But I expect you'll find me plenty to do. It's time and a half on Sundays, remember."

Wilson left the two of them and went back on down toward Blake, anxious to get his professional opinion. The latter lightened his mood at once.

"Nothing to worry about. I've located about a dozen boards that need renewing. I can saw a couple and use them across other joists when I've reconditioned them. And I have a stock of old oak floorboards in my workshop that will match perfectly. I can't give a firm estimate at the moment, of course, because it depends what we find when we get the worst ones up."

Wilson felt relieved.

"Don't worry about that. Nothing major, then? That's fine."

The two men chatted on for a few minutes longer and then Wilson left Blake to his measuring and rejoined the others, who were now rooting about among dusty wooden boxes in the centre of the floor in the second large room.

"What have you found?"

"Oh, this and that," said Clissold but his eyes were filled with suppressed excitement. "We'll take the stuff downstairs so we can dust and clean it."

Wilson then saw that Deirdre had brought up a big plastic shopping bag, which was filled with salvaged material, while Clissold had a bundle of things wrapped in canvas under his arm.

"Come down for some refreshment when you've finished up here," Wilson called to Blake.

He could hear the others chattering animatedly as he followed them down the stairs. But he could not get Blake's words out of his mind. What if the old lady's body was still at the bottom of the well? Then he relaxed. After all, tragic as it was, it hardly mattered now. It was years ago and the well had long since been filled in, as Blake had said. And concreted over. He tried to put it from him as he followed on behind the others.

9

A misty dusk had enveloped the garden when the three of them gave up work for the day and trooped in from the outside. The air was chill now and the sun hung an angry orange ball through the vaporous western sky. Rooks sounded mournfully from a distant clump of trees and a melancholy engendered by the dusk and the time of year had momentarily descended.

Blake had long departed, after giving Wilson a reassuring report, and a preliminary estimate that was extremely modest considering the amount of work involved. Wilson found his spirits lifting. After his shower there would be dinner and then Deirdre had promised to display the refurbished treasures she had taken out to the kitchen. Away from prying eyes, she had said.

"Never mind about that," Clissold had warned her tartly. "I hope you've put plastic sheets down or Mrs. Savage will kick up hell on Monday."

Deirdre had pirouetted, one hand on her slim hip, her eyes flashing in a way that Wilson had come to love and admire.

"Who's mistress here? Mrs. Savage or me?" she challenged.

Clissold and Wilson looked at one another.

"Mrs. Savage!" they chorused together and all three had collapsed with laughter.

Now, as Wilson put on a clean shirt, slacks and a sweater before descending to prepare any liquid refreshment that might be required, he forgot the cold and dampness and mist that was shrouding the grounds outside and in his mind's eye he could see the restored attic rooms, their magnificent beams waxed and polished, the floorboards reflecting back the light of shaded lamps, and he was already mentally rearranging furniture, pictures and other items that would surely turn up among the vast mass of salvageable stuff there.

He quickly drew the thick curtains across the dining-room windows and filled the glasses, the tinkling of the bottle necks against the lips of the crystal goblets igniting a small glow of content that would suffuse all of his being when the time came to taste the first sip. Even for a novelist you're becoming fanciful, John, he told himself. He went over to the polished table where Deirdre and Barry sat among the heaped blue plates and glittering cutlery, while wisps of steam rose, carrying delicious aromas from the best chinaware casseroles.

"We've been nibbling already," Barry said.

"Well, I hope the pre-dinner drinks won't spoil your appetite," said Wilson dryly.

There was a flash of perfect teeth from Deirdre as she raised her glass.

"We've found some treasures already while you were prowling around the attics after tea," she said. "Apart from the candlesticks, of course."

"Ah, but you have an eye for it," Wilson said. "And you do spend a lot of time in Bond Street and at Camden Lock."

Clissold raised his eyebrows.

"I didn't know you were a connoisseur," he said. "But Deirdre's right, you know. You have some lovely stuff tucked away up there."

"I didn't see anything much just now," Wilson said.

Clissold put his glass up in a silent toast.

"That's because you're taking the long view. All you can see is those magnificent beamed rooms when they're refurbished. And you're missing the gems at your feet."

Wilson laughed.

"Well, I can safely leave that to you and Deirdre, surely."

He walked back to sit at the head of the table.

"Which reminds me, we haven't got much farther forward for Christmas."

"That's hardly accurate, John," Deirdre said. "I bought a box of a hundred cards before I left town for the weekend. And Barry dug up a small fir tree in the grounds, replanted it in a tub and brought it indoors just before dark."

"Oh, shut up!" said Barry. "I was saving it for a surprise!"

The two burst out laughing and after a few seconds Wilson joined in.

"It's nice to know what's going on under my own roof," he said at last. "But after dinner I promise we'll get down to some serious planning."

"Don't forget you've still got to fit old Arnold in," Barry reminded his host. "He'll want the whole tour."

"And that's in addition to dinner on Christmas Eve," Deirdre put in.

"What are we going to do for decorations?" Clissold said.

"Only a few sprigs of holly here and there," said Deirdre before Wilson could reply. "All those chains and garlands are so vulgar, really."

"Deirdre's right," Wilson said. "Except we ought to have a garland on the front door."

"Oh, we can go to that," said Deirdre with a satisfied expression. "Now let's have dinner. We can sort out Christmas afterwards."

They did, in fact, do just that. By the time ten o'clock came there were something like thirty cards ready to post. Deirdre would mail them from London in the first week of December and by next weekend they would hope to have the rest done. In addition they had fixed a day for Dr. Broadbent to come to look over the house and had actually telephoned and fixed details with him and for Christmas Eve also.

As he walked into the kitchen to make some coffee for the three of them, Wilson felt as though they were at last getting on top of things. And Blake would be coming on Monday to start work on the attic. Wilson had promised that the three of them would begin clearing the floor on

Sunday morning and the carpenter had indicated very clearly the sections where he intended to start work. These were near the door and pretty sensible places to begin, Wilson felt. Far better than shifting a great mass of stuff from one end of the vast rooms to the other and then repeating the process in reverse.

He had forgotten Deirdre's earlier remarks and when he entered the big beamed kitchen with its massive Aga and modern steel sink units he was astonished to see how much she and Clissold had brought down from the top rooms. Most of it was piled on plastic sheeting in two huge bundles on the floor. The Georgian silver candlesticks were obviously the major find of the day and Deirdre had already dusted them and put them down on one of the granite working tops, together with a soft cloth and a tin of silver polish.

Somehow, Wilson felt touched by this little proprietorial gesture and once again he felt a small flash of remorse; Deirdre did so much for him in quiet, unobtrusive ways, and he felt he had never really adequately thanked her. He picked up one of the massive objects, marvelling at the intricately chased workmanship beneath the grime of years. He wondered why old Miss Hollamby had secreted such treasures away in a neglected attic. Perhaps they were relics of people who had lived at the Old Hall many years before or possibly she had simply put them in store and forgotten about them. That was the most likely supposition.

There was an impatient call from the lounge area—Deirdre with mock complaints about the lateness of the coffee—and a moment later Clissold poked his tousled head round the door jamb.

"No peeking!" he said in an affected voice. "That's the *pièce de résistance*, you know, and we wanted to astonish you."

Wilson laughingly put down the candlestick on the working top and bustled about with a pretence of great activity. Ten minutes later he made his way back to the lounge with the coffee and biscuits to find the others studying gift catalogues.

"Heavens!" he said protestingly. "Christmas isn't for over a month yet."

"You can't start too soon," Clissold said. "And I've seen a lovely pair of wool mittens that would just suit you."

Deirdre had collapsed in front of the log fire, her shoulders shaking.

"You know what you can do with them," Wilson said. "Why do you play the fool so?"

Clissold put on a mock-crestfallen look.

"Try and get into the spirit of the season, old man," he said. "We'll just finish the coffee and then Deirdre and I will go out to the kitchen and put the treasures on display."

"Why not bring them in here?" Wilson asked.

Deirdre shook her head, the blue-black sheen of her hair glinting in the firelight.

"Too mucky," she said decisively. "Tomorrow, perhaps, when I've had a chance to clean some of them up."

Wilson said nothing further but settled himself at an oak side table and went over Blake's estimate again. He noted that all the joinery would be of the old, seasoned oak that the contractor had already mentioned. He was so absorbed, both with that and some drawings he had made for further improvements to the house, that he was only half aware that the girl and Clissold had left the room, though he could hear them faintly giggling as they went down the far corridor.

A comfortable silence ensued for about half an hour and Wilson was completely absorbed in his calculations, the only sounds the creaking of boards as the building settled, and once a log fell from the fire to the massive stone hearth, sending a small chain of sparks dancing.

Then he heard Deirdre's voice and rose quickly, putting his pen and the documents aside on the dark table surface. He made his way to the kitchen where the others waited with veiled expectancy.

"Well?" said Deirdre at last.

"Well, what?"

"Don't be obtuse, man," said Clissold. "Haven't you even noticed the candlesticks?"

He moved away as he spoke and Wilson was dazzled. They were indeed magnificent now that Deirdre had polished them and he was taken aback by their splendour.

"They must be worth a fortune," he said.

Clissold nodded. "Solid silver and genuine Georgian too."

"That's what I can't understand," Deirdre said with a little frown running across her forehead. "Why hide them away in that dusty old attic?"

"Why indeed," said Clissold. "Maybe the lady used them to light her way around there."

"Impossible," Wilson said. "I noticed before Deirdre cleaned them that they hadn't been used for years. There was no candle grease and certainly no trace of candle stumps in the sockets."

Deirdre looked thoughtful.

"Yes. And didn't you tell me the agents said electric light had been run up there more than thirty years ago."

"That's right," said Wilson. "Hullo, what's this?"

His attention had been taken by some exquisite animal carvings in rare wood. To him they looked like eighteenth-century Eastern European work but he was not expert enough to be sure.

"This is more your line, Barry," he said. "Genuine stuff, I presume? Like that jade there."

Clissold looked quizzical.

"Can't you see the green in my eyes?" he asked. "We didn't bring any rubbish down, I can assure you. I can get you free valuations any time at the museum if you wish. Some of this stuff is a bit out of my field."

"Later, perhaps," Wilson said. "But don't think I'm not grateful."

Half an hour passed as the three rummaged among the agreeable treasures unearthed from obscurity.

"There are a few other smaller things that may be interesting," Deirdre said at last. "But we haven't had time to get to them yet."

"Tomorrow will do," Wilson said. "Just look at the workmanship on that Japanese sword . . ."

He turned back from the big pine table on which the refurbished artefacts had been placed, set out with almost mathematical precision on the plastic sheeting. As he did so he kicked against something wrapped in plastic that stood near the table legs.

"What's this?"

"I haven't had time to see yet," Deirdre said. "Some very nice things in leather mostly."

Wilson bent down to look. He stood up with a very heavy volume bound in expensive brown leather, with gilt lettering on the spine. He took the duster from Deirdre and wiped the leather clean before placing the book on the table. As he did so there came a musty, somehow familiar odour from the thick linen-backed pages.

"It's an old photo album," he said in a somewhat unsteady voice.

He turned over the pages, almost reluctantly, aware of the beautifully mounted deckle-edged photographic prints, depicting the sensuous faces of long-dead Victorian beauties shaded by large-brimmed hats. There were scenes by the riverside, with picnic parties; punts gliding along what looked like the Thames at Marlow; and one extraordinary scene with young men and women intertwined in the rapture of the dance, as they waltzed in what looked like a Viennese tea-garden, beneath the soft glow of Chinese lanterns looped among tree branches.

"These look interesting," Clissold said, moving closer. "Does it say to whom the album belonged?"

Wilson shook his head, turning the spine of the volume to the overhead light. The gilt curlicue lettering merely winked back: *Photographs*.

"It's definitely an English album," Clissold said. "For a moment I thought it might have been Continental. Some of these studies have that feel about them."

"I agree," said Deirdre, craning over the two men's shoulders. She gave a little gasp. "What's this?"

She had turned to the back of the book and Wilson now saw identical postcards to the ones which had arrived for him through the post during the past week. The resemblance was uncanny.

"This is remarkable," Clissold said, enthusiasm in his voice. "Yes, I have noticed. I'll go up and get those other cards from my valise so that we can compare them."

"No need," said Wilson, a deadly certainty settling over him. He had turned back the leaves. There, at the beginning of the sequence of pictorial views were the empty spaces where the original cards had been taken out. The next, where they resumed, was a view of Nottingham.

Clissold gave a rather foolish, wavering laugh. "The lady's getting closer," he said with an attempt at jocularly. And then, more slowly, "It almost looks as though she must be sending them from here."

"Don't be ridiculous!" Deirdre broke in sharply. "There must be some perfectly logical explanation. How on earth can cards locked in an attic for years get into the British postal system for delivery here?"

"You have a point," Clissold conceded. He avoided his host's eye.

Wilson said nothing. He felt such a sense of foreboding that he had to almost physically fight it down.

"The whole thing is silly," he said stonily. "There must be lots of these cards extant. As you said before, Barry, it's nothing to worry about. I'm going to put this stuff back upstairs and forget about it."

"I shouldn't go back up there this time of night," said Deirdre in a rather breathless voice. "Why not just leave it in a drawer on your desk?"

"I'll take it up," Barry said.

"Don't bother," Wilson told him in a dead voice. "We're all going up, anyway. It's nearly a quarter to twelve."

As Wilson put out the lights and threw the door-bolts before joining the other two at the foot of the staircase, it seemed as though all the gaiety and high spirits of an hour before had drained away and he was never more conscious of the coldness and dampness of the night outside and of the thin blanket of mist that clung round the old house and rimed the windows. He had a feeling of blackness and desolation as he said goodnight to the others and made for his bedroom.

10

Sunday passed in a frenzy of work and no-one mentioned the subject of the old photo album, though it was never far from their minds. Instead, they breakfasted early, working all morning on shifting material in the attics, ready for Blake on the Monday. When they had stacked a good deal of old furniture outside in the broad corridor, shifted a host of smaller things and Deirdre had vacuumed the ancient floorboards, the beauty of the four vast rooms began to be revealed.

They had lunch in the kitchen and then set to in an afternoon of bright sunshine on certain necessary clearances on the overgrown garden. Again, it was dusk when they came in for high tea and afterward they grouped round the big fire in the dining room. But something was missing from the light-hearted atmosphere with which they had started the weekend, and Wilson found he could no longer take the same interest and pleasure in the beautiful things Deirdre had salvaged from the attic and had so lovingly restored. The three parted in a restrained mood on the Monday morning, when Deirdre was to drive Barry back, and though they assumed a cheerful gaiety, none of them felt it as Clissold ran the car engine up in the misty chill of early morning, and there were many unspoken questions at the back of their minds.

Deirdre clung to him for a moment or two longer than usual as they kissed goodbye. "Take care," she whispered into his ear. "And try not to worry. There's probably some quite normal explanation. And we have Christmas to look forward to. I'll ring you tonight."

Then the car had purred slowly away into the mist and Wilson returned to the house with a heavy heart. Mrs. Savage was not due for another half hour, so he took his second cup of coffee up to his study, switched on the overhead light and desk lamp and worked on his notes for a new book. After a few minutes he finished the coffee and opened the desk drawer, taking out the big leather album, which had now been properly cleaned, its massive cover waxed by Deirdre. Despite this a faint mustiness still hung about it.

Diffidently, he turned to the section where the pictorial cards were; ignoring the earlier empty spaces he carefully removed the next card in line with its sepia-toned view and turned it over. There was nothing on the back. He did the same with a few more but they were pristine and had never been written on. He put them back in the curiously shaped corner mounts and replaced the whole thing in the drawer. It was quiet in the house now except for the creaking of the old beams as the warmth from the central heating increased.

The pumping of his own heart seemed to rise in his throat, threatening to drown him. He was startled by a loud noise and then realized it was merely Mrs. Savage slamming the front door. Normality returned but despite the reassuring sounds as the housekeeper moved about the kitchen he could not settle. After he had descended to the kitchen to greet Mrs. Savage and hear the latest village gossip, he showed her the more interesting of their attic finds and was reassured by her brisk, matter-of-fact manner.

"Yes, she wasn't short of money, Miss Hollamby," said Mrs. Savage. "Those candlesticks are lovely. Fancy hiding them away in the loft!"

After they had duly admired the articles for a few minutes more, Mrs. Savage indicated that she had much to do and Wilson went back to his study. But as he was crossing the hall he came to a sudden decision. He kept a small leather address book on the demilune next to the telephone and on impulse he rang Dr. Broadbent. He was at home and Wilson came straight to the point.

"If you aren't busy this morning would you like to come round and see the house now?"

Broadbent was both laconic as well as enthusiastic.

"I'd like nothing better. Be with you in a quarter of an hour."

Wilson guessed that he had been itching to see the interior of the house for many years and he hurried back to the kitchen to ask Mrs. Savage to prepare some refreshments for eleven o'clock. Broadbent was punctual almost to the minute and as they went over the house together, the antiquarian explaining abstruse points of architecture and historical anecdotes regarding the structure, Wilson gradually began to be fired by the doctor's enthusiasm. It was almost as though he were the visitor and Broadbent the host, showing him facets of his own dwelling that he had never even noticed.

Before they descended to the lounge for their coffee break, Wilson took his guest up into the attic rooms to show him the progress they had already made. Broadbent looked round with approval, his eyes missing nothing.

"These will be magnificent, when finished," he said. "I envy you, sir, though I am not exactly short of space myself."

He walked up to the far end of the vast rooms, threading his way between ranks of sheeted furniture that Wilson had not yet explored. He grunted with satisfaction as he knelt to inspect the new work on the floor and window surrounds.

"Yes," he said, rising to dust his trousers. "Tom Blake is a good man. One of the best craftsmen hereabouts. Had him in to do some of my own renovation work."

"He's promised to come back this afternoon," said Wilson as they descended to the ground floor. "He's gone somewhere this morning to discuss the renovation of a tithe barn."

Broadbent nodded, stroking his beard. His kindly eyes looked reassuringly at the other.

"The owners are in good hands, then."

After the coffee they continued the tour, taking in the cellars, and when Broadbent eventually left, declining all invitations to stay on to lunch, Wilson felt curiously deflated. He went out into the front garden, where thin swathes of mist still hung above the frosty grass, all stained a rust colour by the red ball of the sun low down in the winter sky. There was still much to do before Christmas, Wilson mused, both in the renovation of the house and in his personal affairs. His thoughts were interrupted by Mrs. Savage calling him in for lunch.

Another of the cards came in by the early afternoon post which Hoddesden still enjoyed. It depicted the Goose Market or some such place in Nottingham; the same view as that in the card upstairs. Wilson hardly noticed, he felt such constriction of the heart. The reverse said: "*Still coming to meet you, John.*" It was the first time the unknown writer had used his name but the other particulars were the same. He threw the thing almost savagely on to the hall table and went out for a long walk, turning away from the village and striding through the bleak countryside that lay beyond; the bare branches of the trees and every individual twig stood out silvered by frost, like some exquisite artist's conception, but he was in no mood for such fancies this afternoon.

His first thought was to visit the Rector and he made a wide circle back toward the village, but then he decided against it. He did not really need spiritual advice at the moment but a layman's common sense. He longed for Barry's solid expertise and the reassuring comfort of Deirdre; it was true there was her call tonight but she would not be returning for another four days. It seemed a long time to get through. Back at the house he found that Blake had arrived and that work was steadily progressing in the attics while the bricklayer was again at work on the stacks.

He had put the card away in his desk and gradually, in the press of making decisions about the house and in preparing for Christmas, his mind emptied itself of the subject, though it was never far from the surface. The following weekend passed in a much lighter atmosphere

and though Wilson showed Barry the latest card in confidence while Deirdre was in the kitchen one afternoon, the latter made little comment and put it in his suitcase.

"There's been a big run of work on at the lab lately," he said. "But I hope to phone you with a report on the cards by next Wednesday."

The next week three more came, each bearing the ancient views that Wilson had come to hate and fear. The first was from Leicester, the second from Aylesbury and the third, on Wednesday morning, from London. Each one bore the cryptic message: "*Coming closer.*"

He had put the latest on his desk and was staring at it obsessively when the jangling of the phone exacerbated his already eroded nerves.

It was Barry.

"I've got that lab report back," he said in a rather restrained voice. "Not very good news, I'm afraid."

Wilson cleared his throat with difficulty.

"What do you mean?"

"Well," Clissold began diffidently, "it's against all the odds; against all reasonable scientific proofs, of course, but those cards . . ."

His voice trailed off.

"Well?" Wilson asked almost savagely.

Clissold plunged on.

"I didn't tell our lab people, of course, what exactly we had in mind—just asked them to date the cards and give me their opinion on the writing. As we know the cards must have been posted a few days before you received them; the thing's a scientific impossibility. Our chief scientist says that the writing and the ink used date from many years ago."

Wilson could not speak for a moment and blackness seemed to envelop him. He must have felt dizzy for a second or two because he next heard his friend's anxious voice issuing tinnily from the mouthpiece and he realized he had dropped it on to the desk. He picked it up with a trembling hand.

"My God, I'm frightened!" he burst out before he could stop himself. "I've just had another three of those beastly cards, the last posted from London. Each one says simply: '*Coming closer*'."

"Now hold on," said Clissold hurriedly. "No need to get upset, John. We'll be with you shortly, and I'm coming several days before Christmas. Then we can face this thing together."

"So you are beginning to take it seriously?" Wilson said.

"There has to be some logical explanation in the end," Clissold persisted stubbornly. "We've just got to work this through. And it mustn't spoil Christmas."

"But the last card came from London," Wilson said wearily. "This means the woman will be here shortly. But what sort of woman, who writes with ink fifty years old or whatever your lab people say?"

"It's too fantastic for words," Barry said. "There's got to be a logical answer, as I just said. And we mustn't let Deirdre know."

"For God's sake don't say anything to her. Not even about the new cards."

"Quiet as the grave, old man. Don't let it get you down. I'll try and get there on Friday afternoon if I can. I'll take an early train if Deirdre can't get away in time."

"Thanks a lot," Wilson said. "I greatly appreciate it."

The two friends said goodbye and he hung up. Then Wilson put the three latest cards in his desk drawer. As he did so a sudden thought struck him. He got out the heavy leather album and opened the musty leaves. He looked incredulously at the pages. There were three extra spaces where cards had been before. He checked again on all the empty places, extending over two pages. They tallied with the number of cards he had received. All had inked captions and the last of the missing set indicated Leicester, Aylesbury and London.

Then he noticed that the very next card, after the interrupted series, showed a faded old view of a village only ten miles away. When he left the room half an hour later he was walking like a drunken man.

11

For some days Wilson could not concentrate on the work on the house and wandered the great beamed rooms as though in a somnambulistic trance. Mrs. Savage noticed immediately the change in him but was unable to draw anything from her employer, despite her solicitous questioning. Wilson left Blake to his renovation work above and locked his study, retreating to one of the smaller ground-floor rooms overlooking the garden, where he installed his typewriter, his notebooks and a fresh ream of typing paper. Here he made a pretence at work as the shock of the most recent events slowly began to recede.

He dreaded the arrival of the post and often took long walks about the village when the mail was due in, returning only when he was satisfied that none of the sinister postcards were on the hall table. In the meantime he made discreet inquiries at the library, reread the photocopies of the newspaper cuttings as though he might, somehow, by a process of osmosis, arrive at the truth of the bizarre events that he felt were beginning to enmesh him. He longed only for the arrival of Deirdre and

Clissold when the house would be again fully inhabited and a more normal atmosphere would prevail.

His self-sought solitude was broken on two occasions by the arrival of the Rector, who came to bring him Christmas greetings and to invite him and his guests to a midnight carol service on Christmas Eve, which Wilson gladly accepted; and the second time was a more social call when Anstey stayed on for sherry and biscuits and a long chat.

Wilson was greatly taken with his strong character and common sense by this time and though greatly tempted, kept his mouth tightly shut on the subject of the postcards and particularly the death of Povey and the disappearance of Miss Hollamby all those years ago. He craved the comfort of Deirdre's encircling arms and her sturdy common sense but at the same time he was worried in case his haggard face, withdrawn manner and edgy nerves would quickly lead her to the truth.

But as day followed day without any more cards being received he began to recover; he slept better and rediscovered his appetite. Mrs. Savage noticed the change in him and put it down to the imminent arrival of his fiancée. In fact things were so back to normal that Wilson took to using the study again on Friday morning, though his desk remained locked. Blake was still hard at work and Wilson was frequently in and out of the attic rooms, admiring the carpenter's skill and craftsmanship as he shaped and restored window frames and gradually replaced all the defective boards. One of the roof-beams was found to be in a dangerous condition and he renewed that with no help other than that afforded by a portable sling hooked to one of the great king-posts; and the next time Wilson looked in he found that Blake had even shaped the massive timbers to match the adjoining adze marks on the ancient originals.

At the weekend Wilson was so far himself again that he entered fully into the Christmas preparations, inaugurated by Deirdre, who looked dazzling in a dark blue evening dress on the Saturday night when the three went out to dinner at a fashionable roadhouse some miles distant. Though Wilson and Barry discussed the strange situation in which they found themselves into the small hours each night, they came to no probable solution to the mystery.

"Perhaps you ought to sell that album," Clissold had muttered one night as he mounted the stairs. But, Barry, true to his word, had said nothing to Deirdre and gradually the two men put their sombre thoughts behind them and entered fully into the spirit of Deirdre's arrangements.

On Friday night they had trimmed and decorated the tree which had been brought into the great beamed lounge, though it was really a hall

house which had been fitted with a lower ceiling at some period of its history to create more accommodation upstairs.

Carol singers were round early on the Saturday evening, as the three finished sending out the last of the cards, and when Wilson had left lists for Mrs. Savage on Monday for the various provisions for Christmas week he was quite himself again. They arrived back to find a few flakes of early snow falling, but on the Sunday morning the expected blizzard had not materialized, though the ground sparkled with frost.

"And a very good thing too," said Deirdre firmly. "I wouldn't have fancied driving back along these narrow lanes in heavy snow tomorrow morning."

"I think it might be better for you to take the train Christmas week," Wilson said seriously. "Just in case there is a heavy snowfall over the holiday period."

"We'll see," Deirdre said. "I like to be independent, as you know, and I don't fancy crowded trains at this time of year."

"Nevertheless . . ." began Wilson, interrupted by a warning glance from Clissold. He dropped the subject abruptly. Barry was undoubtedly right; if he got into an argument with Deirdre it might lead to other things. His nerves were in shreds beneath the surface. If he got irritated she'd soon know something was wrong.

"Only a few days to Christmas," said Clissold cheerily. "We really ought to sort out the itinerary. And what about presents . . . ?"

Wilson smiled a genuine smile.

"That's a restricted subject. There are certain locked cupboards in this house."

Deirdre came up behind him and put her arms round his neck. The tip of her pink tongue tickled his ear. Wilson was embarrassed in front of his friend and tried to wriggle away but she only held him tighter.

"Secrets, eh?" she breathed. "You said there were to be no secrets between us."

"Only at Christmas," Wilson said shortly. "You'll spoil the surprises."

Clissold laughed, breaking the sudden little tensions that had begun to grip Wilson.

"He's using the plural, Deirdre," he said. "So there are more than one. A generous chap. It's a good augury for the marriage."

Deirdre smiled too and gave Wilson an affectionate little kiss on the back of his neck before moving away.

"It's Christmas time," she said, giving her fiancé an enchanting smile. She looked round the big, beamed room, shining with lamplight and firelight; taking in the brilliantly decorated tree and the sprigs of

holly festooning the tops of pictures, the old clock and the door-cases. To Wilson the berries suddenly seemed like little dark flecks of blood.

"We don't want to talk about balls and chains and lifelong commitments," Deirdre went on. "We're going to enjoy ourselves."

Clissold made a knowing little grimace at Wilson which Deirdre intercepted. She laughed again.

"No need to worry, gentlemen," she said gravely. "I shall fall into line like everyone else when the time comes."

"It won't be that bad," Wilson promised. "Now, when are you two coming down?"

"As I told you, I've got quite a bit of time off," Clissold said. "I'll be here next Wednesday. That's six clear days before Christmas and I can give you a hand with the renovations or whatever."

"I'd greatly appreciate it," Wilson said. "What about you, Deirdre?"

She frowned, which didn't affect her beauty at all, Wilson thought.

"I can't make it as soon as I would have liked, but I'll manage Friday afternoon. That's still four days before Christmas Day."

"Fine," Wilson said and gave her arm a little squeeze as he made his way to the liqueur cabinet.

Next morning, when they were both gone, he had the same old sinking feeling. But Mrs. Savage's bustling presence soon restored his spirits.

"I'm making some nice things that you can store in the fridge, Mr. Wilson," she said. "They'll keep nicely for Christmas and you won't have too much trouble over the holiday."

"Excellent," Wilson said. "And I greatly appreciate your kindness in coming in on Christmas Eve."

The housekeeper gave him a knowing smile.

"Well, you do have a dinner party and an important guest. But I'd like to leave by three o'clock to make my own arrangements. I'll leave everything ready. Your young lady will be able to manage all right after that."

"Great," Wilson said. "I'll make it worth your while, Mrs. Savage."

"I don't do it for that, Mr. Wilson."

"I know," Wilson said gently. "That's why I like to do it."

When Mrs. Savage had left the room he sat for a long while, feeling an unaccustomed glow of contentment. Presently he went out for a walk. There was a ferocious edge to the wind but a fragrant smell of woodsmoke in the air. It looked as though it was going to be seasonable weather. Contrary to his expectations the next few days passed quickly

and agreeably, and he ate and slept well, free from all the things that had been troubling him.

He attended an antique market in the village and a carol concert at the local school, exchanging greetings with people he was coming to know. On Wednesday morning Clissold had phoned to say that he was detained longer at the museum than expected but would definitely be there late that night.

That was the morning the penultimate card came. It lay on the demilune and he picked it up with fear and loathing. It was an old card depicting Gosford, the village only half an hour's drive away. The message was as clipped as the illegible initial. It merely said: "*Be with you soon.*" On impulse he took it into the dining room and threw it savagely on to the great log fire. It burned with a curious greenish glare that set strange shadows dancing on the panelling and to his overheated imagination it seemed as though the sudden upsurge of flame was accompanied by a faint screaming sound. Then he realized it was merely the sap burning in the logs and used the poker vigorously, forcing the jumbled wood into silence.

He debated for some time whether to tell Barry. In the end he decided he would share the knowledge. And after all there appeared to be more at stake here than his wanton destruction of potentially valuable old postcards. Despite his doubts and fears he forced a strained smile at the thought. Contrary to his habit he walked down to the station to meet Clissold off the half-past ten train.

He could not bear the clotted silence of the great house on this winter night. Mrs. Savage had, of course, long gone home; she had said nothing about the card but now Wilson wished he had spoken to her about it. She had probably brought it in from the hall and had tactfully avoided the subject. In some ways he wished she had herself thrown the card on to the fire but he realized that given her trustworthy and upright nature that would be the last thing she would do.

His feet crunched heavily over the frozen paving as he went down the shadowy lane between the yellow glare of the street lamps, his shadow flung swiftly before him on the powdery white surface of the road. There was little traffic about tonight and the inhabitants of Hoddesden were obviously at home busily preparing for their own Christmas celebrations, though there were a few late-night shops such as grocers and chemists which still kept open.

The train was only a few minutes late and Barry's welcoming face was soon evident among the surprisingly large crowd of passengers that debouched from the eight-coach diesel. The two men shook

hands. Clissold carried with him a heavy suitcase and a large canvas bag and Wilson took the latter from him as the two fell into an easy stride.

"Forgive me for not bringing the car," Wilson said. "It seemed hardly worth it for such a short distance."

The other shook his head.

"It doesn't matter at all. The exercise is good for us. And since we're going to be heavily over-eating at Christmas . . ."

He broke off suddenly. The two men were passing beneath a street lamp and the guest had noticed the expression on Wilson's face.

"You've had another card," he said quickly.

Wilson nodded, unable to speak for a moment.

"It came this morning," he said. "Apparently posted from Gosford. That's only a few miles off. I'm afraid I burnt the horrible thing this time."

The two had paused for a moment and Clissold put a reassuring hand on the other's shoulder.

"It will be all right," he said soothingly. "There are two of us now. Mrs. Savage will be back in the morning and Deirdre arrives the day after tomorrow. Full house again."

Wilson forced a smile.

"That's true."

The two men moved on, their shadows dark and mysterious against the frosty white tracings on the pavement. They did not mention the matter again and once at the Old Hall they flung themselves into small tasks, interspersed with hurried conversation, as they prepared to make a fitting reception for Deirdre when she arrived. It snowed in the night and when they woke in the morning there was a deep oppressive silence everywhere, a dazzling whiteness in the garden and Mrs. Savage complaining banteringly of the difficulty she had had in walking in.

To Wilson the snow came as a welcome diversion, though he was a little worried in case Deirdre was unable to get there. For it snowed all the next day and by Friday, when his fiancée was due to arrive, it lay in thick drifts, banks of fog between the distant trees giving a spectral aspect to the landscape. Wilson phoned Deirdre and persuaded her to take a train and then he and Clissold dug out a path to the garage and while Barry cleared the driveway with some difficulty, he put chains on his tyres in order to drive Mrs. Savage home.

The main road had been partly cleared by the local council but later snow, drifting, had been compacted by the sparse traffic and the surface, with its thin coating of ice, was treacherous.

When they arrived back at the house it wanted only an hour to Deirdre's arrival. Clissold tactfully volunteered to stay behind and prepare their evening meal while Wilson drove down to the station. In the event the train was half an hour late and he had a miserable time stamping about the badly heated waiting room before the one face in all the world, with its crown of blue-black hair, now with a faint dusting of snow, came flying through the crowd, its owner, heavily furred, bearing suitcases and mysterious packages. The melting into each other's arms and then the silent drive to the house; glances passing from one to the other; quiet contentment in the joy of possession; minds at rest and exhilarated with the prospect of a whole week or more of Christmas festivities ahead; cut off from the outside world by a brittle coating of snow and ice, ghostly white as the headlights glanced across the lattice-work of trees that fringed the road.

Back at the house Clissold was presiding, beaming over a fully laid dining table, glass in hand as he welcomed them both.

"Dinner in twenty minutes! And here's a toast to the new master and mistress of Hoddesden Old Hall!"

12

The next few days passed swiftly and though the blizzards continued, little seemed to disturb the well-ordered routine of the household. Even Tom Blake continued work on the attic rooms until just before Christmas. He had now covered about half the space and Wilson promised him they would shift more of the furniture ready for the next phase, which he intended to start around the 28th of December.

The Tuesday before Christmas Wilson rose early, his mind at rest. He had phoned Broadbent the previous day regarding the weather but the latter had said he was well able to walk the short distance to the Old Hall for the Christmas Eve celebrations. Surprisingly, most of the post and milk deliveries were getting through and radio and television reports indicated that public transport was still working at seventy per cent capacity.

Early as he was, Clissold was already up and working in the kitchen and the agreeable smell of toast and coffee drifted out as Wilson went down the corridor. He fancied there was a somewhat strange expression on his friend's face and a moment later he saw what had caused it when Barry handed him another of the now detested postcards.

"This just came. Though it's miles too early for normal deliveries."

Wilson stared at it dully, his thoughts turning uselessly.

Then he made out the faded sepia view. It was Hoddesden High Street at the turn of the century. He turned the card over with deadened fingers. Mechanically he glanced at the inked message, barely taking it in.

"At last!"

"She's here!" he told his companion, dry-mouthed.

"And so are we," said Clissold grimly. "We three. Four of us, when Mrs. Savage gets here. There's nothing to be afraid of, man."

His reassuring words steadied Wilson a little.

"Someone's having a diabolical joke," said Clissold savagely, pouring coffee.

Wilson sat down automatically, hardly conscious that he did so.

"I wish I could believe that," he said, ashen-faced.

Clissold pointed with a spatulate finger at the inked initial.

"I've just thought of something. That could be an O."

"Well—"

"Your aunt. Old Miss Hollamby. Her christian name was Olive, wasn't it? Someone's having a dreadful game with us. I wish I could get my hands on the perpetrator."

"And I wish I could believe you," said Wilson, the hot coffee bringing some of the colour back to his cheeks.

"What other explanation is there?" said Clissold in a matter-of-fact voice. "Such things cannot be. Dead people don't come back. And if she was in the well she could never get out in a million years."

"That's true," said Wilson slowly. Just what Blake had said.

His heart had stopped hammering and he felt a little more normal now. He accepted the slice of toast Clissold pushed toward him.

"Even so, we must think of Deirdre. Burn that thing before she gets down. We don't want to spoil her Christmas."

Clissold took the card from him and put it straight in the boiler; again, there was the strange greenish flare and the musty odour. Wilson went over to the sink to wash his hands before starting on fresh toast.

"So what happens now?" he said dully.

Clissold smiled.

"If someone does turn up we shall be ready for her," he said in a deceptively mild voice. "There are laws to deal with such things."

Wilson felt more at ease now.

"A bit difficult to prove in a court of law, wouldn't it?"

Clissold shook his head.

"I wasn't speaking about a court of law. I just want to put the fear of God into her."

"She sounds more like someone out of a lunatic asylum," Wilson went on as though talking to himself, all the time aware that their pat explanations could not touch the core of the matter; how the cards were delivered or why the messages were written with ink half a century or more old.

"What were you talking about?"

It was Deirdre in the doorway, looking radiant and rested.

"Oh, this and that," said Barry casually, not knowing whether she had heard anything of their conversation or not. "Chiefly my superb culinary gifts. *Voilà, mademoiselle!* Coffee and toast!"

Deirdre laughed obediently but her eyes were darting shrewd glances at Wilson. He made an effort to appear normal and joined in the conversation, relieved a few minutes later by the arrival of Mrs. Savage, welcomed by Clissold with an invitation to a second breakfast, which she gratefully accepted.

The day passed in a whirlwind flurry of last-minute activities and towards dusk the snow stopped and stars blazed out of a deep velvet sky. The three were agreeably tired but satisfied with their exertions and went to bed fairly early for them—before eleven o'clock—as the following day was Christmas Eve. Wilson slept well and on waking found his mind cleansed of all his previous forebodings. He found Deirdre already busy in the kitchen. She broke away from his arms with a flushed face as Clissold's footsteps sounded on the stairs. He poked his head in at the door.

"The mail's just come," he said brightly. "Nothing but bills by the look of it!"

This was for his host's benefit, as Wilson's face had momentarily changed alarmingly. Deirdre was bent over the sink so the moment passed unnoticed. Mrs. Savage arrived at the appointed time and the day passed without incident. There was the crisp sound of church bells coming from the nearby village; the occasional rumble of a passing car, its driver cautious with the steering wheel as he traversed the treacherous road surface; once, some last-minute carollers; the faint barking of a dog in the thin air.

Wilson felt extraordinarily happy as he went up to his study to do some last-minute packing of presents for Deirdre and Barry. He busied himself with coloured paper and string, vaguely aware of muffled laughter and preparations for the coming feast going on below. When he came downstairs he found Mrs. Savage ready to depart and pressed into her hands a thick envelope and a very expensive bottle of wine, suitably

wrapped. Clissold drove her home and returned in twenty minutes to say road conditions were much better.

Dusk was falling when there was a sudden ominous click and the whole house was plunged into darkness. Wilson was replenishing the lounge fire at the time and he heard Clissold swear as blackness descended; he had evidently cut himself during one of his kitchen tasks. As Wilson hurriedly crossed the hall he could hear Deirdre throwing light switches to no effect.

"It's a power cut," she called. "This would happen on Christmas Eve!"

Clissold loomed up, a shadowy figure, putting a small plastic bandage round his little finger; they kept a kit in the kitchen.

"Where are the candles?" he said.

Wilson looked at him hopelessly, his face worried in the faint light of the snow filtering in through the hall windows.

"We haven't any," he said. "Though there may be some in the cellar somewhere. This is something I never thought of."

"But we can't be without light tonight," Deirdre said. "This might last for hours and we have a guest coming. Thank God we have a gas cooker so the meal won't be affected."

She went over to the hall rack and reached down her anorak.

"Where are you going?" Wilson asked.

She gave him a pitying look in the dusky hallway.

"To the village to buy some candles, of course. It's only four o'clock and the shops are still open."

"I'll go with you," Clissold said decisively. "I'm out of cigars anyway. Besides, you can't go alone in this weather. You might fall into a snow-drift. And it's not worth getting the car out again. I put it in the garage for the night."

"As if I would fall into a snowdrift!" the girl said contemptuously but there was an affectionate look in her eyes which was not lost on Wilson.

"Barry's right," he said.

Clissold was already shrugging on his overcoat.

"We'll only be about half an hour at the most. Anything you want in the village?"

Wilson shook his head.

"Not that I can think of. But be careful, the two of you. It's pretty treacherous underfoot."

The two waved, the front door slammed and Wilson was left alone in the muffled silence of the dying of the day. He went back into the lounge and poked the burning logs in the fireplace, sending great flickering

shadows over the furniture and on to the walls. The radio was still switched on in the kitchen; it worked off batteries and it was comforting, as he went in, to catch the latest bulletin on the weather. It sounded pretty glacial over the whole of the country.

Wilson went back into the lounge to check the fire and from there into the dining-room. He had just realized that the central heating would be off too and if the power cut lasted all evening as it well might, given the severe weather conditions, they would have to rely on the two big fires for warmth. Fortunately, Barry had brought in a huge supply of logs for the iron baskets each side of the great beamed fireplaces in the two rooms and they would last the evening at least.

He returned to the hall and was hesitating, wondering whether to try any more light switches, though he knew it was a fatuous exercise, when he heard the footsteps. They were a woman's, he thought, slow and delicate across the snowy flagstones that ran round the front of the house. He held up his watch to the faint light creeping into the hallway; it was too early for Deirdre's return; only ten minutes had gone by since she and Barry had set out for the village. He waited, suddenly gripped by strong emotion. Could this be the person who had been sending the cards? If so . . .

He took a deep breath and started toward the massive studded front door. Then he saw the faint shadow of a figure passing the old bottle glass-panes that formed the lower half of the window. There was fantastic distortion and the traceries made by the frost rendered it impossible for him to make out who was passing at a stately pace along the terrace. He stood immobile for a few seconds more until the dragging footsteps had died away. He cautiously opened the front door. An icy blast of air came in.

Then he noticed two things. Light shone clearly from the curtained windows of a house several hundred yards away, farther down the road that led to the village. And there was a street lamp still alight at the far end of the street leading to the station. He rushed back and flipped the hall light switch angrily. Nothing happened. Now he saw the delicate set of footprints in the snow that led along the terrace and round the angle of the house. He hurried on, anger and apprehension mingling within him. If there had been no power cut . . . ? Though there could have been a fault in the main fuse box of the Old Hall. But what was this intruder doing in the garden and behaving in such a furtive manner?

He was round the end of the house now, saw that the set of footprints ended abruptly within a dense mass of laurels. He went forward cautiously, noticing that nothing had emerged from the other side. There

was no sound anywhere except a faint crackling as though someone were moving about in the small coppice that bordered the garage at this side of the house. Then the noise stopped and he was suddenly conscious of the great silence; the falling dusk; and the loneliness in his own heart. He went quickly back to the front door, careless of the icy surface underfoot. He had just slammed the massive oak behind him when there was another click and all the lights came on and with that sudden brilliance normality flowed in.

As he gained the lounge he could hear, through the open doors, the faint humming of the refrigerator and deep-freeze in the kitchen and all the other homely little sounds that a well-ordered house gave out when things were normal. He stared thoughtfully at the Christmas tree and the gaily wrapped presents heaped around it. The hammering noises started at that moment. They seemed to come from upstairs and they reverberated throughout the ground floor rooms. Wilson felt anger mixed with his exaggerated fears. An insane idea that Blake had again started work on the attic rooms crossed his mind. On Christmas Eve? Surely not. And yet . . .

He turned swiftly, energy returning. He mounted the staircase two treads at a time, noticing then the wet imprints and the melting snow left by some recent visitor. The hammering noise was louder now; a steady, monotonous thumping that started echoes from every corner of the ancient house.

Wilson forced himself to go on, some unknown energy infusing his actions, the adrenalin coursing through his veins. He was on the second attic flight now and the noise was so loud it seemed to split his head. The lights burned steadily and he fumbled briefly with the switch to the last flight. Then he was before the attic door. He took a deep breath and flung it open. The noise was now almost like a physical barrier; the loud, regular thumps like some giant pulse.

Before his courage failed he forced himself into the great room, operated the switches there. As he did so an enormous silence fell. He noticed then that perspiration was streaming down into his eyes, noticed too the wet footmarks that went on until finally they started getting fainter as they threaded between the sheeted furniture. He was aware of the same faint odour, like a woman's stale perfume.

This was the far end where Blake had not yet commenced working and it was equally obvious that the carpenter had nothing to do with the bizarre manifestations here. For one moment Wilson wavered; what if the lights again failed, leaving him alone at the top of the house at the mercy of whatever intruder had just passed up these stairs? For Wilson

knew that the figure he had glimpsed passing the hall windows was the same person who had just climbed the stairs and was responsible for these shattering banging noises.

He looked round quickly for some sort of weapon, aware of the dark shadows to the left, up in the darkest corner of the attic; the place to where the footprints led and to where the electric light had never penetrated. He seized a metal shaft at his elbow, lifted it quickly. It was heavy and he then became aware that it was a golf club, he must have cut a ridiculous figure had there been anyone there to see.

But there must be someone here, he realized. He went swiftly round the sheeted furniture but, as he had hoped, there was no one there. That left only the dark corner. He was advancing, club upraised, when there came a sudden rattling on the stairs.

He whirled fearfully, relief bursting in as he made out the anxious figures of Deirdre and Clissold. Then the girl was in his arms and he felt all the strength ebbing from his body.

"I saw the lights down the street," Clissold said. "So we decided to come back because it was obvious the power cut was over."

Wilson turned to face the dark corner, explained the situation in a few broken sentences.

"You'd better go back down," he told the girl.

Deirdre tossed the dark curls from her forehead; her face was set and stubborn and revealed no sign of fear.

"Certainly not, John. We must get to the bottom of this."

Before either of the two men could protest she had dragged the dust sheet off a big pier glass and tilted it so that the reflected light from the nearest overhead bulb shone into the corner. To Wilson's relief there was nothing there, though he could see the faint outline of a footprint near the wall.

For some reason this end of the attic had been covered in a yellow patterned wallpaper and the ancient boards creaked and trembled as the trio walked down toward it. There was a shadowy angle there where four of the old beams followed the outline of a gable and Wilson saw that the paper was all cracked and split with age.

Clissold suddenly bent excitedly.

"Hullo! There's a cupboard or door somewhere here."

He picked up a rusty carving knife from an old set of kitchen cutlery that lay open in a faded velvet-lined canteen on the floor and started stripping the paper. He turned an apologetic face to his host.

"Hope you don't mind?"

"God, no. Go ahead."

A thin crack had appeared in the paper set against the angle of the wall. Soon, as Clissold worked round, the outline of a door appeared. He went down the middle so that his companions could see the two panels and then enlarged an area round the lock. A keyhole was now visible.

Clissold applied pressure on the knife-blade.

"Locked," he said in a disappointed voice. "What shall we do?"

"Break it down," Deirdre said decisively.

The two men exchanged glances and then Wilson had his fingers round the door-edge. They pulled and then there was a violent cracking noise and dust flew about. Wilson was suddenly engulfed by the same musty odour he had smelt before. Part of the left-hand doorway opened and Wilson had just time to see that the door had been bolted from the inside. He was now able to get his fingers round the right-hand door and it began to creak ominously. To his astonishment that also was bolted from the inside. It suddenly gave with a shriek that jarred the nerves.

Deirdre jumped back with a cry of alarm but it was too late. There was a strong odour of decay and fragments of something loathsome flew about the attic. Clissold was now trying to hold back some weight which sagged forward. With a cry of horror Wilson saw a withered hand thrust toward him as though in some fearful greeting.

Between the mummified fingers protruded a postcard; even by the subdued light he was able to read the jocular greeting in block capitals: HERE I AM!

Deirdre screamed then as the vile thing came out of the cupboard. Wilson found an obscene, yellowed face with blackened tongue thrust into his own, the ligament round its neck brushing across his face with a shock that was almost electric in its impact.

He and Clissold were borne inexorably backward as the wizened, mummified creature, a beetle scuttling from the empty eye socket, clasped them in a ghastly embrace as they went down to the floor in a flurry of dust and decay.

The stench of death was in their nostrils and some frightful liquid drenched the floorboards as the two men, with hoarse shouts of fear and disgust, thrashed about in their efforts to escape the loathsome contact.

Deirdre was already pulling them clear as Christmas bells were sounding in the frosty air. Miss Olive Hollamby had at last come home.



IN A DARKLING WOOD

1

CLAVERHOUSE had not meant to go to Borminster but that was the way things had worked out. It was a bitter evening in early January and the coach had lost one of its driving wheels just at the edge of the town. Dusk was coming on and Claverhouse had no alternative. There were only three other people within the damp interior of the vehicle; an old woman and two middle-aged men, their faces pallid and corpse-like by the flickering sidelights of the vehicle and judging by the rapid way they had all descended to retrieve their luggage as the postillion handed it down from the rack, he had judged, rightly it later proved, that they lived in the place and were glad to quit the vehicle, which now smelled of damp leather and other mingled odours.

"Is there an inn near here?"

The driver, hunched into his high-buttoned cape, was shivering with cold as he calmed the lead horses and now he stared at his passenger piercingly from beneath the rim of his hard hat.

"Aye."

He turned back to soothe the plunging animals and Claverhouse felt irritation stirring within him. Already his three companions, who had spent the lonely hours of the journey in a glacial silence that matched the weather, were distant specks in the dusk.

"Would it be too much trouble for you to tell me where I might find it?"

His luggage, consisting of one piece of hand baggage and a leather satchel containing his drawing materials, was already down from the interior. He drew his thick overcoat about him, waiting with barely curbed impatience, though he knew the driver was a north countryman who did not go out of his way to waste words.

"Nay, master. The Red Lion. About a quarter of a mile to your right."

Claverhouse turned to his baggage, took one piece in each hand and strode off into the dusk.

"Thank you and goodnight," he called curtly over his shoulder, though he knew the irony would be lost on the man. He walked on, his boots gritting on the icy surface of the unmade road, already beginning to glint with early frost. There were a few lights from fairly substantial houses on either side and he soon saw a sizeable town begin to spread itself about him.

The Red Lion turned out to be a large, somewhat imposing hostelry, which appeared to be built almost entirely of granite blocks. A faded signboard swung with muted shrieks in the piercing wind. The place looked better than Claverhouse had expected and he entered with heightened expectations. To his disappointment the great stone-flagged tap room appeared cold and deserted. A sullen fire of logs burned in the broad chimneypiece and a mangy-looking dog sprawled out before it, turned a yellowed eye on the visitor, bared its teeth and relapsed into torpor again.

Claverhouse went forward, his boots raising echoes from the flags that were faintly returned by the massive beamed ceiling. Two large oil lamps suspended from the rafters were the only illumination but as Claverhouse reached the long oak counter, there was a stir from the shadows and the landlord, a red-faced corpulent man dressed in a faded green jacket with brass buttons came out from the end of the bar and distorted his face into what the visitor supposed was a welcoming smile.

"A bad evening, master. You'll be wanting a bed for the night?"

It was a statement rather than a question and Claverhouse somewhat wearily assented, putting down his baggage. A tall, thin girl had appeared from somewhere, bearing a three-branched candelabra and the place suddenly appeared more inviting as light sprang up, revealing more of the enormous room. To his surprise he saw a number of men at oak settles in the far corner, who had sat mute while he entered. He supposed they had been curious to see who the stranger was and had interrupted their conversation as he opened the inner lobby door.

"Bess!" the landlord bellowed. "Kick that fire into life and bring some more candles!"

The girl hastened to do as he said and soon there was quite a blaze flickering over the old panelled walls with their sporting prints and faded window curtains.

"You'll be wanting a drink, sir. My name's Masterby, by the way, proprietor of this establishment, for my sins."

He looked at Claverhouse somewhat warily, the latter thought.

"Come far, sir? Poor weather for travelling."

Claverhouse nodded, taking off his greatcoat and dropping it on to a settle that stood near the bar. The low hum of conversation had resumed from the far corners of the room now.

"From London."

The dark eyes beneath the shaggy brows widened.

"A long way, sir. What will be your pleasure?"

"Brandy, if you have any. I'm chilled to the bone."

Masterby nodded and went to the back of the bar and shortly there was an agreeable chinking of glassware. The visitor crossed to the fire and warmed his hands at the blaze. The great, gaunt dog gave a contented whimper and went back to sleep again. He found the thin girl at his elbow.

"You'll be in The Blue Room, sir. First right at the top of the staircase. I'll take your things up if you wish."

"You're very kind."

Masterby was back now with a metal tray on which rested a bottle of cognac, a carafe and two glasses.

"A little water with the brandy, sir?"

"Not too much."

Claverhouse sat down in a highbacked chair and put his feet out to the blaze, which had quite transformed the hostelry. He waited while the landlord poured. The fat man sat down at the other side of the table.

"You'll forgive me for joining you, sir. We don't often have gentlemen staying here. Trade has been poor of late years."

Claverhouse raised his glass, feeling liquid warmth suffusing his throat.

"I'm sorry to hear that, landlord. What did the girl mean about The Blue Room?"

Masterby sat back in his chair, smacking his lips contentedly as he tipped his glass in salute.

"Just a little fancy of myself and my wife, sir. We have nine bedrooms, all named after various colours. It gives a little touch of dignity to the establishment."

"I see."

Claverhouse was faintly amused but he kept his gaze steady and his face expressionless.

"Would there be any chance of something to eat?"

The landlord held up his hand, as though with a faint air of triumph.

"It's already being seen to, master. In the dining room yonder. Only cold beef and pickles, if that be to your taste. We weren't expecting anyone tonight."

"That's fine."

Claverhouse was inwardly rather surprised. This man seemed to anticipate his every wish.

"Will you be staying long, sir?"

"It depends," said Claverhouse cautiously. "Perhaps for two or three nights."

The landlord nodded slowly, taking another sip of the brandy, then squinting at the contents of his glass against the now considerable blaze from the fire.

"Anyone else staying here?"

"Only one for the moment, sir. Though we're expecting a party from Carlisle tomorrow. That is if the diligence can get through. Some travelers speak of snow on the hills."

Claverhouse bit his lip.

"I was originally making for Croxted."

The fat man blew out his ample cheeks.

"That's a fair step, sir. More than thirty mile, much of it over difficult terrain. Right up in the peaks as you might say."

The host leaned forward.

"If I might make so bold, sir, would you be an artist or surveyor, perhaps?"

Claverhouse smiled. He felt strangely content now that his material needs were being looked after, following such a brutal journey.

"How do you make that out?"

The landlord shrugged, leaning back against the leather-padded upholstery of his chair.

"I saw your case, sir. I've seen that sort of thing before. They usually denote the artist or a surveying gentleman."

Claverhouse smiled again.

"You have very sharp eyes, landlord. You are not far from the truth."

Masterby smiled in turn.

"It's all down to my calling, sir. We get all sorts here, including the gentry, as well as the commercials. I've made a sort of vocation of trying

to assess people who come here, both by their dress and bearing and by their luggage."

The visitor nodded.

"Very commendable."

"I didn't catch your name, sir. For the house records, you see."

"Of course. It's Jeffery Claverhouse. I'll give you my London address later."

Masterby drained his glass and rose quickly, his form throwing a great shadow across the beamed ceiling.

"Certainly, Mr. Claverhouse. Please come through to the dining room when you're ready. I'll just go to see that everything's in order."

2

It was late when Claverhouse sought his bed. Though not by London standards, he told himself ruefully, as he studied himself in the mirror in his comfortably appointed room. A church clock somewhere had just chimed eleven; but in a place like Borminster, eleven o'clock was late and the long and uncomfortable journey had taxed even his robust strength.

Now, in the flickering light of the candle in front of the mirror he saw a strongly-made man who looked a decade younger than his thirty-five years; the blond hair tousled and awry above an equally dishevelled cravat; an impartial observer would have seen the strength in the square jaw with its slight cleft; determination in the level grey eyes; and an inclination toward a degree of fashion in his smart cutaway jacket and elegant breeches.

The dining room had been surprisingly smart; the supper excellent and he had indulged himself at the end of the meal with two glasses of fine sherry in front of the now roaring fire in the huge beamed room. The dog was nowhere to be seen and the landlord and his wife—a buxom lady in her early fifties, who had nodded distantly to him as she passed in the dining room, had discreetly left him to his own thoughts.

He had been going on to Croxted but now he was in two minds. If the landlord's report had been correct, there might be snow on the peaks, and from the framed map which hung in one of the main corridors of the hotel, it appeared to be more like forty miles off than thirty.

For the hundredth time he thought of Angela; the fiancée in London he had left behind; they had parted with harsh words and anger. Now he was embarked on this mad journey; he wanted to forget her but the bleakness of these northern hills and his isolation among strangers had

only made him more aware of the aching longing within him; of the void her absence had created. He sat down on the edge of the bed, tried to calm his raging thoughts. It had all begun some six months before when he had first noted a change in her attitude.

At first it had been subtle; little differences between them. Claverhouse was an artist and draughtsman as well as an architect, and he had had two exhibitions of his oils and water colours in fashionable Pall Mall galleries. It was not that Angela had decried his art; far from it. Once she had been one of his greatest supporters and enthusiasts but her feelings toward the products of his pen and brush had noticeably cooled, though all of Claverhouse's work in that field had been of the highest professional quality.

Indeed, his friends had avowed that he could easily have made a good living by portraiture alone, but Claverhouse had preferred architecture as his main calling and had left his artwork as a minor, but very important, strand in his life.

Often of late Angela had excused herself from their various engagements, pleading urgent affairs of her own; she had a private income and though she nominally lived with her family at their home in Surrey, she kept a suite of apartments in the West End of London where she received her friends and entertained generally.

She was well-read and a lively speaker and her little salon was often crowded with artists and men of letters as well as society people. No, it had nothing to do with that aspect of her life, Claverhouse was convinced. It was something deeper and more subtle which had led to their estrangement. She had not formally broken their understanding at the time, but a few days later Claverhouse had received by special messenger her engagement ring. There was no message, not even a signature; except the one cold, irrefutable word: Goodbye.

It was this which had prompted Claverhouse on this bleak and thankless journey. Even his close friend, Lawrence Griswold, had not been able to penetrate to the heart of the mystery. Though he lived at Croxted he was often in London on the business of his estate and shipping interests, and the three of them had become closely attached. On several occasions Claverhouse had asked his friend to sound out Angela in a tactful manner, as to their growing estrangement, but Griswold remained as baffled as the former.

He put it down to her reluctance to give up the sort of life she enjoyed; with her salon and other artistic interests, she was at the centre of things; she was only twenty-five and did not yet wish to settle down and have children. Claverhouse had protested that he had been through

all these points with her. She would still keep her own circle of friends; have a separate salon in her own apartments if she wished; and, as for children, Claverhouse had no interest in perpetuating his line. He was an orphan and had no close relatives and from what he had seen of his friends' children had no wish to place himself in the same position.

The two young men had burst out laughing at this but despite Griswold's tactful probing and Claverhouse's own conversations with his fiancée, he was never to get to the seat of her objections to their proposed liaison.

Though Claverhouse had never visited Griswold's estate, he had made this sombre journey with some vague idea that he might call in on his old friend and stay a few days. Like himself, Griswold was an orphan, though he had many distant relatives. He lived in some style in a grand house with his own servants so he would not be put out by his friend's unannounced appearance. Aside from which, he did not yet know of the latest development between Claverhouse and Angela and the former was hoping to seek his advice; a last spin of the dice, as it were. In his misery he hardly knew what he was doing. He would stay on in this hotel for a few days more to see whether the threatened bad weather descended; if not he would then complete his journey to Croxted.

He got up suddenly with a strangled sigh and paced about the room, putting his hand to his throbbing head, conscious of the deep stillness about him; the only sounds were the faint creaking of floorboards and the stir of wind at the heavy curtains masking the casements. His nerves, already stretched taut by the anguish of his thoughts were suddenly alerted to some other subtle manifestation contrary to the natural sounds about him. There was a slightly heavier creak of floorboards and he suddenly realised there was someone outside his door.

He looked at his silver-cased watch on the dressing table. It was still only a quarter past eleven. He stood still, listening intently, all his nerves alert. There was a slight rustling sound. He took the candle quickly and went to the door. At first he thought he had been mistaken and it was only the noise made by the timbers of the ancient inn settling. Then he saw the single folded sheet of hand-woven paper lying on the worn oak boards of the floor. He picked it up, his senses heightened. There were just a few short sentences in mauve ink, in a woman's delicately formed hand. The message read; Please help me. I am in deadly danger. Come to The Red Room, Number 9, at about midnight. I am being watched. Do not fail me. Sarah Purvis.

Claverhouse was startled; he turned the paper over but there was nothing on the other side. This was the stuff of sheer melodrama, such

as he had seen on the boards of the London theatres from time to time. He had enjoyed them then, in the well-lit auditoria with their clamorous crowds of well-dressed, well-dined playgoers, but this was something else again. Cautiously, he unlocked the thick oak door and looked warily out. By the wavering candlelight he could see the long corridor with its fretted shadows. A single lamp burned on a bracket at the far end. Nothing stirred and there was no-one there.

Just as silently he closed and re-locked the door. Then he put his watch beneath the bedside lamp, sat down on the bed-edge and composed himself for the long wait.

3

He must have dozed because the church clock had long tolled midnight when he awoke with a start. It was almost half-past twelve. He quickly took off his shoes and went out into the corridor. There was no-one about. The silence remained unbroken and the lamp still burned on its bracket in the far distance. He walked silently down the carpeted hallway, catching the stale smell of lampwick, food scraps and beer dregs which was carried up the main staircase from the kitchen.

He paused before the door of The Red Room, which bore its title in black curlicue script. There was no sound but he could feel his heart thudding in his chest and a sudden feeling of desolation and fear seemed to rise in his throat. He tapped cautiously, waited for what seemed an age. The silence was almost palpable. Nothing stirred. He tapped again. This time there was the faintest rustling beyond the door.

Another long silence and then what seemed like suppressed sobs. Claverhouse put his ear closer to the panel. Then there was a sudden cracking as though someone had wielded a whip and the sounds ceased. The architect felt a faint vibration against the carpet at his feet. Someone was coming down the corridor where it made a right-angle just beyond the bracket. He fled noiselessly down the passage, swiftly gained his own room, closed the door quietly behind him; leaned against the wall, feeling a pulse beating somewhere in his throat. The sound of footsteps died out in the distance. After a while Claverhouse sought his bed but it was a long time before he slept.

When he awoke it was to impenetrable darkness. As he opened his eyes, trying to adjust his vision, he became aware of an insidious scratching. Before he could locate its direction a small flame sprang up in the room. Claverhouse lay back powerless on his pillow, perspiration streaming down his suddenly overheated features. A sonorous voice was

chanting in his ear, using a language with which he was not familiar. Then, as the flame grew a little brighter an obscene, ox-like face thrust itself from out the darkness. Saliva dribbled from its animal lips and the yellow, stained teeth clicked together menacingly. A beetle scuttled from the thing's empty eye-socket. Trembling and helpless Claverhouse tried to scream out but the sound died in his throat.

Then he was awake, the vileness of the dream receding, the sanity of moonlight revealing to him the familiar features of the bedroom. Shaken, he struggled up on one elbow, trying to read the time by a faint shaft of light which came in through the slightly parted window curtains, falling across the dial of his watch on the bedside table. It was just after three A.M. It was then that he heard the small, agonised voice calling for help. Claverhouse started fully awake. There was no mistaking the reality of the horses' hooves sounding on the cobbled yard below his window.

With one agitated movement he was up and crossing hurriedly to the casement he gazed down at a strange scene some thirty feet below. There was a closed coach standing in the yard, with two horses harnessed: it was their impatient stamping in the bitter air which had obviously roused him from his horrible dream. That and the pitiful female cries as though of a woman in anguish. His half-closed eyes, dazed with sleep, barely took in the three muffled figures; the two burly men in heavy cloaks who were urging a struggling woman into the interior. She twisted round on the top step and put up an anguished and imploring face toward the young man's window.

He had a glimpse of beautiful, tear-streaked features which he could just make out in the moonlight; and a mass of tangled fair hair. Then the door had slammed shut and even as Claverhouse still stood irresolute the equipage started up with a sharp grating of wheels against the flinty cobbles. A whip cracked and a few seconds later the coach had rumbled out of the yard and then, its progress muffled by the encroaching houses, the echoes of its passage died out along the frosty road. Shaken, and beset by a dozen conflicting emotions which battered at his tired brain, Claverhouse got back into bed and this time fell into a dreamless sleep from which he was awakened only by the beating of the breakfast gong at half-past seven.

4

There was a blazing fire in the dining room and everything seemed changed as he sat at breakfast, a watery sun trying to pierce the pallid mist which hung at the narrow, bottle-glass windows. Claverhouse had

been going through the events of the night as he made his hurried toilet. Had the young woman who had entered the coach so unwillingly been the Sarah Purvis who had put the note beneath his door? And if so, had she been the subject of a planned abduction when he had listened at the door of The Red Room?

It was certainly unoccupied this morning because Claverhouse, retracing his steps of the previous night, had gone down the passageway to reconnoitre; the door of the room had been half-open and he could see that it was unoccupied; the bed linen and pillows thrown upon the floor, probably by one of the hotel maids. He had re-examined the note on regaining his room but had been unable to come to any firm conclusions.

It might have been that the young lady had been on the point of eloping with some unsuitable person and her father's servants had been sent to bring her home. In that case there had been a perfectly acceptable explanation for the events of the night and he had sat down at table with his mind a little more at ease.

There had been no-one in the dining room except for two of the serving maids when he had arrived and when they had departed for the kitchen to prepare his breakfast, the architect had been tempted to throw the note in the fire. But some sense of caution had restrained him; he could not have said why, but he was a shrewd and cautious person by nature, dealing as he did with so many difficult clients in the course of his commissions, that he had refrained from this action and placed the paper in the strong leather purse he carried, which had two small compartments for coins of lesser value than the guineas in the main part.

Apparently no-one but he had seen the girl's departure at that unearthly hour of the night but in case there had been something amiss, then he would have documentary evidence and a means of positively identifying the woman. He resolved to make discreet inquiries of the landlord, but he would have to be careful in his approach. Claverhouse wondered in fact whether he had better consult the judicial authorities in the town; perhaps a lawyer or local magistrate. But he did not really wish to become involved in what might be a vexing affair and though he was staying in the neighbourhood for a while he wanted to proceed to Griswold's estate without delay when he finally decided to leave.

As things turned out he was saved the problem of making inquiries because Masterby the corpulent landlord, appeared at that moment with a dish of hot buttered muffins which the young man seized on with a will. Masterby put the plate down and waited for the thin girl to bring up a tray on which stood a large white cup and saucer, sugar and tongs and a silver-plated coffee pot.

"Were you disturbed last night, sir?" he asked.

Claverhouse was about to open his mouth to reply when the landlord went on, glancing sharply round the dining room as though hoping to catch the thin girl out in some dereliction of her domestic duties.

"I thought I heard a fox barking in the middle of the night. In fact it woke me up."

Claverhouse shook his head.

"I heard nothing, landlord. But then I slept very well. I had had a tiring day and your beds are extremely soft."

Masterby chuckled with approbation.

"We pride ourselves on the comfort we provide here, Mr. Claverhouse."

He scratched his massive head, still keeping a sharp eye on the girl, who was pouring the coffee. A pleasant aroma began to permeate this corner of the dining room and through the steam the architect could see several other people starting to file in.

He shook his head.

"I could have sworn I heard a fox. Strange them coming so far into the town," the landlord went on.

"Perhaps they are hungry at this time of the year," Claverhouse offered. "The weather is bitterly cold."

The landlord made a rueful face.

"As you say, sir. Perhaps that is the reason."

He excused himself and went off to take the orders of the other guests. Claverhouse left to himself felt curiously content as he ate his meal and sipped the coffee. It was extraordinarily good and he congratulated himself on having found such a cosy billet as Borminster on such a wild journey as the one on which he had embarked.

Afterwards, as he lingered in the hall, admiring some old sporting prints on the walls, he was again joined by the landlord.

"Going for a walk, sir? I can recommend a few of our local sights."

Though inwardly amused, Claverhouse was impressed by the landlord's solicitude for his guests and made a polite show of interest, though he did not imagine that Borminster would have much to reveal in the way of sights.

"I was just going up to fetch my sketchpad," he said, "and then I might take a look round the town."

The landlord's eyes narrowed. "Bit cold for sketching, master. But there's much to see, sir. The Old Cornmarket, which is now a museum; The Shambles, of course. And I'm told that the Norman church is particularly fine."

He gave his guest a broad wink, as much as to say he was not particularly religiously inclined and Claverhouse briefly joined in the joke before ascending to his room. His forebodings of the night were quite forgotten and as a few feeble rays of sun were penetrating the mist he set out on his tour of exploration. A little farther down the busy High Street, with its lumbering carts and wagons and crowds of busy shoppers he saw a sign in Gothic script which indicated The Shambles.

The architect hesitated, as he could see the square Norman tower of the church across the low stone wall on the other side of the road. Then he caught the fresh, invigorating air of the uplands and turned to the right instead. No musty odours of sanctity for him this morning. The exquisite face of Angela floated across his consciousness for a moment, and was almost angrily dismissed. But as he strode out across the cobbles of the strange tangle of lanes that made up The Shambles, his mind became calmer; his breathing eased; and his thoughts became more composed. Even the seemingly dark events of the previous night were momentarily erased from his consciousness.

Presently his pace slackened and he found a sheltered corner between two walls where a stone mounting block had been installed, probably centuries past, and seated on this rough perch with the pad upon his knees he was soon absorbed in a line drawing of an ancient house with intricate carved jettying, which sagged toward the cobbled alley as though in imminent danger of falling. There was no-one about and he spent a rewarding half hour. When he had completed the preliminary study to his satisfaction, he decided to complete the work in the privacy of his room and took down a few scribbled notes before continuing his promenade.

He had gone only a few paces when a keen wind buffeted his face and on turning a corner which corkscrewed in an extraordinary manner, he found himself once again facing a wild and savage countryside.

The path petered out to a mere mud track, now iron hard with frost, and went down into a strange and secret valley, heavily wooded. Claverhouse sensed rather than saw there were distant hills, because the land rose a mile or two away and was then lost in the mist which hung like a thick cloak on the fringes of the steep facing slope. It was obvious that he would have no difficulty in finding his way back to the town so Claverhouse put his pad back into the capacious left-hand pocket of his coat and began the long descent, which spiralled gently round between rough spile fences and gnarled hedges.

He saw no-one, though there were sounds about him as of a busy, invisible host; the sawing of wood; the clop of horses' hooves; distant

hammering; and once or twice the thin, high barking of a dog. Claverhouse was beginning to enjoy himself and decided to prolong his walk. He knew the position of the High Street and of the road over which he had passed on his journey the previous night and he was confident he could regain the high road at any time in order to reach the inn before lunch.

Even as the thought crossed his mind he heard a bell strike the hour of nine; it could have only been the church, whose tower had long since disappeared in the mist and the fringe of wintry trees that were beginning to make a filigree pattern above his head and were slowly caging him in from the sky. He checked the time by his pocket watch; yes, he had heard aright. It was just after nine o'clock, though the two time-pieces disagreed on the hour to within a minute or two. He had plenty of time to explore the terrain before lunch.

A low rushing noise now took his attention and he glanced ahead of him to where the thin thread of the path debouched to a circle of beaten earth; the path finally disappeared here and gave on to a very old stone bridge, with thick buttresses which spanned a dark and quickly flowing stream, though Claverhouse noted that thin ice had formed in the shallower places close to the bank, where the turbulence was less. The sun had now disappeared and the coldness and the blackness of this airless hollow presented a sinister aspect and Claverhouse was glad to hurry on across the bridge and up the opposite bank where there was a faint track between the trees which had begun to hem in the skyline.

Within a few minutes he was in among the gnarled black boles, which began to block out the light and air; there was no sound anywhere except for the faint crackle of the icy leaves beneath his feet and he began to regret for a moment the casual manner in which he had embarked upon this little adventure. He stopped once but the silence was so brooding and oppressive that he at once hurried forward, glad of the brittle sounds which marked his progress and filled the emptiness about him.

There was no sign of the sky now and the interlacing branches and the very density of the boughs made a perpetual gloom that would have been shadowy and dim even in summer; in the depths of winter the darkness was almost a tangible thing. Too, there was a nauseous stench in the air, as of rotting fungi and Claverhouse hurried on, clapping a handkerchief to his mouth. This was really an evil place and if the wood proved to be of large extent he might find it difficult to regain the high road from which he had diverged so confidently only half an hour before.

No bird disturbed the oppressive silence but once or twice there were sudden rustling noises among the leaves, as though some large insect or

serpent was undertaking a stealthy progress and each time the young man stopped, his heart racing until the stillness again resumed its sway. All this time he had seen nothing tangible and it was with incredible relief that he saw the daylight beginning to grow stronger.

As the tree trunks thinned and white mist showed between the interstices of the branches he saw that he was coming to a large clearing. Not only that but fantastic pillars and arches were beginning to compose themselves from out of the enveloping whiteness. These were considerable ruins and he looked with heightened interest as he slowly grew closer. He was out of the trees at last and now stood at the edge of the clearing to take stock of his surroundings.

Judging by the masonry and the style of the arches, together with the ruined cloisters on the right-hand side, what he was looking at was the crumbled remains of a once beautiful abbey, possibly Cistercian. There was a long area of paving to the left and as he advanced toward it he could see that it was of an antique date also, its surface now pitted by time and bonded with frost. He walked on, as though lost in a dream, now pausing before the mutilated remnants of a carved head; now a ruined quoin; then a particularly fine skeletal window against the encroaching branches.

The building stood in the midst of an immense clearing, though it was evident that in recent years the forest was again reclaiming its own. But what took Claverhouse's attention as he walked on across the paving, his stout boots ringing against the setts, was that there was a rough road leading away from the worn entrance steps on the far side. Not only that but the paving continued until it became a rutted lane that led onward into the dark tunnel made by an archway of trees on the other side of the clearing.

Claverhouse was startled at the harsh cry of a bird at that moment and he whirled as something exploded from the thicket from which he had just emerged. The dark shapes flew upward and he watched the birds' flight until they were lost in the tangle of branches. That was why he failed to see the light cart drawn by two black horses on the far side of the ruins until the equipage was halfway toward the sunken lane. The reverberation of the hooves on the frozen ground was a shocking intrusion in that place and at that time, and Claverhouse started forward, his heart pumping, his intended greeting dying in his throat.

As the rapidly moving group faded in the mist, he sensed there was something inherently strange and menacing in the picture presented to him. The dark horses, moving powerfully and purposefully; the black cart; and the two figures he now vaguely glimpsed; one bent over the

reins in grim concentration, but urging the beasts on with frenetic movements on the ribbons; the other motionless and ominous, seated at the rear of the vehicle; a thick cloak enveloping his muscular frame. There was a faint flash of light from the sky, perhaps where the screen of branches were momentarily broken by a gap and Claverhouse was left with the impression of two burning eyes fixed implacably in his direction.

The young architect's head was full of strange impressions as he half-ran forward along the flagged paving, but quick as he was, he knew he had no chance of catching up with the two men or what he would have said to them had he been able to. They had quite disappeared now but he could hear the cart's progress dying out faintly along the distant lane. What strange errand had they been engaged on in this lonely place? They could not have been woodcutters, surely, or farm workers, because there was nothing particularly agricultural about this place. Yet they must have had some purpose there and if it were not unlawful, if not illegal, why had they waited until his back was turned before bursting out so precipitately from the far side of the abbey ruins?

Silence had again descended and Claverhouse hurried round to the opposite façade of the great building; half the roof was still intact and he saw that some attempt had been made to repair it with modern tiles. That was curious in itself and he paused hesitantly, as he went across the huge flight of steps here, looking about him sharply lest there be other persons lurking in the shadow of the bare, leafless trees, that stood like a great black wall around the ruins. He was on the far side now and had completed a half circuit. Despite close scrutiny there was no sign of the cart's progress on the paving here or even on the frozen ground beyond.

Claverhouse went on cautiously, taking his time, his pace more leisurely now. Perhaps he was making too much of this relatively trivial incident. What if the men had been poachers, collecting their night's bag from snares set about the woods? After all, the land obviously belonged to someone and perhaps they were keeping their equipment in one of these outbuildings he was now traversing. He mused on in this fashion for some little while. He had now progressed back along the ruins, walking within the arched cloisters, which gave back rather ugly echoes from the ancient wall.

He then saw a thick oak door set into the main body of the abbey, heavily strengthened with massive iron bands, much rusted and worn with time. He tried the great iron latch but it would not budge and he guessed it might perhaps be used for storing farm or building materials. But it was a curious fact, nevertheless, in this remote spot and his

architect's eye was keenly appraising the details of this extraordinary building as he continued his tour.

It would be a fine subject for a number of studies at a more opportune time but after the slight shock he had experienced the young man was in no mood for pen and ink or even pencilled impressions. He took his free hand from out his pocket and was startled to see that his fingers were actually trembling. He went on, conscious now of the biting cold that was beginning to numb his extremities.

There were a number of massive groynes or buttresses protruding at angles from the wall at this point and within several of them low stone enclosures that looked as though they might at some time have been used for penning farm animals. The first still had a litter of straw at the bottom, soiled and matted, which reinforced the impression.

The second was empty also and as Claverhouse looked over the top of the flint-capped wall, which was about five feet high at this point, his eye was caught by something white and pallid protruding from a corner which was just out of his angle of vision. He saw, without really taking it in, the clenched fingers of a woman's hand; he forced himself to move sideways, his teeth chattering, though not with cold. The girl—for she was little more—was completely naked, thrown down in an angle of the wall like so much domestic rubbish. The eyes were glazed and full of fear and the long golden hair, tangled and trailing in the dirt, was flecked with blood. Her throat had been cut and there were great pools of darkish red making rivulets across the littered floor of the midden, now turned to ice.

Claverhouse stumbled away, retching. He fought for breath while the sky seemed to whirl round and then close in on him. He thought of the two men in the cart and the fearful link was made in an instant. What if they should return and find him there. At that point he looked round like a hunted animal. There was obviously nothing he could do for the girl and no person within earshot. Not that he would have called out in that fearful place. He forced himself away from the terrible scene, fighting down an impulse to run until his heart burst.

Then commonsense reasserted itself. The men in the cart would not stop near the spot after such a foul crime as they had committed. That they were responsible he had no doubt; if they had been innocent farm workers who had just discovered the body they would have called out and sought his help. And then he realised something else; if the men had galloped off at such a pace there must be a main road nearby and the lane would obviously lead to it. He would have to be careful in case they had stopped somewhere to see if he had followed.

He walked boldly across the clearing, through the pallid mist that was beginning to gather, his heart pumping furiously but his legs obeying the instructions from his brain automatically. He saw that the lane was indeed a fairly wide one; there was nothing in sight through the vaporous air but to make certain he would be unobserved, he took to the trees, keeping near the edge of the lane to get his bearings, but ready to conceal himself if he saw anything suspicious. But there was nothing and no-one and a quarter of an hour later he found himself on high ground where the narrow thoroughfare joined the main road over which he had travelled the previous night.

He took briefly to the trees again as he heard a heavy vehicle approaching through the mist. Then, sick at heart, he was running like a madman toward the approaching mail coach.

5

The local magistrate, Jonathan Tyce, lived in a magnificent eighteenth century house surrounded by a high wall and it was still only midday when Claverhouse reached his dwelling. He had told the people on the coach he had had an accident while out riding, as he had thought it best to keep his dreadful news to himself. It would not do to be too open about such things in a small town and Claverhouse had shrewdly realised that he was the only witness to a horrible crime and the two men, if guilty, and if they knew he might be able to describe them, might not hesitate to strike again.

It was a young man of sombre mien who let himself in at a side gate, all thoughts of Angela temporarily banished from his mind. He presented his card to a pallid-faced young maid of about sixteen years of age and after a few minutes' wait in a large panelled hall with silver gilt candelabra set about, he was shown into a huge, gloomy library on the ground floor where a smell of damp mould exuded from the thousands of leather-bound books which lined all four walls. There was a large, faded globe of the world set up in one of the windows and Claverhouse was studying it when he became aware that he was under observation.

He glanced up and now that his eyes had become more accustomed to the dim light he saw that a tall, white-haired man was surveying him from a long gallery at the far end of the room, which he had not noticed due to the gloom of his surroundings. When the magistrate saw that he was in turn observed, he gave a sudden start, as though recalling his manners and clattered hastily down an iron spiral staircase that connected the gallery with the ground floor.

"Magistrate Tyce, sir?"

"I am he, young man. What can I do for you?"

The tall man extended a clammy hand and now that Claverhouse had time to observe him he saw a person in his mid-sixties, athletic and well-preserved; rather dandyish in his dress with grey cutaway coat, an elaborate bow at his ruffled shirt front and with square pince-nez perched on the end of his rather reddened nose.

"I came about a most serious matter, Mr. Tyce."

The tall man stared at him piercingly through his glasses.

"You had better come and sit down at my desk yonder, Mr. Claverhouse. You look rather dishevelled if I may say so. May I offer you a glass of sherry, sir? It is a cold day is it not?"

"That is very kind of you, sir," stammered Claverhouse.

He allowed himself to be led to the magistrate's huge mahogany desk up near one of the big windows and sat down, trying to collect his whirling thoughts, while Tyce fussed with a decanter and glasses. He raised the proffered glass with muttered thanks and took a hesitant sip. The magistrate seated himself behind his desk, looking very official.

"Now, sir."

"I hardly know where to begin . . ." Claverhouse said hesitantly.

A bleak smile across the desk.

"Try the beginning, Mr. Claverhouse. That will be much easier."

Claverhouse swallowed, finding it difficult to articulate his bleak thoughts now that he was within the comfort of such magnificent surroundings.

"I was travelling north when my coach broke down outside the town," he began. "I am a London architect and am at present staying at The Red Lion."

He gave a nervous laugh. "In The Blue Room."

The magistrate folded his hands across the green tooled leather surface of his desk and inclined his head.

"I went out sketching earlier this morning. A mile or two out of the town I lost my way in a dark wood, before coming to a ruined abbey."

Tyce held up one finger, like a schoolmaster catechising a pupil.

"Ah, yes, Mr. Claverhouse. Somewhat fancifully known as The Black Wood hereabouts. The abbey is very old, of Cistercian origin I believe. Sometimes used by local graziers and farmers to store materials and implements. I have told them about it on more than one occasion, but they are poor people and seem not to understand the laws of trespass. . . ."

He broke off with a shrug. Claverhouse plunged on recklessly, now that the floodgates were open.

"There has been a dreadful murder, sir. I discovered the naked body of a beautiful young woman, not two hours since. She was lying just by the abbey wall with her throat cut."

Tyce half-rose from his seat, his fist clenched upon the desk top as Claverhouse went on with his story. When he had finished the magistrate looked at him grimly.

"You need another drink to brace you up, Mr. Claverhouse. If things are as you say this is a terrible business. It must be investigated immediately."

Encouraged by the seriousness with which the magistrate had taken his story and fortified by the second glass Claverhouse felt his spirits rising at the stern manner of Tyce, who rose, gave an abrupt summons on a bell pull hanging near his desk and gave a discreet servant instructions.

"We will investigate this together, Mr. Claverhouse, if you feel sufficiently recovered to return to the scene of this awful experience. My phaeton will be at the door within ten minutes."

"Thank you, sir, I am quite recovered. But ought we not to procure some help from people in the town?"

The magistrate shook his head frowningly.

"Certainly not, Mr. Claverhouse. This must be discreetly done. We do not wish to spread alarm among the local people. Such incidents have incalculable effects upon such closed communities. And we do not wish any false accusations to be made until we see for ourselves and are able to come to proper conclusions."

He crossed swiftly to a panelled cupboard and returned wearing a thick caped overcoat and a wide-brimmed hat. He was drawing on doe-skin gloves while issuing a string of instructions to the maid who had let the architect in and to the male servant who had reappeared to say the equipage was waiting. A few minutes later the two men were driving at a spanking pace through the streets of the town, Tyce acknowledging the respectful salutes of local townspeople with curt nods of the head.

The two chestnuts in the shafts made quick work of the distance, their breath smoking through their nostrils in the bitter air and in no time at all, it seemed to Claverhouse, they were turning off the main road and descending slowly into the rutted lane, iron hard with frost. Claverhouse felt some apprehension as the dark latticework of the trees began to envelope them but one glance at the rock-like countenance of the magistrate and the careful deliberation with which he put a brace of

horse pistol down on the padded seat at his right hand reassured the young man immediately.

They did not speak as the phaeton rumbled on, bouncing and juddering over the uneven surface, the horses reined back to brake their steep descent. It may have been the effect of the liquor the young man had just consumed, but his thoughts seemed to be whirling to the uneven progress of the wheels and everything appeared dreamlike and unreal. He was glad of Tyce's silence then, as he could not have answered the latter's cross-examination in any coherent manner. They were emerging into the vast clearing now and Claverhouse again explained to his host the circumstances when the cart and its two occupants had disappeared into the dark tunnel of branches.

Tyce jumped briskly down from the reins and cast about him with a shrewd eye. He bent once or twice to examine the rutted ground, finally straightening with a grunt.

"Just as I thought, Mr. Claverhouse. Impossible to make out any fresh wheel-marks. The ground is too hard, you see."

The young man nodded as the magistrate resumed his seat and they jolted over toward the stark ruins of the abbey, now emerging more strongly from the shimmering mist which still hung in the hollows here. Their footsteps crunched loudly in the soil as they left the phaeton and hurried down the colonnade to where the terrible scene awaited them.

"It was just along here," Claverhouse whispered, though why he was lowering his voice he could not have said. It was the effect this strange place had upon him, though any religious connotations it once might have had had been completely erased by his ghastly experience of the morning. The two men had slackened their pace and were walking circumspectly as they neared the area with the low walls. Claverhouse noticed that Tyce was holding one of the pistols in his right hand, close to his side. Despite his years, there was something formidable and reassuring about the man. Claverhouse could not have faced that sight alone.

"Just here?" the magistrate queried as they came to the wall his companion had indicated.

The architect nodded, too moved to speak. Tyce raised his pistol casually, almost tip-toeing around until he could see clearly into the small compound made by the right-angle of the ancient stones. His jaw relaxed and a look of bewilderment came over his face.

"Are you certain, Mr. Claverhouse?"

The latter stepped to his side, fear giving way to astonishment. Where he had seen the naked corpse of the girl was nothing but an

empty midden. Straw liberally mixed with manure obliterated the rough stone flooring; there was a dilapidated shed in one corner and from their comfortable beds of straw, two large pigs gazed contentedly at them as they munched their way through a huge pile of cabbage leaves. Claverhouse was unable to speak for a moment.

"I am absolutely bewildered, Mr. Tyce. I was certain this was the place."

He avoided the sceptical look in his companion's eyes and went rapidly up and down the cloisters, fearing that he had made a mistake in the location of the body. But there was nothing there and no-one about except for two woodcutters in the far distance, cutting and stacking timber at the edge of the clearing.

"You were apparently wrong," said the magistrate drily, sheathing his pistol and clapping his gloved hands together as though with disapproval. Claverhouse avoided the censure in his eyes.

"Do you feel we ought to ask those men over there, sir?" he said. "They may have seen something."

"I think not," said Tyce softly. "I do not know what you really saw, Mr. Claverhouse, but I am convinced in my own mind that it was not here. Many people come and go about these ruins which, as I have indicated, are often used for agricultural purposes. Now, unless you have any further ideas, I think we ought to return to the town."

His tones were bland but the young man could not fail to detect the veiled censure in his voice.

"I am sorry, sir, to have brought you out on such a fool's errand."

He broke off, biting his lip. Had he imagined it all? For a moment he was tempted to think so but he knew it had been no fevered dream. The magistrate shrugged and turned on his heel. As he walked away Claverhouse could see the disapproval in the set of his shoulders. He trailed miserably after Tyce, his thoughts churning hopelessly. The two men spoke not at all during their drive back to the town.

6

"So you think the girl who wrote you the note at the inn is the same person who was man-handled into the coach and whose murdered body you later found in that wood?"

Lawrence Griswold's eyes were wide and his face startled as he sat on the silk-covered banquette in front of a roaring fire and toyed with a glass of port. Since the debacle of the previous day Claverhouse had come to a firm decision and the next morning had caught an early coach

and had made good time coming north. The snow had held off, though it was even colder in the peaks and he had been glad to find his friend at home. He had listened with great sympathy to his visitor's story but the architect could tell that he was not entirely convinced by his narrative.

"It sounds fantastic," Griswold went on, his frank, open features expressing disbelief beneath the thick shock of chestnut hair. The buttons on his green hunting jacket glinted in the firelight as he shifted position, to face his friend who sat in a deep leather chair opposite. It was late afternoon now, deepening into bleak dusk and the great park outside the window was dappled with blue-green shadow.

"Fantastic or no, it is something I must resolve," Claverhouse replied. "Won't you help me?"

His expression looked so doleful that the landowner felt a sudden stab of pity.

"You want me to help you investigate this mystery? But if the magistrate has found nothing—and he is an official of the Crown—what do you expect me to do?"

"Watch and listen," Claverhouse said. "What I saw was real, not an hallucination. I am convinced of that. Between us we may achieve something. You were such a great help over Angela, Lawrence. Please stand by me now."

Griswold turned his gaze up to the ornate plaster ceiling.

"Well," he began dubiously. "I do have business at Borminster. It was not until Saturday but a few days earlier will not much matter. And I do know The Black Wood of which you speak. My father owned land in the district and I played in those ruins as a child."

Claverhouse leapt up, almost spilling his glass as he did so and pumped the other's hand. "Then you will help!"

"It looks as though I am committed," said Griswold wryly. "My steward is used to looking after things here in my absence. You will rest this evening after a good dinner. We will take my own equipage and leave tomorrow morning."

He smiled at the other's expression.

"But I can promise nothing. And I am afraid I was not very helpful in the matter of Angela. From what your last letter told me things are beyond repair."

Claverhouse nodded, keeping his eyes averted from his host, as he idly regarded the intricate patterns on the magnificent carpet that floored the study.

"I would rather not speak of it, if you don't mind, Lawrence."

The other got up and put a sympathetic hand on his arm.

"Of course not. I understand."

He went over to a glass-fronted case in a corner of the great room and unlocked it with a key he carried on a ring in his pocket. The door caught the firelight in a lightning-flash of colour as he opened it. He turned, balancing the wicked-looking pistols in his right hand.

"If things are as desperate as you say, perhaps it is best we go prepared. When I have loaded you can pack yours away in your luggage tonight."

He smiled suddenly, revealing even white teeth.

"These will stop anything except a mad bull at forty paces!"

There was a thin sprinkling of snow on the road the next morning, when they set off and Griswold had thought it best to harness two horses in view of the weather and the state of the roads. In the event, though the atmosphere was freezing and the wind glacial, heavy snow held off and the farther south they went it became a little milder so that Claverhouse's spirits rose. They stopped for lunch in a small town while the horses were being fed and watered; the meal was tolerable and the comfort of the chop house made them inclined to linger.

But they were on the road again within the hour and made remarkable time and though it was dark when they reached Borminster it was still the right side of seven o'clock. Griswold went off to see to the horses and when Claverhouse re-entered the portals of The Red Lion, he found Masterby, the landlord, remarkably effusive, after he was called out of his private parlour by Bess, the girl servant who had greeted the young man on his first arrival.

"Snowy, was it, sir?" he said, eager for news of the weather that he could pass on to travellers going north, though Claverhouse had seen remarkably few vehicles on the road; one mail coach only for Croxted and a few local farm carts and private coaches in the towns and villages through which they passed.

"It was trying, but the roads were still passable," he told his host, giving him what information he could. As he had expected, The Red Lion had not seen many travellers since his departure, apart from the party Masterby had expected from Carlisle, who were now having their dinner.

For this reason Claverhouse was again assigned his old room, while he reserved accommodation for his companion, who was given a chamber next to The Red Room. Secretly, the architect was pleased with this turn of events as it might give Griswold an opportunity to search drawers and cupboards for some clue to the mysterious Sarah Purvis, whose murder he had apparently witnessed. For some reason unknown to himself he had not apprised the magistrate of the note the girl had thrust

so furtively beneath his bedroom door in the dead of night. Was it because he had some hopes that she might still be alive somewhere, and he was respecting a confidence? For the same reasons he had not mentioned it to Griswold. Or perhaps some vestige of the affection he had felt for the lost Angela? His mind was still confused and indecisive.

Now he sat down on an oak settle near the big fire, still monopolised by the languid dog belonging to the landlord, and sipped gratefully at the mulled wine the latter brought, which dispelled the chill. As he waited for Griswold he again ran over the events of the day. The sharp clatter of the horses' hooves, and the iron-rimmed wheels drumming over the harsh surface of the badly-made road. He felt guilty that he had not even shown his friend the note Sarah Purvis had left, which he kept carefully folded in his purse.

The two had again discussed Angela on the journey; his friend had been a little reticent on the subject, perhaps from embarrassment, but he had ventured that her interests had diverged from that of her fiancé; she had become deeply interested in the esoteric rites and arts of the mystics of the ages; and had been much drawn to the occult. Claverhouse was somewhat startled to hear this, though he had suspected something of the sort from various remarks she had let drop over the past few months.

But he was somewhat taken aback when Griswold had mentioned that there was a man in London in whom she had become deeply interested; he was much older than she and a learned scholar of the practices and arcane subjects in which she had been so keenly interested—not to say enmeshed, Griswold had concluded. He himself had tried to warn her of the paths in which her studies were leading, but she had merely laughed, and said it was an intellectual pursuit in which she had become fascinated and wished to study and learn more of the rituals and observances of certain ancient orders.

In theory only, she had added, but Claverhouse was more deeply troubled than ever; she had said nothing of this to him, he had remarked to his friend, somewhat bitterly. But Griswold had merely shrugged and said that such confidences were more likely to be imparted to one who was merely a neutral observer, rather than to a fiancé and an intimate, who might be hurt by such revelations.

Claverhouse had to admit the commonsense and justice of such remarks and the two friends had passed on to other, more pleasant subjects, to while away the interminable hours of the journey. They had again, of course, touched on the primary object of their return to Borminster. Griswold, as he had already intimated, had business in the

town, which would disarm any suspicion anyone might have of his presence at Claverhouse's side.

The latter felt he was becoming a little obsessed with the mystery into which he had been plunged, but if murder had been done—and it was obvious that it had—then the two men on the cart might well be able to identify him. In which case he could himself be in deadly danger. But further to that was the additional thought that he had to disarm suspicion if anyone were watching his movements. Which was why he had been so circumspect with the magistrate and now with the landlord.

As Griswold's stated business was not for another two days or so, he had told Claverhouse he would ride out the following morning, alone, to disarm suspicion, and as though bound for a pleasant excursion across country. When he was certain he was unobserved, he would return and reconnoitre The Black Wood, as he recalled it from his childhood days. He would, of course, take his pistol with him and if he saw anything suspicious or a situation likely to be dangerous, he would know what to do.

Claverhouse was greatly comforted by this but during all the time that his friend was away, he felt the hours drag interminably. To give an impression of normality at the inn, he again asked the landlord's advice and was given certain directions to places of interest which, at any other time, would have afforded him pleasant hours with his sketchpad. But on this occasion he could not settle his mind and in mid-morning set off on a short promenade to the church the landlord had pointed out earlier.

He was on his way down a cobbled alley which led to the graveyard, which was surrounded by a high stone wall, when he met the magistrate coming in the opposite direction. Claverhouse was about to give him a greeting but was discomfited by Tyce merely making a stiff inclination of the head as he passed rapidly on his business. The architect glanced back over his shoulder and could see by the set of the man's back that he was still angry at the useless errand in which Claverhouse had involved him.

The young man passed a melancholy hour amid the mouldering tombs in the chancel with their gilded lettering, his footsteps echoing mournfully round the damp old building with its massive columns. He descended into the crypt and was startled to see either the minister or a sacristan there; a tall, thin man in a black soutane, drawn in by a tight leather belt, which accentuated his skeletal aspect. His bald head gleamed under the light of the lanterns which had been lit down here and so far as the visitor could see he was busily engaged in polishing a brass tablet let into the flagstones.

He shot the intruder a frosty glance and bent again to his task and Claverhouse passed quickly on, longing for the hour when he could decently return to the hostelry. The morbid lettering on some of the tombs and particularly those on the gravestones above, when he had again ascended to the body of the church and so into the open air, darkened his thoughts even more and he returned to The Red Lion at half-past twelve, resolving on an early lunch. After visiting his room to wash his hands and to divest himself of his heavy coat and gloves, he descended to the dining room, where about twenty or so people were scattered about the sturdy oak tables and whose animated murmur somewhat enlivened his spirits.

Griswold had still not returned but the architect enjoyed a pleasant lunch. He was taken with an attractive, fair-haired girl, who sat alone with a slim volume, which might have been poetry, propped up against a cruet on the table before her. She wore a high-buttoned costume of some blue material, which set off her fine bust to perfection, and there was something familiar about her features which reminded Griswold of someone he had once seen. The landlord seemed very attentive to her needs and there was a constant flurry of domestics about her.

Claverhouse was tempted to make inquiries of Masterby as to the identity of his beautiful guest but something constrained him. A moment later he was glad he had not sought the information for the magistrate Tyce had paused by her table and was engaged in an animated conversation.

Once or twice the girl smiled, tossing the long blonde hair about her head in a way that Claverhouse found attractive; it was obvious that she was well-known in the locality. Tyce was through with his small talk now and gave a graceful bow as he made his way to a table in the far corner where a group of local worthies were seated. He gave the architect another frowning glance as he passed, again leaving him vaguely discomfited.

As he made his way back to The Blue Room he found his interest in the young lady quickening; on impulse he passed his own door and went back down the corridor to a bow window which overlooked another portion of the coaching yard at this juncture. He remained there for a while, watching people going in and out of the tap room which gave on to this side and on the lookout in case Griswold should have returned for he would have to leave his horse there before entering the inn. But there was no sign of him and as Claverhouse went back down the corridor and paused at the door of his room, there was a muffled tread behind him, and the fair girl passed, giving him a sidelong glance.

He felt his heart beating a little faster, though he could not have reasoned why. He pretended to be having difficulty with the door latch and saw that she was unlocking the door of The Red Room. So she was the fellow guest at the hotel. She gave him a shy, hesitant smile before the door closed softly behind her. Instead of entering his room Claverhouse ran down the stairs with a somewhat lighter step. He was met in the broad hallway by Griswold, who had just arrived.

He shook his head, leading Claverhouse over to a table in the far corner of the dining room, out of earshot of the other guests.

"Nothing?" repeated his friend, disappointment plunging him into gloom. Griswold again shook his head, pausing only to give his order to the little maid, Bess. When she had retreated, he leaned across the table, stopping the other's questions.

"The place was as I remembered it," he said hesitantly. "I found it without difficulty. There was nothing suspicious that I could see. I pretended to alight to allow the horse to rest a little. Then, as though curious at my surroundings, I went casually round the building. Everything was as you described it. Animals were in that stone pen and several parties of woodcutters were busy in the distance."

He stopped, noticing the disappointment on the other's face. He put his hand out quickly, to grasp the other's on the table surface.

"I am truly sorry, Jeffery. I did my best but I could not make any more detailed search of the building, because of the foresters, you see."

Claverhouse forced a smile.

"Thank you for trying, Lawrence. I am enormously grateful and regret putting you to so much trouble."

"Think nothing of it."

Griswold gave him an anxious glance, a weak beam of sunlight coming in through the ancient bottle-glass window behind him, catching his chestnut hair, turning it momentarily to a fiery red.

"Would you not do better to go back to London?" he said gently. "You can do no good here and it is hardly the weather for an extended holiday."

Claverhouse shook his head.

"I came here to get away from old scenes and familiar faces, Lawrence, until I was diverted from my purpose. I may as well stay on for a few more days."

The other gave him a regretful smile, as the servant Bess brought a steaming tureen to the table.

"Very well, Jeffery. I would take you back north with me on Saturday but I have much urgent family business to attend to."

His friend waved away the suggestion.

"I would not dream of it. You have already done more than one could expect from a friend. And now, if you will excuse me, I will take a walk about the town. I will see you later this afternoon."

He was already up and striding toward the dining room entrance. The slim form of the blonde-haired girl paused in the hotel doorway before descending the steps. A few moments later, Claverhouse passed out after her, his heart again beating a little faster.

7

Still depressed at Griswold's impending departure, Claverhouse had momentarily lost sight of the girl amid the teeming streets of Borminster and he realised that it was market day. There were many country people about, who had evidently driven in from surrounding areas early in the morning, and they had set up gaily-coloured stalls which lined both sides of some of the more picturesque lanes leading off the High Street. Trade was brisk, despite the frosty air and iron braziers heaped with coke gave out searing heat at intervals, which abruptly reverted to glacial coldness as soon as one had stepped out of their range.

Claverhouse's thoughts were heavy and a wave of feeling for the lost Angela swept over him, which, coupled with the brutal murder in which he had inadvertently become involved, combined to cast him into a hazy limbo in which he was only vaguely aware of the raucous cries of the street vendors; of the stalls themselves; and the throngs of unfeeling people who roughly jostled him as he stood irresolute in front of a display of garishly painted children's wooden toys. He was aware then of a shadow falling across his field of vision.

"Mr. Claverhouse?"

The voice was soft and modulated and as he turned, momentarily aroused from his indecision, he was startled to see that it belonged to the young lady from the dining room of the inn. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes were sparkling and animated but there was an underlying melancholy about her now which the young man immediately felt attuned to his own mood.

"Yes. Are you staying at The Red Lion?"

The question was a fatuous one and it was merely a conversational gambit but the girl, for she could have been only in her mid-twenties, seized on it eagerly.

"Forgive me for accosting you in this way without an introduction, but I am in dire need of help and advice. I took the liberty of asking your

name when speaking to the landlord of the inn. Is there somewhere nearby where we could talk?"

"Certainly."

Claverhouse found his spirits lifting as he steered the girl through the pulsating mass of market people and out on to the main street.

"There is a large coffee house I noticed the other day. I think that would do admirably."

The girl said nothing as they walked along the stone-flagged pavement, away from the crowds now, and he had more time to study her. It was then that he made a somewhat disconcerting discovery. He had wondered previously if he might have seen her before but now another, more sombre image, came to mind. She resembled nothing so much as the beautiful girl whose body he had seen thrown down so brutally in the Cistercian abbey ruins. It had been only a momentary glimpse, it was true, but the shock had so irrevocably seared the impression of that lovely face into his brain, that he thought he would never forget it. He was somewhat surprised to realise he had not seen the resemblance before, but he had been so absorbed with his thoughts of Angela and Griswold's fruitless quest that he had not made the connection until this moment.

The girl had paused before the imposing entrance of the coffee house which the young man saw also sold wines and spirits by the glass. They went into a huge flagged chamber where tables and chairs were set out between the massive stone pillars which supported the beamed roof, while each side was lined with partitioned alcoves which looked like church pews. A painted board suspended from one of the pillars announced the range of services provided by Lantine's establishment and the prices one could expect to pay.

The place was only half-full and the couple found a secluded corner where two brass candelabra cast a quivering light that glanced on glasses and pewter tankards arranged with dazzling white napery on the serving tables at the side. A smartly-dressed woman in a lace cap, red velveteen waistcoat and long black skirt came up and at the girl's request he ordered a pot of black coffee and some small, spicy cakes. Though he and the girl had eaten just over an hour since he felt a sudden hunger come upon him, as though his recent experiences had temporarily taken away his appetite, which had now returned.

"You must think my approaching you extremely forward and bizarre, Mr. Claverhouse," the girl said gravely, her frank blue eyes fixed intently on his own.

He shook his head, feeling somewhat embarrassed.

"Not at all, Miss . . ."

He hesitated awkwardly.

"It is Miss, I presume . . ."

It was the girl's turn to appear disconcerted.

"Forgive me, sir. I should have introduced myself at once. My name is Lucilla Purvis and I have a strange but important request to make of you."

It was some moments before Claverhouse took in the import of her remarks. Then he was stunned. He leaned back in the sturdy oak chair and got a grip on his emotions. It could not be true, surely. This was not the girl who had slipped the note beneath his door; whom he had seen forced into a coach; and whose foully murdered body he had lately glimpsed at the abbey. It was quite impossible, but the shock was overwhelming.

"Are you all right, Mr. Claverhouse?"

The girl's face was concerned but the woman attendant was back and Lucilla Purvis poured the strong black coffee from the china pot.

"Drink this. You will feel better."

Claverhouse bit back the foolish remark he had been about to make. He had intended to produce the note from his purse and check the signature but now he remembered it only too well. It had been Sarah Purvis. He felt the blood coming back to his cheeks and he knew he had to be extremely careful in what he said.

"Are you all right?"

The girl was repeating the question anxiously.

"I am so sorry. I have been on long journeys recently and have become rather tired. I think it was the quick transition from the cold in the street to the warmth of this place that made me feel faint."

Miss Purvis nodded, concern in her eyes replaced by other worries of her own. Claverhouse was in command of himself now. He determined to say nothing at all but to remain non-committal. He felt for the first time that perhaps some definite form of danger hung over him in the everyday streets of Borminster. But the girl's next words again drove his thoughts into a turmoil.

"I am here on a difficult mission, Mr. Claverhouse. I have made the long journey from London with great effort and some trepidation. I am here to try to discover the whereabouts of my sister, Sarah Purvis, who disappeared from her home some weeks ago. I traced her here from the fragments of a letter, half-burned in the grate, which bore the carrier's stamp which indicated that it had originated in Borminster."

Claverhouse licked dry lips, lifting his cup to his mouth in order to frame his reply as diplomatically as possible. The coffee was extremely good he had no doubt but it might have been warm water for all the impression it made on his palate.

"I am extremely sorry to hear that, Miss Purvis. But how do you imagine I could help? Do you wish me to accompany you in your search?"

He felt that was more than an adequate reply and it evidently convinced her of his lack of knowledge of the sister's whereabouts. Then the awful realisation that he had seen the murdered corpse of this innocent girl's sister began to sink in and he turned again to the pretence of drinking the coffee in order to hide the expression on his face. His thoughts were uselessly churning now; what was he to say? How could he possibly speak the truth? And on top of that there was some inner caution which bade him keep his silence.

Griswold and the magistrate already knew of his suspicions; in some ways that was two too many. If the men who murdered that innocent girl knew who he was then his own life was in danger. He felt an invisible net closing in around him. And he could not possibly involve this girl; apart from the horror and distress his disclosures would cause her, she might herself be in danger. But he could, with a little judicial questioning, get a clearer picture of Sarah Purvis and what she had been doing in this neighbourhood.

The thought did flicker across his mind that she might not have been killed; had recovered and wandered off somewhere, but he immediately dismissed the supposition. Those wounds on the girl's body had been all too horribly real. Miss Purvis was speaking again, urgently, in a low tone; there was no-one near them in this sheltered corner and in any case the hubbub in the coffee house would have made their conversation inaudible to a person only six feet away.

"I need a friend, Mr. Claverhouse. Someone on whom I can lean in a time of great trouble. I believe you to be that person. I have spoken to the landlord, as I have said, and he has told me you are staying on at the inn for a while. May I tell you the circumstances which brought me here?"

Claverhouse was master of himself once more.

"You may rely on me entirely, Miss Purvis. I am ready to hear your story."

8

"You will really not believe this, Mr. Claverhouse," the girl began in a low voice. "But my sister is a wild and impetuous person. She is not content with being a gentlewoman devoted to painting water colours, tea parties and the elegant pursuits common to London society. She became a scholar and devoted much of her time to collecting strange books, and to my mind unhealthy, not to say morbid interests. Searching in private libraries for the weirdest secrets of nature and other such esoteric lore. And about a year ago she met an evil man."

Claverhouse felt a sudden tremor pass through his frame. The story had begun in such a similar manner to his own experiences with Angela, that he fought to keep his features impassive while the girl poured him more coffee from the pot.

"Why do you say that, Miss Purvis? Did you ever meet him?"

The girl shook her head.

"She would not even tell me his name. She referred to him as The Master on more than one occasion. Apparently he held seances and 'retreats' in which his acolytes took part. I became alarmed as time went by, Mr. Claverhouse. Sarah is very impetuous, as I have already said and she seemed to be completely under this man's spell. We are orphans and have no close relatives and live on private incomes held in trust for us by our parents."

The girl's expression was sad now, as she bent to pour herself another cup of coffee and the young man was struck with the beauty of her profile, though he was much troubled in his mind and too inwardly agitated to trust himself to speak. Instead he waited for her to go on.

"Well, Mr. Claverhouse, this was how the situation went on for some while. We maintain separate establishments in different parts of London and so I did not see her from day to day but the lawyer who handles our affairs let drop on one of my visits to Lincolns Inn, that she had taken to going away on rather mysterious errands from time to time. That troubled me considerably, as you might well imagine."

Claverhouse nodded sympathetically.

"You do not think this man's hold over your sister has anything to do with her money?"

Lucilla Purvis shook her head emphatically.

"From what my sister told me this man is quite rich, wants for nothing, and is not interested in his followers' money."

She shuddered suddenly.

"It is their souls he is after, Mr. Claverhouse."

The words struck a chill to the architect's heart. The sequence of events was so uncannily like those appertaining to Angela that he felt they must somehow be connected. The circumstances were too similar to be mere coincidence.

"Did your sister say where this man lived?" he asked diffidently.

Again the negative response.

"She did once mention something about him owning a large mansion near Sloane Square but that is all. He had estates in Sussex and elsewhere I believe."

She put her cup down slowly as though it had suddenly become too heavy for her. Delicate as the movement was the tiny noise seemed almost like an explosion to Claverhouse's disturbed sensibilities. The note from this girl's sister had assumed such significance in his fevered mind that it felt almost as though it must be visible to the girl opposite through the layers of cloth in his breast pocket.

"A fortnight ago my lawyer called upon me. He needed Sarah's signature for some document or other but her housekeeper told him she had packed and gone on a long journey. She had told the woman she might not be back for an extended period. She had not left an address at which she could be reached and I was considerably perturbed as she had never done anything like that before."

"You do not think she may have eloped?"

The fair girl looked startled.

"Good heavens, no, Mr. Claverhouse! Marriage was the last thing on her mind. And she had never even hinted at anything of that nature."

She bit her lip.

"Some while ago the housekeeper came to see me. She had found a scrap of paper half-burnt in the grate of the chamber my sister used as a library and writing room. It was in strange, Gothic-style handwriting which neither she nor I could properly make out, but for one sentence, which read; come to Borminster."

"So that is why you are here?"

Claverhouse was stunned; he so longed to confide in this troubled girl and share his suspicions with someone less sceptical than the magistrate and his friend Griswold but he had such dreadful suspicions formulated in his mind that he dare not. And everything within his nature cautioned him to be circumspect; not only that but to take the greatest care. He still had the feeling he was being watched, though he could not have pin-pointed it. But this was a small town and he could have been observed by the men he suspected of murdering Sarah Purvis at any time

in the past few days; not only that but he could have brushed by them in the busy market this morning without knowing who they were.

"Yes, I arranged my affairs and came up here, after some heart-searching. My friends know I have come. I was talking to the landlord this morning and he had seemed surprised to see me. In fact he had welcomed me back when I first arrived as though he already knew me. But he obviously knew nothing of my sister."

She suddenly intertwined her long, slim hands on the table cloth, as though in anguish.

"Oh, I have such fears, Mr. Claverhouse! Tell me, have you seen her?"

Claverhouse saw his way clear now. He put out his hand on to the girl's arm in a soothing gesture. She did not move her position but regarded him steadily across the table between them. The young man felt as though everything about his own journey north had become unreal; the wicks in the lanterns scattered about the coffee house; the murmur of muffled conversation; and the passing and re-passing of the women attendants seemed as vague as a dream.

"Yes, I believe I did see her, Miss Purvis, once distantly in the street the other day. She seemed well enough, and I hope we shall discover some mundane explanation for her removal from London and her sojourn in Borminster."

The girl's eyes gleamed and she moved her hand so that it was now gripping his own arm.

"Ah, you have lightened my heart already, Mr. Claverhouse! You just glimpsed her?"

"We merely passed one another, as I have said."

Claverhouse hated such innocuous lies as he was forced to tell this girl but he had little option now but to plunge on.

"We did not speak and in fact there was no reason to do so. I am afraid I can tell you nothing further. I hope I have not disappointed you too much, as there is very little I can add."

The girl's grip tightened on his arm.

"On the contrary, Mr. Claverhouse, you have raised my spirits immensely. You are an impartial observer."

Claverhouse forced a wry smile.

"Perhaps it might appear so to an agitated female mind, Miss Purvis. You did say Miss Purvis, did you not?"

The girl's smile matched his own.

"Oh, yes," she said softly. "I should have corrected you long ago had it not been so."

There was a deep silence between them, broken rather awkwardly by the architect.

"Just let us join forces and make some discreet inquiries, shall we?"

The girl's smile lingered long in his mind.

"I am immensely grateful, sir."

9

"Well, goodbye, Jeffery. I hope everything comes right for you."

Griswold gave the architect a regretful smile as he ascended to the apron of his phaeton, his top hat at a rakish angle, his thick cloak pulled tightly round him against the biting wind, which held a hint of snow. The two well-matched horses in the shafts pawed the cobbles impatiently, as though anxious to be off. A single lock of Griswold's reddish hair protruded from beneath the brim of his hat as he bent to shake hands with his friend. It was now Sunday and the landowner had completed his business in the town without making any discoveries that would have assisted Claverhouse in penetrating to the heart of the mysteries that troubled him.

The two had had an early meal as Griswold had a long drive ahead of him and it was with a heavy heart that Claverhouse waved him goodbye, the conveyance lurching and clattering beneath the low arched entrance to the mews, his whip waving jauntily in the air. Claverhouse wished, not for the first time, that he possessed his friend's ebullient spirit and optimistic view of the world. He returned to his room, heavy with thought and passed the afternoon in reading some architectural reports he had prepared before leaving London. He had seen little of Miss Purvis since their previous encounter, but he hoped he might see her at dinner that evening.

He realised he was beginning to take an inordinate interest in the affairs of this attractive young woman, but the dreadful secret he was harbouring tended to blacken his outlook and he did not know which way to turn. But he was glad now that he had not conveyed the contents of the note to Magistrate Tyce or even Griswold—least of all the victim's sister—but the burden was becoming almost too much for him to bear. He was still undecided what to do but determined to keep his promise to Lucilla Purvis at whatever cost to himself.

Surely the murder must come to light some time and the murderer or murderers brought to justice, despite the magistrate's scepticism. Agitated by these and other thoughts he went out for a brisk walk through the town. He was pleased to see that the snow still held off, though the

wind remained keen. He returned in the early evening to discover from the landlord that Miss Purvis had also gone out some half an hour or so after his own departure. He again ascended to his room and after a hasty toilet whiled away an hour or so with one of the three-volume novels he had included in his luggage, before descending for dinner.

But he was irritated to see that though Miss Purvis was already at table, she was not alone. She was with two rather handsome men; one middle-aged, the other quite young, and taking part in an animated conversation, though she gave him a rather strained smile as he passed their table. Somewhat sulkily he took his normal seat in the corner and ordered his meal, idly watching the bustling to and fro of the staff, while surreptitiously looking at the object of his interest. That he was becoming jealous was hard to say, though most probably the girl had merely accepted an invitation to dine with two local merchants.

Miss Purvis had her back to him but it was obvious that the conversation was an agreeable one as there was much laughter floating across to where he sat. Probably feigned on her part, he imagined, given the sombre errand which had brought her to these bleak northern hills. He ascended to his lonely room without having had an opportunity to speak to her, heavy of heart.

He made a desultory attempt at reading. Then he stretched out on his bed, fully dressed, and must have fallen asleep as it was now, he saw by his watch, almost eleven o'clock. He had been roused by unusual noises from the yard adjoining the hotel and then, as he became more alert, he was aware of a wider spread of activity in the town as though many people were moving about. He was crossing to the window to see what was afoot when there came a hesitant tapping at the door.

Heart immediately lightened, Claverhouse crossed the room quickly, only to have his hopes immediately dashed. Instead of the lovely form of Lucilla Purvis he took in the bright eyes and saucy mouth of Grizelda, an attractive serving girl the architect had noticed when he was eating his solitary dinner. She curtsied quickly, glancing along the corridor as she did so. She carried a large crystal goblet on a pewter tray.

"A nightcap, sir, with Mr. Masterby's compliments. A very special sherry."

Claverhouse had hardly time to stammer his thanks and take the glass from the tray when she darted off quickly down the corridor. At the same moment he heard a heavy tread ascending the stairs and quietly closed and locked the door.

He carried the glass over toward the tabouret next to his bed, savouring the heady aroma of the wine. It promised to be excellent. He was no

connoisseur but as he sat down on the bed's edge and took the first sip, he felt something was wrong. There was a subtle, somewhat bitter taste, which his palate immediately told him was not normal. He carried the glass over toward the candelabra's soft, shivering light, while he wiped his tongue vigorously with his cambric handkerchief. He noticed the slight cloudiness at the bottom of the glass, sniffed at its contents. A sleeping draught! So that was it.

Claverhouse suddenly found himself surrounded by a thousand doubts and fears. On impulse, he emptied the goblet into his pewter wash bowl and then put the glass conspicuously on the bedside table. At that moment he heard a furtive footfall in the corridor. He stopped with a sudden constriction of the heart, listened intently but heard nothing further. Then a floorboard creaked farther down and all his tension evaporated. He felt hard anger now, not only against Masterby but against all the forces he felt subtly arrayed against him in this strange town.

He stood irresolute for a moment, then poured half the contents of his water pitcher into the bowl, diluting the sherry and with it its distinctive odour. He then went to his valise and produced the pistol Griswold had given him. Thank God the latter had forgotten to ask him for it back. He made sure it was loaded and then carefully placed it in one of the capacious inside pockets of the cloak which his valise disgorged. It was black and would serve to mask his movements in the night, for the noises outside had increased; it seemed as though the whole town was on the move, there were so many furtive footsteps sounding across the setts.

He put the cloak on and suddenly remembered the scarf hidden within the folds of linen in his travelling bag. He wound it round his neck and then, glancing at the result in the mirror over the wash hand stand, tied it over his head. That way perhaps he might be mistaken for some labouring man if he were challenged in the street. For he was determined to join the steady ebb of people who were making their way out of the town. When he was satisfied with his disguise Claverhouse extinguished the candles and, orientating himself by the crack of light coming in beneath the door, slowly unlocked it and put his head out into the corridor.

Nothing moved in the whole length of the passageway in the faint light from the distant lamp at the far end. Claverhouse knew there was a second staircase which led to the rear quarters of the hotel and as it was now eleven o'clock he hoped that most of the domestic staff would be in bed and asleep. He went cautiously down the long expanse, his heart

hammering in his throat, his mouth dry and constricted. He paused for a fraction outside the girl's door but no light showed from beneath and all was dark and still.

He turned the right angle at the end of the corridor and, as he had hoped, the oil lamp on the bracket showed him a narrow staircase with an iron rail that spiralled downward. The treads were of wood but firm and solid and Claverhouse went noiselessly down two flights until he was in a cold, stone-flagged passage. By the faint light coming in from outside the window he saw he was close to the stable yard and outbuildings.

There was a door almost in front, flanked by barrels which gave off a smell of pickles. A big iron key was in the lock and as Claverhouse turned it and carefully raised the wooden latch, it opened noiselessly, bringing with it a chill blast of night air. Hardly able to believe his luck he tip-toed carefully along in the shadow of the buildings toward the arch which led to the High Street.

There was still some light spilling from the snug of The Red Lion into the street but otherwise the highway was in darkness, though the young man could still hear furtive movements. Then he had turned to his left, still keeping in the shadows of the old, jettied buildings, noting now the furtive shadows in the road and on the opposite pavement. No-one spoke and the silence, apart from the pattering of many feet, was uncanny. Claverhouse soon realised that he was just one figure among many others and his confidence increased.

After about ten minutes the thin stream of people were well outside the town and he began to see the glow of lanterns up ahead. Evidently these were held by people who were now at the head of what might be termed a procession. Claverhouse knew their destination and he halted in the impenetrable gloom of a thick clump of trees, which overshadowed the road at this point. Then he had turned to the left, down the steep hillside, amid the blackness of the trees, the irregular shape of the pistol making a comforting pressure against his left breast.

10

It took him some while to orientate himself and after much stumbling over tree roots and the tearing twigs of undergrowth he was able to take his bearings as his eyes became used to the dim light. There was no sound now as he descended into a deep valley, apart from the distant cry of an owl, but presently he became aware that he could still hear the progress of many feet along the high road far above and knew that he was

keeping parallel with all these mysterious strangers on their nocturnal errand.

Then he was on level ground within the valley, the air sour and bitter against his face. Once or twice he fancied there were flakes of snow upon his cheeks, which burned like fire, but later he concluded that it was merely collected moisture dripping from the trees. Despite the thickness of his cloak and the encircling scarf, the cold seemed to penetrate to his very heart. He bitterly regretted the necessity of keeping his ears free from the warmth of the wool, but it was necessary for him to be on the alert and he wanted to sense the slightest hint of danger, from whatever quarter.

For a while he worked steadily on, icy leaves crunching beneath his feet and he realised that he was retracing his footsteps of a few days previously, and that he was more than halfway toward The Black Wood that Magistrate Tyce and Griswold had spoken of. The sounds from the roadway had long died out, no doubt blanketed by the encircling banks of trees but there were other, more stealthy manifestations that set his heart pounding.

Subtle noises, like stealthy footsteps following, but probably caused by a faint wind rustling the leaves loosened by his passage across the loamy floor of the thicket; there were also scamperings and whimperings, as though caused by animals and once a horrendous explosion close to his face, as some night bird, startled by his passage, suddenly whirled upward. Then he was out of the hollow and the land began to rise, gently at first; before, he could see the faint stars, wreathed in haze, but now the trees of The Black Wood were beginning to close in.

The air was stale and damp here, as though in the vaults of some mouldy church or cathedral, which penetrated his enveloping scarf, and he fought down nausea as he continued to climb. It was slippery going and he fell several times, until his cloak was encrusted with ill-smelling fungi and lichen, his probing hands smeared with leaf mould. He stopped then, his heart pounding in his rib cage, bruised, frozen to the bone and already tired, but determined to carry matters to the end, wherever they might lead. After a few minutes he pressed on, climbing up awkwardly through the massed, menacing black boles of the trees, while the faint light from the sky finally died so that he proceeded in an airless darkness.

He had no idea of the time; it was too dark to see the dial of his watch, even if he could have worked it from his inner pocket; though he knew it must be at least half-past eleven. Curiously, he had not heard any church

bell from the town tonight; unless the ecclesiastical authorities there had them silenced tonight for some reason. By his own estimate it must have been half an hour since he had left the inn. Within quarter of an hour at the outside he should be at his destination. Assuming that he had not become lost in the meantime.

What he was going to do once he arrived at the abbey he had little idea. But the clandestine departure of so many people from Borminster so late at night could have no purpose explainable by normal actions. Law-abiding people did not go about their affairs in such a way. And if there had been some nocturnal public function then surely he would have heard of it at the inn or have seen it advertised about the town. Some deep instinct within Claverhouse told him he was about to penetrate to the heart of the mystery concerning the brutal murder of that beautiful girl; his new acquaintance's sister, who had disappeared so mysteriously and had been traced to this northerly—and to his overheated imagination—now sinister town.

With these thoughts endlessly revolving within his brain Claverhouse came almost casually upon a familiar scene. He was now leaving the claustrophobic confines of The Black Wood and imperceptibly the trees had thinned until he once again came upon the edge of that vast clearing. There was still very little light but despite the pallid mist that rose from the ground and undulated in wave-like movements through the bare black branches of the trees, he could still make out the stark outlines and the shattered cloisters of the Cistercian abbey.

Claverhouse suddenly felt very calm. He gently eased the pistol from the pocket of his cloak and held it in his hand, ready for use if necessary. There was now a deathly silence. To his disappointment he could see no sign of any human form or any horse or vehicle. What if all his suspicions had been wrong and he had come here on an absurd errand, that he would laugh at in the sane hours of daylight? He tried to remember his interrupted journey to Borminster, which now seemed like years ago. He was certain there had been no substantial building of any sort for some miles on his way in by coach.

Only a few scattered cotters' dwellings and the occasional, more solid farmhouse; certainly nothing that could accommodate such a large crowd of people that had issued from the town some three quarters of an hour before. Moving very cautiously and keeping well within the shadows of the trees, Claverhouse began a long, slow circulation of the clearing, until he had come to the point where the sunken road debouched into it. So far he had seen or heard nothing suspicious but now, as he ran across the open expanse into the deep shadow on the other side, he began to

hear the faintest rustling sounds, as though some gigantic beehive had been disturbed.

11

He was still circling, moving cautiously in what were areas of extreme darkness when, having traversed the entire circumference of the abbey ruins, he saw the faintest glow of light. Though he should have felt apprehension his heart leapt. Emboldened by possession of the pistol he moved forward and soon felt the worn stones of the colonnade beneath his feet. As he went farther down the other side of the building the light grew clearer and stronger and he eventually saw it came from a dark lantern hanging from an iron hook on the wall of one of the middens.

He noticed with a thrill of excitement that it was the same one in which he had seen the corpse of the murdered girl. So he had been right, after all! Gone was the straw and manure which had littered the floor of the place; gone the animals and all signs of domestic husbandry. But the light burning solitary and feeble in that charnel place was sinister indeed so he stayed cramped in the lee of the wall for something like fifteen minutes before he dared move on.

During all that time the low noises had continued and had gradually resolved themselves into the chanting of human voices. Easing forward so that he could see completely over the wall, Claverhouse discovered that a great stone slab with an iron ring set in it had been moved aside. No doubt it was normally covered by straw or sacking which was why it had been invisible on his previous visits. Indeed, the shock of the discovery of the girl's corpse had driven all detail of the scene from his mind except for the one central horror. And he now knew why the girl's body had so inexplicably disappeared.

He saw there was a worn flight of steps descending in an elliptical sweep to gloomy depths. But warm air and the sound of many voices came up from the opening and he hesitated no longer. A faint shadow against the lantern he descended the flight two treads at a time and moved swiftly into darkness within the shelter of a Romanesque pillar. No doubt these were the catacombs of the abbey, long hidden and unsuspected by the law-abiding inhabitants of Borminster.

Claverhouse had been afraid that there might have been a lookout posted here but as his eyes adjusted to the faint light cast by the lantern on the other side of the pillar, he could see that he was alone. He went swiftly down the flight trodden by so many dead feet over the past hundreds of years to where another faint light shone between the cob-

webbed arches. The chanting was growing stronger now and he became more cautious; but there was nobody stationed by the second lantern and he went on, down a long sloping passage, in the walls of which candles burned in niches, rejoicing in the warmth of the air, so great a contrast to the glacial cold outside.

He passed in quick succession two rough-hewn chambers, oblong in shape, in which rude wooden benches were set out. Here items of women's and men's clothing were hanging in orderly rows on iron hooks, while in the second chamber a number of dark cloaks with hoods were hanging. Claverhouse was tempted to don one of these but there was no time; and if anyone caught him in here while he was engaged in that attempt he would not be able to get to the pistol in time. Now he could make out fragments of the words the unseen people below were chanting, and it was obvious that some sort of ceremony was in progress. At this point he was confronted by several dark side passages but he ignored them and kept on steadily.

The light was growing in strength and he had to use more caution, easing from pillar to pillar, until he was certain that the large crowd of people below him had no time for anything but the scene that was being enacted before them. All wore dark robes of the kind he had seen hanging in the ante-chamber so that it was impossible to make out their ages and sex. Claverhouse finally came out on to a sort of balcony steeped in shadow, and by leaning forward a little and resting his fingers on the stone balustrade he was able to take in the entire proceedings.

He was overlooking a type of catacomb with Romanesque pillars arching to the shadowy ceiling. The light came from candles set about in bronze candelabra and from highly polished brass oil lanterns which gave off a soft glow from their positions on low stone pillars around the walls. The congregation, if it could be called that, was kneeling on the floor, which was covered with some form of coarse matting which would have taken off the chill of the flagstones. But at the edges of the place, where the flooring was entirely of stone, great iron braziers heaped with glowing coals on either side sent out a tremendous heat and with it a faint haze that rose lazily to the gloom above.

There were broad steps at the far end of the crypt, now covered with rich velvet and similar curtains at the back and sides, making a sort of theatrical setting. An altar of black marble was set in the centre of the platform, with a silver chalice and other utensils lying upon it; while at the back, hanging against the curtains, was a vast inverted cross painted silver. Several people were standing at one side of the platform as though waiting for a signal to begin and Claverhouse then noticed a motif

worked in silver thread was embroidered into the curtains and on the altar cloth. He could not quite make out what it represented, owing to the deep folds of the curtain material, but it looked like a winged emblem.

He settled himself against one of the pillars, where he had an unimpeded view of the ceremony taking place in the chamber below him; noiselessly laid his pistol within reach of his right hand; and began to take note of the chanting which was becoming more clear and to assume the form of a threnody, in which questions and answers were passed from a tall figure with a bass voice, who stood in front of the altar, to the members of the congregation, who gave their replies from their prone positions in the body of the crypt.

When this had finished Claverhouse saw that another figure was standing in the flickering candlelight to the right of the altar. He was dark-robed and hooded like the rest but had a larger silver-thread insignia worked into the breast of his robe, though as the material was folded about him the motionless listener in the gallery could not make out its import.

"This evil is good! This good is evil!" he said in a loud, though muffled voice.

"Evil is good!" chanted the crowd.

A sudden silence fell in that charnel place and all waited for the tall figure to speak again.

"Is all ready for the initiation of the acolytes?"

"All ready, O Master!" said the cloaked man with the deep voice in front of the altar.

"How many are there?"

"Three, O Master."

Three young women in white robes had now appeared from behind the curtains at the back of the dais, ushered in by a stern-looking woman with greying hair; the petrified watcher could see all this because the girls' faces were now visible beneath their hoods and the woman in authority had thrown back her own to leave her head and shoulders free. The heat was stifling in the chamber now and Claverhouse could feel perspiration running down his forehead but still he gazed on as though in a trance.

"Then let the Song of Nudity begin!" said the Master in a ringing voice.

Sick at heart the unseen watcher saw the older woman roughly disrobe the three beautiful young girls until they were stark naked, standing submissively before the altar. Claverhouse was appalled to see

that one was the young girl, Grizelda, who had brought the drugged sherry to his room at the hotel. Hidden flutes had now begun a haunting, obscenely lascivious tune, it seemed to the young architect. The assembled congregation commenced an undulating motion in time to the weird music and the naked girls were kneeling, bending their heads as the older woman placed garlands of white flowers on their heads.

"It only remains for the Sub-Prioress to make her submission to me for the ceremonies to begin," said the Master, in a vaguely familiar tone.

The congregation had commenced to disrobe and almost all were now stark naked; Claverhouse noted with loathing and disgust that many of the men were elderly but all the women were young and comely and that most of them seemed to be under the influence of drink or drugs, judging by their trance-like features and glazed eyes.

A tall, slender form had now emerged from the shadow behind the naked figure of the grey-haired woman and the three kneeling girls. With a symbolic gesture she threw off her robe, which slid down her magnificent breasts and body, and then she had stepped out of the rumpled clothing round her ankles and stood proudly in the candlelight. A mass of golden hair obscured her features and she knelt quickly in front of the altar. The Master came swiftly toward her and stood directly in front of her kneeling figure as the crowd in the crypt watched in an enthralled silence.

"Now begins the Homage to Priapus," he said.

Rapidly the girl undid the cord round his silver and black robe and he shrugged it off, though he retained the hood and mask, which was separate from the main garment. He too was naked now apart from the hood. The Sub-Prioress had a devilish smile on her face and put up her hands eagerly to pay homage to priapus, as the older woman bent to tie back the golden hair with a black bandeau.

With shock and sick horror Claverhouse gazed on the laughing features of a once much-loved woman. He started up with a cry of anguish and despair that echoed round the vault.

"Angela! For God's sake!"

He had the pistol up and the detonation beneath the arched ceiling of the vault seemed to take the top of his head off. The Master reeled backward with a terrible cry, dark blood staining his breast. He went over with a crash, the hood falling from his head, disclosing a mass of reddish-gold hair.

Claverhouse was left with the vision of the dying features of Lawrence Griswold of the manor of Croxted, as the vault was filled with

screaming voices and cries of hatred as the huge mass of naked men and women rushed up the stairway to the balcony.

There came a patter of feet from the stone-vaulted passage behind him as Claverhouse gained the entrance to that evil place. He whirled quickly, throwing the useless pistol into the screaming mass which had now gained the head of the stairs. Everything was now clear to him but his only hope was to escape from this nightmare situation. He found another black-cloaked figure at his elbow. It was Lucilla, who held a pistol in her hand. Relief flooded over him.

"Quick, give it to me!" he said.

She shook her head, levelling the weapon coolly at his breast and with the movement he saw that she too was naked beneath the cloak. He turned again as the screaming mob was upon him, pounding and pummelling with their fists. Then he went down to darkness and despair.

12

He awoke, conscious of pain and a low moaning noise, finally realising the sounds were emanating from himself. When he was able to focus his eyes, he saw that he was in a low, square room, lit by gilt candelabra. It was warm and comfortable and though his head and chest were paining because of the blows he had received, he guessed that he was back at The Red Lion. But as full consciousness filtered in he found he was unable to move; he was lying on some sort of velvet divan but his hands and ankles were pinioned by leather thongs.

Then he became aware of Magistrate Tyce, in a dark cloak and relief flooded in.

"Thank God," he said in a weak voice.

"Do not mention that name here," said Tyce sternly.

At that point the young man noticed the insignia of the inverted cross upon the far wall. He found too, as he tried to struggle up, that the straps that bound him were too strong and too tight to be released without outside help. He was also naked and with that realisation, fear flooded in.

"You have killed the Master of the Order," Tyce went on. "Your personal friend. Normally, your own life would be forfeit. But two of our members have interceded for you."

His eyes glittered.

"You are a very lucky young man, Mr. Claverhouse. Sub-Prioress and Sister Lucilla have spoken on your behalf . . . If you will agree to become the Sub-Master of the Order under instruction, and be taught all our ways, they will become your brides of Satan. You are allowed two women

under our strict rules, any transgression of which is always punished harshly.

"The higher one rises in the hierarchy, the more the rules are relaxed, of course. Mostly the brides are married women whom we break in to become accustomed to our practices. The age limits for females are from sixteen to forty-five and everyone is sworn to the deepest secrecy. There is no age limit for our male members, of course. Our recruitment system is absolutely invulnerable to outside interference."

He licked his lips.

"I am the law, you see."

He looked at Claverhouse in amused contempt.

"The Master was able to enslave and recruit many beautiful young women of the highest rank in London, so that they could be trained for our Order. If you are admitted, that task will fall to you. That was where Griswold and I met—we both belonged to the same London club. Well, do you agree?"

Claverhouse felt horror overcome him.

"Never!" he said through clenched teeth.

Tyce gave him a cold smile and the architect thought he had never seen anything so deadly. How stupid he had been, he thought, to take his discovery to this man, of all people in Borminster!

"Really," the magistrate said, with a stiff inclination of his head. "Even though Sister Angela has forgiven you for murdering her husband."

"Husband!"

Claverhouse could not keep the shock and surprise from his voice.

"She became the Master's bride not a month since, both legally, according to the laws of England and according to our most secret and sacred rites. I myself performed the latter ceremony."

He could not keep the triumph from his eyes.

"Though she had, of course, lost her virginity to the Master long ago in London."

"Stop. I wish to hear no more of these obscenities," Claverhouse moaned.

The magistrate shook his head wearily.

"When you learn a little more of life, young man—if you do—you will realise obscenity exists only in the mind of the puritan unbeliever. The Master we worshipped was head of a mighty congregation whose main object in life is joy and ecstasy. You will see—if you live, my friend. If you are sensible."

Claverhouse turned his face away, sick at heart.

"How long have I been here?"

"A month. It has taken that time for you to recover from your serious injuries. The members of our sect wished to kill you."

"Like Sarah Purvis?"

Claverhouse could not resist the retort. The magistrate came closer and the young man could now see that he too was naked beneath his dark robe.

"Yes indeed."

"And where have you hidden the body?"

Tyce gave him a pitying look.

"We burn them, as we do with all who transgress the rules of the Order. The ashes are scattered upon lonely fields and farms, where they are tilled into the soil. I own The Black Wood, this abbey and the land around, you see."

He turned as there came a timid tapping on the thick, oak-panelled door in the far corner.

"You are a lucky man, Mr. Claverhouse. Here are your brides."

He leaned forward and introduced the lip of a small flask between the bound man's teeth. He was forced to drink or he would have choked. He guessed, by the fiery content that it was strong spirit or perhaps a drug to lessen his resistance.

It was with a blurred vision that he saw the naked form of Angela emerge from the shadows. She bowed submissively and then knelt at the magistrate's feet. He turned on his heel, giving her a lascivious smile as she knelt nude and expectant before him. He caressed her breasts with gestures that told of long intimacy. His eyes glittered as he looked toward the door where Lucilla Purvis was already stripping off her robe, until she too was as naked as the day she was born.

"I would think about it, Mr. Claverhouse, if I were you," Tyce said coldly. "Otherwise, you see the impossible position in which you place us."

The bound man did not reply, his senses reeling under the influence of the potion he had been given.

"Angela has forgiven you, as I have already told you, so you need have no worries on that score. And Lucilla is fond of you and will be as docile as any man could wish and the Master has been cremated with full honours and in accordance with our ancient rites. The only thing you have to fear is the full strength of our Order if you do not comply."

Then he was gone and the two naked girls advanced upon him, placing themselves on either side as he lay sprawled on the broad divan.

Claverhouse was losing consciousness as Angela laughed coarsely as she caressed him at his left side.

"And do you remember, Jeffery, what my father told you about me long ago? 'She is too great a lady for the likes of you!' If only he knew!"

She burst into raucous laughter once more as Claverhouse again lost consciousness.

13

When he came to again, things were as before. He was still weak but he was fed and given some strong posset; he was allowed to attend to the needs of nature along a bleak stone corridor, attended by two strong guards whose identities were concealed by all-enveloping black velvet masks. On this occasion he did not see Angela, which was some consolation to him. Once, as he returned to the stifling chamber where he seemed to have been imprisoned for a very long time, he thought he saw the slender form and anxious face of Lucilla Purvis but it may have been an illusion, induced by the drugs he was being given.

He was again questioned as to his readiness to join the Order, this time by an anonymous figure in dark robes who stood just outside the range of the candlelight.

Though he tried to the best of his ability he could not place the voice. He was convinced it was no-one he knew or had met in this place—or rather Borminster. He again tried to reply in the negative to the questioning, but he lapsed into unconsciousness as he was being strapped back on to the divan. When he awoke for the second time—or was it the third?—he had lost all count of time and place; he did not know the month or even what the year was.

On this occasion there was no questioning but as he lay half-dazed he sensed rather than saw, some unseen presence watching him, perhaps through a concealed opening within a patterned tapestry or in one of the walls. He was well-treated, his injuries had healed and he felt more himself but a terrible dread gnawed at his heart and soul. And then, as he lapsed from consciousness to sleep and from sleep to waking the gentle but insistent questioning went on and he felt his resolve weakening as the days went by.

He had two visits from Angela; she was naked as before and lay by his side, seducing him with promises of sexual delight and power over members of the Order but he was unable to make any coherent protests, only an insistent shaking of the head; even that was an effort in his half-conscious state, so that she was angered and soon left the chamber, much to his relief.

After the last bout of questioning he felt stronger and more clear-headed and realised that either the effects of the drug had worn off or that the repeated treatments of the noxious substance had ceased. He lay, pretending to sleep, but in reality watching the vibrating candle-flames, searching out the shadowy half-world in which he seemed to have lived so long, for any sign of movement or of a silent watcher observing his movements. Once he heard loud laughter in the corridor as of many men passing by; on another occasion—he did not know whether it was day or night in this hellish place—he heard cracking noises, as if made by whips on bare flesh and later, many women sobbing, as though they had been disciplined.

He was stronger now and tested the leather thongs cautiously at intervals, but they were too tough and had been cunningly fastened; tight enough to prevent his escaping but not so tight as to cause a loss of circulation. Of Tyce he saw or heard nothing though he was certain that vile man of the law was somewhere about. He continued to be fed regularly and allowed along the corridor escorted by the guards, at regular intervals, and to his inward horror felt he was becoming inured to this unnatural life. It was only a question of time too, he realised, before his will would be broken and he would assent to Tyce's devilish demands.

Then, during what he supposed was his evening meal—for it was the third during his waking period—he became aware that the hooded person lifting the spoonful of hot soup to his mouth was known to him. The head was inclined toward him and he glimpsed the pale, strained face of Lucilla Purvis. He was about to make some bitter remark when the expression in her eyes stopped him. She put the forefinger of her left hand to her lips as though to enjoin caution. As she withdrew the wooden bowl and put it down on a copper tray by the bedside, she turned it toward him.

Disbelievingly, Claverhouse made out the words, roughly inscribed in white chalk on the side of the bowl. They read; DO NOT DESPAIR. PRETEND TO AGREE. YOU WILL SOON BE FREE. Hope flared within him and he was on the point of blurting out his thanks but one look at the girl's face and the words died in his throat. Swiftly, she erased the message with the napkin on the tray and held out the morsel of bread to his lips, preventing him from speaking. The prisoner saw a shadow move across the wall then and another of the sinister hooded figures looked into the chamber before passing silently on.

For hours after Lucilla had gone, Claverhouse alternated between hope and despair; no-one came near him; no-one questioned him; and

the time wore heavily. Just as he knew it was meant to do. It was all part of a process calculated to erode his resistance, and turn him into a mindless slave of the cult, just as the dozens of acolytes were. He guessed that they were not only held in sexual thrall but by fear of exposure to the outside world. They were completely within the sect's power just as he might be if something did not happen to deliver him soon. And his bitterness and anger at Griswold's treachery and perverted nature only increased as time passed.

But as the hours went by the small flame of hope that the girl had kindled in him began to flicker and die; suppose her message and the anxiety on her face had been merely another drug-induced hallucination? He dare not speculate any further and eventually fell into an exhausted sleep from which he was awakened by a fearful cacophony of noise, mingled with shots and screams, interspersed with the crackle of flames; as smoke seeped into the chamber, Claverhouse felt stark fear flowing through every particle of his body.

Then there were footsteps, hoarse shouting and the robed figure of Magistrate Tyce appeared in the doorway. As he rushed forward, a knife sliced through the leather thongs that bound him and Claverhouse was roughly bundled behind the divan by Lucilla Purvis; dishevelled and upset, but with triumph shining on her face. Tyce raised the pistol but there was a flare of flame and a clap like thunder. The magistrate was slammed against the wall and then fell to the floor, the weapon dropping from his hand. Another robed figure darted for it, fell back before it could be reached, as the whole vault seemed to be full of powder smoke and flame.

Amid the chaos Claverhouse was astonished to see the massive form of Masterby, landlord of The Red Lion, brandishing a bloody cutlass and with the fire of righteous indignation on his face.

"Not before time, sir! Thanks to this young lady, Mr. Claverhouse. To think that one of my girls should be a member of this vile sect!"

He raised his voice with a tone of authority the architect had never heard him use before.

"Burn this place out, men. There will be much for the assizes at Carlisle to do this next session."

He crossed over to the recumbent form of the magistrate, turned him with a grunt.

"He will live to hang."

He pulled back the hood from the face of the other still figure, clicked his teeth. Claverhouse saw the bloodied breast and the tangled mane of golden hair that had been Angela, turned away sickened.

"No use, I'm afraid, sir. You owe your life to a very brave young girl, Mr. Claverhouse."

The latter got to his feet, somewhat unsteadily, allowed himself to be bundled into a thick cloak, his mind still not able to take in what was happening.

"We have been trying for years to catch these people, sir," said Masterby. "I am the Chairman of the local Watch Committee and we have long suspected Tyce. But we could never find the headquarters. Not until Miss Purvis came. But there will be time for explanations later, when we get back to the inn."

"How long have I been here?" Claverhouse asked, as he was led from the chamber, past lurid scenes like something out of paintings by Bosch, with crowds of struggling naked men and women, surrounded by angry townspeople armed with swords and cudgels. Bodies lay sprawled everywhere and half the underground chamber that had been used for murder and other hellish rites was aflame.

"Six weeks," said Masterby, as two of his companions half-carried Claverhouse along the tunnel that led to the wholesome outside air. He was astonished to see that one of them was the gaunt sacristan from the church.

"We were kept informed of your condition by Miss Purvis here. But we could not move sooner as we wanted to get them all, during one of their principal ceremonies. The magistracy at Carlisle have brought in professional thief-takers to strengthen our force."

The rest of his discourse was lost for as he felt the sweetness of the fresh night air on his face, Claverhouse dissolved into tears and then his knees gave way and he collapsed in a dead faint.

14

When he came to himself again he was back in bed in his familiar surroundings at The Red Lion. Masterby sat silent and grim in a big highback chair, his eyes fixed intently on the figure in the bed, while Lucilla knelt holding his right hand in her own. The doctor finished washing his hands in the basin, turning a reassuring face toward the three at the bedside while Mrs. Masterby hovered solicitously behind the doctor's shoulder.

"He is young and strong," was the official verdict. "He will be quite himself in a few days."

"Excellent, doctor," said Masterby. "I will see you down, sir. A glass of port would not come amiss on such a cold evening."

He winked broadly at his wife and the room emptied almost as soon as Claverhouse could stammer out his thanks.

"We will discuss everything later, sir," said the landlord, quietly closing the door.

"And I had suspected him of being concerned in this terrible business," the architect said bitterly.

"It was natural," the girl said hastily. "The serving maid bringing you that drugged drink, as she did. Obviously you thought it came from Masterby. They did not want you abroad on that night."

She suddenly bent her head and wept silently.

"You do realise why I put that pistol to your head," she said brokenly. "It was the only way to save you. They would have killed us both if they had seen we were allies."

She shot him a hesitant smile.

"It was not loaded, in any case."

Claverhouse nodded, hardly comprehending her words. "I understand. Though I was devastated at the time."

He struggled up in bed, grasping her hand more firmly, as she tried ineffectually to release her fingers. Her eyes searched his face, until she dropped them, a faint flush suffusing her cheeks. He guessed what she was thinking and rapidly went on at another tangent.

"I understand much of this black business but there is a good deal I cannot comprehend. One thing greatly troubles me. What is your part in this appalling affair? . . . I thought you too were a member of the sect, Lucilla . . ."

His voice trailed away. The girl shook her head sombrely, the golden curls cascading about her face.

"My name is Sarah, Jeffery," she said gently. "It was my twin who was murdered in my stead. You did see her body, did you not?"

Claverhouse was thunderstruck. He lay back on the pillow, trying to take in what she was saying.

"Please . . ." he said brokenly.

She laid a warm hand upon his lips, drawing closer to the bedside.

"Lucilla and I were identical twins. Even our parents had difficulty in telling which was which. Most of what I told you when we first met was quite true. She met Griswold in London and became involved in this devilish sect, just as Angela had. As I told you, I traced her to Borminster. So I came up here and stayed at The Red Lion and at first Mr. Masterby mistook me for my sister, which made me realise she was known in the locality, at least by sight. But somehow the sect members quickly came to realise I was making inquiries in the area.

"I felt I was being watched and became afraid. Without giving myself away I asked the landlord his opinion of the young man I had glimpsed in the dining room one evening. He gave me your name, told me you were a London architect. In his opinion you were a strong character who could be relied upon. That night, after I put my despairing note beneath your door, Lucilla came to see me. I was astonished and overjoyed. She said she had come in at the rear entrance and that I should leave the same way. When I expressed my bewilderment she said my life was in deadly danger and that I must change clothes with her, take her place. I did not, of course, know of her involvement in these horrors, but I was frightened and did as she wished. She took my place which, with hindsight, was perhaps the most noble thing she had ever done."

"Which sealed her fate," Claverhouse said sombrely. "I am sorry if I cause you pain but I saw her body outside the abbey walls, which led me to the door of Magistrate Tyce."

The girl's eyes clouded with tears.

"We were uncannily alike, Lucilla and I. Obviously Tyce and the others did not tell Lucilla of their intention of killing me, though fortunately she guessed my danger. Quite simply these devil-worshippers wanted me out of the way, where I could not ask any more questions. They evidently came to my room after I had left, probably using the same back stairs, let in by the maid Grizelda. I have this from the girl herself. Seeing Lucilla in my clothes they would not believe her story. Without seeing us together no-one would have."

A slight shudder passed through Claverhouse.

"So they made her a ritual sacrifice, and I saw her being dragged into a coach and was powerless to help."

The girl nodded, her face in shadow.

"I went out of the hotel by the back entrance, not knowing where I was going, my mind filled with confusion and fear. I was wandering aimlessly through the town when, late as it was, I met Magistrate Tyce. I did not know him, of course, thank God, or I might have confided in him, but as I had Lucilla's clothes on he took me for her and addressed me familiarly by name. My only hope was to pretend I was Lucilla and I tried to keep up my end of the conversation without arousing any suspicions on his part. We discussed various things and he had no idea I was anyone other than the person I purported to be.

"He even took me to the door of Lucilla's temporary lodging, in one of the back streets. Apparently she lived with someone he called The Master and came down to Borminster for the sect's various rituals."

Claverhouse's bitterness was increasing as Sarah continued her story. So Angela had been under the same roof as a married woman when he had stayed with Griswold. His contempt for his former friend was growing by the minute; the man was a degenerate monster with his fabrications and stories about Angela meeting a much older man who practised as a satanist in London. He had to force himself back to the present to understand what the girl was saying.

"Fortunately, I had Lucilla's purse and was able to let myself in, after agreeing to meet Tyce next day. Naturally, Tyce said nothing about my sister's fate, and the next day he thought it might be a better idea if I left the lodging and moved into the hotel. If the situation had not been so terrible it would have been amusing, because I was already living there. Naturally, there was no sign of Lucilla and her personal effects had been removed, though my own luggage and other things were still locked in a cupboard.

"When I met Tyce at lunch-time, under cover of a harmless conversation, he told me a young man had come to him with a weird story about a murder—he did not say where or who the victim was—and he wanted me to scrape an acquaintance with the young man in question, who was also staying at The Red Lion. I was so relieved when he pointed you out to me!"

She paused and flushed.

"Of course I know now if you had told me what you had discovered, it would only have made things worse, and perhaps have sealed your own fate, though I would not have conveyed anything to Tyce."

Claverhouse drew in a long, shuddering breath.

"Ah, I see. So we were fencing with one another. You could not tell me you were Sarah, masquerading as Lucilla, and I did not dare tell you about the murder of your sister, for obvious reasons."

Sarah Purvis gave him a sad smile.

"My sister was led into evil ways, but I think that had she lived, she would have meant you no harm."

"Let us hope so," Claverhouse said.

Sarah Purvis leaned forward and drew her warm palm lovingly along the contours of the young man's fevered face.

"You do not know what I have been through," she said brokenly. "For weeks, after the debacle in the underground chamber, Angela and I, together with other leading members of the cult were not allowed out. I was torn with remorse and anguished at the thought of what you were going through. I tried to warn you that help was near but I was closely watched. Tyce had somehow become suspicious and I had to be ex-

tremely careful. But when I told him that people would talk if I did not return to the hotel he saw the sense in my request and let me go."

She gave a deep sigh.

"I then had a difficult decision. I had no-one to turn to and a sort of evil fog surrounding me. In the end I selected Mr. Masterby. He seemed a strong and capable man and I did not think he would laugh at my story. I was taking a terrible risk but I thought it was justified if I was able to save you."

She felt Claverhouse's own hand on her cheek and hurried on.

"You cannot imagine my joy when he told me about the Watch Committee and how they had been trying to destroy these people. Later, I managed to give him the date for the next major ceremony, which led to this conclusion."

A deep silence fell between the two, as they sat on, hand entwined in hand until they were roused by the chiming of the church clock. As the last note of ten died away, Claverhouse stirred.

"At least people in Borminster will sleep more easily after this."

The girl drew closer.

"You will be returning to London? You must have seen quite enough of the Purvis girls."

Claverhouse gazed at her unflinchingly.

"I have seen a good deal of you, Sarah," he said gently. "It makes me want to see more."

Sarah flushed and lowered her head.

"You have not asked me the most important question."

She raised the frank blue eyes and held him transfixed with the honesty of her gaze.

"The answer is no, Jeffery. I was not a bride of Satan. Lucilla undoubtedly was but your friend Griswold was too taken up with his marriage to Angela and the forthcoming rites to pay any attention to me."

Claverhouse drew her close.

"It would not have made any difference," he said. "But nevertheless, it is comforting to know."

The couple were entwined when they were interrupted by a discreet tapping at the door and Mrs. Masterby appeared with a laden supper tray. She looked amused at their confusion.

"Supper for two in bed, Mr. Claverhouse," she said impishly. "If you will forgive the liberty."

Claverhouse laughed.

"It is a liberty we shall be taking regularly in the future, Mrs. Masterby."

He laughed again at the expressions on their faces.

He turned back to Sarah, reached for her hand once more.

"After we are married, of course."

And as the buxom landlady withdrew and the couple settled contentedly to their meal, he saw no denial in her eyes.



THE GRASS

1

MILES studied the map with a carefully appraising eye.

"Are you sure this is the right track, Craven?" he questioned irritably. Craven spat reflectively.

"As far as I can recollect," he returned. "In fact I'm almost sure of it. I remember that big rock distinctly."

Miles grunted. The detached aloofness of the other's manner in the face of hardship and danger, only increased the realisation of his own cowardice and indecision. Both were silent for a space, Miles studying the map anxiously, while Craven stared moodily into the depths of the reeking jungle from which they had just emerged.

The distant mountains shimmered in the haze of heat that hurt one's eyes to look at, while now and then a faint breeze, as though defying the menace of the sun's blazing rays, would bring the lingering breath of some strange perfume wafting to their nostrils.

Behind them was the forest, brooding, remote; in front, the endless plain of tall parched grass that stretched to the soaring peaks of some unknown range that reared, tier upon tier up the far horizon.

A fat yellow beetle scuttled under Craven's foot and vanished in the grass. The tall man shouldered his pack and without a word marched slowly down the valley. After a moment's hesitation, the other followed.

At first it was easy going but after a while the thick yellow blades began to grow taller and finally they came to a place where the grass shot up into the air twice the height of a man. Somehow neither of them wished to enter this area.

A faint breeze rustled the stalks and a ripple, very like the action of seawater in a heavy swell, ran up and down its endless miles of length. It somehow seemed fantastic to see that vast plain of grass bobbing and nodding with the tips of the stalks held close together, like some enormous gathering of old men solemnly discussing a strange and portentous secret.

It suggested vague and uneasy things which filled their minds with doubt and something akin to fear. For some time they wandered up and down, seeking a gap in the endless yellow barrier, but found none.

"We'll have to go through," said Craven tersely, and shouldered his way in.

Miles did the same and instantly found himself in a world of yellowish twilight, with the sun trying to penetrate through the stalk tips that he could faintly see billowing high above his head. Progress was slow, and the continual stumbling, and the heat of the sun, which was still stifling hot, soon sapped their energy. To make matters worse the grass was sharp and Miles' hands were soon covered in minute cuts, which increased his discomfort and dispersed what little humour he had left.

Presently he began to lag behind, and it was only after being repeatedly shouted at by Craven that he was encouraged to keep up. The tall man had taken the precaution of donning a strong pair of leather gloves so that he was practically immune from the cutting edges of the grass.

At intervals they would halt and take a compass reading, for the tall grass soon destroyed all sense of direction. Sometimes little crawling creatures would buzz past their faces, so that Miles would cry out, causing Craven to deliver some stinging retort which made the other flush and curse the tall man under his breath. After a long time—hours it seemed to Miles—they came at last to an open space, where the stalks had been beaten down, possibly by some large animal that had blundered into the maze.

2

Here they paused to rest, while Miles, who had been cursing Craven all the way burst out again.

"Are you sure the story's true? Suppose the map is wrong?"

The tall man regarded his companion wearily; then, sitting down, took a drink from his flask.

"Listen," he said. "This map is correct. I've told you a hundred times. I got the map from an old man in the city on the coast. He was dying. A man in his condition wouldn't lie. Besides, he'd been there himself.

"That's why he made the map. He wanted to go back and get some more diamonds."

Miles' eyes glistened greedily at the mention of the gems.

The tall man paused and then went on again.

"He gave me a diamond that he'd dug with his own hands. He'd come into town to organise an expedition so that he could turn his mine into a viable proposition. He naturally couldn't work it all by himself so he thought of taking some other person into his confidence. He certainly was a simple old man.

"To make a short story long, he confided his secret to the wrong kind of people. And one night they tried to get him for the map. That's where I came in. I found him lying on the ground with three men standing over him. He'd been knifed in the back. There was a short fight and they beat it.

"I did what I could for the old fellow, but he was too far gone. Before he went, however, he entrusted the map and the mine to my care. I knew these three men would stop at nothing, so I thought of a way to fix them. I struck a bargain. We agreed to split the diamonds, a quarter share to each man.

"We got started, and for three weeks we sweated our way up river; what with the heat and the flies we got mighty touchy, until one night we heard a splash in the river, and one of the men came back to the fire with a sly grin on his face. And in the morning a man was missing, a little Cockney named Barnes. That meant we split the treasure three ways.

"Five days passed, and by then there were only two of us; myself and a big red-headed man named Latter. And he died too. In some strange manner the contents of his water bottle was poisoned. I watched him. He took a long time to die."

Craven smiled, and flicked an inquisitive mosquito from his cheek. Miles licked his lips nervously.

"Go on," he prompted.

"That's about all there is to tell," replied his companion. "It was useless to think of going on by myself. Even if I'd wanted to, it would have been impossible, for the water was running low and I didn't know when I should come upon a spring. Those pigs drank too much. Then I thought of you and here we are."

Abruptly he got up, shouldered his pack and resumed the march. Miles, whining at the sting of his lacerated hands, would have stayed longer to rest, but the fear that the tall man would leave him, coupled with the thought of the treasure, forced his weary legs into a piston-like motion, more like a drunken man's perambulations, than a normal mode of progress. That night they hacked a clearing in the grass and slept.

3

They broke camp early next morning and started off. By now they had travelled about fifteen miles, as near as Craven could judge. Miles' arms seemed intolerably heavy and queer fancies kept swimming in his head. He thought of the old prospector dying in the city and the red-haired man and the poisoned water bottle. His hands began to give him trouble too; a sort of convulsive throbbing that seemed to ebb and flow in slow waves of dull pain. His wrists were tinged with blue, and puffed like inflated rubber.

A harsh roaring in his ears came and went at intervals. He gritted his teeth and a vivid wave of white-hot fire flickered up the side of his head. He began to run, weaving crazily from side to side, the grass brushing against his face unheeded, his one thought to get away from the unbearable agony.

Craven was regarding him with amazement.

"What the devil's the matter?" he snapped.

Miles stood there laughing, an insane, foolish laugh, with no mirth in it.

"The grass!" he babbled.

Craven's eyes narrowed. His gaze travelled from the other's blood-streaked hands to the waving ranks of yellow stalks. He hadn't noticed before but there were curious little purple swellings at the base of them. The thought of poison instantly flashed into his mind. And he'd been wearing gloves, riding boots and a long-sleeved shirt. What a narrow escape. He paled as he thought just how narrow that escape was.

Miles sank to the ground, a hot fire spreading through the pit of his stomach. Craven did all he could to rouse him, but it was useless; he had resigned himself to death.

He sat there, an apathetic object, forever murmuring, "The grass! It was the grass!"

Presently he began to cough and fell sideways, vomiting. And so towards sunset Craven left him as the moon was high, came at last out of the grass of death and onto the long low slopes that lay below the mountains.

Ripping off his gloves, he went into a strange dance of glee, all the time shouting abuse at the thing called death that he had eluded. And in the middle of his jubilation he slipped and fell. The slope was steep and as he fell he rolled.

And presently he came to rest, half-in and half-out of the monstrous wall of grass. And the quivering blades had purple swellings at their base. And then he realised, and stared in horror at the tiny streams of scarlet trickling slowly down his fingers.

"Damn," he said.

And the grasses whispered to themselves.



RIDING THE CHARIOT

1

AINLEY was put out. He had just reached a most crucial point in the portrait and now, inexplicably, the light was beginning to fade. He went to one of the big studio windows that looked out over a jagged landscape of London chimney pots and squalid broken roofs and saw that dark storm clouds were gathering over the city. It was obvious that he would get no more work done that afternoon, even though it was not yet five o'clock. He called to Yvonne, his model, to put on her dressing gown and went back to look at his canvas.

It would be good; he could tell that even at this early stage. But it was a great pity that the work had to be interrupted. He flexed his long, thin fingers irritably, and wiped them with the turpentine rag before putting a cloth over the canvas. He washed his brushes and cleaned his palette; like most professionals he was meticulous about this and hated mess and muddle when he started work the next morning. The attractive, dark-haired Yvonne, currently his favourite model, was already dressed for the street. With her blue beret with the silver arrow ornament at a rakish angle, she looked exceptionally attractive this afternoon.

Why was it, he wondered, that beautiful women looked even more desirable with their clothes on, or semi-clothed, than they did in the nude? That was something he had never been able to work out to his

own satisfaction. She paused opposite him, a slightly mocking smile on her lips, as though she knew what he was thinking.

"Same time tomorrow?"

He nodded absently, softly repeating, "Same time tomorrow."

She gave him another enigmatic smile and was then gone through the far door, without so much as a glance at the sheeted canvas. She knew better than that. He waited until the faint echo of her heels had died away down the staircase. He again wondered what she did in her spare time and was surprised to feel a faint stab of jealousy. It was an emotion foreign to his nature and a warning that he was becoming too involved with this particular model.

He made a faint whistling noise between his teeth and then went over to the dressing-room behind the screen. He noticed its meticulous tidiness. That was one of the many things he liked about Yvonne. She was an exception to most women. He switched on the light over the wash-basin and scrubbed his hands with soap and a stiff brush in the hot water. He inspected his nails critically before turning out the light and leaving the room. There was a sudden crack of thunder as he did so and then the rattle of icy hail on the big north-facing windows and skylights. As he had surmised he would not have been able to do anything further today.

A strongly-built man of thirty-four, with black bushy hair, and a genial disposition, he was regarded as a coming artist, particularly at portraiture, and was beginning to be written about in fashionable art magazines. In fact, Alex Leonard, one of London's leading critics in the field was due to have dinner with him the following night. Now, as he locked the studio he had an almost morbid anxiety that someone might break in to steal his irreplaceable work; though it was quite impossible as the studio was on the fourth floor of his enormously tall house and the sheer walls offered no means of ingress for an intruder. His mind was concerned with a strange mixture of ideas and half-formulated plans.

Chief among them, of course, was his current canvas depicting Yvonne; the pose and the expression promised to be sensational and he had high hopes that it would have a great success at this year's Academy. He was using a mixture of oils and other media, which he was keeping secret for the moment, but which enhanced in a startling manner the girl's personality. Then there were two troubling duels—he could find no other word for it—with a prominent member of the Academy, which had been largely conducted by telephone; the fellow did not like him and his work and had tried his best in previous years to get his paintings hung in

dark and less frequented corners at the annual Exhibition, which had given rise to great bitterness on Ainley's part.

The other cause for anxiety was a virulent and prolonged correspondence in the leading art journals between himself and a famous critic over the merits of a protégé of Ainley's, a young South African who, in his opinion, showed great promise. On the credit side, was his growing fame; the generally favourable notices he was receiving in the national and even popular press; and the championing of his work by several major artists on the Board of the Academy.

As Ainley descended the stairs he realised that he was perhaps taking too seriously the crossing of swords with two men whom he detested; after all, they were passing shadows, and they would, as the great Marcus Aurelius had once said, recede rapidly into the past or something on those lines. He walked softly over the thick pile carpet through the mahogany double doors of his dining room, his spirits brightening at the immaculately laid table, the brilliant lighting from the shaded lamps and the thick velvet curtains drawn against the growing storm outside.

He crossed to the drinks trolley and poured himself a generous whisky from the crystal decanter. This was one of the best moments of the day and he always savoured it, though perhaps six o'clock was a little early. For him at any rate. He was always extremely careful of his liquor intake; he had seen so many promising talents in all the arts ruined through their misuse of drink; the sodden wrecks that haunted the bars of Soho and certain suburban pubs were salutary warning enough. So Ainley was careful, as he was in every aspect of his well-ordered life.

He was suddenly aware that Mrs. Rose had come into the room and was standing diffidently near the great leather wing chair which was his favourite. She had been his impeccable housekeeper for the past ten years and now he did not know what he would do without her. She was a widow, a well-educated woman, who also took messages and could do a little secretarial work if required. Moreover, she lived only a few streets away, which was extremely convenient and because of this often stayed until eight o'clock in the evening to serve his dinner and even later when he had guests.

Of course, he paid her well, but he realised that her devotion did not stem from that. All these thoughts passed through his mind in a short space of time but he then realised that she might think him rude and he hastened to ask, "Would you like to leave now, Mrs. Rose? I can get myself something cold later and this storm looks as though it is going to be a fierce one."

Mrs. Rose shook her head, a faint smile on her face. With her faded gold hair and smart black dress with flashes of white at the throat and cuffs, she looked exactly like a very successful headmistress of an expensive girls' school, Ainley thought with an inward flash of humour.

"No, no, Mr. Ainley; it isn't that. I just thought that as your work has been interrupted tonight, you might like dinner a little earlier. Say at six-forty-five?"

Ainley stretched out his long legs before him and reached for his whisky glass again.

"That will be fine, Mrs. Rose. And if the storm keeps up I will get you a taxi."

Again the firm shake of the head.

"I wouldn't dream of imposing, Mr. Ainley."

"It's not an imposition," Ainley said. "There are no buses or tubes nearby and you are too precious to risk. I'll take the fare out of your salary anyway . . ."

Broad smiles on each side this time, because the housekeeper knew he was joking.

"As you wish. By the way, there was one telephone message while you were up in the studio. Merely routine. I left it on your desk. It is just to confirm the dinner arrangements with Mr. Leonard tomorrow."

Ainley thanked her and she quietly withdrew. He sat savouring his drink, oblivious of the storm raging outside, oddly contented after the disturbing thoughts which had pursued him down the studio staircase. He finished his glass and then became more fully aware of the rain that was positively rattling at the windows and racing along the gutters. He moved over to one of the long casements and pulled back the curtain.

He was momentarily awed by the spectacle before him; the window glass streaming with what looked like a solid sheet of water; forked lightning making jagged patterns across the roof-tops, their silhouettes sharp-etched against the gleaming roof slates; and the next moment such a tremendous clap of thunder that Ainley thought that the house must come down on top of him. But all was well and as the crash died away into a menacing rumble, he pulled the thick elm shutters across both windows and then the curtains over them, muffling the uproar outside.

Nerves slightly jangled, he poured himself another whisky and resumed his seat, awaiting with pleasure the delights that Mrs. Rose had undoubtedly concocted for his dinner tonight.

2

"So what are you working on at the moment?"

Alex Leonard's somewhat wolfish features were alive with interest as he leaned forward in his seat and, looking across Ainley's shoulder, secretly admired a dazzling blonde girl at the other side of the Grill Room. He was a past master of dissimulation but the artist had known him for years and had guessed at his centre of interest, from the moment they came in. But the dinner was excellent and he was in a mellow mood from the night before, his temporary anxieties quite vanished.

"Something to interest you," Ainley said drily. "A large-scale nude."

"Ah!"

Leonard drew in his breath with an expressive sigh, his attention now entirely focused on Ainley.

"Yvonne? In which case I should like to see the work in progress. And to bring my photographer."

His companion shook his head, laughing.

"Nothing doing," he said emphatically. "Yvonne wouldn't like it and neither would I. But I'll make a bargain with you. Give me some decent publicity and I'll let you have a peek at my working photographs."

He always took pictures whenever he was working, even on landscapes; he was an excellent photographer and he had read his man aright. Leonard gave one of his celebrated vulpine smiles—a major reason why he hardly ever had his own picture taken.

"It's a deal," he said crisply. "When?"

"Soon," Ainley said evasively.

Then he added, seeing the look in the critic's eye.

"I'll give you a ring shortly."

"That's better."

Leonard's eyes were again fixed on the vision beyond his host's shoulder, as the latter ordered large cognacs and the chocolate bonbons in which the Grill specialised, to follow.

"I liked that piece you did about De Freitas," Ainley said, changing the subject.

"Hit the nail right on the head."

Leonard preened himself. Praise for his own work was meat and drink to him, though the artist had to admit that he wrote well, knowingly and fairly on the subjects closest to his heart. But there was something faintly repellent about the man. Even with his well-cut grey suit and patent-leather hair he looked reptilian.

"Ah, you noticed that, did you? As always, you come up to my expectations."

Ainley ignored the patronising tone.

"What are your latest plans?"

Not that he cared in the least.

Leonard glanced at his gold wrist watch, white teeth flashing like a gigolo beneath his well-trimmed moustache.

"Off to Paris for three days in the morning, old man, so I mustn't be too late tonight. A lot of packing to do."

Ainley nodded, aware that the other was still scrutinising the blonde girl who sat directly behind him, in the far corner.

"I mustn't keep you."

Leonard shrugged.

"Don't get me wrong. Didn't mean to be rude. And I am not in any special hurry. For half an hour or so, anyway. It's that girl in the corner there. She fascinates me."

Ainley forced a thin smile.

"What's so special about her?"

Again the rat-like expression.

"She's really something, old man. Pity you're not sitting where I'm sitting."

That can easily be remedied, Ainley thought, though he did not voice it aloud. The conversation then passed on to general artistic topics and Leonard left at last, thanking his host profusely for the excellent dinner—he was always careful to do this, angling for the next invitation—and finally made his exit, with many reluctant glances over his shoulder.

After a decent interval Ainley discreetly changed his seat to the one his guest had vacated and when the waiter came to clear the things, ordered another coffee. Hiding his impatience he waited until the table had been cleared and then casually let his glance wander over the half-empty Grill Room. He soon saw what had attracted Leonard. He would have had to have been half-blind or senile to ignore the attractions of the girl who sat skewed half on to him, while she was apparently deep in earnest conversation with a balding, nondescript sort of man who sat opposite.

It was a pity his table was not nearer, Ainley thought, but even at this distance the girl—or woman—was sensational. She was about twenty-eight to thirty, he would have said, and exquisitely built.

She wore some sort of gold lamé evening dress which he would have thought rather vulgar and obvious, but the way it clung to every line of

her figure appealed immensely to his artistic instincts. In fact she seemed almost too perfect, with her clear-minted profile and delicate hands, now folded beneath her chin, reminding Ainley vividly of the beautifully moulded Art Deco figures he had once collected assiduously until the prices became entirely too high.

The waiter had now brought his coffee and after he had mechanically paid his bill, leaving a good tip, he made a ritual of spooning in the sugar and stirring slowly while he studied the golden vision presented to him in this prosaic setting. Paradoxically he was looking for some defect in her face and form that would immediately have killed his interest. But he could not see any, and as she talked animatedly on, he became more and more interested, not to say fascinated.

At that moment the maître d'hotel passed near his table and stopped to have a word, as was his habit with well-known and influential customers. They exchanged a few pleasantries and then Ainley asked bluntly, "Can you tell me anything about that girl in the corner?"

The confidential smile was not part of the public persona for once, but a man to man understanding. The perfect teeth flashed in the girl's direction and then he was facing Ainley again.

"Ah, professional interest? Or something more?"

Ainley shifted a little uneasily in his chair but he answered without hesitation.

"Both. She'd make a perfect model."

Smithers, for that was his name, though he affected a more exotic one for the Grill, shrugged.

"Possibly," he said dubiously. "She's married, you know."

Ainley gave a low laugh.

"I only want to paint her."

The smile was back on the other's face.

"Be careful. One thing leads to another."

He straightened up from the table.

"She's a regular. I'll have her name and address and telephone number for you by the time you leave."

He waved away Ainley's thanks with its implied suggestion of some financial remuneration.

"Please . . . Invite me up to see your studio one evening. And her portrait, if you've captured it on canvas by then. That will be reward enough."

3

From the private diary of Walter Ainley:

It was the simplest thing in the world. I merely rang her up. She knew of me and was flattered at my attention. I asked if she would like to pose for a portrait and she seemed intrigued at the idea. Her name is Laurie Jamison and she is the wife of a Cabinet Minister! I shall have to be careful . . . We had lunch at the same Grill Room in which Leonard had already pointed her out to me. She has the most extraordinary green eyes and the exquisite profile I had already noted from a distance is staggeringly beautiful close up. All my artistic instincts are engaged.

I gather the balding man with whom she was dining the other day was her husband. I am not impressed. (But then, would anyone expect me to be?) She is quite unconscious of her own beauty and refreshingly diffident about herself. She has not made up her mind about posing. I decided not to press her upon the point or to be too insistent about visiting the studio. It is a great nuisance that her husband is such a public man.

He might have enquiries made about me or something of that unpleasant nature when he knows of my interest in Laurie. I call her that, though only within the privacy of my diary. We left things in the air and she said she would ring me some time, after she had discussed the matter with her husband.

This is a nuisance as I have no wish to become involved with him. I suggested this tactfully when we were having coffee. She laughed. She has a way of throwing her head back and at the same time exposing beautiful teeth, which is one of the most arresting things I have ever seen. Indeed, people in the Grill Room were most taken with her and many an admiring glance was cast in our direction. If she does come I hope Yvonne will not become jealous. It would be a difficult situation and I have no wish to lose her services.

That is something I will meet when the time comes. I will give her (*i.e.* Laurie), a month in which to make up her mind and will then ring her if I don't hear anything. I must confess I find my thoughts turning more toward her as the silence from her end grows day by day and it is beginning to blur my concentration on Yvonne's portrait. I must hurry on and finish it in case Laurie suddenly decides to accept my invitation. I am still at a loss as to how to broach the matter to Yvonne, as she can obviously see that I am preoccupied. Things will work out in the end, I have no doubt.

4

The shrilling of the phone in the studio burned Ainley's nerves like acid. Yvonne turned a startled face to him. He was at a difficult stage of the painting and both knew that only the most important matters would drive Mrs. Rose to disturb them when they were working. Ainley went to the instrument in a silence so palpable that the repetition of the shrilling noise seemed an intolerable intrusion.

"Yes, Mrs. Rose?"

"I'm sorry to disturb you, Mr. Ainley, but it's the lady you spoke of. Mrs. Jamison . . . She was most insistent that she speak to you. Shall I put her through?"

His voice was trembling slightly as he replied.

"No, it's all right, Mrs. Rose. I'll come down."

Yvonne was already struggling into her dressing gown.

"Urgent business?"

He nodded.

"I'll only be half an hour at the outside. Please make yourself a cup of coffee in the meantime. You'll find cake and biscuits in the cupboard."

An agitated pulse was beating in his throat as he hurried downstairs. His voice was a trifle hoarse as he picked up the telephone in his study on the ground floor. Mrs. Rose had discreetly withdrawn, closing the door behind her and the extension could not be switched through to the study unless another button was activated on the console, so he knew they could not be overheard.

"Mr. Ainley?"

"Yes, Mrs. Jamison."

His voice sounded to him metallic and unreal and he could not recognise it. But he apparently sounded normal to her because she merely replied in even tones.

"I have decided to accept your kind offer to paint my portrait, Mr. Ainley."

He had difficulty in keeping his voice steady.

"That is good of you. Your husband has agreed?"

There was a slight hesitation before the girl replied.

"I have not told him, Mr. Ainley. I will keep the portrait as a surprise for him on his next birthday."

Ainley bit back the sentence that was on the point of springing to his lips. He had wished to keep the portrait for himself and he did not regard it as a commission. However he reflected swiftly, he could easily do another study at the same time, as well as a few sketches. And there

would be the photographs so that her image would always remain before him.

"Excellent."

He was riffling through the diary on the desk before him, making rapid calculations.

"When would the first sitting suit you?"

"Shall we say three o'clock on Tuesday next week, if that is not too soon for you?"

Yvonne never came on Tuesdays, so he might not have to tell her of these new appointments. A slight cloud on the horizon, which he impatiently brushed away.

"No, that would be fine. Until next Tuesday, then."

"I shall look forward to it."

There was a faint click as the receiver went down.

He looked at himself in the big gilt mirror as he made for the study door. Beads of perspiration were gleaming on his forehead. He wiped them away vigorously with his handkerchief as he went back up the stairs to the studio.

5

"Well, how do you like it, then? As you know I don't usually display unfinished work but this one promises to be exceptional."

Yvonne was ecstatic. She gazed at the canvas for a long time, with parted lips, without saying anything, which was unusual with her. Eventually she tore her gaze away and stared at him with a strange expression in her eyes.

"It is magnificent! If it doesn't sound too pretensions it bears all the marks of genius."

There was a long silence between the two. To tell the truth, Ainley was deeply moved. Yvonne was an unusual girl for an artist's model; highly intelligent, well-educated and thoughtful. Her opinion meant a great deal to him though he would not have admitted it to her face. Her reaction on this occasion was exceptional.

"Thank you, Yvonne. I am glad for both our sakes. I think I have captured the essence of your character."

The girl was flushed, her eyes sparkling.

"Rather more than that. How much more work will you need?"

He knew the latter part of her remarks was meant to restore a little more normality to the occasion.

He shrugged.

"About four or five days. Detail, really. I shan't touch the face, of course."

He moved abruptly away from her.

"Put your dressing gown on. We'll have a glass or two of champagne to celebrate."

He went over toward the liquor cabinet with its cold compartment. The toast would serve a double purpose. Laurie would be coming for her first sitting the following week. He already called her Laurie in his own mind. Her husband was a mere cipher in his calculations; in any case his government and Parliamentary duties must keep him occupied for most of the time. But he dare not think beyond the first sitting. He must act normally; be very gentle and tactful. Slowly accustom her to his ways.

A faint shadow passed across his face as he poured the champagne. He could hear Yvonne singing softly as she moved about the dressing room. How to keep the two of them apart; it should not be insoluble. The sensual and the spiritual. The eternal conflict between lustful desire and the ethereal. His eyes met Yvonne's over the rim of his glass as they drank the toast.

"Here's to a successful future."

That night he had a vivid dream; he rarely dreamt but this was so real and extraordinary that he committed it to his diary the following morning. He was living in some remote period of antiquity. He wore a sort of white toga with a bandeau round his brow. The atmosphere was tropical with blue skies and tremendous heat. He was driving a strange vehicle drawn by a team of four horses, at a furious pace. There were two women with him; one blonde, the other brunette. Both were nude, their bodies streaked with sweat; they stood one either side of him, urging him on with curt commands in a language he could not understand.

Their hair streamed out behind them with the speed of their progress as they gave him lascivious smiles and pressed their slim, desirable bodies against him. Ainley whipped the horses on, feeling as though his heart would burst with exhilaration and emotion. The sun burnt into his eyes and suddenly he could see the dark-haired girl's face; it was Yvonne, but the other, the fair one's features, were suddenly blurred as she shook her hair out in the breeze. The brilliance of the light grew and the pounding of the horses' hooves faded. Ainley was suddenly awake; shaken and appalled but glad to be back in his bed in the familiar surroundings of his own house.

Mrs. Rose had already been in because the sun was blazing through the windows and the curtains billowing in the slight breeze. Perhaps that was the genesis of the strange dream. He hurried to perform his toilet

and get down to breakfast but it was an hour or more before he was able to dispel the vivid reality of the images of the night.

Today was not one of Yvonne's sittings and as, for some reason, he was reluctant to spend a lot of time on touching up small details of the portrait, he decided instead to get the tube to the West End and do some window shopping. He had toyed with the idea of calling at Laurie's house; not that he had any idea of going in—that would have been disastrous under the circumstances—but just to look at the exterior. She and her husband lived in a large town house near Mount Street in Mayfair, but eventually he decided against. He would be seeing her again shortly in any case and he must not be too precipitate. If he ran into her in the street it might set her thoughts in a certain direction and he did not want that to happen.

Instead, he got out at Bond Street tube station, avoiding the milling crowds in Oxford Street, made his way through a small alley and onward to the establishment of Cedric Martineau. He was an antique dealer whom Ainley had known for some years; never close friends, they nevertheless remained on amiable terms and the former had often trimmed his prices whenever the artist wanted some exotic piece for his studio. Unless they were of exceptional quality or rarity, Ainley would later sell them back to Martineau when their use as props for his portrait studies had been exhausted.

To his great credit the former always bought them back for the same price as Ainley had paid; in turn the artist had done a number of water colours of the dealer's wife and children and in this way a balance had been struck between them. The shop was a large establishment which extended across four plate-glass windows, heavily protected with steel mesh at night; and it was deep, extending back some sixty feet to where Martineau had his offices and secretarial staff, for he did a good deal of export trade. As though hesitant, Ainley spent some time studying objects in the windows before Martineau caught sight of him on the pavement and hastily beckoned him inside.

"Something special?" said Ainley with a faint smile, knowing Martineau's approach when he was about to ask him to buy something.

The antique dealer nodded.

"Something special," he said softly. "Perfect for your requirements, Walter. Knowing your extraordinary taste in decor."

Ainley laughed.

"I'm willing to look. But I'm not committing myself."

There was no-one else in the big showrooms at the moment and Martineau led the way toward the shadowy rear, in the large cleared area adjoining his offices.

"What do you think of this?" he said, switching on two ornate wall-sconces.

The image that suddenly sprang out at Ainley as though on a stage set, so staggered him that he was unable to speak for a moment and had to catch hold of the back of a Louis XVI canapé to prevent himself from falling.

Martineau, having noticed nothing out of the ordinary, went on with his eulogy.

"Extremely rare. In magnificent condition. We haven't yet worked out its provenance, but it's obviously 18th century or even earlier. Real museum quality and not over-priced."

Ainley stared frozenly at the object under the mellow lighting. What he saw was, to his suddenly fevered imagination, an exact and familiar replica. It was a large chariot, with long, slender shafts. Its huge wheels had burnished bosses—the artist supposed so at any rate—as only one side was presented to him and, as Martineau had said, it looked in superb condition. At some stage it had been painted a dark green with the panels and studs picked out in gilt paint, some of which had faded and foxed over the years, if one could use that term of such an artefact.

Martineau had given Ainley a glance over his shoulder in which admiration at the object of the projected sale now fought with consternation.

"What's the matter, Walter? Are you ill?"

Ainley shook his head, conscious of perspiration trickling down his face. He sat trembling on the banquette. The other was at his side, concern on his face.

"It's nothing, really, Cedric. It's just that I had a terrifying dream last night, which featured an exact replica of this chariot."

"Good God! You must be psychic. Hold on a moment."

Martineau was back in a few moments with a small crystal liquor glass.

"Drink this. It's only a nip of cognac. Soon set you up."

He sat down on a carved oak chair opposite Ainley and folded his arms, while his pale grey eyes searched the other's face.

"You look better now. Your experience is certainly strange, especially as you haven't been here for at least six months. Premonition, perhaps? That led your footsteps this way today. Want to tell me about it?"

Ainley shook his head. He was feeling better now and stammeringly expressed his thanks.

"Nothing to tell, really. Except that I was riding in this chariot, or one very much like it. In the dream, I mean. And I woke up feeling terrible.

The thing was drawn by four white horses and going at a tremendous rate beneath a blue tropical sky."

He shuddered suddenly and drained the residue of the cognac in the glass, waving away the proffered decanter. Martineau gave a nervous laugh and got to his feet.

"Well, I shouldn't worry too much about it, old chap. These things, as queer as they seem, do happen in life. I just thought it would do you beautifully for some of your more fantastic studies."

He drew down the corners of his mouth.

"Obviously, I shan't sell this in a hurry. Too big for one thing and too delicate to be driven. So you've plenty of time to make up your mind. As to whether you're interested . . ."

Ainley felt himself again. He got up quickly, grateful for the dealer's solicitude. He walked round the chariot, admiring its beautiful workmanship. The reverse side was in the same fine condition and there was no sign of woodworm. He paused at the half-open gate at the rear of the vehicle.

"It's quite safe to go up," Martineau said encouragingly. "The well is cased with heavy copper sheathing, incised with some sort of Greek motto. We're still trying to work it out."

Ainley went to stand at the front of the chariot; it trembled slightly beneath his weight and he felt his heart beating faster. The dream seemed to come back overwhelmingly for a moment. He stepped down again and the two men looked at the beautiful equipage for a while in silence.

"Where did you get it? Or shouldn't I ask?"

Martineau shook his head wryly.

"No secret. A stately home sale in Norfolk. Some magnificent things there. This chariot had been kept in a place of honour inside the mansion. Extraordinary, really. There were some waxwork figures with it, but they seemed rather morbid and we didn't want them anyway."

The silence in the showroom seemed suddenly oppressive to Ainley.

"How much?"

Martineau named a figure. Ainley let out a low whistle.

"Even without the figures and the horses? Not to mention the reins!"

The two men laughed awkwardly. But Martineau could see that the artist was seriously considering the proposition.

"I'll tell you what I'll do," he said at length. "Let me have a third of the price and I'll have it delivered to your studio. If you're satisfied you can pay me what you like off the balance as and when you like. Alternatively, you can let me have it back and I'll return your deposit. I can't say fairer

than that. To be truthful, we paid a little more than we wanted because of its age and unique condition. And though I'll probably get a museum interested in due course, cash-flow is the name of the game, as you know."

He was smiling now and Ainley was constrained to smile too. He made a sudden decision.

"That's very fair, Cedric. It's a deal!"

The two men shook hands on it.

6

"It's beautiful but what do you want it for?" Yvonne said.

Ainley had had the chariot mounted on a rostrum at the far end of the vast studio, and after Mrs. Rose had wax-polished it, the artist had to admit that it looked magnificent. Now Yvonne went gingerly up the steps on to the platform and circled it cautiously.

"Can't you see it?" Ainley said. "You in the chariot, holding the reins? The wind blowing your hair back? The cloak on your shoulders streaming out behind?"

Yvonne's eyes gleamed. Her breath made a little implosion in the silence of the huge room.

"I begin to see what you're getting at."

Her scarlet mouth pouted.

"But shan't I catch my death of cold posing like that?"

Ainley smiled

"For the preliminary photographs only. The reins will be fixed to a peg out of range. The cloak will be suspended on invisible wires. And your hair will be ruffled by an electric fan."

Yvonne laughed.

"Sounds wonderful!"

Ainley had to smile at her expression.

"Nevertheless, my dear, I will make you immortal!"

"That's all right, then."

Still nude, she snuggled into his arms.

In the days that followed Ainley counted the hours, almost the minutes. He dare not ring. He only hoped that Laurie would come on the day and at the hour they had fixed. He need not have worried. Mrs. Rose came to him in the study, her face bright and creased in a smile.

"The lady is here!"

Ainley was suddenly calm. He stood up abruptly.

"Thank you, Mrs. Rose."

From the private diary of Walter Ainley:

She has been! Despite my misgivings, everything went well. She is enchanting. Much taken with the house and particularly with the studio. She was greatly impressed with the chariot. I explained something of my ideas to her, though of course I did not reveal my true intentions. She was most amenable to my suggestions in posing. I am becoming more and more under her spell.

But she seems quite unaware of this and appears to think that I am doing her a favour! If only she knew . . . She posed for me and I made a few preliminary sketches, which greatly pleased her. I had hidden the large canvas of Yvonne, of course, and had naturally made no mention of my other models.

Mrs. Rose brought us tea in the study and all in all everything went well. She stayed for over two hours, for this was a mere introductory visit and we made an arrangement for her to come next Tuesday at the same time but she has promised that on this occasion she will sit for me as long as the light lasts. I am to take her on to dinner afterward. It will seem a long week.

7

Ainley sat quietly in the dusk at the far side of the studio. Yvonne's portrait was almost finished and she had left only a few minutes earlier. Now, with the muted sound of traffic from far away he felt tired but content. He got out the small sheaf of drawings he had begun as working exercises for the portrait of Laurie. She was exquisite and he had captured her expression exactly. He was delighted and it was comforting to have a permanent reminder of her beauty. When he had finished them—they needed only a few final touches—he would have them framed under glass for his private archive, kept in another, permanently locked room, away from the public atmosphere of the studio.

From these he turned to the chariot which sat gleaming beneath the lamps on the rostrum. He was becoming more and more enamoured of it as a permanent piece of decor and reflected that Martineau had been right. It was a magnificent *coup de théâtre* and would come in useful, both for portrait sittings and for photography. He made up his mind to send the dealer six-monthly cheques until the capital sum was paid off.

At the same time he would like to know more about its provenance and had telephoned Cedric the day before to ask him to continue with his inquiries. He carried a light chair over to the far end of the studio, his favourite study of Laurie in his hand. He sat there for a long time,

shifting his gaze from the portrait to the chariot and then back again until he became aware that darkness had long since fallen outside the studio skylights.

Restless, he gave his orders for dinner to Mrs. Rose, and went out. It was a fine evening with a brilliant moon and a fresh breeze. He walked steadily, the air cool on his cheeks, his chin tucked into the collar of his light overcoat. For an hour he stood in an entry opposite Laurie's house, watching the two golden squares of light on the first floor of the mansion, that to him denoted the dining room, for he was familiar with the geography of such houses.

Once his heart missed a beat when her shadow passed across the blind. He was chilled yet exhilarated when she finally came to the window, drew back the thin curtain and stared down at the lamplit street. He shrank into the entry, drinking in her beauty for he was extremely long-sighted and the light in the room illuminated her superb profile. Then she had dropped the blind and her shadow disappeared. He walked quickly to his house, contented in mind though unsatisfied in every other way.

The days passed and Ainley had begun her portrait. She was surprisingly amenable to his suggestions. As a preliminary he took a number of photographs, and when he asked if she would permit some off-the-shoulder studies she acquiesced with a readiness and a simplicity that astonished him. By this time he had finished the big oil painting of Yvonne and Leonard had been with his photographer to do a story and pictures on his latest submission to the Academy. The photographer was present throughout and Leonard did not ask about Laurie and he himself gave no hint that she had become his latest model.

By this time he had asked Yvonne to pose in the chariot and she had been extremely enthusiastic. He had to admit that she looked exceedingly beautiful; he had purchased some leather reins and had fixed them to the opposite wall so that it looked as though she were driving the chariot. He took a number of photographs of her in flowing white robes and then a number of nudes in the same poses, both in profile and full on and though the effect was powerfully erotic it did not give him the same thrill as when he imagined Laurie in similar poses. It was a matter of simple chemistry, he supposed; the fact that she was married added to his desires and he realised, with faint misgiving, that she was becoming an obsession with him.

Whether it was an unhealthy one, only time would tell. He had numerous fantasies about her, both in his waking hours and in his dreams

now and some of the visions were so powerful and so pornographic that he would not even confide them to the secrecy of his own diary.

In the meantime he was careful to be gentle and perfectly proper every time Laurie came to the studio and, in fact, he let her lead in the direction in which he wished her to go. As before, she was fascinated with the chariot on the second visit and immediately noticed the addition of the reins and asked him about their purpose. He gave her a few subtle hints and his thoughts about certain of his models posing for him in the vehicle wearing flowing classical draperies.

He was certain he had planted a seed in her mind and for the first proper sitting, as she posed on the other rostrum in a high, carved-back chair, for the formal oil painting he could see that she was turning over ideas for her glance again and again rested on the gleaming, highly polished wheels and gilded bosses of the great artefact in the far corner.

But despite all his erotic thoughts, Ainley was a patient man and he made sure that he engaged in no untoward moves; his fantasies had begun to crystallise in his mind and he had a wonderful idea for a magnificent painting in the 18th century style that might well put the seal on his career. The photographs would come first, of course, as they always did; as they had with Yvonne and with a long line of his female models. They were the small, apparently insignificant levers, that eventually made all his dreams come true.

They had never failed in the past and he could not afford to have them fail now. It was absolutely crucial to his plans that he move slowly but surely; he could not let drop one unguarded word, one false step that might send the edifice he had erected in his mind, crashing to the ground. There was also the great danger posed by the husband; a Cabinet Minister, no less; one of the government's inner circle. A powerful enemy if his purpose were exposed. No, Ainley ruminated, he had to be very, very careful indeed. Something of his tension had percolated to the consciousness of Mrs. Rose, who was a very intelligent and percipient woman. Twice recently she had asked him if anything was troubling him; if he had problems on his mind.

He had laughed her questions away, of course, but that was an added worry. It was obvious that Mrs. Rose had observed the comings and goings of these two beautiful women between the house and the studio and she could not have failed to observe that they came on different days and that neither obviously knew of the other's existence. But the house-keeper had tremendous tact and if she had such thoughts she kept them to herself, for which the painter was grateful.

8

From the private diary of Walter Ainley:

Laurie has been twice more. Though the portrait has progressed I could see that she was becoming more and more absorbed and fascinated with my idea of her posing in the chariot. On her last visit we broke off the formal sitting and she went behind the screen to change into the white robe I had purchased from a West End store the previous day, as I had, of course, already obtained her measurements. She was delighted with the effect in the long mirror. She looked like a goddess as she took the reins of the chariot and I obtained a number of striking photographs. I have to confess now that I am madly in love with her and the thoughts of her absorb me day and night.

My brain is like a furnace sometimes and my obsession is affecting my normal work; even Yvonne has noticed it and she is not normally an imaginative girl. I have now finished her major study for the Academy and it has been formally accepted for the Exhibition. But I also need Yvonne to achieve my ambition and so I have commenced a head and shoulders portrait in oils, which keeps her at the studio once a week in order to continue our normal routine. Naturally, she poses for other artists on other days, but what she does then is no concern of mine. In any event she models principally for old Strudwick, who must be eighty-five if he's a day, and I fancy he is no rival for me in her affections.

Casually, as though by accident, I left the huge nude of Yvonne under a cloth near the chariot rostrum on Laurie's last visit. As I had thought, she, being inquisitive, and wandering about the studio, as she usually did, lifted the velvet and gazed long at the work. She said nothing for a while, but licked her lips once or twice; I could see that she was impressed. At last she asked about the model. I told her and much later, when her sitting in the chariot was over, she said she would like to meet Yvonne.

I have planted the seed; now I must wait for it to come to fruition. But it is difficult and I now find I am not a patient man so far as Laurie is concerned. Then there is still the hurdle of Yvonne to get over; she is inclined to be jealous and I don't know what her reaction might be when she finds there is another woman on the scene.

9

Ainley took a day off. He was tensed up and realised he was falling behind in his working schedule. He took the opportunity to have the huge oil painting of Yvonne crated and transported to the Academy. That task fulfilled he had lunch in town and then strolled round to Cedric Martineau's shop. He was not there but one of his elegant girl assistants

said he was out to lunch but would be back shortly. To his surprise Ainley found that the dealer did not seem too pleased to see him. In fact he was distinctly uneasy, which was unprecedented for him.

He did his best to conceal it and invited Ainley into his luxurious panelled office, where one of the girls brought them coffee. It was really a social visit and the painter had not intended to ask, but he took the opportunity to question Martineau about the provenance of the chariot. The dealer shook his head; he was sorry; he had intended to go into the matter but he had been far too busy lately. Ainley, who was extremely shrewd and alert, even for an artist, had not missed the strange expression on the face of a red-headed secretary who sat at one of the far desks. It was an uneasy meeting and the strained conversation between the two men was concluded in another ten minutes.

Ainley found himself on the street again, puzzled and irritated. He could have sworn that the girl had been expressing disbelief at the dealer's words. Had Martineau found out something about the chariot? Something unpleasant or detrimental? Perhaps something that might have depressed the price? As he strolled homeward through the bustle of the West End, Ainley dismissed the latter thought.

Martineau was an extremely fair and honest man and he would have mentioned such a fact immediately. It had to be another motive; perhaps some aspect of the vehicle's history. Ainley knew the stately home from which Martineau had purchased it and he had also been told the address of the local office of the distinguished auction house which had handled the sale.

A quick telephone call might give him the answer; he would ask Mrs. Rose to look up the number for him later in the afternoon. Instead, he found his feet taking him in the direction of Mount Street. He stayed in the doorway for more than two hours, until, after dusk, he saw a large Ministerial type of car draw up to the kerb. Two men in dark clothes and homburg hats got out. One of them was obviously Laurie's husband for he produced a door key and fumbled for the lock at the top of the elegant steps.

Another car drew up at that point and a third man and two glamorous-looking women in evening gowns got out; they all greeted one another with cries of pleasure. A dinner party, evidently. Ainley waited until they had all disappeared inside the house and the cars had driven off, before he made his way homeward. He now realised he was in the grip of ungovernable obsession.

That night he dreamed a terrible dream. They were all in the chariot; the three of them, that is. Himself, Laurie and Yvonne; they were all

naked and tearing through the sky at tremendous speed. Laurie handled the reins and Yvonne wielded a whip which sang and cracked over the heads of the four white horses. The women had expressions of devilish joy on their faces. Then, suddenly and inexplicably they turned on him and tried to throw him out the chariot. Desperate, Ainley clung to the gilded side-rail as the whole equipage hurtled out of control toward the ground. There was a splintering crash and he woke with a dreadful cry. He was trembling uncontrollably and drenched in perspiration, so vivid had been the dream.

But was it a dream? He switched on his bedside lamp and saw it was two A.M. He put on his dressing gown, fearful that he may have aroused the neighbours. But the whole house was calm and still, its gentle rhythm measured out by the ticking of the grandfather clock on the landing. He hurried quickly up to the studio, unlocked the heavy door, which was lined with steel against intruders who might wish to steal the valuable paintings.

The whole idea was absurd but he had to make sure. The lights revealed merely stillness and order. The chariot stood in its normal place, undamaged. He stood looking at it for some time, finally walking round it, seized by the ridiculous idea that it might be damaged on the other side. But all was well. Aware that he was becoming chilled, he re-locked the door and went back to his room. He slept fitfully until daylight.

10

From the private diary of Walter Ainley:

The last three weeks have seen the most miraculous transformation in my affairs. To my wonder and delight Laurie had agreed to pose nude for me. I was too hesitant but it was her own suggestion! Not only that but I took a number of intimate photographs of her in the chariot. I cannot believe my good fortune. I then started my preparatory studies of her riding naked in the chariot. We had only the first sitting and then we became lovers. I cannot describe what ecstasy and joy she gives me; she takes the lead in everything and revels in our inventiveness yet outwardly she is so demure and shy.

I have never met or known anyone like her but whenever I have mentioned the possibility of a permanent liaison, she smilingly shakes her head. I understand. As the wife of a Cabinet Minister . . . but why explain? He has a fortune and a title and naturally, she has a title also.

I will try to solve that problem in due course. In the meantime the last few weeks have flowed by like a dream. I have seldom been so happy in

my life. Not only that but Laurie's curiosity had been aroused by Yvonne's portrait. She herself suggested that the two of them should pose nude in the chariot. How do dreams come true with such astonishing facility. Sometimes I myself feel as though I am also in a dream; there are occasions when I hardly know whether I am awake or in a dream-state. But I do know that Laurie has inspired me.

I am painting like a demon. The finished works—and I include the formal portrait for her husband—will be sensational when presented to the public; of the very top class. I have already made my name but these works will set the seal on my international reputation. I must stop these entries for the moment. The major obstacle to the realisation of all my desires is Yvonne's reaction. I must proceed very carefully here. And I had completely forgotten my former eagerness to obtain the provenance of the chariot and the meaning of the Greek characters incised in the copper sheathing.

I must ring Cedric Martineau some time. But my fevered thoughts run on and my brain seems on fire with the joy of Laurie's submitting to my desires. If for any reason she turned against me I would be completely within her power, so obsessed am I with the permanent possession of her.

Later—I have spoken to Yvonne. I was amazed and delighted at her reaction. Though surprised at my suggestion she acquiesced at once; I sense she is immensely attracted to Laurie. I had shown her some of the photographs, without revealing the identity of the sitter and she immediately realised the possibilities of such an oil study. It will be magnificent and we both know it. Of course, Yvonne merely believes that Laurie is another professional model and I have primed the latter and we have introduced her under the banal name of Sandra Jones. The first sittings begin tomorrow.

Later—All has gone fantastically well. I worked for six hours non-stop and the large-scale work promises to be superb. The two girls, one blonde, the other brunette, get on beautifully and they look wonderful together. The only cloud is that they so closely resemble my terrible dreams that I sometimes wonder if my brain is not giving way. At first the pair were giggling and shy together but now they are brazen in the extreme.

Yesterday, with the study three-quarters finished—I have been working day and night recently—Laurie actually suggested I join them in the chariot—nude. I did and we took a number of intimate studies with the time-release camera. When I had developed them in my dark room they were fantastic. So erotic that the images seemed to burn themselves into one's brain. Am I losing my sanity? And where will this all end? It seems that we three are embarked on an insane course that can only lead eventually to disaster. Mrs. Rose knows nothing, naturally, and has even commented that I am looking better than I have for a long time. Laurie now comes and goes by the discreet staircase which leads direct to the

studio from the side of the house. No-one goes there any more, but I have oiled the door-lock and given her her own key.

There was something I had not thought of, though. I am determined to show the study of the two girls in the Exhibition next year. There will be a good deal of publicity, naturally. But where does that leave the Cabinet Minister? It would obviously lead to a showdown. Best to meet that in a year's time. I should finish *The Two Graces*, as I have tentatively entitled it, in three or four days. I have never worked so hard in my life and spend hours on the task, even when the girls are not here, painting from photographs. Both women think the result stupendous. For once I have displayed to them work in progress. It represents the best work of my life, and achieved in a quarter of the time I normally take, as I have been at white heat. I put down the pen now, as I am exhausted.

From the private diary of Walter Ainley, July:

I have been ill. Mrs. Rose had become anxious and called the doctor. It was a fever and I had apparently been wandering in my mind. Fortunately, just before my collapse, I had locked away *The Two Graces*, now completed, in the back room of the studio. It would not do for outsiders to see it. I must congratulate myself on that. When I had recovered I rang Cedric Martineau; he apologised for his behaviour the last time I visited his shop. He was preoccupied with business worries. I assured him I would call in with my cheque. We did not touch on the matter of the chariot.

A few days after I had recovered I had a strange visit from the Cabinet Minister himself. He was worried and distraught. He had not seen or heard from Laurie in two months. Is it really May since she was last here? I was glad now that I had removed the chariot to the locked room as well; it held too many memories. Laurie had told him that she was sitting for a portrait . . . he was sorry to disturb me, but had I any news? I reassured him as much as possible, but apologised for not being able to help. He stood in front of the formal portrait with tears in his eyes for a long while.

I was embarrassed and disturbed. The poor man expressed delight at the magnificence of my study of his wife. I told him it had been intended as a birthday gift for him and he was deeply moved. I explained that I would like to exhibit it at the Academy next year but that it would find a permanent resting place with him in due course. He was overwhelmed; when I had given him refreshment he stayed talking about Laurie for an hour and I told him how much I had admired her.

I promised to let him know if I heard any news of her. He departed bowed and dejected, his gait that of a sleep-walker. I sat into the dusk for a long while after he had gone. I missed Yvonne's company but I have sent her on a special mission and she will not return for some time. But now

that the husband has gone I will bring back the two studies and let the chariot resume its rightful place on the rostrum. It runs quite smoothly and I am now feeling strong and fit, despite my recent illness.

11

Mrs. Rose became alarmed when Ainley did not appear for his regular mealtimes. He went out to visit Martineau one afternoon but she had not seen him after that. She then recollected that it was more than two days since she had last seen him. He sometimes stayed in the studio without eating or sleeping when he was deeply engrossed on some major work but this was the longest occasion she could remember. Greatly disturbed, she ascended to the studio. She knocked several times at the armoured door but could get no reply. It was locked, of course.

Then she became aware of a dreadful stench that was permeating the atmosphere at the top of the narrow stair. With an appalling sense of disaster she beat on the unyielding surface of the door, continuously calling Ainley's name. But there was no reply though she could now hear a low humming sound. She fled down the stairs to enlist the help of the gardener from the next house. But the door defeated him and they could not find the key. In the end they had to fetch a locksmith to open the thing.

With the rush of foul air there was a terrible buzzing and clouds of horrible blow flies blackened the skylights of the studio as they rose from the floor. What they found there haunted Mrs. Rose to the end of her days. In the event she had a complete nervous collapse and had to spend several months in a nursing home before she was ready to take up what passed for a normal life again.

12

Extract from the DAILY MAIL, dated July:

ARTIST'S HOUSE OF HORROR Continued from page 1.

At the resumed inquest, Chief Inspector Derek Ridgeway, who is in charge of the case, told the Westminster Coroner, Dr. Horace Pollock, that the naked body of Yvonne Simmonds, a 28-year-old artist's model had been found in a locked cupboard in the studio. She had been strangled and medical examination had proved that she had been murdered by her employer, the 34-year-old artist, Walter Ainley. Documents and a secret diary kept by Mr. Ainley in a locked desk in his study, led the police to

conclude that the girl had been attempting to blackmail her employer over an alleged liaison with a titled woman who had been posing in the nude with her and the artist.

Said the Chief Inspector, "When we examined the studio we found a vehicle beneath canvas sheeting on a rostrum up at the far end. I understand it is a sort of chariot, dating from the 18th century, or even earlier, which had been sold to Mr. Ainley by Mr. Cedric Martineau, the Mayfair antique dealer, whose evidence you have already heard.

"Within the chariot were the remains of a man and a woman, both nude, the woman's body far gone in decomposition. Again, medical examination has proved that she too had been strangled by the deceased artist. The male body was that of Mr. Ainley himself. You have the woman's name, sir, but on Home Office instructions, in view of her high connections in Government circles, we have been asked to withhold her identity from the press and public for the time being."

The Coroner: "That is correct."

The Chief Inspector continued: "After long and detailed examination of the papers found in Mr. Ainley's desk, particularly that of the secret diary, it is our conclusion that he was completely infatuated, not to say obsessed, with the blonde woman found with him in the chariot. Whether it be true or not, it seems from his diary, that he found that she was also involved with another man in high Government circles, and as a consequence, in a fit of jealous rage, he strangled her in turn.

The Coroner: "After careful examination of photocopies of these papers, and the official report by the Home Office pathologist, Dr. Otto Voller, I understand there is some bizarre aspect to this case which makes rendering a true verdict rather difficult."

The Chief Inspector: "Yes, sir. The facts are these and we are unable to reach any valid conclusions. The body of the blonde woman, who was about 30 years of age, revealed under examination, that she had been dead some two months. In contrast, Mr. Ainley had been dead for only two days. Yet the woman's hands were locked round his throat and from skin tissue and nail parings it was evident that she had strangled him in turn, though that was a physical impossibility."



FINAL DESTINATION

1

SHOLEM moved over languidly, enjoying the warmth of the bed. Still half asleep, he was absorbed with the charm of the recurring dream. It was the third or fourth occasion now, and the details, vague as they were, were always the same. He lay back, savouring the fragrance of the early morning; the fresh smell of mown hay came through the half-open window and cow bells were jingling somewhere in the far meadow. His wife lay asleep, her brown hair tumbled into the pillow, her face hidden from him.

He leaned over and kissed her bare shoulder, almost absent-mindedly, before carefully re-arranging the sheet over her, and resuming his original position. She did not stir. He wondered idly whether he should mention the dream. It seemed so inconsequential now he was awake; and he had not been able to remember it until the second occasion. What was so unusual was that it concerned the same subject each time. Sholem was not an expert on dreams or indeed on anything except his own vocation but he understood from his readings that dreams which featured the same subject, time after time, were a comparative rarity.

It was probably because he and Anna had been talking about a holiday recently. He badly needed one and had been working hard in the business over the past few months. Times were bad and they needed every

penny; but they had a little put by and it was Anna's own dream to have a few days in a good hotel. Either that or the seaside. They could not make up their minds. But they had all the summer before them so there were plenty of destinations from which to choose. It was fairly obvious that the dream had stemmed from their talks of taking a holiday.

It began, so far as he could recollect, with a long train journey. There was much sunshine and many people with them, all bound for the same resort. Then followed the excitement of their arrival; the unloading of luggage. Their destination was vague in the dream, but there were always people in striped blazers awaiting them; and beautiful music from a large-scale orchestra with brass instruments that glistened in the sunshine. It was such a happy dream that Sholem always awoke with a feeling of exultation. Always he hoped that the dream would go a little farther. That is, he would be inside the hotel with its glittering ballrooms and vast restaurants, that echoed and re-echoed to the beautiful music.

But it always ended with the entrance to the hotel for some reason. Anyway, perhaps the next time he dreamed, they would be inside enjoying themselves; possibly having a sumptuous meal, finishing up with ice-cream concoctions in tall glasses. Sholem loved ice-cream and could never get enough of it whenever he went on holiday. Though it was now some time since they had had a proper break, he and Anna. Things were bad, and though they had talked, they had never really been able to afford it.

He looked at the clock at the bedside table. It was only six A.M. He had nearly an hour yet, as he did not normally rise until seven. He would then bring Anna a cup of hot coffee and later they would breakfast together before he left the house. It was only a short bicycle ride to the tram depot and he left the machine in the yard of a nearby friend's house, where he would pick it up again in the evening. Despite the problems it was a pleasant life, and he loved his business; polishing the furniture, clocks and bric-a-brac and even more, bargaining with the customers. They knew he was an honest man and would not overcharge them, but he enjoyed them trying to beat him down a little.

In the end they would both compromise; Sholem pleased that he had got almost the price he was asking; the customer delighted at having clipped a little off the top; both sides satisfied that they had got their own way. In his domestic life Sholem was more than content; Anna earned a little money also by working at home on her pottery and art. She was an excellent painter, having studied at the Conservatoire, and she was getting quite good prices for her portraits. The house was now paid for, which was a great relief.

Sometimes she would come to the shop and help him for the day; these were the best hours. They both enjoyed one another's company and she would bring some of her pictures and a number of the best pieces of pottery which Sholem would display in one of the big windows. On those occasions she would usually sell a painting or two and perhaps a dozen or so of the pottery works, as the shop occupied a good central position with plenty of people passing to and fro. Then they would dine out on the strength of the day's sales and later ride the tram homewards in an euphoric state. Both had good health and neither asked anything more of life than to be together and to continue with the business and their domestic affairs.

Sholem often felt they ought to be a little more ambitious. They really needed to put money aside in case of emergency, or for their old age; though that was a long way off. He and Anna had sometimes discussed purchasing a private pension; they had a friend who was an agent but when all three sat down to discuss the matter they always found that the monthly payments were just that much beyond them and that the premiums would leave them too short for the day-to-day running of the house and the business. But it was something to think of for the future and there was always the possibility that Sholem might run across a valuable painting or *objet d'art* during his monthly buying expeditions.

That it was a remote chance did not matter; it was like purchasing a lucky lottery ticket and something over which they sometimes became excited, though more often than not the masterpiece turned out not to be so valuable as anticipated. But that was all part of the game and what made dealing so exciting, Sholem thought. In the meantime they were secure in their home and free from debt; that was the important thing. Beyond that Sholem and Anna did not look; their world was small and secure; nothing else mattered.

2

He moved uneasily. He was sleeping again. Or was he? He could not quite comprehend. He was in the railway carriage; so it had started as it usually did. There was bright sunshine coming through the slats in the blinds. There were many people on the train and it was very hot. Obviously summer and their holiday; he could not see Anna but that was often the way with dreams. Now they had stopped. He peered through the blind; yes, it was the same place. A wayside halt with dust blowing about the tracks and grass brown with the hot midsummer sun.

Somewhere, far off, church bells were ringing and now and again a dog barked. Presently he slept once more. The noise of the train was comforting. If it was reality it gave order and reassurance. If it were still within the dream then it was equally reassuring. In any event it was an equally valid invitation to sleep. Somehow, Sholem found himself back in his shop. Anna was there with him and many people were examining the *objets d'art* for sale. Both were pleased and he remembered saying to his wife that he knew their venture would be a success.

He came to himself with a sudden start. He found himself back in the familiar dining room with the heavy mahogany furniture. He was counting out the money they had taken that day and one look at Anna's happy face compounded his inner joy. Both were amazed at the total. It was a Sunday and he would be able to put the total in the bank on the following day. It set the seal on things. Soon they would be able to take the holiday they had longed for so often. Then he was awake again. It was a bitter disappointment at first.

Had he dreamed that the business was becoming more prosperous? Inwardly, he was a little frightened that he could no longer distinguish dreams from reality. They seemed to melt into one another as night followed day. On this occasion there was only one way to find out. He went down to the dining room. He had his old-fashioned desk in the corner. While Anna was washing the dishes, he unlocked the special drawer in which he kept his cash book and banking slips. No, there had been no mistake. The money was in their account safely.

Happiness flooded his soul. That night saw a startling break in their long routine. He took Anna out for dinner that evening. It was something they would never forget. He chose the menu carefully; it was a small Hungarian restaurant along the riverside. It was a place he had frequented in his youth; he had hardly dared hope but it was still run by the same proprietor. He was a small, fat man with a red face and a faded brown moustache, who always wore a perpetual smile.

What was more, he still remembered Sholem and gave the couple the best table, with its fine view of the river and the cavalcade of passing boats. It was quite near the small, three-piece orchestra which played tzigane melodies which put Sholem in a reminiscent mood. The evening had long mellowed into twilight and then darkness, broken by multi-coloured lamps and signs along the quays and still the couple sat on, as though in a never-ending dream and presently the proprietor joined them for coffee and cognac and they eventually left with feelings they had hardly ever experienced.

They would come again, Sholem vowed, and he determined inwardly to put a little aside every month so that they could enjoy such occasional outings. Sholem could not remember their home-coming, but there was a sudden click, as though a camera shutter had been actuated, and there he was on the train again. It was still hot with the sun coming through the blinds and the dusty countryside whirling by. This time the journey appeared to be nearing its end for here was the hotel; the orchestra playing and the staff in their striped blazers. He was just about to step through the great main gate into the grounds when he again woke up.

It was disappointing as he had hoped to be able to see what the hotel was like but it might be possible some other evening. Sholem realised he was becoming obsessed with the dream. He had still not spoken of it to Anna and it was probably banal; there must be thousands of people who dreamed such persistent dreams; perhaps not every night—in fact, he did not himself dream every night, but on average twice a week—and there was undoubtedly a very ordinary explanation for such phenomena.

He was certainly awake on this occasion for rain was streaming down the windows and he hurried to get ready; after he had washed and dressed and brought Anna her coffee, he went to check his bicycle in the small, neat shed at the rear of his garden, before donning his waterproof cape and leggings. The ride to his friend's house was miserable, but after he had dried himself with the towel he kept in the saddle-bag, he hurried to the tram stop.

All the way into the drowning city with its huddled crowds beneath the onslaught of the rain, he fought against the smells of stale cigarette smoke and wet leather inside the tram, striving to penetrate the secret of the dream and willing himself to reach beyond the point arrived at the previous night. But it was in vain and it was with vague irritation that he quit the vehicle and walked two streets to his shop, keeping tight in to the sides of the buildings, where the projecting eaves afforded some shelter.

He had a packed lunch with him today, which he ate in the small office at the rear of the premises and it was as well, because there were quite a lot of customers, particularly in the lunch-hour, probably because the rain was driving them in. For this reason he kept the shop open an hour later than usual, telephoning Anna to let her know the reason for the break in his usual routine. The rain had stopped by the time he locked for the night and during the tram-ride people looked more cheerful at the prospect of arriving home in the dry.

3

Sholem jerked awake. Was this reality or was he still dreaming? He could not tell. There was the constant clacking of the train wheels, the rush of hot air, and blinding sunshine coming through the slats of the blinds. There were a great many people on the train and he could not see Anna. Then he remembered that it was so crowded they had had to seek separate compartments. He went to look at his watch but for some reason he seemed to have left it behind. He must have dozed again because when he woke, he had his head cradled on his cheap fibre suitcase and its rough surface had made small grooves in the flesh of his face.

Yet he was extremely excited; they had so looked forward to this holiday and now the great occasion had arrived. Presently the train slowed and looking through the blind he could see the same scene he had envisioned so many times in his dreams. The small country station; dust blowing about; and the grass, all parched and brown from the heat of the summer sun. Then the train moved off and he slept again. Conversation brought him awake and he realised the engine was slowing down. They had arrived.

He got out on to the dusty platform, the sun hot on the back of his head, his fibre suitcase heavy on his hand. He could not see Anna. Then he realised that the station was actually adjoining the hotel and all the people were going in the same direction. He would obviously see Anna in the foyer. He fell into step with the shuffling crowd. The heat was stifling now but he could hear the orchestra playing. There were smartly dressed hotel staff at intervals along the platform, ushering the holiday-makers forward.

Sholem's heart beat with happiness. The sun shone brilliantly from a blue sky; there was the entrance and the people in their striped blazers waiting to welcome them. Somewhere the orchestra was playing beautiful music and a tall chimney in the background was belching fragrant smoke. Dogs were barking as in the dream and as the glorious music from Wagner's *Tristan* rose to its orgasmic climax, he raised his eyes to the great entrance and to the wrought-iron legend over the gates, which gave the name of the hotel—BERGEN-BELSEN.



THE OBELISK

1

JUST BEYOND Rye, in Sussex, where the coast bends away from the town and the shingle and sand of Camber meet the sky in an almost imperceptible merging of land and air, there is a strange and curious countryside where the rich turf, bisected by dykes, is given up to sheep and the wheeling flocks of sea-birds.

Of course it was all very much more lonely and mysterious in 1927 when these incidents took place and there was only the occasional holiday bungalow to break the monotony of that remote area.

Richard Anstruther was just eighteen and had come down there on a solitary walking tour; he was of the age when energy and curiosity combine and he had told his parents he intended to follow the Kent and Sussex coasts around. His itinerary, though ambitious, had been followed remarkably faithfully and he had informed his family that he would carry on as long as his money and energy held out.

A University student and classical scholar, he was roughly halfway through his programme, his finances still intact, his energy unimpaired, when he trudged into Rye on a bitterly cold May day. His resources would not run to The Mermaid so he sought a room for the night at a small and cheerful guest-house in an adjoining side-street which overlooked the ancient harbour with its tumbledown warehouse buildings.

So inclement was the weather for the time of year that there was even a hint of snow in the air and urged by his landlady, who was not motivated entirely by commercial considerations, Anstruther decided to stay over the week-end, in case the weather worsened. There is a deal to do in Rye and after a decent lunch at a small establishment in Church Street, the young man wandered contentedly enough through the ancient church and its venerable square set about with timbered houses and duly admired the view from the Ypres Tower, where the Rother wandered away in the haze to be lost in the flats beyond the town.

It was clouding heavily by then and a keen wind started to blow, searching out the unguarded places in his clothing; despite the unseasonable weather he wore only a thin shirt and plaid tie; tweed trousers and a corduroy jacket. A raincoat and a thin pullover in his rucksack in the hotel bedroom constituted his only reserves.

He was driven back into the town and rain had commenced to fall as he turned into a side street and sought shelter in the warmly-lit aisles of a bookshop.

It was a well-kept and cheerful place and the young woman who bounced eagerly out of a small office at the rear, had an equally bright, well-scrubbed face. Her blonde hair was held back with a pink ribbon and her clear brown eyes looked inquiringly at Anstruther.

"Yes?"

Her gaze was so disconcerting that the young man could make only a stammering reply.

"I'm just looking. I hope that's all right?"

She nodded, her eyes still fixed unblinkingly on his face.

"By all means. Is there anything in particular which interests you?"

Anstruther shook his head, a slight uneasiness beginning to fill the recesses of his mind. Then he found firmer ground.

"Rare books interest me most. Anything in Latin and mediaeval French."

The girl smiled slightly.

"I see. A scholar. Well, I think you may find one or two things of interest on that back shelf there. Please excuse me."

There had come again the soft, insistent ping of the bell and she now hurried forward to serve the tall man who had just entered, his face red from the wind. Anstruther looked at him casually. He too had a bright, well-scrubbed aspect, come to think of it. The two might almost have been father and daughter.

Except that it would be an impossibility, thought Anstruther. The man could not have been more than thirty and the girl was in her mid-

twenties. The two stood close together at the end of the room, at a counter near the door, and once or twice they glanced at him as though he were the subject of discussion.

The young man again felt unease descend upon him and moved awkwardly to the back of the shop, searching for the shelf the girl had indicated. He soon found it, a dusty place in a sort of recess at right-angles to the main room, so that he was out of sight of the two so engrossed in their conversation, though he could still hear their voices.

He thumbed through the nearest volume, a thick leather-bound work on psalter, his mind only half-engrossed, his ears straining to catch what the couple were saying, as though it were of great importance.

It was dim in the recess and as he became more conscious of his surroundings, he found it difficult to concentrate on the faded gold lettering on the spine of the book. He put it back impatiently, moved down the shelf and took out another.

It was bound in calfskin and the first thing he noticed was its curious shape. It was incredibly elongated; in fact, he found as he examined it more closely that it was about a foot deep and merely some four inches wide. The text was in Latin and he translated the crabbed type with some difficulty, due to the poor lighting in this corner.

The title was as curious as the shape of the book itself. Its rough English equivalent was: *Concerning the Coming* and the author was a priest, one Dom Alessandro Peyron.

Interested as he was in such matters Anstruther could not help trying to make out the conversation between the man and woman at the other end of the shop as he skimmed idly through the stiff yellow, parchment-like pages. He moved closer to the end of the aisle, his mind only half-engrossed in the task of translation. Then his attention was again arrested by a page division in the ancient text.

Concerning Kantor, it said. He frowned. He went over it again, running his thumb down the narrow single column of print. No, he had not made a mistake. He came across the strange name again, sprinkled throughout the text in these passages. He supposed it referred to some place-name, though he had never heard of it before. Unless the work were a fantasy. But he did not think so from the superscription at the front of the book. He checked again. Unfortunately, there was no date on the work, neither could he see any reference to the imprint.

The murmur of voices was louder now. He slipped round the end of the aisle, holding the volume loosely in his hand, his mind momentarily distracted from the pages.

The conversation between the man and the girl ended abruptly as he came into view. The man gave the woman an exasperated look, made her a slight bow and then sidled almost furtively from the shop. The girl came down toward Anstruther, dark red spots burning on her cheeks. She looked almost like a brightly painted doll as she joined him.

"You have found something."

Inexplicably, Anstruther was taken aback. He held the book awkwardly, stammered out a sentence which sounded fatuous even to his own ears.

"This looks unusual."

"Oh, that."

Her eyes held his. There was a tremendous depth in them that he hadn't noticed before. They seemed to penetrate his very brain, as though she were cognisant of his every thought.

"That shouldn't have been in that section. It's not for sale."

The young man felt a wave of disappointment sweep over him. She sensed his emotion. She moved away and led him to a desk at the back of the shop.

"But you may read it here, if you wish. You will find it extremely interesting."

Then, incredibly, she lifted up her face and kissed him full on the lips. Flame seemed to envelop him. He felt a deathly weakness and stumbled toward the desk. The young woman smiled gravely as though nothing had happened between them.

"You have plenty of time," she said, indicating the volume on the tooled leather surface. "We don't close until six."

She walked back toward the front of the shop leaving Anstruther in a turmoil. He was not even sure now that anything had happened. The floor seemed to be buckling and distorting in an odd manner; he must be ill. He put up his hand to his forehead. It felt hot and fevered to his fingers. He bent his head over the book again, to hide the violence of his emotion.

Slowly he became calmer. He was aware of the type before him, black, solid and reassuring. He perused it slowly, not needing consciously to translate now, but aware of its subtlest meaning. It was the strangest book he had ever read.

It took some time for its sense to permeate. Extraordinarily, it appeared to be a scientific treatise of about 1652 and though there was no evidence to support it, Anstruther gained the impression that it had been printed in Leyden from a number of local references in the text. He read

on with quickening interest, his eyes smarting from the concentration needed in deciphering the small, sometimes almost illegible script.

Kantor, the name sprinkled throughout the pages emerged as some sort of Utopia, whose denizens were blond, bright beings; clear-eyed and powerful; whose mission appeared to be to cleanse the Elizabethan world. It was fascinating and the loosely-knit narrative which evolved had cohesion and purpose, the young man found. He forgot the shop, the picturesque streets of Rye outside, the rain, the wind gusting along the pavement beneath the darkening sky and even the strange young woman who sat at a table near the door and made entries in her ledgers in longhand.

Anstruther turned the next page almost impatiently; he saw now that he had been mistaken. Kantor was not of this world; it appeared to be a planet or star somewhere beyond the galaxy in which our world was situated. The concept was an astonishing one for its time and might well make the book unique; certainly valuable. No wonder the girl had not wanted to sell. That raised doubts in his mind as to the volume's genuineness.

He surreptitiously slipped a small magnifying glass from a capacious pocket of his jacket and examined the paper of the pages and the binding minutely. There was no doubt about it. Unless the volume were the most incredible forgery the book was certainly no later than mid-seventeenth century.

According to the text the denizens of Kantor, with their superior intellect, were destined to populate—or had populated—it was not entirely clear to Anstruther's mind—our world. How they came across those vast distances and what was their mission once they had arrived, was equally unclear. But the narrative, whether intended to be scientific romance, or scientific fact, was fascinating and Anstruther read on completely absorbed.

There was no doubt, however, as to the *deus ex machina* which had brought them there; the text referred to an almost sacred object which had been imported by the Elizabethan astronauts. A small artefact of black stone in the shape of a miniature obelisk which the Kantoreans treated with great reverence and respect. It was incised with a writing that was either indecipherable or one which the writer of the work—or writers, for the wording occasionally made the volume sound as though it had been written by a committee—did not wish to reveal to the reader.

Apparently the inscription on the obelisk was the key to this mystical transportation between planets, culminating in the astronaut or chief priest of the Kantoreans making certain motions across the passage, in

which the palms of his hands actually rubbed the stone. Two pages in particular, covered with abstruse and baffling calculations, promised the reader the secret of these inscriptions. Anstruther smiled slightly at this point and momentarily interrupted his reading. He sat back in his chair. The faint creaking this made attracted the attention of the blonde girl near the door.

She merely looked in his direction, however, gave him an enigmatic smile and went on with her work on the ledgers. Anstruther was conscious of the faint ticking of a clock in the corner now and making out its dim, moon-like dial, saw that it had just turned four. There was plenty of time; he was warm in here, pleasantly absorbed in his study of the book, and escaped from the unpleasant, winter-like conditions that prevailed out of doors. He settled himself back more comfortably in his chair.

One passage in particular arrested him and he returned to it again and again. It seemed the culminatory point of the tale and he took it to be the key to its understanding, such as it was, for it was given such importance, being underlined in red. He studied it yet again, absorbing the import of the wording.

It ran, "He made the four incantatory passes across the Sacred Writing, so bringing up the vehicles. And with lights in the sky and much commotion the Kantoreans overran the earth and overcame its peoples." An almost identical sentence concluded the book.

It was decidedly curious. Anstruther had never come across a work of its age with such extraordinary content. If the idea were not preposterous it could be said to be a direct precursor of modern science-fiction. The young man was not forgetting the writings of Leonardo and other such visionaries; the book before him was something again. It must be absolutely unique. No wonder the young woman did not want to sell. Not only was it unique but priceless if genuine.

And there was no reason to suppose it not to be genuine. It passed all the visual tests he had ever learned or read about. He put the oddly-shaped volume down on the desk in front of him and thought the situation out. It would do no good to reveal his understanding of its value to the owner of the shop. He glanced again at the clock. Surprisingly, it was now a quarter past five; the minutes had fled while he had been reading.

The place would be closed in less than an hour. Still, there was plenty of time. He would come back tomorrow. He sidled along the shelf and put the book back carefully in the place where he had found it. The other books seemed to shoulder themselves aside so that it almost flowed from his fingers back into the shelf-space. He smiled. That was decidedly

fanciful. He lingered for another quarter of an hour or so. Best not to give himself away.

A slight irritation clouded his mind. Why should he give himself away. What was there, in fact, to give himself away about? Yet the notion persisted. The blonde girl's eyes seemed to read his very soul as she looked up from the table. In some strange, mysterious way she seemed to recognise him.

"Do come back. See you tomorrow?"

"Perhaps," Anstruther mumbled.

He gave her a stiff bow and found himself outside in the cold wind and the thin rain. His mind was full of oddly confusing thoughts as he set off in search of a tea-shop.

2

He slept badly that night. It was not that the room was uncomfortable. Far from it. But something about the eyes of the girl in the book-shop, combined with her brightly-scrubbed face and the whispered colloquy with the fair man when they had both looked at him from down the shop, conspired to keep him from sleep.

And when he did sleep he was troubled by bad dreams in which the strangely-shaped book featured. Rye was all in flames; tall, blond people ran shimmering through the mist and there were shrieks and cries with buildings falling and debris tumbling about him. He woke with a strangled cry about dawn, his forehead wet with perspiration and saw with relief that he was safe in his bed, a grey square showing at the window on the far side of the room.

The first birds had begun their tremulous twitter and he listened to them for a while, soothed and reassured, though his mind still lay upon the Kantoreans. Then, slightly refreshed but still tired, he slept until it was time to rise for breakfast. His landlady looked at him sharply, concern in her eyes, but she said nothing. It was warmer today and just before nine o'clock the sun came out, washing the cobbled streets with glowing fire.

Anstruther's heart was light, his mind cleansed from his night fears as he set out past Henry James' house and down Mermaid Street toward the harbour. Refreshed by his walk and his sojourn among the fishing-boats tied up in the deep, mud-crusted creek that nosed its way into the little town, he turned back toward the shop. It was almost ten and the sun warm on his back when he came in sight of it. But a disappointment awaited him. For he saw, as he drew near, his shadow black across the

Georgian windows, that there was a notice on the door, inked on a white card. He did not need to try the handle to know that the establishment was locked.

The legend on the card, in block capitals in a firm, decisive hand read: SORRY. SHOP CLOSED THIS MORNING ONLY. RE-OPENING AT TWO O'CLOCK.

Anstruther felt relief surge into his mind. Well, that was something. He had only to wait another four hours. Lunch would comfortably occupy an hour of it. Perhaps he would take advantage of the weather. He turned down toward the bus-station. There was a bus leaving for Camber in a few minutes. A walk on the shore would clear his mind. Later, if there were no bus, he would stroll back and work up an appetite for lunch.

He took his seat along with half a dozen other people, paid his fare and sat back in an agreeable torpor as the vehicle rumbled through the streets beneath the ramparts of Rye, across the Rother bridge and out of the town over the flat marsh, the sun hot on his face through the glass.

Now and again they stopped to let one or two people off, one or two people on; there was only the obvious farmer or perhaps farm labourer waiting patiently at the lonely road-side places; someone who looked like a scholar or naturalist, a pair of field-glasses slung on their leather strap across his tweeded shoulders; and a bus company employee in uniform, obviously bound for some distant depot.

The rural, tranquil mood suited Anstruther; his mind was pleasantly occupied after his disturbed night and they had already rattled through the huddle of beach-chalets, bungalows and scanty shops that represented Camber before he was aware of it. He let the bus take him a mile or so beyond, where it was quiet. He dismounted below the steep grassy bank that led to the groynes, watching the bus as it drew to a distant green speck along the road.

It was a wild place; only a farm at the far side of the road and before him, hidden by the steep rise of the bank on the opposite side, the shingle, the sand and then the sea that would run clear and sparkling in the wide shallowness of Rye Bay. Now that the bus had gone the silence flowed back in; broken only by the occasional country sounds. The harsh caw of a rook; the faint bleat of a sheep and now, as he scrambled up the bank, the distant breathing of the sea.

There was no-one on the beach. The whole sweep of the bay, with Rye itself standing on its headland, dominated by the tower of St. Mary's Church, sparkled and danced in the sun and the breeze blew exhilaratingly from off the water. Anstruther ran down the shingle, his boots crunching loudly in the silence, a small flock of sea-birds scattering in a

sooty crowd round one of the lakes of salt water left on the beach by the receding tide.

There was a firm stretch of shimmering sand between the pools and the margin of the sea itself and Anstruther splashed through the shallows, careless of his well-shined boots, throwing back his head and taking in great gulps of the salt air. He ran for several minutes toward the distant coastguard station, his only companions the gulls, the groynes making black streaks on the shingle in toward the shore. There was a faint mist on the surface of the sea farther out but inshore two fishing boats bobbed at anchor while toward the visible horizon the faint smoke-smudges of a coaster were scratched on the vaporous haze.

Anstruther eased back, walking now within two yards of where the sea tumbled to foam on his right hand. Behind him, his foot-prints in the wet sand made gentle curving impressions. His heart thumped comfortably and his eyes were stinging pleasantly from the bracing wind. He walked for perhaps a mile, possibly farther. When he turned, the vastness of the bay made the town of Rye look immeasurably remote, almost dream-like on its promontory. He strode back steadily, thinking of nothing in particular, his well-tuned muscles exulting in the exercise. He was back almost at his starting point incredibly quickly, it seemed.

The wind appeared a little colder now, and he turned inland, toward the shelter of the shingle and the groynes. Rye town was clear and sharp, the sun gilding the roof-tops and reflecting pale fire from the weather-vane on the church. He had a bar of chocolate and a packet of biscuits in a side pocket and he sat down in the shelter of one of the groynes to take some refreshment. His back was warm against the sun-soaked timber and he sank his feet contentedly in the worn smoothness of the pebbles.

He had a good view of Rye and the whole of the bay from here, as he was now on a slight eminence and his gaze wandered idly over the various features until it dropped back to the sand and the shingle in the foreground. His attention was caught by a faint hump in the pebbles about thirty yards to his right front which did not seem quite natural in the symmetrical slope. When he had replaced the remains of the chocolate and the biscuits in his pocket, he rose to his feet preparatory to strolling back to Rye. But first he walked idly toward the object which had claimed his attention.

3

There was something odd about it; he could see now. The singular angularity of the pebbles which could not, of themselves, have sustained

the slope. A piece of driftwood, perhaps? Or some tin can which had been covered by children playing with the pebbles? It hardly seemed worth his while to cross the few yards which separated him from the object.

Yet something impelled him forward. A few seconds later he knew what it was. He moved almost instinctively to the right, half circling the strange irruption in the beach. The hump was about six inches high, he now noticed, and at the frontward end the pebbles had fallen away where the steepness of the angle had forced them to obey the laws of gravity. Something black gleamed there; something sooty black which yet had in itself or reflected light.

Anstruther stopped for a few seconds. He looked round the horizon. Nothing moved in the vastness of the bay between himself and the distant town of Rye. To his left there was the same elemental blankness away toward the almost invisible coastguard station with its immaculate white jackstaff. Only a dark cloud of sea-birds exploded with raucous cries at the edge of the tide, about halfway between himself and the signal station.

He moved forward cautiously again, the sound his feet made in the pebbles imprinting themselves in the brittle silence like miniature explosions. His heart felt constricted in his throat. There was a small piece of driftwood on the shore near the spot where he was standing. He picked it up and poked it at the inanimate object. It slid awkwardly, tumbling free and sliding down the shingle with a faint rasping noise. The black stone lay gleaming under the suddenly clouding sky, seeming to draw all the brightness of the day into itself so that it was as if the whole beach darkened about Anstruther.

He hesitated and pushed at it again. The thing, squat, obelisk-shaped, was fully revealed. There came the faint, distant clap of thunder and the young man felt the sharp spit of rain on his face. It felt cold for such a warm day. He cast the driftwood away and got on his knees beside the thing. He still could not believe it. The incised lettering stood out sharp and incomprehensible beneath that now sombre, graven sky. The words were in no language that he recognised.

There were particles of sand and fragments of pebble adhering to the cold, dull surface. Without thinking he bent to the inscription and brushed them away. There was another burst of thunder so loud and violent that he started back. A jagged streak of lightning forked across the water, seemed to illuminate the whole bay. He looked up, shielding his eyes against the glare, feeling exposed and naked on that lonely shore. The sky was so dark it was almost leaden in hue.

It looked as though they were in for a tremendous storm. It would not do to be caught out here. He stooped and picked up the obelisk. It was quite light and he rubbed the other side to clear it of the last traces of sand. Lightning flared again and in that more than white light he could see the town of Rye stand out as though depicted in a steel engraving. There were queer flashes above and within the town that were certainly not made by lightning. Smoke too, which rolled in dark, threatening coils, visible from a long distance.

Great shadows raced across the beach and Anstruther instinctively cowered at the strange cracking noise which followed the passage of some heavy objects which passed above him, invisible in the darkling clouds. There was no more rain though and after a moment Anstruther took off his jacket, made a sort of holdall of it by buttoning it and knotting the sleeves together so that he could use them for a handle. Carried that way, in his right hand, the obelisk seemed hardly any weight at all.

It took him a long time to get to Rye. There was no traffic on the road and about two miles farther back he found the bus, tumbled into the ditch. There was no sign of driver or passengers and he did not stop to find out where they were; probably cowering in the long grass of the fields. Neither were there any sheep or cattle. Perhaps they were sheltering in the barns of the farms or had stampeded farther back from the beach; certainly those vast peaceable flocks were no longer in evidence.

He could now see that Rye was in flames, or at least that portion of it directly in his view. The intermittent flashes continued and an unusual whining noise. Above it, as he grew closer and closer to the bluff on which stood the ancient fortifications and the Ypres Tower, he could hear a chanting. He made it out at last, quite without surprise. It was simply one word, repeated over and over, in a low monotone.

"Kantor! Kantor!"

Anstruther stopped and looked again at the black stone he carried cradled in his jacket. He passed the tips of his fingers over the inscription once again. He felt no fear. A rose of flame licked from a wooden public house close to the road along which he had been walking. The roof fell in in a shower of sparks. It was consumed in an extraordinarily short space of time.

No-one saw Anstruther enter the steep streets of Rye. Or at least no-one had time for him. The air was full of screams and thin, shrill cries. Yet he walked unhindered, onward and upward toward the centre of the town.

Now and again long, protesting groups of townspeople passed in the middle distance, herded along by tall beings, who wielded short whips. Yet no-one even glanced toward him. Anstruther should have felt astonished yet he knew what he must do. He had no emotion at all. The tall, handsome people in shining helmets, who wore togas like the ancients, walked proudly as though they owned everything about them.

Flames blocked Anstruther's way but he turned aside. Mermaid Street was intact. He passed up it, his feet slipping on the cobbles, perspiration beginning to stain his shirt and collar. There was a warmth like a furnace about him and the sky now had an angry copper glow.

He skirted the churchyard, circling, to bring himself toward the book-shop. In the market square were a column of townspeople, urged imperiously on by the tall blond people. He recognised his landlady among them. Her eyes sought his embarrassedly, as a stranger and then she knew him.

"Oh, Lord!" she said. "Well I never!"

Anstruther stood dejectedly, making a wry shrug toward her. It was woefully inadequate but it was all he could think of. The group passed beyond the houses to an unknown destination. In the High Street he found his progress barred. A great silver machine had come down atumble, one of its cigar-shaped ends bursting an ancient gable. Clothing and furniture littered the street. The tall people in shining helmets were everywhere.

On a translucent ramp that ran to a slot in the side of the machine stood the man Anstruther had seen in the book-shop. He looked transformed in the toga and helmet. He had the most remarkable eyes the young man had ever seen. At his side, radiant and god-like was the girl from the book-shop. She smiled as she saw Anstruther. She knocked up the tall man's arm and the metallic, three-pronged instrument fell from his hand to the ground.

She waved back the flood of men who rushed toward Anstruther.

"This man is mine," she commanded proudly. "He is reserved."

Anstruther walked up the ramp toward her. His legs suddenly felt very tired, the obelisk intolerably heavy.

"Welcome!" she said. "You have returned then, O Priest!"

She bent over him, her lips parted for the kiss. Anstruther noticed that she carried the oddly shaped book in Latin, as though something precious and irreplaceable. He surrendered the black stone to the tall man, who took it roughly from him. The girl's mouth was on his and fire consumed him. He screamed as something pierced his breast.

4

Anstruther gave a great moaning cry and found himself on the shore. The tide beat sparkling at the edge of Rye Bay and the wind was cold on his face. He felt a ludicrous sense of anti-climax at the same time as relief flooded through him. There was perspiration on his forehead as he started to his feet. The town of Rye sat safe on its promontory, its roofs and spires tinted with the gold of the mid-afternoon sun.

He looked at his wrist-watch. It was not yet four. There was plenty of time to get back. He moved along the beach, his feet heavy and sluggish in the shingle. About three hundred yards along he stopped.

There was a strange shape in the pebbles before him. The edge of the black stone winked dully in the light. He carefully cleared it with his hands, careful not to touch the lettering. The obelisk lay malignantly at his feet, the heiroglyphs reflecting a dim pulsation that seemed to emanate from the core of the stone.

He spent a quarter of an hour wrapping it in his jacket. But on his way back to Rye the vibration of his walking must have brushed the material against the lettering. The sky started to darken and there were flashes of light rising from Rye town. He looked at his watch again. It was not yet twenty-past four. There was plenty of time to reach the book-shop. It did not shut until six. And he would need the book as well as the obelisk if he were to be safe. The book was the key to everything and would be vital to his survival.

The sky was quite dark now and a shouting wind blew from the sea. He held the stone heavily to his chest. Then he set off at a stumbling run in the direction of Rye.



OUT THERE

I sent my soul through the Invisible,
Some letter of that After-Life to spell;
And by and by my Soul returned to me;
And answered, "I myself am Heaven and Hell."

—Edward Fitzgerald
The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam

1

"**W**HAT is out there?" Watson said.

He had just arrived at XK24.

Rort shrugged.

"Mutants? All sorts of things. Who knows?"

He moved over from the switchboard, indicating the monitor screen.

"See those doors? Titanium. Two feet thick. There had to be good reason for those."

He smiled thinly at the disturbed expression on his companion's face. Watson looked round the vast metal chamber with its humming machinery with something approaching awe. He was a short, stocky man of about forty, with receding sandy hair and a permanently quizzical expression that made him look rather like an intelligent chimpanzee, Rort thought with inward amusement. But he merely indicated the massed

banks of electronic instruments with their complementary rows of push-buttons. Watson licked dry lips and Rort abruptly erased the amused expression from his face. He knew what was passing through the other's mind.

"It will take about six months to get used to this," he said gently. "You will be supervised at all times. In fact you have been assigned to me and we will work as a permanent team."

He paused briefly.

"That is, if you shape up well. As I think you will."

Watson gave him a fleeting smile.

"It all looks so complicated . . ." he began. "And the responsibility . . ."

His voice tailed off. Rort sat down on a metal swivel chair in front of the main switchboard. Above them the 200 monitor screens gave back the images of the vast complex that stretched beneath them. He motioned Watson to sit opposite him.

"It took me seven months to master all this," he began. "So there is no reason why you should not do it more quickly. I am older than you, after all."

Watson nodded. "Thank you. Is there any printed material on all this?"

The other gave him a wry look.

"Yes and no. All the printed stuff is highly secret and restricted to only about a dozen personnel. The technical staff have to learn their way around by rote. This is a free day. My colleagues are in charge on this watch."

He jerked his thumb toward the two silver-overalled figures up at the far end of the Central Control Room. One was a grey-haired broad-shouldered man whom Watson had heard his companion address as Stevenson. The other was a tall, slim, dark-haired girl in her late twenties, who gave them curious glances from time to time. Watson felt a heightening of interest. Perhaps his duties would not be so bleak and austere as he had feared.

"How did you come to be chosen for these duties?" Rort asked, slightly changing the subject. "I see you have absolutely first-class results in your various tests. Far better than most of the technical staff at XK24, in fact."

Watson looked down at the brightly burnished metal floor, more in order to hide his embarrassment than anything else, Rort thought.

"It was rather a mixed blessing," Watson said in a low voice. "I worked very hard, of course. But I was more interested in Space. I was rather disappointed when I was assigned here, to be quite frank with you."

Rort gave him a long, steady look.

"Your honesty does you credit," he said at last. "But this is far more important."

He again looked round at the massive banks of humming machinery whose tireless work went on day and night. He knew of the vital imperative of maintaining everything in tip-top condition and of the three stages of back-up machines, one set of which would take over if there was the slightest faltering in the front-line equipment.

"Nothing is more important," he went on in the same steady manner. "In fact it is absolutely essential. It is no exaggeration to say that the safety of the world depends on all this and the great chain of other stations with whom we are in hourly contact."

Watson shuffled his feet again.

"I am sorry, sir. I did not wish to appear unenthusiastic. You can rely on me absolutely. Just as soon as I can find my way around and can be at ease with all this . . ."

He swept his hand up with a broad gesture.

". . . complication."

Rort smiled then.

"I am sure of it. But we always impress on newcomers the absolute necessity for alertness and vigilance at all times. You could not have accepted a more vital task. One that we all here find immensely absorbing and satisfying."

Watson suddenly fixed him with piercing green eyes.

"Would it be indiscreet to ask what we are guarding against, sir?"

The Watchmaster shook his head.

"At this stage, yes. All this information is restricted initially to a few senior personnel."

He stood up abruptly.

"And there is no need to keep calling me sir. We are all on Christian name-terms here, except on formal occasions, of which there are very few."

He waved toward the two distant figures.

"You will be meeting your fellow watchkeepers later," he explained. "In the meantime let's go up for lunch and I will answer any relevant questions you may have."

He gave the other one of his impenetrable looks.

"That is, if the answers are in the unrestricted category. I am sure you understand."

As the great electronically operated steel doors slid open in front of them, Watson was not quite sure that he did.

2

"We just had a Blue Trace," Cameron said. "The night cameras have picked up something."

Cameron was the Station Commander and when he spoke his subordinates took notice. Jonas stared at him for a moment without saying anything.

"What does this mean?" he asked eventually.

Cameron threw down the sheafs of elaborate tracings on the steel surface of his desk.

"All or nothing," he said grimly. "But we can't take chances."

"Red Alert?"

The corrugated brow of Cameron developed even more lines. He shook his head.

"No, no. Far too early. But we must concentrate our attention on the sector covering the swamp and the forest beyond. That's where the main danger might come from."

Jonas sat down. He was a big man, over six feet tall and on the shoulders of his silver uniform he bore the epaulettes of a senior Flight Commander. He had special skills and he had been seconded to XK24 to assist Cameron in any upcoming emergencies that might have threatened the stability of the Command Chain. These Outposts were coming increasingly under threat over the past few years, and he, almost more than anyone, knew of the possible dangers that might be lurking beyond the range of their night vision cameras.

"What about the latest sighting reports?" he asked, his faded blue eyes looking casually at the station chief but the latter knew that there was a razor-sharp mind behind his deceptively relaxed manner.

"We'll go to have a look at them now," Cameron said. "Everything is ready."

He led the way along one of the ubiquitous shining steel corridors outside his office, which were hung with framed photographic reproductions of the lush green world which had once existed many decades before.

The Chief Photographic Technician, Andrew Carter, was a tall, slim man with silvery hair, entirely devoted to his craft. He had been at XK24 for the past ten years, which made him an invaluable expert at assessing the smudged images which sometimes were the only visual clues they could gather of the outside world. He was also one of the longest serving members at the station and had informed Cameron that he intended to complete his time there.

Now he made the two men welcome and when the Station Commander had affected the introductions, he poured them coffee from a shining metal flask that always kept its contents heated and handed round a plate of the special fruit-flavoured biscuits that all the station personnel found so refreshing.

"You've come about these latest *imaging*?" he said shrewdly.

Cameron assented.

"I thought it best to see for myself."

"It's all rather nebulous at the moment," Carter said. "To be honest, I thought it a bit premature to issue a Blue Trace, but the Night Watch people insisted."

He shrugged.

"Still, I suppose they have their instructions. Here are the recordings of the night's events. Edited, of course. You'd like to see them, naturally."

The two visitors settled back in their chairs as the lights dimmed and a vibrating image appeared on the large, eight feet wide screen that dominated the banks of instruments. Carter turned from the screen, his face a bluish mask from the flickering images. He smiled apologetically at the Station Commander and Jonas.

"Sorry if I erred in not reporting to you direct, sir, but I didn't want to disturb you for what might be an unsupported surmise. It's all in the official reports, of course, which should have reached you this morning."

"No problem," Cameron assured him. "I got the print-out, of course. That's why we're here."

The three men began to watch the recording. They could merely make out the dull sheen of swamp water and the black outlines of gnarled trees, with tangled roots and leafless branches. For the rest there was merely mist and shadow with the usual dull grey sky toning to black. Carter leaned forward to operate a switch and accelerated the images. They steadied again on the screen, only this time there was a bright yellow circle in the top right-hand corner of the frame.

"This is the area we were concentrating on," Carter said.

"Can you bring it up?" the Station Commander queried. Carter shook his head.

"We've tried that. This is the best we can do, I'm afraid. We've got it down to about a mile distant."

The watchers again leaned forward to concentrate. Presently they made out a wavering of the vapour with something dark dimly seen beyond.

"Could these be storm clouds?" Jonas asked.

Carter shook his head.

"I sent a copy to Meteorology, of course. Their people say no. But we haven't got to the meat of the matter yet."

Cameron stiffened as dim, amorphous shapes appeared faintly through the mist. They appeared to undulate as if they had no substance, though that may have been an aberration caused by the sifting tendrils of mist which thickened to fog at times.

"What do you make of that?" Carter asked. "We've established these phenomena must be of enormous size, whatever they are. This actual recording is of the fifth sighting and the best we've yet picked up. Apart from what you're about to see."

Cameron made an irritated clicking sound.

"Did you get any sound recordings?"

Again Carter's vehement shake of the head.

"Too far away," he said succinctly.

Then he added an astonishing thing.

"Do you remember that old book people used to believe in?"

Cameron thought for a moment, mild surprise on his face.

"You mean the Bible?" he said at last.

Carter nodded.

"That's what it was called. There were quotations there that always stuck in my mind. They seem particularly apposite to our situation today."

"I thought this was a scientific discussion," Jonas said with some acerbity.

Carter had a faint smile on his lips. He leaned forward and froze the image of swirling clouds on the screen.

"It was just this," he said gently.

He closed his eyes in concentration and leaned back in his chair while Cameron and Jonas waited with faint disbelief on their faces. Carter then spoke in a somewhat declamatory voice as though he were an actor in one of the screened dramas that constituted their main entertainment.

"And the beast was taken and with him the false prophet. . . . These both were cast alive into a lake of fire burning with brimstone . . . And the sea gave up the dead which were in it and death and hell delivered up the dead which were in them . . . And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire."

There was a long silence as Jonas and Cameron exchanged glances. Carter opened his eyes as though he were coming out of a trance.

"What is the point of all this?" the Station Commander asked.

Carter put up his right forefinger to the side of his nose in a strange gesture. He operated two green switches on the panel in front of him. Immediately the largest of the screens in the banks above the controls came to life. The mist still swirled around the blackened tree boles but this time there was a change. Great, dark forms, half-glimpsed moved ponderously within the heart of the vapour and every so often, amid these shifting masses, were crimson and orange flashes against the whiteness as though there was a great fire burning somewhere. The three men gazed in silence until the vision faded. Carter switched off, his eyes holding the others, his face grim and sombre.

"Something is gathering out there," he said heavily. "A lake of fire burning with brimstone . . . I thought I would save that for last. You would not yet have seen it, sir. I thought it too important for general promulgation."

"You were right," Cameron said. His face looked bleak in the dim light.

"A little fanciful, isn't it?" Jonas said, barely concealing his irritation.

"But he has a point," Cameron observed, picking his words with care. "This is something we have to take account of. The duty Watchmaster behaved perfectly correctly in putting out a Blue Trace on these new emanations, even though he had not seen this latest material. How long have these sightings been going on?"

Carter shrugged.

"About two weeks. But nothing like this before. This last recording was made barely an hour ago. The monitors are continuing observation day and night, of course, but the traces have now faded completely."

Cameron studied his fingernails in silence for a moment.

"You are right. We have never seen things like this before. I'm inclined to agree with you. Something is gathering out there in that hell-brew. It's a sort of soup made up of all sorts of aberrant lower life-forms. What may have evolved there over the years is beyond our comprehension. This could be very serious, gentlemen."

"But not yet serious enough for a Red Alert?" Jonas queried.

"You're right there," the Station Commander assured him.

To Carter; "Keep me posted."

He got up abruptly.

"We have many things to do."

He and Jonas walked back down the corridor in silence.

"What do you really think?" the Flight Commander asked his companion.

Cameron stopped opposite a door which bore the legend in red; POSITIVELY NO ADMITTANCE WITHOUT SPECIFIC AUTHORITY.

He gave a long sigh.

"We are set out here to guard the frontiers. It's a curious business. No-one knows the effect on the watchers."

"You think Carter may have been affected?"

Cameron gave Jonas a twisted smile.

"Who knows? But those Biblical quotations were disturbing. It appears that Carter will need watching too."

3

After two weeks Watson was beginning to find his way around the instrument panels under Rort's expert tuition. At first he had been too worried even to press a button or throw a switch, even at Rort's urging, but now he was starting to feel more at home, and even to begin to make sense of the blurred images that showed up on the bewildering display of screens, each one of which was fixed on a certain area of the frontier for which they were responsible. There had been no urgent alarms; no Blue Traces or the even less Yellow Traces, which merely meant that there were unidentifiable objects on the screen; usually rocks or tree branches, now obscured, now revealed by the swirling mists of the outside world.

Rort, as was his way, had been sparing in his praise, but Watson knew that his superior was beginning to trust him and that gave him even more confidence. This afternoon he was analysing columns of abstruse calculations that had been thrown up by the Central Machine; analysis of air, soil, water and other chemical components that together added up to a complex picture of the outside conditions.

Rort was busy tripping banks of switches, frowning all the while, as he made jotted notations with his electronic pencil. He was a distinguished-looking figure, with his bright blond hair, greying now at the temples, cropped close to his scalp. Watson felt great confidence in him and was glad that the vagaries of the selection process had led him to become the permanent watch-keeping companion of such a man. He glanced up from the figures and once again saw, in the far distance, the friendly eyes of the dark-haired girl fixed upon him. Rort had told him her name and grade but it had temporarily slipped his memory during the gruelling weeks of adjusting to his new duties.

He was only sorry that her own duties kept such a great distance between them in the physical sense and was slightly disappointed that

he had never seen her off watch or in one of the communal restaurants where the scientists and technicians gathered when off duty. He pulled his attention back to the columns of figures set against the functions they represented and was instantly arrested by an extraordinary term. He waited until Rort had finished his operations and come to sit again in the metal chair close to him.

"What is the Memory Machine?" he asked.

The Watchmaster gave him one of his ironical expressions.

"Ah, that," he said in a curiously soft voice. "When you dream have you ever noticed how the dead often live again and come back to haunt us? One's parents, one's friends. Then, it seems, that the regrets, the lost opportunities, the searing despair of past times; aborted love affairs; the missed chances; the wrong turnings that so many people take in life . . ."

He broke off, aware of the surprise in the other's eyes. He smiled then, revealing strong yellow teeth.

"You think I'm becoming poetic, perhaps! But I'm sure you know what I mean. A team of our most brilliant scientists hit on the idea that somehow, these secret thoughts, fears, hopes, regrets, that surface in our unconscious when we dream could be canalised and made visible on our screens. I won't go into the details. I didn't really understand them myself. They were incredibly complex but put simply, electrodes attached to a sort of helmet worn by the subject transformed the images evoked by the sleeping brain into visual form."

"A fascinating idea, but not new," Watson said.

Rort shook his head.

"Not new, no. Of course not. That sort of experiment has been dreamed many times, but mostly by fiction writers and not by hard-headed scientists such as these men were. However, after several years, they succeeded. You ask what was the point of it. Apart from the incredible scientific breakthrough it represented, it would also have meant that the stability and loyalty of the subjects involved could have been evaluated visually. Anyone on the point of a nervous breakdown, for example, could have been detected. You realise the dangers posed by people in such a mental condition being in charge of such dangerous equipment as we have here. The recordings were filed along with their records."

He paused again and Watson interjected, "You said, 'have been.' Does this mean that the experiments have been discontinued. Because I should be greatly interested . . ."

Rort smiled thinly.

"No doubt," he said drily. "As would many others. All went well until Sandberg, one of our most outstanding people, who had helped to set up the Memory Machine, himself became a subject. After half an hour he came out, ashen-faced and fear-stricken. He went to his quarters and straight away hanged himself. The then Station Commander was the only person to see the recordings Sandberg had left. He was considerably shaken also by what he saw and heard. He erased the material and closed down the Memory Machine permanently and the room in which it is installed has been kept locked ever since."

Watson felt the hairs on the back of his neck begin to prickle and he shifted uneasily in his chair.

"An incredible story, sir. What do you think happened to Sandberg?"

"I wouldn't like to say. It isn't healthy to pry too closely into these things. At the time some of us called the project the Dream Machine. After Sandberg's suicide many called it the Nightmare Machine. I think that says it all."

He sighed deeply.

"I don't think I'd like to have my secret hopes and desires permanently recorded here. We all have them, you know. Secret dreams, I mean."

Watson gave him a bleak smile.

"Just where is this Machine Room?"

The Watchmaster jerked his thumb in the direction of the dark-haired girl at the far end of the vast chamber, filled now with the soft green glow from thousands of illuminated dials and the even humming of the powerful machinery.

"Down there. Impossible to get at without written permission from the highest authority. Sensibly, one has to pass through the three private offices of some of XK24's highest-ranking officers. There are three electronic keys to that door and each one of them—all different—is held by one of the three men in those offices, under separate lock and key."

Watson let out a hissing breath.

"It must have been something fantastic that Sandberg saw."

Rort looked at him with haunted eyes.

"Best not to know," he said softly.

Watson was silent for long moments.

"Government orders?" he said at length.

"Maybe," Rort said cautiously. "You see, it might have opened a Pandora's Box."

"What's that?"

There was amusement in Rort's expression now.

"It all happened a long time ago."

Watson glanced along the big chamber to where the dark-haired girl was still looking at him curiously. Rort intercepted the look that passed between them.

"We'd better get on with the instrument check," he told Watson. "Before the next watch comes on duty."

4

Watson was in the commissary two days later, drinking coffee alone at his table, when a shadow fell across the bulletin he was reading. He looked up to see the dark-haired girl who, he had since learned, was one of the scientific officers in the Central Control Room. He got up courteously and was surprised when she asked if he minded if she joined him.

"Can I get you anything?"

She shook her head, her smile revealing small, perfect teeth.

"No thanks. I've just had lunch. I thought I'd join you and bring my coffee over. You looked a little lost just now. I'm Elaine Russell, by the way. I work with John Stevenson."

"I know," Watson said. "I looked you up. But I'm pleased to meet you formally, just the same."

The two shook hands. After a few moments of embarrassed silence, Watson asked, "What exactly do you do there?"

The girl made a wry mouth.

"You shouldn't ask, really. It's all supposed to be very secret."

She cut short his mumbled apology.

"It's just that everything falls into compartments at XK24. But I can understand your curiosity."

"I'll be frank, then," Watson said. "Just what are those huge titanium doors for? To keep something out, obviously. But why have them at all? Unless it's to let some of our own people out."

The girl's eyes held his for what seemed like minutes. They were very blue and very frank, he noticed for the first time.

"You're right on both counts."

"Has anyone ever been out?"

The slim shoulders beneath the silver uniform, made a slight shrugging motion, almost imperceptible to the casual onlooker.

"Some," was the cautious reply.

They were in a quiet corner here, out of the main hub of the huge covered atrium with its subdued lighting, and there were no tables nearby, so that Watson could study the girl without fear of curious

glances. He did not know why this thought should have come to him but something within urged caution, in the slightly charged atmosphere of XK24.

"And what did they report on their return?"

The girl's face was serious now.

"Few did, from what I have been able to gather from the records."

There was a long silence between them, suddenly interrupted by a heavy footfall nearby. Rort passed quickly, on his way to the distant counter where the food was served. He gave the couple a sardonic smile.

"Getting acquainted?"

Watson gave him an artificial one in return, he felt, but he did not venture any comment. The two waited until his tall figure was out of sight in the throng round the food servery before resuming their conversation.

"I won't ask what your last remark meant," Watson resumed. "What about the reports of those who did return. Assuming there were any."

The girl had an amused expression now.

"Yes, there were reports. But they're in the Sealed Section."

Watson made an attempt to be jocular, failed miserably.

"Not to be released until a hundred years' time, I presume?"

The girl nodded.

"Something like that."

Watson drummed with long, sensitive fingers on the surface of the metal table to conceal his inner unease.

"There's far too much mystery about this place," he said at length.

Elaine Russell gave him another steady look from the disconcertingly frank eyes that somehow increased his uncertainty.

"Once you've settled down here, Mr. Watson, you'll understand a good many more things than you do now."

"Call me Conrad," Watson said. "It sounds more friendly."

There was slight asperity in the girl's voice now.

"I am being friendly, believe me. Please take notice of what I say. I'm only trying to be helpful. Everyone who comes here behaves as you do at first. Then, after a few months, when they've learned their way around and gained a few more facts they fully understand the reasons for the reticence of long-term personnel."

"I'm sorry," Watson said. "I didn't mean to sound offensive."

The girl shook the dark hair that fell about her head in soft waves.

"You weren't. It was just the normal reaction of every newcomer to this place. You must realise that this establishment can be regarded as a frontier post. If one goes back into history there were many barriers

erected to keep the barbarian hordes out. The Great Wall of China, for example . . . Hadrian's Wall . . ."

She broke off, laughing.

"Of course, you know all about that. I'm not trying to give you a lesson in ancient history. Just pointing out a few factors that will soon become obvious to you once you've had a little more experience here."

Watson's brow corrugated in a frustrated frown.

"You still haven't told me what the barbarian hordes represent."

The girl's face became serious for a moment. She anticipated his next question.

"No, that isn't restricted information. We really don't know. Except that whatever is out there is inimical to human life. That's been established by our own scientists on a national scale. We're just a small cog here. All the stations send in their reports to Central Authority. We seldom know what they contain."

"Why is that?"

Elaine Russell's sombre eyes fixed his own and it was as though all the muted sounds of the distant diners in the commissary were suddenly erased.

"Perhaps they're mere statistics, too boring to circulate."

"Or too horrific, perhaps?" Watson put in.

"There is that. And possibly to avoid a general panic."

Her words stayed with Watson long into the evening and were still reverberating in his mind as he sought his bunk that night.

5

"Gentlemen—and Miss Russell! I've asked you here this afternoon because an extraordinary situation has arisen. Potentially dangerous, which is why we're calling for volunteers."

The Station Commander's face was set in grim lines as he stared round the Conference Chamber. Cameron had called the twenty or so senior personnel together following a coded message received at XK24 earlier that morning. Only five people on the station, those of the highest rank, had access to those codes, and it was usually serious when such a secret message arrived.

Cameron's craggy face beneath the ash-grey, close-cropped hair, looked almost menacing, Jonas thought, as he glanced around at the silent ranks of his colleagues. All of them were hand-picked and they knew better than to interrupt the Station Commander when he was

holding a formal conference. These were very rare as everyone present realised. There was great tension in the big room with its polished mahogany panelled walls which threw back a warm sheen from the concealed overhead lamps, and glistened on the green leather chairs that were clustered round the oval map table, behind which Cameron was standing.

Jonas' eyes lighted on the slim figure of Elaine Russell. She was the only woman ever allowed at these conferences and no-one was quite sure what her real functions were at XK24. Not even John Stevenson, who worked most frequently and most consistently with her in Central Control. Some said she had been sent undercover from the highest echelons of government to keep an eye on things in this dangerous sector where curious incidents had been happening over the past few years.

Jonas, as he studied her now, thought there might be something in the rumours. He was convinced that she was not there to spy on the personnel, but to exercise another safeguard at a higher level. He felt that vaguely reassuring, though the rumours about her were surmises at best and thin ones at that. She caught his eye and gave him a somewhat wary smile, he felt. He turned his gaze upon Rort whose eyes held his for a moment before the latter concentrated his attention once again on the Station Commander.

"We have had several Blue Traces, as you all know," he continued. "There is nothing unusual in that, of course. But their frequency has increased in the last year or so and they are now beginning to come in clusters. I have reached the conclusion—and our superiors agree with me—that something extraordinary is happening out there. I want you to watch the Master Screen carefully and give me your opinions."

The lights slowly dimmed and there was the familiar faint humming noise as blurred images filled the big screen. All those in the Conference Chamber watched the emission intently, each trying to make coherence of the jumble of phantasmal shapes that gyrated and undulated through the swirling whiteness of the swamps. There was a long silence in the big room when the transmissions finished.

"I am sure you are familiar with at least some of these visual recordings," Cameron went on, as the muffled murmurs of conversation died away and the assembly eased themselves in their padded seats.

"But there are certain changes, which I am sure some of you will have noticed. I would like your candid opinions. Much weight may be attached to them at higher levels."

It was Rort who spoke first.

"Though these recordings are clearer and more accurate than many we have seen, I can make little of them, though it seems obvious there is life of some sort out there. What I would be interested to know is what higher authority thinks of all this."

There was a murmur of assent at his words.

Cameron nodded, the overhead lighting limning his ash-grey hair so that it looked almost as though he wore a halo.

"They are taking it seriously," he said sombrely. "That is all I am at liberty to divulge."

Rort smiled crookedly.

"That is an answer we often get," he observed. "But it is no answer."

Cameron held up his hand in a peremptory gesture.

"Naturally, we all have our opinions. But you may take it from me that higher authority is well aware of everything that goes on in each one of our chain of some 2,000 stations. And these newest recordings have been noted."

"But we are not yet on Full Alert?" Rort persisted.

Cameron shook his head.

"We shall have ample warning."

"What about the other stations?" Elaine Russell put in.

Cameron pursed his lips and sat down on the arm of his padded chair.

"A good question. Yes, some half dozen or more of our sister stations have observed the same phenomena and have issued the same Blue Traces as XK24. You are at liberty to draw your own conclusions from this."

There was a low chorus of mocking laughter from the assembly, which Cameron had evidently intended. He smiled thinly.

"I am well aware that a number of you hold strong opinions about some of the people in authority. But you must admit that collectively they have been extremely successful in keeping the frontiers of civilisation intact for many, many years."

"No-one is disputing that," said Jonas, who slowly eased into view from his position in one of the rear seats. "But it is obvious that we are not going to learn very much from these visual traces. We know there is danger out there. Exactly what, is quite unclear. But all our sophisticated instruments tell us nothing specific. Merely a few Blue Traces from time to time. And once, every five years or so, a Red Alert which, fortunately, has proved unfounded so far."

Cameron nodded but said nothing. It was left to Rort to break the hushed silence which had just descended upon the room.

"So what are you suggesting?"

Jonas shrugged. His face was serious above the silver uniform, which seemed to glow beneath the soft lamplight. Several men in the front row turned their heads to regard him, for he had a reputation for clear thinking and swift action. Once, long ago, when there had been a panic in the Central Control Room of a distant station and water had begun to pour in, he had broken a man's jaw with one blow and prevented him from opening a valve which would have inundated them all and have set off a chain reaction.

"We need volunteers," Jonas said quietly. "Someone must go out there and find out what is happening. We need detailed information."

Cameron waited without saying anything, a faint smile playing about his mouth. A middle-aged, red-haired man in the back row was moved to protest.

"It would be too risky. A large party of experienced people would leave some of our most dangerous posts dangerously undermanned."

Jonas shook his head impatiently.

"I quite agree. I'm not talking about a large party. I'm talking about one man. Someone with courage and intelligence who can use one of our portable cameras and radio back valid information."

"That would be madness!" the red-haired man protested. "We tried that before and you know the results."

"Someone's got to try," Elaine Russell insisted.

"In that case I think Jonas should go," the man at the back went on.

Cameron suddenly clapped his two hands together with a sound like an explosion in the quiet Conference Chamber.

"That is out of the question," he said incisively. "He is far too important to the workings of this station. As he said just now, we need volunteers in order that we can select the right man."

His eyes were suddenly freezing.

"Think about it, gentlemen—and lady. The conference is over."

6

Jonas rode back down the miles of tunnel in one of the station's electric trolleys. His thoughts were heavy and he ignored the idle chatter of the other passengers who were clustered in the rear. Elaine Russell sat opposite him, her eyes searching his face.

"Have you found out something that the rest of us don't know?"

Jonas shook his head sombrely, his enormously tall form looking as though it might teeter over the edge of the trolley's low rail.

"Nothing like that, Elaine. Just suspicions. Vague suppositions with no tangible substance. But you must have your own ideas on what may lie beyond the defences of XK24."

The girl raised her eyebrows. She pointed her forefinger at the shining steel wall, studded with recessed lamps, that glided smoothly past. All was so ordered and quiet, except for the faint whining of electric motors and the shirring of the thick rubber wheels over the guide-rail.

"Out there? I have no idea and I must confess I haven't given it too much thought. Too busy in Control. But it would take an enormous amount of courage for one person and I'm afraid I'm not cast in that mould."

Jonas smiled, revealing strong white teeth.

"No-one was suggesting that you should go. You're far too valuable here. But my Intersection's coming up. We'll take this up some other time."

The two shook hands gravely and then he had pressed the red button next to his seat and the train of linked trolleys glided smoothly to a halt in front of a big red notice which said; Intersection 83. He said a brief goodnight to the men behind and then he was striding down an identical steel-lined tunnel to where another trolley waited. The cars glided off in different directions but the questions raised by Jonas seemed to permeate the very air they breathed.

When Elaine Russell arrived back at Control the next day she found Rort and Watson preparing to go off. She was on night duty for the next six days and sometimes the watches coincided; at others they were staggered, as on this occasion. She exchanged formal greetings with the two men who sat gazing at the control panels with their flickering images, and was answered by vague waves of the hand. Strict protocol existed there, however friendly personnel were when they were off duty. Watson watched her receding figure out of the corner of his eye as the girl went to take up station at the far end of the steel-lined chamber. He and Rort still had half an hour to go before their watch ended.

The latter had switched on the Recording Unit and was only watching the screens desultorily now, as very little of interest had happened on this watch. Watson took the opportunity to sound him on the recent Conference. The Watchmaster shook his head, smiling slightly.

"You know better than to ask that. The meeting was restricted to high echelon officers only. It is something you'll have to get to understand."

Watson sagged back in his padded chair, rubbing his eyes, overstrained from watching the flickering images, and eased his cramped leg muscles.

"Surely you can tell me something?" he persisted.

Rort had again turned to the main instrument panel, as though the matter was closed. But Watson's curiosity had been aroused by the secrecy surrounding the meeting and he felt impelled to continue.

"I should imagine that security arrangements on this sector were at the top of the agenda . . ." he began hesitantly.

Rort had swivelled his chair to face him now. He was still smiling but he had a serious air just the same.

"There is always danger here," he said gently. "There are forces outside we know little about. So we have to keep alert at all times. These conferences are routine but designed to keep everyone on their mettle."

Watson scratched an itch in his shoulder-blades, casually glancing along the consoles to where Elaine was bent across her instrument panel. He admired her profile for a while longer.

"That may be so," he said in answer to Rort's remarks. "But there are three thousand men and women on this station alone. Multiply that by the total and no force known to man could break through."

Rort held out his big, spatulate hands in mock despair.

"You still haven't got the picture. When you've put in a full year you might just begin to envisage what we're up against."

Watson smiled in turn.

"It sounds as though you know what's out there?"

Rort laughed then. The sound went echoing down the arched steel ceiling and Watson saw the girl and her companion, Stevenson, turn curious faces toward them.

"I'm not to be drawn," the Watchmaster said. "And there's an end of it. Please don't persist or we may fall out."

There was a steely edge to his voice despite his bantering manner and his subordinate fell silent.

Later, in his own quarters off watch, Watson felt a faint foreboding. He was an optimist by nature but there was something strangely disturbing about the atmosphere in XK24. It was not that there appeared to be anything abnormal about the station; he had been posted to several during his relatively short career and was used to the routine. Perhaps it had to do with his promotion for previously he had occupied much junior positions, with not so much responsibility.

He had sensed that Cameron and Rort were grooming him for bigger things. Now, he desultorily watched a feature film on one of the two monitor screens in his room; one for official announcements, the other a Pleasure Channel, and poured synthetic cream on his dish of fruit salad, and ate it while he watched. But he could not concentrate; and presently

switched the film off. Something vaporous and insubstantial was clouding his mind so that he eventually went to lie sprawled out in his leather reclining chair, a drink in his hand, while he sieved through his troubled thoughts in an attempt to locate the source of his worries.

He appeared to be getting sudden flashes of memory, which seemed disturbingly abnormal, and he recalled what Rort had told him about the Memory Machine. It was as though he were under its influence at the moment. With a sudden effort he sat up straight and finished off his drink. He had no desire for sleep tonight and wandered through his quarters restlessly, picking up a book here and there. Then he sat down at his desk and consulted the printed official log, with which every member of the station staff was issued.

He read through the cold, calculated codes of procedure, and then began to peruse the general notes at the back. There were a hundred or so blank pages at the end, which could be updated by further printed notices and by his own pencilled notations. He studied the last of the printed pages carefully, then turned to the loose-leaf section, on which his own impressions had been scribbled a few days earlier. Then he stiffened; there was a paragraph at the end in a hand which was not his own. It said, cryptically: *Your destiny lies in volunteering.*

Watson got to his feet, his throat dry and constricted. He looked round his apartment as though there were someone or something lurking in the bright, clinical atmosphere. He went unsteadily over to his drinks trolley and poured himself another with slightly trembling hands. Even the fiery spirit did not seem to have any effect. He remembered the ponderous shapes half-glimpsed on the monitor screens and fear began to eat at his very soul.

7

John Stevenson was worried. The secrecy of his duties and the strain of maintaining that secrecy was beginning to tell. He had been five years in his present high position, even though ably assisted in them by Elaine Russell latterly; his frayed nerves already almost stretched to breaking point by his grave responsibilities.

None but Cameron and a few other high officials at XK24 knew what these were and the need to maintain a close mouth on duty as well as off had started to show in his outward physical demeanour. Elaine had noticed this, of course, but she said nothing and had given him strong and loyal support, which he greatly appreciated, though neither had spoken openly of it.

While he waited at the Intersection for his trolley he was joined by several other colleagues from his section and his train of thought mercifully broken, he joined the talk of mundane matters. As always, he was in good spirits when surrounded by other people but the nights were the worst; then he was alone in his monastic, cell-like apartment and the brooding began. His wife had left him some years before, being unable to stand such a hermetic life; he could not really blame her but it made his situation worse.

He had thought once or twice to consult one of the Station's resident doctors, but had decided against. They would only report his traumas to higher authority and he could not risk that. It might mean him having to leave XK24. Despite the responsibility he liked the many friends he had made among the personnel and the camaraderie exhibited during the communal meals. He was so absorbed with the high-spirited chatter of his companions that he almost missed his Intersection.

Jonas had decided to walk home that evening. It was an eccentricity he had long practised, for the exercise helped to tone up his muscles and harden his frame. His tall form was often seen striding along the glistening, steel-lined tunnels by colleagues gliding past in comfort and though one or two cheery remarks were addressed to him by the contented passengers, they were careful not to say anything offensive; not only on account of the high rank he held, but because of his powerful, somewhat forbidding physique.

There were numerous tales about his strength and prowess at sports and he was an expert at ju-jitsu, as a number of opponents who had suffered broken bones at his hands, could attest. He had been speaking to Cameron earlier about various secret matters and he was mentally working on the problems involved as he strode swiftly along the tunnel. Unlike many of his colleagues he was never depressed or mentally affected, either by his surroundings or the great responsibility invested in him. And he feared nothing, neither man nor beast, he told his friends, aware of their somewhat mocking smiles at his use of this ancient cliché.

But tonight his introspection was to be starkly interrupted by an horrific and entirely unexpected incident. It began with a faint, whispering cry. When he looked up he realised that he was quite near the Photographic Laboratory. He had been so absorbed in his own thoughts that he had not noticed his surroundings. He took his eyes off one of the reproductions of the lush green world that they had lost. He had not seen Carter since the evening when he had visited him with Cameron to investigate the Blue Trace warning. He thought he would look in for a

few minutes and get an update on the current situation. But he was again arrested by the strange whimpering sound.

Then he realised two things; the first was that the door of the Laboratory was standing ajar, which was against all standing security arrangements. And the whimpering sounds resolved themselves into the noises made by a woman under extreme pressure. Their intensity increased until they became strangled screams. Jonas was running now toward the distant doorway and as he neared it, the sound of his pounding feet echoing and re-echoing against the massive steel-beamed ceiling, the door was flung open and a figure he did not at first recognise, appeared.

It was that of a woman with dark hair but her face was so swollen and distorted, her complexion chalk-white; her eyes mere dark hollows that it took him some moments to realise that it was the formerly glamorous figure of Elaine Russell. He caught her by the arm to prevent her falling.

"What has happened?"

She made inarticulate choking noises, her eyes wide and desperate. He shook her roughly to bring back her reason but she only pointed dumbly over her shoulder. Jonas gently lowered her to the floor of the corridor, propped her back against the wall and with a few comforting words opened the door to its widest extent. At first he could see nothing; there was the usual dark red glow of the low-density lighting; and the chatter of the instruments. A monitor screen was flashing and vibrating without any discernible images, which was unusual in itself. Normally they were transmitting or turned off completely.

He went toward the far end of the laboratory, where he knew the main overhead light switches were situated. He would have to risk fogging any photographic material as it was obvious that something unusual, even tragic had happened here. He had never seen Elaine Russell in such a state; she was normally a very strong and level-headed girl whose nerve did not normally give way. Something terrible must have occurred to shatter her composure and affect her in such a dreadful manner. He was halfway down the big chamber before his nostrils caught a strange, sickly odour. It was so strong and cloying that he almost retched.

He put a handkerchief over his nose and went toward the area where the light switches were. Before he got there his foot skidded on something nauseating and slimy. It was so unexpected that Jonas almost fell and he regained his balance with difficulty. Some cloying substance was adhering to his shoes and it was from this that the revolting stench was coming. He went across the remaining yards to the far wall, found the switch and threw it. Pale light glowed from the overhead installations

and washed the floor in an even, golden glow. It was then that Jonas wished he had not done so. He stared incredulously, sweat suddenly bursting from every pore.

Something that had once lived from which every vestige of humanity had been expunged as though by some foul mechanism. Crushed, eviscerated and squeezed into a square yard of floor space was the remains of a human being, compressed in some diabolical manner into a rough cube shape. Viscera and other organs dangled obscenely, interspersed with scarlet splashes of blood and a sickly green ichor which gave off the abominable odour. Jonas gazed uncomprehendingly at something outside all human experience, even his iron nerve shaken to its very foundation.

Long trails of colourless liquid were still running from the thing on the floor and he moved quickly to avoid them. He turned a disbelieving glance on the dark glasses and a single human finger-nail lying nearby. Those and the remnants of tufts of silver hair, now withered strands, protruding from the mass, made him realise that he was looking at the remains of Chief Photographic Technician Andrew Carter. His nerve broke then and he tore his glance from the foul thing and gazed desperately round the laboratory, looking for some source of this unbelievable horror.

With enormous courage he went through the various rooms and other laboratories of the Photographic Section but there was nothing there; nothing, that is, that could have been responsible for the liquidation of the unfortunate Carter. Relief flooded through him, though he mentally despised himself for his momentary cowardice. No wonder Elaine Russell had been so affected; even his own sanity had tottered at this inexplicable and obscene expunging of a human life. Fortunately, there had been no-one else on duty with Carter that night as, if that person had survived, there would have been little hope of keeping the tragedy secret.

But his reason had not quite deserted him. He went over to the monitor screen and snapped open the chamber. There was no cartridge where there should have been one. He pressed a number of switches, anxiously watched the readings that came up on the dials. Whichever way he looked at it, it was obvious that all-important recordings of the past hour or so were missing. Whoever—or whatever thing—had destroyed Carter had abstracted them. With the hairs on the back of his neck prickling Jonas went through the written log on the far side of the desk. Where tonight's notations should have been entered, several pages had been torn out. At the edges of the tears were traces of the foul green ichor that gave off such a nauseous stench.

His senses recovered, Jonas was seized with a powerful resolve. Carefully averting his glance from the floor, he went down the laboratory and punched Cameron's private alarm button. A few minutes later, which seemed like hours, he was speaking to the Station Commander who had fortunately just come on duty. Cameron could not believe what his senior Flight Commander was trying to tell him. Twice he had to ask him to stop and begin again. When he finally realised what Jonas was saying, he was frankly incredulous. Jonas, his nerves in pieces, finally broke.

"Come down at once—and come alone!" he almost shouted.

There was a long silence but he had finally got through to Cameron.

"Very well," he said quietly. "In five minutes."

Jonas went out, feeling shrunken and ineffectual, his giant frame seemingly diminished, his shoulders bowed. He found Elaine Russell quietly weeping but some sanity had returned to her face. He sat down on the floor beside her and put his arm around her shoulders, without saying anything. They were still sitting there in silence when the pounding progress of Cameron sounded down the long stretch of the tunnel.

8

"I have never seen you so shaken!"

Cameron's voice was hushed and reverential as though he and Jonas had just been through some deeply religious experience. The latter took a deep pull at his second glass of whisky and stared grimly at his chief, who was himself on his third. The two men had spent a traumatic hour behind locked doors, clearing up the photographic laboratory. They had wrapped Carter's remains in waterproof sheeting, using tongs, and then scrubbed the floor with disinfectant. They had themselves conveyed Elaine Russell back to her own quarters and had impressed on her the need for secrecy. She had been visiting the laboratory to pick up some photographs Carter had promised and had found his remains. She had not seen anyone else in the laboratory but she was so shocked and upset that it was hardly surprising, Cameron thought. Now she was sleeping heavily, after having been given a draught by one of the Station doctors, who had been told that she was suffering from strain and overwork.

"Do you think she is reliable?" Jonas asked.

Cameron nodded, his face tired and haggard beneath the overhead lamps. The two men were in Cameron's own quarters, where they would not be disturbed. Someone else had been detailed to take over his watch duties and the two men had destroyed the remains of Carter in one of the powerful underground incinerators. They had not been seen

and the following day Cameron intended to say that that Carter had been called away on urgent family business.

His subordinates would be asked to take over his duties and told that he was being transferred to another station at his own request, in a fortnight's time, so there would be little difficulty in arranging for other technicians to take over the department. The two men had made sure that everything appeared in order at the laboratory but the events of the past hours had taken a heavy toll on both of them.

Cameron put down his glass on a low metal table at his elbow. The clinking sound, almost inaudible as it was, seemed to exacerbate Jonas' already overstretched nerves.

"Russell?" Cameron said, replying to the Flight Commander's question.

"Yes, she's extremely reliable. She won't speak to anyone of this. We three are the only people that have this . . ."

". . . dreadful knowledge," Jonas finished the sentence for him.

His superior shot him an intimidating glance.

"Yes, this is one of the most serious situations XK24 has ever faced. Something from outside is loose in the Station and we are all in deadly danger."

"But how can they infiltrate? And what are they?" Jonas asked in a voice whose normally clipped tones were slightly eroded. "Has this happened before?"

Cameron's eyes were boring into his own now and the Station chief was again in control of himself.

"I am going to confide in you, Jonas. It needs more than brain and more than one human being's courage to confront these things. You ask what they are."

He shrugged.

"We simply don't know, except that they do come from outside. So far as I read it no-one has ever seen one."

He paused momentarily.

"And lived," he concluded grimly. "They must come from outside. There is no other explanation."

"But how can they get in?" Jonas persisted. "We are hermetically sealed here. The airlocks and huge double entry doors . . ."

"Some may have come in when one of our people returned to the Station."

Jonas looked incredulous.

"Without being seen?"

Cameron put his two hands round his glass and lifted it again. Jonas noticed that his finger-tips were as restless as the antennae of an insect.

"I have never spoken of this, Jonas. And I haven't even confided it to my private log, but it's my belief, after long thought and study, that these things can assume other shapes and forms, much as a chameleon. Let me tell you of two terrible incidents that we had to hush up. Both concerned trusted members of the personnel here. In the two separate occurrences, a year apart, these men attempted to attack the then Station chief and on the second occasion, his principal scientific officer. Fortunately, in both cases the attacks were thwarted. But an incredible thing happened in both instances. The two men collapsed as though they were balloons which had been pricked with a pin. They were like two envelopes in which something else was living inside. Both the outward body of the man and the inner force or whatever inhabited the human shell, burst into flames and consumed itself, leaving only a small residue of brittle ash."

Jonas' eyes were wide with amazement but he said nothing, merely waited for his superior to go on.

"Yes," Cameron continued. "A sort of auto-destruction was at work there."

"Are you suggesting that this is what happened tonight," Jonas said. "That Carter . . ."

Cameron shook his head.

"No, no. This is something different. In my opinion Carter knew something or found out something so terrible that he had to be killed by some intangible creature, perhaps inhabiting the outward shell of a trusted member of our own staff."

Jonas turned a grey face to his chief.

"In that case, God help us."

Cameron broke into a harsh laugh.

"So you still stick to those old superstitions. If there were a god would these things exist?"

Jonas reached out for the decanter on the table and helped himself to another measure.

"You have a point, sir," he conceded. "Question is, what are we to do."

Cameron had a set jaw and a dangerous glint in his eyes now.

"There's only one thing to do. We must get someone outside. Find out more about these creatures."

Jonas shook his head.

"Is that wise, sir? If your theories are right, we may be letting more of these creatures in."

"We'll have to think about that," Cameron put in crisply. "Carter may have found out something to do with what was happening outside. That was why the recordings were either abstracted or destroyed and why those sheets were torn out of the duty log."

"You mean those strange shapes we've been getting."

"Maybe. That's the reason he was killed. Something already inside could not let that knowledge be promulgated within the Station. So the thing simply destroyed him. The creature is walking about here inside all our installations. If I have read the situation aright he could be in the guise of anyone."

Jonas took another sip of the whisky, felt courage seeping back through him.

"Who is going out?" he asked. "You're not likely to get many volunteers. And you can hardly order anyone to go in view of the history you've just explained."

Cameron stroked his strong chin, the metal strap of the voice box clamped to his wrist giving back winking lights on to the ceiling panels. To Jonas' overstrained imagination, they seemed momentarily like dozens of alien eyes blinking at him. He shifted his position on the chair and concentrated on what his superior was saying.

"It's a big problem, Jonas. But something that must be faced. Above all, we mustn't let anyone beside ourselves and Elaine Russell know what has happened or what we suspect. That's the first imperative. I'll give it some thought and so must you. We'll come up with something plausible. It must be as mundane and routine as possible because if something is watching us from inside the station it must not be forewarned."

"A secret operation, then," Jonas said. "We must select someone when we're absolutely certain, from his record and general demeanour, that he will be the best person for the mission. No-one outside the three of us must know what we really intend. And one or other of us must keep in voice contact with him throughout."

Jonas gave a long sigh.

"A heavy task, sir. And we dare not fail."

Cameron stood up and put a hand on the other's shoulder.

"We'll work it out," he said. "in the meantime we'll sleep on it."

But Jonas did not sleep at all that night.

9

"I heard you were ill," Watson said.

The viewing screen above the doorway flickered and came to life. After a few seconds Elaine Russell's image came into view. She looked pale and disturbed, the visitor thought.

"I brought you some chocolate and a bottle of wine," he went on. "Rort told me that you had been ill but were now recovering. I wondered why I hadn't seen you in Control the last few days."

The girl smiled then.

"That's extremely kind of you, Conrad."

It was the first time she had used his Christian name. Watson felt his cheeks stinging, though the metal alley in which he stood had a cool draught blowing through it. The whine of a distant trolley starting up sounded and then slowly died.

"Aren't you going to let me in?" he stammered. "Or do you not feel up to receiving visitors."

Elaine Russell's eyes opened wide.

"Oh, forgive me. Of course. Do come in. 78-435."

Watson pressed the code buttons in their console next to the oval steel door which slid back with a barely audible rumble. He went through into a small hall lit by concealed lighting and up a free-standing metal spiral staircase to the living quarters. They were elegant, as he had expected them to be, with many white rugs and white furniture. In stark contrast to his own spartan quarters, he thought. But then the girl occupied an important position within the hierarchy of XK24. He had suspected that from the moment he had first seen her working with Stevenson in Control.

She had deserted the silver uniform with its badges of rank and wore a white gown of some thick material, which clung to her excellent figure. She took the gifts from him with a gracious inclination of her head and beckoned him into a deep leather chair.

"Thank you so much for your kindness. Will you not share the wine with me?"

"Delighted," Watson said, looking curiously about the lavishly furnished apartment. He had been in few private quarters since coming to the station and he was somewhat overwhelmed by the luxury displayed here. The girl must have sensed his thoughts in some manner for she gave him another enigmatic smile, putting the chocolate box down on an engraved glass table, before gliding across the black marble floor carrying the bottle. As Watson waited he could hear the friendly sound of clinking glasses and the popping cork. She was back presently with a silver tray containing the bottle, tall goblets with gold rims and an assortment of biscuits on small porcelain dishes. He waited until she had

opened the box of chocolates and was pouring the wine before he spoke again.

"I trust you didn't mind me calling. I hope your illness wasn't serious. Rort was unable to tell me much about the details. Except that he had heard you had collapsed on your way home the other night . . ."

The girl handed him a glass, indicated the biscuits on the tray and sank down into an identical leather chair opposite.

"That's quite true. I've been working extremely hard lately. And I must have had a touch of 'flu. I don't normally pass out in that manner."

Watson took a tentative sip of the wine. It was delicious. As he drank he studied Elaine Russell's face through the rim of the glass. She did look pale and he sensed rather than observed that she had gone through some extremely traumatic experience. Though why he should have thought that, he didn't quite know. It was just a feeling. Perhaps the atmosphere of XK24 was getting through to his nervous system also. There was something strange about the station; an ambience that he had not observed in his other postings.

It was not merely to do with the strange, misty landscapes outside the thick quartz observation windows he had been shown in a number of locked sections. They were just part of the usual tour new members of staff were given; he had seen the same things during his other postings. If it did not seem ridiculous, even to himself, there appeared something ominous about the vast complexes and miles of corridors through which the electric trolleys snaked their way. It was quite ridiculous, of course, but now it had affected him. It was a sensation he had never felt before and he did not like it.

"But you are feeling better now?"

"Oh, much. I'm very grateful for your visit. It's something that's never happened to me before."

Watson's eyes were wide.

"You surprise me, Elaine. If I may call you by your christian name . . . ?"

The girl inclined her head gravely.

"By all means. Have another drink."

She got up to pour. Watson felt strangely at home here and he began to imagine that he and the girl were old friends. That was a dangerous assumption, he knew, yet there was something so open and friendly about her nature, that he was completely disarmed. Watson had never had much to do with women; not from inclination but the life he had led and his postings to various stations had mitigated against it and where there had been large populations of women in some of the complexes in which he had served, they were invariably old or already married.

She was just about to sit down when there was a buzzing sound from the next room. She turned quickly.

"Excuse me. I'll be back in just a moment."

She went out and a moment or two later Watson heard her talking on one of the internal telephones. He knew it was not an outside call because the repeater in the far corner of the room showed a green dial. He put down his glass and wandered round, admiring some of the paintings. He paused in front of the girl's desk when his eye was arrested by something unusual. It would have meant nothing to the average person at XK24 but to watchkeepers and even to relatively junior people like Watson it had immense significance.

It was just a large silver key with a red handle and a number stamped into the shank. But Watson, who had discussed the matter with Rort some days earlier, recognised it for a key to the room containing the Memory Machine. He had seen a colour illustration of it in one of the restricted handbooks at about the same time. This meant that Elaine Russell was an even more important person than her presence in Control indicated. There were a very few people on each station entitled to one of those, and each station had a different system for such machines.

It could be that she was a high-ranking official from central government. In which case what was she doing there? It had to be something to do with the Blue Traces and the emanations from outside to which higher officialdom seemed to attach such importance.

But he seemed relaxed and preoccupied, toying with his wineglass as she came back into the blinding whiteness of the room. It was then that he noticed for the first time the long mirror in the apartment she had just vacated, and that there was a latticework screen dividing the two chambers, through which he could have been seen. He felt his cheeks flaming red as the girl went to the desk. She picked up the silver key and held it up toward him, the tip of her pink tongue protruding from between her even white teeth.

"I'm sorry, Elaine," he said haltingly. "I wasn't prying, I assure you. I just happened to see it lying there."

The girl had a strained smile on her face now.

"It doesn't really matter, Conrad. It was my fault for leaving it out. You know what it means, of course?"

"That you're here from higher authority."

She inclined her head slightly.

"Something like that. Now that you know, would you like to see the Memory Machine? There is another entrance, unknown to anyone ex-

cept a selected few, which by-passes Central Control and the three electronic keys."

His reply surprised even himself.

"If you're sure it's all right."

The girl laughed then, tossing the dark hair back from her face.

"Now that you know, you'll only be curious. Showing you tonight will mean that you are committed to silence also."

Watson debated for a long moment. Then he blurted out something that had been on his mind for some days.

"I'd really like to see that Memory Machine. If you're sure it can be arranged."

He was conscious that his heartbeat had slightly increased when Elaine Russell stared at him with incredulity in her eyes. The tension was finally broken by her low laugh, which expressed both humour and admiration for what she perceived as his affrontery.

"I was only joking, Conrad! Do you know what that means? If we're caught there without authority?"

Watson felt rebellion rising within him.

"I'll dare it, if you will. I take it you've been there before?"

"Not only that. I've actually experienced it!"

"What was it like?"

"Wonderful in my case. Quite unlike some of those other reported incidents."

Watson stood up, his heart beating so violently he thought it would explode in his throat.

"Let's do it, then!"

10

It was two hours later when Watson and the girl arrived at the small, secluded steel entry. They had used the overhead walkways to avoid contact with personnel on the electric trolleys which occasionally whirred past, their passage causing low swishing noises which took an unnaturally long time to die out along the miles of shining corridors.

They had spent over an hour arguing the pros and cons of the dangerous expedition on which they were embarked. Dangerous only from the risk of discovery by higher authority, the girl had assured him. She had been sceptical that there would be any physical danger in using the Machine; she had been under its influence twice and she assured Watson that it had been not only soothing, but even pleasurable.

The danger lay in their being observed coming and going from the Machine Room. She had assured him that there was no possibility that use of the Machine could be monitored or recorded in any way by outside forces. All the controls were grouped within the chamber itself and she was fully conversant with all of them and their uses.

Despite these reassurances Watson had a dry throat and was now somewhat regretting his earlier bravado and rather wild words. He knew that if they were discovered it would mean instant dismissal. The girl, being of higher rank, might merely be reprimanded and given lower seniority. But it would be an absolute disaster from his point of view. The destruction of his entire career in this elite force; instant dismissal and banishment to some lowly post in a remote settlement where he would surely spend the rest of his days. It was a prospect which filled him with dread yet every measured step among the metal walkway that led to those secret doors that guarded the Memory Machine filled him with burning exhilaration.

Elaine Russell paused and took him by the sleeve, drawing him into a narrow entry between two towering metal tubes that spiralled up into the shadows, eventually losing themselves in the gloom beyond the reach of the lamps.

"Only a few yards now," she whispered.

Watson waited, his heart beating in his throat, while the girl fumbled with several small keys at a great metal door, set flush with the wall, in the darkest corner of the entry. By dint of straining his eyes he made out the red-painted letters; EXIT ONLY. He gave himself a strained smile in the dusk. A perfect cover, that no-one would have suspected, unless they were of the higher echelons of personnel. The girl had finally produced the special keys and there was a long ticking noise that went on for almost a minute, so Watson guessed that it operated solenoids within the door casing itself.

The portal whined back smoothly, self-propelled and Elaine Russell had a small shaded torch in her hand, whose pallid beam made a dancing finger of light as soon as the door had closed firmly behind them. She found a switch and lights quivered into existence in the curved ceiling. They went down a short passage and through a padded door which she also unlocked. Light slowly grew through louvered openings in the walls. When his eyes had become adjusted, Watson was at first disappointed. It was a large, curved chamber with two leather padded reclining chairs mounted on swivelling axes in the middle of the floor, set on a circular raised platform.

Next to the chairs were curious metal helmets and a number of trailing electrodes on small metal tables. For the rest there was a large Visor screen on a console in the far wall and several small monitor screens. A control panel was set alongside the righthand chair or couch. There was a deep silence between the two as Watson took in the scene.

"Well?"

He shrugged.

"It doesn't look very much."

Elaine Russell smiled faintly.

"Appearances can be deceptive. This is one of the most important installations in the entire complex of XK24. It is what it does, not what it looks like."

He did not answer at first.

Then, "Do we sit in the chairs?"

"Yes, but before that we have to be nude."

She laughed as he gave her an astonished look.

"It is necessary," she explained gently. "We have to fasten the electrodes on to bare skin. I will be using the Memory Machine as well if it makes you feel less uneasy."

A faint humming filled the chamber as she started throwing switches and bringing the equipment up to full power. Watson began to strip while her back was turned, knowing that he was deeply embarrassed as well as uneasy and confused. The chamber was warm now and when he was naked he lowered himself on to the lefthand couch and kept his eyes on the ceiling, averting them from the dark girl, who was now naked also and smiling. She slid sinuously on to the next recliner and he closed his eyes as she leaned over and started fixing electrodes on to certain parts of his body.

At her command he put on the large metal helmet with padded inserts and fastened the webbing strap securely beneath his chin. He lay back, his thoughts racing, as she carried out the same process. When her helmet was in position she pulled the swivelling instrument panel over to her side and dialled the robotic instructions.

"Are you ready?"

"Yes."

"If you are in distress or you imagine something is wrong, you have only to press the green button in the arm of your recliner to abort; the process will then stop. You should wait at least ten minutes before you attempt to move. But I'm sure the experience will be a pleasant one."

Watson nodded. Sweat ran down his face and he could feel it on his body as he fixed his eyes on the illuminated clock set above the main screen on the far wall. It was now two A.M.

"I am going to dim the lights as this works best in the dark."

"Shall I close my eyes?"

"No, no. Of course not. Watch the big screen. You will see your inmost thoughts there. I shall be using a smaller monitor this side."

Watson said nothing further, his throat dry and dusty-seeming. He flexed his toes involuntarily as light started to fade from the ceiling, and dug his fingers into the padded arms of his chair. His last impression was of the whiteness of Elaine Russell's magnificent body, which slowly faded from view.

Reedy music filled the chamber and the big central screen gave off a pale green light. Watson felt a tingling sensation on the points of his body where the electrodes had been set and his scalp crawled as similar electrodes in his helmet were activated. Or at least he supposed that were so; he was no scientist and he would not have been able to absorb the intricacies of the processes involved even had Elaine Russell been able to articulate them. There were faint whisperings in his ears now and images were beginning to appear on the screen; insubstantial at first and then a little stronger.

There was limpid green water and hazy views of a summer sea with stipples of sunlight glancing on the wavelets; something that Watson had been able to see only in simulated fiction dramas promulgated on the public screens. The music died and there was only the idle ripple of the water which in turn faded away.

Swirling incense; blue clouds that scudded by at an enormous speed; scintillating lights mingled with volcanic turbulence so that Watson was both exhilarated and giddy at the same time. In fact, the images, which seemed now to explode within the chamber almost made him cry out and he was dimly conscious that his hands were frantically grasping the arms of the recliner. The impressions were so vivid that Watson felt himself being actually drawn into the screen, so that he was virtually there, in a brightly coloured, kaleidoscopic world, in which he felt, for once, supremely happy.

His parents were there; incredibly young and good-looking; smiling and waving to him as they danced around what looked, to his overheated mind, like a painted representation of a magnificent ball-room that had once existed centuries before. There were old loves, too; girls that he had known, with smooth, unlined faces; they seemed overjoyed to see him, even those he had wronged; there were others,

too; beautiful and unattainable in real life, who had wronged him also; but he felt no malice and their earlier spurning of his advances seemed to have been forgotten, as they danced round him in turn, laughing and embracing him.

Heady perfume was in his nostrils and all his senses were alive and vibrant, pulsing to some unheard rhythm. Then actual music began; languorous waltz-tunes from a past age that ensnared the senses; he was pirouetting on a mosaic pavement that stretched away into infinity; fountains were jetting a cooling spray; birds were singing; and voluptuous sunlight made patterns and bars of light and shade across luxuriant trees that Watson had only seen previously in old documentary material.

He felt he had never been so happy and then, somehow, he was transported into a boat; a huge boat with spreading white sails that surged across a grey-green sea, where the wind churned up the waves and spray chuckled along the gunwhales; he was naked except for a small loincloth girded with a gold belt and a slim, blonde girl with a laughing face and rippling hair sat in the prow and gazed back at him with adoration in her eyes. Watson wanted to speak to her but the words would not come; there were only faint, bell-like chimes, as though a far off cathedral was tolling the hours somewhere on shore.

He rose to his feet and began to walk toward the golden girl in the prow but as soon as he let go the tiller the wind caught the sails and the craft heeled over, throwing him into the water. But the images had changed and he was in some sun-baked town with aqueducts, castellated walls with Moorish domes shimmering on the horizon. Sheep and goats grazed peacefully and a shepherd boy wearing a crown of myrtle leaves played a haunting tune on a pipe nearby; Watson reached out for a green fig growing on a sun-baked wall and ate it. It was delicious and his joy increased. Here was a world in which the sun shone eternally and no darkness invaded the soul.

Centuries seemed to have passed and when he came to himself, perspiration drenching his naked body, his mind brimming with joy and happiness, he found himself in Elaine's arms. Their mouths blended in the sweetest and most sensuous kiss he had ever tasted.

"Are you happy?"

"Yes," Watson said.

"Let's make love," she whispered.

They did.

11

Cameron's face looked haggard beneath the shaded lamp. As Jonas took a seat opposite him he thought the Station chief seemed to have aged ten years in the last few days.

"It must be something important to call me here in the middle of the night, when I'm off-watch," he said.

They were in Cameron's private quarters and he pushed across a flask of fiery spirit and watched in silence while his second-in-command filled his glass.

"It is," he said, when the pause seemed unbearable.

"I've just received a coded message, restricted to we two only."

Jonas sat up straight.

"Red Alert?"

"Even more important than that. The President is coming here in three days' time. Apparently this is the most threatened sector. Someone must go outside!"

Jonas narrowed his eyes.

"You know what that means? Almost certain death with no guarantee that we shall get the information we want. Look at what happened to the last two who went out there. And I'm not forgetting Carter."

Cameron shook his head impatiently.

"Do you think I have?"

The big man lowered his gaze.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that."

Cameron's expression softened a little.

"It makes no matter. I am the only person who holds the decode to this message. Let me give you the gist of it. These things have been steadily infiltrating our ranks for some years. The hierarchy think they are awaiting some pre-arranged signal to attack *en masse*. I can't order anyone to go. There was almost a mutiny after the last time."

"You still want a volunteer," Jonas said grimly. "As I said, that won't be easy. You saw the reaction at the last meeting on this subject."

Cameron nodded brusquely.

"The President is coming here to boost morale, to inspect our defences and to call for that one volunteer. My predecessor made the biggest mistake in sending too many people out at once. They were soon detected . . ."

He broke off.

"Our scientists in central government have now confirmed what I told you recently. Nobody knows what these things from outside look like.

They strike without warning and kill silently and secretly, leaving no trace of their presence."

Jonas leaned over quickly and poured himself another drink. His fingers trembled very slightly as he raised the glass to his lips.

"There is more?" he said at last.

"Much more, I'm afraid," Cameron said softly. "Some of it I'm not even allowed to reveal to you."

Jonas' square jaw was set now.

"You mean the Destruct Button?"

A deep frown corrugated the Station chief's forehead.

"Yes. That little green piece of electronic equipment that's kept under an unbreakable glass dome in the special room in Central Control."

Jonas swilled the fiery spirit round his tongue lovingly.

"You realise some of the lower-grade personnel believe it to be a device to blow us all to hell and back if the line is breached?"

"I do know that. But it might just as well be, for all the good it will do us, if it's ever used."

"I don't follow you," Jonas said.

"Many years ago, when things were better from our point of view, a system of extremely powerful mines was laid in the swamps, controlled from Central, of course. They were installed in case there was a mass attack of these creatures. Naturally, they cannot be triggered by accident; if, for example some animal wanders among them. They are buried too deep for that."

"So? You hinted that the system might be no good in case of emergency."

Cameron shrugged.

"These things have been in the swamps for generations. Water penetration, earth movement, half a dozen things may have affected them."

Jonas grimaced.

"That's fine!"

The Station chief gave him a tight smile.

"That's the world we live in. We have to make the best of it."

"And we have to pick up the pieces for higher authority if anything does go wrong," Jonas said.

Cameron gave a short, barking laugh that echoed and re-echoed round the apartment.

"Naturally! It's always been like that since the world began."

Jonas made a sound that might have indicated disgust or impatience.

"If these creatures have already infiltrated the Station, as seems obvious from the death of poor Carter, what is the point of all these precautions? Have they not already been pre-empted?"

Cameron's face was suddenly haggard again.

"There you have one of the great imponderables. Do you not think this has lived with me day and night ever since it happened. My report went straight to the higher echelons."

He made a hopeless gesture with his hands.

"They are no more able to help us than we are to help ourselves. We have done everything humanly possible. Obviously, it is not enough."

Jonas felt a sudden stab of pity for the Station chief. He himself knew the stark loneliness of command and the great burden of responsibility it laid on the individual's shoulders.

"So what's the answer?" he said at length.

"Watch and wait. Eternal vigilance. Wait and see. It's a bleak prospect but all we can do."

The two men carried on drinking in a sombre silence. On Cameron's monitor screen in the corner of the living room, the black outlines of gnarled trees and the eternal fog that wreathed about, forever obscuring the view of the farther reaches of the swampland, merely emphasised the starkness of the problems that confronted them.

12

"I will go!"

The words burst out of Watson involuntarily, as though he could not help himself. Amazed faces were turned in his direction, not least among them those of Cameron and Jonas. But Elaine smiled at him approvingly. There were some two hundred people in the large communal hall, including those off duty from Central Control. Cameron had explained something of the problems facing XK24, without going into detail; and called for a volunteer. Though the situation was of the utmost gravity, the Station Commander had disguised its true purpose by announcing an important routine meeting that normally came up every three months.

He had conveniently masked the unusualness of the occasion by announcing that the President was shortly to make an inspection visit, and a volunteer was required to check the security arrangements, which had caused something of a stir. Now there came the low murmur of conversation and a smatter of ironic clapping from the back row.

Watson did not know how he had come to this decision. His momentary euphoria was suddenly punctured by a flash of memory; of the cryptic entry in an unknown hand in his official log: *Your destiny lies in volunteering*. He was not a brave man—or so he told himself—yet he had felt supreme confidence in his own abilities when he had stood up in that crowded hall to make his simple statement. His eyes caught Elaine Russell's and he felt an upsurge of pride in her faith in his ability to carry through a difficult and dangerous task which Cameron's speech had cleverly obscured.

"You know what you are saying?"

This from the Station Commander.

Watson nodded. He could not trust himself to speak. Cameron gave him a glance of approval and he could see grudging admiration on the faces of Rort and Jonas.

"Well, that concludes the business, gentlemen. You all know what you have to do. Senior personnel most closely involved will remain behind for the briefing of Watson. With the President's visit imminent, we have little time to lose."

The next two days passed for Watson as in an euphoric haze. He was lectured by Cameron, Rort and Jonas on the procedure he should follow once outside XK24, until he could almost recite the instructions in his sleep. He was kitted out with protective clothing, the anti-radiation helmet with heat-shield and microphone headset which would enable him to communicate with base.

His oxygen supply, with an emergency reserve of up to three days; the flame-gun for defence; and the other elaborate equipment which was mandatory on any personnel who ventured outside, was demonstrated and expounded upon by experts in each particular field, so that in a very short time Watson had acquired the confidence in using the equipment as though he had been familiar with it for many years.

When off watch he was supported by the presence and unswerving faith of Elaine Russell, on whom he had come to rely to a remarkable extent during the relatively brief period of their intimacy.

She had naturally brought out from the Memory Machine room the recordings of their dreams and when Watson had secretly re-screened his own, he retained a faint hope that he would somehow meet his parents again. Anything seemed possible in the world of XK24. No-one knew of his relationship with Elaine; of that he was convinced, though Rort and even Jonas had made amusing hinted remarks from time to time. Such liaisons were not forbidden on the station, but personnel were fairly strictly supervised and senior technicians who worked in

Central Control had to get official permission if they were involved in any deep relationships.

Watson did not know exactly why. It was something to do with security, but he understood the basic reasoning behind such precautions. Now, as he went through an intensive course of training, all fear of the outside world had left him, as Elaine had assured him it would. He had come to rely on her more and more as the days passed.

"You are certain about the exact order of these functions?"

Watson jerked back to reality at Jonas' words. He was currently undergoing complicated instruction based on emergency procedures and it was imperative that he be absolutely conversant with their workings.

"Yes, of course."

Jonas smiled mockingly.

"Repeat them. And trip the switches in exact sequence. Remember, though you will be insulated from outside conditions and breathing the correct oxygen intake, it will be exhausting through the swamps. And you will need all your wits about you."

Watson nodded, his face white and strained through the heavy duty transparent shield that fronted his metal helmet. He was perspiring inside the suit, though he understood that conditions were colder outside and he would need the specially heated insulation that surrounded him. He worked the miniature switches a dozen times more, getting the vital last eight in correct sequence, before Jonas was satisfied.

"You'll do," he said at the end of the session. "There's nothing further we can teach you."

"What about the camera?" Watson asked. "Shall I take it with me?"

Jonas shook his head.

"Too big and cumbersome for the terrain you'll be covering. The one inside your helmet is a monitor, really. It won't be as accurate as the big model but it will have to do. But there's so much mist and fog out there, we shouldn't be able to see a lot from Control anyway. We'll record it all, together with your microphone reports, of course."

He put his hand on the younger man's shoulder.

"Remember that your outfit is tearproof. You have enough oxygen; plenty of time for the outward and inward reconnaissance. And, just as important, you have the flame-gun in case you run into any trouble. It's accurate up to a range of half a mile. Following your course I'm sure you know how to use it."

Watson licked his lips.

"After your training I know the thing inside out."

Jonas smiled grimly.

"Just make sure you know it right way round. That could be very important."

13

Watson took a last look round at the small group of men gathered in the narrow chamber. Elaine was not there; she was on duty in Control but they had, in any case, said their intimate farewells the night before. Cameron, Jonas and Rort, who headed the small cluster of senior personnel had their hands up in formal salutes. Watson acknowledged the tribute briefly, feeling strange and cumbersome in the heavy suit. He had checked and re-checked all the controls and procedures and he turned to face the great titanium doors of the air-lock. It slid open with a faint hissing noise.

He stepped into the small space beyond, which looked very much like an elevator. There were calibrated instruments on the walls, but he knew these were controlled from within XK24, so they did not concern him. The far doors slid open slowly and then he had stepped through into a world of viscous ooze underfoot and writhing mist that swirled in the rarefied air.

What he had not foreseen was the cold, which seemed to penetrate through the thick protective clothing, until he remembered to switch on the internal heating system which was activated by spoken commands through a pre-determined sequence of words, which he had thoroughly memorised. He turned back, looking longingly through the thick visor of his helmet, at the cold grey domes of Station XK24, behind whose clinical surface was comfort, friendship and civilisation; what might once have been called home, he thought wryly.

The special miniature compass, situated inside the helmet and mirror-corrected, gave back an illuminated image in the glass visor of his helmet. It pointed due north from the friendly sight of the base and even as he turned to look behind him, it had already faded in the haze, though he could see the red signal lamp atop the highest dome blinking at three-second intervals. That, with the compass and the radio link with XK24 would guide him safely home when the mission was over.

He set off walking northward, sloughing through the sticky ooze; he understood there was nothing particularly dangerous about the swamp itself and nowhere was it deeper than three or four feet. All his clothing was waterproof in any case but it was good to know that he would not sink in the slime, never to resurface. After a few moments longer he

called base and was relieved to hear Cameron's calm, even tones in his ear, almost as though he were standing next to him.

He reported that everything was well and was further reassured to hear that all the systems were working properly, and that they were able to record his progress through the sensor tracking devices built into his suit. He gave the order to switch off when the conversation was finished and then noticed that his visor was misting over. It had nothing to do with the outside conditions but was engendered by his exertions through the swamp; he was perspiring and his breath was causing condensation but when he switched on the heating element built into the visor the condition rapidly cleared.

He had gone almost a mile into the swamp, his instruments told him, when the mist began to thicken. At the same time he became aware of a low, monotonous thudding, like a drumbeat, which seemed to emanate from miles away. He glanced round nervously but could see nothing amid the swirling vapour. The faint throbbing sound seemed ominous to him and he wondered, not for the first time, whatever had impelled him to take such a reckless step as to volunteer for such a potentially dangerous mission. It had emanated, he realised, from Elaine; her enthusiasm and her beauty had swept him away and it was probably to make him shine in her eyes that he had made such an impulsive decision.

The low pulsations, like some giant's heart beating in his sleep, continued to make Watson uneasy and he was relieved when Cameron's clear, incisive voice sounded in his ears. The sensitive instruments back at XK24 had picked up the faint vibrations also and the Station chief wanted to know the situation. Too late, Watson realised he should have reported it at least a minute before and he decided that he must concentrate more carefully. Fortunately, Cameron had apparently sensed nothing amiss and Watson was able to pass the matter off by saying that he had already noted the sounds and was about to report them.

Cameron's voice faded and was replaced by the crackle of static which Watson rapidly erased as he switched off. He had an exterior microphone which picked up all sounds around him in the swamp and which was more vital to him at the moment than contact with base. Some people there called the swamps The Badlands and he was beginning to see the reasons why. As he had been told, they were not particularly deep but the ever-present mist strained the nerves as vague shapes appeared and disappeared, and though they were always the boles of dead trees or large branches half submerged, they were constant potential threats and the continuous effort to keep one's balance in the slimy ooze beneath was tiring to the leg muscles.

He stopped to rest for a few minutes, reclining against the half-submerged trunk of a large tree, his heart hammering in his throat. He then realised that the dull thumping noise had stopped. He also noted something else. His instrument readings showed that he had travelled approximately a mile in the northerly direction. He had been told that about two miles should be his maximum penetration and he could then circle round in a wide arc to reconnoitre the terrain before returning to base.

He reported in to Cameron when he had sufficiently rested and was then told to continue to the end of the allotted range before swinging eastward on his inward journey. The sky was now black but this was normal. A strange, unearthly twilight persisted, with greenish pulsations coming from swamp areas far ahead. The mist helped to lighten the atmosphere but at the same time cloaked everything in a weird blanket through which greenish fires glowed. Watson had never been outside before and he was in awe of his surroundings, which were both terrible and beautiful at the same time.

He again checked the dials and the circuits in his suit and helmet by means of voice commands. Everything appeared to be working normally and he plodded onward, through the foul, scummy water which swirled about his ankles, his heart heavy amid such sombre not to say bizarre surroundings. He was almost at the limit of his reconnaissance range and had heard nothing of the muffled drumming or seen anything out of the ordinary, except for some strange, lizard-like creatures which hopped from log to log before swimming out of sight.

There were sickly-looking lichens and fungoid growths on the trunks of trees here, which glittered through the mist in nauseous hues of red, blue, yellow and green, the like of which he had never seen before. Everything here was distorted, depraved and degenerate and he was extremely glad that his own atmosphere inside the helmeted suit prevented him from smelling the disgusting odours that were undoubtedly emanating from them.

It was at this point, when he was just about to check in with base that he found his voice communication system was no longer working. He repeated the code word several times but there was nothing in the earphones except a faint crackling sound. He felt that perhaps some knoll or an area of higher ground had interfered with the reception. But as he circled to the east on his pre-determined course that must eventually return him to the safety of XK24, the condition still persisted. He felt sweat beading his forehead and he fought down a sudden spurt of

panic. After all, it was a simple malfunction that should clear the closer he got to base.

Watson moved on eastward, his mind heavy and troubled with an unease whose source he could not place. He tried the voice link over and over again but could not contact Control. The swamp was deeper here and he found the going heavy, and sat down again on a fallen tree trunk to rest, keeping his legs out of the water. Even though his thick suit was water and chemical proof, his legs felt cold, despite the suit's internal heating system. It was shortly after his third abortive attempt to contact XK24 that he saw a fiery glow coming from far off through the mist in the eastward direction.

He was now an hour and a half out but as his compass told him he had started on his circular inward journey there was no cause for alarm, though he was aware that Cameron and Jonas might be worried at the broken contact. After a brief interval he pushed on again, moving toward the faint crimson flicker which came and went within the haze. He was stumbling over black tree roots now, twisted into grotesque shapes.

Then the going eased up and he was in shallow ooze, his thick boots sinking in barely to the ankles. But he was aware that something unusual was happening. The faint pulsating beat had again commenced, the glow on the horizon had strengthened and he noticed that odd indistinct shapes were keeping pace with him beyond the splintered ranks of trees. He altered course abruptly, so that he was facing directly toward XK24 but that left the strange manifestations in his rear, so that he was constantly having to look over his shoulder.

He had progressed in this way for perhaps twenty minutes or so when the mist momentarily parted to his left and he saw a vast brown shape slithering slowly through the swamp, sending sheets of scummy water cascading over the blackened roots of the trees. Watson stopped, his heart pounding, his mouth dry. He could not believe his eyes. The viscous, glistening carcase came closer and he could see the vast, squamous head, like that of a slug; the central eye in the forehead opened to disclose a white, filmy disc.

Watson's instinct for self preservation returned then and he broke into a shambling run through the thick slime, the perspiration pouring from him and blurring the helmet visor. The thing did not seem able to move very fast and he soon left it behind but there were other similar monstrous shapes ahead and he altered course to the right, a direction which would still bring him safely back to base. But now the slug-creatures had been joined by other, more potentially deadly entities. These resembled a mass of tangled brownish ropes where the bodies should

have been, with what appeared to be miniature hands and feet in human terms, depending from their extremities.

As Watson rounded a tree-bole he was confronted by one. It had two toad-like heads from which malevolent pink eyes stared implacably into his own, and it made a sibilant mewling noise which seemed to emanate from pairs of yellow antennae on its foreheads. A thin crack which served for a mouth, opened, revealing two sinister rows of spiked teeth. The mouth on the righthand head remained closed. Something glittered in one of its paws and Watson saw with sick horror that it was a disembowelling knife, such as he had seen during surgical operations which were sometimes shown on the monitor screens.

As he stood irresolute, his will momentarily paralysed, he saw that the toad creature had been joined by others and they stood in a menacing semi-circle around him and in each miniature right-hand paw glittered the same incredibly sharp knife that the first one carried.

The mewling cries came again and then they were advancing toward him. The spell broke then and Watson gave scream after scream. With suddenly gathered strength he seized the nearest tree branch and swung himself clear, dropping into the ooze on the far side, where there was the only open space. Then he was running for his life in the direction of base.

14

"Watson's back."

The cry echoed along the steel corridors of XK24. Cameron and Jonas were running toward Central Control, where they saw on the monitor screens the mud-covered figure of Watson staggering into the air-lock. Behind him could be momentarily glimpsed dark forms rapidly receding into the mist. Then Elaine Russell was on the screen, explaining to Cameron that Watson was too ill to speak at the moment. A surgeon was attending to him and he would be taken immediately to the base hospital. As soon as he could speak she would let them know what he had to report.

She looked white and strained, Cameron thought, as she asked haltingly what had happened to the voice-link. Cameron explained that there was nothing wrong with the base equipment and that they had lost contact after about an hour. It had to be a malfunction in Watson's helmet and he would await a report from the technicians responsible. Stevenson, who was on duty switched off the monitor then and Jonas and Cameron walked back to the Station Commander's private office, where they slumped into padded chairs and stared silently at one another for what seemed like an interminable interval.

Cameron was the first to speak.

"This is it, then, Jonas. You saw those things on the screen. Fortunately the technicians involved would not have read them as being any different from our previous traces."

The Flight Commander nodded.

"Serious stuff, nevertheless."

"Serious as it could be. I've already erased all the monitor copies except for the master here, which we'll keep confidential."

Cameron got up and poured two glasses of strong spirit.

He smiled bleakly.

"This is becoming a habit."

He pushed the other glass across the steel desk surface to his second-in command.

"And we don't want anyone talking to Watson until he's fit to see us."

Jonas gave him a long, hard look.

"Got you. I'll have a guard put on his room."

He shifted uneasily in his chair.

"But you're thinking about the Destruct Button?"

Cameron's face was grey now but the spirit seemed to be reviving him.

"Maybe," he said slowly. "But let's hope to God nothing happens before the President's inspection."

There was a faint glimmer of a smile on Jonas' lips and Cameron inwardly admired the man's iron control.

"I see you're believing in God, too," Jonas said. "It might be a good idea if we got the President to press the button. It would show we're fully in control and might even lead to promotion if we can wipe out these creatures."

Cameron shot him a bleak smile.

"You have a point," he said softly. "It certainly seems that XK24 has the biggest concentration—or infestation—call it what you will—of these things. But if anything went wrong it could be disastrous. The President expects formal ceremonies, a banquet and all the trimmings, plus a pat on the back from the senior officers on the station. You know what these politicians are."

Jonas took another sip at his glass, his brow furrowed.

"Yes, I do know," he said heavily. "It seems to me we play it by what Watson reports as soon as he's sufficiently recovered."

"Rort's off duty," Cameron said. "He's his Watchmaster. I'll get him to go down to the hospital in an hour or two and check things out with the Russell girl."

When Rort came back he and Cameron were closeted together for over an hour. A short while later Cameron called Jonas back to his private office in Central Control. Jonas had not seen him so gloomy since he had arrived at the station.

"Bad news?"

"As can be," Cameron said. "According to Rort, Watson was chased by weird-looking creatures to within a few hundred yards of the main doors. He's given a rough description of their appearance. I will have electronic likenesses prepared in the strictest secrecy. There were no clear sightings on our screens. They were too cunning for that."

"What are we talking about?" asked Jonas. "What are we up against?" Cameron shrugged.

"He says their bodies are like a loose assembly of rope-like appendages resembling an octopus and that they have heads like toads. Two heads in each case. It sounds too fantastic for words, but I suppose we must take account of his shocked condition. He almost lost his life, it seems. The huge shapes we've been picking up as vague shadows are enormous creatures like vast slugs, according to him."

Jonas made a deep rasping noise way back in his throat.

"Are you sure he's in his right mind?" he asked. "Obviously he's seen something out there. But he's been under great stress . . ."

Cameron stopped him with a look.

"We've got to believe what he says. He's given us the clearest sighting we've ever had of what faces us. This is the reason the frontier chain exists. Many of the earlier people who went out never returned. It seems we must soon use the Destruct Button."

Jonas leaned forward until his eyes were boring into his superior's.

"But why have they waited so long?"

Cameron made a hopeless gesture.

"Perhaps they were preparing something," he said ominously. "We have to assume they are now ready. If they came to within a few hundred yards of XK24 it's the clearest warning that we ignore at our peril."

He got up suddenly and paced around the office, tension in every line of his body.

"I shall have to get authority from the President," he said at last. "It is time to act!"

15

"Ladies and gentlemen, the President!"

There was thunderous applause in Central Control from the select audience of senior personnel, some with their wives, at the conclusion of

the President's inspection. He had spent a whole day touring the complex, making speeches, and presiding at a glittering lunch party attended by over 300 people. A tall, blond-haired man in his early fifties, with a well-scrubbed face and wary blue eyes, he had made an extremely favourable impression in his finely tailored light blue uniform with gold braid on the shoulders and a few discreet military decorations on his uniform breast.

Now he rose from a long table, a glass of wine in his hand and gave a toast to the assembled guests. There was no room for them to sit down in Cameron's suite so they were having a light buffet with white wine before the special ceremony. Beyond them, past the locked sliding doors, the work of the station went on with watchkeepers closely regarding the monitor screens and throwing switches; the same weary routine which had persisted for more years than anyone could remember. No-one gathered at the private party knew what was about to happen apart from the President himself, Jonas, Rort, Cameron and Elaine Russell.

Watson was present too, now completely recovered from his ordeal. He had been the centre of attention when his exploits had been explained in private to the President, who had personally decorated him with the Star of Light, one of the highest honours the world could bestow. As he stood next to the President, flustered and embarrassed at being the focus of all eyes, Elaine gave him a reassuring smile and then glanced across at the Station Commander and his senior personnel as they waited for the President to make his speech.

In the event it was short and succinct. There were the usual platitudes when he praised the staff of XK24 for their efficiency and eternal vigilance; commended several senior officers, including Cameron, Jonas and Rort, and presented a number of certificates of commendation, including one to Elaine Russell, which was greeted with a storm of applause. She was seen to whisper something to the President but even those nearest could not make out what she had said, which merely reinforced the suppositions of some of those present, that she was very highly placed in the hierarchy and one of those in the great man's confidence. When the presentations were over and the last of the applause had died away, the President became even more grave and a deep hush fell upon the room. Rort thought he had never seen the leader so grim and determined.

"A number of you here today, realise the seriousness of the situation on this section of the frontier," he began. "I do not need to impress upon you all the importance of your task here and of the threat to us all that lurks outside. Of course, the higher echelons at XK24 are *au fait* with

the situation, but for the benefit of the majority of you, I am going to explain matters a little more fully."

He went on to describe the great system of explosive mines that had been laid in the swamps years before as the main line of defence. He added that Watson's mission out there had been vital and it was time to put a stop to the menacing situation that had arisen in the sector guarded by XK24. The defences had been laid with one purpose; to destroy the alien forms of life that were massing to attack the station and breach the defences. XK24 guarded the most menaced and vital sector of the line, which was why the central authorities had given it such high priority, both in its forms of defence and in the quality of the personnel. That was something of which they could all be proud.

At the conclusion of this opening he glanced round at the serious faces in the room. He caught Cameron's eye and gave him a wan smile.

"What only a few people know is that we have an extremely important piece of equipment here in Central Control, one of only three in the entire chain of command stations. It is called the Destruct Button and to disguise its real purpose it is coloured green, unlabelled and kept within an unbreakable glass dome to which only the Station Commander has access. When that button is pressed the swamp area at a safe distance from XK24 will erupt in a series of devastating explosions and fires which will destroy whatever is massing out there. So lethal is this barrage—it covers an area three miles deep and two wide—that our scientists estimate it will secure this section of the frontier for at least the next ten years."

He held up his hand as a thin ripple of applause interrupted him. His face was solemn as he glanced round the assembly.

"The time has now come for me to press that button, ladies and gentlemen, and rid the world of one of the vilest scourges it has ever known. You will be privileged spectators who will see everything happening on the monitor screens outside. If you will follow me I will then perform this necessary ceremony which is one of the most vital that has ever been entrusted to mankind."

There was a long silence followed by muffled conversation as the President followed Cameron and the other senior officers toward the sliding doors. Once in Central Control, where all personnel were now standing to attention by their equipment, Cameron led the way down to the far end. He operated a lever and a steel panel slid open to reveal a shining dome, beneath which gleamed the Destruct Button. There was an awed hush as Cameron unlocked the base and opened the dome.

He held out his hand in a courteous gesture that seemed inexpressibly sinister to those present.

"The President!"

The tall man in the blue uniform took a deep breath and glanced round at the ranks of intent faces.

"A great moment in history," he murmured.

He pressed the button. For perhaps ten seconds nothing happened while everyone held their breath. Then there came the dull boom of explosions which appeared to echo along the steel corridors outside. Smiles of triumph were erased in a second as the monitor screens went dead, leaving the technicians dumbfounded. Sparks were running up and down the instrument panels and there was the smell of burning insulation. A little dust descended from the ceiling in filmy clouds. The President sagged against the console, consternation on his face. Cameron hurried to his side.

"What has happened . . ." the former began in a trembling voice.

There were further explosions and distant screams.

"For God's sake!" Rort said.

All those present were suddenly arrested by a steely voice which cut through the chaos outside with startling clarity. It was Elaine Russell, whose face was shining with delight. In her hands she held a flame-gun and as she swivelled it, the ashen-faced gathering cowered back against the far walls.

"Yes, Mr. President, the Destruct Button has been the means of ensuring your own doom! You have merely destroyed the titanium doors and our people will be here shortly. We have spent many years locating those explosive charges and replacing them in the area round the station entrance. Our artificial mist that blanketed your monitor screens was to hide our activities. You suspected something but you really did not know what was going on."

"You she-devil!" Jonas shouted, stepping forward. He was brought up by the swivelling of the gun barrel and the menacing look in the girl's eyes.

"Why have you betrayed us to these creatures? One of our own!"

Elaine Russell shook her head.

"I am not one of you! And neither is Watson now!"

At her motioning he stepped forward to join her. All those in Control fell back in horror, listening to the agonised screams and the chaotic pounding of running feet that was going on outside.

Then something even more terrifying happened. Elaine Russell shed her human envelope like a snake shedding its skin. The two toad-heads

with the pink eyes swivelled toward her stricken captives and she moved the congeries of whip-like appendages, still keeping the flame-gun levelled in one diminutive paw. The same dreadful metamorphosis had also taken place in her companion and the thing that had been Watson slithered over to join the monstrosity that had been Elaine Russell. A nauseating stench emanated from them. The pink eyes glowed, as she screamed, still in the same human voice she had always used.

"Over the generations you have made us what we are, with your atomic bombs and radiation! Yes, you have created us; now you must pay the price! You have two hours to live as human beings! Then you will be our slaves for ever!"



THE SUMMERHOUSE

1

BELINDA put down her book with a sigh, blinking in the bright sunshine. She was a girl of about twelve years old, with vivid gold hair, tied back in a pony-tail; and with china-blue eyes which stared with deceptive vacuity at the people she met. Her pink dress, draped across bronzed knees, was dusty where the hem had dragged across the old wooden floor of the summerhouse. Far below, a sheer drop from the cliff edge, Atlantic rollers beat furiously at jagged rocks, before being turned into white foam.

Few people ever came there and she now regarded it as her own private domain. During the long school holidays she would laze away the afternoons, eating sweets, watching the smudged horizon for the faint wake of ships, and then returning to her current book. This was one of the major ways in which she could forget some of the problems which had begun to darken her ideal life with her father and mother. Daddy was a prominent businessman in his mid-thirties and the family lived in some style in a Georgian house with a large garden overlooking the sea.

Her mother was an attractive woman with a large private income which supported her husband's business enterprises, some of which were not particularly successful. Belinda did not know what he actually did though she knew it was connected with the motor-racing world, and

sometimes he would drive home beautiful scarlet sports cars from his commercial showrooms. Occasionally, as a special treat, she would be allowed to accompany him on runs to the more remote parts of Cornwall, when he was engaged in business deals and she loved the coupés best, with the summer breeze ruffling her hair and the dusty lanes whirling by beneath the thrumming wheels.

Her mother seldom accompanied them on these trips; she was an amateur painter of some note and spent a good deal of time on the cliffs painting landscapes, many of which had been displayed in national exhibitions. But latterly there had been a growing schism between the couple. Belinda had first noticed it by veiled remarks dropped by Mrs. Jenkins, their motherly housekeeper, who had a habit of talking to herself whenever she had a problem on her mind. It was a subtle process, much as storms slowly began with a slight darkening of the sky across the calm sea that, far below, skirted their home.

Raised voices at night where there should have been harmony; slammed doors in a house which did not know such eruptions into its ordered silences; tyres scrabbling in the gravelled drive as her father accelerated a sports car savagely, and disappeared without his usual waved goodbye; moody silences at the breakfast and lunch-tables; and odd glances the little girl intercepted with growing dismay and perplexity.

Sometimes, at night, there were even more dramatic and disturbing occurrences. Screams and shouts from her parents' quarters and once, a terrible sound as of breaking glass. On this occasion, Mrs. Jenkins, who normally lived in the town, had volunteered to stay overnight, as though she knew something awful was going to happen. She had comforted Belinda and had established her in another, larger bedroom, which was farther away from her mother's, where she would not be disturbed by "such goings-on," as she put it.

Later that evening, she had a long talk with Belinda's father, when they stood at the stairhead conversing for some while. This was nearer to the little girl's new room, but she could not make out any detail, merely the low mumbling of conversation. Belinda's cheeks were wet with salt tears as she finally found sleep. The next morning Mrs. Jenkins' normally cheerful manner had deserted her; she was unusually subdued and had a haunted look in her eyes, Belinda thought.

Her mother did not appear at breakfast, but later her daughter caught a glimpse of her through one of the front windows. Her father was helping her into one of his large saloons; she had a white, taut face and Belinda noticed a bandage on her right arm before the car door slammed

and they sped away. She was lost in thought for a long while and after Mrs. Jenkins had prepared lunch, which she ate alone in the huge dining room, she went down the cliff path that led away from the garden, and not to her usual haunt in the summerhouse.

There was a small wicket gate at the side of the garden, near to old Forrester—the gardener's—tool shed, and it formed a short cut from the town when he came in to tend to the lawns and plants twice a week. The gate saved him a long walk round to the main entrance and up the drive, and it was useful too as there was no public footpath there and Belinda could stroll across the cropped turf undisturbed, daydream and gaze with childish awe at the turbulence of the sea over a hundred feet below.

Mother was absent for several days after the night disturbance and to Belinda's anxious questions, her father said that she was resting at a local hotel for a while before returning home. This was confirmed by Mrs. Jenkins but Belinda remained anxious until her mother turned up unexpectedly late one afternoon and greeted her with her usual affection. The incident was never referred to again, though the little girl thought long and hard about it but kept her own counsel. She was remarkably mature for her age, but from that day onward her attitude to her father began to change.

2

The crux of it stemmed from an incident shortly after the previous events. Her father, Lionel, had been awarded the concession for a new type of Daimler and was justly proud of these magnificent cars. One afternoon, when Belinda's mother was out on the cliffs working on an oil study of gulls nesting on ledges, he turned up with the newest custom-built model, shimmering in emerald green livery with the panels picked out in delicate gold lining.

They had had lunch in a delightful old beamed hotel restaurant with all of Belinda's favourite food and her father had been especially nice, buying her a box of chocolates—which, however, remained unopened for the time being—and later in the afternoon, ice-cream. Then they had gone on a long drive over the coastal road with its magnificent views far out to sea, where the ocean and the sky merged in hazy vistas.

Afterward, they walked farther down the cliff approach, parking the car on a small subsidiary road below. A warm sun drenched the landscape, imparting a golden patina to everything and Belinda, hand in hand with her father, felt fleeting happiness. Far away the sea made a lazy

murmur against the rocks, broken only by the occasional harsh cry of a gull. Then they sat for a while and Belinda was allowed to use her father's binoculars as he indicated points of interest in the vast panorama before them, and showed her how to manipulate the focusing screw.

Later he stretched out on the soft turf, tilted his hat over his eyes and dozed. Left on her own, Belinda went farther along, the binoculars round her neck, supported by their strap. All her worries momentarily banished she gave herself up to the magic of a summer afternoon. Her thoughts wandering, she presently found herself at the cliff edge. There was a notch in the ground here, and beyond it she could see sun shimmering on the wavetops, seemingly at a vast distance below. Suddenly she felt something touch her and was teetering into space. She screamed involuntarily and then her father had swung her up and on to his shoulders. His face was drawn and he was trembling from head to foot.

"Far too dangerous!" he kept muttering over and over again. "Far too dangerous! Never go near the edge again."

Belinda felt sick and buried her face in his thick tweed jacket. She could never afterward get clear in her mind whether she had first been pushed and then pulled back, for a group of hikers had suddenly appeared round a bend in the cliff path. But from that day forward her attitude toward her father had darkened further.

3

A day or so later her mother appeared at breakfast in a normal fashion and as though nothing had happened. Lionel had gone to his office early that morning, as he had appointments with representatives of important motor manufacturers, and the two of them were alone except for Mrs. Jenkins who waited on them and then, when she brought the coffee, joined them at table. An intelligent woman, she was more or less treated as an equal by Belinda's mother, though she did not adopt this practice when Belinda's father was present. He would not have tolerated what he would have described as such familiarity.

The talk between the two adults concerned the usual banalities; what provisions were needed for the household; the orders for the gardener, who was due on the following morning; some homework that Belinda was expected to do during the long school holidays; the beauties of the special Daimler Lionel was selling to a rather distinguished titled person in Penzance. The talk flagged after a while and Mrs. Jenkins poured more coffee for herself and her mistress, and a refill from the jug of orange juice for Belinda.

The latter's blue eyes were wide open and staring at the bandage which covered her mother's right arm beneath the short sleeve of her summer dress. Melissa—for that was her mother's name—had a strange expression on her face beneath the mass of dark hair, now burnished by the strong sunlight that came through the dining room windows. She licked her lips, obviously slightly embarrassed, and gave a hesitant smile in Mrs. Jenkins' direction. The housekeeper's smooth, plump face had a somewhat wry expression.

"Oh, that," she said, with a nod of her head, by way of explanation. "Mummy had a nasty fall in her bedroom the other night. In trying to prevent herself from hitting the floor, she cut her arm on a glass perfume bottle on her dressing table."

Melissa nodded, obvious relief on her face. The strain was momentarily erased from her features.

"Yes, that's right. It could have been serious."

"It was a nasty gash at any rate," Mrs. Jenkins interjected. "Daddy had to take her to the doctor's. She didn't want to go but it was a good thing she did. The doctor had to insert three stitches."

She stopped, aware that Belinda's eyes were brimming with tears. Impulsively, the girl left her place and almost hurled herself into her mother's arms. Melissa cradled her closely. Above the child's head, now buried in her lap, she looked approval at Mrs. Jenkins.

"There, dear. It's nothing to worry about now. Mrs. Jenkins was only explaining what happened. It probably sounded worse than it actually was."

She produced a cambric handkerchief of dazzling whiteness and dried the tears from her daughter's face.

"If you've finished, darling, run along and play. It's another beautiful day out. There's nothing to be worried about."

Mrs. Jenkins was already up, clearing the breakfast things, her face shadowed with concern as Melissa kissed her daughter. But the child, all her distress erased by a dazzling smile, followed Mrs. Jenkins into the vast kitchen, which was equipped with every modern appliance.

"What really happened to Mummy?" she said artlessly when the two were out of earshot.

Mrs. Jenkins was staggered.

"What do you mean, child? Whatever has come over you. I don't understand your question."

But Belinda was not to be put off. She was a persistent little girl and when her mind was fixed on something, she usually carried it through to the end.

"Was it really an accident? I heard voices. Mummy and Daddy were quarrelling."

Alarm and concern chased themselves across Mrs. Jenkins' features in quick succession. She turned swiftly and took Belinda by the shoulders.

"You must never say things like that, young lady. Your Mummy and Daddy love one another. But they have arguments and disagreements sometimes, as all married couples do. There's nothing to worry about, as your mother has already told you. Your father has some troubles in his business affairs and this occasionally makes him irritable. That's all there is to it."

Belinda nodded slowly, but she did not really take in all that Mrs. Jenkins was saying, nor did she believe the few remarks which had penetrated her consciousness. But she had to leave it at that and she moved away down the kitchen, tapping the china cups on their hooks with her forefinger, until they made a pleasant little tune, which, however, seemed to irritate Mrs. Jenkins who held up a reproving finger. When she had left the kitchen to finish clearing the dining table, Belinda crept along the hall, being careful to avoid a place where the polished pine floorboards gave out creaking sounds.

Mummy and Mrs. Jenkins were conversing in low tones. She moved toward the door, which was half open, but did not dare go any closer; not only because she could be seen through the hall windows from the drive, but because Mrs. Jenkins might come back at any moment and find her there in such suspicious circumstances. However, she could only make out the odd sentence here and there.

"No, no, no!" her mother was saying. "It can't go on like this."

Then Mrs. Jenkins' soothing tones intervened. After that they appeared to lower their voices, because there was merely an indistinct mumble in which she was unable to distinguish any individual words. Shortly after there was the sound of a vehicle entering the drive entrance, and she hurriedly retreated back through the kitchen, without waiting to see who the visitor was.

4

The following afternoon Belinda was in the summerhouse at the edge of the cliff, crouched on the side ledge, her usual place, with her father's binoculars, idly watching distant shipping. She should not really have been there at all, because the floor was slightly weak in places. But Belinda was well aware of that and avoided those spots. The summer-

house was an Edwardian structure, built well out from the cliff-face, and supported by six enormous curlicue iron girders, deeply sunk into the granite surface.

Her parents knew she went there, and once or twice her father had mentioned it, but there had been no absolute prohibition in the matter and so it had tacitly been allowed to drop. But on this afternoon something had happened to disturb the inner calmness which had descended in this placid place. The quiet background of far-off surf and the nearer humming of bees had given way to a harsher sound. Footsteps on the gravel path nearby. Not one but two sets. Quickly, she huddled into the dark recess, thinking her parents had come down to look for her and perhaps to reprove.

However, it was not her mother and father and the couple had no intention of coming into the summerhouse. They were merely taking a walk and had turned in that direction, completely absorbed in their conversation. Their shadows paused almost imperceptibly at the summerhouse entrance, one of whose double doors had been left slightly ajar by Belinda. She could see her father, his face worried and absorbed as he stared at his companion. Then, as he slightly shifted his position, the girl caught a flash of red.

A slim, dark-haired girl was with her father, rapt and absorbed in their conversation. She was about twenty-six years of age, beautifully coiffed, with an elaborate gold necklace about her delicate throat, and strikingly dressed in the dark red tailored suit. Belinda still could not make out the gist of their conversation, but that urgent matters were being discussed between the couple she had no doubt. Once the girl caught her companion's arm, her eyes flashing, as though she were urging him to some action, but he hastily moved away.

Though their tones were serious, it was obvious they were not angry with one another and then they had moved off, their footsteps crunching in the gravel until they finally died out in the distance. Belinda sat on in the shadows of the summerhouse for a long time and presently again felt tears stinging her cheeks. It was not until Mrs. Jenkins' voice calling down the pathway, urged her to lunch, that she stirred herself. She brushed the tears away with her handkerchief and presented a cheerful, smiling face to the housekeeper when she finally caught up with her. The two went into the house together.

Belinda did not mention the scene she had just witnessed, though she saw her father's coupé down at the first bend in the drive, and Mrs. Jenkins seemed unaware of the visitor. Belinda's mother was not in evidence and the girl and the housekeeper ate an informal lunch in the

kitchen which was only interrupted, toward the end, by the gaunt figure of Forrester, the gardener, passing the window. It was then that Belinda heard the faint sound of her father's car departing toward the main road.

At tea-time an immaculately laid table was set out on the lawn, beneath a huge pine which provided additional shade to that afforded by the striped umbrella. This lawn took the sun directly and faced the sea, though it could not be seen from beneath the pine, owing to the rose trellis and hedge which bounded this part of the grounds. The South Lawn, as it was grandly called in the household, though it did not, in fact, face south, was one of Belinda's favourite places, and this afternoon she and her mother were luxuriating in the fine spread that Mrs. Jenkins had provided.

Melissa wore a white silk dress and she lounged back in her deck chair, occasionally sipping her tea from a fine china cup, the saucer of which rested on a special flat tray clamped to the deckchair arm, which had been designed by Lionel. The conversation had been desultory; firstly with Mrs. Jenkins, who had been inquiring about some household tasks and which stretches of the gardens Forrester should tackle next. The old man was cantankerous and resented being ordered about, as he called it, by the couple who were paying him. He was quick to take offence and Mrs. Jenkins was the only one who could oppose a soothing presence against his prickly nature and she kept him sweet by slipping him delicacies from the kitchen from time to time.

Then her mother had questioned her about her homework and Belinda was somewhat at a loss because she had been neglecting it of late.

"You spend too much time mooning about," Melissa said irritably, brushing away a wasp which was hovering over the jam dish.

She looked up, catching the little girl's sullen expression.

"Especially in that summerhouse," she continued. "I'm sure it's not safe."

Belinda shrugged, reaching out for another slice of her favourite cherry cake.

"It has enormous iron girders supporting it," she said deliberately.

"Even so..." her mother began, when the siren from a large pleasure steamer close inshore, distracted her.

The matter was eventually dropped, to Belinda's relief. Presently her mother took up a book and began to read in a perfunctory fashion. After a long silence Belinda said slyly, "Who is the lady in red that daddy sees?"

Melissa looked up, her eyes flashing suspiciously from beneath the brim of her white summer hat.

"Oh, her," she said in a languid voice. "That's Miss Collins, Daddy's secretary. She runs things at the office. Why?"

The question was put casually but Belinda was instantly on her guard. She did not want to spread suspicion where there might not be any justification.

"It's just that I've seen her about from time to time."

Melissa nodded, the intent look fading from her eyes.

"She comes up here," she said carelessly, "when there are problems with the business and Daddy is too busy to look in."

Belinda's face was impassive but she filed the information away, resolving to keep her eyes and ears open. Something was slowly crystallising in her mind; even she could not have said exactly what it was but a plan was forming. In the meantime she would say nothing to her mother and father.

A dark shadow fell across the table.

"Ah, there you are!"

It was her father's tall form looming against the hazy sun. Melissa did not stir from her chair but she had a contemptuous look on her face for a moment. Belinda had glanced up but though her mother had instantly changed her expression, it was not quick enough to deceive the little girl.

But all her mother said was, "I'm afraid we've eaten almost everything, Lionel. You'd better go and ask Mrs. Jenkins for another tray."

Lionel nodded without speaking, but his eyes were smouldering and Belinda knew that anger was burning within him. Or was it something else? It was difficult to make out the attitudes of grown-ups. Her mother turned again to her book and Belinda's gaze followed her father's strong figure across the lawn until he had disappeared round the nearest bank of shrubbery.

5

Two days passed. Two days in which Belinda's mind was filled with chaotic thoughts. Relations between her parents had not improved and she blamed her father for this. She also had an insatiable curiosity about the lady in red. After lunch on the second day she left the grounds. She was not supposed to go into the town on her own, but it was only a mile away and the streets were crowded with holidaymakers in the sunshine and no-one took the slightest notice of a small blonde girl who strode along occupied with her own thoughts.

She felt tired after her walk and sat down on an empty seat on the front, where young people were disporting themselves on the sands and splashing about in the shallow water inshore. An ice-cream man had parked his van nearby and she would have loved to have bought one of the large cornets but she had not enough money in her small leather purse. The sun was now hot on her head, and she left the front and hurried quickly across the road and into the shade of a narrow alley that led back from the promenade.

Five minutes later she was entering the large open doors of her father's main showroom in this area. He had three others in major towns and visited them regularly once a week to see how things were going. The sales manager here knew her and waved from behind the partition of his glassed-in office, giving her a pleasant smile at the same time. She ran lightly up the carpeted stairs and went along the corridor that led to her father's private quarters. There was no-one about.

At the left-hand side of the corridor were rooms where stores and spares were kept, Belinda knew. There were no lights on, so she realised that no members of the staff were working there. The last room on the left was the secretary's office and beyond that the cloakrooms in the cul-de-sac formed by the two passage walls. There was a light on in the secretary's office but the lights burned also in her father's large glass-panelled office on the right-hand side. There was a faint murmur of voices but because of the frosted glass she could not see inside.

Heart thumping, she eased slowly forward until she was almost opposite the office door. She then knelt in case her shadow would be thrown on the frosted glass. Because something told her that secretive, perhaps suspicious things were happening within. The voices had stopped suddenly, as though a faint creaking on the floor of the corridor had signalled her presence to the persons within. But the moment passed and the conversation was taken up once more.

But Belinda could not make out the gist of what they were saying, though she realised that it was a man and a woman who were talking so intently and so agitatedly. Belinda stiffened as a telephone bell sounded. Then she realised it was coming from downstairs as she heard the faint tones of the showroom manager answering. She was afraid he might come upstairs but apparently it was a routine matter because he went on speaking for another couple of minutes before putting the receiver down.

By now Belinda was becoming desperate to see what was happening in her father's office. Then, by moving slowly along the base of the frosted glass panel she found a small area where the opaque surface had

been worn away. It was only a tiny spot, but she put her eye to it and found she could now see into the room. A splash of red slowly resolved itself into the figure of Miss Collins. She was sitting on the edge of her father's desk, her top clothing removed, wearing only her skirt and stockings. Horrified, Belinda watched as her father passionately embraced the girl, forcing her back across the desk.

She waited no more but crawled quickly down to the end of the corridor, before rising to her feet, rage and disgust blinding her to everything else. She eased down the stairs carefully; her father and Miss Collins must not know they had been observed. She waited until the personnel in the manager's office had their backs to the street and then slipped quickly through one of the open side doors.

Once in the open air she ran carelessly, bumping into shoppers, ignoring their irritated cries of censure, and rushed headlong out of the town. When she had cleared the outskirts she threw herself down on to the turf in a secluded spot. She did not cry, but certain thoughts which had been agitating her for months came to the surface and she finally walked home with a terrible resolve. Instead of going into the house she ran back to her old corner in the Victorian summerhouse and sat brooding over the sea until dusk had fallen. She only stirred herself when she heard Mrs. Jenkins calling her to come in for the evening meal.

6

It was about a week later, the sun shining serenely as it had done for months, the soft chirping of birds filtering in from the garden, when it happened. Belinda was sitting in the kitchen with Mrs. Jenkins, watching her prepare lunch. Her mother had gone out on some errand or other and her father was in the garage tinkering with one of his cars. Those were the only things which remained clearly in Belinda's mind.

She vaguely recalled her father, white-faced and distraught, staggering up the gravel path from the direction of the sea, shouting incoherently at Mrs. Jenkins. Then there were police cars in the drive, an ambulance with stretcher-bearers and important-looking men in plain clothes with notebooks, questioning Mrs. Jenkins. Belinda received no answer to her questions. Later, when the grounds were being searched, her father took her aside, into a quiet room, away from the hubbub. His face, usually so firm and decisive, was haggard and drawn.

"Mummy has gone out," was all he would say. Bewildered and upset, Belinda went back to Mrs. Jenkins, who comforted her in her usual good-natured fashion. When everyone had departed, she had gathered

from overhead conversations between Mrs. Jenkins and Forrester and then from her father and the housekeeper that her mother had fallen through some rotten floorboards in the summerhouse. Though a search had been made of the surrounding sea by rescue vessels, her body was never discovered.

Belinda did not believe any of this. She knew her mother never went to the summerhouse. She felt it was too dangerous and in any case she suffered from vertigo. Though it was strickly forbidden, Belinda went down to the building a day or two later. The doors were secured with a padlock, but she knew where she could gain entry by sliding back a loose plank in one of the side walls. Sure enough, there was a splintered section of flooring up at the far end, big enough for a body to pass through. It was toward the window side and the fall would have been direct to the foaming surf below.

Belinda shuddered, though she still refused to face the facts. She knew in her heart of hearts that her mother would never have gone there voluntarily. The girl replaced the loose plank and returned to the house with black hatred in her heart. She slept with the light on in her room in case she were needed during the night.

The very next day workmen arrived in a white van which proceeded slowly down the narrow path to the summerhouse. Later, wandering that way, Belinda saw that the two burly men were repairing the broken section of flooring with pine planking to match that already there.

Her father had resumed his normal routine, though his face was dark and abstracted. The tragedy, if Melissa had indeed plunged accidentally to her death in the sea, had not drawn father and daughter any closer together. Belinda remained aloof, taking what comfort she could from Mrs. Jenkins' solicitous attitude. Her father breakfasted early in order to avoid conversation with Belinda and the little girl was glad of that. She could not have avoided showing her true feelings had she spent any extended time with him, especially alone. Even Forrester had seemed kinder to her than her father, and he was not a man given to emotion of any kind. In his gruff way he had brought her fruit and chocolate, and given her what solace he could, for which she was grateful.

She had again taken to wandering the grounds, though her father had expressly forbidden her to go near the summerhouse. She took no notice and early one evening when Mrs. Jenkins had gone home, and her father was in town, she took a hammer from Forrester's toolshed and with a few swift blows had broken the padlock, though it was easy enough to arrange it as though the summerhouse was securely locked. There was still no news of her mother, but ideas were gathering in Belinda's mind

and eventually she decided on a certain course of action. For she had witnessed another scene between Miss Collins and her father the previous day. They were sitting in the red coupé in a secluded part of the drive, where thick clumps of rhododendron grew.

There was an S-bend there, which screened them from the drive entrance and the road beyond, and also from the house. Belinda crept nearer but did not stop. The couple were embracing passionately and a blind rage enveloped her as she stole away. She knew what she had to do and she laid her plans with care. The very next morning she abstracted some tools from Forrester's shed; they were never used by him anyway, as he tended the garden only. They were at the back of the lean-to, beneath old broken flower pots and sections of board fencing that had blown down in gales years before. Mrs. Jenkins had gone to the town to shop for the evening meal and her father was at his office.

Aunt Ada was coming down from London to look after Belinda but she was not due until a few days later and, in any case, Forrester would not be in until the Friday so she had the place to herself. She knew now what had happened to Mummy as clearly as if she had been present. And if Mummy did not return, then eventually Daddy would have the use of all her money for his failing business. And Miss Collins...

But she dare not think of that. This time Belinda got into the summer-house by removing the loose board at the side so that if anyone came it would look as if it were still locked. The place had the smell of fresh wood. The work of renovating the flooring had been skilfully done. There were still a few shavings scattered about and she carefully gathered them all up and put them in her pocket. Later she would scatter them on the compost heap.

She had chosen the tools well. She knew she had more than two hours before Mrs. Jenkins would return, as she often visited her sister in the town for a cup of coffee and a chat. Nevertheless, she was worried in case the noise would attract attention, though she knew there was really little fear of that.

She knew exactly what she must do and she had paced things out. There was another weak place in the floor that she had always avoided. It was up at the far end, always in deep shadow, due to the configuration of the small window there. She had brought a special saw and she marked the area with a thin chalk line. It would be about four feet square, and was about six feet from where she sat in her usual place. She worked quickly but carefully, using the thin saw inserted through a knothole. The wood was quite thin and things went more easily than she had anticipated. By the time she had finished she had completed two sides

and was pleased to note that there was battening on the underside of the planks for additional reinforcement.

It would not do for the planking to fall into the sea below as that would destroy the entire scheme over which she had brooded so long. As the flap she had made widened, she could see the sea far below. It was a sheer drop viewed from that angle and momentarily it made her feel giddy. She thought then that there was a danger that the whole thing might tear away if there was a high wind during the night. After a few moments' thought she drove four large nails round the edge of the planking and secured the trap with string attached to the nails and then securely tied to the iron stanchions of the side seating at floor level.

Afterwards she tidied up, hid the tools in the shadows, got out the same way she had come in and had returned to the house to wash her hands before Mrs. Jenkins returned. She had given some thought to the next stage of her scheme and mentally listed the things she would need for its completion. She went to bed that night in a more contented frame of mind.

The next morning Belinda was out soon after breakfast. Her father did not appear and Mrs. Jenkins said he had left early to drive to London to bring Aunt Ada and her luggage down. Forrester, the gardener, was not coming until the afternoon, so she had plenty of time. Mrs. Jenkins was used to Belinda disappearing for hours with her books, or wandering on the cliffs, so there was little chance that anyone would come near the summerhouse.

Belinda was soon at work there. Within two hours she had completed the sawing-out of the entire square of weak floorboards. As it was secured by the heavy nails and the string she was able to carefully lever it up complete on its battens. She then drove in a series of small nails at angles in the surrounding boards to give support to the panel when she had replaced it. She was pleased to see that it fitted perfectly, only a thin line being visible.

She spent another hour in brushing dirt into the cracks and then swept dust from other areas of the floor with a soft brush until all traces of her handiwork were obscured. No-one who had not seen what she had done would have realised that the floor was not as secure as the rest of the planking. Belinda went back to her corner seat and sat frowning at the interior of the summerhouse. No, she knew her plan was perfect. There remained only the necessary motive to set the whole thing in motion. She would have to think carefully about that.

The hot sun was now slanting across the sea and deep shadows were etched on the floor. Even she could not see the evidence of the deadly

trap. She carefully gathered up the tools, got out through the loose planking at the side and walked around to the front of the building. She listened carefully but there was nothing but the cries of gulls and the soft susurrance of the sea.

She looked at the padlock on the door critically. It would do. To all intents and purposes the summerhouse was still securely locked. She went back to the toolshed and then to the house for lunch with a strangely lightened heart.

7

Aunt Ada's presence did a good deal to brighten the atmosphere of the household and Mrs. Jenkins took to her immediately. Belinda's aunt, whom she had not seen for some years was a rather glamorous lady, in her early forties, though a pale copy of Melissa; rather addicted to gin and tonics several times a day and keen on tennis and ballroom dancing, though there was little chance of the latter in her new role. But despite her modern ideas and attitudes, she also stuck to a number of old-fashioned hobbies, such as doing giant crossword puzzles—she had brought several in her luggage—and knitting long scarves for winter wear, which she rarely wore.

All this Belinda gathered from Aunt Ada's vivacious conversation and from various anecdotes related to her at secondhand from Mrs. Jenkins. Even Forrester had brightened at her presence and had several times brought her gifts of fruit and vegetables for the table. Aunt Ada and the little girl struck up a warm friendship; though more subdued than she would have been in London, because the tragedy of her sister's disappearance had hit her hard, Aunt Ada was a tough, resilient woman who was no stranger to disaster. Her husband had been killed in a car accident some years before and her only daughter had married and gone to live in Australia.

While greatly welcoming her aunt's presence, Belinda was worried that this new addition to the household might spend a good deal of time in the garden and would want to visit the summerhouse. Fortunately, Aunt Ada had a very delicate skin and said the sun was bad for her. She preferred sitting in the conservatory with the doors wide open for the breeze, while remaining in the shade. She had made a cursory tour of the garden on the day of her arrival, but had avoided the summerhouse completely, which was not surprising, considering its tragic overtones. No, Belinda felt quite safe in that direction.

She waited several days before making her next move. The opportunity came rather sooner than she had expected. She had written the note on a large sheet of white paper with a felt nib pen. Her father had arrived back for lunch in the red coupé and had parked it halfway down the drive. Belinda got down from the table early, as she often did, and wandered outside, leaving the adults chatting in the dining room.

She made up her mind, heart beating in her throat. She strode over the gravel and fixed the large sheet of paper beneath the windscreen wipers where he could not fail to see it. She then rushed down to the summerhouse, removed the padlock and chain and opened the doors wide. Then she went back to the shrubbery, in a position which commanded a good view of the drive. She was wearing a white dress today which would be easily visible against the dark green of the foliage.

She did not have long to wait. In about a quarter of an hour her father came out and strode down to the car. He looked puzzled on seeing the sheet of paper and slid it out from under the wipers. Then his expression changed and he looked wildly round. Belinda jumped out then, making sure he could see her. She was already running down the path, ignoring his mumbled injunction to stop. She easily outpaced him but once round a corner of the hedge, made sure he was following. The summerhouse was in sight now and she again showed herself, knowing that he could clearly see that she was entering the building.

She ran quickly inside, carefully skirting the lethal area of the floor she had prepared, and hunched herself up in the window seat, her heart thudding almost uncontrollably in her narrow chest. She could hear his hurried footsteps on the gravel now and shortly afterward his shadow fell across the entrance. He stood just inside the double doors, his face black and enraged. He held out the piece of paper.

"What does this mean, Belinda?" he said in a harsh, strangled voice.

The girl shrank back against the window embrasure, noticing for the first time that he held something glittering in his right hand. It was a knife. Her silence angered him. He took three or four steps toward her, his face distorted. The flooring gave way so quickly he did not even have time to change his expression as he went down to eternity. She was already at the seaward side of the summerhouse but the minuscule splash her father's body made was lost amid the foaming of the waves.

Trembling and shaken, she got down from her seat and kicked the knife after him. She picked up the sheet of paper and put it in the pocket of her dress. Then she took the hammer from beneath the seat and went round the gaping square in the floor, avoiding the sight of the churning of the sea so far below. She broke out all the planking round the hole until

nothing but jagged edges remained. It then looked as though the rotten boards had given way naturally. She sent the wooden fragments and the few remaining nails downward also.

When she was completely satisfied with her efforts she went out, leaving the double doors wide open. She returned to a secluded part of the garden where Forrester had his bonfires. She had already abstracted a box of his matches from the shed. She took out the sheet of paper from her pocket. On it she had written in large block capitals; YOU MURDERED MUMMY.

She set fire to it and thoughtfully watched as it crumpled to hot ash which she scattered over the compost heap. She was not to know for many years that her mother had been mentally unstable for a long time and longed for death. She had finally achieved her ambition by stamping on the rotting floorboards in the summerhouse until they had delivered her to the merciful sea. What Belinda never knew was that the pocket-knife her father was carrying had been used by him to peel an apple when he read her note. He had carried it into the summerhouse unthinkingly and her imagination had supplied the rest.

Breathlessly, she regained the house, her manner quieting at the faint sounds of Mrs. Jenkins going about her work in the kitchen. She went through into the conservatory where Aunt Ada was sitting. The little girl's very blue eyes were alight with triumph as she looked at her aunt.

"Daddy just went out," Belinda said.

Aunt Ada returned her smile and went on placidly knitting.



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