HONEY FOR THE GHOST



A NEW NOVEL BY

LOUIS GOLDING

AUTHOR OF "MAGNOLIA STREET," "FIVE SILVER DAUGHTERS" AND "MR. EMMANUEL"

3.00

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Author of *Five Silver Daughters, Magnolia Street* and *Mr. Emmanuel*

Louis Golding, one of England's foremost writers, conveys to the reader a feeling of suspense and exhilaration in this tale of the unusual soldier and the witch—a story that moves from East End, London, to craggy Scotland, as well as into the lives of the English fox-hunting set, the suburbs of Birmingham, and even into the realm of demonology.

When Jim Gunning of Holloway, a Cockney suburb of London, came back from the war, he discovered he had incurred a disease that the doctors despaired of curing. But Jim loved his wife, Sal, and his small son too well to accept the doctors' dismal verdict.

Fleeing the sanitarium to which he had been ordered, he travelled to Largan nah Chaorochain, a remote spot in the Scotch Highlands, to cure himself. It was there that he met a very strange and seemingly wealthy old woman named Miss Lemuel, who lived alone on her farm. But she was a "queer one" and her neighbors were sure she possessed supernatural powers. Certainly, she had acted strangely ever since the horrible death of her nephew, an aviator in the R.A.F. However, she seemed to have a strange liking for Jim Gunning, and she took him in with her and worked for his recovery.

(*Continued on back flap*)

(*Continued from front flap*)

Soon Jim's physical health improved, but he began to feel a dread of the old woman with whom he lived. Gradually it became apparent to him that Miss Lemuel had an eerie influence on his life and dreams, and he began to doubt the line that separates the normal from the supernatural. It wasn't until Sal and his son finally managed to locate him, that a solution was reached . . . and a most surprising one it was.

This is first and last a story. As Joseph Taggart says in the *London Star:* "Jim Gunning is a character as wonderful as any Louis Golding has ever created. The story moves on wings because Mr. Golding just couldn't stop writing it."



Honey for the *Ghost*

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	Day of Atonement
	Store of Ladies
	The Miracle Boy
	The Prince or Somebody
	Give Up Your Lovers
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	Five Silver Daughters
	The Camberwell Beauty
	The Pursuer
	The Dance Goes On
	Mr. Emmanuel
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	Hitler Through the Ages
	The World I Knew
Sport	Louis Golding's Boxing Tales
	My Sporting Days and Nights

HONEY FOR THE *Ghost*

By LOUIS GOLDING



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For my friend
LORD DOUGLAS OF KIRTLESIDE
MARSHAL OF THE ROYAL AIR FORCE
because of
days and nights of fierce debate
at Melle
and the villa by the Wannsee

Part One

CHAPTER 1

He turned the key in the front-door lock of the house in Territon Street and let himself in, then took off his army greatcoat dyed dark-blue and shook off the tiny globes of rain spread across it like a hoar-frost. Along the bare lobby and up the wooden staircase his boots sounded hard and heavy. They had not got round to buying themselves any stair-carpet, for it was still scarce and expensive and likely to be for a long time yet.

A dim line and a bright line of light rimmed the lower edges of the two doors on the first floor landing. The dim line came from the night lamp by young Dickie's bed, in the front room that looked out on the street. The bright line marked the kitchen-living room that looked out on the stony garden and the railway embankment. He reached the kitchen door and entered the room. His wife, Sal, was leaning over the fire stirring a saucepan. The firelight shining from in front of her hair made it puff and blow like steam rising from a cauldron of hot metal. He did not usually notice such things, or at least he did not put them into words in his mind; but he did tonight.

"Is that you, Jim?" she asked. Of course she knew it was. But

that was part of the convention that prevailed between them. They pretended not to be excited, or even particularly pleased, when they met again at home, after the day's work outside was finished for both of them. But they always were pleased about it, in their own quiet way.

"Yes, it's me," he said. "It smells good. What is it?"

"Stew, with mushrooms." She turned from the fire, a glow in her cheeks. She looked lovely tonight. "The old woman," she went on, "managed to get a half-pound today, for four shillings." The old woman was Sal's mother, old Mrs. Purdom. They both talked of her as the old woman. She lived with them, in a room up on the next floor and looked after the house and young Dickie. It would have been impossible for Sal to keep on with her job at the chromium-plating works without the help of the old woman.

She looked up at the clock on the mantelshelf, but said nothing.

"Yes," he admitted. "It's getting on." It was half-past eight. "I left the bike at Baker Street," he added. "There's another slow puncture." It certainly had been a long day. Mondays and Tuesdays were always long days. They were the days he delivered the "Weekly Clarion" through a big swathe of the northern districts, and that meant getting up at five-thirty; even earlier when the bicycle was not behaving itself, which was quite often, with good inner tubes still so hard to come by.

"How's the kid been?" he wanted to know.

"Not so bad. Mum says he was in a bit of a fight after school. His knee was bleeding."

"He went to bed all right?"

He moved across to the angle of the room where a blue chintz curtain hid the hooks where they put their outdoor things. He hung up his cap and coat and came and sat down to the table. For a moment she stood, her back still turned to the fire, and looked at him. It was as if she was waiting for him to make some comment, answer some question; but he did not raise his eyes to hers. She turned and took a pot-holder from a hook, and lifted the stew-pot from the fire. Then she brought two plates down from the cupboard and scalded them with hot water. She was good at

these things. She cut him a slice of bread, gave him his helping of stew and sat down to her own plate. They were not a talkative pair, and usually they were quite content to switch on the radio, when they sat down like this facing each other over a meal. But it occurred to neither of them to turn on the radio tonight. They were quite pleased that the old woman was out of the way, too. Tuesday night was the old woman's night at the local pub, the Black Swan. She had always given herself one regular night off since she had come to look after things, soon after Dickie was born. On Tuesday nights quite a group of the old women from around about got together at the Black Swan and drank a nip or two of gin or cider and had a good time. Some were grandmothers, like Mrs. Purdom, who had buried or married off all their children and were helping out a married son or daughter. Others were lonely old women who lived in single rooms, like the two old bodies who had the ground floor rooms under Jim and Sal. And one night a week the old women got together and had a drop or two, and sang songs in querulous voices, and came home a little tearfully, and it did no harm to anyone.

So the old woman was out of the way, and Dickie in the next room was clearly sound asleep, for if he weren't, he would soon let you know about it. And there they sat, Jim and Sal, facing each other, and the kitchen cosy and bright as a scoured copper kettle. So was the whole flat, for that matter. It was all cosy and bright, except for the top floor back-room, which was still a salvage-room for the bits and pieces from their former place in Querridge Street which a V2 bomb had brought tumbling about their ears. Some day that was going to be Dickie's room, when he was too big to be sleeping in a cot in his parents' bedroom. But he was all right for the time being.

Yes, though they both worked hard all day long they still managed to put a lot of elbow-grease into the house, on the long summer evenings, and on Sundays. And the place needed it. This street, too, Territon Street, had been knocked about a good deal by the bombing, and the trains did not help either. But Sal wanted to live near Querridge Street, where she had always lived, and you had to

take what the Borough Council gave you, and things might have been worse. For instance, the rooms were quite big; there was a garden behind the house, though you could hardly call it a garden yet, for most of the place was still buried under the air-raid rubble. But bit by bit the rubble would be removed, and underneath it was not cemented down, it was earth. So some day they would sow grass-seed, and plant a flower-border; and they could use up the rubble at the bottom of the garden, and make a rockery.

She did not hurry him. She knew he always liked to take his own time. She hoped he would not want to go to bed without saying a word. No, he wouldn't do that. It wouldn't be right.

"There's some more mushrooms down here." He coughed a little. She waited for him to stop coughing. Then she prodded into the saucepan with her fork. "Yes, here." She impaled the mushrooms, and put them on his plate.

"Thank you, Sal," he said. His lips parted in a brief smile, then came together again, and were sombre, as before. She cleared the plates away and got busy with a pot of tea. They could both take tea at any hour of the day or night. She scalded the teapot and dried it, then she put in the tea, first one teaspoon, then a second. Then she poured, hoping that now at last he might say what he had to say. He said nothing. Then, as if she had only just opened the tea-caddy, she put in a third teaspoon, as if it were the first, and a fourth, as if it were the second.

"One for the pot," she murmured. That was formula, of course.

"No," he said. "That's four already. It'll be like ink. I went to see him," he told her.

"Yes?" Her breath came sharp and short. "What did he say?" She poured the water from the kettle into the pot.

"I think it's all foolishness," Jim said.

"What did the *Doctor* say?" she insisted.

"He said it *is*. He said I'd have to go away for a few months. I'm not going. I'll be all right."

"Jim," she begged. "You *must* go."

"A bloke told me everybody who lives in a town's got spots on his lungs. Everybody."

She was pouring the tea into his cup now, but her hand trembled, and the tea slopped into the saucer.

"Let me, Sal," he said. "Don't take on so."

"I'm not taking on." She poured out the second cup. Her hand now was firm as a rock. "You'll go, Jim," she said. There was silence. "Won't you, Jim?" All her love for him, all her anxiety, were in her voice.

"I don't believe in it. If anyone's got guts, they'll be all right. If they haven't, it's no good."

"You mustn't talk like that, there's things you don't understand. I want you to go, Jim. Do you hear? I want you to go."

Neither said a word for quite a long time. A cough bubbled up from his lungs. It went through her like a wind through the branches of a tree. She turned her face away.

"I'll go, Sal," he said, "if you want me to."

"Yes," she said. "For his sake, too." She turned her face away, for there was a tear in her eye, and he thought crying soppy. So did she, for that matter. "Oh, I forgot!" she exclaimed.

"What did you forget?"

At that moment there was a cry from the other room, where young Dickie was.

"Mummy, Daddy!" the child's voice called.

"*He* hasn't!" she pointed out. "All right, Dickie, I'm coming!" she cried, and went to the door.

Then Jim remembered. They were broadcasting the match for the lightweight championship tonight from the Stadium, not far off, at Harringay. It was immutable custom that whenever a big fight was being broadcast, Dickie should be allowed to get up and listen to it. For Dickie was going to be a boxer, too, like his daddy before him. His daddy had gone quite a long way in the lightweight class till the war had sent him to do other things.

Jim went over to the wireless and switched it on. A moment later Sally was back again, leading Dickie by the hand, in his pink-and-white flannel pyjamas. Dickie was a sturdy youngster, about seven years old, freckled, his dark hair red-brown like his father's, his eyes grey-blue like his mother's.

"Oh, daddy!" the boy said reproachfully. "You didn't wake me up!"

"That's all right, son," said Jim, as he tuned in to the station. He looked up at the clock. "You won't have missed much. There! That's it!" The cultured voice of the commentator established itself, over the ground-bass roar of the crowd. The first round seemed to have only just begun.

"They're sizing each other up carefully. Well, we'll have an opportunity tonight to see if the champion really has a glass chin. They're both looking— Oh that was the Yorkshireman! A left straight to the point! And another! Now a left from the champion! And a right! And a left! They're mixing it down below now."

Jim came around to the rocking-chair on the right-hand side of the fire. It was wonderful the way that rocking-chair had held out when the bomb fell on the house in Querridge Street, though half the place had piled up on it. Jim sat down and Sal brought the boy over to him.

"There!" Jim breathed, as he sat down, and took the boy on his knee. "All right, son?" But the boy did not reply. His head was bent sideways towards the aerial voice, like a bird on a bough. His eyes were shining and glancing like a mountain spring. Sal started moving the dishes to the sink with immense care, so that not the slightest clatter should mar the enchantment.

"—straight on the jaw!" continued the commentator. "That was a *good* one! The champion will have to look to his laurels tonight. At it again, both of them, left, right, left. Alfie means business—"

"Clang!" went the bell.

"Clang!" boomed Dickie.

The interval between the rounds was taken over by another commentator, in the nature of things more equable and judicial. The appraisal quickened in tempo, ran neck-and-neck with the seconds of the stop-watch. "But I still think," wound up the second commentator, "that the Yorkshireman's open as a barndoor to a good straight left."

"Seconds out of the ring!" cried the time-keeper.

"Clang!" gonged Dickie. Then, his excitement flowing over, he turned his face up towards his father's.

"Daddy!" he cried, clapping his hands. "Daddy!"

"Yes, son?"

"When you die, Daddy, will I be a boxer?"

For two moments or three, out of the eyes and ears of both Jim Gunning and his wife, the whole universe of color and sound died. There was silence and blackness. Then a voice cried "Break!" very sharply. The silence and blackness broke. The filament glowed again in the electric globe. The cultured, breathless voice of the first commentator continued out of the walnut box:

"—and now again! And again! Tommy'll have to watch that left hand! Back to the centre of the ring again! Punching away below! They break away! A left from the champion! Oh, that shook him!"

The small boy had forgotten his question. And it was not really the sort of question that demanded an answer. He had his fists doubled up, and was punching away, right, left, right, left, as if he were himself in the ring, taking on the champion.

It was the old woman who had first uttered the deathly word. All the symptoms were there: the cough, the flush in the cheeks, the sweating.

"I don't like it, Sal. You've got to get 'im to see the doctor again. It ain't just bronchitis any more."

"Mum, you don't think . . . no, it can't be . . . He's so strong. He'll get over it. He always gets over it." Sal's eyes were like a dog's, with a huge boot hanging over it, about to kick.

"Sal, dear, it's consumption. It can't be nothing else. Quiet now, love, quiet! 'E'll be coming in any minute. You mustn't let 'im see you in that state."

The beginning of it all may have been that night he was floundering in the water off St. Nazaire, when a German bomb blew up the transport. Until that night his chest was sound as a bell. He

was, after all, a professional boxer, though he made the steadier part of his living as a newspaper deliveryman. If the trouble did not start that night, it certainly started during the following winter, or the winter after that, when his battalion stood on guard in the rain-soaked defenses of the East coast. There were bouts of pleurisy and bronchitis, which, as their way is, never quite cleared up. When the war ended, he returned to his newspaper deliveries. The Union confirmed his membership card, which had been on the point of endorsement when he joined up, and though his job was one of the humblest in the industry, the money was good already; and it would be better in the years to come, for the Union was hard to get into and looked zealously after its own, particularly when they were good Union members, like Jim Gunning, who was on the committee of his section, and never missed a committee meeting, and worked like a slave for the annual functions, dances and all that.

And he liked his job. He could not bear the idea of working indoors. For a brief time during his army career, they had made a clerk of him, and he had detested it. He liked people, and people liked him. He liked movement. At present he could move no faster than a bicycle took him. Some day he would have a van assigned to him, and would go hurtling through the London streets in a lordly style, flinging out the bound parcels of newspapers to boys and men waiting for latest editions at street-corners, as he himself had waited once.

The work was strenuous, or he made it strenuous, for he undertook more deliveries than most, and he had several jobs on the side. At mid-day, between editions, he collected bets up and down the place for a bookmaker. Now and then he undertook odd jobs, like carpentry and decorating. And he was indefatigable in his own home. Probably for a time the fresh air kept the thing at bay. Or perhaps it had already slid inside there, like a snake through a crevice. It may be that the abandon with which he increasingly threw himself into his job was a psychological reflex of the still obscure physical fact. But there was nothing obscure about the hemorrhage which followed a previous bout of quinsy. For a time

the nature of the hemorrhage remained in doubt; it could be either pulmonary or a lesion created by the quinsy. He recovered, and once more became extraordinarily strong. He gloried in feats of strength which he would have hesitated to undertake when he was doing eight and twelve three-minute rounds. Only at night, on that last bicycle journey from Baker Street to Holloway, his knees sagged, and the sweat gathered clammily on his forehead. The other symptoms manifested themselves more and more grimly. At last his wife and his local doctor prevailed on him to submit to a specialist's examination. The report, pronounced by the specialist with the customary tact, was as positive as a clap of thunder.

He was not so much surprised as angry. He had had a feeling that the specialist would set his seal on the outrageous conspiracy which the universe had organized against him. He was so angry that for a blinding fraction of a second he was aware of exactly the same sort of emotion that possessed him from time to time in the ring, when his opponent struck him below the belt, certain that he was so strategically placed that the referee could not see it, and at the worst it must seem like an accident. He had the sensation now as then, that he must lash out, anywhere at all, with fists, skull, feet, anything. And now as then the sensation was gone almost before it was born.

But he remained angry. The doctor did not know it that morning, and that night even Sal hardly guessed it. To show his anger would be to confess he was anxious and frightened. And he was not. He was angry and humiliated. How could they believe such things about him, *him,* Jim Gunning? How could they ask *him* to go spitting into dirty little blue bottles, and using paper handkerchiefs that must be burned at once? He did as they asked him, for he had a natural sense of discipline, but it was laughable. He could still do twelve three-minute rounds with any boy in the country at his weight and age, if he got into training. Apart from that he was such an ordinary bloke. Why should they pick on him?

Yes, they believed it, the doctor and Sal; the old woman would believe it, too, as soon as she was told about it after coming in from the Black Swan. He pressed his lips together so hard the blood

seemed to leave them. Sal noticed it, but she said nothing. She noticed a good deal that night without saying anything, as he sat in the rocking-chair by the fire, the small boy on his knee, the roar of the Big Fight broadcast filling the room.

Why should they pick on *him,* he asked himself resentfully? He was just an ordinary bloke. He had his wife, and his kid, and a job he liked, and a home he was glad to get back to of an evening. Sal had been the first girl he had gone out with, and in course of time he had married her, just before the war. Then the war had come, he had been to France, he had come back to England, and had served his time out. There hadn't been another girl, neither in France, nor in any of the garrison towns where he'd been stationed. There's nothing unusual about that. Lots of men are that way, though some will make out what gay dogs they are. He loved Sal and he loved Dickie, as anyone would with a wife and kid like them. He liked his couple of pints at the local pub now and then, with a game of darts thrown in. He was really quite a dab hand with the old darts—he was an asset to any team. He carried his flight of darts with him all the time in his upper left-hand waistcoat pocket, neatly tucked away in their black leather purse. He looked after them as carefully as keen cricketers look after their bats. He was a member of the darts team at the Black Swan and more than once they had insisted on his being secretary; and often on a Saturday night you played for pints, and then win or lose it meant more than two; so you'd get drunk, and come back feeling rather muzzy and guilty. Well, what can you do about it? You tell yourself you'll take care it won't happen again, and then it does.

Sometimes, too, you put more than you should on the horses or the dogs, and it makes a hole in the week's wages. But it doesn't happen very often, and when it does, you get down to it and earn it back somehow, and the old woman gets just the same amount of wages to run the house.

So this can't be a punishment, this . . . this consumption. (Come on, now, face it. That's what they say it is.)

Besides, it's not true. It hasn't happened. It couldn't happen, not to *him.*

Look, everything is just ordinary. Sal's just finished the washing-up. She's taken out a pair of my old grey army socks from the drawer under the sewing-machine. What, this is the last round of the fight, is it? That's funny. I could have sworn it was only the fifth or the sixth round. I suppose I've not been listening. So Alfie Totham's the new champion? Yes, Alfie Totham's the new champion. They come and go, these champions; nowadays some of them aren't worth a light. This Totham's not so bad, though, just a bit flash; a good left hand when he likes to use it . . .

"To bed now, Dickie!" the father said, putting the boy down on the floor. Then he got up from the chair.

"No, daddy, no!" the boy protested pouting. "Can't I stay up a bit? *Please!*" He made disgracefully big eyes, and did all he knew to look heartbreakingly wistful. It was a mode of behavior which his parents called "playing up." Normally his father sternly disapproved of the "playing up" routine, but he was not stern tonight. His voice and eyes were unusually gentle.

"Yes, son. I think we ought to. Listen how late it is." He put his wrist-watch to Dickie's ear. "We'll play trains, if you like, just for a minute or two."

Such mildness would normally have provoked a further adventure into the field of "playing-up"; but somehow now it did not. The boy opened his eyes still wider. This was not quite like daddy. He almost preferred the other daddy, the one whose chin came out, and sometimes the hand came out, with a smart slap on the rear.

"Yes, daddy," breathed Dickie. "Let's play trains." The father and the boy went off towards the bedroom.

"I'll just finish tidying up," Sal called after them. "I'll be there in a minute."

The trains and cars and things were in a big untidy box in the corner behind a curtain. Jim put his hand into the confusion, and brought out a vehicle or two.

"No railway-lines?" asked Dickie. He was not arguing, he was merely asking.

Jim shook his head. The railway-lines, as Dickie well knew,

were for Sundays or holidays, when there was time to get down to it. So they just played about with the engines, turning the keys till the engines ran down, spinning the wheels, saying: "Puff! Puff!" It was all a little childish, felt Dickie, but if it amused daddy he did not mind.

By the time his mother came in, the boy was asleep, the passing from waking to sleeping being instantaneous, like a shutter coming down, or a light being switched off. Jim was tucking the bedclothes round him, when Sal spoke.

"It's time you were in bed, too," she murmured. "You've had a day."

"Where are those extra blankets?" asked Jim. "In the wardrobe drawer, aren't they?"

"What for, Jim? Are you cold?"

"No," he said. He did not turn round from the cot. "I'm making a bed up in the back room. That spare mattress up there will do fine." He waited for her to say something, as she must. There was a long silence.

"You must do what you think right, Jim," she said. Her voice was thin and tired and old; it seemed to come from a long way off.

He turned around to her suddenly, as if he felt somebody was standing over her with a knife, and he was going to knock it out of his hand.

"Sal," he said. "You know I've got to sleep up there."

"Yes," she murmured. "It's hard."

He went up to her and kissed her on the forehead, between the temples.

"To be going on with," he said, "till afterward."

She turned away from him, and sped out of the room, her teeth biting hard into her upper lip.

"She's only a kid, after all," he said to himself. "I wondered how long she'd hold out." He went over and opened up the drawer under the wardrobe, where the blankets were, and took out two. Then he bent over the sleeping boy, and kissed him, too, between the temples. Then, as he passed the kitchen door: "Sal!" he called out. "Goodnight! Sleep well!"

"Goodnight, Jim!" came her muffled voice. "Make yourself . . ." she stopped, till she got her voice under control again. . . . "—make yourself warm! Goodnight!"

The next few months were like an evil dream to Jim: Deep in a tortured nightmare the husk of him existed in a world of hot water bottles and thermometers, x-rays and night sweats, sputum cups and hot sheets. And he fought for his life—not this life: the white-walled sanatorium at Barnham, with its nurses in starched flying skirts, its doctors and their eternal "say ninety-nine! Hmmm. . . ." This was not life—this was not the life of Jim Gunning, and impatiently he refused to settle into the hospital routine. Here he lay, away from Sal and Dickie and the old woman; away from his paper deliveries and the odd pint or two; away from everything that made up the life he'd known and enjoyed.

"Not for me, this ain't!" he whispered to himself, night after night after the nurse had been around to take his late temperature. And night after night he lay there awake, staring into the dark and thinking, thinking furiously. He'd get out, that's what he'd do—get out somehow and get away from here: away from the doctors' talk of operations, away from the eternally-offered glasses of milk and the thermometer pushed into the unwilling mouth. Away? Where to? Back to Sal? No, that's where he *couldn't* go, back to Sal and Dickie—leave them out of this. But away he must go, that was a sure thing, before he lived out his life here between hospital walls. He'd seen some die since he'd come . . . he thought of Jack Thomley who'd been wheeled from the ward in the grey light of early morning, swiftly, covered with a sheet. "Not for me!" Jim whispered again, tossing in his narrow bed.

But where to? That was the question. Somewhere far off, so no one he knew would see him and have him brought back here. . . . A foreign country? He knew only one, France by name, and it held too many memories of the war. Where to? The ends of England—Cornwall, Northumberland? Wales? Not far enough. Farther. How far can you go without going into foreign countries? Scotland, of

course. Scotland. The farthest end of Scotland, as far North as you can go. Nurse MacGlowrie was Scotch. . . . Scottish. He remembered how she was always correcting poor old Jack Thomley, when he teased her for being Scotch. "Will ye never lairn? Scottish!" she scolded. He remembered Jack Thomley's teasing. "Nurse MacGlowrie comes from Largan nah Chaorochain. Ever hear of Largan nah Chaorochain? 'Course not: nobody ever heard of it, did they, Nurse MacGlowrie?" And he'd go off into a mocking sort of laughter, causing Nurse MacGlowrie to press her lips together tighter than usual. She'd spank up his pillows, push him back into them, reprovingly.

Jim Gunning turned again on his pillow. "Largan nah Chaorochain," he muttered to himself as he drowsed into a fitful sleep.

CHAPTER 2

The evil dream, as he thought, was over. Jim stood in the road and looked back. There was the sanatorium, up the road a way, and here was he, Jim Gunning—free, on his feet, walking away from the evil dream; putting it out of his life forever.

The road was northward. There was no hurry. He could do things now in his own time, without lying around on couches when he felt like walking, and walking when he felt like taking a nap; no sickening guzzling of milk and chewing of thermometers. He could tackle it his own way: win or lose, it was *his* life, and he was going to manage it his own way.

He could not hide from himself that he felt a nagging unhappi-

ness about Sal. She would be miserable and unhappy, but even to save her misery and unhappiness he would not return to Barnham Sanatorium to be cut up like a joint of beef. Would she be angry? He knew she would. One thing he was quite certain of: she would know it was not for himself that he was doing this. It was above all for her, and for their kid. There might be people, he knew, who would say he had gone off with some dame. His lip curled with scorn. Sal would know better. So would anyone who had the least knowledge of them.

This was his chance—his chance to work things out his own way. Somehow he would find a way of getting in touch with Sal, and letting her keep in touch with him, and when he got to grips with things, up there, far off, and he could write and tell her how well it was all turning out, the smile would come back into her face again, the smile that was not often there, but when it was, it was like spring in the parks and a fresh wind on the canals and the pools.

And if it did not turn out well . . . he shrugged his shoulders. When you put your money on a horse or a dog, it might not win.

By bus and train he made his way to Salisbury, to Oxford, to Birmingham. And it was there, in Birmingham, in a pub called the Noah's Ark, that he met an old army pal of his, a certain Tosher Davies. He was feeling rather blue that night, as he had felt since the moment he got into the bus for Salisbury, after the first excitement of his breakaway had died down. Then suddenly, there in the Saloon Bar, he felt a handclap on his shoulder.

"Well, if it ain't old Jim Gunning!" said a voice. "What do you know, Jim?"

Jim turned, and recognized a young man with whom he had done a good deal of "square-bashing," as they called it, in the old Norwich days. There could not be two young men with a nose as long as that, with the same twist to the left.

"If it isn't old Tosher Davies!" Jim exclaimed, with an enthusiasm which slightly astonished Davies. They shook hands. "What'll you have?"

"A pint of half-and-half," said Tosher.

"Have a short!" ordered Jim.

"I don't mind if I do," said Tosher, who had never minded if he did. There was whiskey. That added to the amiability of the occasion. "You look fine!" said Tosher. "What a colour! Have you joined up again?"

"Not me!" said Jim.

"What are you doing in these parts?"

"On my way up North."

"After a job?"

"Not exactly," Jim admitted. "Sort of. What are you up to?"

"Got a deal on."

"Of course." Jim smiled. Tosher Davies was known for his "deals" he remembered.

"What's it this time?" He recalled several of Tosher's "deals": the commission he used to make for "peddling" the cook-house ration for the Q.M.S.; the time he had "peddled" the spare petrol and tire of his truck in the market square of King's Lynn. And surely it had been Tosher Davies—hadn't it?—who had appropriated Major Gibson's riding-kit and sold it to Lieutenant Walker?

Tosher Davies's face gloomed over.

"It's on the up-and-up," said Tosher Davies.

"How do you mean?"

"You remember that tart wot came to see me once at Mouse-hole?"

"I can't say I do."

"She married me."

"Oh?"

"Yes. She married me. She's from Shrewsbury. I'm from Stepney. So here I am, trying to peddle a pre-fab in Birmingham."

"You'll make out. Have another?"

"Have one on me," objected Tosher Davies.

"Oh no. Two pints of half-and-half," Jim ordered. His mind was working fast. The outlines of Tosher Davies's character were filling in. Quite a straight sort of bloke he was, but always ready to win himself the odd half-crown or five bob on the side. It was

always Tosher you could rely on to blanko your kit or do your fire-picket for you, if you dropped him that little pay-packet.

The idea crystallized.

"Here's looking at you," said Tosher.

"Here's looking at *you*."

They drank.

"Tosher!" exclaimed Jim.

"Yes?"

"I'd like you to do something for me."

"Yes?" Tosher looked up cautiously.

"It's all right. It's on the level."

Tosher looked down again. It was impossible to see whether or not that disappointed him.

"It's tied up with the wife, see?"

"Oh," said Tosher Davies. "I see." He winked, to show how clearly he saw.

"I want to get away for a time, see?" Tosher Davies nodded sympathetically. "But there's a kid, see. He's a good kid. The wife's a good kid, too."

"Sure." Tosher was full of understanding.

"So I want to be able to get in touch with her, and I want her to be able to get in touch with me. In case anything happens to the kid, like. You know." Tosher tapped the side of his long nose. "You say you live in Birmingham, Tosher, eh?" Jim went on.

"I'm likely to be here for a long time," admitted Tosher gloomily.

"So listen. Every month—no, every two weeks, something like that, I'll drop her a note telling her how I'm going on, and all that."

"You're still pals, like?" asked Tosher diffidently, as one not anxious to intrude.

"Oh yes. We're still pals. But *you* know." Tosher might as well think there was another woman in it as not. "So I'll send her a stamped addressed envelope inside an envelope addressed to you, see, here to G.P.O., Birmingham. O.K.?"

"O.K."

"All you have to do is pick it up and post it straight away."

"Sure."

"I'll give her your name and the G.P.O., Birmingham, and then she'll do the same thing."

"What if she doesn't?"

"Then she doesn't. But she will. When I'm settled I'll give you a postal address, in Scotland, I think. Then you'll send *her* letter on to me, see. Now, listen, Tosher, I can't expect you to do this for nothing, you know. There'll be tramfares and things."

"Oh don't mention it," said Tosher.

"No. I want you to go regular at least twice a month to the G.P.O. and it means trouble for you. So I'll slip a ten-bob note in one of the envelopes once a month."

"Honestly, you shouldn't bother. An old squaddy's in a bit of trouble; it's the least I can do, Jim."

"So that's settled, Tosher. Oh look. One more thing. She's quite likely to write to you direct. You know what women are."

"I know."

"She might try and find out what address you forward her letters to. You won't tell her, will you?"

"You know me, Jim."

"I know her, too."

"Don't you worry."

"She may try and do anything to get the address from you. She may say I'm ill, and she must get to me to look after me. You know how they go on."

"Jim, boy, you can trust me."

"I can?"

"You can."

"Shake on it. Another pint, Tosher. Oh yes. It's on me."

"O.K., Jim. Well, here goes. For old time's sake."

"For old time's sake."

Next day Jim Gunning despatched a note to Sal, his wife, from Birmingham.

"*Dear Sal,*

"Hoping you are well as it leaves me at present, I hope you

will forgive me. I know what I have done is the best thing. They wanted to muck about with my lung, it is an operation called pneumo-thorax, they cut you open and take out all the air from the lung, it goes down like a football and they cut it up and then they fill it with gas and sometimes they cut it out.

"I won't stand for it. I will get better without being mucked about like that. But like I told you it has all got me down. There has been a bit of blood, but that does not mean anything. I will get better. I will get myself a bit of an outdoor job, maybe in some garage or bicycle-shop in a village. You know I am handy with my hands. I will take it easy, because I am all right with money for some time. You know I always manage all right for money, a bit of fiddling here and there. Perhaps I could take on some sort of an odd-man job at a farm. Sounds a bit funny, doesn't it, me being on a farm, but it may mean eggs and milk, though I think another glass of milk would choke me.

"I wish you was here to talk all this over, but better not, like I have said. Perhaps I will not get better. I think I will and I will try hard, because I love you, Sal, and I love our kid, and I want to get back to you both.

"But, Sal, if I don't get better I know what it's like, being ill with this thing. I refuse to be a burden to you. I don't know what it is, something inside me makes me act like this. I don't know what to call it, it's pride I suppose. I don't want to pass out before your eyes coughing my lungs out. I want you to remember me strong and all right and able to stand up against anybody and do twelve three-minute rounds. I want you to think of me like that, and the kid, too.

"So please don't be hard on me, pal. I got to act like this. I'm sending you this from Birmingham, and then I'm going on. I have found a way of letting you know how I am getting on, through a bloke I know who will send on letters to you. I hope to write to you every two weeks, something like that, I am not one for writing, but it's best not too often, isn't it, Sal, to give it time to work out. And if you don't hear from me sometimes for longer than that, you know I'll be thinking of you night and day. This bloke

is called Eustace Davies. Think of that, Eustace, we used to call him Tosher. And please, please, you send a letter through him as often as you can, % General Post Office, Birmingham, the envelope stamped already, inside an envelope addressed to him, and he will straightway send it on to me, though there will be a delay sometimes before he picks it up, and before it gets to me. And when I am in a job I will send some money to help you out; also I am sure the Union will keep on paying you direct the money they were shelling out to the Sanatorium, as long as the allocation lasts. When it is finished, I will be in a job and send you a weekly pay-packet, like always. Also there is our Post Office account, it is a tidy sum. But I know it is not dough or anything like that that will upset you, I am sure of that.

"Sal, you will help me have this chance and fight it out. I love you so much and kiss the boy for me and give my best to the old woman and Tom and Alf and George and Clara and her kids and everybody. You will think out a thing to say to Dickie and all of them.

"I love you, Sal, I love you.

Yours sincerely,
Jim Gunning."

Jim Gunning wrote his letter from Birmingham, not because Sal would be expecting a letter; she was used to just getting a letter when she got one. But that letter had to get written. He wrote it, went to bed, and got up very early, feeling bright and fresh. He saw a bus marked Tamworth, the first of the day. That was north, too. He boarded it and got off because it went no further. Then he was lucky. He had already made up his mind to thumb a lift on a long-distance lorry, when the right one hove up. It hove up outside a lorry-driver's pull-up at Tamworth. The driver had a driver's mate beside him, a scraggy lad of sixteen or so.

"Going north, mate?" asked Jim.

"Yus," said the lorry-driver. "Newcastle. Tonight."

"Any room?"

The driver sharply scrutinized Jim's face. He must have concluded it was not the face of a hold-up man. The suitcase may have been reassuring, too. Then he looked at Jim's girth, and added it to the lean shanks of his companion.

"O.K.," said the lorry-driver. "Jump in!"

That was practically all the conversation that took place on the long road from Tamworth to Newcastle, though they stopped once or twice for food and a fill-up with petrol. The boy was as silent as the two men. Even the game of darts that was played in the public-house near York did not add substantially to the total tally of the conversation.

"What'll you have?" asked Jim.

"Brahn," said the lorry-driver, from the broken-off corner of a doorstep sandwich. The boy was at a café hard by washing chunks of cake down with mineral waters.

"Two brown ales," ordered Jim.

A couple of local men were playing at the dart-board.

"Like a game?" asked the driver. Jim looked up a little surprised. Keeping a heavy lorry on the road for many hours is a tiring business. Lorry-drivers often prefer the less manually exacting game of dominoes when they knock off for half an hour. But if the driver felt like it, so did he. He nodded. They waited till the dart board was free.

"I have my own," said Jim, taking his leather case out of his waistcoat-pocket.

"Me too," said the lorry-driver. He was a good player, but Jim beat him. Doubtless the wrists *were* feeling the strain of all that driving . . .

"Two brahns," ordered the driver, for it is rigid custom for the loser to pay.

"They're on me," said Jim. He was, after all, the man's guest on a long journey.

"Two brahns," insisted the driver. Jim did not argue. The ale was drunk. They got on to the lorry again. The boy was already waiting, his eyes fastened raptly on a comic. Near Northallerton Jim had a fit of coughing.

"Got a bit of a corf, mate, ain't yer?" said the lorry-driver. It was for him a long speech.

"Yes," Jim brought out.

"I'd look arter it if I was you, mate."

"Yes." Jim nodded. "I will."

They got to Newcastle, to Station Road.

"We're 'ere, mate," said the lorry-driver. "Stayin' 'ere or goin' further?"

"Staying here, thanks," said Jim. He jumped off and the boy handed down his bag.

"Thanks, mate," said Jim. "So long."

"So long." The driver got into gear, and swerved off towards a street on the left. There was the grunt of gears as the lorry went up from first to second. Then the lorry made its turn. And then, for one moment, it seemed to stand still, immobilized. But not the lorry only; the newspaper boy coming up with the sheaf of newspapers, the horse plunging for a foothold among the cobbles, the cyclists pedalling away, the cars moving left and right, the people crossing the roads, thrusting along the pavements, entering and leaving the shops, the cloud above the roof-tops; all, all, stood still. His own heart stood still. The only thing that moved was a thing which was not there at all, with black wings, that spanned the space between the roofs. The thing slid across the heavens, and everything was dark. The shining tramlines were soot and the windows grey felt.

All this was one moment. You knew it was only one moment, and it was like a year with thirteen months, and each day had twenty-five hours. All time had gone wrong.

It was loneliness. It was terror. You did not want the lorry-driver to go away where you could not hail him, where he could not stop for you and take you on, and you could never get back again to your own world. Never. Never.

"Hold on, mate!" the parched tongue sought to cry out. "How long are you staying round here? Hold on! I'm coming back with you!"

But the tongue could not disengage itself from the roof of

the mouth. The mouth was dry as sand. And then the moment broke. A rent broke zig-zag like lightning in the wings of the dark thing, and the wings were not there any more, and the sky was clear. In the gear-box of the lorry the sound changed, as the lever engaged in the fresh couplings. The lorry thrust forward out of sight. The feet on the bicycle-pedals revolved again. The horse found its footing among the cobbles. The ribbons of sunlight lay along the tramlines.

"I'd better lay off a bit," Jim Gunning said to himself. "I mustn't overdo it. I can give myself a day or two. What's the hurry? Then northward again, boy. Edinburgh, Perth, Inverness, John O' Groats. Take it easy."

Jim spent two days in Newcastle in a commercial hotel. The window of his bedroom looked across to a grey-painted brick wall, about eight feet away. The wall went up and up and out of sight.

"The fresh-air cure!" mused Jim, as he looked out from his bed on the flaking paint, or distemper, or whatever it was. "They should see this over at Barnham; Hillman and Packenham and all those doctors!" He had made up his mind to take it easy, and was not getting up for lunch, if then. So there were a couple of bottles of beer within arm's length on the wash-stand. He opened one. "Nice color, this milk!" he murmured. He raised his glass. "To Scotland!" he called out. He brought the glass over to his mouth, then held it a moment. "To Largan nah Chaorochain!" he added. Then he drained the glass.

On the evening of the second day he went to the station. In the matter of fresh air there could not be much difference between a night in that commercial hotel and a night in a railway carriage.

"I want to go to Scotland," he told a porter. "How far into Scotland do the trains go?"

The porter looked at him hard. That is the sort of question a man might ask who wants to get away from something—the

scene of a crime, for instance. Then it struck the porter that if you want to get away from a crime that is the sort of question you don't ask. You don't ask questions at all.

"There's a through carriage to Inverness," said the porter, "on the late train."

"That's fine," said Jim. He booked for Inverness. He was in good time, and had a corner seat. Altogether things were going nicely. He had inside him all that belonged to him. Both his lungs, for instance. That was something. It was everything. The cough had held off most of the day. The beer was a happier drink than milk, you couldn't get away from that. He had on his knee the weekly "books," as he called them, the magazines which are no strain to anyone. A pity it wasn't football time. But there's something you can get out of the cricket scores, too. Enough to keep you going for a minute or two, or an hour or two, and you drowze off, and when you get up you're in Scotland. For some of the English voices have got out at the in-between stations, and the voices that have come in are unmistakably Scotch. Scottish voices, Mr. Thomley. Will ye never lairrn! O.K. ducks! Anything you care to teach me.

We're in Scotland, Sal. Get a load of that. We're on our way, pal. It's worth trying, mate. We gave the other outfit a try, didn't we?

Ho-ho! Hoo-hoo-hoo! Put a sock in it, Thomley! It's not Thomley. It's the wheels. Ho-ho! Hoo-hoo-hoo!

An hour goes by, two hours, three. Jim Gunning is going north to Largan nah Chaorochain, his head on his chest, fast asleep. We are in the Highlands now. Jim Gunning raises his head, though his eyes are still closed. It is the moon: so sharp and cold and clear a moon, it is like a voice, and it calls you, and you open your eyes, and come back from wherever it may have been. It all breaks in that moment of awakening like a fleck of scud on a sea-wall. Wherever you are, it is far off and different from everything that has gone before, the woman at Baker Street who has the evening pitch, the men bringing in the new gas-stove in Territon Street, the fight against the Swansea boy at the old Devon-

shire Baths. The moon is like a voice out on the broad high moors, but only if silence has a voice. It is far off among these moors, and it is very different. It would be frightening, if you could be frightened any more. But not any more, not after the scare you got among the Newcastle tramlines, when everything froze up, lorries and bicycles and horses and night and day and life and death.

Get back into snore, Jim boy. Take it easy. Soon it will be Inverness.

Soon it was Inverness. He stretched his limbs, got out of the train, and deposited his bag and raincoat. Inverness was the terminus. The local train west and north did not leave for an hour or two.

He went out into the town. It was a white, clean morning, like washing on the line. It was still cool, but it looked like being a warm day. The walls were like bed-sheets slung from the telegraph-poles; in the strong wind that was blowing, you almost heard the wall straining and flapping. Apart from the little imp of loneliness that sat at the centre of his heart, twiddling its thumbs, it would have been easy to stay on in this place. The people seemed strange and foreign, but he liked the wind-scrubbed look of their faces; their eyes seemed open, sharp but not unkind, like the sky over their heads. The seagulls were making a clamour. The air had a sort of active quality to it; its feel was good inside your lungs.

Yet, after all, it was a town. It was not a town he had come for—he, a Londoner, and therefore snobbish about all other towns anywhere. A town and no job meant pubs, cinemas, lounging at shop windows: it was not for these things he had escaped from the shadow of the knife. The object of his journey was a place called Largan nah Chaorochain, hidden somewhere deep beyond that estuary and in the folds of those hills; and that was not a place, it was a thing, almost a symbol, though that was not the word he attached to the thought of it. He knew there were places which, whether or not they were actually on the map, were

somehow ideas rather than places, usually comic ideas, music-hall jokes. So English and Scottish and Irish lads in the army had joked of Wigan, of Kirkintilloch, of Ballymeena.

Largan nah Chaorochain had been a joke, too. But it had been an exclusively private joke, in the noisy mouth of the dead Thomley. Nobody else but poor Thomley had laughed at it. Certainly not Nurse MacGlowrie, who was alleged to have come from there, though she had not, as far as Jim could make out. It was possible there was no such place; it was possible Thomley had concocted it. Jim had never seen it printed or written down. It was a sequence of syllables he had never himself uttered. But something was there, behind his eyes, certain vowels and consonants; there was a sequence of soft sound behind the ear-drums. Lar-gan nah Cha-o-ro-chain.

He entered a barber shop for a wash and shave. It occurred to him the barber might be of use. Barbers are knowledgeable people.

"I'd like to get to a place called Largan nah Chaorochain. Have you any idea where it is, mate?"

"I'm sorry, Mack," the barber answered in a strong Middle Western accent. "I'm from Milwaukee. You know"—he winked —"I was a G.I. I married a Scottish dame. Johnnie might know. Johnnie!" he called out to the barber at the other chair. "The gentleman wants to know where . . ." The brush paused in mid-air. The man stooped towards Jim's lathered cheeks. "What was the place you said, Mack?"

"Largan nah Chaorochain!"

"Do you get that, Johnnie?"

"Ah cannae say ah ever heard of it!" said Johnnie. "Would ye say it again, sir?"

"Largan nah Chaorochain!" came out of the lather.

"No idea at all. Would ye be having any idea, Mr. MacIntosh?" Mr. MacIntosh was the customer in the other chair.

"I beg your pardon!" shouted Mr. MacIntosh, lifting his hand to his ear. He was somewhat deaf.

"The gentleman wants to know where . . . what's the name of the place, did you say?"

"Largan nah Chaorochain!" repeated Jim. He felt certain his blush must be showing red beneath the white soap.

"Largan nah Chaorochain," repeated Johnnie. On his Highland lips it sounded like a completely different place. "He's an Englishman," explained Johnnie.

"I dinna ken," snapped Mr. MacIntosh and shut his lips tight. It was difficult to decide whether he merely did not know, or preferred to hide what he knew—everything he knew—from an Englishman.

Jim had a little more luck in the driver's café where he had breakfast. At a table in the corner an old man was dipping a hunk of bread into his mug of tea. With that wind-scored face and white rim of beard he might have been a seaman, but he wore no sweater or other marine rig. He did not seem to be a townsman. What else could he be but a man of the crofts and the hills? Jim brought over his tea and fried sausages and slabs of bread with margarine and sat down facing him.

"Good morning, dad," he said.

The old man looked up from under his scraggy grey eyebrows. The eyes were as blue as periwinkles, and strange as words in a foreign book.

"And to you." The tone was remote, noncommittal.

Jim spent a few minutes at his food. The old man was obviously in no hurry to be off. Then he spoke again.

"Are you from these parts, dad?"

The old man stretched forth a thumb. The chin thrust forward.

"Frae over the hills," he said. The words seemed to repudiate Inverness and all its works.

Jim went straight at it.

"You wouldn't know a small place called Largan nah Chaorochain?"

The old man put his head back, and closed his eyes. Half a minute later he spoke.

"Ah would and ah wouldnae." He was not committing himself very far.

"Perhaps you could tell me where it is?"

"Aye, perhaps ah could." That was not helpful, either.

Very well then, Jim thought. If he won't talk, he won't talk. Funny people they are around here. It don't matter much anyhow. It's all mountains and sea and lakes and more mountains up there. I'll get on the train and then somewhere I'll get off. There's bound to be a few houses and shops near any station, and a pub or two, and farms. I'll make it. He got out his cigarettes, and mechanically offered one to the old man. He was deep in his own thoughts. But the cigarette released a spring.

"That place you said, mister," the old man said. "Largan nah Chaorochain?"

"I think that's it."

"It's the name of a hollow between the hills, I'm thinking."

"It may be."

"It wouldnae be in Perthshire, noo, on the banks of Loch Tay?"

"I don't think so," said Jim doubtfully.

"Then maybe it's in the glens beyond Braemore Bridge."

"Where's Braemore Bridge?"

The old man looked up as if to make sure Jim was not fooling him.

"A'body kens whaur Braemore Bridge is," he said sternly. "It's on the railway, is it no'?"

"Thank you," said Jim.

Braemore Bridge. He might as well take a ticket for Braemore Bridge as anywhere. There would be a pub and they might tell him where to hang out for a few days while he looked round. Braemore Bridge it would be, and a pint or two of ale. The day was warming up. He would feel like a pint or two later on.

The train went through meadows and woods and villages and a few small towns. On Jim's right were the shining waters of estuaries, with dimmer meadows, dimmer woods, beyond. On the

left the meadows and woods roughened up into moorland, and the moorland swept towards hazy hills.

Left, the hills. Right, the sea. Left, right! Left, right! Quite clearly under the curve of his skull he heard the sound of marching feet. Left, right! Left, right! He listened attentively, screwing up his eyes. Yes, he had it now. It was the tramping feet of his battalion on a long French road, straight as a ruler. Left, right, left, right, going into battle. But that time, in France, he and the boys never got there. They had to turn and retreat towards the west.

From the battle he was going to now, there would be no retreat, no throwing in of a towel. He clenched his fists, as if he had gloves on, and stiffened his jaw, tucking his head into the hollow he made below his raised left shoulder. Then suddenly he felt stupid and self-conscious. He looked furtively round the carriage to see if anyone had noticed anything strange about him. No, the others were engrossed in their own affairs.

He got out of the train at Braemore Bridge, checked his things, and strode out of the station. The road ran parallel with both the railway and the bank of the estuary before it turned northward to be carried over the narrowing water. The prospect was spacious: salt water, bordering meadows, bordering woods, moorland broken by plantations, rolling upland; only the curtains of heat-haze confined the distances. The main mass of Braemore Bridge proper lined the northern bank of Mulloch Firth, beyond the bridge and east of it. On this side small cottages, houses, a couple of churches, made up the smaller village of Glamaig. There was a public-house, or maybe it was a hotel, some few hundreds of yards away from the station. "That'll do me," he murmured. The shop nearest the station was a tobacconist's that announced Mineral Waters and Ice Cream. There was a whish of wheels behind him as he approached, and half a dozen cyclists passed him, boys and girls with sweating foreheads and freckled thighs, in their white flying jackets and corduroy shorts, with their few ounces of luggage strapped on the carriers behind their saddles.

"Ices!" cried the leader with delight. The wheels braked, the

boys and girls got off their bicycles and stacked them against the shop-window.

Not only ices, observed Jim. A notice was hung up in the window: "Accommodation for Cyclists." Another notice below corrected it. "Full." Well, there would be other accommodation for cyclists and their like not far off, which would do for him to start off with. Then with luck there would be a bicycle shop or garage or something where he could pick up that light job when he felt like it. Or perhaps it would be in one of those crofts, as they called them, up among the hills there. "I'll manage," he told himself.

He strode on to the inn, the Glamaig Arms. A few vehicles were drawn up in the gravelled yard, a car or two, a few country wagons, a motor-cycle, a few bicycles. Good. It was not yet closing time. He went in and ordered a first pint, then a second. He did not normally toss them down like that, but it was hot, and he was thirsty. He wiped his mouth, and demanded a third. As the barman passed it over: "Have one yourself, Jock," he demanded. The barman filled his own glass. "To Largan nah Chaorochain!" Jim said. The barman shot his head forward on its scraggy neck. The eyes rolled interrogatively.

"What's that?"

"Forget it!" said Jim.

He drank more slowly, relishing the stuff. Halfway through the pint, an attack of coughing got hold of him.

"Went down the wrong road?" the barman smiled, shaking a finger at him to reprove him for his haste.

"That's right, mate," Jim agreed. "Would you know of a place where I could put up for a few days, Jock?" There had been a certain gaiety in his manner before the coughing. It was gone now.

The barman looked a little puzzled. Jim did not seem much like the sporty holiday-maker type they usually put up at the Glamaig Arms. But he was neatly dressed. He took his drink nicely. His manners were all right.

"For a holiday?" asked the barman.

"While I look round," said Jim.

"You mean, maybe, a room? In a house, maybe?"

"That's it. With meals, if they do it."

"Ach, aye." The barman scratched his head, served a large gentleman in breeches and leggings, and came back to Jim. "The MacGregors, maybe," he decided. "They had a couple frae Glasgow till yesterday. The room's still free, ah think. The second hoose ayont the kirk there. Ye'll see it, with the white railings."

"You're a pal, Jock," said Jim. He finished his pint and went out. He was beginning to feel a bit light-headed, and he didn't want to come in rolling, asking the MacGregors for their room.

The second house beyond the church was a short half mile away. It looked very pleasant, with the little garden in front, and the chicken-run and the vegetable patch behind. The low white railings went all round the house. In the rear, beyond the railway, the pinewood extended to the estuary flats.

Mrs. MacGregor was a worried little woman; not very sturdy, perhaps; the pair of twins in her arms seemed to have taken it out of her. Another child, a boy only a few years older than the twins, held on shyly to her skirts.

"But the gentleman has some luggage whatever?" she wanted to know. Jim reassured her. He would go down to the station for it at once. Nothing of the sort, Mrs. MacGregor said; she could arrange to have it brought doon by her husband, who was working in the woods up ayont the station, he was with the forestry. Then, as if she felt she ought to make up for a question that seemed to indicate a slight misgiving: "Ye can hae eggs for breakfast," she assured him. "Two! Maybe the gentleman would like one the noo?" The gentleman had drunk too much beer to feel the need of a mid-day meal. Perhaps he could have a cup of tea later and a slice or two of bread-and-butter? He would like to go up to the room now, and lie down.

She took him up. It was a pleasant room, once the window had been thrown open, despite the quantities of looped lace and velvet drape on the mantelshelf and enlarged photographs of relatives and ceremonial groups. The window looked out on the woods and the estuary and, beyond the bridge, to a great inland

sheet of water he saw now for the first time. The air outside was almost as hot as the air inside the room. He pulled down the blind. That made things easier. The drowsy sounds came to his ears of chickens clucking, crows croaking, dogs barking. One twin below, then the second one, added their cries to the sleepy noise-makers. There was a jug of water in a basin, a piece of soap, a nice clean towel. He washed, then he took his shoes off, and threw himself on the bed. He was fast asleep in less than five seconds.

He rose about six that evening, quite famished, for he had not eaten since his breakfast that morning in the café at Inverness. The husband was back by that time, a great hulk of a man, who looked as if he did not need to use a saw to get the trees to lie on their sides—he could flatten them with his shoulders, like an elephant. He had washed, he had his coat off, the table was laid, he was just about to give Jim a call when Jim appeared downstairs. It was obvious it was going to be easy to get on with Angus MacGregor, with that grin, and those vast paw-like fists. There was such an accumulation of food on the table that Jim's conscience pricked him. These folk were private people, they did not run an eating-place. He'd got no ration-book on him, he murmured, he'd have to send for it. He was not to fash himself, Angus MacGregor assured him. If he was staying only a few days it did not matter. If he was staying longer, they could think about it. They had no difficulty in these parts, with their own eggs and chickens, an occasional rabbit, a bite of salmon on the table now and again. He winked. It was to be gathered the salmon was not picked up on a fishmonger's slab.

They went out for a walk and a drink, later on, and got on very nicely. In the Glamaig Arms Jim met a few of the local workers, the flesher, the blacksmith, one of the gardeners from the big house up the strath, a shepherd, a crofter or two. The atmosphere was easy. At closing-time Angus and Jim returned and sat chatting around a before-bedtime cup of tea. Neither Angus nor his wife showed undue curiosity about what Jim, a manifest Cockney, was doing up in these regions. Jim told them of his own

accord that he hadn't been too well lately, what with the war and this and that. The MacGregors were sympathetic. Angus had been a naval rating on board a corvette. He had been wounded in the thigh, and he, too, wouldn't be quite the man he had been. He hoped, said Jim, to pick up a light job in a week or two, maybe in some outfit in the village, or maybe in the back places somewhere. The MacGregors didn't think that ought to be too difficult, though wages wouldn't be what he was used to down in London. And some of the folk round these parts were a bit odd. People are a bit odd everywhere, thought Jim, and as for wages he'd manage. He just wanted to get himself right. "This cough," he said—for at that moment an attack came up at him—"it gets you down a bit; but it isn't anything to worry about; it soon goes."

The MacGregors gave no indication they were worried. At least the large Angus did not, the amiable Angus. Mrs. MacGregor looked a bit peaked and hard-done-to. But those three children were a handful; and there was no doubt she worked harder than she needed. She was that sort of a woman. Like his own Sal, in fact, in that way. It couldn't be necessary to scrub those floors every day, when the air itself was clean and fresh as soap.

"We'll soon get rid of that cough for you," vowed Angus MacGregor. His wife recommended a little goose-fat smeared inside a stocking tied round the neck. It was always recommended for tonsils, but she knew it was good for a cough, too—anything to do with the throat. She always prepared a stocking that way for the children.

"Perhaps not tonight," said Jim. "Another night, when it isn't so hot. Thank you kindly, Mrs. MacGregor."

Two or three days passed pleasantly. He felt it was doing him real good, just lying around, breathing the fine air, taking a little exercise when he felt like it, eating decently. It was grand not having it *thrust* at you all the time: the thermometer, the glasses of milk, the staff in uniforms, all that palaver. You could be yourself; just yourself, not a damned invalid all the time. You could walk, or not walk, just as you felt, along the sun-barred pinewood,

down by the estuary flats, or up to the springing heathery places, where the peewits called, and the little springs rose up from among the bog-cushions at the pressure of your foot. You were beginning to recognize faces: Mr. Merrilees, the minister; Mr. Mitchison, the schoolmaster; Jimmy, the blacksmith; the crofters from the near-by crofts. They smiled a greeting at you, and you smiled back. It was tough luck not being able to write all about it to Sal and the kid and the old woman, where you were, and everything. But you mustn't. She understood. There'd be a letter from her in a week or so. It wasn't starting off at all badly.

It was on the fourth evening in the MacGregor house that the peaceful water slid over the brow of the weir into black tumult. It was a Sunday, and high tea was nearly over; it had been a good meal, winding up now with two sorts of jam and buttered oat-meal scones and home-made cream cheese. Jim protested "Honest, Mrs. MacGregor, you shouldn't go to all that trouble." "But my Angus likes his food, and he takes a great deal of filling, so haud your wheesht, man," requested Mrs. MacGregor. That was only her way of speaking, and that was only her way of loading the table. There was no arguing with either.

Then Jim found himself coughing. It was not an attack of coughing; something down there had to come away. He lifted his handkerchief to his mouth, then returned it to his pocket. The meal continued. He spread another scone with cream cheese, and spread one for little Wullie, too, the eldest small boy; then once more he felt the rasp and the fulness at the base of his mouth. Once more he lifted his handkerchief. It hesitated a moment before his mouth while the stuff collected. Then he became aware of a constriction in the air, as if the oxygen had been sucked out of it. Angus had been saying something, something about a foot-ball team of Maltese dock-workers he had once played against in Valetta. There had been a word on his lips, but it was broken off, like a dry biscuit. His eyes, the eyes of his wife, were concentrated on a single object, the handkerchief Jim held to his mouth. With infinite caution, as a pickpocket might let his eyes descend towards

his own hand, to see if it has entered the pocket he has intended to pick, or if somehow he has bungled it, Jim let his eyes descend towards his handkerchief. He had bungled it right enough. Rich and fresh the patch of blood lay clamped on his handkerchief, like a large poppy-petal pasted on with glue. He felt his own cheeks slowly flush as red, up to the cheek-bones and beyond, into the pits of his eyes. But there was the immediate job on hand to get through. He cleared his throat, and once more restored the charged handkerchief into his pocket.

They said not a word, neither Angus nor his wife. They did not even seek each other's eyes, Jim noted, his faculties preternaturally sharpened. To the broken-off word Angus brought the broken part. He went on with the tale he was telling about those wild Maltese football-players. But it was not the players at that game that disported themselves in the field of Jim's mind. He was back at the Sanatorium. He would be out on the verandah at this hour, yes, out on the verandah. The players were lying outstretched on their couches. One of them had slipped up badly; he had lost a good many points. You wouldn't call this just "color," Gunning, though I wouldn't say it's a hemorrhage. It's stopped, hasn't it? It doesn't necessarily mean anything. But there's the old Doc, coming in with his golf-clubs. A signal from one of the boys brings the old Doc to the scene. The old Doc feels the pulse, clasps a hand over the forehead. Oh yes, Mr. Gunning, I think we'd better get up to the Ward at once. Take it easy now. I shouldn't worry. A week or two in bed and we'll be as right as rain.

This was not the old Doc's voice now, though his voice, too, was kind and hearty. It had the Highland accent. Oh yes, Angus it was.

"Will ye no' hae a wee bit strawberry jam on ye'r scone to wind up?" Angus asked.

"Or cherry jam, maybe," suggested Mrs. MacGregor. "It's home made." They were such kind people. That's what made it worse, of course.

The meal came to an end. Angus and Jim smoked a cigarette.

Mrs. MacGregor took Wullie over to the sink to prepare him for his bed.

"What about a pint?" asked Angus, certain that the atmosphere at the Glamaig Arms would be easier to breathe.

"No, Jock, thank you," Jim said. "I'll just stroll up the road a minute or two. Then I'll come back and . . . maybe I'll do some letters. It's about time I did a letter or two."

He was not altogether lying. Only yesterday, before sitting down to supper, he had made up his mind that he was going to write Sal a nice long letter. He wasn't going to tell her what part of the world he had got to—of course not. But there would still be a lot to tell her. He was in the country, and also near the sea. He had a room with real nice people, who had a kid nearly Dickie's age, so comical you could die laughing, and twins as well. The grub was marvelous: they never seemed to have heard of rationing in these parts. The prospects for landing the sort of job he wanted were not bad at all. And as soon as that happened, he'd write again pronto. He was feeling quite good in health, too, but please keep your fingers crossed.

That was the sort of letter he was going to write. But he would put it off now, after tonight. He had no heart to write her.

But saying he was going to write to Sal was not the real lie. The real lie was keeping things from these MacGregors the way he had done since asking for the shelter of their roof. He made no pretence of writing letters and went off early to bed.

That night the humiliation piled up on him like ten thick grey woolen blankets. It had always been there, from the first moment the specialist had pronounced him a consumptive. The sentence had been an intolerable affront to the pride he had always had in his well-trained, well-made body. It had been an imbecilic and criminal thing. The humiliation now was thicker and darker than it had ever been before. He felt himself spongy inside his soul. He had deceived these innocent kindly strangers who had three children; he had had no right to ask them to put up with him for a few shillings a day, for any number of shillings a day,

without telling them the truth about himself. If he had told them, they would have turned him away. As they would turn him away tomorrow. . . .

And then a gust of fury swept forward upon him out of the dark places of the room.

"What have I done, for God's sake?" he cried aloud. "I'm ill, and I ask for board and lodging. What's wrong with that, eh? I'm a crook, eh?"

"Take it easy," the voice of Doctor Hillman said, all the many miles from his cream-painted surgery in the Sanatorium. The young man felt the practiced finger-tip on his pulse and the curved hand upon his forehead. "This won't get you anywhere, Mr. Gunning. Go to sleep now. Go to sleep."

The hand withdrew, but the white-coated presence was still there.

"Thank you, Doc," the young man murmured. "It's good of you to come up all this way, when I played a dirty trick on you the way I did. But I didn't want you to start cutting chunks out of me. Like I was a rotten apple. You do understand, don't you?"

"Yes, I quite understand, Mr. Gunning. Now I want you to go to sleep now. Go to sleep. Go to sleep."

Jim slept, the sweaty hair matted on his forehead.

Mrs. McGregor gave him breakfast and lunch without anything being said. She looked harassed, but then she always looked harassed. During the morning and afternoon Jim walked around a bit, or sat lounging in the little front room, where the harmonium was, and the enlarged photographs of the two fathers, the two mothers, the wedding-group, the children, and of Angus himself, an enormous child in sailor-collar and bell-bottoms.

Jim had a feeling that perhaps he ought to go off and look for a fresh room before anything was said by anybody. Yet that seemed an awkward and ungracious thing to do. The MacGregors had been extremely kind. They had not said a single word to him. Perhaps they didn't intend to. Perhaps he was making all this up. And yet . . . and yet . . . suppose the MacGregors *did* want him

to go! Where should he go to? Why should anywhere else be different from here? Oh hell, the only thing to do was to wait and see how things turned out.

Jim was in the front room stretched out in the big plush armchair when Angus came in that evening. Angus washed, then came in to the front room to wait for tea. He had a newspaper or two. There was some desultory talk about the latest murder. Then it petered out. Time dragged. Angus couldn't get comfortable in his chair. Now and again his newspaper dropped, revealing a forehead damp with embarrassment. At last it came out.

"Och, by the way," Angus exclaimed, "we got a letter today." He could not bring himself to look Jim in the eyes.

"Yes, Jock?"

"It's frae a married couple, regulars of ours, Mr. and Mrs. Bruce. They're cycling up frae Glasgow."

"They'll be wanting my room," said Jim.

Angus dropped his paper. He looked quite startled at such quick perception. "Aye, that's right. They're comin' up a few days early." Then another thought occurred to him. His face went red as beetroot. "Of course, if ye'd like to stay on—"

"It's O.K., Jock. I'll look out for something tomorrow, or shall I try tonight?"

"Tomorrow'll dae fine. I hope it doesna upset ye'r plans?"

"Oh no, Jock. I ought to be thinking of a job. But I'll take it easy for a day or two yet. There's a few places seem to have a room to spare."

"Aye, there is." There was a silence again for a minute or two, then a shout came from the kitchen. "That's herself calling," said Angus, immensely relieved. "Come noo. To ye'r tea." There was a change at the table, Jim noticed: the small boy, Wullie, who had hitherto stayed up for grown-up tea, had been bundled off to bed. "Which is as it should be," Jim said to himself, a pang at his heart. "Wouldn't I do the same thing if it was my own Dickie?" They got through the meal somehow. Then Jim made a great business of putting his things right and having his bag ready for next day. The job took him three or four hours. In Barnham, about a

week and a half ago, he had got through it in three or four minutes.

Angus had gone when Jim rose next morning.

"Himself said tae gi' you guid mornin'," said Mrs. MacGregor. "He was sorry he couldna stay aroond tae say it himsel'."

"I'll be about," said Jim.

"If ye'd like to use his bicycle, he says, ye're welcome."

"Thanks. I'm in no hurry. I can take my time. I can leave my bag here, till I'm fixed up?"

"Of course ye can." A tear was trembling in her eye. "Haud ye're whisht, Jeannie!" she demanded of the small girl in her arm. But the child was contentedly nuzzling, quiet as a mouse.

It's time I went off, Jim told himself, or Mrs. M. will be hollering her head off.

"I'll be seeing you," he said, and went. First he turned east for a mile or so along the road beyond the station. There was nothing doing in that direction. There were only one or two folk who let rooms, and these were either occupied now, or would be in a day or so. He did not want to go further east, in the direction from which he had come. It was dangerous. It was retreating. When once you start retreating, you don't know when you can stop. No, Jim, turn back again, westward. You're forgetting. Largan nah Chaorochain's where you're making for.

To get back he took an inner road, hardly more than a cart-track, that cut up southward uphill and circled round to the road again a little distance beyond the MacGregor house. He remembered seeing on one of his walks a small house with the sign "Accommodation" in a front window, hung up among the pots of ferns and geranium. He found the place in some fifteen minutes, saw that the notice was still in the window and knocked at the door. The door was opened by a raw-boned woman in her forties. Another woman stood immediately behind her, also lean and scraggy, perhaps a year or two older. They looked like sisters.

"Good-morning," said Jim.

"Good-morning," they both replied. "Yes. What wud it be?" They looked at him dubiously, as if they expected him to produce a fire-arm any moment.

"I see from your window you put people up," Jim said. "I'm looking for a room."

It might have been an accident, or it might not. He saw the shoulder of the woman behind nudge the shoulder of the woman in front.

"No," they both said. "We're full up." They did not talk so broadly as the MacGregors. They might have been retired schoolteachers.

"I'm sorry," said Jim. "Good-morning." He turned on his heel, and walked off. They should have taken that notice down, he said to himself, if they're full up; but I suppose that's all nonsense. They just didn't like the look of me. It's a bit on the lonely side up here. I can't blame 'em, with some of the tales you read in newspapers.

He continued along the lane, and came out into the main road just beyond the Glamaig Arms. The day was getting quite hot and his feet were beginning to drag a little. He rested for a time, there was no reason why he should knock himself out. A depression was beginning to creep along his veins. Or it would be truer to say that it was there already, it had been there when he got up that morning, mixed up with the blood-stream and tapping at the heart there, tapping, tapping, like the rubber tip of a blind man's walking stick. It was a depression different from and outside the major tragedy of which his whole body was the theatre. It was an immediate and local thing. The MacGregors have turned me out. Who will take me in? If someone takes me in, have I any right not to tell them about myself? If I do, why should they behave any different from the MacGregors?

He got up, and continued on his quest. He left the church on his right hand, and continued beyond the Spinner's Burn to another house he knew of where they had a room to spare—the house of Mr. Meiklejohn, the carpenter, with whom he had drunk a pint or two. The out-house where Mr. Meiklejohn did odd jobs for the shop-people and the small farms was in the garden alongside and had both doors wide open. The carpenter was planing a length of wood at his bench.

"How do, Mr. Meiklejohn?" Jim called out as he went towards the front door of the house. The carpenter could not have failed to hear. The plane is not a noisy implement. He did not lift his head. Short, sharp, short, sharp, went the plane. Jim did not repeat the greeting. He did not cover the remaining distance to the front door. Was Mr. Meiklejohn hard of hearing? He could not recall ever noticing that he was. But he was not going to resolve the doubt. He turned back towards the garden-gate, his ears burning. He felt himself moving stealthily on the balls of his feet, as if it had been in his mind to steal something, but someone had noticed him, causing him to think better of it and make off.

He tried once again, this time at a house a mile further west where the road slowed round into Strath Groban. He could have sworn that he saw the lace curtains move in the window of the little parlour, in front of the ferns and cactuses on the high bamboo stands. But no one came to the door. He knew now that no one in these parts would come to the door to let him in. He returned to the road and turned back towards the MacGregor house.

It was several hours since he had left there. Yes, it was half-past one now. He should be feeling hungry. He had no doubt Mrs. MacGregor would knock up something for him if he asked her. But he did not wish to be any sort of trouble to her or to any of these people, along these banks, among these slopes. Besides, he was not hungry; he could not eat a thing. A drink of water would be fine, even a glass of milk, he told himself wryly. He heard the slow clop of hooves and the creak of wheels and perceived that he had left the road; now the road was some thirty yards to his left and below him, with a hay-cart going towards the Strath. He was ascending a track towards a wood of pine and larches, and beyond the wood the rough land spread upward to the moorland and the peaty places, and there were springs there that came up from among the ferns and stones. He could drink there, and lie down under a bank of heather with his face turned from the sun. A pigeon came out from the wood clacking its wings like a toy bird Dickie had, which made exactly that noise when you pulled its wings by the string that hung down below the tail. (Shall I ever see you again, Dickie?)

In the wood, in the darkness of the wood, he said to himself with words the thing he had known for an hour or two: these people do not want me, they have chased me out. It was painful, and he wanted not to know it, the way you keep on poking a bad tooth with the tip of your tongue, hoping to assure yourself the tooth is not bad, at last realizing that it is, and that whatever you are going to do about it, it is bad luck. He was through the wood now. A crofter leading three cows crossed his path, and a word of greeting passed between them. Soon the track he was following was only a sheep-path, and the slopes were a little rancid with the brown edges of the burned bracken. The bushes of whin burned steadily and without visible smoke, but the smoke was in his nostrils, and further over, the hard cups of the heather were twanging like xylophones.

They will not let me go into their houses. The tongue was in the hollow tooth again. They are afraid for themselves, and their children, as I myself was, when I found out. I got out the old mattress, and went up into another room. You remember? They have found out, somehow. I can't think the MacGregors are people who go round yapping like old dames in pubs. But news like this travels. This is the country. Back home if you wanted to keep a gorilla in your back yard, you kept it: it was your business and no one else's. These country people are different. I seem to understand them and they seem to understand me, but it's only the words we understand, even if they're army blokes and navy blokes and we've been through all that lark together. It's all strange. I don't know where I am. Suppose I pick up my kit and take the train to another place. What good will it do me? It can't go anywhere from now on and not say just what's wrong with me. I can't. They'll soon hear something or maybe even see something. So I've to go on again further, and then further; I'd go on and on, till there was no place left for me—only the Sanatorium, the place where the knife is. Or thirty-seven Territon Street, where Sal and Dickie are. And the knife's there, too.

The path was not easy going, and his knees were not so firm and supple as they had been, but he trudged forward and upward,

and there would be water soon somewhere. There were sheep here on the hillside. Idly he wondered if they got their water out of the stalks of the stuff they nibbled. Somehow he was afraid to stop. He was afraid of the ideas that were in his head: he almost heard the sound of their wings beating, through and beyond the sound of the bees droning, the minute threshing of the wings of dragon-flies, and curiously precise and near though God knows how far off it might really be, the sound of a whetstone on a scythe-blade.

God knows. He stopped a moment between the heather and the heather. The words came back to him out of the hot noon . . . not a casual phrase, not statement but question.

God *knows*?

That was why he did not get himself to lie down, though he was really tired now. He did not want to ask himself this sort of a question; he had feet for walking, hands for doing, eyes for seeing, but not the brain adapted to such questioning. It was not fair. He had enough on his plate without being called on to decide whether God knows.

But by this time the thoughts were out of their nests, invisible yet almost audible—these birds that, though they were shadows, were more real than those plovers meowing like winged cats. With those creatures in the air, and with this heat, and with these muscles so stiff behind the thigh, no, you could not go further. Lie down, Jim, you're not the man you used to be. The heather here is shorter and softer, under the shadow of this big stone.

God knows. Does he?

It all seemed to be tied up with God, somehow, this business of being just an ordinary bloke: you didn't go out of your way to cheat the other bloke; you loved your wife—it's nothing to make a noise about, but you didn't go barging off with other women the moment her back was turned. And you're fond of your kid, you tried to do the best by him: perhaps sometimes you were a little harder than you should have been, but it looked as though he'd grow up a decent kid. And you tried to do the right thing by the people in your family and your mates; that's the sort of bloke you

were—not a plaster saint, and not a villain. And you do your stuff in the war and on your job, and you're not looking, then suddenly you're coughing, and they say you've got consumption: you bring a handkerchief to your mouth, and you take it away thick with blood.

Does that look like there's a God about? It didn't somehow. The war didn't make things seem too good for God, but that was on a big scale; all the world was in it, and you were just a speck of dust. But in this business of the lungs, you are all the world, all of it, and it didn't make sense. God should have stopped the big outside War, if he was there, *and* if he was able to; and he should have stopped this little inside War, if he was there, *if* he was able to.

What is this God I've heard tell of (he asked himself)—when he wasn't just used for a swear-word, like sometimes you say Christ or Hell? They used to talk about him at Scripture lessons in school when he was a kid; this God had plans in hand, according to the teacher's ideas, and he was written about in two books, Old Testament and New Testament; but all of what was written about him in the Old Testament was out of date now. In the New Testament they often called him Christ, but that was still harder. For all sorts of people went along with God: Mohammedans and Jews and Chinamen and black men, but Christ didn't get around as much. So we'll stick to God. Father and mother didn't know much about him, and they didn't make him go to Sunday School, as other kids' people did, though rather less in Holloway than other places, I suppose. Sal and I weren't married in a church, only in a register office; but I don't think that's because we'd have said God was all hokum, if anyone had asked us. We just don't like fuss, so we got married in a register office, and then we went off with the relations and the neighbors to have a few drinks, and we had a good many, as a matter of fact, and so we were married. But when Dickie was born, it was different. We had him christened in church, and not just given a name on a piece of paper. Why was that now? I suppose because what *we* did, Sally and I, was just our business but Dickie was someone

else, he couldn't work things out for himself, we were responsible for him. We hadn't ever said there wasn't any God: he just hadn't come our way if he really was around somewhere, and no one ever bothered to explain how he could be there and let certain things happen that tore you to bits, they were so stupid and cruel. So we said to ourselves without talking it over, of course, if God really is there, we can't take risks with Dickie, so he'd better be christened in church. But it didn't go any further than that. There hasn't been much God-talk about our place while the kid's been growing up; he hears a little at school, the same as we did, and that's about all.

I wish I could understand. I wish I'd been told more about it. Don't see why if there's a God somewhere, he should be interested in us; I mean, the world and whether it goes to war or not, and me—whether germs do or don't get to work on me. Perhaps there is a God and he's good all right, but maybe he's not such a big shot as he thinks he is. My head's splitting, and I could do with a glass of water. That's all I'm asking for just now. It's not only the heat outside, it's the same inside that is drying me up. I'm worse than a criminal. If I was hiding from the police because I'd done a job, those people would have thought twice before turning me out. But they *have* turned me out. To hell with them! I'll make good somehow. I'm not quitting, Sal, old girl. But it's tough going just now, tough going . . . it's like chloroform, this heather, it's like lying on an operation-couch, say ninety-nine . . . ninety-nine . . . ninety-nine . . .

He drowsed off and fell asleep, but it could not have been for long, because the sun had not moved far off when he awoke. He had pins and needles. He rose to his feet and kicked the soles of his feet against the roots of the heather as if to sluice away the tingling from his skin.

And then he heard a voice address him out of the heat-haze, a woman's voice; not a young woman's.

"Young man, who are you?" He turned. The air between them moved slightly and shimmered as with a smoke, but the

grey-green eyes staring intently at him were bright. The woman was tall and lean, perhaps nearer seventy than sixty. Her uncovered hair was grey, with an undertexture of black, and was fastened tightly behind her neck. The rest of her was covered down to her heels. The tight-waisted blouse and full skirt were made of some grey home spun material. She wore nothing to mitigate the severity of that costume, except a service badge on her breast, the badge of the Air Force. She carried a stout hazel stick. A collie-dog was beside her, his feathered tail upright like the plume in a helmet. His stare was quiet and remote, hardly like a dog's at all.

Jim came closer to the old woman, though he was not aware he moved. The ghost of a bark, rather than a bark, rumbled inside the dog's throat. "Quiet, Hunish!" the old woman said. On the puckered upper lip spread a pale grey down. There was a wart beneath her right cheek-bone from which three or four long white hairs started.

"My name's Gunning, madam," said Jim. She was old and had authority. It was impossible not to answer her question, and with respect. The tingling was going on in the soles of his feet like blunted needles.

"You're a stranger here?"

"Yes. I'm from London."

"You've not seen my Belties pass this way?"

"I don't know what they'd be, madam."

"No, of course not." She was about to say something more, when suddenly she raised her head and half turned it from him, as if her attention had been distracted by some one calling out to her. But, of course, no one had called out to her. She kept her head turned away for some twenty or thirty seconds, then turned towards him again. "They're my heifers," she explained. "There's four of them. They've strayed from the rough pasture below my croft. You saw no young cattle without a cow-herd?"

"There was a man with three cows back there, lower down."

"No, they wouldn't be mine." She still stared at him with that intent look. "You don't look well. Aren't you well?"

"I'm all right, thank you." But the untruth sounded silly in his ears. He reversed his answer at once. "I'm not well. That's why I'm up here." It was curiously easy to talk truth to this old woman, who had come out of the afternoon haze so suddenly you might have thought her something in a story, made by turning a ring or saying magic words; yet at the same time she was English, and from South England, too, maybe from London. He felt she was much less foreign to him than any of these people he had talked to from the Scottish north, though they were of his own class, and this woman was, as you say, a lady. "I'm thirsty now," he said. "Do you know where there's any water?"

"Come this way." She motioned to him to follow her. She went along the path by which he had come up an hour ago, or whenever it was. She went down some fifty yards, not more. Then she stopped. "Listen!" she said. Yes, he could hear water lapping somewhere not far off; he could scent the freshness of it in the air. "Along there!" She pointed round the fringe of a tussocky slope. He went ahead this time, and she went after him. Yes, true enough, there was a small spring, coming up from under a stone and trickling down into the silk-smooth basin it had followed out for itself. Then almost at once the water was lost in the tangle again except for a greenness and sweetness that held the earth for some yards over the hidden course.

It was curious how he had missed it, when his nostrils had almost been twitching for water like a dog running along the ground. The spring was like the old woman herself—not there one moment, there the next. Like magic as you might say. He bent down and drank, then rose and wiped his mouth. He felt much refreshed. The prickling, too, had gone out of his feet.

"Thank you, madam," he said. "I don't know how I missed it. I'm sorry I've not seen your animals."

"Sit down," she said.

It did not occur to him not to do as she asked him.

"Yes," he murmured. She herself did not sit down. She stood and looked down on him, her body slightly arched. She seemed

very tall just then, her hands fastened round the top of her hazel stick.

"My boy would have been about as old as you," she said.

"I'm sorry, madam." Obviously the young man she was talking of was dead. "Your son was in the Air Force, I suppose?" The poor old woman seemed a lonely creature. Probably her husband was dead, too.

"Not my son," she said shortly. "My nephew."

He felt absurdly guilty for making a mistake it had been almost impossible to avoid making.

"I'm sorry," he muttered.

She did not seem to hear him. She stared at him with an ever closer and closer absorption.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

He hesitated. He recalled the humiliations that the people below had heaped on him as soon as they became aware what his illness was. He had never spoken of it to any stranger at all.

"You can speak to me," she said softly. He almost jumped, the voice was so different. It was almost not an old woman's voice at all—it was soft and sweet like a girl's. It was like a girl's bosom that a man leans on when he is tired and sick.

"T.B.," he said.

"I'm sorry," she murmured. "You poor boy." He felt his teeth biting into his lower lip. The old dame would make him do something silly, if he didn't keep himself on a tight rein. It was all so different from the way the folk down in the village had behaved: the MacGregors who had turned him out, the others who would not let him in. At all events with this old woman he could talk things over. She might put him up to something. She might even . . . an idea started up in him like a match-flame in the darkness. But no. Things don't work out like that. You don't go up on a hill and meet an old woman coming from nowhere who offers you a job tied up in a parcel; a job you need so desperately, more than you needed anything in your life before. He threw the spluttering match down and trod it underfoot.

He felt it necessary to get the conversation away from himself,

or anything might happen; he might start boo-hooing before her like a kid who suddenly finds a kind teacher in a bleak world. To hell with all that.

"What's your name, madam?" he said. "If you don't mind my asking?"

"My name is Lemuel. Deborah Lemuel. Edward's name was Tourneur."

Her lips tightened. She said nothing for some moments, as if she were debating some issue within herself. Then, as it seemed, she resolved it.

"I have preferred for a long time to be known as Miss Lemuel, which was my maiden name. I was Mrs. Grimett for some months. You asked. You might as well know."

"Yes," he stammered. He was embarrassed by this sudden upwelling of confidence, on lips which looked as if confidences were rare on them, and extremely difficult. She went on.

"Edward was my husband's nephew, his brother's son."

"Yes," he said again. Edward. Edward. Nothing seemed to exist for her apart from this dead Edward. Well, he must have been more like a son to her. Obviously she didn't get on with her husband. It was odd: he'd only met the old lady a few minutes ago, and already, in so few minutes, how much she knew about him, and he about her! It made him dizzy. The tingling was going on again in his feet like a tattoo-needle.

She was talking. What a kind voice it was! Nobody had ever spoken with so much kindness to him, except Sal. With Sal it was love; this was kindness. They are not the same thing.

"Tell me about yourself, Gunning. Why have you come up to these parts? The people here are mean and cruel. You must not let them discourage you." It was tearing the heart out of him, she was so kind. How she got hold of things without being told a thing! It was uncanny! "You've been staying down in the village? Where?"

"People named MacGregor. They take cyclists in."

"The Angus MacGregors? This side of the Glamaig Arms? I know them. She's a slut. He's a drunkard." Jim looked up in sur-

prise. Mrs. MacGregor was anything but a slut. Angus MacGregor was no drunkard. At least they hadn't shown themselves that way during the time he had known them. Perhaps the old lady was mixing up the MacGregors; it was a common name. Or perhaps they *had* been pretty rough people once, but they had turned over a new leaf since. Miss Lemuel was still going on about them. "I'd put a horsewhip to their shoulders if I had half a chance. They're a lazy shiftless lot, the whole lot of them." Miss Lemuel's face had changed. The upper lip hardened over the slightly protruding front teeth. The eyes were bleak and forbidding. It was clear she had no use for the people in these parts. Well, probably they did not hold much by Miss Lemuel, either. He knew that people get that way about each other in the country. It was no concern of his. He saw the effort she made to get control of herself. He waited. He did not know what to say next.

"What did the MacGregors do?" she asked at length.

"Oh nothing. They asked me to find a fresh room. I must say, it's only natural, with those three children. But please, let me explain."

Her face was quite different now. She had managed to wipe the bitterness off, as if it had been a spurt of mud.

"Please sit down, Miss Lemuel," he begged her. "Or perhaps you want to be going off after those cows?" he remembered suddenly. A pulse quickened in him. "Could I be of any use, Miss Lemuel? I feel fine now."

She smiled. Perhaps that was because of the aptness with which he seemed to learn things. His good manners, too, may have given her pleasure. She had an odd smile—not with the eyes, but almost entirely with the upper lip that came slightly away from the teeth then went back again. She sat down, the back curved like a cat's, the hazel stick across her knees.

"The cows may have been missing for twenty or thirty hours. An hour or two longer won't make any difference. You were going to tell me?"

"Well, it's not much to say. I started coughing and all that, and I still think it would have been all right, but the doctor said I

must go to the specialist, and so did Sal. She's my wife, see?" He looked up. She nodded. He went on, almost sick with surprise to find words coming to his lips so easily. "I'm very fond of Sal. I'd do anything in the world for her." (He had certainly never put his feeling for his wife into words to any stranger before, hardly ever to Sal herself. He listened to his voice to assure himself it was actually his own.) "So I went, and they said I had T.B. I don't know. I still don't believe it. It could have been beaten by not thinking about it. It's thinking about things that makes them happen." He looked up to see whether she thought he was talking rot. Her eyes were shut. She was listening attentively. "I went to a Sanatorium, and I didn't like it. It wasn't only having invalids on top of you all the time. It's the way they went on. There was only one thing in their minds." He hurried on. It was not an aspect of things he wanted to dilate on, least of all before this stranger, this curiously fleshless old woman. "I couldn't stick it. I wanted to quit almost from the first day. But I didn't. I held on because Sal wanted me to. And then—" He paused. She waited for him to go on. "And then, they were going to cut open my ribs and mess about with the lung. I don't know what they wanted to do. They might have wanted to let it down, like a bladder, or take it out altogether. I wouldn't have it. It was a liberty. I walked out."

"You didn't go back to your wife?" she said.

"No."

"Have you any children?"

"A small boy, Dickie." Then he went on. "If things was really as bad as that, I wasn't going to . . . going to push it on them, being ill and all that. You know what I mean?" She nodded. "I said to myself, 'I'll go as far away as I can and tackle it my own way.' So I came up here—and got off at Braemore Bridge."

"Why?" Her eyes were still closed. "Any reason?"

"It sounds a bit daft, Miss Lemuel."

"Yes?"

"I was looking for a place called Largan nah Chaorochain, if that's how you say it. A chap used to joke about it at the Sana-

torium; he said one of our nurses came from there, and thought it very funny. I don't really think there's any such place."

"But you got off at Braemore Bridge," she said.

"Yes. I asked an old man in Inverness. He said get off here."

She opened her eyes. There was a curious smile on her face, slow and sly.

"An old man?" she asked. "An old man?"

"Yes. Why not?"

"Why not?" she repeated. "And what has been your idea? What did you intend to do?"

"I wanted to take things easy for a week or two, if I could stick doing nothing that long. And then—"

"Yes?"

"Then I wanted to do some light job, for a time, anyhow, till I got this thing down. Like, for instance, in a cycle-shop or garage. I had to be good with a bike in my job in London. I'm handy at most things. Or maybe, I thought, I could be of use on a farm, though I don't know anything about the country."

"Yes?" she said.

"Yes," he repeated, his eyes down on the ground. He felt ashamed. He was not one for beating about the bush. The old lady had a farm or she wouldn't have cattle that walked out on her. She couldn't be overstaffed, or she wouldn't be chasing after them herself. Why not ask her straight out could she find some use for him? Why not? Was it because of the red patch on his handkerchief? The smell of it was in his nostrils, the curious tinny taste at the back of his throat. Had he the right any more to go asking people for jobs? She herself decided the matter.

"I've got a croft here," she said. "You've gathered that. It's called Skurr nan Gillian. It's some three miles back there, beyond the shoulder of that hill." She turned and pointed. "I have trouble getting help here. I've an Irishwoman who helps with the milking and the farm-work. I get a man or two sometimes from the crofts round about. I could do with a regular odd-job man. Would you like to take it on? You're a Londoner—so am I."

"Miss Lemuel, I don't know what to say. It's like . . . it's like

Fate. And you a Londoner, too, Miss Lemuel. Fancy, a Londoner, up around these parts!" He was very moved. His lower lip was trembling, his fists were opening and closing like a schoolgirl's. "But I've got to tell you what happened at the MacGregors'. You know what happened? You know why they turned me out? I was sitting at tea, feeling perfectly all right, and I've felt all right since. But there, without warning, suddenly my handkerchief was full of blood. They were frightened. They've got children; of course, I had to go. I've been trying all day to find a room somewhere else, but they must have heard somehow. It's only right for me to tell you. I mightn't be so strong at first, but I think you'd find me all right as I got on my feet. I believe in myself. I think I can pull through. As for my being *careful*, you know what I mean, you can rely on that."

"Listen, young man," she said. "You're talking to an old woman. If I wanted you around, and you had cholera or leprosy, I'd have you in. For whatever *that's* worth, I was brought up among doctors. You can be useful in many ways. There's the haymaking, for instance, and the fencing, and the weeding, and the chickens; and when you have to take it easy, you can take it easy. If you want to come, you can come." She made as if to move off. "I'd better go after my Belties."

"When would you like me to come, Miss Lemuel?"

"Obviously, you'd better come in today. You don't want to sleep out of doors, do you? Any time will do. If I'm not back yet, just make yourself comfortable. Get yourself a cup of tea. Agnes will not be there. She'll run off and hide the moment she sees you coming."

"How do I get to your place?"

"You've got a bag, of course?"

"Yes."

She reflected a moment.

"My little Ford van is out of commission. Are you any good with a car?"

"I was a driver in the Army, and did running repairs."

"That's excellent. You might look at Daisy's inside some-

time. That's the name I give the little Ford. But she's laid up now, and I don't know when I'll be back, in any case. Ask Andy Creich, the carter, down in Glamaig. He'll bring you up. He knows us—Skurr nan Gillian." She walked off a yard or two, as if to ward off any word of thanks he might utter. Then she turned, and looked at him, and smiled. " 'The Peak of the Young Men,' that means in the Gaelic, they tell me. Edward will be pleased to have you there."

"That's fine," he said. "And thank you, Miss Lemuel." But she was moving off already, and surprisingly quickly, concerning her years and the long thick dress she wore. He stood looking after her for some moments, as if he was not at all certain she would not disappear like a puff of smoke; but she was solid enough. Then, suddenly, as he, too, was moving away, her last words repeated themselves inside his head:

"Edward will be pleased to have you there."

What? he asked himself. Edward *will* be pleased? But surely Edward was dead? Had the old woman said something else, and he had heard wrong? But no. He repeated the words as she had spoken them:

"Edward will be pleased to have you there."

He shrugged his shoulders. How stupid he was! She meant some other Edward, of course. He retraced his steps towards the village. He must get hold of the carter, Andy Creich, the sooner the better. Perhaps he could find out something about the job while he was there, too.

Then, as he strode downwards, the scent of hot heather in his nostrils, and the butterflies flickering before his eyes, he felt a rush of joy in his head. It broke rich and red like the flow of blood in his throat two nights ago.

"Sal, old girl. I've got somewhere to go. I've got a job on a farm, with an old dame that's good as gold. Aren't we lucky, Sal? Maybe it won't be so long now before I'm better and we're together again. Not so long.

"I tell you, another thing, Sal. Maybe there's a God around, after all. What do *you* think, Sal?"

But he and Sal had never discussed the question. They had never bothered their heads about it. Why should they?

Down in the village Jim got himself a bite of food, then made his way to Andy Creich, the carter, who had a placard up in his window. Jim knocked, and Mr. Creich came to the door, limping, a small dark man he had not seen before, with steel-rimmed spectacles. He was holding in one hand a thick leather strap into which he was digging a hole with a spike in a clasp-knife.

"You're Mr. Andy Creich?"

"Aye."

"Can you do a small job this afternoon or evening?"

"Aye, man, ah can." Then a thought seemed to present itself to Andy Creich. "Ye wouldnae be the young man that's been staying with the Angus MacGregors?" He chewed his words, and spat them out, like raisin-seeds.

"Yes. That's right." People knew about people in a small place like this. "I've a bag I'd like you to take up for me to Miss Lemuel's place—Skurr nan Gillian, I think she called it."

"What?" said Mr. Creich, quite sharply. He snapped the spike back into his clasp-knife. Then he raised his hand to his spectacles and pushed them up on to his forehead. Then he thrust his head forward from his shoulders and stared into Jim's face. Then he spoke again.

"So ye're going up tae Skurr nan Gillian, are ye?"

"That's right."

"Tae be the new odd-job man, ah take it?"

Jim did not see what concern it was of Andy Creich, and would have told him so. But he thought it better not to make any trouble. Possibly Andy Creich was the only carter for miles around. Well, he'd always heard country people are like that, he told himself. They talk. That's about the only thing there is for them to do.

"Yes, that's right," he said shortly. "Are you free?"

"Aye. Ah do most of the carting for the auld buddie." He

replaced his spectacles on the bridge of his nose. "How soon wud ye like me tae pick ye up?"

"As soon as you like."

"Will it dae in an hoor?"

"Fine. I'll be waiting for you at Mrs. MacGregor's."

Jim turned from the door and was already walking off, when Andy called after him.

"One moment," said he.

Jim turned again.

"Yes?"

"Come here, mon." Andy Creich called him over with a forefinger.

Jim didn't particularly like to be summoned like a schoolchild, but he went.

"What is it?" Perhaps the fellow wanted payment in advance. He could have it.

"It's nae business o' mine," said Andy Creich.

If he meant the fact that Jim was going to take up a job at Skurr nan Gillian, it certainly wasn't.

"Well?"

"Ah shudnae gang if ah were you."

"What are you talking about?" Jim felt his heart knocking with annoyance. Andy Creich shrugged his shoulders. "Ah've tellt ye," he said.

"Now look here, Mr. Creich!" He lowered his voice which seemed to be getting quite shrill, he was so angry. "What's it got to do with you?"

"I said it's nae business o'mine."

"For Christ's sake, man, what are you getting at? You're mad."

"It's not me that's ma'ad!"

"Don't you want to take me up there?"

"Ah'll tak ye, if ye want tae go."

"What's the *matter*, Mr. Creich? I'm a stranger in these parts."

"There's naething the matter. She's strange, yon wumman. They say . . ." the man hesitated.

"Yes?"

"They say she's a *witch*."

Jim's head turned sharply on the neck-bones as if someone had given him a short-arm jab from below to the side of the jaw. It was so fantastic, so supremely idiotic. This was, after all, the same island as the island where Baker Street Station was, and Harringay Stadium, and the Dominion Theatre, Tottenham Court Road. He felt an impulse to burst out laughing, but he got hold of himself. If he started, he might not be able to stop. And Mr. Creich would very likely get angry. Very likely indeed. He would have to carry his own bag, and it was a long way.

"Well, thank you, Mr. Creich," said Jim. "I'll be expecting you at Mrs. MacGregor's in an hour."

"Aye," said Andy Creich, and turned into his house without another word. Jim paused a moment. He was half inclined to call Mr. Creich back and ask him to explain what he meant by the cockeyed things he'd said. Then he thought better of it. The man was obviously a bit touched, if only on the subject of old Miss Lemuel. He'd probably have enough of the subject from Mr. Creich on the way up to Skurr nan Gillian.

Jim walked away from the house, and realized it would be better to leave it till the last possible moment before he picked his bag up at the MacGregors'. The less time he spent there the better. Besides, he wanted to cool off. The lunatic thing Andy Creich had said, not in the padded cell of an asylum, but on the door-step of an ordinary house, made him feel hot and sticky all over. It would do him no harm to sit down for a few minutes in the shadow of the pinewood yonder, beyond the railway-line.

He picked up the tube of tooth-paste and bar of shaving soap he wanted, and sauntered off among the pines. He threw himself down in a small clearing, on a soft carpet of fallen needles, on the edge of a whin thicket. Immediately above his eyes surged the slim spires of a wall of foxgloves.

"No wonder the old lady doesn't get on with these people," he murmured, "if there's many more like Andy Creich! He sounded as if he meant what he said. Poor mug! He's got a screw loose!

Come to think of it, there *was* something a bit funny about his eyes when he took off his spectacles!"

He smoked a cigarette, then another, then got on his feet again. He hadn't got too much time, but he wanted to take things slow and easy. He strolled off back again, through the pines, and out into the high road. He was glad Angus would not be back from work by the time Andy Creich called to pick him up. Angus was a good bloke, and there wasn't any other way he could have behaved, him with his three children. But he didn't particularly want to meet Angus just now.

He reached the MacGregor house, pushed aside the garden gate, and knocked at the front door; not too loud, for the twins were asleep in a double perambulator out here in the garden. A few moments later, Mrs. MacGregor came to the door, Wullie, as usual, tacked on to her apron.

"Ach, Mr. Gunning," she said. "It's you."

"Yes, Mrs. MacGregor. I've just come to collect my bag."

"Come in! Will ye no' set down in the parlor? Yes, dae that, Mr. Gunning. Ah'm just making tea for Mr. MacGregor. The kettle's on the fire. Will ye no' hae a cup? Ach, Jeannie, haud yer wheesht!" (This to the girl twin, who had awakened and was crying in the perambulator.) "Ye'r ba'ag's in the parlor here, waiting for ye. Please come right in!"

He went in, and entered the parlor. As he stood there, Mrs. MacGregor fluttered round restlessly with little birdlike noises, moving from perambulator to parlor, parlor to kitchen and back again. She was not unlike a bird in a cage with several compartments. I shouldn't be suprised, he said to himself, if her conscience isn't troubling her.

"Please don't let me bother you," he said. "Mr. Creich, the carter, will be here in a minute or two."

"They havena come yet, our reg'lars frae Glasgow," Mrs. MacGregor pointed out. "Ye mightna' hae left for a day or two. Ye willnae think too badly on us, will ye noo, Mr. Gunning?"

"Of course not," Jim assured her.

"I hope ye'll be happy in the place whaur ye're going, Mr.

Gunning? Wud it be a long way? Ach, there's the kettle!" She ran back into the kitchen, poured the water in to the teapot, and returned with it, then set it inside the fender on the hearth. "They're verra convenient, these kettles, whistling like a wee blackie. Wheesht the noo, Tommy!" (This was the other twin yelling now.) She was at the china cabinet, that stood between two plush chairs, with the remnants of a best tea service on its shelves, and some decorative plates and vases from seaside resorts. She opened the cabinet door and removed one of the china cups and saucers, very pretty they were, too, with flutings, and green sprigs and purple violets. It was the first time she had brought out the best service for Jim's use. He had only been a lodger, before. Now he was a visitor, and more than that, an affliction to the conscience. The conscience had to be soothed somehow. "And whaur did ye say ye'll be staying?" she asked again in a friendly way, as she came back to the teapot, the saucer under her arm, wiping the cup with a cloth she had produced from somewhere.

"I've got a job," said Jim. "I'm going to do odd jobs at Skurr nan Gillian, at Miss Lemuel's." He tried to make his voice sound as casual as possible, but he had a feeling something would happen, as something had happened with Andy Creich. He was right. Mrs. MacGregor's jaw dropped. The eyes came forward in their sockets till they looked like greengages. Then the saucer she held between her side and her elbow slipped. She made an effort to catch the saucer, and the cup slipped too. Both fell against the brass fender and smashed. Mrs. MacGregor suddenly let go.

"The de'il tak' her, the auld witch!" she burst out. She kneeled down at the fender and began to collect the fragments, but she soon realized they were useless, nothing could be done with them. She threw them down away from her. They broke into still smaller pieces. Then she got to her feet again. "She's up tae her tricks again, eh? The de'il tak' her!" she cried again.

"Mammy, mammy!" young Wullie yelled suddenly. It was all too much for him. He began crying at the top of his voice.

"Haud yer wheesht, Wullie, or I'll belt ye!" She cuffed him on

the side of the head, but that did anything but quieten him. Outside, the twins in the perambulator doubled their clamor.

"I'm terribly sorry about that cup and saucer, Mrs. MacGregor," Jim said unhappily. "I insist. You must let me pay for them!"

"It's no' your fault, Mr. Gunning! It's thon ba'ad wumman's!" She went over to the cabinet again, and was taking out another cup and saucer. All three children were yelling their heads off now. At that moment another set of sounds was added to the concert—from outside came a clop, clop of hooves, the crack of a whip, a shout of Whoa!

"Please, Mrs. MacGregor, you're not to worry!" begged Jim. "I've had some tea! Here's Mr. Creich! I *must* go! I'm *so* sorry about the cup and saucer!" He stuffed into Wullie's sticky hand whatever silver coins were in his pocket, and lifted his bag. "Good-bye, Mrs. MacGregor! Good-bye, Wullie!" he exclaimed, and fled. At all events, he would be spared an explanation of the way poor Miss Lemuel, a few miles away on the moorland, had pushed Mrs. MacGregor's cup and saucer out of her hands and smashed them to pieces on the stone hearth.

CHAPTER 3

"How do, Mr. Creich?" murmured Jim, as he handed up his bag. "I've not kept you waiting, you see!"

"Guk!" replied Andy Creich, placing the bag behind him in the open cart. "Jump in, will ye?" He gave no indication of whether he meant Jim was to get in beside the bag or the driver. Jim got in beside the driver. Though Andy Creich's face did not seem encouraging, Jim felt he might get him to answer a question

or two. Andy Creich flicked at his horse with the tip of his whip, and the cart creaked off. The wailing of the MacGregor family followed them like the wailing of the survivors when a soul sets out to cross the waters of Lethe.

"They're in a bit of a stew in there," said Jim.

"Guk?" growled Andy Creich. His face was quite blank. Of course. They could hardly be expected to understand Cockney rhyming slang on the shores of the Mullach Firth.

"They're in a bit of a state," explained Jim.

"Aye!" Andy brought forth, and slumped into silence, behind his spectacles. He was sulking. He had not forgiven Jim for taking so little notice of his warnings. He had probably meant well, anyhow.

The cart moved forward, over the Spinner's burn, past the shingled portico of the Presbyterian Church, past the school and the schoolhouse beyond.

"How long will it take to get there?" asked Jim.

"Aboot an 'oor, maybe more, maybe less." Andy Creich was not committing himself. And he was not indulging in small talk, either. He was being paid for a job of carting. Beyond woodland and meadow, beyond the curve of road and railway northwestward over the bridge, towards Invercoire, the cart continued along Strath Groban. On the right the pastures sloped towards the river, on the left the moors ascended towards the long heathery crests that broke against the mountains of Easter Ross. A little breeze had sprung up, fluttering among the gold flowers, shaking the dry pods of broom.

Well, if the bloke wouldn't talk, he wouldn't talk. It wouldn't be much loss. He himself was certainly not one for forcing conversation when folk were disinclined for it. It was puzzling, all this business. It was clear the folk round about didn't like Miss Lemuel any more than she liked them. Why didn't they like her? Andy Creich said she was strange. He said people called her a witch. That was the word Mrs. MacGregor had used about her too. To tell the truth, Miss Lemuel certainly looked a bit like those old crones you see pictures of in kids' fairy books, and in films. But

that was in books and films. Were these people daft? He'd heard somewhere that the people in North Scotland were superstitious. Who'd have imagined they could be as cock-eyed as this? Perhaps you couldn't help getting that way if you lived long enough in these parts; and if you were born here, you were done for. He smiled with a corner of his mouth. He'd probably get a bit potty himself if he didn't look out. Anyhow, the only thing that really mattered to him was that this job had turned up, an open-air job, a job where he could go easy while he found his feet. The old dame wasn't giving any charity, either. He could be as useful to her as she to him. You could almost say she had been looking out for him, just as much as he had been looking out for her.

They had left the road for some time now, and were moving up a cart-track transversely across the lower slopes. On their left were the buildings of a small croft. In a field near the road a man and woman were spreading the hay. The nutty smell came up warm and rich from the gold pasture.

"Aow, Andy!" the man called out, and waved his hand. The woman went on with her hay-making.

"Aow, Hughie!" responded Andy Creich, raised a hand, and went on. Then suddenly the silence broke. For, after all, Mr. Creich was a Highlander, and no Highlander can keep silence indefinitely.

"Thon's Hughie Ross," he said.

"Yes?"

"He helps the auld wumman oot."

"Miss Lemuel?"

"Aye. When she needs a mon or twa for the ploughing or the haymaking. It costs her plenty. He kens which side his bread's buttered."

"And she's got a woman there, too, she told me."

"Aye, fat Agnes. She's as daft as the auld witch hersel'."

"Excuse me, Mr. Creich. Why do you call her a witch?"

"Because she is."

"You don't really think . . . what on earth *do* you think, Mr. Creich?"

"She talks to the de'il."

Jim bit his lip. It was a hard job to get anywhere with stupidity like this. He looked at his watch. They must be getting pretty close, he thought. They would be reaching their destination in twenty minutes or so. It was up to him to find out what he could before he got there. He might be spending weeks there, maybe even months, and he didn't know the first thing about it, any more than if it was Thibet. The only thing to do was to humor the little bloke.

"What does she talk to the devil about?"

"About young Mr. Tourneur."

Edward. Yes, of course. Edward. Edward.

"He *is* dead, isn't he, this Mr. Tourneur?"

"Aye."

"How did it happen?"

"He was on one of them big air-raids, on Berlin, when they started raiding it proper. Ye'll mind that?"

"Yes. Towards the end of forty-three, wasn't it?"

"Aye. And he brought his airyplane back, a' blazing fire frae end tae end. He was blazing himsel', puir laddie, like a pine torch. They got him oot and tuk him off to hospital doon there somewhere, Surrey they call it. He was in dreadfu' agony a' that time, and then he deed. The curse of Skurr nan Gillian reaches a long way oot."

"What's that? What curse?"

"Ye'll find oot."

Jim was quite out of his depth. The man was talking like a gibbering half-wit. He was talking again:

"Thon's the time when Skurr nan Gillian went to rack and ruin, though noo and again she'd work like the de'il himsel' when she thocht he might come back again. But he didnae."

I see, Jim said to himself, I see what's happened. The old lady was crazy about the young man, and he died. And here she is, up among these mountains, miserable and lonely. A bit touched, too, maybe. I shouldn't wonder at that. Maybe they've seen her wandering around, having a bit of a palaver with herself. So they get ideas into their heads. She's a witch. She talks to the

devil. They ought to be certified, the whole lot of them. But I suppose you can't blame them altogether. There just isn't enough to *do* in the country. The nearest pub may be miles away, there are no cinemas, no dancehalls, no boxing-matches, no greyhounds. It's simply *asking* for trouble.

He sat back, and took a deep breath. He was sure he had the hang of it now. He brought out his cigarettes and handed one over.

"Cigarette?"

"Thanks. Ah dinnae smoke."

"O.K." He lit his own, and puffed the smoke out into the great inverted bowl of blue-grey air.

"Hi, young man, there's ae thing ah wanted to ask ye. What's ye'r name, noo?"

"Gunning."

"Aye, Mr. Gunning. Tell me. How did the auld dame get hauld o' ye?"

"She didn't. I was just walking on the moor, and I met her. She was out after some cows that had got away."

"Aye, the Belties, ah'm thinking."

"Yes. That's what she called them."

"Which way?"

"Back there. A good way back." He pointed in the direction he had met her.

"Then she'll hardly be hame when we get there," Andy Creich pointed out with satisfaction.

"No."

"It may be hoors afore she's back."

"I suppose so."

"Fine. I usually set ma goods doon on the doorstep when there's anything tae deliver. I dinnae see eether o' them. The auld dame sometimes willnae leave the books for hours at a time—"

"She reads a lot, eh?"

"Aye. Nae wonder her beasties go straying."

"I see."

"And whenever fat Agnes sees a mon, she runs for miles." He shrugged his shoulders. "A queer couple."

"Yes," Jim agreed. There was silence for a time. Behind them the firth and railway had now for some time been hidden from view. They were out among the broad hollows of moorland now. On their left in the middle distance a tarn lay like an abandoned steel buckler, with the serried rushes along its margins like racks of green arrows. Along the ridge of a hill beyond the tarn an assembly of tumbled stones that had once been a crofter's farm lay huddled like a flock of sheep petrified where they chewed their cud of grass long decades ago. Ahead of them the squat pyramid of Carn Gorm straddled its enormous flanks against the dim West. Here and there a croft with its out-buildings set in its small area of greenness and woodedness intruded upon the waste. Out of the high air a hawk came thudding down like a thunderbolt, and, baulked, flung back with an angry twitter into his own air again.

"It's O.K.," Jim was saying to himself. "Just the job. A few months of this, and I'm laughing. Somehow I'll get them both over, Sal and the kid, for a few weeks. It's a long way and it'll be a big fare, but we can sell the radio if necessary. I never was sold on it, anyway."

Hello, Andy Creich was talking again. Yes, he was.

"Ah was saying to ye, mon. Ha'e a care, will ye noo?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Creich. I was thinking. What did you say? Have a care? Yes, sure." (What did he mean? Had it got round to him that he was supposed to have something wrong with his lungs? Damn that handkerchief. He was going to be damn tired of that handkerchief before he turned his back on Braemore Bridge.) "Don't worry, Mr. Creich. I'll take it easy. As a matter of fact, Miss Lemuel knows I'm a bit off color. But it'll be all right. Look!" He pointed to the wide moors, the wide skies. The gesture meant: how against such a background could everything fail to be all right? You just had to take it easy and you'd be fit for eight rounds before you knew where you were.

"Ah wasna talking o' that, whatever," said Andy Creich, "and ye know it."

"What were you talking about then? Were you on about the old lady again?" He felt resentment start up inside him and go tick-tick, like a watch.

"I tellt ye there's been one or twa ither young odd-job men in Skurr nan Gillian. Dae ye mind?"

"I remember. What's wrong with that?"

"Naething. A' ah said was hae a care."

"What happened? Did she get rid of them?"

"No. They cleared oot."

"I suppose she didn't like them?"

"Aye, that may be."

"Were they Scotchmen?" He felt he was on to something.

"Ah dinna mind."

"What are you trying to say, Mr. Creich?"

"Ah'm no' trying to say oot." They drove on in silence for several minutes. Then he spoke again.

"She's up tae something."

"What?"

"Since she cam' back after the young mon's death."

"I asked you what she's up to."

"Ah've tellt ye."

"You've told me nothing."

"Verra weel."

"I think I see," murmured Jim. No wonder the old lady was so raw and touchy and strange. No wonder.

"Ye dinna see," said Andy Creich quietly.

"All right, then." This mystery-making was beginning to get on Jim's nerves. "I don't see." They rode on. Mr. Creich thrust his spectacles firmly back on the bridge of his nose, and concentrated his attention on the ears of his horse. Five minutes passed, ten minutes. The plovers dipped and whined, making the loneliness lonelier. A stack of peats by a peat-march looked abandoned and unwanted, as if the man who had cut them had died and they would be no use to his ghost.

Then at last the cart-track, swivelling round under the curve of a hill, brought a new prospect into view. Below them a spate of bracken tumbled roughly down into a hollow. On the further side of the hollow the track ascended towards a hillside crowned with larch and pine plantations. Below the plantations, separated from them by fenced pasture reclaimed from the wilderness, were to be seen far off the white walls and steep roof of a croft.

"That's the place, I take it?" asked Jim.

"Aye, thon's the Goodman's Croft," said Andy Creich. "Ye can tak' it an' keep it."

"The Goodman's Croft!" Jim screwed up his eyes. Then a sound distracted his attention.

"Ho, ho!" it went. "Hoo, hoo, hoo! Ho, ho!"

What's that? A bird calling out, a mocking sort of bird, flying across the hollow, flying over to the hill? There was a large black bird on the rock there, but that was silent. There were grey birds mewing and crying. But no visible bird was calling out: Ho, ho! Hoo, hoo, hoo! in a sort of morse code of laughter, dot-dash, dot-dash-dot, dot-dot!

Largan nah Chaorochain, hooted the ghost of Jack Thomley.

"Skurr nan Gillian!" observed Andy Creich, as if by way of correction, and spat full and hearty over the rusting croziers of bracken beside the track.

The cart descended into a hollow bright-green with marsh and pulled out up-hill again. There on the further slope the view opened up. On the east the great sickle of Mullach Firth sweeping round towards the inland waters of the Kyle of Sgorach, and due north the pine-woods and hurrying waters of Strath Groban. The territory covered by the croft of Skurr nan Gillian was bigger than that of the average native crofter. Miss Lemuel probably had done a good deal of buying at one time. The land was roughly surrounded and divided up with fences, many of them in a bad condition, as could be seen even on a first approach, when there was so much more to take the eye. Along the margins of the property the shaggy moorland which must once have been cleared with great labor was encroaching on the areas cleared for pasture or

for crops. The planted pines and larches on the higher ground seemed to be spilling over into regions where they were not wanted. Jim did not see these things as a countryman might, but even to him, a townsman in his marrow, the air of neglect was manifest; a thing rather to smell than to see, like hot dust on window-ledges behind thick curtains.

Then he became aware there was an odd sound in his ears, that it had been in his ears for some little time: like a chuckle of rain in gutters, or the scratch and creak of insects in tall grass. It was, in fact, Andy Creich, tittering, he was enjoying himself hugely, the little chest vibrating as if it were made out of stretched parchment.

"What the hell's got hold of you?" Jim cried out suddenly. "Are you daft?"

The tittering stopped dead, as a cricket stops when a foot comes down hard on the ground.

"No' sae daft as you, laddie," said Andy Creich quietly.

"What do you mean?"

Andy Creich did not propose to explain what he meant. "There's a lot tae be done roond here," he said, "if she wants ye tae do it."

"Well, that's what I'm here for," said Jim.

"Aye," said Andy Creich. "Fine."

They had come up to the gate in the wire-fencing. Jim got down, opened the gate to let the cart through, then swung it to again. The catch dropped in its slot with a short sharp click—a slight noise, but important, like a doctor's stiff cuffs rattling as he examines you, or the click of handcuffs.

"Ah'll tak' ye up tae the porch," said Andy Creich, as if that were really quite a concession. On their left the dark pines crowded the ridge and shouldered their way down the slope. Far down below, the woods began again thickening towards the Strath. The cart moved forward, first through open land of heather and bracken, then alongside the cleared land with the raked grass waiting to be thinned out to dry on the fences. Then came a clover-field, then an orchard of gnarled fruit-trees, that gave the appearance of leaning backward and raising their branches to ward off

the prevailing wind. On a lower level gloomed a small reed-fringed pool, green with scum. On its south bank a clump of willows trailed their dispirited leaves, and beside the willows was an overturned boat, dry as a bone and cracking in the heat.

"He wud hae it up here," muttered Andy Creich. "And he had only tae say the word, and she had it brought for him." That clearly meant the boat, thought Jim. You learned more from Andy Creich by letting him talk than by asking him questions. "But he dinnae ever hae it oot. He went tae be a flying-man, and he had other boats tae sail. Aye, aye!" he shook his head mournfully.

Beyond the orchard was a thicket of trees, birches and larches, planted for a wind-break. Between the listless foliage and the trunks, which glowed as if there were a heat behind them, you could now see the out-buildings of the croft, and the rough white walls of the house itself. How breathless the evening was, how still. No bird sang or clapped a wing. The bees must long since have gone to their hives, the butterflies had folded their wings and the moths not yet unfolded them. The cart-wheel crunched on the hard ruts. Beside the track a rabbit crouched forward on its fore-paws, its bright eyes gazing upward so still they seemed made of glass. The cart-wheels did not disturb that impassive unfrightened gaze.

"Ye'll hae a job keeping thon doon!" said Andy Creich. "Can ye shoot? Ye canna shoot like young Mr. Tourneur!" he affirmed. "Naebody could for miles aroond."

Only young Mr. Tourneur seemed to be moving, if only the ghost of him, among the bushes of heather, the trunks of trees, under the lee of the white walls.

Now the path had curved round the orchard and the trees in the wind-break. Here was an enclosed paddock, a vegetable plot, and closer to the house a garden smoldering with summer flowers half choked in their own foliage. On this side of the house was a small wooden outhouse with curtained windows. This place, at least, showed no sign of neglect. The wood had a fresh coating of creosote, and there were flowers in narrow beds either side of the door.

"Thon was his ane wee hoose," murmured Andy Creich. It was not necessary to ask whose. "She keeps it locked up day and necht. What goes on in there is naebody's business. They say she keeps it the spitten' way it was when he left it." They drove on another twenty or thirty yards, flanking a small green lawn with a single broad tree at the edge of it, and then, of its own accord, the horse stopped. Below them was the house proper, the house on the Peak of the Young Men. Beyond it was the garage where, doubtless, Daisy, the little Ford van, was resting. The first feature of the house that took the eye was the two dormer windows that stared like eyes out of the steeply sloping thatched roof. Below them the white wall heaved and shimmered with pale blue shadow in the late afternoon heat. Set deep in the white wall like blind rockets were the two ground floor windows on either side of an added porch. The left hand southern wall was thickly curtained with ivy, blue and green like dug-up bronze.

"Thon's the hoose," said Andy Creich. He looked round. "Naebody aboot, as ah thocht." Then suddenly he gave tongue. "Agnes, whaur are ye? Hi, fat Agnes!" There was no reply, no human reply at all. Only a sort of low echo coming back along the ground, through the stalks of grass, the stalks of harebell and heather, like the broad seething of a wave along a beach. Or perhaps it was the cooing and the gurgling of the chickens in their runs some distance away.

Andy Creich turned to Jim.

"It's a 'recht," he assured him. "She's likely hidin' awa' in her wee bothy, dae ye see there, below the hoose? She always does the moment a stranger shows up." He turned to cry out to the empty air again. "Dinna fash yersel', Agnes! He's a'recht. He's the new mon. Miss Lemuel sent him." The silence was unbroken. "Weel, mon!" He was at Jim again. "What are ye waiting for? Ye get off here."

"Yes, of course," said Jim. He blinked. There was a buzzing in his head. He got off, and Andy Creich gave him his bag. The account was settled.

"Thank you, Mr. Creich," said Jim. "It's been very good of you."

"God be wi' you, young man," said Andy Creich, shaking his head doubtfully. "God be wi' you," he said again, and turned the cart round.

"I'll be seeing you," Jim shouted out after him. Seeing you. Seeing you. Once more the words came back in echo, like seething salt water upon the sands. He stood looking for some time after the cart, noting the fine dry dust the wheels sent up into the air, like a cloud of gnats. Then beyond the windbreak that covered the house the cart at last disappeared.

It was very quiet. There was no sight or sound of human or animal creature, except for the hoarse cawing of a crow back towards the woods, and the cooing chickens in their enclosure below the garden. She had said if she was not back he was to go in and make himself a cup of tea. It's awkward going into somebody else's house for the first time and poking around for this and that. But I can't hang around here indefinitely, sitting on my bag, as if this was a railway-station.

He lifted his bag and coat and advanced towards the porch; then he was aware of a curious tingling that ran between his ribs and his breast, like the flickering pink and blue lights in pintables.

It was a pressure, a warning. It became a sound in his ear. It became a little man with spectacles and a lip, chewing his words, spitting them out, like seeds.

Ah was saying to ye, mon. Hae a care, will ye noo?

He turned his head over his shoulder as if Andy Creich were actually there, still poking his nose into affairs which in no way concerned him. His face became black and ugly with resentment. "Sod you, Mr. Creich!" he growled, and went up to the porch-door and pressed down the latch. The door opened with a squeak of unoiled hinges. "Job Number One!" he told himself. He moved forward the six or eight feet that separated him from the original door, and turned the handle. A gust of warm air flooded out and over him. The air was imprisoned in a small hallway

with a door to his left and a door ahead of him, and on the right a window, a wooden staircase, and a door beyond the staircase. He tried the left hand door-handle. A brief glimpse showed him this was the old woman's room. Her bed was there, with a large smoke-grey Persian cat resting on it. The creature stared at the intruder, unblinking, with gold-rimmed eyes. There was a table there with a candle on it, a wash-stand, a wardrobe, several articles of woman's wear. There were photographs on each wall, as well as tasselled caps, some medals in glass cases, a silver cup on a small table, a bronze statuette of a boxer. He closed the door quickly, but there was time enough to gather whose the photographs were, and who had won those trophies. That small boy, that youth in running shorts, that young flying-officer, they were all Edward. All that was left of poor young burned-up Edward.

He walked forward a step or two, then opened the door on his right, beyond the staircase. Yes, as he thought, it was a lavatory, and there was just room under the slope for a bath, too.

"Posh!" he told himself. It wasn't going to be as old fashioned as all that. Then he opened the door in front of him and stepped over a stone sill down into the main room of the house. There was a quick scuffle as a small lean tabby-cat jumped on to the window-sill and fled. Another cat, a black one with white anklets, rose from a hearth-rug, arched its back, yawned, and curled up on the rug again. The room was large, running the greater part of the width of the house. It seemed to serve as both a kitchen and a sitting room. The walls were whitewashed. Three or four good rugs were scattered over the stone slabs of the floor. Over on the right was a large open hearth, one side of it filled with a useful-looking kitchen stove, the rest of the space largely stacked with peats. Along the left-hand wall was a door, through which you could see the ranged shelves of a scullery. A back door led out into the open from the right hand wall beyond the hearth. Between the windows in the main wall, that looked north, was an oak dresser ranged with crockery, some of it handsome, some cheap kitchen stuff. Near the fireplace two deep easy chairs faced each other, across the rug where the black cat lay curled. An old

clock ticked deep and steady from the mantelshelf. Several wooden chairs stood around against the walls, again the same mixture of cheap and fine. The centre of the room was occupied by a large oak table, with two chairs drawn up before two places laid for tea, with a teapot on a pewter stand, a milk jug, a sugar bowl, two cups and saucers.

So she was expecting somebody to tea, Jim murmured. Or does that woman sit with her, he wondered, because she gets that lonely?

He put his bag down, and hesitated for some moments, as if waiting for some one to give him instructions. And in a manner of speaking, some one did. Not the ticking clock. Not the old woman —she was out in the moor somewhere. Not the woman servant, fat Agnes—God knows where *she* was.

Not they, but Edward. Edward was everywhere: here, as in the old woman's room. He was in a shelf of boys' books beside the hearth, big books with pictures, like school prizes. He was on every wall: Edward in rompers, his infant head held up by a woman's hand to face the camera; Edward in school-groups; Edward in athletic-society groups; Edward the footballer; Edward the actor in school plays; Edward the flier, the L.A.C., the corporal, the sergeant, the flying-officer; all in all, Edward the host, Edward at the joy-stick, flying the Peak of the Young Men.

A cup of tea, Jim. It'll do you good. There's a primus stove there, beside the hearth.

I don't mind if I do, Mr. Tourneur. Thanks.

And sure enough, there was the primus stove, just against the stack of peats, and a kettle on the hob of the stove beside it. He took the kettle over to the scullery, where there was a sink with tap water, worked by a pump. He was at home among household things. He often helped Sal out with a small meal when she felt off color. He found tea, milk, sugar, without trouble; bread in a bread-bin, butter in a bowl of water in a meat-safe on the cool wall of the scullery. He had no compunction about using the teapot on the table, but he took down from the cupboard a cup and saucer and bread-plate for himself, he took from the dresser-drawer a spoon and small

knife. The two places already at the table had been set for someone else. It seemed proper to set a third place for himself. He enjoyed his tea, as he always did, then washed the things and put them away. Then he lit a cigarette and walked towards the easy chairs by the hearth. He was about to sit down on the chair nearer the shelf of boys' books, when he felt the same compunction as he had felt about the place laid for tea. The two chairs seemed somehow so clearly marked out for Miss Lemuel and some other person, that it seemed a sort of liberty to sit down in one of them. He told himself at once that that was foolish. Dishes are specially laid out, but not chairs. Chairs are always there. None the less he did not sit down in one of the armchairs. There was a wooden chair with arms and a cushion against the inside wall and he sat down on that, and smoked, and shut his eyes. It was quite comfortable. The windows were open, and it was getting cooler. Twenty minutes or so passed, then he opened his eyes, though he was still drowsy. He could have dropped off where he sat. Was there anything he could do, he wondered, like chopping a bit of wood, or scrubbing something out? He was not happy to be inactive. If only that Agnes woman showed up, he could get some idea about things. But she seemed a funny one, by and large, from what he had been able to gather. At all events it would do no harm to get his bag and coat out of the way and put them into his own room. It was to be presumed he would have a room of his own, and probably here, inside the house. There were two staircases leading up to bedrooms, one from the kitchen here, one from the small lobby outside. One would have been the boy's until he died. The other one was probably the one he was to have. Which room was which? He had a feeling Miss Lemuel must still feel the boy's room was something special, something holy-like. He did not want to go poking around finding out about things. It would be time enough to get himself settled when one of the women turned up. Well, he would wash, anyhow. He went into the scullery, pumped up some water, washed at the tap, and found a roller-towel behind a door. He had a pocket-comb; he combed his hair, and felt fine. While he was wondering what to do next,

and wouldn't it be a good thing to have a breath of air, the cooing and cackling of the chickens he had heard all the time since he came, now softly, now more loudly, acquired a sudden and an increasing urgency. He went over to the window, and saw the fowls assembled in a blue-white and brown-golden crowd against the gate that led into their enclosure, clamoring for their evening feed which they knew to be imminent. A few moments later Agnes herself appeared, for it could be no other than she. She was fat enough in her dark-blue short-sleeved dress, and even though she was seen in profile and at some distance, she looked anything but a bright creature, with that black hair falling around her ears over the pink-and-white cheeks, and the pudgy arms and elbows, and the shuffling walk. She kept her eyes averted from the house as if afraid of catching the eyes of the young man whose presence Andy Creich had clearly made known to her. She thrust the gate before her, attended to the fowls, and issued again, the eyes still fearfully hugging the ground. It occurred to Jim that he might go out to her, or at least call out, to reassure her, but he thought better of it. If she was so nervous a woman, it was better to leave the job of introduction to the mistress. He turned back into the kitchen and sat down again. He had no idea whether it was kinder for him to stay in or go out. He took down a book from the shelf, and sat turning the pages for some minutes. Then a fresh set of noises came to his ears. He heard a cow mooing, or more than one; he heard the clink of a pail on a stone floor. Agnes was at the milking. He smiled with a wry amusement. There would be milk again, as there had been milk these many months. To tell the truth, he had quite missed the stuff these last few days. Before long the silence was on the place again. If it was Agnes's custom to bring some milk up to the house, she did not intend to do so this evening. There was silence except for the clock ticking, but that was part of the silence. Even the turning of the pages was an intrusion, the pages Edward had turned many years ago. They were Edward's books. He felt a certain discomfort to be making free with Edward's books; clearly the loved books of his childhood, all the more loved because they had sur-

vived so long. He raised his head to one of the photographs of Edward on the mantelpiece beside the clock. It was frameless, standing on a sort of silver easel, a photograph of Edward the flying-officer, with the silver medal of the D.F.C. hanging from its ribbon. It was an amiable face, not the face of one who would say put that book down, it was my book when I was a little boy.

No, it was not the thought of Edward that made the book feel heavy in the hand. It was the old lady. She was queer about that boy. She might not like people playing around with his things.

He rose from the chair, snapped the book to, and replaced it on the shelf. I'm going out, he said to himself. I need some air. He went out, across the small lobby, and out into the open. He walked up hill a little distance and then turned. Skurr nan Gillian lay spread out before him, the house, with Edward's hut beside it, Agnes's cottage, the cow-house, the barn, the garden and vegetable plot beside the house, the small wood on the east side, the chicken-run, the meadows with the drying hay, the rougher land that descended to the fenced limit of the property. The flush of summer was in the sky, and was reflected in the still and moving waters of firth and river and lake. The northern hills spread out far and splendid in the dusk.

It was fine up here, first-rate; just what the doctor ordered. Well, it wasn't quite the doctor who had ordered it. If the trick could be done, this was the place to do it, the trick of getting better, of getting back where he had once been. He felt his forehead for temperature, and then quickly withdrew his hand. Don't think about *that*, he told himself sternly, forget it, forget it! Give all this a chance! You've got to do all you can to keep this job! It's not going to be easy all the time, with these two old dames to reckon with, he admitted. But he had met one of them already. She was odd, but she was all right. Doubtless the other one, the little fat one, will be all right too, when she gets to know you. I'm going to make a go of it! I must, I will!

He continued up the hill towards the ridge of pine-trees. Moths brushed the lobes of his ears. Bats twittered about his head.

Among the pines it was dark and odorous and soft underfoot. Beyond the pines the ground descended slightly towards a plateau where rocks and scattered bushes of whin and heather lay like sleeping dogs, their ears pressed back. A tarn in the centre of the plateau looked like the broad end of a tunnel through which you might gaze deep towards the earth's core. So he moved about for an hour or more, then at last retraced his steps. He wondered whether by now there might be news of Miss Lemuel, though as he came down from the ridge he saw no light shining in any window of the house facing him. She might, of course, be in the kitchen, he thought. He reached the porch and opened the outer door. There was a line of light outlining the lower edge of the inner room door.

"She's back!" he told himself with satisfaction, and knocked at the door. There was no reply. He knocked again, and then entered. No, Miss Lemuel was not there, and there was no sign that she had arrived. The two sets of tea-things were on the table in front of the two chairs, exactly as before. He wondered whether, if Miss Lemuel had come back, she had gone to her room, for she might well be tired out after so many hours on the open moor. He sat down in the wooden chair he had sat in earlier, and waited for some minutes. It was hardly likely she had come in and forgotten about him, all the more as his bag and coat were there, where he had left them, up against the wall. Who had lit the lamp? Whether Miss Lemuel was back or not, it was probably Agnes. It was a pity the poor woman was so downright silly. Well, there was nothing to do but wait, though to be sure he was beginning to feel he would like to get to bed himself: he had been on the go in the fresh air a good many hours. And if Miss Lemuel was not in already she would be in before long. It would be a decent thing to do to be up and waiting for her, to make her a cup of tea or something, after so long a day.

But was she in? Was she? This was silly. If she was in, she was in her own room, and she couldn't have been there long, either. She herself wouldn't want him to hang about in the kitchen

all night long. All he needed to do was to go to her room, if it was her room, and call out her name. If she was there, she would answer. He rose, and left the kitchen, and went to the door of the other room off the small lobby.

"Miss Lemuel!" he called out softly, and waited. Then he called out more loudly. "Miss Lemuel!" and still no sound answered him. "Miss Lemuel!" he called again, and then he knocked at the door. She could not be there, he decided. Old folk do not sleep as soundly as that. He went back into the kitchen and sat down again. Well, definitely, she had not come back yet. She was not there. The black cat with white anklets was gone. He smoked a cigarette, and took one of the young Edward's books from his shelves, and drew a chair up to the table where the lamp was. He would read for a little time, then he might drop off for a bit, and then sooner or later she would come. He finished the cigarette, but could not get on with the book. He was no book-reader at the best of times. He replaced the book, and went back to the other wooden chair, with a cushion and with arms; it was slightly more comfortable.

Miss Lemuel had not come back yet. She was not there. But someone else was. No, not Agnes. She was probably down there in her stone hut. Whoever it was, it was not Agnes who was here. It was Edward, of course. But that was ridiculous. Edward was dead. Sure, Edward was dead. The old woman, his aunt, had said so. So had Andy Creich, for that matter. Poor bloke, he was very much dead, after going through hell for two years with burns, like some of those Air Force blokes did.

Yet there was this funny feeling, you couldn't get away from it. Edward was here. It was all my eye. How could Edward be here? That's easy. All those photographs, those books, those trophies on the mantelshelf, everything was tied up with Edward. It *was* Edward. Suddenly it came to him. Those two places laid for tea on the table, with the lamplight shining on the cups and saucers and plates . . . one was for Miss Lemuel, *one was for Edward.* No, it had not suddenly come to him. He had known all along,

somehow, but he had not wanted, he had not dared, to put it into words.

But it had been put into words for him already, up there, on the moor. "Edward will be pleased to have you there." Those were her words. How could Edward be pleased to have him there, if Edward was not there, too?

So Edward was here. How could he be here if he was dead? Was he a ghost, or something? Don't talk rubbish! There's no such thing as ghosts. I tell you, there's no such thing as ghosts. Edward's dead.

He got up from his chair, and started striding around the room. It was impossible to sit in one place with such mad ideas as these banging at your brain. What was wrong here? What was it all about? He found himself peering into the corners of the room, to assure himself nothing was around. He found himself looking suddenly over his shoulder. He was suddenly up and walking to the scullery, then walking back again.

This won't do, he told himself. I'm going dotty. If I'm going to start having ideas like this, I'd better clear out. He found himself at the foot of the staircase which led up from the kitchen to the attic. Maybe he's up there, he told himself. Maybe, he's in that other room, up that other staircase.

Then suddenly the image presented itself to him of the wooden hut in the darkness, Edward's hut, just outside the house, beyond the small lawn. "She keeps it locked up day and necht," the carter had said. "What goes on in there is naebody's business. They say she keeps it the spitten way it was when he left it."

Had he left it? Of course he'd left it, to go and be an airman. And he'd come down in a plane, and been burned up, and later on he'd died. Had he come back again?

Jim Gunning, you're going crazy. How can he come back if he's dead? There's only one thing to do. That hut is where he is, if he's anywhere. Perhaps she's with him, too, at this very moment. You'll have to go and find out. It's mad, but it's the only thing you can do. And the place will be still and empty, like any other empty place, and then you'll come back, and throw yourself in

one of those chairs, and have a sleep. But first you must go and find out.

He rose and went out of the kitchen and through the porch with a firm step. With a firm step he strode across the strip of lawn between the house and the hut. Then he stood at the door, and knocked loudly.

"Are you there, Miss Lemuel?" he cried. "Have you come back?" He stood and listened. There was no sound from within the hut. Then it seemed to him he heard a movement somewhere behind him. He turned swiftly, but in the darkness there was nothing to see. Perhaps it was some animal, or the leaves rustling on the big tree at the edge of the lawn, as they sometimes do even when there is no wind.

He turned back to the hut and knocked again. He was beginning to feel foolish about all this.

"Miss Lemuel, are you there?" he cried once more. Once more there was no reply. I might as well make sure, he told himself, and reached out his hand to turn the handle. The door opened. It was *not* locked day and night. At least it was not locked now. But in that same moment he was aware somebody was at his back. Somebody started beating with fists at his shoulder-blades. A woman's voice was yelling at him, tearing the night to shreds.

"Go away, will ye! Go away! You've no right here! I'll tell Miss Lemuel! Go away at once! Ye're a bad man!"

He turned to face the woman. It was, of course, fat Agnes. She must be Irish, with that brogue. She was beating away at his face now. The black hair was like streaks of ink down her face. He seized her wrists.

"I'm sorry, miss," he said. "You're Agnes, aren't you? Calm down a bit, there's a good woman!"

She was crying now.

"Let me go, let me go!" she blubbered. "You have no right here! I'll tell Miss Lemuel!"

"All right." He released her wrists. "I was browned off inside

there. I wondered if Miss Lemuel had come back. That's all!" She had her hands to her face, as if she daren't look into his. She was shivering all over, the loose flesh undulating, as if there were no bones inside it. "I'm only the new odd-job man," he reassured her. "You must have heard Mr. Creich tell you."

"You have no right in there," she wept. "She'd slay me if I let you in."

"It's all right, my dear. I'm not interested." And he wasn't. If the old lady wanted the place left the spitting image of what it was when Edward had gone, it was her business, and no one else's. "Go back to your bed, will you?" he demanded. "I'll go back in there and have a rest. You've no idea when Miss Lemuel will be back, I suppose?"

"No, sir," she sobbed. "I don't know at all."

He noted the addition of the "sir." Things were improving. She turned away, with her hands still at her face. "You wouldn't like a cup of tea, maybe, and a bite to eat?" she asked, with her face still averted. She was a kind soul, evidently, though a bit wanting.

"No, Agnes," he said. "Don't worry. I can look after myself. My name's Jim."

"Yes, sir," she said, the sob still in her throat. She moved off beyond the big tree towards her own hut, and disappeared. He felt better now. He had established some sort of contact with a human being, even if it was not a very bright one. He went back to the house, and descended the step into the kitchen. Well, what about it? he asked himself. I'm dog-tired. So much for all that business. Ghosts! You ought to be ashamed of yourself! His eye caught sight of the silver-framed photograph of Edward on the mantelpiece. There was a smile on the face. Even Edward's smiling at you, he told himself. He walked towards the wooden armchair he had been sitting in. "To hell with that!" he said aloud, and strode over towards the easy chair on the right hand side of the hearth, the one near the book shelf. He stretched his legs out happily. So did the tabby-cat on the hearth-rug. It was the first time that

day he had been really comfortable. He closed his eyes and in a moment or two was sound asleep.

He was awakened by the feeling of a hand tugging at his shoulder. He was aware, also of a dead weight lying draped about his left foot. He felt himself coming up through the deep green waters of sleep. He was on the surface now. A voice spoke.

"Wake up, Gunning! Are you awake? Naughty, naughty! Sitting in Edward's chair!"

It was the voice of Miss Lemuel. She stood over him admonishing him with a wagging forefinger. The weight on his foot shifted. He looked down. It was Hunish, Miss Lemuel's collie-dog, getting himself more comfortable. Hunish seemed to have made up his mind he liked the strange man, doubtless because he found him in his own home, and his mistress addressed him so kindly.

Hunish was happy. So, apparently, was Miss Lemuel. Doubtless she had found her Belties and brought them back and all was well. Yes. It was the Belties she was talking about.

"It's quite absurd," she was saying. "Yes, yes, Chappie." (She was talking to the tabby-cat that was meowing at her feet.) "You shall have your milkie soon." She addressed herself to Jim again. "I found the Belties only about a quarter-of-an-hour after I left you. I saw Strawberry's horns sticking up out of a small dip grown over with rushes and high-bracken, and there they all were."

But Jim had no heart to be interested in the finding of the Belties. He was aware of headache, and a crick in the neck. He did not like the taste at the back of his mouth. And he did not like this Edward nonsense, either, the very first thing when he woke up. *Naughty! Naughty! Sitting in Edward's chair!* He had had already enough of it for the day, and the day had only just begun. It was hardly full dawn yet. He had had far too much of the wretched young man yesterday and last night.

He got up, out of the chair.

"Good morning, Miss Lemuel," he said. "I'm sorry I'm sitting

in a chair I shouldn't be in. But I don't know what you mean, Edward's chair. You said your nephew was dead. How should I guess you keep his chair all-special?" The irritation in his voice was palpable.

"My dear boy," she said. "You are very tired. Otherwise you wouldn't talk to me like that, would you? I was joking. Surely you see that? I told you yesterday to make yourself comfortable. Why shouldn't you sit in Edward's chair? It was his, you know, and it still is. But why shouldn't you sit in it? You fill it nicely. You're more or less his shape."

"I don't know," he said crestfallen. "The way you said it—"

"No, no, no," she adjured him. "You mustn't take things that way. You should have gone to bed, of course. Why didn't you go to bed?"

"I didn't know which room to go to, and I didn't feel like poking about in some one else's house. To tell the truth, Miss Lemuel . . ." He hesitated. He felt embarrassed. He felt he was behaving common, like. She was so obviously a lady. And she was so kind, too; her kindness got you down straight away.

"Yes, Gunning?" she prompted him. She was eyeing him through narrowed lids.

"I don't know when I made up my mind, Miss Lemuel. I don't think it was there when I fell asleep. So during the night it must have been . . ." Again he hesitated. He was making heavy weather.

"Yes?" she said softly.

"I was going to tell you, madam, I don't think I want to take the job on. You see . . ."

"I quite understand. It's all very strange to you, perhaps even a little frightening. You're a town boy, and all this is so far away from everywhere, with just two women for company, one poor unhappy old woman like me . . . and poor Agnes. I gather you saw Agnes for a moment or two last night? I had a word with her just now after putting the heifers away. You must forgive her. She's not very strong-minded at the best of times, and when she saw you trying the door of Edward's hut . . ."

He did not like the sound of that at all. It sounded very dodgy.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Lemuel—" he started hotly.

"Please let me talk, Gunning. I just want you to understand. Of course you had no idea of the way I feel about Edward's hut. How should you? But Agnes has never been allowed to put a foot inside the place since the day she came, and no one else, either. I look after it entirely on my own. It is exactly as it was the day Edward left it."

"Yes," he muttered. "I was told."

She looked up.

"Who told you? Someone down there?"

"Yes, the carter you sent me to."

"Yes, of course. You understand why I've given those orders about the hut? I think you will when I've talked to you. Was Agnes very rude and unbalanced?"

"I'm not worried about Agnes," he said.

"Are you worried about me?" she asked him. "If you are, that settles it, of course. You must go. As soon as you like. I wouldn't dream of keeping you here if you were at all unhappy."

"It's not you," he said.

"I'm so pleased you say that." She smiled at him. "I would like you to stay. I think it would be of mutual benefit. It would do you good here, I'm sure of that. And I really could do with a bit of help. I'm an old woman, very old. I've been really feeling it one way and the other the last few months. But if you must go, my boy, you must go. I must try and find another helper."

"I can't explain," he said. There was something like misery in his face.

"I would like you to try to explain," she insisted. "We haven't discussed the question of money yet. Oh, I know it's not that," she said hastily. "I know it isn't. Are you afraid of being bored? I can assure you you wouldn't be. You'll be surprised to find out how much there is to do, even in a small place like this. As soon as you are fit, of course. We wouldn't have to rush things."

She paused, as if waiting for him to comment on what she had said. But what she had said had nothing to do with the guts of the matter, which was Edward, all this hoky-poky about Edward. The

poor bloke was dead, why couldn't they let him lie? It gave you the creeps the way they all went on, Andy Creich, Mrs. MacGregor, Agnes, Miss Lemuel, photographs of Edward, cups, bats, trophies, Edward's untouchable hut, Edward's untouchable chair, the two places laid at table . . .

Suddenly he whipped round, on the thought of those two laid places. He turned round with so violent a jerk that he kicked Hunish out of his place. There was a whimper of protest from the dog.

"There!" he cried. "Look at those!" The tea-cups were exactly as he had first set eyes on them some twelve hours ago. "I don't understand! Who are those two cups for? *What's it all about?*"

She was silent for some moments, then she spoke, so quietly that he hardly heard her.

"Oh, so that's it? she said.

"Yes, that's it!" he repeated inaudibly. He felt himself blushing to the rims of his ears. He was a complete stranger. He might have been a crook or a tramp. Yet this woman had trusted him. She had invited him into her house. And here he was thrusting his nose into a matter which concerned her and her alone, and one she felt about so deeply she was half crazy about it.

"I'm a bastard," he said to himself. "Oh, hell, what have I let myself in for?"

"I see," she murmured. "I see." She bowed her head, this upstanding gaunt old woman, and shut her eyes, and stood meditating for a minute and more. Then she raised her head and opened her eyes and faced him.

"You understand, of course, there's no reason in the world why I should answer you? You're a complete stranger, for one thing."

"I understand that," Oh hell, he said again, under his breath.

"And we're from two different worlds, you and I."

"Yes." He knew what she meant. She meant she was a lady, and he was not of her class. Well, that was true.

"Yes, madam."

"But I'm going to answer you, because I'd like to employ you, despite your impertinence; despite the fact that I don't know any-

thing about you. I've asked for no references. My instinct tells me that you're honest. I'm too old to stand on ceremony. You've asked me why there are two places laid at my table. I will tell you the exact truth, young man. One place is laid for myself, of course, the other is laid for my nephew, Edward. You're saying to yourself: Edward is dead, why must she lay a table for Edward? The answer is this—because it's so hard for me to believe Edward is dead. I don't think he's dead, though I know the ashes of his body lie down in Croydon. At any hour of the day or night I feel he might walk in. If he walks in, I want him to feel he's welcome."

"Yes, madam. I—I—"

"No, Gunning, there's no necessity for you to say anything. I feel he is always near, because he loved Skurr nan Gillian so much. He once said he would come back if anything happened to him; he belonged here and nowhere else. He said it with a smile, but he meant it. He's back because he's part of it. I brought him here when he was a small boy, for certain reasons that don't concern you. It was nearly derelict when we came, and we built it up with our own hands. He loved every stone in the house, every flower in the garden, the beasts in their stalls. He loved the moon and the hills, the estuary and the lake and the high tarns. He loved the wild things on the mountains and in the water, the salmon leaping the falls of Invercoire, the snipe in the marshes of Carn Gorm. He loved the spring flowers and the winter snows. He loved it all, and he became its poet, that ordinary small boy. He loved all this . . . and he loved me." She bit her lip as if she was afraid that her voice might at last betray the emotion which she had so far successfully kept out of it.

"Please, madam, please," he broke in. "I don't want you to tell me all this. I think I—"

She waved a hand, as if to brush the words aside.

"You've asked me, and I insist on answering you, precisely because you are a stranger, and I may never set eyes on you again after another five minutes have gone by. I say, he loved it all and he loved me. I won't measure his love for me against my love for him. I only know if I'd died first, and he had stayed on here, I'm

certain I should have tried to come back to him as he tries to come back to me. That's why I'm not certain whether it's Edward or the wind when I hear a noise in the branches; that's why, when I hear a plover crying out, I think it might be Edward trying to speak to me.

"Do you wonder then, young man, that he's in my thoughts night and day, and that I let myself believe he will suddenly open that door and come in? Do you wonder that I set places for two, silly old woman that I am? Would you, Gunning, deprive me of the only solace I have in all the world? Would you, Gunning, would you? I would like you to answer. Would you?"

"No, madam."

"Ah, there's a good boy," she said. She stooped and patted Hunish, as if to suggest that, had she known Jim longer, or if they had been closer to each other in their stations, she would have patted *him* and not the dog. "He's a good boy, after all, isn't he, Hunish?"

"Yes," went the dog, barking with that low muffled almost soundless bark he had. His eyes were bright with love. "Yes. Whuff. Whuff." The tail wagged to and fro like a plume on a helmet.

"Would you like to stay, then, Gunning?"

"Yes, madam, I would."

"Miss Lemuel," she corrected him, smiling. "It's less formal. We're going to be friends."

"Yes, Miss Lemuel." His voice was very subdued.

"And you're going to tell me all about your wife, and your little boy . . . what did you say his name was?"

"Dickie."

"Oh yes, Dickie. And you're going to let me talk to you about Edward? You will, won't you?"

He nodded his head.

"No, please say you will."

"I will, Miss Lemuel."

"That's right. It's different, you know, when a word is actually said. Do you know what I mean?"

He did not, but he let it go.

"Yes, Miss Lemuel. I suppose I do."

"Well, I suppose we must get you settled in," she said briskly. She smiled at him. "You must forgive me talking so much. I'm not naturally a garrulous old woman, but when you live alone so much as I do, sometimes you find yourself talking, and can't stop. It won't happen again. We'll be far too busy."

"That's all right," he assured her awkwardly.

"Will you wait here a few minutes while I get your room ready for you? It's the one up the other staircase. No, I'd rather do it myself, thank you. Perhaps you could get some water boiling on the primus stove? You know where things are, don't you?"

"Yes, thank you. I made some tea."

"That's excellent. Then I'll prepare breakfast, and after that we'll both have a bit of rest. Agnes will do the milking this morning. You might like to help with that later on, when you feel strong enough. Oh yes, it's quite hard work. Well, I'll be down soon."

She went off. In a moment or two he could hear her in the room overhead, opening doors, moving things about. He filled the kettle and got the primus stóve going. Then he brought out bread, butter, marmalade and so on, and laid them on the table. He had no idea whether she intended him to eat with her, or how she wished to manage it.

She was moving a heavy piece of furniture about up there; the bed probably, after she had seen to the bed-things. What a terrific old dame she was! She seemed more full of guts now, after she had spent a night out on the moor looking for her cattle, than she had seemed yesterday, when he first met her. What a dame!

Then suddenly he remembered. Almost the first thing she had told him this morning was that she had found her cattle only a quarter of an hour after she had met him yesterday. But that was in the afternoon. She could not have been out all night on the moors. Where had she been? Did she have some pal up there, some old dame like herself, with whom she had a night out now and again? Perhaps they got through a bottle between them, too.

You couldn't say she looked the sort, but she was a deep one, she was. He shrugged his shoulders. It was no concern of his.

Well, here she was, coming downstairs like a two-year-old. Her lips were puckered into that black-hole smile of hers, the upper lip slightly further forward than the lower.

"I see you know your way around a kitchen. That's excellent. What would you like to eat now? I could heat up some porridge, and you'd like some bacon and eggs, wouldn't you? How many eggs? Of course we have all we need. One moment." She went up to the dresser, and took down a third set of things and laid them on the table. "We must leave Edward his place, mustn't we?" she said, quite casually, as if Edward was just outside, putting his bicycle away.

"Of course," he said. "Of course."

"You must sit down till I get things ready," she demanded. She looked round the table. "Oh, we must have the honey out," she exclaimed. She went and got the pot of honey, and placed it on the table, beside the marmalade. "Edward likes his honey," she said, and went off to the scullery. He moved towards the right hand easy chair, and then remembered it was Edward's, and sat down instead in the wooden armchair.

"I'm going loopy," he told himself. "I'm getting as loopy as she is. *Edward likes his honey.* I must leave this gaff."

But he did not. How could he! She was so kind. And he needed her, and she him.

CHAPTER 4

Miss Lemuel was a woman of tact and breeding. Moreover, as she had already informed Jim Gunning, she had a medical background. In fact, both her father and her husband had been doctors,

as Jim learned quite soon. She did not tell him much about herself, not because she was secretive, but because she preferred to talk of someone else, and that was Edward, of course. Equipped as she was, she knew how to manage the young man, for he was, after all, an invalid. She realized how detestable it was to him to be treated as one. She realized that if he saw a thermometer he would break it in two, and quite likely pack his bag and make off. So she tended him well without invalidizing him. It did not mean more just now than seeing that he ate well, and rested well, and did as much carefully chosen work as would make him feel he was earning his keep.

Above all, he was not to be allowed to think about his condition. He had stated his conviction that the way to get it down was by not thinking about it. Well, he would have someone else to think about. She put it into words one afternoon while he was lying in the hay-field in the sun, and Hughie Ross and Agnes were hard at work spreading the hay. She had talked Edward, Edward, all afternoon. He had wanted to get up and lend a hand, but she kept him there. He rose and said he would go off and make a cup of tea for the haymakers. But she said no, Agnes would make it, and she kept him there, and talked of Edward. She saw his lips tighten with impatience, then form the shadow of an oath.

She looked at him sadly, and shook her head.

"You remember your own words, Gunning? The thing to do is to think of other things? Do you understand them?"

She thought it wise not to be more explicit than that. He understood, and sat down beside her again, and let her talk. He felt like a lout, so dull he was, and so ungrateful.

"Yes, please. What was you saying?" he asked.

She smiled sweetly, and went on.

There was a good deal of work for Jim to put his hand to, both inside the house and outside, though Miss Lemuel saw to it that he took it slowly, for the cough was still there, and there were mornings when his forehead was damp with sweat. There were floorboards to nail down, warped windows to adjust, pieces of

furniture to mend, torn oil-cloth to trim, walls to paper or paint. He got Daisy, the little Ford van, right too. He could turn his hand to most things. She worked with him most of the time, and she seemed to be almost as good an odd-job man as he was, with a pair of hands extraordinarily strong for so old a woman. She insisted on working with him most of the time, as if she was certain if she left him much on his own he would overdo things or start brooding over those lungs.

But it was by no means all indoor work. He would have to take it slowly, but there was a great deal to do, with weeds rioting in the garden, the pond thick with scum. Later on, the pasture land, sour with blocked drainage and lack of lime, would have to be cleared and sweetened, the gorse and tansy uprooted, the thistle and rushes. The rabbit-fencing would have to be put right, and the big fencing round the estate, which was in so bad a condition that in winter time the deer came from the wild lands straight in, as it were, to the front door. The gates leaned sideways, fencing-posts were flat, wire lay in loops along the ground. Yes, there was a great deal to do.

He recalled more than once that she had said to him during their first conversation in the kitchen that they were going to be very busy. They *were* very busy, and they worked together most of the time, and most of the time she talked of her dead nephew. It had started like that up in the moorland, he realized, and it had carried straight on to their first conversation in the kitchen. She had hoped it was all right with him, her going on and on like that, and he had of course said Yes. Or rather he had nodded his head, meaning Yes. But she wanted more than that. He had to say in words "I will." And he had said "I will."

Then, only a little time later, she had apologised for keeping on in that way. She had said an old woman who lives all on her own is bound to talk a lot when suddenly she finds somebody to talk to, but it wouldn't happen again, they would be far too busy. Well, of course, it was happening, and it looked like happening all the time he stayed in Skurr nan Gillian. If there was any catch in the deal,

that was the catch. But he did not resent it, not, at all events, after the first few days. He was by nature a kind-hearted fellow, and he realized how much it meant to her to have somebody to talk to about the lad she seemed to have loved more than most mothers love their own sons, if such a thing is possible. She couldn't talk to any of the local people, or at least she wouldn't. Besides, the locals had other things to do than come and be talked to at Skurr nan Gillian. She certainly couldn't talk to Agnes; partly because Agnes was only half there and didn't know what was going on most of the time. And then the old woman was very much mistress and maid with Agnes. She kept the line between them quite sharp.

She felt different with him, obviously, though he was just as much her paid servant as Agnes. The big thing seemed to be that he was a young fellow, just about a year older than her own Edward. She thought he looked quite a lot like him, though he couldn't see it himself, judging from those photographs. She was kidding herself, probably. Well, if she was, she wasn't doing anyone any harm. And then both Edward and he had been in the War, though he had been a soldier and Edward an airman. Of course, everyone had been in the War come to that. But it seemed to mean something to her, and good luck to her.

There was no getting away from it, he was a working-class bloke and she was a lady. But that seemed to make very little difference to her; in fact, none at all, after a few days had gone by. He naturally called her "Miss Lemuel," and she went on calling him "Gunning," though he was the sort of person most people call by their Christian name quite soon. But that was the only outward sign that they were people born in different classes. They ate together, worked together, and spent long hours together, in the kitchen, out in the open; he listening, and she talking. The only times when they were not together was at night, after they had gone to their rooms. He heard her bedroom door down below open and close—but not always. Sometimes she would get up in the middle of the night and go off to Edward's hut. His room was on that side of the house and he could hear her turn the handle and go in, and then see the light come up behind the curtained win-

dows. He could not begin to imagine what she did in there for long hours at a time. Sometimes she did not go back to her own room till early morning. He supposed that it was when her grief for Edward got her down that she had to try and find comfort among Edward's things, his papers, his books, his guns, his butterflies, whatever he had in there. Once or twice when he heard her go out through the porch and his ear had been straining for some time for the sound of the handle of Edward's door turning, he realized she had not gone to the hut at all, she must have gone off into the night, for doubtless she could not sleep. It was extraordinary how quiet she was. She never seemed to move a stone under her foot, as she went off, and as she came back again.

What she did in Edward's hut or what she thought of out on the moor was no concern of his. She treated him like a pal while she was with him, and that was all that mattered to him. He was conscious at first of a certain surprise that he found their easy relationship so unembarrassing. The normal English working-class man, both urban and rural, still retains a sense of social distance from the classes once described as "better" or "upper." When he is truculent, his truculence may well be the mask over an instinctive sense of inferiority which, often enough, he emotionally or intellectually condemns. Jim was not truculent; on the other hand, he was not subservient. He felt happy in his own world, and ill at ease outside it. But with Miss Lemuel he had felt from the beginning a sense of being completely at ease, except for that first conversation in the kitchen, when there had been a certain tension. He was intelligent enough to realize she was out to be as agreeable to him as possible. But that, after all, was no matter to provoke resentment, least of all when the job he had with her was so miraculously the job he had dreamed of, and had not dared to hope for. She charmed him, to put it simply. It was a situation which could not have existed had she been a woman who in any way challenged a man's attention as a female, for the whole of the male in him was tied up in his love for his wife. But Miss Lemuel, of course, issued no such challenge. She was a lonely old lady grieving for her lost boy. He, Jim Gunning, made her not only

less lonely, but also less unhappy, by letting her talk endlessly of the dead youngster. And she talked not only of the past, but of the future, too. As the days went by, she seemed to treat him less and less as a casual odd-job man, met haphazard on the moor. The idea seemed to develop almost visibly in her eyes that, as he recovered something like his normal strength, (and he was not to rush things —she was always careful to insist) he was to help her restore Skurr nan Gillian to its former condition, the house like a new pin, the garden like a china plate, the cattle back to their old sleekness, the fields fair and free. They would both enjoy the process and the accomplishment, but it would all be chiefly for Edward's sake. What joy all this would give to Edward, to have his beloved croft restored again to be the jewel of the countryside!

He tried to remonstrate with her several times, but she did not seem to hear him. After all, he *was* an odd-job man, nothing more, and he had come up into these parts to try and get his health back, for his own sake, of course, and for the sake of his wife and boy— *not* for the sake of an old woman who had been a stranger a week or two ago, and a young man who was not even alive any more.

Where did Sal come in all this? He tried to talk to her of Sal and Dickie once or twice, when he felt so acute a pang of longing for them that he felt he had to talk about them to somebody or burst. He remembered very clearly her words to him during that ghostly first talk in the kitchen: *You're going to tell me all about your wife, and your little boy, aren't you?* But when he actually did try and bring up their names, her manner became remote and preoccupied. He detected even a certain hostility in the gruffness of her manner when next she addressed herself to him. She was often gruff with other people, but never, except on these occasions, anything but tender, and even playful, with him.

"Well, I'll have to take the rough with the smooth," he told himself. "She gets jealous, that's what it is: *jealous,* of anything that's going to attract any attention away from poor old Edward."

So he would sit down and write Sal a letter, or if he had writ-

ten her a letter within the last few days, he would find somebody to talk to. Not Agnes. For some reason he made her nervous. She was content to work by his side; but she would start as if a horse-fly bit her, if he attempted to get on to any sort of friendly footing with her. It would not be Hughie Ross, either, nor any of the occasional day-labourers they employed, nor any of the rare callers from croft or butcher's shop or fishmonger's. He might even have tried Miss Lemuel's cats, but they were as indifferent, or wrapped up in their own affairs, as Miss Lemuel herself. He did not try Hunish. You could never get Hunish away from Miss Lemuel, unless he went on a gallop after a rabbit or scented a wild cat.

So he went and slapped the dairy-cows or the heifers on their haunches, and said: "Sal sent you her best regards, Primrose" (or it might be Strawberry). "Dickie says will you give him a ride when he comes up for a weekend?"

It was completely loopy, of course. But it made you feel better. You heard somebody say Sal's name and Dickie's name, even if it was only yourself. Then you could go back to Edward.

The following letter went from Skurr nan Gillian to Holloway a week or ten days after Jim's arrival.

"Dear Sal,

"I hope you are well as it leaves me at present. This is my first letter since I wrote you from Birmingham. I know you will answer this as quick as you can after it gets to you, because then I will know Tosher Davies is doing his stuff, and it will be fine for us both to know we can rely on him.

"If I was to try and tell you what luck I have had, it would look like I am making it up. But I'm not. It looks like fate, though you know I am not one for believing in that sort of thing. Well, I was feeling pretty cheesed off and I was walking in the country, and I met an old dame who has a small farm, she was looking for her cows. Well we got talking, and very soon I found she is breaking her heart for her dead nephew, who was an airman and brought

back his burning plane, and he was nearly burned up but they worked on him for nearly two years and then he died. They made up this farm together, and she was crazy about him and she talks about nothing else all the time and that's the only snag to this job, because sometimes it gets you down. But she's wonderful to me, she knows all about my chest and all that, she doesn't let me do anything that will do me in, though of course I could do much more than she lets me. But it's what I dreamed of, you know, no doctors, no nurses, no thermometers. And I have got my chance and it's up to me to take it. It suits her and it suits me so what more could you ask for? It's too early to say how I'm getting on, but it's bound to put me right ahead. It's up to me, Sal, and it's up to you. If you long for me sometimes like I long for you, it's pretty tough for you over there. But thank God you've got the boy and the old woman and the family and only give me my chance, Sal. It looks good, Sal, that's all I can say now.

"I love you and I kiss you and the boy, and if people ask you what I'm doing of, why not tell them the truth. It's nothing to be ashamed of. I'm having a go at it. In my next I hope to tell you more of this place, but don't ask me where it is. I must find out if it's working out. So till my next, lots of love. And tell me if you got George to have a go at that rubble in the garden, like he said he would. It would be great to see the beginnings of a bit of grass when I got back. But I must be the one to put in the first flowers. So long for now.

"Yours sincerely,
Jim Gunning"
xxxxxxxx

A much-blotted letter from Sal Gunning to her husband, which reached him some three weeks later. The blots were not all just ink.

"Dear Jim,

"I hope you are well as it leaves me at present. I have heard from you and you are all right and it's all I want. When I had

that letter from Birmingham, I did not know what to do. I wanted to run after you, and I wanted to advertise to you Come Back in the newspapers, but what newspapers? And I wanted to go and tell Scotland Yard. But how silly! So I went and had a good cry, and then I said I'll wait for him and he'll write me an address and I'll tell him I love you and I believe in you and if you want it like that, that's how it's got to be.

"I can hardly hold the pen I'm so glad to hear from you, and I've shown the letter to Dickie, and he's so excited he's running up and down like an engine. Also Mum, she sends her love. She thinks you're a bit funny, but you know what she is, and in some ways you are. But what does that matter, now you've had this wonderful stroke of luck? There's so much I want to ask you, about the old lady, bless her, that gave you this job, and who else is on the farm, and what you will do when you are all right. But I leave all that to you. I promise not to try and find out where you are, I promise. I can reach you by letter, it is all I want. The boy asks after you every day and says a prayer for you at night, his teacher told him he should, I think, you should see him he is a caution. I am all right for money, without touching the Post Office either. The Union is sending the money good as gold. Thank you for telling them so quick. All you have to do, dear, is get well, and then we will be together. Mother keeps the house spick and span like always. I'm putting away two shillings a week in a club towards our three-piece suite. Every-one is doing fine, though Mary's got the whooping-cough. George has been in twice but he makes a bit of a mess with his boots. I'll tell you more news in my next. For just now love and love and more love.

"I am

Your own sincerely
Sally Gunning"
x x x x x

Appended to the note was a greeting from Dickie, set down in sprawling capital letters.

"DEAR DAD

"I HOP YU AR ALL RITE AND YU HAV PLENTY OF BEER AND ORRIDGES AND KAKS AND GO TOTHE PIKSHERS

"I AM YUR LUVING SUN

RICHARD GUNNING"

There was nothing to do about this but to go and read selected paragraphs to Jan and Strawberry in their pasture, though they did not seem particularly interested, and just went on swishing their tails, and chewing their cuds, and flapping at the flies with their hairy whisks of ears.

Not many days had passed before Miss Lemuel had conveyed to Jim the gist of the tale of Edward and herself and Skurr nan Gillian. There were one or two elements in it which she did not supply. These, rightly or wrongly, he was able to provide himself, out of his own knowledge of life—limited in many aspects, surprisingly spacious in some.

Miss Lemuel was some seventy years old, the daughter of a distinguished surgeon of good family. She had hated her mother, a silly self-absorbed creature, as much as she had idolized her father. Her father had died when she was seventeen years old, and a year of intense unhappiness followed. Her mother looked and dressed and behaved as if she were less than thirty years old, a pretence she could not well maintain with her daughter, Deborah, about. When Doctor Harold Grimett, an ageing associate of her late father, paid suit to Deborah, her mother fostered the suit with every wile at her command. Deborah was not many months over eighteen when she was married to Dr. Grimett and packed off to a large house in West Kensington, pattering with mice and teeming with housemaids.

What happened during the next few months Miss Lemuel did not discuss; she never explicitly stated what her attitude towards her husband had been, and, of course, it was all such a long time ago. Moreover, none of it was any concern of Jim Gunning's, who

was only Miss Lemuel's paid man. But she talked with him during many hours of many days and her feeling about Dr. Grimett came through to him, like the sound of some one talking to himself in another room: for a time we are certain no one is talking, that it is only a sound in our own heads; then we cannot disguise from ourself that it is some one else's voice; finally we make out actual words, and then whole sentences.

Miss Lemuel had loathed her husband. Apparently there had not been in him any quality of face or body or character in itself loathsome. He had been considerate with her, painstaking with his patients, honest in his general dealings. But the touch of him had been detestable, like the touch of a cockroach on the rim of a glass of milk left out at night. The touch was united with a faint smell which was more of a torture in the nostrils than any rankness. And these things made his very virtues insulting and intolerable. There was nothing to do but to arise and run like a mad thing—which Miss Lemuel did. She got up from beside him while he slept; he was one who slept heavily. She dressed and packed a small bag, her eyes distended with the terror and loathing which, at that moment of that night, had reached their climax. And so she fled. All this took place some two or three years before the close of the last century.

There was, of course, no question of returning to her mother, and she went to stay with an aunt who had a large house in Essex. When she came of age she inherited ample means and the young woman determined to fend for herself. The story of the next thirty or forty years was vague, and not relevant to the climactic episode of her life, which was Edward, and the Highland croft. Miss Lemuel spent some time in India, and in China, and met an Englishwoman in the Orient, a Miss Channing, to whom she became much attached. The two ladies returned to England and for a number of years ran a small farm near Minchinhampton, in the Cotswolds. They were reasonably happy.

It was in 1924 that Miss Lemuel first heard of the existence of her nephew, Edward Grimett, as he was still called, though not the first time she had heard of the existence of Simon, his father.

In fact she had made his acquaintance only a month or two after she had left her husband, his brother. Simon was a self-confident young gentleman. He was articled to a solicitor and was very young still—only a few months older than his youthful sister-in-law. He had already had considerable success among the women of Ealing, where he was the life and soul of the local dramatic society. He was therefore of the opinion that he had only to flash his large expressive eyes at Deborah to get her to be a good little wife and return weeping to her husband's arms. It was a self-appointed mission, and it ended in ignominious failure.

Miss Lemuel heard from her brother-in-law several times again during the next two or three years, in care of her solicitors, for no one had any other address. She finally requested her solicitors to destroy any further letters from Simon Grimett, and there was no further contact till she had been established for some years with her friend, Miss Channing, in the Cotswolds farm. Simon may have calculated that the charm he had been able to exert at the age of nineteen was too callow for so exacting and severe a lady as his sister-in-law. He hoped he would have more luck with a vastly improved technique which had wrought great devastation for years in the dressing-rooms of provincial theatres and the bars of Leicester Square. And the lady herself was getting on, too, still virtually a spinster; even (he had gathered) a virgin. She must have made up her mind that if the time was not now, it was never. He went to Minchinhampton, where he found even Miss Channing a formidable obstacle. He was with Miss Lemuel but briefly, and it was a deflating experience.

Soon after this he married, perhaps to re-establish his self-esteem, though it is not likely he met serious resistance on the part of Linda Tourneur, the girl involved. She was a little ingenue who played her part winningly in the sketch in which they were both touring the provinces at that time. She was not Simon's first wife. There had been two others, and both had died, as likely as not, of the disaffection called a "broken heart." Linda died of the same malady, but not before she had borne her husband a son, a phenomenon which caused his intense chagrin, for he prided

himself on his adroitness, a talent sharpened in him by years of crowded experience.

When the child was born, his father made plans to have him farmed out, but to everyone's astonishment the mother spurned the idea with a quite tigerish ferocity. There was nothing for it but to let the child tag round the country with them. It was not an ideal upbringing for the small Edward.

Then the mother died, and if once again the malady was a broken heart, a certain portly lady, gold-haired, red-lipped, broad-bosomed, Simon Grimett's latest concubine, had a good deal to do with it. Linda Tourneur died. The small boy was left in the care of such a father, and such a nurse.

He was a blasted nuisance, his father said of him, he was a pain in the neck. The woman friend vowed with tears that she would devote her life to the small boy, but Simon Grimett felt she was not cut out for such devotions. Still less was he. In meditating what was to be done with the child, the thought of his brother's solitary state arose in his mind. How would his only brother, Harold (he asked himself) like to take on the job? And then a flash of genius flared across his darkness. Harold was not really a widower. He had a wife, still (as far as Simon knew) running a Cotswold farm. The old dame was lousy with money. He might make a deal with the old dame. "Boy!" he cried excitedly, slapping the concubine on her silky shoulder-blades. "I have an idea, baby!"

He made his way to the Cotswold farm, accompanied only by young Edward: the female friend had been left behind at the Station Hotel. He had no idea if Miss Lemuel would set the dogs on him, assuming she kept that sort of dog, or would bar his way with the even more redoubtable Miss Channing. He hoped, of course, Miss Lemuel would see him, believing it was possible that young Edward's charm might succeed where his own had failed. He was not obstructed by Miss Channing for the simple reason that Miss Channing had died some four weeks earlier. Miss Lemuel saw her brother-in-law coming up the garden path holding the small boy's hand. She built up in her mind the greater part of the story then and there, and it was a surprisingly accurate picture, for she was an

intelligent woman, and despite the brevity of her encounter with Simon Grimett, she understood him better than many women who had known him for years. She had the door opened for the man and the boy, bade the man sit down and waste no time getting on with what he had to say.

As Simon began his exposition, Edward smiled at Miss Lemuel. It is possible no child had ever smiled at Miss Lemuel before. The father had been right. The child's charm succeeded where the father's had failed. The transaction was already concluded, before it had been proposed. There were certain other elements in the situation which might have clinched the issue, if clinching had been necessary. Miss Lemuel was lonely. She was missing her friend, Miss Channing, quite dreadfully, though they had taken to quarrelling a good deal in recent years. The child's plight was, indeed, tragic, and Miss Lemuel had a kind heart, despite the severity of her exterior.

But young Edward Grimett was not taken in by that dourness. He smiled at the strange woman. She only just smiled back at him, for she had little practice in smiling at children. She listened quietly as the father spoke, then she spoke in her turn.

"I agree to your terms, Mr. Grimett," she said. "The details will be worked out by my solicitors. I will take the boy off your hands, and I will, of course, become his legal guardian. There is only one condition. You probably know what that is."

He smiled.

"I know. I'm never to try and see the kid again. It's O.K. by me."

"I'm glad you're so clear-headed about it. If you do, I do not cease to be Edward's guardian. You merely cease to be my pensioner."

"Fair's fair," Simon agreed magnanimously. "He already seems to have taken to you."

"That is gratifying. Do you wish to have a meal in this house, or would you prefer to have it elsewhere?"

"I'll manage," said Simon. "I know when I'm not wanted. His

things will be sent on after him. Goodbye, old chap," he said to his son heartily.

The small boy cried, for, after all, he was a very normal small boy. The father made off hastily, not because he could not bear tears, but because he was afraid his female friend might be getting fractious back at the Station Arms. Soon Edward stopped crying. He was used to being pushed on from one pair of hands to another. Then he smiled. It seemed to Miss Lemuel that she was born again.

Almost the first thing she did was to arrange to have the child's name altered by deed pole from Grimett to Tourneur. It may have seemed to her a touching tribute to the poor lost little girl, his mother, who had been so unhappy and had died. She must have played with the idea that the child's name might be changed to Lemuel. But that would have led to confusion. It might have been thought she was Mrs. Lemuel, not Miss Lemuel—that is, the boy's grandmother, even his mother. She preferred that nothing should compromise her retrieved spinsterhood.

Miss Lemuel was always one to make up her mind quickly, as Jim Gunning found for himself many years later, when she met him on a moor, a complete stranger, and within a few minutes made up her mind to install him under her roof. Within a few minutes of the departure of Simon Grimett from that stone farmhouse in the Cotswolds, leaving his small son with her, she had made up her mind to uproot herself from that Cotswold farm and take herself and Edward to a far place somewhere, with great skies and loud winds, sea water and inland water, moorland and mountain.

A number of factors coalesced in this almost immediate decision. In the first place, she had wearied of the small curved horizons of the Cotswolds: they were neither wild nor spacious enough for her fierce spirit. She would have sought another place some years earlier, but Miss Channing had been sickening for a long time with the illness which finally carried her off. Then she felt the need, which she would probably have been forced to

gratify even if Edward had not appeared, to take something hard and crude and jagged between her own two seamed hands, and constrain it to form and beauty, to hew a small private world out of the stuff of chaos. The Cotswold farm, even its very landscape, felt like something made and planed and chiselled by hands too delicate, long centuries ago.

But undoubtedly the chief factor was Edward. She resolved to remove him completely from the ill-starred influences which had attended him from birth. She did not trust the father. It was possible he was finished for good and all. But he was shiftless and unreliable and, she believed, a drunkard. He could not be relied on in the years to come to keep his side of the bargain. He might take it into his head to demand an increased allowance, and to grant it would certainly not guarantee that he would not appear again, and again. He might decide in a fit of maudlin self-pity or maudlin contrition to drive over from somewhere and demand the return of his child, and to hell with the money. Prospects like these were laden with the smell of law-courts, and that was not the atmosphere in which she intended that the boy should grow up.

There was only one thing to do. She would transfer herself and Edward to a place far off, the sort of place she had long been envisioning, as far off as she could take him in these islands, where, at all events, Simon Grimett could not come charging up on the whim of a drunken moment. She was opposed to the thought of a foreign country. She did not think a small child should be uprooted from his own land. She decided upon the far reaches of Northern Scotland, a land she did not know, but which seemed to her to have the qualities she had in mind.

So Edward and his Aunt Deborah set out for the North. This was in nineteen hundred and twenty-five. She made a few enquiries in Edinburgh, and then continued to Inverness. That was her center for some weeks, while she went out into the countryside into places where she had to leave the car miles behind her. She never failed to take Edward with her; not only because the child already showed himself companionable and charming, but because it was to be Edward's home as well as her own, and she

felt that in some way he would respond to the right, the destined, place, as inevitably as she.

The sort of place she was looking for fell into the category of croft, for there are few houses in the Highland countryside between the croft class and the shooting-lodge of the Sassenach sportsman, except the bourgeois houses of dominies and the manses of ministers, a type and a setting she wished to avoid. She visited a number of places as far as the Far North coast, where the country fell to flatness again, and over in the Western Highlands, where she found the horizons more constricted than they were on the broader Eastern moorlands. The process of dereliction by the Highlanders of their crofts had long since begun. Some of the crofters were just leaving, or had just left, the crofts their forefathers had occupied for generations. Others had been left untended for years, and were in bad shape, or completely ruinous. A day came when Skurr nan Gillian was proposed to her, and on terms which seemed surprisingly modest.

"What's wrong with the place?" she asked straight out, scenting the diffidence in the agent's manner. She knew there would be no nonsense in his reply. If he tried out agent's tricks with other clients, she had a manner which forbade the trying out of tricks on her.

"It's in no sort of condition," admitted the agent.

"I gather that from the price. But what else is there?" she insisted. "Is it the water supply? Is the whole land a bog?"

"It's very silly," said the agent. "But the fact is, there's a curse on the place. The local crofters won't go near if they can help it. They call it the 'Gallitrap'—that's the Gallows Trap. You'd have a job getting the house put right and hiring help with your corn and potatoes. You'd have to bribe them good and hard."

"Fiddlesticks!" said Miss Lemuel firmly. "Is there a ghost there, or what?"

"They say there's a curse on the place," repeated the agent. "The last man who lived there was a recluse, a lawyer from Banff. He said the curse had been on the place long enough, and

it was about time it was lifted. He went there to forget his wife, who had run away from him. That was the truth of it."

She did not point out that she, too, was a wife who had run away from her husband. If she ever thought about him, she remembered he was still alive. But she never thought about him.

"Well?"

"He cut his throat."

"Perhaps she threatened to come back and give him something that was good for him," she suggested harshly. "And that put a curse on the place?"

"Oh no," the agent said. "That's why he cut his throat. The crofters say the place has always had a curse on it. There was a murder there in the forties, though the curse goes back long before then. Two brothers lived there. One killed the other, and then disappeared. Years after they found a body in a bog which they imagined to be his. But they were not sure."

"You don't seem to be anxious to sell the place?"

"As a business man I'd like to, but I've got to give you the facts."

"The facts!" she mocked. He shrugged his shoulders.

"The curse goes back before the two brothers," he said. "There are places like that in the highlands. The Goodman's Crofts, they call them. They say they are dedicated to the Devil."

"Oh the *devil*!" she picked up. "I'll know how to deal with *him*. He's quite a friend of mine."

"Very well, madam."

"How do you get to this place?" He told her. "We'll have a look at it, and tell you what we think of it. Coming, old chap?" (This to Edward).

"Yes, Auntie Deborah!"

And off they went to the croft on the Peak of the Young Men.

It was not only the long monologues of Miss Lemuel that put Jim in a position to build for himself episodes like these in the earlier history of Skurr nan Gallian. He insisted on going out on

solitary excursions from time to time, where he made the acquaintance of crofters and others who lived on the moors and along the Strath. He met the farm-workers and ghillies from the estates of Ben Voith, the big white house on the south side of the river, hidden from Skurr nan Gillian by a ridge of rising ground crested with a wood of pines and beeches. A good deal of the surrounding countryside, including all the land that surrounded Skurr nan Gillian, was Ben Voith property, so that these outdoor workers considered themselves expert in the history of Miss Lemuel's croft. There was no indoor staff, except for a couple of old caretakers. The house was shut up for the time being, though there was always talk of new tenants moving in. Now and again Jim went in with Daisy, the little Ford van, or took the opportunity afforded by a visit to the croft of Andy Creich, the carter, or one of the visiting tradesmen, to ride back to the village and take in a few pints at the Glamaig Arms. Miss Lemuel disliked to see him set off, but she knew better than to thwart him. For his part, he was sure that if he did not get a break now and again, he might suddenly feel he must either turn his cards in or go mad. The feeling dwindled as time went on, but that was how it was during the first month or two.

They did not talk easily about Miss Lemuel anywhere, especially in the presence of an English stranger from London. But there was one word regarding her that came to him more than once: Witch. He had heard it on the lips of the first two people to whom he had brought up the name of Miss Lemuel, Andy Creich, that is to say, and Mrs. MacGregor. He heard it again, and still again, among the mooing of cows in byres and over the froth of pint-pots of beer. Witch. He heard it on Miss Lemuel's own lips, for there was very little that was said or done in those parts that Miss Lemuel did not know about, though she lived in a place so out of the way, and kept herself so much to herself.

"They call me a witch," she said, smiling. "A couple of hundred years ago there'd have been a great witch-trial to prove what they knew already. They'd have tied a rock round me and thrown

me into the Kyle of Sgurach. If I'd have sunk, that would have been too bad. If I'd have floated, they'd have said it was my friend the Devil, so they'd have taken me out and burned me at the stake. What's the matter, Gunning? You look frightened. Are you frightened of anything?"

"Certainly not," he said quite angrily. "I've never heard such madam in my life!"

She arched her eyebrows enquiringly.

"Madam? Nonsense, I suppose? Oh, I see. You're a dear boy, Gunning. What a comfort it is to have you around! I suppose it all started with that first talk I had with the agent in Inverness. You remember? He told me the Devil was in the place, and I said I thought I knew how to manage him, he was quite a friend of mine."

"I see," said Jim.

"You don't travel about the world as much as I've done without getting on nodding terms with the Devil. I've met him closer at hand, too." She closed her eyes, and the color seemed for some moments to go out of her cheeks. He did not know what she wished to convey to him, or if she wished to convey anything. By "devil" did she mean her husband, Harold Grimett? Or Simon, the brother? He did not want to know. She opened her eyes again, and spoke. "That's how it all started, I suppose. You see, don't you, Gunning?"

"Yes," he admitted. "If people say things like what you said, people will start saying things." He was not very articulate.

"How right you are, Gunning!" she smiled at him. "How right you are! I suppose I've only myself to blame. I was telling you about the day Edward and I first set eyes on Skurr nan Gallian."

She went on to tell him again about that first day. It was September, and there was a nip in the air. There was a scurry of winds among confused droves of small clouds, and their shadows gamboled about the earth, like puppies chasing their tails. The wave-tips in the Firth ran helter-skelter between the banks. Sudden odors from near and far struck the nostrils and went off again like billiard-balls from the table cushions: the

nutty odor of drying grass, the thymy odor of mountain flowers, the dank smell of bog, the cleansing smell of water, odor of pine-tree and exploding gorse-pods and udders of cattle and ferns under stones. The small boy chortled and ran round himself that bright forenoon like a thing possessed. Now he buzzed like the bee at his nose, now he barked like the dog in the valley, now he mewed like the peewit in the cloud, as if he were the one who really knew how to make these noises, and the others had better take pattern by him. Then, as he saw twelve feet away a butterfly heel over and settle on the flank of a bell of foxglove, he would fall down on his belly, exactly like a cat, and wait till it came flickering towards him. He had his hand on it. No. It had eluded him. He was at once crying and laughing in his frustration. All the bright sky was mirrored in his tears.

"Yes, Edward, my boy," she said to him, patting his back. "This is our place."

She did not mollycoddle him or want him around; he was to be no sissy-boy. In all the years that were to follow she did not kiss him more than once or twice, though if he kissed her in moments of great excitement, the first day home from school, or the day when she brought him the boat or a dog or a gun, she smiled and wagged her head, blushing a little. Her love for him seemed of such a nature that a physical expression of it would somehow cheapen it, just as her love for him seemed to have a sort of fleshless radiance about it, exactly because he was the child of another woman's womb, not hers. She did not kiss him when he went off to be an airman, nor when she saw him on leave and he might never return again from his next sortie. She only kissed him with full mouth the first time she was allowed to see him in hospital, after he had brought down himself and his plane blazing like a great torch. It was the first time that any contact other than the finger-tips of doctors and nurses was permitted, their instruments and unguents and bandages. She kissed his broken, charred, peeled, transmuted body, then stood away from him rigid as a rock, as his own heart had been earlier, in the white center of the fire.

Miss Lemuel and Edward did not both together get to work on Skurr nan Gillian, for he was only three and something. She was a year or two less than fifty. She had little difficulty in those early years in getting hired help, for folk knew that she paid well. Some thought the curse all nonsense, others who respected it found it possible to take counter-measures. And Edward in himself was a potent talisman. The lively eyes, the broad grin and throaty chuckle of the growing child, were enough to make any curse sorry for itself. The folk in the region round loved Edward throughout, from romping child to debonair airman with the comic quiff coming down into his eye. She trained him to be her partner in all her undertakings, starting from the nails he held for her to knock in with her hammer, and going on to the scythe with which he mowed a field of hay as dandy as Hughie Ross himself. They kept the thatch in order together, they milked the cows, they cut the peats, they ploughed and sowed and reaped, they made themselves a new water supply, they made a fine pond out of a few yards of bog.

But for many hours at a time, sometimes for a whole day, or a whole day and a night, he was away from her with the crofters' boys, or the lads from Glamaig or Braemore Bridge. He would poach his trout or salmon with the best of them, and he was as good a shot as any. But he liked to be on his own sometimes, for there was a dreamy streak in him, and he was writing quite fair verse that Miss Lemuel thought highly of at an early age. And when that mood was on him, he would tramp for hours among the quaking bogs of the upper moorlands, or lie for hours on his stomach, watching the salmon by moonlight leaping the falls of Invercoire, watching but not quite seeing them, so that the creatures were like a rising curtain of drops of silver rain. He would return to his own hut, for that had been put up for him when he was quite young—some seven or eight years old—and write down verses, and there would still be a twitch of rhyme-making on his lips when he came in for his tea—seas, breeze . . . Breeze? No, no. He shook his head. Seas and breeze had breasted the tapes together too many thousand times before. Seas, tease? That was a

bit better. Kneeling on his chair, the tip of his tongue protruding between his lips, he would go on with his poetry-making hour after hour, till a sharp pang of hunger assailed him.

"What's for tea, Aunt Deborah?" he would cry out from his hut. "Do I smell potato-cakes? Oh, that's corking!" He read the weekly school-tales proper to his age and generation, and had its language off pat, up in that sun-drenched, wind-havocked croft-land, with the ancient curse upon it.

But he was to be no Auntie's darling, she determined. He was to meet lads of his own age, not merely in school-tales or shaggy crofts, but in school, and in England. In many ways she was a woman well inside her own type. Never in all her years in Skurr nan Gillian did she quite get out of herself the idea that these Highland folk in the countryside were "natives," and she herself an Englishwoman and a lady. She was doubtless too eccentric to be accepted by the English summer visitors in their shooting-boxes, or the local Scottish gentry. But for them she had merely a contempt. For the crofters and traders and fishermen, at least in the pre-war days, the contempt was mixed with a certain affection.

So Edward was to be an Englishman, and he was to go to an English prep-school. She had already for years herself had his formal education in hand: he was at French and Latin and stiff mathematics a year or two before the average boy of his age. But one thing, though she tried hard, she could not teach him in these surroundings, and that was to talk English without a trace of the Boeotian Scottish accent she deplored. He was eight now, and if he was not at school among English boys, the Scottish accent would soon be immedicable.

So she packed him off to Eastwood, a school near Dover. There was no nonsense of taking him there, or seeing him off even as far as Edinburgh. Off he went, and at the right time he got there. Her only anxiety was lest by one of those strokes of bad luck that beset us from time to time, Edward's father might find out he was at Eastwood, and turn up and throw his weight about. In fact, Simon did turn up in Edward's last term at Eastwood, having read in a local country paper that a small boy named Edward

Tourneur had distinguished himself in archery in competition against bow-and-arrow men of national standing; he had, in fact, become a master bowman. The name was not common, and the age was about right, so he took a chance and asked respectfully if he might see the lad, whom he had reason to believe to be his son. However the authorities had been put into the picture by Miss Lemuel and the caller was turned away. There was no trouble. None the less, had this not been the last term, she might well have changed his prep-school, perhaps even changed his name a second time. Instead, she cancelled his name from the list in one of the more august public schools in the south, and arranged for him to enter a school in Yorkshire which was nearer to herself and likelier to be outside Simon Grimett's eyes.

The boy did well enough at school, but despite Kent and Yorkshire, a trace of the regrettable Scots accent was there to the end, on lips writhen and ridged by fire like eroded lava.

And it was not to be wondered at. Skurr nan Gillian was his place, not those others. And if it can be said that Miss Lemuel loved him with a love which had a sort of purity and lambency because it was non-umbilical, it might be said of Edward he loved Aunt Deborah in her turn with a love in some sort surpassing the love of a boy for his mother, which he takes for granted, which is sometimes darkened by confusions bred in the conflicts between mother and father, or soured by jealousies provoked by her other children, and the friends and occupations that take her out of his sight. But with Edward none of this. There was something incredulous in his love for her. She was tremendous, she could do anything, she could be anything, and yet she loved him so. There had never been any nonsense about her being his Mummie, and, in any case, at the age at which she had taken him over, he was already far too old for that. She knew that he must not be brought up in any atmosphere of sweet lying, and carefully, slowly, she let the whole truth come to him. She had devoted her life to him, and together, shoulder to shoulder, they had built up and were building up Skurr nan Gillian. He was a grateful boy, and a happy boy, superbly happy on his holidays.

He did not return to school when the war broke out. He was seventeen, and he would be off to be an airman when his day came. He had made up his mind it should be the air, during the crisis that came before the War, when even thoughtless boys knew they would probably have to fight soon in one or other of the elements. So he and she had a last incomparable year together. The croft needed him more than ever before, because help now was harder to get than it had ever been. So they worked at the croft like slaves, as if to make sure that the Skurr nan Gillian he would return to when all this was over, was as close as mortally possible to their dearest dream of it. In the kitchen, out of the large reserve of stores which it had been her routine to collect, Miss Lemuel canned shelves upon shelves of jam and syrup and pickled nuts and peas and asparagus grown under glass. Edward made his pond glow like a splinter of Como. Together they worked at the garden, till it shone like a hearthstone. Out of doors Edward shot, rode, drew his arrows, fished, swam. It seemed that they almost did not sleep during that year. At night he read poetry to her, or went off into his hut and wrote poetry, smoking endless pipes, knocking out the burning ash till the rugs and planks were scorched black, secure in the knowledge that no one would put away the scrawled-on books and papers, or sweep out the inch-thick ash. Only when he went off to enlist, did he slightly raise the embargo.

"Well, Aunt Deborah. You can sweep up, but not tidy up." (The distinction was quite clear). "You don't mind, Auntie dear? Not Lily, or anybody. Just you."

"Just me, Edward." Her lower lip quivered very slightly. "Off you go, now. There now, there. You're forgetting the haversack of sandwiches."

He picked it up, and slung it over his shoulder. Then he pulled Aunt Deborah's forehead towards his mouth, and let it rest there a moment. Then he turned away.

"Are you there, Andy Creich?" he called out. "Let's get cracking! Goodbye, Aunt Deborah!"

"Goodbye, Edward!"

The cart rumbled off and disappeared beyond the wind-break of birch and pine.

Edward Tourneur made a good airman. It took some nine months before he became operational, and within three or four months after that he had shown his quality. Though he was the second youngest member of the bomber-crew of which he was sergeant-pilot, authority came easily to him. They were all close friends, as happened so often in bombers, and his crew would have gone through fire with him, as they quite literally did often. One day *The Times* announced that the Distinguished Flying Medal was awarded him for a good job of work done while flying over Hanover, and soon after that he was commissioned. He managed to keep most of his crew together, till his tour was completed, though one member, namely Billy Noble, the tail-gunner, had dropped out for the most final of reasons, having received a bullet between the temples from a German night-fighter, a couple of minutes before the night-fighter himself was sent careening down from the sky.

Before the end of the tour, the crew managed to get a long leave together, and Edward took them up to Skurr nan Gillian, to show off the incomparable Aunt who sent them those smashing parcels, not to mention the croft itself, that dream made of stone and wood and water. The company could only remain together an evening and a night and a morning, for most of them had their own parents and wives or girls to think of. It was a long way for so short a time, but how comfortable it was to feel solid steel and wood under you for so many hours, without a jerry sniper to come heeling over towards you from behind the opaque plume of the engine's smoke. What an evening that was, what a night and a morning! It was summer, and they bathed in the pond. (They could have bathed in the lake of liquor they got through.) And what meals they were that Aunt Deborah prepared for them, on a farm-kitchen stove, a primus stove, and a heap of peats to keep things warm! And how many tales they told, how many songs they sang! What an unparalleled rendering Edward gave of

Drink to me only, keeping in tune way beyond "Within the cup," all the long perilous journey to "The thirst that from!" And how proud she was of her young Flying-Officer, with that one ring of his; how proud of his friends, Vic Stokes, the bomb-aimer, who was a plumber's mate from Camberwell, Bob Shuttle, the flight-engineer, a chartered accountant's clerk from Kidderminster; the front-gunner, Jock Malcolm, the tail-gunner, Johnnie Carpenter; the mid-upper-gunner, Sandy Hughes. What a pity it was that Bob Smythe, the navigator, couldn't make it, or the whole crew would have been there! If there was a curse on Skurr nan Gillian, surely the laughter and chivalry of these young men, and the shining eye of that old woman, exorcised it. But those things were not enough, it seemed.

The lads dispersed. Edward stayed on several more days. Then he told his Aunt there was a girl near their station at Bedford, whom he would like to see for a day or two before the leave ended. She patted the back of his hand, as she did in her most affectionate moments, and mussed his hair a little.

"Have a good time, my boy!" she bade him. If there was any chagrin in her heart, as there might well have been, she did not show it. "I don't know if it's serious at all. If it is, I hope she'll like this." She meant the croft, of course, all there was in it and around it.

He smiled noncommittally. The girl and he had not got round to anything like that yet.

So Edward returned to Bedford, and after his leave was over, did the three or four trips outstanding from his tour. Then, to his immense dismay, he was ordered to an Operational Training Unit in Leicestershire, to do an instructional job for several months. It was purely routine, the idea being that nerves should be put "on a rest," as they called it, after their aerial stimulations. But his nerves were much more harassed by teaching sub-human "prunes" to fly, than they had been in his Lancaster in a sky solid with flak. He behaved very badly in Leicestershire and got drunk a good deal. He was only saved from harsh disciplinary correction by the concentrated attack which the bombing author-

ities directed against Berlin at this time. The time was November, nineteen hundred and forty-three.

So Flying-Officer Tourneur was ordered to his Lancaster again, and by the exercise of all the considerable resources of charm and chicanery at his command, he managed to assemble almost the whole of his former crew. Off they went to Berlin, bearing Uncle Tom with them, Uncle Tom of the celebrated Cabin. And when, after the return from the first flight to Berlin, Aunt Deborah received a wire from her nephew, informing her that: "UNCLE TOM ARRIVED SAFELY IN BERLIN AFTER EXCITING JOURNEY. EDWARD AND CREW." Jeannie and Robbie, who kept the post office in Glamaig, and the countryside generally, nearly went frantic with speculation as to what the sinister-sounding message might mean. And Aunt Deborah nearly broke down, she was so flattered the boys had remembered. For on their visit to Skurr nan Gillian, one of the topics of conversation had been the early days of Herr Hitler, the German leader. And Aunt Deborah, still capriciously in some ways a humanitarian Victorian, had said: "If somebody had thrust a copy of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* down the throat of Mr. Hitler when he was young, he would have been a very different man today." Upon which Bob Shuttle, the flight-engineer, had said, "Very well, Aunt Deborah,"—they all called her Aunt Deborah—"if we have the luck to go to Berlin together, we'll drop a copy of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* especially addressed to Adolf Hitler. Is that O.K., Freckles?" (He was addressing himself to Edward Tourneur, his superior officer.)

Edward knew that it was not O.K. He knew that it is highly reprehensible to drop *bonnes bouches* out of the sky from which the enemy might extract, however unlikely it seemed, any scrap of information which might be useful to him. Bob Shuttle should have known better. He himself knew better. But what the hell! he said to himself. You only die once.

"That's O.K.," Edward said easily. Then he got deeper into it. "What's more, Aunt Deborah, we'll sign it with all our names. And the names of the ground-crew, too!" (Might as well

be hanged for a sheep as a lamb.) "You must put your own name in as well, Aunt Deborah, won't you?"

And Miss Lemuel arose, and got from her own special shelf her father's copy of the work.

"You will sign your names now," she said.

"You first!" the young men demanded in chorus.

She reached for the fine-pointed pen and the bottle of purple ink in the deep recess of the window.

"That'll frighten him," she announced, as she signed her name in a signature curiously floral and delicate for hands as gnarled as hers. Then the bomber-crew signed, and in course of time the ground-crew signed, and Edward's Lancaster, of which they spoke nostalgically as "B for Beer," set forth to Berlin with Uncle Tom in the bomb-bay. Billy Noble, the rear-gunner, was not there, as has been said, for he had been killed. The signature of another tail-gunner, Johnnie Carpenter, supplemented Noble's on the fly-leaf; and when the more serious business of the visit to Berlin was discharged, Uncle Tom was released over the blazing city, in a carefully padded parcel suspended from a parachute especially designed for him. Among the objects preserved in the Edward Tourneur reliquary at Skurr nan Gillian, few were more precious than the telegram which the crew sent next day, and the letter which Edward sent the day after, giving details of the episode. Both were kept in silver frames in the inner sanctum, the hut beyond the lawn, to be revealed to Jim Gunning when the time came.

The bombardment of Berlin was intensive, and "B for Beer," along with multitudes of its kind, paid several visits there during the next fortnight or so. "B for Beer" was setting out still again, when instructions came through that ex-Flying-Sergeant Tourneur, now Flying-Officer, was to hold himself in readiness for an Investiture at Buckingham Palace, at which his Majesty would be pleased to confer upon him the decoration whose award had already been announced. It was held proper among bomber-crews that an Investiture be made the occasion for general wassail, if the Wing-Commander, or whoever was in charge at the station,

beamed with a favorable eye. The eye beamed on "B for Beer." Flying-Officer Tourneur also felt that he would do wrong not to let his Aunt Deborah know he had a ticket for her to be present at the Palace, if she cared to make the enormous double-journey in wartime discomfort. The whole business of the Investiture was slightly sticky, but it was fun, too, and the sort of thing you have to go through with, like a night-raid, which is also slightly sticky, and fun, too. He sent a wire informing his aunt of the invitation, telling her the crew would be with him that night. A wire came back from her. She was setting out by the first train, and after the Investiture, the whole crew must take dinner with her at the Savoy Restaurant.

She had not kept her wardrobe modish, up at Skurr nan Gillian, but few women at the Palace looked more dignified and handsome, old though she was, and marred by that wart on the cheek from which those long grey hairs sprouted. She did not wear her pride on her arm like a sleeve-band; only Edward himself divined it from the slightly excessive rigidity and backward slope of her lean finely-made head. The Air Force badge on her breast was like a lone star in a dark sky.

That was the time for pride, but dinner at the Savoy was the time for happiness. The crew of "B for Beer" looked young and handsome, and though she admitted to herself that among those young men one or two were better-looking than Edward, she was certain none was so lovable. It was clear to her that the crew felt this almost as intensely as she. They obviously had the utmost respect for his skill and courage as a pilot, though he was only twenty-one, and all but one of them were older than he. But they loved him; almost they could not take their eyes off him, as if he were some lovely girl, and heaven knows they were one and all girl-crazy young men. If some of the others were talking to each other, and he started talking, they unconsciously stopped, so as not to miss what he had to say. The sweetness of her boy had made the waiters his lap-dogs within a few minutes. She could see how the awareness of him spread like a warmth among the diners at neighboring tables, and then to tables further away.

There was a good deal to drink, and the cheeks of the young men became pink and their eyes bright and their hearts big with love. Above all they loved Edward, and of course they loved Miss Lemuel, their hostess, and the food, the wine, the waiters, the table-linen, everything but the people around them, whom they scarcely noticed. They were encamped on an island, washed round with warm seas, and Edward was their king, and Aunt Deborah their queen.

Then there were speeches. They insisted on speeches. The waiters somehow made their way across the surrounding wastes, bearing cigarettes and cigars and port and brandy. First there were speeches in honor of Aunt Deborah. Then to his immense embarrassment, there were speeches in honor of "Freckles," their Pilot, who had that day had a medal pinned on his chest. Then there were speeches in honor of "B for Beer," and it was while these were in progress that Vic Stokes, the bomb-aimer, one-time plumber's mate from Chamberwell, abstracted from Edward's pocket the little case that contained his medal, took out the medal and propped it up on the bottle before him. Then when the "B for Beer" speeches were concluded, Vic Stokes got on to his feet, and embarked on a speech in honor of the medal. Edward made a frantic lunge for the article, but it was removed from his reach. The speech continued, a rather drunken, a rather disrespectful, an entirely hilarious, performance.

By now the diners on the whole floor of the restaurant had given up any pretence of being interested in their own parties. From behind the furthest pillar, they joined in the merry-making, lifting up their glasses to those young men who had come down out of the sky and would shortly return again, especially that young officer, whose night it clearly was, for his was the medal that had been propped up against the wine-bottle. They toasted the old lady, too, who sat taking it all in, saying hardly a word, her eyes glowing. She was probably the grandmother of the young officer, judging from the fuss they made of her, and the way she hardly took her eyes off his face. She was too old to be his mother.

It was a jolly table. A pity the party was coming to an end,

with the waiter standing behind the Flying-Officer's shoulder, totting things up. How happy they had all been, hardly rowdy at all compared with the way young airmen sometimes are!

They had all been happy. The tension of their recent days and night was gone out of them. Love and pride and liquor were flowing sweetly in their veins. They had had the time of their brief doomed lives.

Goodbyes were said. Goodbye and thank you, Aunt Deborah, Aunt Deborah, Aunt Deborah. Goodbye, boys. I hope to see you all again, up on Skurr nan Gillian.

So Edward took his aunt back to the station hotel, where she would rest for a few hours till the morning train took her north again. He himself was going back to join his crew. The train for their bomber station was leaving in less than an hour.

"Goodbye, Edward," she said. "Until your next leave."

"Goodbye, Aunt! How kind you've been to us all!" He raised her hand to his lips. He would have preferred to throw his arms round her and hug her and kiss her. But he knew she was one who disliked a hearty expression of emotion, particularly on poignant occasions. Perhaps in this instance he was wrong. "Goodbye, Aunt!" he said again, and went off, and left her.

The night after the celebration in London, Edward Tourneur again piloted "B for Beer" to Berlin. But this time on the return journey he carried a cargo of dead and dying. The aircraft faithfully made its landing-field but even before it touched the ground, it was ablaze from nose to tail. The fire-crew by some doleful miracle rescued Edward still alive from the seething charnel-house. The rest of the crew were luckier.

Miss Lemuel did not dwell long on the details of the two years that followed. Apart from the actual ravaging of his flesh, Edward had suffered a degree of shock, which hitherto had proved fatal in all but two or three known instances. But he did not die within a few hours, or a few months, even. Under the circumstances, that would have proved a better thing, for during all those two years there was not a moment's respite from pain, for if the flesh ob-

tained narcotized peace at times, the nerves and the heart never knew it. It would have proved a better thing for Miss Lemuel, too, of course, apart from the permanent translation of her character produced by the ineffable protraction of her anguish; for there was no balm in knowing that the boy was alive, when his life, if it could be called a life, was merely a thin string upon which, like blood-red beads, were strung one operation, then another, then another, then another.

From the broken roaring plane they took him off to the nearest R.A.F. hospital with a burns center, which was at Ely. There in a dim dream stabbed with saw-toothed stilettos of pain, he passed through two months and more of the saline-bath treatment during which the burnt stuff was chopped away and a plan outlined of the grafting which would be necessary. Then they took him at last to "E.G.," as they called it, the Queen Victoria Hospital at East Grimstead, and installed him in Ward 3, headquarters of the "Guinea Pigs' Club," of which the sole necessary qualification was to have been burnt air crew of the R.A.F., ("the most exclusive club in the world," they said of it, "the club no one wants to belong to.") There he fought his fight so valiantly, with so heartbreaking an attempt at good humor; that even among the Guinea-pigs he was notable. The valor of the fight was matched only by the saint-like patience and almost supernatural skill of the surgeon, whom, with bated breath and eyes bright with veneration, his patients called the "Maestro," or the "Boss." By his side labored his anaesthetist, whom they called "John the Giant Killer" or the "Knocker-Out," and the "Boss's" other pair of hands, a noble and decorative young lady, acclaimed as "Jill" by these tortured mouths and the eyes that lit up to see that well-set fair hair approaching, that body smart and rhythmical as an actress.

So tough was Edward Tourneur's fight, that even the "Boss," by no means a sanguine man, was cheated into believing that the lad would emerge from hospital after all this, at all events seeing and hearing, to some extent using arms and hands, and moving with some ease from one point to the next. He would not be

Edward Tourneur to the outer eye, not only because most of the visible surfaces of his body were skin-graftings, but because the very form of face and body were not the same. But it was not with the outer eye that Miss Lemuel had looked upon Edward these eighteen years, or at least not only with the outer eye. She would have loved him as much had he been pale and lanky and hare-lipped, though she was happy for his sake he was pleasant to look at, for people pleasant to look at find life easier, on the whole.

For Skurr nan Gillian this was a curiously twilight period. It had perhaps never looked more beautiful, or as a farm, been run more successfully, than during the three years in which Edward had been away in the Air Force. If some of the country folk had had their old-fashioned doubts about her, either the folk had died or the doubts had died. You cannot go on believing a place has a curse upon it, when from year to year you see it like a fruit tree, putting forth leaf and blossom and fruit, each year more beautifully than the year before. The old dame was a cantankerous old lady, there was no denying that, sharp of tongue but often warm of heart. And what connection had the little English boy, the growing English lad, with dour old curses of ages long gone by? Did the old dame never go to church? Heaven help the day when we must think folk accursed because they are not church-goers! And when once the boy Edward down in his Sassenach school had got the habit of going to service in the school chapel, here he was in Glamaig too, and in Braemore Bridge, going to this service or that service from time to time, as his fancy pleased him, with his Aunt quite clearly never lifting a finger to say No to him. It is true the poor benighted lad had not much knowledge about the differences between the Free Kirk and Episcopalian and Roman Catholic, even. But then when had he had a parent to teach him? As for the old dame teaching him anything, some said she preferred Buddha and Brahma, the Chinese Gods, and Mary Baker Eddy, the American Christian Science Goddess, to Jesus Christ, so what chance had he had to

know the Truth? It looked that it wasn't the Truth he was really after, down at these assorted services. Sometimes it looked as if it was just something to do, while waiting to go off fishing or swimming with some of his pals. Sometimes it looked as if there was some wee girl he wanted to grin at. But always he liked to open his chest and let his voice go. It was a great pleasure for him to sing in company for only then could he follow the thin red line of a melody without deviating left or right, sharp or flat. Unsupported, it was only "Drink to me only" he was master of, and then only as far as "within the cup," beyond which the treading was most hazardous.

So during these three years they were as friendly with Miss Lemuel as Highland peasant folk can be with a foreigner in their midst. A curse on Skurr nan Gillian? With the things you heard about Berlin, and that red harlot, Rome, not to mention the prison-camps you read of in the papers—Dachau and Buchenwald and all those—there, you felt, was where curses were these days, not here above Glamaig, amid fine Scottish heather, and under tidy Scottish thatch.

Yes, despite all the fresh hardships added to the old ones, each year Skurr nan Gillian was bonnier than the year before. You might call it the auld buddie's war effort. But everyone knew she worked herself to the bone for the lad's sake, so that when he came back from it all, it would be a comfort and a pleasure to him, with joy every way he pointed his nose to the horizon's edge: the hills he loved to climb; the shooting of rabbit and hare, wood-pigeon and wild duck; the fishing of sea-fish and river-fish; the swimming in salt water and river water, and the high black tarns of the moor.

Then the boy came down out of the sky, burning. A telegram was sent her at once, which Donald the Police delivered in the dead of night. She took the first train south and reached Ely the next day. They took her in to his room at once, where he lay soaking in a large bath beyond a drawn curtain. Half an hour later they laid him upon his wheeled rubber bed, pulled aside the curtain, and brought him over to her, swathed in wrappings

like a Pharaoh's mummy. Only three holes stared out upon her, the black holes of the eyes, and the black hole of the mouth.

"Hello, Auntie Deborah!" his words came in an unsteady whistle. Exactly thus her name had been on his lips when she had first taken him.

"Hello, Edward!" she murmured. "Tough luck!" They did not let her stay long. She hung around in Ely for some weeks, then returned to Glamaig, but she was not there for more than a week or two, before she was on the train back again for London. (They had taken him to East Grimstead now.) So it was during the two years that followed, while the boy "got his chops," as they termed it: his endless operations. There was nothing at all she could do for him, except only to look after Skurr nan Gillian, in case some time he might return to it. So again and again she made that journey South, old and in anguish though she was, thinking no more of it than if it were a journey to Inverness; and came back again, this time to have a lawn put down, this time to plant fruit trees, or perhaps to buy a pedigreed bull, because he had whispered to her: why shouldn't we go in more for breeding cattle, Auntie, when I come home?

It was at this time that Miss Lemuel met Agnes, as fat then as now, but perhaps less daft. She was, in any event, simple—and that in itself commended her to Miss Lemuel. She questioned the girl, in the waiting room of the Agency where she found her. Agnes had been in domestic service in Dublin and in Liverpool, and more recently, in Blackheath. Now she wanted a change.

There was a reason, of course, and it was no time before Miss Lemuel got it out of her, with a good deal of boo-hooing from Agnes, and a handkerchief sopping with tears. She cried quite unrestrainedly, like a small child, and that, too, influenced Miss Lemuel in her favor.

The story was incoherent, but its essentials were simple. Agnes had been walking one dark night in Blackheath, when a big burly man came up to her and knocked her down. Whether or not that night she felt like being knocked down and did anything to stimulate such behavior Miss Lemuel did not enquire. It gave

Miss Lemuel the opportunity to take up a position in which she always found considerable satisfaction, and one which had cost her considerable sums in subscriptions and donations—the champion of female virtue rudely strumpeted. There were several elements which complicated the story. One day a week or two later, Agnes recognized the big burly man who had knocked her down, as a policeman, and that added a dimension of horror to the misadventure, as if the very prop of civilization had been pushed out from under her. She did not explain how she came to recognize him again, if it was so dark when he had knocked her down. An even more tortuous motive came to light, though Miss Lemuel had to use tact amounting to pressure to get it from her. The young woman sometimes found herself as violently wanting to go out on Blackheath in order to be knocked down as she was violently afraid of going, and for that same reason. Miss Lemuel smiled grimly. For the most part she despised men. Her companion of long ago, Miss Channing, had disliked them. The Irishwoman had developed a holy terror of them. All in all Agnes fitted in well in such company. She could have the bothy, the small stone cottage that stood below and away from the house, at Skurr nan Gillian.

"Very well, Miss Ryan . . . Agnes, you said the name was? I'll be pleased to take you on. We'll try it, Agnes, shall we?" she said, and smiled.

"Oh madam, madam, what can I do for you to show you how grateful I am?" She seized Miss Lemuel's hand to smother it with kisses. Miss Lemuel sharply withdrew it.

"You will help to look after my boy for me, Flying-Officer Tourneur, when he comes out of hospital!"

"Bless his heart, madam, I'll look after him as if he was my own little brother, Paddy, that died, God rest his soul! When shall I come, madam?"

"When are you free?"

"When I've given my lady a week's notus."

"That will do. Yes, yes, Agnes. That will do. You had better leave now."

"God bless you, madam, and your boy that's in hospital!"

"Goodbye. You had better go now."

She told Edward about Agnes, during one of his good spells. A good spell was a time when his misery, without benefit of narcotic, was less miserable than other times. He laughed. He made the curious chopped-off sound which she knew must be laughter, from her knowledge of the way his mind worked.

"I'll be looking forward to seeing her, Auntie." (It was always "Auntie" now. It was fewer syllables to say than "Aunt Deborah." Even through the distortive filter of broken teeth and ridged lips, the faint Scottish intonation was audible.)

But he was never to see Agnes, nor she him. Suddenly, capriciously, for no reason the doctors could determine, Edward died. He had been having one of those good spells. He was beginning to talk with some conviction about the time he would leave hospital. There would be a period of convalescence either somewhere in the South, or perhaps straight away up to Skurr nan Gillian, which he had talked of so often in his delirium. Miss Lemuel was showing concern about his transport, and wondering whether the authorities would allow her to hire for him the most luxurious ambulance that was available. She was bending all her fierce energies towards making good the neglect which had befallen Skurr nan Gillian during these two years. And then he died. And darkness fell upon Miss Lemuel. She had not yet emerged from it—if she would ever emerge. . . .

She did not have his body brought back to Skurr nan Gillian, for she was as radical in some ways as she was conservative in others. She thought the idea of the exhumation of bodies indecent, and asked that Edward's body be cremated, as her own would be in its time.

Besides, Skurr nan Gillian would not recognize its young master, he was so unlike himself after those endless operations.

CHAPTER 5

It was early September, but it had been more like March all day, with sudden squalls, the clouds bustling pellmell out of the sky, the sun shining quick and hot, as if determined to have a look-in while it still had the chance. Then once more the clouds were back in the sky again and the rain was tearing down. Miss Lemuel and her helpers had been in and out all day between the fences and the hay-shed getting the hay in. Jim had been indoors all day, doing various small jobs that needed to be done. Miss Lemuel would not have him outdoors in weather like this, where he would be liable to get soaked to the skin, then a moment later start steaming like a cauldron in the suck of the sun.

Agnes was out in the hayshed, lending a hand. She was a farm-laborer's daughter and as good as two men. Jim knew that Miss Lemuel would like him to get the tea ready for herself and him. Agnes would brew a pot of black Irish tea for the others. Blue sky had been visible five minutes ago. Now the rain was streaming down the windows like sheets, where the wind flung it in great fistfuls.

Miss Lemuel would be in any moment now. He toasted the crumpets. It was odd how very English things were in some ways here in the croft. The crumpets were just like those Sal might buy for Sunday tea at the baker's shop just before you turn the corner into Territon Street. Miss Lemuel had made the crumpets herself, of course. Jim buttered them, and covered them over in the silver muffin-dish.

"It's funny," Jim told himself, "here's me making tea up in the wilds of Northern Scotland for an old dame, just as I sometimes make it for Sal on a Sunday afternoon, and she's feeling a bit off color, and I say: Sal, don't you bother to get up. I'll make the tea. And Dickie'll toast the crumpets, won't you Dickie? Funny? Not half it ain't!"

He went into the scullery and got out the pot of strawberry jam, and was proceeding back into the kitchen when he remembered the pot of honey. Yes, of course. Edward always liked honey on his crumpets. He got out the honey, came into the kitchen and put down the honey-pot on to the table, which, as usual, was laid for three. His eye was quick to notice small details out of gear. At Miss Lemuel's place, there was no spoon in the saucer. It was Edward who did not like sugar in tea, not Miss Lemuel. He moved the spoon from one saucer to another.

Then the fantasy got hold of him, as it did now and again; not often nowadays, but still once every week or ten days. It did not so much get hold of him as kick him in the knee, like a horse.

"Funny, I said? Funny? I don't make tea for just a living woman, but for a dead bloke, too! Honey for the ghost! So matter of fact, like, just as if I was totting up my paper-accounts in the evening. Have I gone altogether balmy?" He stopped with one hand on the table, on his way back to the kettle, which was boiling now. He considered the question, as he had done before. And gave himself the same answer.

"No, boy. It's a game she's playing with herself, and it's all she's got to do. Now she's brought me into it. It's a game, like playing trains with Dickie. So I've got to play, too, or clear out.

"I don't want to clear out. I'm feeling fine here. Another two or three months, Dickie, and it'll be trains again."

He heard the door of the porch open. She stood outside there a few moments, taking off her gum-boots, and shaking the rain out of her mackintosh and sou'-wester. Then she opened the kitchen-door and came in.

"Well done, Gunning!" she said, surveying his work. He was

filling the teapot from the kettle and was stirring the tea. "I'm famished! Honey, too! What a nice young man you are!"

She sat down at her chair. He came up behind her and poured the tea into her cup. He remembered she liked milk in after, not before. She put out her hand patted his back.

"You remember everything!" she murmured. That was enough praise and sweetness all round for the time being. He brought the hot buttered crumpets over from the hearth. The rest of the tea was on the table. He sat down and filled his own cup. He did not fill Edward's cup, because he might turn up late, and the tea would be cold. Or he might not turn up that day, at all.

After tea, she washed up the tea-things. She was always anxious that he should not feel his status to be that of a domestic servant. He was sitting down in an easy-chair which had been brought downstairs specially for him. It was over against the book-shelf. She took her place opposite him, with Edward's chair between.

He was reading last Sunday's papers, the more popular ones. The news was out-of-date, but there was a good deal of easy reading in them, the sports, the murders, and so on. As she sat down he raised his head and addressed her.

"Oh, by the way, Miss Lemuel," he said. "I met Reverend Merrilees last night on the Strath Groban road."

"Yes?" She did not raise her head. He only just heard her voice above the thudding of the rain.

"He'd been to see some people called Soutar. Their big girl's been ill. He said she'd been dying."

"Yes, I heard. She's all right now, isn't she?"

"That's what he was talking to me about."

"Really? I don't see why he should think it would interest you?" There was a slight note of irritation in her voice.

"He's a good talker," said Jim. "He's got a voice like a . . . like one of those big flutes in an orchestra."

"Yes. These Scottish ministers know what to do with their voices."

"You know what he said to me?"

"I can guess." There was a curl of derision on her lips.

She was being a bit haughty about all this, but he had started so he might as well go on.

"The Soutar girl had pneumonia, and she was practically out. And he said he prayed for her. He got the whole congregation to pray, too."

"So she got better?"

"That's what he said."

"He didn't mention she has a constitution like a cart-horse?"

"No, he didn't. But I don't think that matters. I've seen big stout chaps go out with pneumonia, like blowing out a match."

"What was he telling you all this for?"

"He asked me was I a Christian."

"Yes?"

"I said I didn't know. I was, and I wasn't. I said my small boy is. He's been baptized. I think I've been baptized, too, but I'm not sure."

"I think it's insolence!"

"It's his job, Miss Lemuel. Like mine used to be doing my rounds."

"What else did he say?"

"He asked me did I ever pray."

"What for? Aren't you comfortable here?"

"Of course they all know about my T.B. That little hemorrhage in my handkerchief; you can't get away from a thing like that."

"But there hasn't been any more, has there?"

"Only just a spot of color once or twice."

"That might be the throat, it might be anything. You are feeling better, aren't you? Of course you are. You look a great deal better. You can do lots more work without getting tired. At least you try to, the moment my back is turned."

"You know how it is sometimes. You get a little cheesed off. I suppose it's partly being away from my wife and boy all this time. It feels like they're a thousand miles off. This rain makes you feel a bit blue, too."

"You won't be impatient, Gunning, you've promised me. As

soon as you're really fit you know . . ." She left the sentence and the thought undetermined.

"Miss Lemuel!" he said suddenly.

"Yes?"

"I mean . . . if you don't mind," he said lamely.

"You want to ask me something?" He was not aware how closely she scrutinized him through slits of eyes.

"Yes, please."

"When your Edward was very ill—" he started.

"Yes?"

"Are you an atheist, or something? If you don't mind me asking?"

"Is that what they tell you, that I'm an atheist? Because they've seen me clearing a field of weeds on the holy Sabbath?"

"No, Miss Lemuel. You know what they think of you. I wasn't thinking of what *they* think at all. I was thinking of Edward and you and all that long time he was ill."

"What do you wish to ask me, Gunning?"

"It went on so long and so long, and the doctors were doing all they could . . . did you sometimes feel . . . did you sometimes feel like *praying* that he should come out all right?" The sweat was pouring down his cheeks in his embarrassment.

"I did, Gunning, I did."

"Well?" He looked at her quite piteously.

"Do you remember I told you they were beginning to be quite hopeful about him?"

"Yes!"

"I thought that that was God"—there was a slight pause there as the lips shut close and opened again—"that was God answering my prayers."

"And then he had to die," Jim murmured.

"Yes. He wasn't big enough for the job. God, I'm talking of."

"What do you mean, Miss Lemuel?" He felt the skin at the back of his neck contract.

"You know how long the boy suffered? You know how long I

suffered? You don't know, I can't tell you, how I prayed for his recovery. Can't you understand, then?"

"Understand what, Miss Lemuel?" His eyes were glazed with fear.

"It seemed to me there'd been a fight between God and the Devil . . . and the Devil had won."

"Oh, *please!*" He covered his eyes.

"You must forgive me, Gunning. *I* haven't raised the question. And you'll remember, won't you, the deadly, deadly despair I fell into?"

"It isn't that, Miss Lemuel, that's turning me over."

"What is it? I think, if you can, you'd better tell me."

He was silent for some time, his hands still before his eyes. She could see his mouth working away. He did not at that moment look much like the tough boxer from Holloway. At last he spoke again.

"You remember that day we first met?"

"Yes."

"It's funny," he said.

She waited. He was silent so long this time that she prompted him very quietly. "Yes?"

"I was thinking that what you said you was thinking, you know, about God, and the Devil, and the Devil being stronger than God, it was just what I was thinking, what with there being a war like this one. And then this illness picks on me, I don't know why. What have I done to deserve it? What has anybody done to deserve it? Then the MacGregors push me out, and the others shut the doors in my face. It seemed all wrong, it seemed the Devil's the one that manages things.

"That's how I felt that day. Of course I've never said anything about it, to you or to anybody. I couldn't even talk about a thing like that to Sal—she'd think I had a screw loose. I've been ashamed ever since then. Why, in ten minutes, there was you. You turned up and everything was different. You know, I don't talk much, but I do hope you understand, Miss Lemuel, how grateful I am to you. And so is my Sal, let me tell you. She doesn't know your name or

where you are, but I don't suppose a day goes by without her blessing you."

"We are both lucky," she told him, "you and I. I hope you don't mind when I say that I think of you as a friend, and I want you always to think of me in the same way."

He was not listening to her. He was following his own train of thought.

"After all, you've got to grin and bear it. A bloke didn't ask for it when he was torpedoed and out for weeks and weeks in the ocean. Did he?"

"No," she admitted.

"You've got to do what you can to help yourself. Sometimes it helps, and sometimes it doesn't."

"But, of course, that's exactly what you're doing here, at Skurr nan Gillian," she murmured.

"No," he said. "The Reverend Merrilees said No. He said have you tried praying? And I said No, of course not, why should I? Did I ask to get T.B.? Did I ask to leave my wife and kid? But he talked and talked. He talked so beautifully it brought a lump to your throat. There wasn't anything you could do about it but do what he said. So when he got down on his knees, in the damp long grass there by the river, he said: Won't you get down, too, so I got down, too. And he prayed. He must have prayed for a whole hour, at least, and there was tears streaming down his face. And he said Aren't you praying, too? So I tried to pray. I tried to pray," he repeated lamely.

"Did you feel it doing you any good?" she asked him quietly. "Any sort of good, your body or your soul? As for your body, I'm not so sure . . . that damp grass—"

"I felt silly," he said. "Just like at the sanatorium. There was a bloke there reading from the Bible all the time. The other blokes thought it a big joke, but I always felt shy. It was just like that with this Mr. Merrilees. I had to tell him so, too. He seemed to have the idea I wasn't with him, so he asked me what I was thinking about. I felt silly, I said, sort of embarrassed. And then he got up from his knees, and took out his handkerchief, and wiped his

tears away. I suppose prayer's like a foreign language to you, he said. He sounded awfully browned off; not browned off, just sad. You can't talk the language of prayer perfectly straight away, he said. So he asked me wouldn't I like to come to his services some time. I said I don't know. I can't do anything unless I feel inside I've got to. Then he stood there a bit, shaking his head. He looked so miserable, I felt a swine. But there it was. What could I do? And then as he was going off he said one more thing."

"Yes? And what was that?"

"It was the same thing over again, but coming from him it sounded a bit different, and educated like."

"He warned you against me?"

"Yes."

"What did you do?"

"I said that was my business."

She was obviously too deeply angered to betray her emotion by word or gesture. She was dead silent for some time, then she spoke:

"Oh look, the rain's stopped! Will you just go out and give a shout for Agnes. I'd like her to bake some of her Irish bread for tomorrow. I don't think we ought to eat it fresh."

There were one or two metaphysical discussions about this time between Jim and Miss Lemuel. They could hardly be called discussions, of course. Rather they were expositions of Miss Lemuel's philosophy, if philosophy is the right word.

Now did Miss Lemuel believe in Heaven and Hell? Obviously she believed in a life after death, because she admitted Edward had died, yet she was quite certain he was alive, too. She laid a place for him at table for every meal, and she still kept Edward's chair for Edward, though she had long since put out a third easy-chair for Jim to relax in, after the day's work. What part of Edward was alive, then? Obviously it was not his body. That had been nearly burned to a cinder, and though it had managed to keep going for a couple of years, at last it had come to bits, and been cremated, down in Croydon. If it wasn't his body, what was

it? His soul? If Miss Lemuel believed in a soul, did she believe in a Heaven and Hell, too?

These were all odd thoughts for an ex-boxer, ex-soldier, to be concerned with, till not long ago a newspaper roundsman. But things were not the same now as they had been a year ago. Skurr nan Gillian was not the same as Territon Street.

To tell the truth he had himself always been rather a sceptic about Hell and Heaven. All that stuff didn't seem to make sense, somehow. If you were good, you went to Heaven, where you sat about in damp clouds playing a harp and getting piles for ever and ever. If you were bad, you went to Hell, and there you lay stretched out on grids, frying, like rashers of bacon. He realized all that was probably only a way of putting it, like. But even so, if there *was* a soul, the soul must go *somewhere* after you're dead.

What was going on with this bloke, Edward? If he was only hanging around here like Miss Lemuel said, was he in Heaven or Hell, or where was he? Jim remembered the Catholics had a third place where souls could go to. What was the name of it? Purgatory. Yes. That's what they called it. Purgatory. But was that a place where only Catholic souls went to? That seemed cockeyed, somehow, when you're dead and pushing up daisies, it oughtn't to make much difference whether you were a Catholic or a Protestant or a Mohammedan or what you were.

It was all extremely puzzling. But Miss Lemuel had an explanation for it. She had thought it all out.

"I'll try and explain my views to you, Gunning. I'm glad you're so interested. I'll put it in language as simple as possible. Will you stop me if I get out of your depth?"

"Yes, Miss Lemuel."

"Very well then. I go back to the beginning. I believe there are two eternal Persons or Powers, in eternal conflict with each other. It's an old old idea. People have had this idea since they started thinking about these things. These Persons are usually called God and the Devil. The abstract names for them are Good and Evil. You know what I mean by abstract? Good. But I think it's too simple to think of them as just Good and Evil. Neither is wholly

good in our sense of the word, neither is wholly evil. Do you follow me? Shall I go on?"

"Please!"

"Between them is conflict and they are conflict. That is how poetry and music and all arts are formed. Out of conflict, out of both God and Devil. Without conflict, everything would cave in like a handful of sand." She hardly seemed to be talking to him now. She seemed to be re-establishing in her mind her own elucidations. "How God and the Devil began, and how they'll end is beyond all speculation. All I know is they *are*. They *are*, and in perpetual conflict. The human animal arose out of their conflict, a creature endowed with enough energy to last it out roughly for a span of threescore years and ten.

"The human animal, Gunning, is a sort of mechanism, but a mechanism of the higher and the subtler sort. The baser mechanisms which are all that we humans have so far managed to evolve are more steel and iron activated by blind steam or blind petrol. Starve them of their motive power and they are already practically dead. Separate or smash up their parts and they are quite dead. They're junk. There's nothing left of them.

"But it's not like that with us human creatures, Gunning, with you and me and Edward and Agnes and your wife. There's not only bone and flesh and brain and blood in us: a combination of chemical elements. There are subtler forces, subtle and strong enough to persist after the body's been destroyed. You can call it the Soul, if you like. But that would be a stupid word. The Soul-merchants, the theologians, the clergymen, would tell you the Soul is immortal. That's nonsense! There is no immortality. There is neither Hell and Heaven to be immortal in. Only God and the Devil are immortal."

"But, Miss Lemuel, I don't understand. What about . . . if you don't mind . . . what about Edward, then?" He looked round as if Edward himself might be on hand to answer the question.

"You may call him a ghost, if you like. Let's not be afraid of words. Edward was cut off in the prime of his days. He's what was left of him, what was still unexhausted. He had energy and

wisdom and love. With his wisdom and his energy he has come back again. He's come back to the things he loved, because he loved them so intensely. I reach my hand out to him, but it is hard for him to take it. We shall find a bridge."

"How do you mean a bridge, Miss Lemuel?"

"You will help us some day, I hope."

"I don't see what help I can be, Miss Lemuel. Honest, I don't. I'm just a working-class bloke. It's beyond me, all this. Besides, I'm going off to my own home, you know, when I'm all right."

"Of course," she said. "Of course."

"How long is he going to hang about here, Miss Lemuel, if you don't mind me putting it like that?"

"Till what was left unexhausted becomes exhausted. Then he will die."

Jim Gunning shook his head.

"It's strange, what you're saying. It's very strange. Will you be a ghost, too, Miss Lemuel? I hope you don't mind me asking."

She smiled.

"Very little of me," she said, "is left unexhausted. When I die, there won't be much left of me beyond my bones."

"Supposing you die when Edward's still up here?"

"I don't know. I think he'd not be interested in staying any longer. You'd be free, Gunning."

"What do you mean I'd be free, Miss Lemuel? What's all this got to do with me?"

"Did I say you'd be free? Oh forgive me, Gunning. You *are* free, aren't you? You're perfectly free."

"Of course I am. I don't know what you're talking about. Free!" he rambled on. What's the matter with her, he asked himself. Does she think she's bought me?

It began to be really important to Jim that he should attend a Sunday morning service at Reverend Merrilees's Parish Kirk at Glamaig. It was not that he believed praying in public with the villagers was going to do him personally any more good than the private service he had had, all to himself, by the river. Certainly he had a feeling that he owed something to the Reverend Mer-

rilees, who had prayed his throat sore over him, and turning up at their services always makes clergymen feel good, he knew that.

But the real reason had very little to do with the Reverend Merrilees. It had a lot to do with Miss Lemuel. He liked her a good deal. She was in so many ways a wonderful woman. She had guts. They didn't like her round here, some of them said the most shocking things about her—damn silly, but shocking. But did she let them beat her? Not her! Then he was very grateful to her. He was sure she was getting it down, this lung business inside him. Just now and again, a cough or a bit of a sweat came up out of nowhere and drew him up short. But not very often, less and less all the time. To whom did he owe that but to Miss Lemuel? Oh yes, he was grateful to her, right enough. But that didn't prevent him from feeling real sorry for her. It sounded a bit soppy, but there it was. He was sorry for her. Whether she was a bit crazy, or quite sane, he was sorry for her. That was one thing, however, he couldn't allow. She was his boss, but it was very like having a boss in any other job. She didn't own his soul. She mustn't get ideas like that into her head. He knew she strongly disliked the idea of his having anything to do with churches and clergymen. That might be partly because of the things people were likely to say to him about her. But they said things anyway. When they started off on that track, he just didn't listen. He let them talk. Then they stopped. Funny people, these Highlanders.

No, she didn't like religion, she didn't want to have anything to do with it. He didn't go much for religion himself, but he damn well would if he felt like it!

So just to show her how he felt, he told her a week or two later he was going to the next Sunday morning service at Glamaig. She was very nice and ordinary about it, she quite took his breath away.

"You must do so, by all means," she said, "if you think it will give you pleasure."

"It's not a matter of *pleasure*," he said, uncomfortably. She had rather taken the wind out of his sails. "For pleasure I'd rather read the sporting columns in the Sunday papers. Or go on with that wooden truck I'm making for my Dickie."

"Well, if you feel it will do you *good*, so much the better."

"Thank you, Miss Lemuel," he said, rather lamely, as if, after all, she *was* doing him a favor in not kicking up any fuss.

"You're back early, Gunning," she said, after his return.

"Yes, the Stewarts from the croft beyond Ben Voith offered me a lift. They took my bicycle, too."

"You didn't try riding home up the hill?" she adjured him.

"No. I took it steady. But I feel fine."

"Oh," she said, and went back to the fruit stewing on the fire.

That was a rather short Oh, he told himself. I hope she don't think I was digging at her. He didn't mean he felt fine because the service had worked wonders. No. Not that. It was just Skurr nan Gillian that had worked wonders. But he couldn't go on explaining all that. He'd have to leave it.

"The Stewarts said they're doing up Ben Voith inside out," he observed. "They say a rich woman from London is taking it on."

"That's what they're always saying. The wish is father to the thought. They think poaching is easier when a woman takes a place over. The Stewarts will be pleased."

The Stewarts had been kind to him. He would not pursue that subject, either.

"Anything I can do?" he asked. The table was already laid.

"You can mix yourself a gin and grapefruit. Mix me a little one, too. Unless you don't think it unholy, on the Sabbath." She was smiling easily. She hadn't taken anything amiss.

"You mustn't pull my leg, Miss Lemuel," he requested her. He went over to the oak dresser where the drinks were, and mixed them. "Smells good," he added.

"A roast," she told him. "You like roast parsnips, and you've got them. So I insisted on creamed spinach for myself."

"You're welcome. Here's yours, Miss Lemuel. Cheerio."

"Good luck." She sipped her drink in small drops, like a bird at a saucer, savoring the stuff, and throwing her head back. Then she went on with the last stages of the meal. He realized she

wasn't going to mention the service, or anything to do with it. If neither of them said a word about it, it was going to be between them, all a bit silly and awkward. And it was all just nothing, really, as far as he was concerned. It was like Church Parade in the army. Though not for the congregation, of course. They prayed and sang as if it was a field day.

"It was all right," he said. "I quite enjoyed it. A bit of a change, like."

"The service? Oh, of course. I'm glad you enjoyed it." She turned from the fire. "Mr. Merrilees didn't warn you against me from the pulpit, did he?" She spoke quite lightly.

He was shocked at the suggestion.

"Oh, Miss Lemuel, certainly not!"

"You remember, he did it in private when you last met? To do it in public would be logically the next step. He certainly would have done it a century ago. Or a century and a half."

He felt he was blushing to the ears. How this old woman could make him feel a mug when she felt like it. A good thing she didn't often feel like it.

"Was there some pleasant gossip after the service?" Miss Lemuel continued. "That's when the choicest titbits are relayed."

"I don't know. I didn't stay. I went back with the Stewarts, like I told you."

"Did you stop to have an ice-cream wafer at that little general shop beyond the War Memorial at Glen Tussach? The mother of the woman who keeps that shop has sworn on her Bible that she's seen me riding across the sky in a sieve. Did you hear that? Do you remember when Willie MacCullough's cow died three or four weeks ago? They said I threw the evil eye on it, because MacCullough wouldn't come and lend us a hand with a scythe. It might interest you to know that an old crofter, who had a few yards of croft a mile up the Spinner's Burn, and died only a year ago, had a musket loaded with silver shot to shoot at a hare whenever he saw one. If he hit it, it would have become me. That would have proved something; that I was a witch, or the hare was a witch, or we were both witches, I'm not sure. One more thing. Do you see

this here?" She pointed to the wart beside her nose. "They say that's where I suckle my cats, who are my familiar spirits: 'the Devil's Nip,' they call it. The Old Gentleman made it with his teeth, or his claws, maybe. It can't bleed or hurt if you prick it."

"I know all this, Miss Lemuel, or a lot of it. It's not new to me, and it's horrible. The day I first came they told me there was a curse on the place. Then you told me yourself later on. But it's never worried me. Why are you bringing all this up again?"

"My dear boy, we had to have it out some time. I didn't think you were in quite a fit condition when you came to hear it all. I wanted to give you time to get on your feet."

"They're funny people, I know they are. But they've been talking like this for years. It's been worse lately, I think, since the War."

"That's the way people like these have talked about old women since Time began. And not only old women, either. Sometimes they've been young and beautiful, not a plain old crosspatch like me. But the things the witches do remain the same, the way they get about . . . sieves, broomsticks. I'd have thought they would have been a bit more—what is the word?—*streamlined*, these days. They should have been jet-propelled, or perched on the war-head of a rocket-bomb."

"But, *Miss Lemuel*!" . . . he did not dare to put his thoughts into words . . . *"Miss Lemuel!"* She saw the way his eyes moved to the table and the three places laid there, then moved quickly back again.

"Edward!" she said shortly. "We've had all that out before! We won't go into it again!"

"No," he said lamely. "But I suppose . . . it's got something to do . . . with the way they carry on."

"We'll have our lunch, Gunning. The roast will be quite cold." She went over to the oil-stove in the kitchen and took out the roast and the vegetables. She thrust away with her knife and fork. Jim thrust away with his knife and fork. The knife and fork of Edward remained impassive beside his plate. They finished their meal.

"Listen, Gunning!" she said. "They'll have talked about Edward's hut. Haven't they? Please answer me. Haven't they?"

"Of course they have, Miss Lemuel!"

"I'm not going to ask you what they've said about it. But I'd imagine there's a globe there, and a skull or two, and a big crystal, and mixtures in test-tubes, and big moth-eaten volumes, and the liver of a blaspheming Jew . . ."

"What?" he screwed up his eye.

"It's in Shakespeare," she reassured him. "Take your sugar."

"Thank you."

"You're going to see for yourself."

"When?"

"Now. Why not. There's not much to do. It's Sunday."

"I'd rather you didn't, if you don't want to. I quite understand, Miss Lemuel. I've understood the whole time."

"We haven't any astrolabes for you, or viper's fangs. I'm afraid practically the only thing out of that list we've got is those big moth-eaten volumes. Edward had been collecting all sorts of odd books since he was quite a boy. I let him go his own way with his reading, of course. When the book-parcels came, they went unopened to his own hut. Naturally, I've been very interested in them since . . . since Edward died."

"Miss Lemuel. If you want me to go in, of course I will. But why do you suddenly—"

"Oh it's all right," she smiled. "Edward let me know he'd like you to go in."

Again the heaviness and the unease fell upon him. She was so queer. You never knew where she was. One moment she was as sensible and ordinary as the old woman, Sal's mother. The next she was . . . well, queer.

So they went in. He was glad that she had at last, like you might say, pulled the curtain aside. He had known that some of the mad things some of the folk round about had said about Edward's hut was sort of Boris Karloff nonsense. But it was nice to have it in black and white. He followed her across the lawn, and she turned the handle of Edward's door. The door opened.

"So it's never locked," he said. He had turned the handle and found the door unlocked the very first night he was at Skurr nan Gillian. He had never tried since.

"No," she smiled, pausing on the threshold. "Never. No door here is ever locked."

"The folk round here said the hut was locked night and day."

"There's no need to lock the hut. They'd keep out even if there was a pearl necklace lying in the middle of the floor. Come in, won't you?" He followed her in. There was nothing in any way fabulous about the hut. There was a divan-bed along the wall facing the door, with a motley moorish saddlecloth drawn over it for counterpane. Under the window facing north down to the valley and the estuary was a big table, littered with books, papers, ash-trays, pencils, ink-bottles, and so on. There was a pipe-rack just under the window, and three or four pipes, and a twenty-packet of cigarettes close by. In one corner was a butterfly net and a bow, with a fishing rod in its canvas case and a case of arrows close by. There was also a sporting-gun in a baize case. There were one or two glass cases and cabinets with butterflies, fishing-flies, bird's eggs. There was just room among the piles of books on the floor for a low easy chair. Books were not only on the floor, but in the three chairs, and ranged on book-shelves along the wall. There were a few group photographs of Edward on the wall above the books: Edward in black shirt among the footballers, Edward in white shirt among the harriers, Edward a non-commissioned airman in a station group, a photograph of Edward and his crew on a long strip of lawn in what was evidently a town garden, judging from the large block of flats which made the background of the picture. There was a small silvered statuette of a boxer, doubtless a prize in some amateur boxing tourney. Edward was once seen as an actor, in a round-striped school cap and Eton suit, being the inane small boy in the unperishing music-hall sketch called "Motoring." There was the framed wire after the *Uncle Tom's Cabin* episode; the framed letter.

There was no air of the dedicated chapel about the hut, such

as was almost overwhelming in two of the rooms in the house—the kitchen, and Miss Lemuel's bedroom. Andy Creich had been quite right, at least in one respect. The place looked almost as if Edward Tourneur might have stepped out of it that very day. But Andy had added a blood-curdling observation to the effect that: "What goes on there is naebody's business." He was by no means the only person who made insinuations along that line. Jim had been told to look out for a sort of altar, where Miss Lemuel sacrificed goats in a ceremonial called the "Black Mass." Well, it would have been a hard job to get goats to Skurr nan Gillian without him knowing about it. It would have been a hard job to slit their throats without him hearing a bit of hollering out. He didn't see no altars, no blood-stains. They were all loopy.

"Listen to this!" he heard Miss Lemuel say. "Isn't it beautiful? Are you listening?" She had a book in her hand.

"What?"

"I told you Edward was a poet. It's quite likely he was a great poet. He certainly would have been if he had been spared." Her eyes were shining with love and pride like a mother who sees her little girl dressed up as a fairy with a wand, about to do a solo dance in a church hall concert.

"Yes," said Jim. "You told me."

"He was the laureate of this landscape," she said. "Here's a poem he wrote in the end-page of Montague Summers."

"Who?"

"I don't think you'd know. Edward often used to write poems in the blank end-pages of books. Listen! Are you listening?"

"Yes."

She pushed her spectacles up on her forehead.

"It's called: *Pontimar*. He meant Carn Gorm, I think." She pointed in the direction of the mountain that hung over the landscape westward. She began reading:

No hill like Pontimar for mightiness!
Nowhere such tides of all the grandeurs dress
A hill like Pontimar at dawning-time.

Proud Pontimar stands as a misted bard.
Him serried rocks and ranks of thunder guard;
Round his dread knees the crested lightning climb.

Those viewless birds of deathly meaning slide
About his upright head in a swift tide.
No man shall see them or he dies at noon.

She stopped and sighed.

" 'No man shall see them,' " she repeated, " 'or he dies at noon.' It was well before noon he died." She went on reading. There were several more verses. She stopped, and remained silent for a little time.

"Miltonic," she whispered at length. "What poetry! What imagery!"

Jim said nothing, for he held himself to be no expert on the subject. He did not, as he himself phrased it, go a bundle on it. As far as he remembered, poetry was all about old Kaspar's work was done and on Linden when the sun was low. This Pontimar stuff seemed like just a lot of words to him, but what did he know? He was out of his depth.

Miss Lemuel put her glasses back into her case, and placed the book back on the table where she had found it. She shrugged her shoulders. You might as well read Edward's poetry to Hunish.

There were a great number of books around the place, some large and moth-eaten at the corners. Very old fashioned they looked. There was one lying open on the small table by the divan. He went up to look at it, anticipating no objection from Miss Lemuel, and there was none. It was in some foreign language, he thought perhaps French or Latin, because the letters were the same as in English. One of the pages was all funny pictures, like a sun with wings to it, and a crested fish in the water, and a goat with wings and human hands with a crescent moon behind; and on the other page was a lot of drawings, triangles and double triangles, and circles with crosses inside and outside, and a list of names in big capital letters. Asmoday, he read, Gaap, Marchosias, Bifrons.

He looked up at her, puzzled.

"Looks like a lot of old junk to me," he said tentatively. He did not know what her attitude to it all might be.

"In a sense you're quite right," she admitted. He was reassured.

"Like a sort of kid's game," he went on. "Like hopscotch. Did Edward used to play it?"

"I don't know," she said quietly. "I don't know. He was very fond of catching butterflies," she observed, perhaps trying to divert his attention. "That's his butterfly-cabinet. He was very fond of that rod, too."

"All these here books," he insisted. "He was well educated. You are too, of course, Miss Lemuel."

"Ah well," she murmured. "I suppose I've gone on where he left off. There's so much less to do in the winter months at Skurr nan Gillian than at other times. We'll go now . . . if you're satisfied."

"Satisfied?" he blushed and went on. She shut the door behind them.

"Now you can tell them," she smiled. "No dried lizards? No mandrake-roots?"

"No." He didn't know what mandrake-roots were, but he hadn't seen any roots, or anything.

"No toads' brains? No pouch of civet-cats?"

"No!"

"Ha! Ha! Ha!" she suddenly laughed aloud. He did not remember ever hearing her laugh aloud before. She was in good shape. Further down the lawn Agnes gloomed, with her black hair lying all over her face. She seemed angry that her mistress had deprived her of the duty she appreciated more than any . . . she was no longer Wardress of the Magic Cave. The Magic Cave lay open now like a nursery school-room.

For Jim Gunning, at least. Agnes thrust her lower lip out, and shook her fist at him, when she thought Miss Lemuel was not looking.

"Bah!" she mouthed. "Bah!"

The following letter went from Jim Gunning to his wife, a week or two weeks later.

"*DEAR Sal,*

"I hope you are well as it leaves me at present. Good old Tosher Davies; he doesn't half earn his ten bob a month doing his stuff. Your last letter made me feel so happy. It was the proper thing to do, telling them all the exact truth, without saying names and places which you can't because how can you. They must all think me balmy, but anyhow none of them thinks I am sniffing around with another woman. I never been that sort of a chap, but things get hold of people sometimes, but now they can't think anything like that.

"I had a bit of a cold last week, and the old dame looked after me like I was her own son. I better not say son, I better say nephew, because nobody could love their son so much as she loved that kid in the Air Force. I was a bit restless like, at night, don't get anything into your head it wasn't anything of the other. It was just one of my good old colds like I get when winter's coming on, and it isn't half cold at nights, excepting I have lots of blankets and hot-water-bottles. What a job you'll have looking after me when I get home, I'm that spoiled. So in the evening she would come upstairs and sit by my bed, and just talk to me, and as I've told you there's only one thing she talks about and that's that chap. Sometimes she just reads to me books what he used to read, his favorite books like, I don't get the hang of them at all, poetry and philosophy and all that. Then she goes over to his hut, I can hear her from my window, it's over on my side of the house. I told you about it, didn't I in another letter, how nobody has been in there since Edward left it to join the Air Force. Poor old dame, it's really sad, wanting to keep everything just like it was, like Mrs. Dodson, do you remember, with the blue ribbon and the lock of hair and the broken rattle of her little girl who was done in by that flying bomb in Salterton Street. I never wanted to poke my nose in, though some of the people here have some rum ideas about

it, like that Krazy Kavern in the White City where you and I laughed so much.

"But a week or two ago Miss Lemuel let me go in, and what was there, a lot of sporting-things, like a gun, and a fishing-rod, and all that, and a big bow and arrow, young Dickie wouldn't half go a bundle on that. And above all, there was a lot of books. Some of them aren't half old-fashioned books, with funny drawings and patterns like in geometry, and funny names. On thinking it over, I think the bloke must have been a free-mason or something. So she came up and sat beside my bed, that was the first time, though she's often read to me in the evenings till late at night, and I've fallen asleep in my chair, but she doesn't mind that at all, the poor old thing, so long as there's somebody there who'll let her talk on and on and on about her Edward. I suppose Agnes, that's the woman help, would have listened till the cows come home, if Miss Lemuel wanted to have her in. I asked Miss Lemuel once, but she said Agnes wasn't the same thing. She's a bit wanting like, and she isn't another young fellow like Edward like I am. So sometimes I've got up suddenly in that chair, and there she is talking away or reading, reading. It don't matter so long as I'm there.

"So there she was up in my room, she didn't seem to want to go to bed, and she knew she wasn't disturbing me. If I want to sleep, I sleep. Do you know, Sal, did I ever tell you of that bloke, Dawkins, we had in Lowestoft? He was really an author, he shouldn't have been just a private. He talked posh and was at Oxford or Cambridge or somewhere, and he said he was living among us blokes, and wasn't going to try for a commission, and one day he said I was the sort of bloke he wanted to write his book about, not gangsters or artists or all that lark. I said he was balmy, and he said he wasn't, and that was that. Well, you know Sal if I was an author like that Dawkins I would write a book about poor old Edward. Honestly I know as much about him as he ever knew himself. That's what it feels like. I think I know him better than I know myself, but does any one really know themselves? I wonder.

"Oh lord, here's me just scribbling away and scribbling away, like I was some schoolgirl. It's not really like me at all. But it's funny out here, with the wind blowing, and the noise of the pine-trees, and sometimes you think it is the sea, and it is the sea, when the wind is coming that way. It's getting dark, too. It doesn't half get dark quick these days. But I won't light the lamp. I'll just write I love you, and sit here thinking about you, and all my dear ones and my relations and my pals.

"Sal, dear, it's worth it, it's worth it. And I know you know it. That's all that matters. What's inside is for a special do at the pictures for you and our boy and of course the old woman.

Kisses all around,

I am yours sincerely,

Your loving husband,

Jim Gunning."

Things did not often happen inside Jim Gunning as suddenly as they had happened that evening, when he dropped the letter into the letter-box on the Strath road. He felt the vastness of the distance he was from his wife with a stabbing urgency he had never known before in any time or place, not in France in wartime: nowhere. He told himself it was stupid, as of course it was. He was in the same country and only six hundred miles—or what was it? He could get into a train tonight and be with her tomorrow midday, some time like that.

But that made no difference. That was how he felt. He must do something about it. He could not just go dropping letters into letter-boxes, with a noise like dropping lumps of clay on a coffin. His dear Sal was not dead to him. He was not dead to his Sal. He must go and see her, or she must come and see him, one or the other. Not next week, not the week after. He wanted to show himself still nearer to perfect health than he yet was. But it must not be more than a matter of two months, he would not stand for it. Say three months. He was not going to have time drag on and on here as it did in that sanatorium. That was done for, that place, and everything connected with it, including the way they kept

you on a string month after month, till sometimes it became a year, two years, and sometimes forever, because the sick ones died, and sometimes even the sound ones died, and it was all over for ever and ever.

It was different here. That was the point of this place. Everything was different. He would say a definite time. He would go to see her on the day and hour arranged, whenever the arranged train landed in King's Cross. Or she would come here and he would get the nicest room round these parts for the two of them. He was due for a holiday.

At the very thought his heart beat in his throat. He kept on finding out all the time that he loved Sal more than he thought anyone could love anyone. He would go straight back and let Miss Lemuel know exactly what he intended to do. By all means, he would choose a time when it was as easy as might be for Miss Lemuel to do without him for a bit. She had previously done without him for quite a long time.

When he came in she was at her job of knitting Air Force blue socks. She must have collected a whole drawer-full of socks by now in Edward's chest of drawers up in his room. He came straight to the point.

"Miss Lemuel," he said. "I can't stand it any more. I've got to see my wife."

"But of course you must," she said. "When do you wish to see her here?"

He felt as if somebody had thrown a bag at his stomach. She was always like that. When you expected arguments, she was as sweet as water.

"I wanted to talk it over with you, Miss Lemuel. I think it would do me good to knock off for a week or so."

"Oh, Gunning," she brought out. "You don't think we've been overworking you here?" She looked quite apprehensive.

"Oh no. I mean, just a change, like."

"But of course. Agnes and I will be able to carry on with Hughie Ross. It wasn't your idea to go up to London to see her?"

"I don't know. I could see my boy then, too, and my pals."

"You know I don't want to exercise any pressure on you. But the first thing is your health, isn't it? Both from your own point of view and your wife's. Don't you think the journey there and back would be unwise at this stage? Just when you're settling down so nicely? I think the exhaustion and the excitement are likely to undo a lot of the good that Skurr nan Gillian's done you. I'm speaking in a way I usually avoid, as a sort of medical person. And, Gunning—"

"Yes?"

"You know how this malady is? I'm sorry, my boy. I must talk of it. You're not absolutely through the wood, yet. We want to make a thorough job of it, don't we?"

"You think it would be better if she came up here? I suppose you're right."

"And your small boy."

"I've been thinking. I want to see him just as much as I want to see her. But it would unsettle him, coming up here, then leaving me again. He'd grieve after me."

She nodded her head.

"I think you're right. When would you like her to come up?"

"I was thinking . . . perhaps I could have my break at Christmas. It would be a Christmas present for her, too."

She was silent. She was silent quite a long time. He knew something was troubling her, something had rubbed against that shuddering tract of skin somewhere on her body, which sometimes was a sudden smell, or a line of print in a newspaper, or a casual word he himself uttered. Then it came to him. He recalled how much Christmas had meant to them both, Edward and her. Among those uncouth celebrants of Hogmanay, these two English folk tended a lonely Christmas fire, flickering and crackling over their cold hillside. The thing to do, he thought, was to say as little about Christmas as possible, forget he had uttered the word.

"I think that would be too soon, maybe," he stated. "How about January, the end of January? Is that a good month up here?" He felt, rather than saw the slight shake of her head. "Or the end

of February," he hastily amended. He wanted her to be wholeheartedly with him.

"We'll fix an actual date, shall we, my boy?" She was clearly grateful for the tact he had shown in not insisting on a Christmas outside routine. But she would not put her gratitude into flat words . . . It was odd how much they could say to each other these days without talking.

"Well, February the twenty-first, shall we say?"

"Or the middle of March? Give it time, Gunning. Give it time. March the fifteenth!"

He snapped his impatience as if it were a twig in his hand.

"March the fifteenth," he repeated. He refused to let himself think how far off that was.

"Yes, why not? We'll go later into the matter of where you'll stay. There's hardly room for her here . . ." she started.

"Oh, certainly not!" he interrupted.

"But you won't want to go far off," she said. There was a hint of pleading in her voice, a quality which was not often there.

He hesitated. It had been part of the idea, of course, to get a few miles away, anyhow. But there were lots of pleasant places round about, without applying to the folk in Glamaig, who had not treated him too kindly.

"I'll scrounge around," he said.

"And now," she said, wagging her finger at him as if what she proposed to do were by way of punishment, when, in fact, they both knew she would do it in any case, had done it often before, and would do it often again. "I'm going to read to you."

"If you don't mind," he said.

He reached for the latest newspaper.

That was not by way of rudeness. She read to him while the deeper layers of his mind were submerged in sleep. It did not worry her if the top surface of his mind was engaged with a comic strip in a newspaper.

"I have his copy of Davenant," she said. "I'll read you, oh here it is . . . *For the Lady Olivia Porter; a Present upon a New Year's Day.* It's one of his favorite poems.

Goe! hunt the whiter Ermine! and present
His wealthy skin, as this dayes Tribute sent
To my Endimion's Love; Though she be farre
More gently smooth, more soft than Ermines are
Goe! Climbe that Rock! and when thou there hast found
A star, contracted in a Diamond . . .

She lifted her eyes from the book, and saw his eyes were still open. She repeated the line:

A star, contracted in a Diamond,
Give it Endimion's Love, whose glorious Eyes,
Darken the starry Jewels of the Skies!

She read, and read on. She saw that the newspaper had fallen over his chest, and he was asleep, his head to one side.

"He grows more and more fitting every day," her lips went. "It is almost the same mouth, you might say."

She continued with the poem, reading in a monotone, scarcely above a whisper. She did not wish to waken him. Above all, not that.

Part Two

CHAPTER 6

The weather was crisp and cold and splendid. It was November, elsewhere so drear a month. Now it was December. He had never enjoyed Skurr nan Gillian so much, the great reaches of blue sky between rollicking clouds, the crisp frost between the grass-roots, the undismayed flare of gorse over hill and hollow.

But the enjoyment was not only Skurr nan Gillian, he knew well. The enjoyment was Sal coming; he would see his own Sal at last after an absence which seemed years. Yet it was not so long as that, really. He had seen her, bless her heart, in early summer, that time she came to Barnham, to beg him to stay on. The time seemed long, and it *was* long, because the things that had happened in it were strange, blimey, *how* strange! As if Sal was living in one world, and he was living in another world, each going round and round his own knitting-needle. (He was recalling his teacher's elucidation of the solar mysteries, when he was a small boy, hardly older than Dickie.)

And I'll tell you what makes it seem longer, too. Having to send letters to her, and getting letters back from her, a long time afterwards, through good old Tosher Davies, General Post Office, Birmingham. With the direct post, you're only a day, maybe a

day and a night away. You can even send a wire; come and telephone to me this afternoon five-thirty, Glamaig five three, Rossshire, that being the post-office telephone-number. But through Tosher Davies, it's days away, damn it, you're as far off as Rome and those places. And they've got Air Mail.

But he stuck to Tosher Davies, and therefore she stuck to Tosher Davies, too. He had no doubt at all it was the right thing. He was getting better all the time. Jeannie Graham, who ran the post office with her brother, Robbie, and gave piano lessons, had told him last week his cheeks were like roses. It had made him feel a bit soft; he did not like the thought of having cheeks like roses. He colored up even now. And she said his eyes were so bright, too, these days. She really meant it, she wasn't being funny or anything. Just like there's so many sharps (he presumed) in music, and so many flats, his eyes were bright and his cheeks were like roses. Sonny Bright-eyes, once the tear-away challenger for featherweight honors. But there it was. That was exactly how he was feeling.

Yet you can't be too careful, with *that* business. He remembered things he'd seen down in Dorset with his own eyes, about people who ran away with themselves.

"*So, dear Sal,* (he wrote) we'll stick to old Tosher till February some time. It makes me feel I'm being real cautious. Besides we don't want to do old Tosher out of his half-quid, do we, till we've got to? He put in a note along with your letter what came yesterday, saying he's wangled that pre-fab. at last from the Birmingham Council. What a fiddler! Thousands of real Birmingham blokes waiting on the line for their pre-fabs. Roll on, February! roll on! I can hardly keep myself from writing to you every day. It's the next best thing to having you with me and talking to you. I write to you while she reads old Edward's books, or tells me about his teething-troubles. *She* don't mind.

"Anyhow, for the time being, I am your own pal and husband,

Yours sincerely,

Jim Gunning."

Christmas came. Outside Skurr nan Gillian it seemed to Jim that this was all the Christmas on all Christmas cards rolled into one, a thousand Christmas trees wherever you looked, red berries in branches, gleaming sky, snow on ground, footprints of tiny creatures on snow. But the people set no great store on Christmas round these parts, least of all Miss Lemuel, who did not belong here. She said quite clearly she was no Christian, and Jim supposed he could not be much of a Christian, either, though that is what he was, if he was anything. The same went for Agnes. Nobody knew what she was, though she came from the Protestant part of Ireland, and maybe she started life as a Protestant.

But Christmas is another sort of holiday, as well as the one that celebrates the birth of Jesus. Families are together, strangers are asked to be the guests of families, if they are far from home. There may or may not be a Christmas tree in the house. But there are presents. There is turkey and bread sauce, or turkey and cranberry sauce, according to which side of the Atlantic you come from. There are crackers and raisins and tangerines and candied fruit and pudding with a sprig of holly and mince pies.

But there was not that sort of Christmas, either, at Skurr nan Gillian. You couldn't expect it, said Jim to himself, just a shade ruefully. You couldn't expect Edward's Christmas with only Edward's ghost. Miss Lemuel locked herself up all through Christmas eve, and most of Christmas day, in Edward's hut. That was *her* Christmas. She had the spirit stove in there, to make tea. That was enough to keep her going.

But she did give her employees presents, and handsome ones. For Jim there was a fine brown leather wallet, with a few pound-notes, a bonus for good service. There was a good leather handbag for Agnes, too, also with notes. Also, she said that Agnes must prepare Christmas dinner for both herself and Jim in the kitchen, and stay in there with Jim to eat it. Only two places were to be laid. If Edward came, he would come straight to his own hut, where his Aunt was.

There was not much fun at the Christmas dinner with Agnes. Jim was no longer a strange man who might knock her down. But

she was still timid. A concession to gaiety had been made with a box of great red crackers. Jim and Agnes pulled them, and each time one exploded, Agnes gave a sharp titter, and put her pudgy fingers before her eyes. They were both too self-conscious to put on the paper hats. That was the high water mark of the festivity. There were red winter apples on the table. His cheeks and hers were almost as red as the apples. They both looked as sound and healthy. They ate an apple each, cracked a few nuts, munched a few raisins. Then at last Agnes got up to go off to her own bothy. As she went, she made a suspicion of a curtsy, as if he were a big shot, which caused Jim both annoyance and embarrassment.

"Goodnight, sorr," she said. "Merry Christmas, sorr."

"My name's Gunning," he said, "or Jim. Just as you like. Merry Christmas, Agnes."

Off she went, faintly whinnying, like a restless mare. He stayed about for a little time, thinking of home, as it is hard not to at Christmas time, when one is separated from it, and far from the people one loves. Then he put out the light and went up to his own room. It's a good thing, he thought, that it'll be January soon, and then February. Otherwise it would be a pretty lousy night.

It would be January over soon, and February beginning, then March, the great benevolent month. Jim had not thought of March in those terms before, but that is how we are when a certain day, a certain month, a certain cabin in a strange ship, a certain set of inanimate rails, are to bring back our loved one to us. They are endowed from now on with a light and a glory.

Miss Lemuel smiled indulgently.

"That was what my boy was like at school when the holidays were coming up ahead, dancing to get back home. A cat on hot bricks," she added.

"My own kid's like that, too," said Jim, "when holiday-time's coming. But it's the other way round. He's excited about going away. He's at home already."

"And in some ways you are, too," she said quietly. "Otherwise I've been a failure with you."

"Never!" denied Jim. "You've been smashing. I'll never forget you!"

He was tired. It had been a big day. He went to bed earlier than usual, and was awakened the first time by the sound of Miss Lemuel's door below closing. At once after that the front door opened and shut.

"She's away again," he told himself drowsily. He listened for the sound of the unlocking of Edward's door. But he heard no sound. "She's off on one of her midnight walks, I suppose," he murmured. "On a sharp March night, too. She's got the toughness of a coal-heaver." But it had happened before, on weather more inclement than this. He turned round, and dropped off again.

He was next awakened by a scratching half-way up his door. Was it Hunish, the dog? No, Hunish would be with Miss Lemuel, wherever she was. It was not one of the cats. One or the other sometimes asked to come in, but at dawn sometimes, not in the dark night. And the scratching was higher up on the door. Someone was knocking.

He half-raised himself from the bed.

"Yes, Miss Lemuel?" he asked. "Is anything the matter?"

The scratching stopped. There was silence. Nothing came or went. But he was sure someone was there. Was it Edward? Had Edward come at last? Yet, somehow, there was no icy dazzle of fear at the back of his neck. That was human, the creature there. He felt the warm effluence of flesh come round the frame of the door, like the smell of cattle blowing from their barn.

"Agnes!" he shouted suddenly. "What do you want?"

The silence was maintained for several more seconds. Now he could quite plainly hear the sound of a woman breathing beyond the door. It could be only Agnes.

"Go away, Agnes!" he called out. "There's a good girl, go back to your bed!"

He heard her twist her heavy body round from the door; then the sound of her feet followed, descending the staircase. She moved so clumsily he must have been deaf with sleep when she

first came up. Or perhaps she had suddenly lost control of her limbs. Thump, thump, her feet went thickly down the stairs, and through the porch, and away. She was obviously certain Miss Lemuel had not returned yet, or she would not be traipsing round the house at this time.

That was not Agnes's last appearance at the door of his room that night. It might have been half an hour later that she appeared; it might have been more. Anyhow, he was sound asleep again.

This time the knocking was strong and sure. It was so loud that there was a sense of panic in it. He woke up at once.

"For God's sake," he shouted angrily. "Is that you again? Clear out, or—" his eye caught the pale glimmer of his water-jug— "or I'll chuck the jug at you."

She opened the door a few inches, but made no effort to get in. She stood there on the landing, sobbing, sobbing, like a bad small girl in an industrial school.

"Please, Mr. Gunning, *please!*" she begged. "Ye won't tell her, will ye now? *Please,* ye won't tell her!"

"I'll only tell her, if you don't go away and let me have some sleep," he shouted. "Go away!"

"Because if ye tell her, Mr. Gunning, she'll change me into a toad or a rat or a mangy cow, or some creepy crawly thing out of the lanes and the hedgerows. Say ye won't tell her, Mr. Gunning!"

"I won't tell her, for Christ's sake!" he snapped.

"Heaven bless your soul!" prayed Agnes. "Goodnight, and thank ye, Mr. Gunning!"

"Goodnight!" He turned to his pillow.

Oh Sal, Sal, how much I need you!

The breakdown came on the evening of March the seventeenth. Over in Holloway, Sal must have been doing the little things to her best silk underthings which a young woman does before setting out to join her sweetheart after a long absence. Dickie was doubtless out in the street, bullying boys a year older and two inches taller, because his daddy was once a boxer. Old Mrs.

Purdom was making tea, but not fussing about as much as she used to, when there was a meal to prepare for the master of the house. Sal did not have Jim's address yet. The last letter she had received had still gone through the Birmingham Post Office, via Tosher Davies.

"*Don't worry about anything, dear*" (he had written). "It's in the bag. I'm not sending you the address through Tosher, because suppose something suddenly happens to old Tosher, and somebody gets wise to one of his fiddles, and he can't turn up to pick up and forward any of our letters. I don't say it's likely, but suppose. So I'll wire the address to you about the eighteenth of March, and that'll give you good time to get here."

Every minute she would be thinking perhaps he'll send the wire a bit early, to make sure like, and she would be rinsing out those undies with an ear alert for the telegraph-boy bringing a wire: perhaps it's not too late for the boy to come.

But no boy came to Sal Gunning that evening. It was the agony that came instead, six hundred miles northward, to her husband, Jim. A cold March wind had been blowing the last few days, drying the herbage saturated with the damps of the first months: bracken and heather on the slopes, bracken and reeds in the pasture. It was dry enough to burn down now and they had all been hard at it the last two days. The wind had been searching, and Miss Lemuel had more than once told Jim he ought to be indoors out of it. But he could be obstinate when he felt like it, and the Jim Gunning that was to be on view for Sally was to be the Jim Gunning who could do a job of work, come wind, come rain, with any tough guy anywhere. So he smiled, and shook his head, and went on with it.

But of course it wasn't that small-boy disobedience that brought the thing on. It came from deeper sources. Miss Lemuel and Jim had come back for their tea. It was messy work, this running round with the paraffin-rag torch. Miss Lemuel had cleaned herself up in the bathroom, and he went in while she got down to

things in the kitchen, having left him half a ewer of hot water. He was soaping his hands in the wash-basin, when he felt the odd rasp at the back of the throat which he had felt once before. There was no mistaking it this time to be the clearing of a lump of phlegm, as he had done earlier at Angus MacGregor's table. Besides, the smell of blood was already seeping up through the nasal passages.

His hands were soapy, and he washed the soap off slowly, as if by that slowness he was denying and frustrating the panic which rested like a thin cold wire along the channels of all his nerves. The soap was washed off, he dried his hands, and only then he went to the pan and let the blood come away. But for the moment that was not much, just the blood that had collected in his mouth.

Then the rest came, the hemorrhage broke. It had the ease and fullness of a man being sick at sea after hours of haggard self-control. He slewed his body round to the bath, moving his head inward under the slope of the staircase, and let the blood flow from him. There was no intermission. The great rich river hurtled downward, till, as it seemed to him, bent over the fume and the froth of blood, the bath was half-filled. The final drops fell away large and warm. And then he stood there, bent over the bath, as if to make sure that the whole toll that Someone was demanding from him had been paid in full. Then he brought his head out from the constricted space under the staircase, straightened himself up, and leaned his matted scalp back against the wall behind him. He reached out his hands, and from the wrists the damp hands dropped limply. His head lay to one side, drooping to his shoulder.

"Why, why," he murmured. "Why have you done this to me?"

He stood there unmoving for some time, his eyes closed, till it seemed to him the knee-caps were going soft round the edges, and if he did not prevail on himself to move, he would fall to the floor like a huddle of used linen. He dragged himself over to the edge of the bath, and sat there. The sweat was now pouring from his forehead like a stoker's before a furnace.

The huddle of linen was in his forehead, all the sad thoughts

lying anyhow inside and on top of each other. I've not been able to make it, Sal, after all. I'm going to die, in two or three months, it can't be very long. You'll be waiting for that wire, old girl, giving my address. Shall I send it, now this has happened? Why shouldn't I send it? Why shouldn't I? Because all along I've said I didn't want her to see me dying, a young bloke like me, coughing my lungs up, getting thinner and thinner, till the cheek-bones stick out of my face like door-knobs. But she'd want to come along and be with you, Jim. If it was the other way round, you wouldn't shirk it, Jim, would you? You can't die up here, all lonely, with two dames you don't know, and a ghost knocking all the time at the window; a bloke shouldn't be so proud. That's what's wrong with you. If you've got to die, you've got to die, what difference does it make, two or three months? No, no! Let her remember me like I used to be, taking on all comers, bang, bang, that's Stan Chapman, down for the count in the first round, that's Pedro Gonzales, butting like a bull, his hair's like wire filings, rabbit-punching, kidney-punching, but that's Pedro Gonzalez stone-cold in the sixth.

A knock at the door. The voice of Miss Lemuel.

"Is anything wrong, Gunning? You've been there a long time."

His voice was like the creak of an old floor-board.

"I'm not so well, Miss Lemuel."

"Is the door open? Shall I come in?" She tried the handle. The door was open. She entered. It was easy, in half an instant, to see what had happened, excepting that most of the blood had already flowed out of the bath.

"Was there a lot of blood?" she asked. She came closer to the ceiling-slope beside him where he sat, and looked down into the bath. You could see the red tide-mark quite high on the porcelain.

"It looked like it half-filled it," he breathed.

"You poor boy," she said. She took the glass from the shelf above the basin, ran some water into it, and put it to his lips.

"Sip this." He did as she said.

She took the hand-towel from its rail, damped it under the tap and wiped his mouth and forehead.

Ha-ha-ha, dot-dash-dot, went the morse code of Jack Thomley's laughter across a great many lands and seas, like a ship's signal you get on the edge of the radio program you're listening to.

"Will you be able to get across to my room?" she asked, "if I help you? Wait!" She opened the window, and called "Agnes! Here! At once!"

"I'll manage!" he said.

"Put your arm round my neck! That's fine!" They left the bathroom and went across the passage.

"I can make my own room easy."

"No, later. Slowly. You're doing fine." She was cool and calm as a trained nurse. She opened her bedroom door for him on the moment that Agnes appeared at the porch-door, her eyes goggling like large gooseberries.

"No!" said Jim, gesturing towards her. "No!"

"Very well," she agreed. She understood he could not bear to have Agnes the witness of his humiliation. "Stay there, Agnes, outside!"

They went into the room, and deftly she moved the pillows. "You must lie flat!" she said. She helped him lift his body upon the bed.

"I'm all right," he told her. But he knew that was just his vocal cords working; like his lungs, he thought, what was left of them, blowing out and falling in.

"I'll get you a glass of water, ice-cold. Lie there quite still now. I've been thinking! I was going to take Daisy out to fetch Dr. Muir from Invercoire. He's further than Ramsay, at Bonar Bridge, but I trust him. However, I won't go myself to Invercoire. I ought to stay with you. I'll send Agnes down the hill to the road-telephone near Ben Voith! It won't take much more time. Agnes can move if she wishes to." She went out and opened the porch-door.

"Go off just as you are!" she told Agnes. "Change those felt slippers! You know the telephone-booth on the Strath road? Get Dr. Muir to come at once!"

"Yes, madam!" Agnes's teeth were knocking together like a cold puppy's.

Miss Lemuel went into the bathroom and brought the glass of water back with her. She put it down beside him, and brought other things that might be necessary, some towels, a pail in case the hemorrhage should start again.

"Are you all right? Don't talk! I'll sit beside you! Close your eyes! I'm sorry I've never got round to having the telephone installed. I've never liked it. I'm sorry. I told you, didn't I? No, don't talk!" He nodded his head. She had often inveighed against the telephone and its impertinences. She sat on a chair beside him and mopped his forehead again, then let him be. Her eyes moved up and away from the sight of the young man on the bed to contemplate the memorials of the young man in his grave. But, of course, she did not believe him to be in his grave. There was a faint shadow of a smile on her face. Her eyes moved once more to caress the cheeks and forehead of Jim Gunning, which in their fever had a certain childlike quality, a touching innocence.

"Yes," she thought. "Innocence. That is the quality the Masters insist on. There was enough flesh in him to bind him to the woman, and to father the child, but not more than that. He is naive, as he must be. That is why I failed with those two others. They were carnal."

The shadow of the smile did not leave her face. She was not unhappy.

Dr. Muir came with despatch. He got a quick general idea of the case from Miss Lemuel, then went to the patient, ran him over swiftly, and gave him an injection in case there was a recurrence of hemorrhage.

"And you're going to take these drops, too, old chap," he added. "They'll give you a good night. It's been a bit of a strain, hasn't it? Don't be too miserable about it. You're going to drink and drink during the next few days till you think you're awash. Astonishing how the blood gets built up again. I'll leave you now. I'll be in tomorrow. Take it easy, old chap."

Then he went back to Miss Lemuel. She gave him in some detail the history of the case, which she knew well. She also told

him that the young man had been expecting his wife to join him shortly for a holiday. They had booked rooms in Mrs. Adair's Guest House at Glen Tussach.

The doctor looked up from under his grey-black eyebrows. His nose twitched, and the spectacles slipped. He set the spectacles firm again.

"He's been very excited about his wife's arrival, of course?"

"Yes."

"I'm no specialist, you know, but I seem to remember intense excitement has been known to open up an old lesion."

"In a sense it's the young woman's fault he's in this condition?"

"Oh no, Miss Lemuel, I wouldn't go so far as to say that."

"Do you think it's serious? Is he going to pull round?"

"I repeat, Miss Lemuel, I'm in General Practice. This is a matter for a specialist, though in this malady, as you know, specialists are as often wrong as right. It's probably your idea to bring in a man from Inverness, or perhaps Edinburgh? He's covered by insurance, of course?"

"Yes, we'll have all the help we can. We'll discuss that later. I was asking your personal view, about his chances of pulling round."

"Well, giving you my own view: a hemorrhage is not as important as it seems. It always means there's trouble there, of course."

"But a hemorrhage on this scale?"

"Oddly enough, back in the twenties, a cousin of mine had a large hemorrhage, as copious as this one. He was in his last year at St. Andrews. He's now putting up bridges again, out in Malaya. I mean with his own hands, so to speak. He's a beef of a man."

"Very odd, to be sure. How do you explain it, Dr. Muir?"

"I don't dare to explain it. One can only hazard explanations. I suppose it was a superficial lesion, near the surface of the lung, and very near a major blood-vessel, too."

"Which would explain the quantity of blood lost?"

"I suppose so. Mind you, I don't say the same applies in this case. The threatened pneumo-thorax operation has to be taken

into account. I've sounded him just now, of course, but he'll have to be x-rayed. You'd like him to go to a chest hospital, as soon as he's fit to be moved?"

"You remember I told you that he ran away from that Sanatorium in Dorset?"

"He was an extremely foolish young man."

"He's a strange creature. He might run away again."

"If he could. It wouldn't be your responsibility. His condition may be much graver now than before. It may well be quite incurable."

"Do you honestly think, Dr. Muir, they could do more for him in a Sanatorium than can be done for him here, if he's properly looked after? I might remind you, my background is a medical one. I've nursed the sick before."

"Yes." The doctor lowered his head. He did not know whether the reference was to the poor young Flying-Officer whom he had known since childhood. Probably not. The nursing of that young man had practically all been done at that superb place in East Grinstead. He raised his head again, and went on. "With regard to clinical treatment, there couldn't be much in it. There is surgical treatment, of course, but, as you say, when the question of a pneumo-thorax arose . . ." he shrugged his shoulders . . . "That was the decisive reason for his breakaway, you say?"

"So I gather. I'm an old woman, Doctor. I can't think of anything more worth while for me at this tail-end of my life than to do what I can for this young man and his little family. If you think the young man himself can't possibly suffer from it—"

She stopped, and he did not say anything for some time. There seemed to be the shadow of some consideration in his mind, but it was evidently not medical in its nature. He dismissed it.

"I think in some ways he would be very fortunate to be kept on here," he said. He proceeded to give her some general instructions, then: "It's pretty late," he concluded. "I ought to be going. I'll be in tomorrow."

"You're very kind, Dr. Muir. You didn't knock your car about too much?"

"Not more than usual," he smiled. "Goodnight, Miss Lemuel." She saw him out, then returned to the kitchen and sat down. The three cats assembled round her. Twopence jumped in her lap and curled round himself there, like a snail's shell. Chappie rubbed his tongue against the cloth of her skirt, till it seemed even that thick frieze must wear thin. Twilight sat on his haunches and stared into her face. Hunish lay on his paws, whimpering.

She sat forward on her chair, looking straight before her, her chin on her hands, her elbows on her knees framing the curled cat as with metal bars. A look of profound calculation was in her eyes. Her lips tightened till they were thin pale lines. They opened and moved though no sound came from them.

"That makes it a lot easier than it might have been," the words were.

Then she got up and went into his room.

She had done all she could for him, and there was nothing to do now but for him to rest. The opiate was having effect. But he was struggling with some thought. It must get itself uttered, she thought, or hold up the action. She well knew what the thing was.

"Miss Lemuel," he said. "I was going to send this address to my wife tomorrow."

"Yes, you poor boy. It will be a great disappointment for her; and for you, too, of course."

"I'd like her to come."

"Of course she shall. But later, later. Don't you think, later?"

"I might die, Miss Lemuel." The resistance was quite gone out of him. He was like sodden paper.

"You ought to sleep now, Gunning. Your eyes are already heavy with sleep."

"But I want to know what I ought to do. I'd like her to come . . . Oh so much, Miss Lemuel . . . But is it quite fair?"

"I wonder if it's fair to either of you. I don't think the excitement will do you any good in your present condition. It's just possible . . . I hardly like to tell you this . . ."

"Please!"

"It's just possible the excitement of her coming brought this on. That was the doctor's view."

"It was coming anyway," he said, with a voice toneless as soot.

"We oughtn't to go into that now. You must rest."

"I'm worried about tomorrow. What shall I do?"

"I can send her a wire, telling her you've had a bit of a set-back. That's nothing, you know, in this illness, it often happens. And will she just hold on. You'll write to her."

"I was getting better," he whispered sadly.

"You still will." She placed her finger-tips upon his forehead, as in some sort of sign or vow. "If you'll be good, and do as I tell you."

"Oh, Miss Lemuel!" A thought had struck him. He tried to raise himself in the bed.

"Quiet now, quiet!" she reproved him.

"The post-office mark on the telegram." (He was schooled to acute sensitiveness in the matter of post-office marks, with the long training he had had through the General Post Office in Birmingham.) "If she sees the stamp, she'll come up in any case. She will. I know her."

"You are not to worry. The wire will be forwarded by way of my London solicitors. I'll send it myself, as soon as I see you safely asleep."

"Oh, Miss Lemuel, you're so kind." His head turned away from her on the pillow. "You think of everything. She'll be so . . . disappointed."

He was asleep.

Sally Gunning was too excited to go to work. She spent a good many hours at the window of the front room, awaiting the arrival of the telegraph boy, though there was a good deal she could have turned her hand to. The boy came, preceded by Dickie, hooting excitedly. She went down to meet them at the front door.

"Telegram for Gunning," said the telegraph boy, aware of the excitement he was causing, an excitement usually created by the delivery of a telegram in streets like these.

"It's from Daddy! It's from Daddy!" shouted Dickie.

"Quiet, Dickie!" she reproved him. "Of course it's from Daddy."

But it was not. It ran:

WE ARE LONDON SOLICITORS JAMES GUNNING'S EMPLOYER STOP REGRETTED GUNNING HAS SETBACK STOP CONSIDERED ADVISABLE YOU POSTPONE VISIT GUNNING WRITING.

The signature was Smith. The post office stamp was Chancery Lane.

"Any answer?" asked the telegraph boy, already a bit blasé about the effect his envelopes sometimes caused.

"No," her mouth went. Her face was pale as chalk. It was obvious to Dickie the wire brought bad news.

"Mummy! Mummy!" he called out in sudden alarm. All the neighbours heard him. "Daddy's dead!"

She turned and screamed at him:

"He's not! He's not!"

Then she ran upstairs and locked herself in her bedroom. A minute later her mother was at her door.

"Sal, dear!" she called out. "Let me in! It's not true, is it? He's not dead?"

"No!" Sal's muffled voice came from beyond the door. "Please go away, Mum!"

She came out half an hour later, her face swollen with weeping. She came into the kitchen and held the wire out to her mother.

"It says he's had a setback. Oh Mum, Mum, he ought to have let me go to him!" She was weeping once more, locked in her mother's arms. Dickie was howling, too, his fists in his eyes.

"Sending messages through solicitors!" sniffed the old woman fiercely. "It's a liberty! And you with all your special undies all washed and ironed. It's a bleeden liberty, I call it!" She was formidable when aroused. "Let me see that tellygram again! *Smith!*" she read out. "*Smith!* I don't like the sound of that at all. It doesn't sound like the name of no solicitor!"

Sal tore herself free from her mother's arms.

"It's from Jim," she said, "though someone else sent it. Jim's

ill. He must be more ill than he's been before. I'm going to find out where Jim is!" She clenched her fists. "I'm going to find out!"

"How?" asked her mother tensely.

"I don't know!" she murmured piteously. "I'll see." Her whole chest seemed to fall in. She looked very small and frail and helpless. And she had great power arrayed against her.

Another wire came two days later. Once more the telegram came through Messrs. Smith, who again despatched it from the Chancery Lane Post Office. It was less formal. Gunning was doing as well as could be expected, and sent love. She knew that it was Jim himself who must have requested the wire to have some human feeling in it, as much as can be transmitted by a telegram through a firm of lawyers. The next wire also sent love, and said a letter from Gunning was on its way. That meant that he was, at all events, fit enough to write. There was another wire soon. Behind this spatter of wires she divined the love that had demanded them, despite the evident difficulties involved, and his own wretchedness. Then at last a letter arrived from him by way of Birmingham. It was not a long letter. Perhaps he had not the strength to write a long letter. And also what was there to say?

"*You know how dissapointed I am, dear.*" (They couldn't either of them get that word right. Is it two s's or two p's?) "And just when you was coming, too. It seems awful I'm still writing you through Tosher, but darling it's the best thing. She says so." (She says so? Since when had her husband to go asking other people how he should write to his wife? I don't think I like that much, Jim.) "She is being wonderful, and all the best attention." (Thank God for that, anyhow, and she's seventy, he said, once, didn't he?) "So please trust me like before, and when I am fit, you will come, because I long for you like I have never longed before. Hoping you are well as it leaves me at present."

She wrote back by way of the invisible and invaluable Tosher:

"*Darling* you know I always do what you want me to do. But

it breaks my heart I should not be with you. I only ask please think again about letting me come. If it was the other way round, Jim, could I let you not come to see me?" (You don't know Sal, you've not seen people wasting away like a lump of margarine on a hot plate. Besides, it's different. Women aren't so strong as men, Sal. Besides, she says it would be the worst thing, Sal. So what can I do, dear? I can't do anything.) "Perhaps you should let me have the address. You can trust me not to come. But just in case. You see what I mean?"

Jim did not see what she meant, because she did not know herself. Once more he put the issue of letting her have the address before Miss Lemuel, and once more Miss Lemuel pointed out the folly it would be: he would never know if in a moment of depression she wouldn't be getting on a train. Any bark of the dog, or the hoot of a far-off car, might mean her. The tension would be the worst thing for him. Miss Lemuel could not take the responsibility.

So in Jim's answering letter he told her he had to say No, giving her exactly the reasons Miss Lemuel had put before him.

"She says no, does she?" Sal said to herself. "Oh, she says No." And she sat down at once and wrote a letter to Birmingham Post Office, directed to Mr. Eustace Davies, a letter she had often contemplated, but had always at the last moment been afraid of sending, well aware how angry Jim would be. Well, the time had come to take the risk.

"Dear Sir,

"I am the wife of Jim Gunning, who you send his letters on to, and you send my letters on to him. Please, he is very ill, and I want to be with him again. I am not lying, it is God's own truth. So please will you send me his address? He does not send it me himself because he is funny. He does not like people to be with him when he is ill. But it is my duty. And I am very very anxious. Can you do me this favor? I will thank you all my life.

Yours sincerely,

Mrs. Sal Gunning."

Tosher Davies slit open the envelope. He recognized the handwriting, for he had often enough seen it on the envelopes he forwarded to Jim Gunning, by way of earning his ten bob's worth. But the lady had never before written to him directly.

He read the letter, and put his finger to his nose.

"Not me, Baby," he thought. "*That's* not the way to catch an old 'un like me. I remember now, old Gunning warned me she might try on a letter just like this. The things that these women will get up to get their men back! Who'd have thought that old Gunning would be such a dark horse? Besides" (it further occurred to him) "there's the little question of my ten bob." He stood meditating a few moments. Ought he to put the letter in another envelope and send it off without a word to Gunning? No. He decided against it. It wasn't his job to go poking his nose into the private business of a husband and wife. It seemed mixed up enough, already.

He tore up the note, and dropped the pieces into the waste-paper bin.

CHAPTER 7

Miss Lemuel waited for Jim to speak. She knew the way Jim's mind was working. She knew better than any other mortal being, because she had had much to do with its present motions. As she sat beside him, his skull seemed to her a thing made of glass, like a glass tank, in which the obscure fish of his thoughts threshed to and fro amid the mournful twilight mosses.

The only danger was that he should die, as Edward had died, in a sudden surrender, or because of a sudden compulsion, related

with the actual condition of his body. She kept watch carefully. He was still occupying her room, set out like a Byzantine Chapel with its ikons of Edward. He had begged her to be allowed to go back to his own room, he was quite fit to go up a single staircase, he said. But no, she assured him. It was better for him to be downstairs. Partly she meant the bathroom. But she also meant the memorials of Edward, the photographs, the tasselled caps, the medals, the silver cup, the bronze statuette. If such things have an effluence, the time when he is grievously sick, she thought, must be the time when he is most sensitive to it. She herself had spent a week or so up the stairs in Jim's room, sleeping with the door wide open, lest there was need for her. She had now moved to Edward's room, which led up out of the kitchen; but she spent a good deal of her time at night in the kitchen, which lay between. She kept watch with eyes and ears, and those other faculties we have that twitch when death is coming, faculties which the brute beasts have more highly developed than most of us. If she believed death was likely, anyhow within a few months, she would talk to him. But she preferred that he should speak first.

Jim had had great strength. Perhaps that weighed in the balance now more against him than for him. But he had love. That seemed to be the one thread in the twist of string which was not frayed and at breaking-point.

She waited for Jim to speak, and at last one bitter-bright day in late April he spoke.

"I was thinking, Miss Lemuel," he murmured.

"What about, Gunning?" she asked innocently. "You're not worrying again, are you?"

"I'm beyond worrying," he said.

"No, no," she reproved him. "You mustn't talk like that. It's not kind to me—or your wife."

"I don't want to die," he brought out with sudden violence. "It's so daft."

"There are worse things," she said.

"What's worse?"

"To be half-dead and half-alive."

He paused, while the thought she had dropped into the dark soil of his mind thrust out its hairy fibres.

"Like Edward?" he asked. He was almost inaudible.

"Like Edward," she repeated.

"You think . . . the same thing . . . could happen to me . . . that's happened with Edward?" His heart was numb with fear.

"I can't say. It's possible. If you wanted to be back as much as Edward does . . . what difference does it make that it's a city, not a mountain?"

"If there's a God, he couldn't let such things be."

"You shouldn't be talking about things like that. It's not good for you."

"I can't help it. I don't believe in him."

"I'm sorry to hear you say that. I'm quite certain that a God exists. I think he has the very best intentions."

"He ain't done very much for me." His speech was slipping back towards its beginnings, as an old man in his dotage slips back to the things he knew and was when he was young. "And not much for you, neether."

"He kept Edward alive for me for nearly two years."

"In a fine state, too," said Jim Gunning. "Like he's kept me alive, this last year and more."

"He did his best, the old man. I admit, not a very good best. He has his work cut out, you know."

"What do you mean, Miss Lemuel? I want to get things straight."

"You oughtn't to worry about things like that. You must get your strength back. You must get well."

"I want to get things straight," he said sullenly.

"People have been trying since the human race began to get things straight. They haven't succeeded yet."

"Did you really mean what you said? I don't see there's anything else for it."

"What are you referring to?" But she knew well.

"You said you prayed to God, and then look at the trick he played on you. I tried to pray, too, but I wasn't much good. I

suppose you feel mean, praying, when you haven't prayed all your life. But whose fault was that?" he asked angrily. "He didn't make me the praying sort."

"I've told you he has a great deal on his hands," she said. "For instance, he has to keep his end up with the Devil. It's not easy."

"Do you really think there's a Devil?" The fear was in his eyes.

"I don't think there's any doubt of that. You mustn't look so frightened, my dear boy. You and I are not the only people who've believed in the Devil. He goes through all the so-called Holy Books that have ever been written. The word 'Devil' sounds horrid, I know. Just listen to it. Devil. But we've got to get over that." (She was already treating him as her accomplice.) "There was probably a time when God was more powerful than the Devil; I suppose that's when he sent him crashing out of Heaven. His name was Lucifer, then. 'Lucifer' doesn't sound half so unpleasant as 'Devil' does it?" She was talking with extreme ease and naturalness, as though she was talking of the amount of milk the cows had yielded that morning, or the shopping order for Inverness. "There've been ups and downs between them ever since," she went on. "I don't think God was riding very high during either of these recent wars, do you?—least of all the last one. I think it's a simple problem, my dear boy. You've got to make up your mind which is the stronger one of the two, and come to terms with him. That is, if you want something hard enough. I want something," she continued implacably, "I want something so hard that I'd be quite willing to give up my immortal soul for it—if I had one."

"You want Edward," he breathed.

"Yes, Edward." Her eyes were like opaque glass disks, and her fingers curled over like the talons of a great bird. "You, too," she stated. "You say it's foolish to die. I agree with you. You don't need to. You don't need to lose your little wife, and that boy of yours."

"What can *I* do, Miss Lemuel? I'm half-dead already."

"I'll tell you. You know there are people who dedicate themselves to God, don't you, people like priests and monks, and nuns? There are people who dedicate themselves to the Devil, too." She

kept her eyes fixed on his, so that even her eyelids hardly blinked. "I am one of their number," she said. She spoke with a certain pride, throwing back her head. There was the expression in her eyes which is sometimes noted in the eyes of an accused murderer in a murder trial. "Do you plead guilty or not guilty?" "Guilty!" the accused murderer declares, with a certain pride, throwing back his head. Through Jim's tired mind raced all the things he had been told about her—the witch. She was telling him the rumors were true. . . . His heart thumped; his head ached.

"What do you want from me?" asked Jim Gunning.

She was silent. He asked again.

"What do you want from me?"

"You know very well what I want from you."

"It's not clear. Nothing's clear. I feel like hammers are banging away inside my head. Give me something for my head, Miss Lemuel. I want to rest. I want to rest. Will I ever rest again?"

"You will rest later," she told him. There seemed to be no eyes in her eye-sockets. The sockets seemed hollow, and dark vapors swirled in them. "I'm offering you a deal. You will live. You will be cured. In due time you'll go back to your own again. In return for that . . . In return for that," she repeated, "you will give Edward back to me."

"How can I do that? What do I know about these things? I can't!"

"The boy is lonely and miserable, wandering about all day and night on the empty moors. I'm lonely and miserable, waiting for him. We can't reach each other, excepting for a few moments at a time, and then he slips away again, like a twist of smoke. You can open yourself up to him, so that he can come into you from time to time, and be at rest." The vapors swirled in the dark eye-sockets, their roots tinged with fire.

"But I'm me," he protested. His voice was hardly louder than a fledgling bird's. "How can I be Edward, too?"

"You will give yourself to the Devil, as I've done. There will be a contract signed. It will be made easy for you."

"Lights are going on and off in front of my eyes. It's like a big

switchboard. I want the lights to go out. I want the hammers to stop banging. Miss Lemuel, have you got those drops what the doctor gave you to make me sleep? Please can I have some? Please let me take them myself, and then I can have an accident and take too many and never get up again."

"You mustn't talk such nonsense," she said. "There will be a contract signed. If we do not fulfill our word, no harm's done. You will die. If you do not die, we shall have fulfilled our word."

Perhaps at another time the young man's native sense might have made him suspicious. There was a flaw in logic here. But not at this time.

"What will Sal say? How can I do such a thing to my Sal and to my boy?"

"Ridiculous!" she said. "Will she be better off as a widow? Does she need to know?"

"I've never done anything I didn't tell her about. I know all about her and she knows all about me."

"You're lucky!" she said with a touch of scorn, "both of you. Well, you'll have a secret from her now! It might have been another woman you were hiding from her. It will be the Devil. He will do you a lot more good. Take your hands away from your eyes. Are you afraid to look at me?"

"I want that medicine, Miss Lemuel."

"Very well. You may have some." Her manner softened. "The doctor said you might if you got over-excited. I won't be a moment."

She moved with extraordinary speed out to the bathroom where the drugs were in a cabinet, and was back almost at once, soundlessly, like a gliding thing of the fields. She measured out the dose for him.

"There now, my boy, take this. That's right. It's strong. You'll be asleep soon. I'll be here till you go off. Easy now, easy. All will be well. No unhappiness. You healthy again. Your wife, your boy, again. There now. Easy, easy." She stayed with him, murmuring soothing words, until he slept.

Then:

"Come, Hunish," she said to the dog, who was crouched beside her. "Let's go out and report progress. I think we're winning through, don't you, dog-a-wog?"

The dog yelped.

"Hush, now Hunish, hush! You'll waken him. Come now!"

It was three nights later.

"What do you mean by contract?" asked Jim. "I want to know what you mean."

"I mean exactly that, a contract. It will be a statement in which both the service asked from you and the recompense to be made to you will be written down quite explicitly."

"On a document, like?"

"But, my dear boy, what do you expect? On an old boot?" The high crisis was over. She permitted herself a wry jocularity now and again.

"I see." He seemed troubled, none the less. She eyed him carefully. It was the portentousness of the word, she concluded, that disturbed him. Document. He was envisioning scrolls of parchment, voluted script, a mumbo-jumbo of opaque technicalities, a great heraldic seal.

"It will all be perfectly simple," she assured him. "A child could understand it. Do you know that twopenny exercise-book I do the household accounts in? The one that's in the windowledge?" He nodded. "We'll tear a sheet out of that. That will do."

"Very informal, like," he murmured. Her jaw thrust forth. Was there a note of mockery in his voice? Her eyes moved from his eyes to his mouth, from his mouth to his eyes, again. No. He had meant no disrespect.

"Not entirely," she corrected him. "There must be a slight element of formality in the contract. It will be signed with your blood," she said easily. "It is customary."

"In *my* blood," he repeated. Even yet, despite the hold she had taken of him in his feebleness and desolation, even yet a spasm of horror could twist his heart. "Oh no, Miss Lemuel. I can't do *that*. It's . . . childish . . . and it's bad!"

"*Bad!*" she mocked at him. "*Bad!* I thought we'd agreed how stupid such words are."

"It's like . . . kid's playing," he said weakly, as if, finally, that were the intolerable thing—it was so preposterously childish.

"It *is* a game," she pointed out. "And for high stakes."

"I won't play it! I can't!"

"You can't?" She looked him steadily in the eyes. "You can't?"

"What are you looking at me like that for?"

"Will you feel like that when the next hemorrhage comes?" His heart felt cold as ice. "It would probably be the last," she added gently.

He bit his lip, and clenched his weak fists. How could she be so cruel, how *could* she, this old woman who had been so kind? He would have liked to assert himself, to fight against her. But he was so worn out. And she was so immensely much stronger than he was.

"What do you mean," he quivered, "write it in my blood? Haven't I lost enough already?"

"A drop or two," she assured him. "We'll prick your thumb and draw just enough for your signature. Don't worry about a drop of blood, Gunning. You'll soon have it back again, all you lost. And more. And more," she repeated loudly, rising to her feet. She lifted her hands, and stretched them out, as if she were offering him on a platter all the kingdoms of the earth.

As indeed she was.

He had asked once or twice if he could get up for two or three hours in the afternoon. But she did not think that a good idea. She had the feeling that, despite his great weakness, if he got up he might begin to find his feet again. There might still remain unexhausted a last reserve of stamina. On a certain day, then, she decided to pounce.

She saw to it that there was less nourishment that day than there might have been in the food she provided for him—water in his milk, the thin spreading of butter on his bread, the tiny helping of his main dish. There was nothing she overlooked.

He usually slept for two or three hours after his lunch. She let him sleep for an hour, then awakened him; knowing that to awaken a sick man from his sleep is more debilitating than not to let him sleep at all.

Then she pounced. The ruthlessness was like a hawk's. The fluttering of the wings and the cooing of the voice were like a dove's.

"Well, Jim," she said. "I have the contract here, all ready for you to sign."

He turned his head weakly on the pillow.

"The contract?" he asked. "What contract?"

It was not as if he had actually forgotten the contract that had been discussed between them, so much as he had hoped she wouldn't bother him. It would be such a nuisance to get up from the pillow and start playing around with pens and sheets of paper.

"*You* know," she said, "the contract that's going to get you on your feet again." It was as if she were humoring a child to take a medicine. "The one we agreed on. Don't you remember?"

He did not seem to remember they had actually reached an agreement for him to sign the contract, but he was too weak and tired to argue. Anyhow, if she said so, it must be so.

"Where is it?" he asked. "Do I have to read it?"

"Certainly you do. It's a very bad practice to sign an agreement without first looking carefully through it." She had brought in with her the black and white woollen handbag in which she carried small things from room to room. "Here it is." She extracted her twopenny blue exercise-book. "I told you. The household accounts book." The spectacle case came out. She took out the spectacles, and fitted her reading-glasses on her nose. "Wait!" she said. "I'll go and fetch the eye-bath."

Eye-bath? He wondered dimly why she wanted so odd an object. He had said nothing, had he, about having any eye-strain? Did she want it for herself? She brought the thing in from the bath-room and held it up to the light, the small glass eye-bath she kept there.

"I've marked it out carefully," she said. "Look. I've left just

a tiny drop of water in the bottom. That's just to dilute the blood a little. Otherwise it might be too thick to write."

So that's what the eye-bath is for, is it? That's what it's for!

"It's not happening at all," he said to himself. "I'm dreaming. I'm not here. There's no such place as here. She's just a lie. She's just a bit of grey fluff under a bed."

She took out a pen from the black and white handbag—an ordinary wooden pen, such as they put out on ledges in post-offices.

"I put a clean nib in," she said. Then she lifted the nib to her mouth and wetted it. "That'll make the blood stick," she observed. Once more her hand went down into the bag. This time she brought out a small square of flannel, with a few needles and pins stuck in it.

She meant all this. All this was happening. It was not a dream.

It *was* a dream. It was not happening. She did not mean it. She was fluff, she was smoke. How could she mean it?

She removed a needle from the square of flannel.

"Matches?" she asked. "Oh here they are." There was a box of matches on the table beside the oil-lamp. "We'll sterilize it," she said. "We don't want to run any risks." She struck a match, and put the needle into the blue part of the flame.

"Your thumb, Gunning," she ordered.

"Miss Lemuel, what are you doing to me?"

Her voice, as she answered, was rough, the voice of one not by any means to be trifled with.

"I've told you. You'll read it for yourself before you sign it. Your thumb!"

He held out the thumb towards her. She seized his wrist with her left hand, and fastened her fingers around it like a collar of steel. Then she jabbed the pin into the ball of the thumb.

"There now, there, that was easy, wasn't it?" she said. She put the pin down, and squeezed the soft flesh round the puncture. A large drop of blood came through. Then, before it had time to flow away, she placed the eye-bath there to receive it. Then

she squeezed out a second drop of blood, then a third. The blood flowed thickly down the inner side of the receptacle.

"That's perfect," she said. "Suck your thumb, Gunning." She put the eye-bath down, and lifted the note-book. "Here you are." She opened it, half way through, and put the written-on page before him. It was her handwriting of course, the curled delicate letters like trailers of bindweed.

"Please," he whispered. "Please read it to me."

"Very well. But I want you to look on while I'm reading. You must make sure that what I read out is exactly what's written down on the page. And then you'll sign. I'll sign for our Master." As she spoke, she put a match-stalk into the mixture of blood and water in the eye-bath, and stirred it round. "Can you see?" she asked. She had the document a foot or so from his eyes.

"I can see."

She read. First the place, Skurr nan Gillian, Glamaig, near Braemore Bridge, Ross-shire. Then the date. A day in the month of May, nineteen hundred and forty-seven. Then the text:

"I, James Gunning, once of thirty-four Territon Street, Holloway, in North London, do hereby enter into a solemn contract with the Lord Satan to be his servant, and do his bidding. It is his bidding that I throw open my heart and brain for the visitation of Edward Tourneur, of Skurr nan Gillian, Glamaig, near Braemore Bridge, Ross-shire, who passed out of his flesh in East Grimstead, Surrey, on the fourteenth day of November, nineteen hundred and forty-five. I undertake to oppose no question and no resistance to the visitation of Edward Tourneur, and further, to provide him with whatever help, knowing or unknowing, it may lie in me to provide. In return for this service, the health of my body will be restored, and remain with me for the natural span of my days.

It is however understood that if I in any sort do foreswear this contract by taking measures at any time to resist the entrance of Edward Tourneur, or by discussing with any person soever other than Deborah Lemuel the terms, conditions and existence of this

contract, it is understood that the contract becomes null and void, and the malady from which I am to be delivered will return into my body in the degree which it would by that time have attained, if this contract had not been drawn up and signed.

In the name of the Lord Satan,

With my blood I hereby inscribe my name."

She finished reading, and pushed her spectacles up on to her forehead, and looked at him. His face was like candle-wax. His eyes were closed. She did not give him much time to lie back reflecting.

"What are you waiting for?"

His lips moved, but the words were scarcely audible.

"Must I sign it, Miss Lemuel?"

"You'll be dead soon, if you don't, and you'll be dead a long time."

"I don't care, Miss Lemuel."

"There's other people besides yourself to think of. Get it over, Gunning. Sign!"

He held out his hand, his eyes still closed. She dipped the wet pen into the ink.

"Here," she said. "I've dipped it into the ink for you."

He opened his eyes, and took the pen from her with a hand that trembled like the shadow of a leaf.

"Be a man!" she said to him. She placed the document within reach of his pen. "Here! Where it says: 'signed!' " she commanded again. He wrote. One letter of his name, then another, then another, went down on the page. The signature was concluded. James Gunning.

She breathed on it. Her eyes danced merrily in her skull.

"I'll sign it, too," she said. She took the book from him, slipped her spectacles on to her nose, and wrote down her name: *For the Lord Satan: Deborah Lemuel.* She breathed upon her own name, too, and the whole document. It did not seem so much that she wished to dry the ink, as to assure life to something just born and hardly living yet. She held the document before her eyes and gazed on it tenderly. Then she read it out, word for word, in a

sort of happy murmur. She seemed almost to have forgotten Jim Gunning, having extracted from him the thing she wanted.

But no. Of course she would continue to have need of him. Indeed her real use for him was only just beginning. She turned to him and saw that his eyes were closed, his whole body still as stone. For one moment of blinding fury she thought he was dead, she thought her enemy, God, in the last moment had snatched the victory from her friend, Lucifer. Then reason got the better of her. She placed the finger of one hand over his lips and felt the faint air come through. With the other hand she felt his pulse.

"You're all right, my boy," she breathed. "How like my other boy you are, as you lie there." She turned her head towards the door as if so soon the other boy might enter room and marrow. "It will be easy, Edward," she murmured. "But you'll know the time when." She bent down and kissed Jim lightly on the forehead as in former days she had kissed Edward. "Stay there a moment, my precious," she whispered. "I'll be back with you."

She went out and into the kitchen, where there was half a bottle of brandy in a cupboard, and came back with it. Jim still lay calm as stone. She poured out a measure of brandy into a tumbler, and placed it at Jim's lips.

"Here you are, my boy," she said, slapping his cheeks again and again. She let the brandy trickle down into his mouth. "Come back, Gunning! Come back!"

The fire of the brandy licked his throat. A wash of color came into his cheeks. He moaned, and opened his eyes.

"There's a good boy," she said briskly. "Wake up, now! You're going to have a nice little meal, Gunning! You must eat and drink! You're going to get well. Come. Let me prop your pillows up for you. Have some more brandy if you feel like it."

She propped his pillows up, then lifted the document from the table and placed it in her black and white bag. "I'll take this with me!" she announced, and went out of the room, leaving the door open. She went into the kitchen, leaving the kitchen-door open, too. Then as she got the meal ready, she sang snatches from

half a dozen songs, one after the other, interrupting them only to address one or other of the animals.

"Dashing away with a smoothing iron (she sang)
Dashing away with a smoothing iron
Dashing away with a smoothing iron
She stole my heart away.

"Stop that now, Chappie, do you hear? You'll lick a hole in my shoe!

"Ye hills and vales of pleasure
Ye woods with verdure drest
Where every thought of pleasure
So oft hath charmed my breast."

"I've never heard her sing before," Jim Gunning said to himself. "How happy she is! What funny old-fashioned songs they are! I didn't know old women can have such funny nice high sweet voices! I've only heard old women sing when they've had a few gins or a pint or two of apple-juice. They like apple-juice. It's cheap and nice. I can't stand the stuff myself. Keep on thinking. Of anything—doesn't matter what. Is Jimmy the newsboy doing the Paddington Street stand all right? That asthma will get him down one of these days. That brown pullover Sal said she was knitting for me: do you remember the grey one?—one sleeve was lighter than the rest. The brown one will be the same all over, Sal's a clever kid, never makes the same mistake twice. Keep on thinking about anything, anything, except what's just been. She's singing again:"

"I know a valley sweet and golden
I know a valley fair to see,
Here where the dreams of life be folden
One with the veil and the slumbering sea."

"A couple of pints of apple-juice, and there you are, one with the veil and the slumbering sea. It's cheaper than gin, the quick way to heaven, the old dames call it. Heaven. I know who isn't

going to heaven any more, but what do *we* care. There isn't any heaven to go to.

"But what the hell! I'm going to get well now! I'll sing, too! I'm going to get well!" Suddenly there was an ecstasy inside him like a lot of blood in his brain that threatened to explode and shatter it. His teeth almost met in his lower lip. He clenched his fists. Great scalding tears gathered in his eyes.

It may have been a coincidence or it may not, but within two or three days there was a visible and notable improvement in Jim Gunning's general condition. Whether there was a spectacular improvement in the actual condition of his lungs cannot be stated. Miss Lemuel had omitted to bring in a specialist from Inverness, if one was there, or further south, from Edinburgh. Only he could have pronounced an opinion on the subject, and that a tentative one. And now that almost from day to day Jim's condition seemed to be improving, there seemed no necessity to call anyone in. His color improved, some vitality came back into his eyes, and he began to put on the weight he had lost during the dreadful weeks that had followed the hemorrhage.

In the spells of fine weather, Miss Lemuel made him sit out in a deck chair on the lawn, as near as possible to the shelter of the porch, in case of a sudden shower. There he would sit from hour to hour, his head following the sun like a sun-flower, from south-east to south, south to south-west, south-west to west. The busy days had come back to the croft again. These were the days of potato planting, and ploughing, and sowing. Hughie Ross was on hand, with Jamie Kinross, a shambling, tow-haired young man from a croft up the strath; but there was always a good deal for Miss Lemuel and Agnes to do. Miss Lemuel did not in the least mind Agnes preparing Jim's meals for him, while she herself was busy with the garden or the dairy and the hundred and one things that claimed her attention. If Agnes got in the way of attending on Jim, it would be good practice for the day when she would be attending on Edward. She had better get used to it.

While the well-being of Jim's body increased, the nerves which

had been stretched so taut during the period that had gone by, lay relaxed and loose like wet string. He had known pangs of conscience; it would be impossible to find any other name for the dismay and fear that had haunted him. He knew no conscience now. He had had longings for his wife and son more ravaging than he had ever known before. For the time being his wife and son seemed far-off, self-sufficient. They did not need him. He did not need them. So it was for the time being.

There was only one anxiety which troubled him at this time. He had always been one for faithfully fulfilling a bargain. He would sometimes make himself a nuisance with his punctiliousness. He could not, in fact, bear to be indebted to anybody. A debt must be discharged to the last halfpenny.

The Devil, or Master Satan, however you called him, was manifestly fulfilling his part of the bargain. That was fixed as firmly in his brain as the spine in his skeleton. It was up to him sooner or later to fulfil his own part of the bargain.

He was to open himself up to Edward, to let Edward in. He was to *be* Edward.

"But how can I do that, Miss Lemuel?" he asked her one night. "I'm still me. I feel myself me all the way everywhere." He passed the tips of the fingers of his right hand along the spines of his left fingers till they came to the finger-nails.

She smiled gently. "He'll come. You'll know nothing about it. He'll go. Then you'll be Gunning again." He looked hardly less puzzled than before. "Have you ever had teeth out by gas?" she asked him.

"Yes. Why?"

"Because you may have had an experience something like this one. It happened to me a long time ago when I had these two teeth out at the back here." She pointed to a corner of her mouth. "I told myself I would quote the words of a famous poem, Poe's *The Raven*, so long as I was conscious. Inwardly, of course. I wanted to see if I could remember how far I had got when I came round, and if I could go on with the poem. So I started the recitation and while I was reciting I heard the voices of the dentist

and the anaesthetist talking to each other. 'Good heavens!' I told myself, 'I'm not yet under the anaesthetic, and they're going to take my teeth out.' So I made signs at them to make them understand I was not yet under. But all they said was: 'Spit it out! It's all over now!'

"Do you see, Gunning? Between being conscious and reciting *The Raven*, and being conscious and making signs, I just had not been there. I had not been myself. It will be the same with you. You will not be there. You will not be you. You will be Edward."

He shrugged his shoulders. "You understand these things. I don't. I hope it's going to be all right." Twilight, the smoke-grey Persian, readjusted himself as Jim changed his position in the bed. "Sorry, Twilight," he apologized. The amber-rimmed eyes looked at him and looked away.

"He's not too heavy for you?" asked Miss Lemuel.

"No," he said. "He's like smoke. You don't know he's there." A thought fluttered into his mind. "Sal was going to buy a Persian cat once from a woman in Staines who bred 'em. Then she said it frightened her."

"Edward hasn't met Twilight yet. You'll be glad to meet Edward, won't you, Twilight?" asked Miss Lemuel, scratching the base of his skull with her long leathery finger. The cat protruded the tip of his coral pink tongue, as if he relished exceedingly the prospect of the forthcoming meeting with Edward.

She had been working long and well on her plans, and when the time came to move Jim out of her bedroom, she felt she did a useful thing by moving him not back to his own bedroom again, but to the bedroom above the kitchen which Edward had once occupied. She told him it was a better room for him, because it had its own water-basin, and because it led off the kitchen and she could take his food up to him more conveniently. But that was not the reason. She felt that it might affect him as much as anything that had been said or done that he should be in Edward's bed, rest his head on Edward's pillows, and have the self-same

things to look on night and morning that Edward had looked on while he was still alive.

She had no idea when and where Edward would come, but she knew that the time for the fruition of her plans was at hand. She would do nothing to hasten it. It was not impossible that ill-advised action on her part might dislocate a cog in the delicate machinery which was now pulsing steadily, finely, like a bird's throat.

Yet the hour could not be far off, and the place, surely, must be close at hand. She could see no harm in spending the night more regularly than her habit was in Edward's hut. That was the place where she had always felt him closest to her. There she recited his poems aloud, and then went on to study the Books. It was the place above all she had kept intact for him.

So in middle May she was there one night, and it was as before, he did not come. She was awake for several hours dreaming, reading the Books, dreaming again. And at last she turned the lamp out, and stretched herself out on Edward's divan, and fell asleep for two hours or so, with the Moorish rug stretched across her.

Hunish, beside her, was restless that night; and so was Twopence, the black cat with the white anklets, who alone of the three cats did not feel himself out of sorts there. And because Agnes had something of the simplicity and sensitiveness of animal creatures, she, too, over in her bothy, was restless that night. So she soon proved, for she did something she had not done before. She rose from her bed and came within thirty or forty feet of Edward's hut. Then she called out, in a thin and quavering voice:

"Madam, madam!"

Miss Lemuel rose from her chair and went to the window.

"What is it, Agnes? You should be in bed!"

"Are you all right, madam?"

"Of course I'm perfectly all right."

"Can I brew you a cup of tea, madam?"

"Thank you, Agnes! I have the little methylated stove here if I want some! To your bed, Agnes!"

"Goodnight, madam!"

"Goodnight, Agnes!"

The night after that, the second night, Miss Lemuel was in Edward's hut once more. Again Edward did not come. She was in the hut on the third night. It was a night of no moon, but in those regions, and in that time of year, darkness is brief. She sat in the blue easy chair which had been Edward's since early boyhood. She sat dozing, a book on her knee, the lamp turned low. She rested almost as well leaning back in that chair as lying stretched out on the divan.

She was awakened by the sound of Hunish whimpering at the door.

"He's dreaming," she muttered, and did not open her eyes. But the whimpering went on. He was scratching at the door now.

"Very well," she murmured, rising from her chair. "Are you expecting a visitor, dog-a-wog?" she asked, opening the door. He shot out into the night, into the dark fields away from the house. She turned from the door and looked towards the divan where Twopence had been curled up. Twopence was still there. "You're not frightened, are you, Twopence?" she said. "You're not an old scare-baby." She turned again to close the door when it occurred to her there was more light in the atmosphere than there ought to be. She looked at her watch.

"Is it dawn already?" she asked herself. "Isn't it too soon? Has Agnes lit the lamp in her bothy?" She went over to the window, but there was no light in Agnes's place. Then she knew that the light had been lit in Edward's room, the room where Jim now slept. The body of the house lay between her eyes and Edward's room, but the light released into the night air was refracted from leaf and trunk; it hung here under the trees like a pale mist.

"Why has Gunning got up from his bed?" she asked herself. "He's been sleeping well, hasn't he? Is it . . ."—a thrill of dreadful exultation burned through her heart like an electric current . . . "is it Edward who has risen where Gunning lay down?"

She heard sounds now, with ears sharpened to the delicacy of a deer's. Was not this the sound of feet coming down the staircase into the kitchen? Were not the feet moving from the kitchen

into the passage? The feet were hesitating, were they not? Was that the door of her own room being tried? Was not this the sound of a hand upon the latch door, the sound of the door opening?

She was across the floor-space between the hut-window and the hut-door swift as a lizard's shadow. She flung the door wide open, and standing there in the threshold, she saw a young man approach her over the black-green lawn, a young man with the features and bearing of Jim Gunning, and wearing his clothes.

She stepped down out of the hut and held out her hands.

"Edward!" she called out. "Is that you, Edward?"

A voice answered her from out of Gunning's throat. The sound was harsh and wooden, rather like the mechanical reproduction of a voice, than the voice itself.

"Of course it's me, Aunt Deborah! I tried your room. You weren't in. How are you, Auntie?"

The movements of the jaw left and right, upward and downward, were rigid. The lips did not quite come together at the ending of the labial sounds. It was like the performance of a ventriloquist's doll, a performance which would be improved.

"Is that really you, Edward?" she breathed. "At last? At last?"

"You jolly well know it's me, Aunt Deborah! You've done a good job of work!"

She put her hands around the back of his head. For a moment her lips were on his forehead, then they were away again.

"You can kiss me, too, old chap," she said. "I won't think it sloppy."

He did to her as she had done to him. He put his hands round the back of her head, and brought her forehead to his lips. His lips were as soft and cold as December moss. Then he turned his eyes towards the open door of the hut.

"I see you've taken over, Auntie," he said.

"Only till you came back," she assured him. She reached out her hand and took his, and led him up into the hut. He stumbled on the raised step.

"Careful, Edward!" she bade him.

"It's been a long time," he said. "I'd forgotten." He looked

round the hut, but there was not enough light to see. "Turn up the lamp a bit, will you, dear?" He looked down at his fingers and manipulated them, as a pianist does before getting down to the keyboard. "They're bound to be a bit stiff for a time, you know."

"Yes, dear," she said, and turned up the wick. "Have I kept it as you wanted it to be?" He looked round, taking stock of the books, the tables, the divan-bed, the sporting-gear, the pipes, the ash-trays.

"That brown tobacco jar's gone," he said, "the one I bought in Ely. Where is it?"

"I'm sorry, Edward dear. I knocked it on the floor one day while dusting. The rest's all right, isn't it?"

He patted her on the back affectionately. "Wizard show!" he said. "What a sportsman you are."

"Sit down!" she bade him. She pointed to the blue easy chair.

"What about you?" he hesitated.

"I'll sit on the edge of the bed, as I always used to."

He sat down a little awkwardly, like an old man stiff with rheumatism. He had his hands round the arm-rests.

"I'll have to limber up a bit," he said. "Hello, the spring's still gone." He meant the spring in the left hand arm-rest. "You said you were going to get it put right."

"I will, my dear. I've had a lot on my mind. Will we be able to get it into the back of Daisy? We'll have the whole thing re-covered."

"Daisy? Is Daisy still going? Good old war-horse! Oh Aunt Deborah, this is terrific! It's so miserable out there!"

"Don't think about it, Edward, while you're here with me. What is it, my boy, what is it?" He was trying to say something, but his emotion made it difficult. He was stroking his cheeks and chin with the finger-tips of both hands. Then the fingers went up to the forehead. Then they stroked the skin behind his ears.

"It's so *smooth*," he brought out, "so *smooth*. You can't guess how horrible it used to be. The feel of the skin, as soon as they let you touch it. It didn't seem to be me at all. Tell me—" he started.

"Yes, Edward?" The tears were in her eyes.

"This fellow . . ." He got hold of his jacket and tugged it away from his body, as if all that belonged to the other young man was the suit of clothes. "He knows?"

"He knows everything, everything. He knows more about you than he knows about himself."

"Tough luck on him! Well, we can't worry about *him*."

"It's a bargain," she pointed out. "You know that?"

"Is it? You'll have to tell me! How heavy it all feels!" He lifted his arms from the chair, and they dropped again, as if they were made of lead. "It's like being in a diver's suit, very deep down."

"It's bound to be hard at first, Edward, but it'll be easier in time. You'll be able to spend more and more time with me. I'm sure of that. We're going to be so happy, Edward; there's so much to do. All we didn't have time for. We'll forget about the things in between."

"Are all the birds' eggs all right?" he asked. He rose with difficulty, and walked over to the little nest of drawers which contained them.

She went after him, and felt his forehead. It was damp with the before-dawn air.

"You're tired, Edward. We must not run risks. If something happened to *him*"—she touched the shell of Jim Gunning's body—"it would be hard to do all this over again. You must promise me to run no risks, Edward."

"Trust me, Auntie. I say, where are you taking me?"

"You mustn't think I'm fussing you, Edward. But it's the first time. We must go slowly, slowly. I'm going to take you to your room, old chap, and get you into your bed, and sit and talk to you. I'll stay with you as long as you're awake."

He pouted a little in a way he always had when he was crossed.

"Can't we stay here, and you'll make a cup of tea, and we'll go on chatting? I see you've still got the little silver methylated-spirits stove."

"I think we ought to go, Edward. You're looking pale." She had taken him down the step out of the hut. "Oh Edward! Edward! How wonderful it is to have you with me again!" Her lip quiv-

ered. She fumbled for her black and white bag and brought out a handkerchief.

"No slops now, old girl. That's not like you a bit. All right, Auntie dear, let's go!"

She led him across the lawn into the house. He needed her help a good deal. He leaned on her quite heavily. She took him through the kitchen, though it was hard to get him away, and up the staircase, into his own room.

"I'll help you," she said. "Sit down. I'll take your shoes off."

"Oh, Aunt, I had so much fussing in E.G. How long was I there?"

"Come along, my boy. Sit down. I'm quite used to it. Jim—the other one—he was very helpless for a time, you know. He's only just got on to his feet again."

"Is he a decent sort, Auntie?"

"He's quite a good fellow. Come along now, the other foot."

She undressed him, and got a pair of pyjamas out of a drawer for him. They were his own pyjamas, not Gunning's. She kept them specially aired for him. They were silk, with broad blue stripes. She folded Gunning's pyjamas, and laid them on the chest of drawers. Then she straightened the pillows under him. Then once more she kissed him on the forehead.

"Goodnight, Edward, my boy. Come to me soon again."

"As soon as I can make it, Aunt Deborah. I'm awfully tired. Goodnight, Aunt."

She went downstairs and out of the house again. Dawn was shuddering on the rough edges of the eastern horizon. The greenness of young birch leaves lay on the estuary waters. She looked towards the up-thrusting lances of the eastern sun and saw them blunted through a curtain of tears. There was a great clashing of cymbals in the air. The long edges of sea and land, the circular layers of clouds, shuddered with fire and glory.

She threw herself down on the lawn, crouched on all fours, and struck the dew-wet grass again and again with her forehead.

"I thank you, Lord Satan," she murmured. "I thank you, Lucifer, Prince of the Morning."

Coming out of her bothy, to attend to the milking of the cows, Agnes saw Miss Lemuel thus abased.

"Heaven help the poor old lady!" said fat Agnes. "The Devil has her truly!" She was by birth an Orangewoman, and one that did not hold by Papist practices. But she saw nothing for it but to make the sign of the cross, as the Romans do, on her forehead and over her bosom.

"The poor lost old lady!" moaned fat Agnes, and tittered, and shuffled off to do her milking.

Jim Gunning lay long abed this morning, and it would be midday soon. Miss Lemuel had been up to him at nine o'clock as usual with a buttered biscuit and a cup of tea, but he slept so soundly she would not waken him. When it was near midday, and he still had not risen, she went up to his room, and shook his shoulder. She did not know, when she awakened him, which of the young men would answer her.

"It's late," she said. "I think you'd better get up."

There was an unintelligible muttering from the bed.

"Get up!" she repeated.

The young man opened his eyes.

"Oh, is that you, Miss Lemuel?" he asked. "Is it late?"

"Yes, Gunning. You've slept a long time. But that's all right. Stay in bed, if you'd like to."

"No, no," he said. "How late is it? What? Ten minutes to twelve!" He half-rose from the bed. "Oh I feel tired this morning. I don't feel as if my limbs belonged to me. Hello! What's this?" He was looking down at the pyjamas he was wearing, feeling the texture between finger and thumb. "It's another pattern! They're silk! They're not mine!" A pair of pyjamas lay folded on the chest of drawers. "Those there must be mine," he said. "Yes, they are!"

"Don't worry," she said. "You must have gone into one of Edward's things last night instead of your own. You're welcome to them! Edward wouldn't mind in the least! Come! Get dressed,

Gunning. You'll feel better out in the sunshine." She drew his curtains. "See what a fine day it is!"

"These pyjamas," he said. "It's funny. I could swear I didn't go into one of the other drawers. O.K. Miss Lemuel. I'll get up." He yawned.

"I'm awfully busy," she told him. "Lunch will be a bit late."

"Suits me," he said.

He was out on a deck chair in front of the porch when she came in to get the lunch ready. There was an air of bustle about her, as if a whole lot of fresh things to be done had come up.

"There'll be just a cold lunch," she told him as she passed. "We'll make up for it tonight. I'll call you when it's ready."

"Can I help, Miss Lemuel?"

"No. Not after the night you've had. Take the sun while it's there."

About ten minutes later she called him. She could turn out a very presentable meal in no time if she felt like it.

"Ready, Gunning?"

"Coming, Miss Lemuel!"

He came into the house and down the step into the kitchen. He made for the side of the table where his chair usually was. But there was no chair there. There was only a chair at Miss Lemuel's side, and a chair at Edward's. There were only two places laid, not three. Not three, as three had been, for so many months now.

He stood still for a moment. He felt his heart tapping like a mallet.

"Come along, Gunning, my boy. Sit down!"

He approached the table on those legs which did not seem altogether his any more. He sat down on the chair. Then, his jaw dropped, the eyes dark with inquiry, he looked into her eyes.

She was smiling. She closed her eyes, and answered his question, nodding once, then nodding a second time.

"Oh Miss Lemuel," he breathed, and placed his hands against his face.

"Come along, Gunning," she said shortly. "You mustn't let that tomato soup get cold! Have your lunch!"

CHAPTER 8

On the night of that same day Jim Gunning sought to question Miss Lemuel about his possession by Edward Tourneur. But she saw exactly what he wished to speak about, and gave him no opportunity. When he saw her again at lunch the day after, and again she sought to avoid his questioning, he stood up at his place at the table.

"Miss Lemuel," he said. "I've got the right to know."

"Sit down, Gunning," she ordered him. "What have you got the right to know?"

"Whether he came again last night."

"I'm not aware you have any right to question me. He did not come last night."

He hesitated a moment. Then he sat down.

"He was there the night before, wasn't he?"

"He was. Why do you ask? I told you it will make no difference to you. He'll come and go. You'll not be aware of it."

"Were you satisfied?"

"My dear boy. Is that what was worrying you? I was very satisfied."

"Good. I was very tired yesterday morning. You know that?"

"I assure you, Gunning, you needn't worry. You'll get used to each other."

"All right, Miss Lemuel. I wanted to know. That's all." They continued with their meal.

The possession of Jim Gunning next took place some five nights later, and again when he was asleep. Edward Tourneur rose and dressed, and knocked at his aunt's bedroom door. She dressed in her turn and they went out together into the moonlit moorland.

They were intensely happy, and Edward was for walking all the way up to the summit of Carn Gorm.

"I'll race you, Aunt Deborah," he teased her.

"How like you, Edward dear," she had at him. "You've been like that ever since you were a baby. You won't remember jumping into a tarn a hundred feet deep before you could swim? No, old chap, you must take things easily." They went not much further, and sat down by a spring, and ate the sandwiches they had brought with them. It seemed to Miss Lemuel that that half-hour was worth all the years of contumely.

They rose to go, and turned to look down on the house. The straws of thatch were like dark water combed by a rake of wind. The night-light shone in the hut, diffusing its mild light on the books within, the velvet-smooth lawn beyond, the flanks of the walnut tree.

"We'll read tonight, Edward," she said. "Perhaps your own Davenant. Or Francis Thompson. I'll read to you as long as you like." (She remembered his mouth was not yet at ease with any but the simplest words).

"No," he said. "Please. No."

"Or you might like to write. I came across one or two unfinished poems. I'll show you where they are. Then I'll lie down on the couch, and turn away from you, and you won't know I'm there. Or I'll go to my room, if you prefer it."

"I don't want to read or write, Aunt Deborah," he said. "My eyes don't feel as strong as they used to be. They don't get things quite into focus. Besides, I don't want to. I've been quiet long enough. If I lie still, I just want grass under me, or heather, or pine-needles. Just that."

"Yes, my dear Edward," she soothed him. "You shall do just as you like. Later on, maybe. You're such a *good* poet, you know."

He shrugged his shoulders doubtfully.

"Maybe," he said. "Come along, Aunt. We'll get mobile."

From Jim's demeanor next day she could not gather whether he was aware that the possession had taken place a second time; he made no reference to it. But she saw that the shoes Edward had worn, which must certainly have become muddy in the boggy hollows, were brilliantly polished. The polish on his shoes had always been a matter to which Jim gave considerable attention, even when he felt weak and wretched. Gunning must have made certain deductions.

The first possession of the waking Jim took place half a week later. It was after lunch and they were drinking a cup of tea. She herself preferred coffee, but he had the British working man's indifference to coffee, so she indulged his preference for tea at the meals they took together. She could well afford to, she thought. She had something to thank him for.

He was sitting in the chair that had earlier been reserved for Edward. She had requested him to ignore the taboo since the signing of the contract. She sat on the easy chair facing him. A low table between them held the tray and the tea-things. There had been silence between them for some minutes, when suddenly she heard the rattle of a tea-cup in a saucer. Jim's right hand was shivering as if a cold fit of malaria had seized him. He managed to get the tea-cup down on to the table, while his brain still remained aware of the cup in his hand and the table beside him. Then his body fell back against the curve of the chair. The eyes closed. The arms fell till the palms of the hands were around the knees.

Her eyes travelled swiftly to the door then back again along the stretch of floor to the chair. It was as if she expected to intercept a glint, a flicker, of something moving, before it took up its lodging in the body of its servant. But she saw nothing, only the expansion of Jim Gunning's chest, then its contraction, as with a deep sigh the air was expelled from it. This happened once again. She saw the lips part as if it were through that entrance that the returned youth must pass.

Then Edward Tourneur shook his head violently two or three times, and opened his eyes. A drowsiness was in them, like a vapor on a mirror. Then the mist dissolved. The shade of the color of the eyes was not identical with the shade that had been there once—as the body was different, not the same. But the expression in the eyes, Miss Lemuel told herself with rapture, was exactly the expression they had always held. The lines at the corner of the eyes were alien to Gunning. They were the lines which deepened when Edward Tourneur smiled. These were Edward's eyes.

"Hello, Aunt," he said. "We've arranged it better this time, haven't we? Right on the beam! Do I get up and kiss you? Or are we less formal from now on?"

She got up from the chair.

"Stay where you are," she ordered him, her eyes kindling with delight. She went up to him and patted him approvingly on the shoulder. "The tea's quite hot," she said, and lifted the cup from the table. "Here, take it. Have you got it all right?"

"You don't think I'm pickled, Auntie?" he chaffed her. The hands held the cup a little clumsily, as the voice held the throat. He lifted the cup to his mouth, swallowed, then grimaced. "Darling!" he said. "How naughty of you! You know I can't bear sugar in my tea!"

"I'm so sorry, Edward dear. I should have poured you out a fresh cup. Here, give it me." She took the cup from him, poured the tea into the sink, then washed the cup out. Then she heated the cup again with water from the hot-water jug, and dried it.

"Still fussy about the old tea," he mocked her.

"Still talking with a Scottish accent," she countered. "Foossy!" she mocked. She returned to the topic of tea. "Milk in *afterwards*," she insisted, smiling.

"You can argue about that till the cows come home."

"Any ginger biscuits?" he wheedled, exactly as he used to as a schoolboy home from the holidays.

She rose, and took a biscuit-tin from a cupboard.

"Here you are!" she said. "I remembered. I ordered them specially for you. They're reserved." She meant she did not bring

that biscuit-tin out when it was Jim Gunning who was having tea with her.

He felt in his pockets. Yes, that was a packet of cigarettes there, and a box of matches. He took the packet out and removed a cigarette, but before he could strike a match, she had taken away the box. She lit up for him.

"You'd better go easy at first," she bade him. "Don't breathe out, dear. Breathe in."

"I'm a bit out of practice," he said. He got the cigarette going. "Don't mollycoddle me, Aunt, will you?"

"Certainly not. May I have one, too?"

"You smoke now, Aunt?" He opened his eyes wide.

"Yes, since . . ." she explained, "since . . ." She took the matches again, and lit up her cigarette. She leaned back, and looked at him. An immense pride and gratitude swelled in her breast.

"I thank you," her heart murmured. "I thank you. I thank you. I can die now. But not too soon, dear Master. Let him be with me for a time. Let him have rest."

He was already starting to his feet. He was restless.

"Relax, dear. Take it easy."

"I can't. Let's go out. Let me see things."

"Very well." She would have liked to sit there quietly for a time, talking of the thousand things there were to talk about: the old days, the days to come. But she rose with him.

They went out and moved towards his hut.

"How's my gun?" he asked. "And my rods? Has the other fellow used them?"

"No. I've kept them for you. I've looked after them." They went in, and he went over to the gun lying in its rack. He reached up for the gun, and it seemed too heavy for him.

"Later, dear," she murmured. "When you've got your strength back."

"I suppose they'll let me go fishing again, down at Ben Voith?"

"The Percivals have sold the place, dear. Of course, you wouldn't know. A woman has bought it, a widow. No, they said

she divorced him. She married a rich American. Yes, a Mrs. Winckworth."

"We'll soon get round *her*," he grinned. He had never met the woman he couldn't get round, particularly if she was one or other sort of ex-wife. "You've added a few books," he said, looking round. "Quite a number. Hello, did I have this?"

She took the volume from him. "No. I got this from Rupert's, in Cheltenham." She confirmed it from the little label pasted in the end fly-leaf.

"Oh let's go out," he cried. "Let me smell the earth, and the running water, and the meadow flowers! What month is it? And forgive me for going all poetic!" he grinned apologetically.

"June!" she told him, her eyes glowing. "And I forgive you."

"June! June!" His voice quivered. "Oh Auntie, Auntie!" He went up to her and threw his arms round her neck and hugged her. "How shall I ever thank you for all this?"

"Come, my boy! Let's go down to the stream through the Long Pasture. You've not seen the Belties before. We'll find them out there. You'll tell me what you think of them. Come, Edward!"

They set off. Agnes and Hughie Ross and young Jamie Kinross were hard at work in the fields as they passed by. They were a good deal surprised to see her sauntering off like that with Jim Gunning, when all morning she had been working like a steam-engine, as if there were far too few hours in the day to get through a quarter of the work she had proposed to do before nightfall.

It was some two hours later. Edward Tourneur sat with his back against the trunk of a willow, paddling his feet in the stream, his shoes and socks beside him. A few feet away his aunt, Miss Lemuel, sat on a fallen tree-trunk. He had been talking about the crew of "B for Beer," Bob Shuttle, the bomb-aimer, Bob Smith and Arthur Vincent, his two successive navigators, Jock Malcolm, and the rest. He seemed vaguely disturbed about them, as if he were not quite sure that he ought to be sniffing the odors of meadow-sweet, or letting the cold sweet water nibble at his fingers without having the boys in on it, too. He was talking about Bob Shuttle,

the ex-accountant's clerk, from Kidderminster. Bob had met a smashing girl, a WAAF, at a Mecca dance just before the Berlin jobs started. Not at all the usual dance hall type: they were going to get married on his next leave . . . his next leave, repeated Edward. His next leave, he said again, as if he had lost the thread of what he had been saying. His eyes closed. His head drooped on to his chest. Eks leave, he muttered incoherently, like a man in drink. Then a shudder passed through the body. Jim Gunning opened his eyes, blinked and shook his head. He looked round and took stock of the situation, the naked feet in the water, the shoes and socks beside him, Miss Lemuel sitting on the fallen tree-trunk.

"How long have I been here, Miss Lemuel?" he asked.

"About a couple of hours," she told him.

"Thank you," he muttered, "thank you. I hope you have had a good time."

"Yes, Gunning, thank you very much. It's all turning out very well indeed. From every point of view," she added. "How well you're looking!"

He took his feet out of the water, shook the water off them, then swung them around on to the bank. He reached for his socks.

"No, Gunning. You must dry your feet first. You'll catch your death of cold."

He wiped his feet perfunctorily with the socks themselves, then started pulling them on to his feet.

"You wouldn't like it at all," he said, gazing at her somberly, "if I caught my death of cold."

"I don't think you'd find it very helpful, either," she assured him coldly. "Will you find your way back, or shall I take you?"

"I can find my own way back. I'm feeling fine."

"Don't overdo it," she requested. "Put out the tea-things, please, if you feel up to it."

Jim Gunning addressed a letter to his wife on the anniversary of his arrival at Skurr nan Gillian.

"Dear Sal,

"Today it is a year since I came to this place. I am feeling well, I have not felt better than I feel now, for years. So you ask me why don't I come home. I can't tell you, Sal. If I tried to tell you, you would not believe me. Nobody in the whole world would believe me. It has happened, and it is terrible, and I can't tell you what it is. You would think I am mad, but I am not mad, and it has happened.

"So what is there for you to do, Sal? If I tell you that I love you more than I ever loved you before, you won't believe me. The only thing I beg you is not to think that anything has happened to the way I feel about you. I couldn't bear that. If I thought that, I wouldn't know what to do. I would do myself in, and perhaps not a bad thing, either.

"I am bad, Sal, and you must give me up, for your own sake, and for the kid's sake. You could go to a lawyer, and say I had left you a year ago, and refused to go back to you. What do you think of that? To write a thing like that, I can't tell you what I feel like, it's like cutting myself open with knives all over.

"What do you think, Sal? But I can't leave it to you. It's up to me, and I say you've got to do it, you've got to break away from me. I can't write any more.

With love

I am your

Jim Gunning."

He read the letter through, and then he remembered something. He remembered that Miss Lemuel was an old woman. She would die sooner or later, and then Edward Tourneur would go away. In fact she had said just that. Edward Tourneur would go away when she died. He would be free then. He would go back where he belonged, having fulfilled his part of the contract. He would go back with his lungs and everything all right. He tore the letter up and took the pieces to the hearth, then struck a match and burned them.

In a fit of pitch-black gloom he wrote another letter along the same lines some three weeks later in August. This was in his bedroom above the kitchen. This time he did not get to the end of the letter, because, the pen still in his hand, he became Edward Tourneur.

Edward Tourneur found himself in his bedroom slippers, his coat hanging over the chair he sat in. He picked up the letter on the table before him and read it through as far as it went. Then he put on his coat, got into his shoes, and went to his Aunt's bedroom. She sat up in bed, reading.

"Hello, Edward," she said. "It's four whole days since I've seen you."

"I found this letter on my table," he told her, and handed it to her. "He's taking it pretty badly."

"I suppose he is," she said. "But he's not doing badly out of it."

"Shall I put the letter back?" he asked.

"No. I'll keep it. I'll deal with it."

"Very well, Aunt Deborah. It's your pigeon."

"What would you like to do, Edward? I *would* like to read some poetry. I like those seventeenth century mystics more and more. They're so nearly right, and so beautifully totally wrong. If you'd rather not, of course . . ."

"If it's all right by you, Aunt, I'll go out for a walk on the moors. I refuse to get you out of bed again at this time."

"What?" she exclaimed. "Leave you to go out wandering on the moors, alone, at midnight? No, Edward, no. Let me get up! Go into the kitchen, will you? I'll be with you in two minutes."

She was still prudish about dressing or undressing before a man, though the man was Edward, her darling, and a ghost walking in a borrowed body.

Miss Lemuel did not think any purpose could be gained by keeping silent about the letter Edward Tourneur had brought her. She tackled Jim Gunning the very next day. She held the letter in her hand.

"You must forgive me, Gunning," she said. "I'm not in the

habit of taking possession of other people's correspondence. This is your letter of course?" She handed it to him. "We found it on the table in your room."

His lips tightened. He was hard put to it to keep back an outburst. Then he spoke.

"*We,*" he repeated bitterly. "You mean Edward?"

"Yes. I mean Edward."

He crumpled the letter up and stuffed it into his pocket.

"I knew something funny had happened to it," he muttered.

"There's nothing to prevent you sending off that letter," she observed. "Have you thought that the first result would be that your wife would come up here?"

"She doesn't know where I am," he said roughly.

"She'd find out. After receiving a letter like that, a woman would make it her business to find out."

"What if she did?"

"You know that you're at liberty any time to send her this address. Or I could send it myself, of course."

"What good would that do you?"

"None. It would do me no harm either."

"What are you trying to make out?"

"You're the one it would do harm to. Don't you see that, Gunning?"

"No."

"You'd be well advised to be a bit more civil. I can understand you're under considerable strain."

"I'm sorry if I talked rough, like."

"Very well, Gunning. I was saying it would not be helpful if your wife came up here just now."

"She'd do anything for me, like I'd do for her."

"Supposing you tried to tell her . . . about Edward. Do you think she'd believe you?"

"Nobody'd believe me."

"Of course quite soon she'd see for herself."

He bowed his head.

"Yes."

"What would she think?"

"I don't know."

"She'd think you're mad."

"Suppose I tried to tell her the truth, Miss Lemuel?"

"That would make no difference at all. She'd be more certain than ever that you're out of your senses. I don't think she'd be happy about that. It would upset her more . . . more than the other illness. Isn't that true, Gunning?"

"Yes, Miss Lemuel."

"Have you ever read the stories of Edgar Allan Poe?" she asked, surprisingly.

"I don't know." He was in no mood to talk or think about stories.

"I have a copy here. There's a story I should like you to read. *The Strange Case of M. Waldemar.* You don't think you've read it?"

"No."

"It tells the story of how the processes of disintegration were arrested, for forty days I think it was, after the moment of the death of this M. Waldemar. The processes were resumed, for a reason I need not go into. In a single instant the whole body collapsed into a heap of putrid jelly. A *horrible* story. Don't you think so, Gunning?"

"I know what you mean," he whispered.

"Quite. You're completely forgetting the fact that you've entered into a contract. You remember?"

He nodded. A spasm of nausea gripped his stomach. It seemed for a moment or two that he must vomit. She eyed him carefully.

"It would be easy enough to repudiate the contract," she went on. "In a matter of moments the consumption would get hold of you again. It would be the 'galloping' type. That's what they call it, isn't it? You would die. But that would not be the end of it, it would be the beginning. You would have quite a long chapter ahead of you. You understand me, don't you?"

"Yes, Miss Lemuel."

"Don't you think it would be better if we remained friends,

Gunning? You know I'll be delighted to have Mrs. Gunning here. I'm quite certain we'd be able to work something out between us. I mean, about the times when Edward comes. But we'd have to put our heads together, Gunning. We'd have to discuss it thoroughly between us . . . all three of us, Edward, and you, and I."

"I don't want her to come," he said.

"That depends entirely on you," she assured him. "Come, let's shake hands on it, Gunning, old chap."

They shook hands.

Agnes was no more than a peasant woman of a low order of mentality, but it was impossible for this condition of affairs to continue for long at Skurr nan Gillian without even Agnes getting an inkling of it. She could not but become aware that there were times when Miss Lemuel and Jim Gunning seemed to behave towards each other with a tenderness and good humor that was lacking at all times else. It was true that Miss Lemuel had been unusually kind to Jim Gunning, in the way she looked after him, and in the way she had him to meals with her at all times. But it was the kindness of an eccentric employer toward a favored servant.

Then all of a sudden they would be laughing and joking with each other as if they were the dearest of friends, almost as if they were blood relatives. He would lean on her arm with a trustfulness and affection which would be completely lacking the next time she saw them together.

Then on a certain evening she overheard them talking together. They were soon out of earshot, and when they were gone, the poor creature had quite literally to pinch her flesh to assure herself she had not been dreaming.

It was on an evening when poor Agnes's misery had got the better of her. Her misery had a twofold shape. Partly it looked like the policeman who had knocked her down and inflicted on her an experience which at once had horrified her and enchanted her to the marrow. Partly it had the shape of Jim Gunning, of

whom she had long given up her tremulous and guilty hope that he, too, might one day knock her down. On the contrary when she had come begging to his door, he had sent her away.

So from time to time Agnes had a misery, which usually she got the better of by having a good cry all by herself in her own bothy. But now and again she felt she had to get out. She wanted to make a lot of noise, crying, and in her bothy that would be overheard. So she would go up to the edge of the pine-wood on top of the hill, and yell and blubber, and get over it, and then go back. It was on such an evening that she saw Miss Lemuel and Jim Gunning making straight for the little needle-carpeted cradle between the trees where she was lying. Agnes, too, was a female, and she could not bear the thought of anyone seeing her face and eyes the way they must be at that moment. So she kept still, and slid lower down below the rim of her cradle, and hoped they would not tread on her. They approached within nine or ten feet of her, but she was in the shadow, and below their eye-level, so they did not see her. Then they stopped a moment, while Jim Gunning took out his cigarettes, and lit up.

"How about you, Auntie?" asked Jim Gunning. "I'm so sorry. I always forget you smoke." (*Auntie*, he called her. *Auntie!*)

"That's all right, Edward dear," she said. "I don't like to smoke unless I'm sitting down to it."

Edward dear!

Am I drunk? Agnes asked herself. Or are *they* drunk? I've made some mistake. That's what it is.

"Well then, Aunt Deborah, let's sit down," Jim Gunning said. Agnes's heart froze with fright.

"Not here, Edward, old chap. Let's get higher up, where there's more air. Have you lit up properly?" And they moved away.

They moved away, but they certainly were not out of ear-shot before Agnes opened her mouth to emit a loud yell. Somehow, she did not. She managed to stuff her plump fist into her mouth and stifle the yell before it got anywhere.

She was frightened. She was more frightened than anything. It was so . . . she had not the word for it . . . it was so *ghastly.*

They were not drunk. Neither of them ever got drunk. So it was something else. They were playing some sort of a game. What game was it? Was she pretending that he was her poor dear dead Edward, and was he pretending she was his dear Aunt Deborah, that used to worship the very ground he walked on?

If he *was* pretending, what was he doing it for? Was he trying to get round the poor old lady for what he could get out of it?

Or was it, maybe, the Divil's work, like everybody said, was it the Divil that was in madam? And, indeed, had she not herself seen Miss Lemuel banging her head on the green grass in the first of the morning in the way that no human creature, Catholic or Jew or Protestant, would greet the Lord God coming up from over the sea?

It was a problem to bewilder wits a good deal more stoutly-built than the wits of fat Agnes. She got up from the cradle of pine-needles, shaking her head in sore bewilderment from side to side. She was crying to herself like a small child, the tears rolling steadily down her cheeks.

"Poor Miss Lemuel," she sobbed. "And poor Mr. Gunning!" Though a simple creature, she was a kind one. She ached intolerably for some strong man in whose bosom she could lie and pour out her bewilderments. She would not mind, now, even if he knocked her down first, so long as he would give her a little guidance and comfort. Even Jamie Kinross would do, she thought mournfully, though he was a black Catholic, and had long hair on the back of his hand. He had a squint, too.

Some two weeks later Jim Gunning went down in Daisy to Braemore Bridge, where Miss Lemuel had sent him to take delivery of a parcel which was being sent to her from a station further up the line. He was quite fit enough to drive now. He had already taken the parcel out of the van, and was on his way to go through the necessary formality at the station office, when suddenly he became conscious of a necessity to see Sal more imperative than any desire which had ever assailed him in all his life

before. There was no time to debate the question in his own mind, still less to provide himself with a ticket, or anything of that sort. The signal was down, the porter was waving the green flag, the whistle announced immediate departure. The train lurched, and moved off. Jim twisted a door-handle, and flung himself into a carriage. As the train moved he caught a glimpse of Fergus the porter, standing on the platform, staring open-eyed. Jim rushed to the window.

"Hi, Fergus! Take this!" he shouted, and flung the parcel through; then he sat down and mopped his forehead.

There was plenty of time now to think things out. He was glad he had yielded to the impulse. He was glad. He almost felt like yelling out at the top of his voice how glad he was. But there were people in the carriage, who were already sufficiently alarmed, so he controlled the impulse. He would wire to Miss Lemuel as soon as he got to Inverness that he was giving himself a few days holiday. He was entitled to it so he proposed to have it. He would wire to her later the day he proposed to return. Had he money enough for the fare? he wondered. He took out his wallet and saw that he was all right. There was another difficulty, of course, a much more formidable one. Supposing Edward came while he was on the journey, or later, during the holiday, while he was still with Sal in Holloway? He would have to explain, somehow. He had better cook up some sort of explanation in advance. He had better tell her that the Scottish doctors gave him a drug to kill the bacilli in his body, and for the time being it was doing funny things to his mind: it was giving him illusions about his being someone else, in fact, Edward Tourneur, the old woman's dead nephew. Doctors often did that sort of thing. They have to give you one sort of illness in order to get rid of another. Like inoculation, in a manner of speaking—though it wasn't quite the same thing. Doesn't that give you a little dose in advance of the same illness they don't want you to suffer from? While this, on the other hand . . .

Anyhow, there was no point in worrying about it. He had a

feeling Edward would keep away from him for a few days, at least. Edward had been a decent bloke in his time. Wouldn't he understand how much it meant to him to get back to see his Sal for a bit? Besides Edward had been on a visit only last night. He, Jim, did not *remember* Edward had been. He merely *knew*. He always *knew*. Even if he went to bed at night as himself, and got up as himself in the morning, still in his own pyjamas, still in bed, he *knew* if Edward had been.

So if Edward had any control over things, he would keep away. He would give him a break. After all wasn't he giving Edward a break? It was hot, wasn't it? It seemed to be always hot in this train. He remembered how hot it had been when he came to Braemore Bridge, just over a year ago. A lot had happened in that time. He had got his health back, for instance. It was up to him to hang on to it.

The first station had gone by, the second, the third. He had been over an hour in the train. It was not getting any cooler. He fanned himself with the newspaper that he had picked up at Braemore Bridge. Then the fanning dwindled, and stopped. The newspaper slipped between his fingers. The young man in the corner of the carriage closed his eyes. He seemed to have a touch of malaria, or something, from the way he shook all over; undoubtedly an ex-soldier who had picked up a packet in Burma or somewhere like that. He was asleep now, sound asleep, judging from the way his throat rattled.

But he wasn't asleep. His eyes were opening. They were wellopen now. Funny business, this malaria. He shook his head hard as if to throw a bad dream out of his head. They do say that in a sleep lasting a few seconds you can have a dream that seems to last a hundred years. He must have been a great long distance away during that quick dream of his, judging from the surprised look in his eyes as he looked round the railway-carriage and the people in it, and the country going by outside the window. It was as if he hadn't expected to find himself in a railway-carriage at all. Perhaps, there *was* some mistake. The train reached the next

station some ten or fifteen minutes later, and the young man got out quickly as if he had left his best girl behind somewhere.

The next train back to Braemore Bridge left some half-hour later, carrying Edward Tourneur with it. He got out of the train on to the platform, and walked out towards the barrier. On his way he was aware that the porter, laden with parcels, was staring at him with considerable surprise. It was the same old porter he had always known, wasn't it? Oh yes it was. What was his name? Oh yes, Fergus.

"Hi, Fergus!" he said easily, lifting a hand in salute. "How're you?" And he walked on.

"What aboot ye'r package?" Fergus called out after him.

"Oh yes, the package," said Edward. He waited till Fergus brought him the package.

"Ye've no' been long," said Fergus.

"Depends how you look at it," smiled Edward. "So long, Fergus old boy!" And he went off.

The porter stood on the platform scratching his head. "Thon young mon from London's a wee bit drunk," he told himself. "Seems to me a wee strange in the head."

"It's a bit of a walk," Edward said to himself, as he got out of the station. Oh no, it was all right. There was old Daisy sheltering from the sun under a beech-tree, exactly as a cow does. He felt in his pockets for the ignition-key. Yes, there it was, in the back hip-pocket.

"It's easy," he told himself; and got into the car, and drove back to Skurr nan Gillian.

CHAPTER 9

Aunt Deborah was a dear, of course she was (thought Edward). But she was a bit on the fussy side, there was no getting away from that. She was getting old, of course. How old would she be? Seventy? Oh yes, at least seventy. Of course you had to keep on the right side of Aunt Deborah. Things wouldn't have got very far without the old dear, and without the old dear they wouldn't last very long.

But it would be a good thing to get away from time to time, both from her and from Skurr nan Gillian. He had already tried it two or three times. Once he thought it would be a good thing to get away in Daisy, but on looking for the ignition-key, he found it wasn't there. She was a sly one. It had been in that chap's pocket the time he had found Daisy at Braemore Bridge Station, and driven it back home so sweet and easy. It hadn't been in evidence since that time. Perhaps she didn't want that chap to be able to move about freely. Perhaps she wanted to fasten a bit of ball and chain on his own ankle. Anyhow, there it was. Daisy was out. Then once or twice he had sloped off on his own into the moor, but she had come up on him somehow, just like that, from nowhere. She was a shrewd old party, our Aunt Deborah.

So one afternoon he made up his mind to wander off to Ben Voith, the big white house on the bank of Strath Groban down the hill and beyond the woods. The owners of Ben Voith were the owners of all the land that marched with Skurr nan Gillian,

and in the old days the former owners, the Percivals, had been very kind to him. They let him shoot over their land and fish their waters whenever he was on holiday or on leave. They had not got on very well with Aunt Deborah, or rather she had not got on very well with them. She never had got on with the gentry. That was one of her little foibles.

But that had made no difference to him at all. He had often had some jolly good fun down at Ben Voith. It was time he went to see how the land lay down there. The river meadows of Ben Voith were absolutely lovely; so were the woods, and the lawns, and the gardens. And it was certainly one place where old Auntie could be relied on not to pop up suddenly from around the back of your neck.

So off he went that afternoon to Ben Voith. It was a curiously calm windless day, with a sheen of light on both sky and sea, in which the splashes of color that were tracts of bracken were like tongues of gold and scarlet set in a silver-grey monochrome of Vermeer. He kept away to the right of the field where Hughie Ross and Jamie Kinross were carting hay to the wire fences, only to come up against the beetroot face of Agnes staring from out of a thicket of bramble-bushes, where she was collecting berries, a milk-pail over her arm.

"Good God!" he cried. The sudden sight was so comical; the lank hair sprawling down her forehead and cheeks like tongues of ink, and the eyes so blue and silly and innocent. "Ha! ha! Ha!" he roared. She was so funny. "Ha! Ha! Ha!"

But she did not say anything, not a word. She stood there, gawking.

The mood changed. Irritation flushed from him like the spark from a flint.

"What are you staring at?" he shouted.

"Nothing, sir, nothing!" she replied, her lips wobbling like a jellied soup.

"To hell!" he muttered, and strode on. I wonder, he asked himself, I wonder what she knows. Who does she think I am? Would she call that chap "sir," too? A fat lot I care!

The mood of well-being was quickly restored; the late sun was so warm, and the air so full of fine odors. He took his time, and nearly an hour went by before he found himself among the Ben Voith woods. The higher levels were chiefly pine, but nearer the river there was great richness of shape and color among planted tracts of ash and fir and spruce, laurel and birch, larch and yew. He cut transversely down and across the woods, northward and eastward, so that he should reach the river some little distance from the house. He could already hear the water threshing among the boulders, and soon he was at the water's edge, with the meadow to right and left of him as green and translucent as water, and the willow branches like a cascade of green water coming down towards his head.

He sighed with content as he sat down and leaned his body against the trunk of the willow. Never since his reappearance had he felt so well at ease in both mind and body. He reached for the packet of cigarettes that he had always found in the left-hand jacket-pocket, and it was there right enough, but there was only one in it.

"I'll have to get Aunt to see there's always a full packet on hand," he told himself, and lit up, and inhaled deeply, then slowly, contemplatively, luxuriously, exhaled again. Wondering if he still had the art of making smoke-rings, he pursed his mouth, and tried. It was not a bad effort since he was so much out of practice. He smoked the cigarette down to the last inch, and felt for a pin in the lapel to impale the butt-end. But he was out of luck. Ah well. He took another two or three puffs, then threw the butt-end away. Better luck next time, he told himself, and leaned back with his folded hands between the tree-trunk and his head. Then, somewhat to his surprise, he found himself singing. He was surprised because he was no addict to solitary singing, in bathrooms or elsewhere. That was doubtless because, given rope enough in a song, he was bound to go sharp or flat, sooner or later, usually before he had delivered himself of some fifteen or twenty notes. His star turn at parties had always been *Drink to me only*, which he could often sing correctly as far as "cu-up" before

he went off the rails. But here, on the bank of the River Groban, it was not that dewy ditty which his voice rendered, and his ears, as it were, overheard. It was a later song, much sung by the service-men in the war that had been his undoing. To the Navy the hero of the ballad had been a sailor; to the Army a soldier; to the Air Force, of course, an airman. The air-borne forces were convinced that the hero had been a paratrooper.

"Around the park" (sang Edward) *"she wheels a perambulator,*
She wheels it in the springtime and in the month of May
And if you ask her why the hell she wheels it,
She wheels it for an airman who is far far away."

Edward sang, and he sang with mounting pleasure and incredulity. He was singing in tune, bar after bar, bar after bar, till he had reached, and sung, and sung correctly, the very last note in the verse. To the majority of human beings the pleasure of consciously keeping on singing in tune is almost unknown, because they automatically sing in tune, as they automatically see.

"She wheels it for an airman" (Edward repeated, marvelling) *"who is far far away."*

Then he betook himself to the chorus.

"Far away," he sang, *"far away."* But he was out, disastrously out. He shut his eyes and shuddered. He always knew when he was singing false. He turned his back hastily on the chorus, and attacked the next verse, the final verse of the ballad:

"Upon his grave she lays a wreath of flowers
She lays it in the springtime and the merry month of May
And when they ask her why the hell she lays it
She lays it for an airman who is six feet down."

Flawless! To the very last note flawless. He would try the chorus, which, as before, was a repetition of the last three words of the verse.

"Six feet down," he started off, *"six feet down."* It was terrible.

It was like your finger slipping down a window-pane. *"Six feet down,"* he started off again, *"six feet down."* He had it! It was perfect. And he had proceeded for several bars before he realized that he was only in tune because he was supported across the chasm by the powerful bridge of someone else's voice. He stopped. The supporting voice continued on its own: *"She lays it for an airman who is six feet down."* The last "down" came out with an almost bass plumminess and sonority. *"Down."*

He was reluctant to turn his head, because he knew he had blushed poppy-red. There is almost no contingency so embarrassing to an out-of-tune singer than to be found playing about with his voice.

But the air was juicy with silence. The singer, male or female, was obviously relishing the situation, and enjoying his embarrassment hugely. He would have to turn his head. He would have to say *something*.

He turned his head. Some dozen feet above and beyond him, on the meadow path, a tall broad-shouldered woman stood, a vast grin plastered across her face. She was staring at him with bright green eyes, in which her mirth twinkled like the evening sunbeams on the green water close by. Her hair was jet-black and close-cropped. She wore a green silk tie on a white silk shirt-blouse. There was a mannish set to her tailored black coat and skirt. She was leaning forward towards him, supported on the silver knob of an ebony cane.

"I . . . I . . . I beg your pardon," said Edward. "I hope you don't mind." That was an extremely silly remark to make. How could anybody mind if he couldn't sing in tune? It was *his* funeral.

"But I do," said the woman unreasonably. She had what is called a horsey voice. The words came from deep down a profound chest. "You haven't any right to go off the note like that. You should be psychoanalyzed," she observed severely. "It's just a complex. Do you know Wheeler-Thompson of Devonshire Street? I'll give you a note."

"I'm afraid I don't," said Edward. "I've been like that all my life." But the woman's mirth was infectious. He found himself

smiling back at her, showing all his excellent teeth. "But you should hear me sing: *Drink to me only*," he assured her. "I can sing it right, all the way to 'within the cup.' "

"You can, can you? Very well then. Try?"

He opened his eyes and mouth simultaneously. It was like a stranger asking him to stand there and take his clothes off.

"I couldn't *dream* of it," he said. "Not unless I was absolutely pickled!"

"What a good idea!" the woman exclaimed, slapping her thigh. "We'll have to pickle you, that's all! Who are you, anyway?"

"I take it you're the new tenant, are you? From here." His gesture took in the river, and the woods, and the house beyond.

"Quite right," she said. "How did you guess? I take it you know you're trespassing? Or are you? I've only been here a couple of weeks. I wouldn't know."

"I live with my aunt on the moor behind there. A little place called Skurr nan Gillian. My name's Edward Tourneur."

"I'm Mrs. Winckworth." She came towards him with her hand outstretched. "How are you?" She seized his hand and shook it vigorously. "You'd better come along and have a drink. I was on my way back. What do you do? Are you Scottish, or what?"

"I'm really English: my people were on the stage. But I was brought up here. I suppose you notice it, a bit of an accent, I mean? My aunt tried to beat it out of me, but it wasn't any good."

"I should hope not!" Mrs. Winckworth exclaimed forcibly. He was already by her side, walking towards the house. "It's most attractive!" she went on. "I'd give pounds for it. Then everybody would know I've got a house in Scotland. Do you know Ben Voith?" she asked.

"Oh yes, I used to know it quite well in the old days. The Percivals used to have me down quite often. They were awfully decent."

"Who said I'm not decent, eh?" she demanded truculently. "Do you shoot?"

"Yes, I do a bit."

"Fish?"

"Yes, I love it."

She opened her hands wide.

"It's all yours!" she announced. "Come along and fish and shoot when you like. I suppose you ride, too?"

"Oh, Mrs. Winckworth. You're . . . you're wizard!" There was no help for it. That's what she was, just that, wizard.

"Air Force, eh?"

"Yes, Mrs. Winckworth."

"Bombers? Fighters?"

"I was a bomber-pilot."

"Splendid!" she cried out. "Splendid! Those were the boys! You must meet Bob. He's coming along to dinner tonight. He was in bombers, too." Suddenly an idea occurred to her. "Are you still in the Air Force? On leave, or anything?"

"No," he said shortly. "I had a bit of a do in late forty-three. I haven't flown since then."

"Oh, I'm sorry." Her voice and manner softened at once. She was obviously a tender-hearted creature, despite the hearty tie and collar and the ebony walking-stick. "A bit of a crack-up, eh? Tough luck, old boy!"

"Oh well. You know how it was. Just the luck of the game."

"Do you live up here?"

"Off and on."

"What's your job, Edward? I hope you don't mind my calling you Edward? You're just a kid, aren't you? I've got a daughter very nearly your age."

"Good-oh!" said Edward, rubbing his hands.

She smiled.

"Just an Air Force wolf," she said. They were in sight of the house now. Two or three cars were parked on the gravel in front of the main porch. She pointed to the house with her stick. "It's rather attractive, you know, isn't it? I like the *outside*. But there's an awful lot I want to do *inside*. You know, there isn't a bar?"

"Good Lord!" said Edward.

"No, I don't know what the last people can have been dreaming of! What did you say your job was?" she turned and asked him;

as if he had told her, and she had not quite registered what he had said in the heat of her emotion about there being no bar in the house.

"I've been away," he said, "since the autumn of forty-five."

"Really? How interesting! What have you been up to?"

He winked at her, and put his finger to his nose.

"*You* know!" he breathed.

"Ah, I see!" She lowered her voice. "Hush-hush, eh?"

"That's right!" he said.

"Good for you," she said breezily. "Come right in!" She registered the cars around the place. "It's been one long house-warming party since I moved in." He followed her up the stone steps that led up to a pillared portico. Then she turned. "I like you!" she said. "You're all right. We'd better like each other," she warned him. "We're neighbors!"

"You're a sport, Mrs. Winckworth," he murmured.

"We're going to get you pickled," she smiled. "I want to hear you sing *Drink to me only.*" The inner door, mainly glass panel, was opened for them by a man in a black coat and herring-bone trousers. "Thank you, Maguire," she said pleasantly. "Come straight in, Edward!" She was always pleasant with servants. They were ready to lay their lives down for her.

But it was all Maguire could do not to let the handle of the door slip from his hand and swing back straight into his employer's face. For the young man that his employer was bringing in to the house through the front door, with every mark of friendship and equality, was a young man he had had a drink with only two nights ago in the Public Bar of the Glamaig Arms. As far as he could remember, he had gathered he was a farm-hand up in one of the crofts, owned by some daft old woman. He had come up from down South somewhere, judging from his accent—from London probably. The locals had called him "Jim," he seemed to remember, when they asked him to make up a four at darts. He had played a good hand, too, even though he had stacked away the pints like a vat.

But it was some mistake, evidently. The boss, Mrs. Winckworth,

had called the young fellow "Edward," not "Jim." He couldn't be a farm-hand, he couldn't possibly. He must be a gent. It's those nips of gin, Maguire told himself. Gin always does funny things to me. He reached his hand forward as in a dream and relieved Mrs. Winckworth of her stick.

Mrs. Winckworth, with the young man close behind her, went through into the entrance-hall of Ben Voith. It was a big room with a great open fireplace, and lots of easy chairs and sofas scattered about; and a suit of armor under a staircase, which some wag had encased in a suit of bright yellow pyjamas. There were the pelts of animals on the floor, and wide-branching antlers on the walls. A number of tables were scattered about, laden with glasses and bottles, trying hard and successfully to remedy the absence of a bar. And there were young people up and down the place, and a few people not quite so young. Altogether it was a heartening sight. Ben Voith had not been anything like so festive in the epoch of the Percivals, who had been Low Church.

Mrs. Winckworth opened wide her arms and her chest.

"Hello! How's everybody?" she called out. "Sorry, I'm late! The Air Force led me astray!"

"Wincks!" the older people cried. "Peter!" the younger people cried. They were an odd urban assemblage, curiously unrelated to these dark pinewoods, these sombre moorlands that encompassed them, these grey North seas that flanked them. "Where have you *been*?" they cried. "We're worn *out*, waiting for you!"

"Where have I *been*?" asked Mrs. Winckworth. "Ask Edward here. And he won't tell. Will you, Edward?" She winked.

"Not one word!" murmured Edward. "I won't breathe a word!"

"Oh, I forgot," said Mrs. Winckworth. "This is Edward Tourneur. He lives up the hill there. There are probably some people here you know, aren't there?"

Edward examined the company calmly.

"No," he said. "I've been away so long."

"Well, give us a drink, somebody!" demanded Mrs. Winckworth. "We're parched!"

It was a good cocktail party. Everybody was at the top of his form. Half the people there were house-guests of Mrs. Winckworth. The rest had come in from the big houses within fifteen or twenty miles of Glamaig. For the most part everyone had already met everyone else in London or in parties at Henley, or Ascot, or over at Cowes. The older people went back further than that, to pre-war sun and baccarat and bathing-suits and whiskey-sours at Saint Tropez, or Garda, or Miami.

Edward Tourneur could not talk about these things and places. He had been a schoolboy before the War, and then the war had come, and he had had a hefty spell in hospital, and then he had been abroad somewhere, he had been out of circulation. Despite that, he held his own satisfactorily. He was a little shy, you could see that, but he was easy and charming, and his manners had a pleasant old-fashioned quality. The party did not break up till about eight-thirty, and then only because one or two people turned up dressed for dinner, which meant that Mrs. Winckworth had further duties that night as a hostess.

So the cocktail party broke up at length, but not before a number of people had requested Edward to come along and have a drink with them, or do a day's fishing, or have a spot of lunch or dinner. And Edward himself was saying goodbye to the people staying on, when Mrs. Winckworth came up and informed him quite firmly he was staying on, too.

"No, really, I couldn't think of it," said Edward. "I've stayed far too long already. Besides, my Aunt will be getting worried. She hasn't the ghost of an idea where I am."

"Oh that's been settled. Miss Hyland's settled it," Mrs. Winckworth assured him. "She's sent one of the servants over in the Mouse"—that was evidently one of her cars—"to let your aunt know where you are. She must come along herself soon, won't she? Anyhow, Miss Hyland's had your place laid for dinner." Edward screwed up his eyes. Mrs. Winckworth seemed hard enough to argue with, but nothing to compare, he judged, with this Miss Hyland . . . She saw his expression. "You didn't meet Hyland, the invaluable? You will. Have a spot of whiskey."

"Thank you," murmured Edward. "What a pal you are, if you don't mind my saying so!"

"My dear boy!" Mrs. Winckworth boomed. "My dear boy! Get that whiskey down!" Then she turned to Maguire, the houseman, who had been helping with the drinks. "Maguire, will you take Mr. Tourneur along and show him where he can wash his hands? Oh, I'm sorry." She had turned to Edward again. "You know the geography, don't you? You've been in this house a long time before I ever got here. But there have been quite a few alterations. Take the gentleman along, will you, Maguire? You'll find towels there, and everything."

"This way, please, sir," said Maguire, choking. He went forward, and up the staircase, and along a corridor, and round a corner, and stopped at a door.

"Thank you," said Edward, and went in.

For Maguire it was a strange journey, and, though it took no more than a minute or two, it was a lengthy one. The temptation to do something violent was most difficult to resist at that moment of the opening of the bathroom door. The violent thing that was in his mind was to thrust himself inside the bathroom along with Mr. Tourneur, bolt the door, turn to Mr. Tourneur and lash out at him: "Well, Mr. Bloody Tourneur, what the hell's all this about?"

But it was possible that Mr. Tourneur *was* Mr. Tourneur, and not Jim, who played an occasional leg of darts at the Glamaig Arms. So Maguire saw the bathroom door close on the gentleman, and went downstairs again to clear away the glasses, and empty the ashtrays.

There was a considerable stir of excitement in the servant's quarters below stairs at Ben Voith. Apart from the invaluable Hyland, Mrs. Winckworth's staff consisted of a chef and a maid she had brought with her from London, and several Scottish servants, male and female, who had been found for her by the agent who had arranged the purchase of the house. There were,

in addition, an elderly local couple, a Mr. and Mrs. Cunningham, who had been caretakers while the house had stood empty. They were under notice to go, because their room was needed, and they were too old to be of much use. But Mrs. Winckworth had not pressed the matter, for there was nowhere for them to go. There they were, and there they were quite likely to remain, Mrs. Winckworth being Mrs. Winckworth.

This was the assembly of human beings to whom Maguire, the parlor-man, brought his disturbed mind during the third or fourth housewarming cocktail-party given to her friends by Mrs. Winckworth.

He had first sought to unburden himself to Lacey, the parlor-maid, who was on duty with him upstairs in the lounge-hall.

He sidled over to her, a cocktail-shaker in his hand, as if about to fill somebody's empty glass. He put his hand up to his mouth.

"Hi, Lacey," he said. "D'ye see that feller the governor's come in with? D'ye see him now?"

"Yes," said Lacey. "I do." She was a refined young lady from Wimbledon, and one of Mrs. Winckworth's own imported servants. "And what of that?"

"D'ye know him? Have you seen him around?"

"I can't say I have. The gentleman there's looking for something to drink."

Maguire went over to the gentleman and filled his glass. That took him within several feet of Edward Tourneur, so he stared at him hard, as unostentatiously as he knew how; then he came back to Lacey again.

"I could swear I had a couple of pints with him at the Glamaig Arms on Monday. It was my night off."

"You were seeing things, Maguire," said Lacey frigidly.

"I could swear it," vowed Maguire, "on the Holy Cross."

"If you think I didn't see you help yourself to the gin-bottle before the people came in, you're mistaken," observed Lacey. She turned her back with a palpable toss of the head, and proceeded to circulate a plate of caviare biscuits.

There was no change to be got out of Lacey, stuck-up minx that

she was. And yet he *had* helped himself to the gin rather liberally. And he'd had a drop of whiskey, too, since then. Perhaps she was right, this Lacey. Perhaps he *had* been seeing things. Anyhow, who the hell cared?

"You might bring up a few more plates of sandwiches and things," a voice said in his ear: the voice of Miss Hyland, whose eye never missed the plate emptied, the glass drained, no matter how hectic the party.

"Certainly, Miss. At once." He picked up a number of empty plates, piled them on a tray and went off, with no idea in his mind of ventilating the Tourneur affair among his colleagues, for he had already accepted the theory that he was the victim of an optical illusion. And then, out of the blue, as it were, he heard a voice say:

"The impertinence o' it! Makin' himsel' oot tae be a gentleman! He sells newspapers! He tellt me so himsel'."

Maguire nearly dropped the plates in his excitement. It was old Sanderson talking, one of the gardeners. He, too, had obviously been hit in the eye by this fantastic "Mr. Tourneur" business.

"What's that, ye're saying, Sandy? You've seen him, too? Sure, and I wasn't mistaken! I knew I wasn't!"

"What's a' that?" "Who're ye talkin' aboot?" "What's got hauld o' them the necht?" The inquiries came from various corners of the huge kitchen.

Sanderson turned and addressed himself to Maguire.

"So ye've been stuffin' the bastard's gizzard wi' drinks, hae ye, a' evening? Did ye no' tell Mrs. Winckworth she was nourishin' a saerpent in her bosom?"

Mr. Carter, the chef, condescended to come over from the *vichysoisse* he was preparing.

"Kindly make less noise in my kitchen," he demanded magisterially, "and let us know what it's all about." His tall white cap glared frigidly round like an iceberg.

"There's some deviltry afoot," said Maguire. "Sandy's seen him, too, this 'Jim'! I don't know his other name."

"Gunning," supplied old Mrs. Cunningham from a corner of a

table, where Mr. Carter was kindly allowing her to polish up some of the silver.

"Aye, thon's the name," confirmed Sanderson the gardener.

"I was having a pint with him only two nights ago down at the pub," declared Maguire, "and him throwing them down like a horse with a great thirst on it."

"Who's this Gunning?" Mr. Carter wanted to know.

"The odd-job man frae Skurr nan Gillian," supplied old Mr. Cunningham, appearing at this moment from the passage where he had been hanging about, because no job had been assigned to him. "Thon's been a sick mon for a long time, but they say he's a'recht the noo."

"What's this Gunning been up to?" Mr. Carter insisted, disregarding the old man completely.

"I saw him go straight in wi' the governor, bold as brass. Through the front door!" exploded Sanderson.

"Why not?" Mr. Carter smiled a superior smile. "Mrs. Winckworth is what we call a Bohemian. She knows all sorts of people." He was preparing to return to his *vichysoisse*, his fingers already twinkling in the air, as if he were reaching for this spice, this condiment, when Maguire brought out a piece of information which could not be dismissed lightly.

"The governor introduced him to everybody. Not as no Jim or Gunning, or anything. No." All eyes were on him. He was savoring the surprise he was creating. "She introduced him as Edward Tourneur."

Then a disturbing thing happened. A sort of strangled cry was heard. The silver entree-dish lid that old Mrs. Cunningham was polishing fell from her hands with a clatter upon the floor. Then she spread out her hands, and her head fell forward with a dull thump on the baize cloth of the table before her.

"Jeannie!" cried her husband, and shuffled forward towards her as fast as his old legs could carry him.

"A fine to–do!" murmured Mr. Carter. It was really very difficult to get on with the preparation of a creditable meal with excitable Celts shouting and fainting all round you.

"Mother of God!" cried Maguire.

"What's wrong? Is she deid? Lord save us!" cried the pantry-boy, the kitchen-maids.

Mr. Cunningham reached his wife's side. He lifted her head, letting it rest in the crook of his arm, and chafed her temples. Then suddenly he turned his head from her and shouted: "It's a' the auld witch! The de'il tak' her! It's the auld witch!" His eyes glared balefully. Spittle dripped from his lips.

Mr. Carter shrugged his shoulders. *What* old witch? It could hardly be Mrs. Winckworth. The old man would not be so foolish and insolent. And what had the old witch done? Was she responsible for Mrs. Cunningham banging her forehead? Or had she induced a servant to masquerade as a gentleman?

"Aye!" The word was to Sanderson, now. Everybody's eyes turned to him. "Aye!" he repeated. "The auld witch! Mebbe it's her, mebbe it's no'!" He was not committing himself.

"What *are* you talking about, all of you?" demanded Mr. Carter, losing patience. "You're going mad! Get on with your jobs, everybody! What have you come down for, Maguire? Sandwiches? There they are!"

One of the maids was sprinkling Mrs. Cunningham's forehead with vinegar. The old woman opened her eyes.

"Are ye a'recht noo, Jeannie?" her husband asked. "Will ye no' come to ye'r beid?"

"I'm fine," insisted Mrs. Cunningham, shaking her head hard two or three times. "Whaur's ma siller?" She reached for the fallen entree-dish lid. Her husband stooped and picked it up for her. Then he turned to Mr. Carter.

"It's a' verra strange, Mr. Carter," he said. "There's been some strange goings-on up at Skurr nan Gillian. This Mr. Tourneur, Mr. Edward Tourneur . . ." He paused.

"Yes?"

"He was the auld wumman's nephew."

"Well?"

"He's deid. He deed two year ago."

Mr. Carter felt like screaming with anger. He had heard some

tales about these Highlanders among whom his employer had taken a house, but he had not anticipated them to be so lunatic as this.

"It's another Tourneur!" he almost screamed. He turned to Maguire as if he was going to punch his nose. "Don't you see you've made a mistake? Get out of my kitchen!"

But for the time being Mr. Carter's discipline in the kitchen was at a low ebb. With such strangeness and mystery in the air even Mr. Carter looked a bit taken aback and his big white hat a little contemptible.

"Not only me's made a mistake, Mr. Carter," Maguire said quietly. "Sanderson, too."

"It isn't a mistake," declared Sanderson. "It was this man frae London sure enough, this Gunning. And he's pretending to be poor Mr. Tourneur!" he proclaimed with mounting excitement. "Dae ye no' see?" The appeal was to the company at large. "He's an imposter, that's what he is! He's a confidence man!"

Maguire scratched his head.

"He seemed an ordinary straightforward feller to me," he observed. He shrugged his shoulders. "If he can bring it off, good luck to him! Myself, I'm going straight upstairs to tell 'em I'm Mr. Rockefeller."

He left, carrying his tray of sandwiches. He had been off the job long enough.

Such was the atmosphere that prevailed that evening below stairs at Ben Voith, with the "auld witch" from Skurr nan Gillian flying on her broomstick in through the window and out again. Even Mr. Carter's celebrated aplomb, his highly recompensed capacity to deal efficiently with kitchen excitements and sudden dining-room expansions as they arose, were not quite proof that night against the electricity with which she charged the air. The *vichysoisse* was slightly below par. The sucking-pig could have been a shade more tender. It is not to be wondered at that Maguire, requested to escort Mr. Gunning-Tourneur to the bathroom, experienced the almost irresistible temptation to lock himself up

with him, (or them,) and demand the explanation which only he, (or they,) could give.

"Sit down, everybody!" demanded Mrs. Winckworth. "We won't wait for Bob! He'll turn up!"

Everybody sat down. There were eleven places laid, the eleventh being for Edward Tourneur. The vacant place was three places down from him, across the table. Some of the people were dressed for dinner, some not. Mrs. Winckworth wasn't, Miss Hyland was. That evened things out. It was not too formal a party. The conversation followed the usual lines, horses, fish, plays, the Iron Curtain, books. Edward Tourneur was not primed on the latest developments in these fields, and for the most part kept his counsel. But his eyes beamed with pleasure. He so obviously enjoyed everything. Mrs. Winckworth looked down the table towards him with a friendly smile.

"Edward!" she called out. He turned. She was looking towards him across the rim of her raised wine-glass. "To you, Edward! I hope we're going to see lots more of you!"

He raised his own glass.

"Cheers, Mrs. Winckworth!" And then, almost in a whisper: "And thank you so much, Mrs. Winckworth!"

"Peter!" she corrected him.

"Peter!" he repeated, blushing slightly.

"Isn't he a pet, Tony?" she declared to the gold-haired young man on her left.

"He's a dear!" confirmed the gold-haired young man.

"Hello! Is that a car?" asked Mrs. Winckworth.

"Yes, it's a car, madam!" confirmed Maguire, who was near her.

"That's fine! That'll be Lord Wexton! Tell them, will you, Maguire?" She returned to the consideration of the gold-haired young man. "You wouldn't think this was one of the bloodthirstiest commandos we had in the War, would you, Edward? This one, I mean." She touched her companion lightly in the center of the smooth gold hair, so that there should be no possible mistake.

"Let bygones be bygones!" begged the gold-haired young man.

At that moment there was a crunch of tires on the gravel outside the house, a harsh thump of metal, the violent squeal of a brake. The car seemed to have landed plumb against the front wall of the house.

"That's Bob right enough!" announced Mrs. Winckworth a little grimly. She collected herself. "What were we saying? Oh yes, bloodthirsty commandos. Doesn't look it, does he, Edward?"

"I'm not sure," said Edward. "I was never one to be taken in by the tough guys, with big scars running from eye to chin. You should have seen my little Bob Shuttle. You would have thought he was an accountant's clerk, and as a matter of fact he was . . ." He was warming up to a subject which obviously interested him a great deal, when the door opened, and the late-comer arrived, an embarrassed young man of about thirty. He had given himself a perfunctory little hand-wash in the washroom off the entrance hall. His hands were still dripping.

"Oh dear! Oh dear!" the young man wailed. "Peter darling, will you forgive me?" He came up to the head of the table and kissed her. "No, I can't tell a lie! It wasn't the petrol! I didn't have a puncture! I just got squiffy at the Kavanaghs!"

"Well, if the sucking-pig tastes like an old boot, it's your own fault!" declared Mrs. Winckworth. "Sit down, darling! There's your place!" Then she remembered that a few of the people there didn't know the newcomer. "This is Lord Wexton, everybody," she explained. "Answers to the name of Bob." She looked round among the assembled guests to recall who knew who. "You've not met Kathie, have you? This is a Kathie Payton." Lord Wexton's eyes reacted. "Yes," she assured him. "*The* Kathie Payton. And this is Bill Bates. Race-horses. And this is Edward Tourneur. Air Force. That's Connie Bolton. She's just rich."

"How do you do? How do you do? How do you do?" The greetings went this way and that. Mrs. Winckworth took in the rest of the table. "I think you know everybody else. Now get some food inside you, Bob. Did you damage the car?"

"Nothing could damage the car," he declared, squeezing a

wedge of lemon on the plate of smoked salmon that had been placed in front of him. "Nothing could damage my appetite, either. I could eat a horse."

"We'll see what we can do for you," smiled Mrs. Winckworth. "Black pepper? All right, now?"

"Um, um!" Bob signalled, his mouth being full of brown bread and butter and smoked salmon.

"Fine." She turned her attention again to the young men she had engaged in conversation before the appearance of the last guest. "What were we talking about? Oh yes. Commandos. Tough guys."

"Yes," said Edward. "Bob Shuttle."

"Who's he? I remember, now. Your clerk. He does your accounts for you."

"Not quite," said Edward. "He was killed coming back from Berlin."

"Edward was a bomber-pilot," Mrs. Winckworth explained to Tony. "Bad luck! What was he doing the accounts for?" It was obvious Mrs. Winckworth had not got a complete grip of the situation. She had got a lot of other things to think of, and the arrival of Lord Wexton had dimmed things a bit.

"He didn't say he did the accounts, darling," said Tony. "He said he looked like an accounts clerk, and was. But he was a tough guy. Am I right, Edward?"

"You're quite right. Thanks." Edward looked at him gratefully.

"Who was he? What was his name?" asked Mrs. Winckworth.

"He was my flight-engineer. His name was Bob Shuttle."

A juicy lump of salmon, the last and largest, was on its way to Bob Wexton's mouth. It stood arrested there, coiled cleverly round the fork. Bob Shuttle? The name was familiar. A fairly common name, isn't it? Not really. It's not such a common name. But it wasn't the name that struck the chord of memory, not the name alone. It was the name and the job together. Bob Shuttle, flight-engineer. Bob Shuttle, flight-engineer. Hadn't he one time known a Bob Shuttle, flight-engineer? Yes, by Jove, he had. Of course he had. He was a member of Freckles's crew. That's right!

Poor old Freckles! The name *had* been Bob, hadn't it, not Tom? Yes, that's right. Sergeant Bob Shuttle. What had the fellow said, the one in the brown suit, with the wavy coppery hair, sitting two places away from Peter? He hadn't caught the name. Edward Something, she said. Air Force. He'd said Bob Shuttle had been his flight-engineer, hadn't he? That sounded as if Edward Something had been a bomber-pilot. Then he, too, had had a flight-engineer named Bob Shuttle. Of course. That's all there was to it. It was a big war, and quite a big Air Force. There had been two flight-engineers named Bob Shuttle.

What had they called young Bob? Tarzan! That's right! Because he had a skin pale and white as a girl's.

"They didn't by any chance—" started Bob Wexton, when he felt a gentle pressure behind his left shoulder. He looked round. It was Maguire gently but firmly letting him know the sucking-pig was there for his pleasure. It looked enchanting on its silver-gilt platter, the melancholy little mouth still stuffed with a tangerine, the rear parts of the body reduced to nothingness, like a renaissance cherub adoring his Lord.

"The horse will follow, Bob," declared Mrs. Winckworth. "See how far the wild boar will take you!" The late Bob Shuttle went out of his mind completely.

"I never saw anything more seductive," he vowed. "Thank you Maguire. Yes, all the crackling you can spare me."

"Have you ever stuck them?" asked the lady on his left, whom he had been rather neglecting. It was Connie Bolton, who was just rich, it had been announced. But she was a good-looker, too.

"I'll be blowed," Bob Wexton said to himself. "She's a corker. What have I been up to?" Then aloud:

"Yes, often," he said. Then he realized he didn't quite get what she meant. "Stuck what?" he asked. "Yes, thank you." (This for the apple sauce.)

"Pig!" said Connie Bolton.

"Oh, Good Lord, *pig!* Have I stuck pig? Yes, I have once or twice. In Morocco. Great fun, isn't it?" He cut into his sucking-

pig. But you did not need to cut into it. It came apart, as you breathed on it.

"Yes, isn't it fun!" declared Connie Bolton. "All those long lances! Frightfully Uccello, isn't it?"

(Good Lord. The lady was rich. She looked like, and perhaps owned, a million dollars. She was cultured. This lady had what it takes.)

"Frightfully," agreed Bob Wexton. "Where are you from, Miss . . . Bolton, isn't it? I'm such an *idiot* about names." (She wore no ring; but how much does *that* mean?)

She nodded. The nod went for the Miss, as well as the Bolton.

"You can't guess where I'm from?" The intonation gave nothing away, but there was a vague suggestion of "fram" in that "from".

"Windsor," he said gallantly. Windsor had distinguished overtones.

"I was born in Providence, Rhode Island."

"Yes, Maguire, thank you." (The pig was at his shoulder again.) "If there *is* any more! Providence, Rhode Island?" He was with Miss Bolton again. She smiled. Her eyes were very lively. He smiled. There was really not much point in going on about Uccello. The conversation went on through the mushroom savory on less rarefied levels. (He had now drawn neck-and-neck with the rest of the dinner-party.) He permitted himself the slightest pressure of knee against knee. Had knee responded? Had eyelids flickered?

Then Miss Bolton broke the fine gossamer web that was a-spinning. In the group around Mrs. Winckworth the name of a famous book suddenly isolated itself against one of those hushes which from time to time befall the most voluble dinner-party.

"*Uncle Tom's Cabin*," said someone.

"How *touching*!" said Mrs. Winckworth. "What a delightful story!"

"*Uncle Tom's Cabin?*" exclaimed Miss Bolton excitedly, dropping the conversation with Bob Wexton as suddenly as a dog drops the whip he has been carrying in his jaws. (It could, of

course, be picked up again.) "Uncle Tom's Cabin? She was a great-great-aunt of mine, or something!"

"Who?" asked someone.

"Topsy!" someone else murmured, but almost quite inaudibly.

"Harriet Beecher Stowe!" crowed Miss Bolton. She was hopping up and down in her chair like a small girl.

"That wouldn't have been a bad idea, either," Mrs. Winckworth was addressing the young men near her.

"You're right! Ha, ha!" laughed Tony. He obviously knew what she meant.

"Don't you think so, Edward?"

"A jolly good idea," he confirmed. He, too, obviously knew what she meant. But most of the table didn't.

"What would have been a good idea?" everyone clamored. It sounded intriguing, whatever it was.

"To drop Harriet Beecher Stowe on Berlin!" Mrs. Winckworth explained. "Ha! ha! ha! Ho! ho!" she roared with laughter.

"What *are* you talking about?" asked Bill Darnley. (Sports Cars.) Connie Bolton looked a bit hurt. She did not see what could be funny about dropping her great-great-aunt on Berlin. "I like it!" said someone else. "I like it! The thought of Harriet Beecher Stowe in bloomers floating down towards Berlin—"

"What *is* the story?" asked Bob Wexton, very quietly. He was aware of a curious faint tap-tapping at his heart, a tap-tap of warning.

"Edward's just been telling us the most delicious story," said Mrs. Winckworth. "We were talking about favorite books. What's yours, Bob?"

"Oh, *Lord Jim*," said Wexton. "Go on."

"Tony said *Eric, or Little by Little*," Mrs. Winckworth went on. "Miss Hyland said *The Egoist*. *I* said *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. I'm *mad* about it!"

"There! What did I tell you!" proclaimed Connie Bolton. It was as if she had written it herself.

"So he said: 'That's funny! It was my aunt's favorite book too!' " continued Mrs. Winckworth.

"Who said?" asked Bob Wexton.

"Edward here. So then he told us how his aunt had told them that if Hitler had read *Uncle Tom's Cabin* when he was a little boy, there wouldn't have been a World War Two."

"I haven't got the hang of it," said Bob Wexton. "Told *them*. Told *who*?"

"His bomber-crew. Edward was a bomber-pilot during the war. Go on, Edward. You tell them the story. It's a peach!"

"Oh please, I'd rather not!" Edward looked rather embarrassed. "It just came out!"

"Oh *do* tell us!" the chorus came.

"Will you, Edward? I will if you won't!" warned Mrs. Winckworth.

"Oh it's rather silly!" he said.

"Please, tell us, Peter!" insisted Bob Wexton. He felt as if someone had placed a slab of ice in the small of his back.

"It's just this," said Mrs. Winckworth. She was aware of Edward's embarrassment, but the only thing to do now was to get the story over. Yet it was a *nice* story, well worth telling. "He was a bomber-pilot, as I told you. Bob was in bombers, too," she said, turning to Edward. "Weren't you, Bob?"

"Yes," said Bob. "I was a navigator."

"And Edward had his crew up here with him on leave one time. The whole crew, eh, Edward?"

"More or less."

"Well, they were all staying with Edward and his aunt in their place up there. How do you call it?"

"Skurr nan Gillian."

"That's it. So his aunt made the famous remark about *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. So the crew jumped at it and said they'd drop the book on Berlin if they ever were sent out to raid it. The whole crew signed their names in it. Is that right, Edward?"

He nodded.

"Edward's aunt signed, too. And later on, the ground crew in the bomber station."

"We shouldn't have done it," said Edward awkwardly.

"Well, you did. So what does it matter? And in course of time they went off to Berlin. And they had this copy of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* with them, all specially wrapped up, with a special parachute all to itself. That's right, Edward?"

"Yes."

"And there was a special note in the fly-leaf commending Uncle Tom to the attention of Adolf Hitler. A little belatedly I must say. They waited till they'd dropped all their bombs, then they dropped Uncle Tom, too, last thing. What do you think of that, eh? I think it's a *lovely* story."

"Didn't they give it out on the wireless?" asked Bill Bates. (Race-horses.)

Edward screwed his mouth up.

"Did they?" insisted Kathie Payton. (*The* Kathie Payton.) "Did they!"

"I think it got out somehow."

"Did anybody ever find the book?" asked Connie Bolton. "Wouldn't it be just too funny if it landed, and it *was* handed over to Hitler?"

"Oh don't plague the poor boy!" demanded Mrs. Winckworth. She saw Edward was getting quite uncomfortable. These flying-people were usually like that. They hated public interest in the things they had done, and the times they had gone through. He probably had told the story, in the first place, only because he had had a fair amount of claret and burgundy; the port had been going round, too. Besides, it had just been the three of them, Tony and Edward and herself. Bob Wexton had been just like that, she remembered. She turned to Bob, who hadn't said anything for some time.

She was startled and dismayed at the things that had happened to his face. He was staring down on the table-cloth, his shoulders humped up. His teeth seemed to be chattering, as if he were in the first stage of malaria.

"Bob!" she called out. "Bob! Is anything the matter?"

He turned to her with a jerk.

"No!" he brought out. "Not at all! I'm perfectly all right!"

Then suddenly he got up from the table. His chair nearly fell down behind him. "Excuse me, Peter," he said. "I feel I'd like a breath of air!" Quick as a shadow Maguire was at his side, holding his arm as he went unsteadily towards the door. Lacey held the door open. "*You* know, Peter," Bob Wexton said, turning his head at the door. The smile on his face was quite ghastly. "One of those silly old do's." Then he went out.

"Pass the port, will you, Tony?" asked Mrs. Winckworth. "That's a good boy! I'll just go out and have a word with Bob. Sylvia, dear, take the girls out to the drawing-room. We'll have our coffee there!" Then she went out. Edward Tourneur went out a minute or so after her. No one noticed his departure. Or if they did, they thought he was just going to wash his hands.

Mrs. Winckworth hurried along the dining-room passage into the lounge-hall. Bob Wexton was not there. Only Allan was there, the pantry-boy, smart in his striped coat with the brass buttons.

"Bob!" she called out, for he could not be far away. There was no answer. "Did you see Lord Wexton, Allan?" she asked the boy.

"He's gone out, madam," the boy said. "Through there." He pointed to the front door.

"Very well." The boy held the door open for her, and she went out. She went down the steps, and stood there a moment, looking right and left.

"Bob!" she called out again. A voice answered her from somewhere beyond the big cedar on the lawn, to the left. She hurried forward. "Bob! I don't want to be a nuisance!" She saw him now, walking along the path that led down to the pool, where now the swans, that by day burned like snow, glimmered like ghosts against the dark night. He was limping slightly, the way he always did when there was damp in the air, or if something upset him. She came up to him.

"You must tell me if there's anything I can do, Bob," she murmured.

He stopped, and turned.

"Peter, darling, I'm sorry to be such a bore," he said. "But there's something funny. Something wrong!"

"Can you tell me? Is there anything I can do?"

"I've got to tell you! I'm bewildered! I don't know what it's about!"

"Yes?" She waited for him.

He was silent for quite a long time, trying to get to grips with his problem, whatever it was. She waited. His next words came out with a rush.

"What's the name of this fellow? What do you know about him?"

She knew at once whom he meant. There was only one stranger at her party.

"You mean Edward Tourneur? I met him today for the first time."

"How does he spell his name?"

"Tourneur? I don't know. He pronounced it Toor-ner, so the idea I've had in my mind has been T,o,u,r,n,e,u,r. It might be just Turner, of course."

"Peter, darling. Edward Tourneur's dead!"

"What are you talking about? The young man seemed very much alive. What's the matter with you, Bob? You're not tiddly, are you?"

"Not now. I was when I left the Kavanaghs. When I got here I was perfectly all right. No, Peter, I'm perfectly sober."

"Then what are you talking about? What do you mean Edward Tourneur's dead? You doubtless knew another Edward Tourneur."

"No. I knew Edward Tourneur very well indeed. I met his aunt in the Savoy, the day Freckles got his gong. We called him Freckles. We had a terrific party. I wasn't in Freckles's crew then. They'd pushed me off two or three weeks earlier to some other kite that had lost its navigator. But I got special leave to go up to town for that party. I wouldn't have missed it for all the tea in China."

"For heaven's sake, Bob, sort yourself out. Suppose you did

go to the Savoy to meet Edward Tourneur. It was another Edward Tourneur, that's all!"

"No!" he shouted. "No! I beg your pardon, Peter! There's something fishy about this. This man's a crook!"

"Steady, Bob, steady! What do you mean he's a crook?"

"Let's sit down," he said. There was a bench a little distance away. "I'm all knocked to pieces!" They sat down. "I tell you there was only one Edward Tourneur. I mean one Edward Tourneur who dropped a copy of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* on Berlin with a parachute. You can't deny that! There can't be two Edward Tourneurs, both bomber-pilots, who both dropped a copy of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* on Berlin, can there? Both of them with bomb-aimers named Bob Shuttle? There can't be!"

"No. Of course not. It's highly improbable. It's preposterous, if you like."

"I tell you I knew Edward Tourneur. I was his navigator. The whole crew came up here to Glamaig for a terrific binge. You wouldn't know that, would you?"

"I do. He told us."

"Of course he did. He's got it all off pat. I nearly came up myself, but I couldn't make it at the last moment. My old man was taken very ill."

"Well?"

"When you told me you'd taken Ben Voith—do you remember that night in Claridges?—and you said it was near Glamaig, it was on the tip of my tongue to tell you that I once very nearly made a trip to Glamaig, a long time before you'd ever heard of the place. But I didn't. Something took my mind off. And it wasn't terribly important."

"I don't see where this is leading to," she observed. But she was already feeling quite sick. She did not know where it was leading to, but it was certainly leading to something odd, and unpleasant.

"It was on that binge that Freckles's aunt brought up the subject of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The crew signed their names then and there, up on that croft somewhere. Jock Malcolm, Johnnie

Carpenter, and the others. When we next met at the bomber station, they brought the book out, and I signed my name, too. You see, Peter, you see? I know what I'm talking about."

"What do you make of it? You say this chap's *not* Edward Tourneur? You say he's only pretending to be?"

"What else can I say? I can say this fellow doesn't look like a crook. He's even got a bit of a look of Edward Tourneur, though he hasn't got the famous comic quiff by which you could tell Freckles a mile off. This fellow talks a bit like Freckles, too, with just a trace of a Scottish accent. But it isn't *HE*!" His voice rose. He banged his fist down on his knee. "It isn't *He*!"

"You say your Edward Tourneur's dead? Or am I going mad?"

"You're *not* going mad. And I'm not going mad, either! We went to that party in the Savoy the day Freckles got his gong at the Palace. His aunt was there, too. She seemed a good sport. After the show, Freckles and his crew went off to their station, I went off to mine. I told you, I'd just been taken out and shoved into another kite on another station. They had dear old "B for Beer." I spat blood. I knew that old bus as well as I know my own hands. Freckles and his crew went off to Berlin the very next night. When they got back, "B for Beer" was a mass of flames. Freckles did a brilliant job of piloting, that's quite clear. It was miraculous how he got her back at all. They bust up on landing and everybody else was charred to a cinder. Including Bob Shuttle, the bomb-aimer. He used to call him 'Tarzan' because he had a skin like a lily. You remember this so-called 'Tourneur' fellow talking about Bob Shuttle?"

"I do," said Mrs. Winckworth in a whisper. She was certain she would start crying if she did not take herself fiercely in hand. "And what happened to Edward Tourneur?"

"They got him out. He was far more dead than alive. The station doctor gave him a shot of morphine, then they yanked him off to Ely, the nearest R.A.F. hospital with a burns centre. Then as soon as they could move him, off to E.G."

"Where?"

"You know. East Grimstead. Wizard place, where they did what

could be done for roasted airmen. I've told you about the Maestro, haven't I? Oh yes, I have, till I was blue in the face. That's where the chaps got new eyelids, mouths, legs, anything. Some lived, some died. Freckles' case was quite well known—among the chaps, I mean: the boys of Ward Three. He had endless operations, thirty or forty, it may be—only the Maestro knows how many—a new nose, a new skin, new bones, everything. It went on and on. He was one of the most honored members of the Guinea Pigs' Club: the most exclusive Club in the world; the Club nobody wanted to belong to."

"I see," said Mrs. Winckworth. "They changed him beyond recognition. Don't you see? That's why you don't recognize him! Don't you see, Bob?" she pleaded.

"That's not true," said Bob Wexton. "I was in Ward Three with him from time to time. This silly knee of mine, at the back here. I'll have to go back for a check-up next month, I believe." He patted the back of his left knee with the palm of his hand. "I was a regular visitor while Freckles was there, but I used to come out for months at a time. Freckles stayed on, and died there. I remember Freckles coming out with some crack about making sure the second time they roasted him. I went to his funeral at Croydon."

"O-o-oh!" The sound left Mrs. Winckworth's lips, thin and fearful and long-drawn-out. "You're sure of that?"

"That's not the sort of thing you make a mistake about, is it?"

There was a silence, broken only by the calling of an owl, and the response of another owl some distance away. The silence continued. A marsh-hen, disturbed in the sedge, flitted out over the water, and disappeared into the sedge beyond.

"What do you make of it, Bob?" she asked faintly.

"What *can* I make of it? The patter! How did he get the patter off so perfectly? Did he sound like a crook to you?"

"No, Bob, he didn't. I can't tell you why. Tell me," she floundered. "Why didn't he recognize you, if you were in his crew?"

"Because he isn't Edward Tourneur," said Bob Wexton.

"Well, why didn't he recognize your name? He knew Bob

Shuttle's name, didn't he? And I think he mentioned the names of one or two other lads in the crew."

"I wasn't Lord Wexton then," Bob pointed out. "Don't you remember? It wasn't my father that died the time I told you about, when I went up to see him. He recovered for a bit. It was my uncle. My uncle had the title. Then my father inherited it. He only had it a couple of months, then *he* died. So it came to me."

"It's cold, Bob," she said. "I'm shivering all over. Let's move about." They got up.

"Is the old woman rich up there?" he asked.

"You mean the aunt? I don't know. I'd not heard of her existence till this evening. Some of the servants will be able to tell us. Anyhow, the old caretakers will. They're from the village. You mean, he's a confidence-man, and that somehow he's managed to convince the old woman he's her dead nephew? A sort of Titchborne case? No!" she wailed. "No! I can't believe it!"

"I can't either. But there you are, Peter dear. Stop shivering, will you? Let's go back and have a couple of drinks. Do you want to talk to this fellow, or shall I? I'll do anything you say. Are you all right, Peter? Are you all *right*?"

"Please, let me talk to him on my own! You be around in case I need you. Let me take your arm, Bob! Oh what a bloody weird business!"

They went back into the house, and found the lounge-hall deserted, except for Maguire, who seemed to be prowling around on the look out for them. The women were in the drawing-room, the men still at their port.

"Maguire," Mrs. Winckworth called out. He came over. "Will you please ask Mr. Edward Tourneur—that's the gentleman I brought in with me this evening—if he could just come along and have a word with me?"

"He's gone, madam. He left the dining-room just a few seconds after you went out. He didn't come back."

"Oh!" She sat down suddenly, as if her legs had given under

her. She looked helplessly towards Bob Wexton. Bob took the matter in hand.

"What servants are there in the house who belong to these parts? I understand the old caretakers do. What's their name, Maguire? Are there any others?"

"Excuse me, your lordship, for butting in. But if it's anything to do with this . . . this gentleman, this Mr. Tourneur, I beg permission to say a few words on the subject."

"As a matter of fact, you're right, Maguire. Mrs. Winckworth and I just want to make a few inquiries about this Mr. Tourneur. Isn't that so, Mrs. Winckworth?" She nodded. "If there's anything you have to say on the matter, please say it."

The lump of indignation which had been boiling up and down in Maguire's throat since cocktail-time, like a celluloid ball on a fountain-spring, soared up again, and almost got wedged there.

"He's not a gentleman at all, your lordship," he managed to bring out. He's odd-jobman at that croft up the hill, Skurr nan Something. He's an impostor."

"Now be very careful what you're saying, Maguire. That's a serious thing to say," Bob Wexton pointed out.

"I'm not the only one to say it, your lordship. When I went downstairs—"

"Please, Maguire, let's stick to what you yourself know. Well, what *do* you know?"

"Well, your lordship, if madam doesn't mind me saying so, you could have knocked me down with a feather when I saw her bring him in through the front door this evening. I knew at once he was an impostor, but I didn't dare say anything, because mistakes have been made, I know that, though I went straight up to Lacey, that's the first parlor-maid, your lordship—"

"Cut all that out, please, Maguire. If the gentleman was not Mr. Tourneur, who was he? Had you met him earlier?"

"I met him two nights ago in the Public Bar of the Glamaig Arms. We had a pint or two together, and we made up a four at darts."

"Did you know his name?"

" 'Jim' " they called him. I understand his name's Gunning."

"And you say he's an odd job man at that croft up the hill?"

"That's right, your lordship. At least I didn't myself know what he was, but Sanderson—that's the second gardener—he saw him this evening coming up the drive with madam here. He knows the fellow quite well."

"And Sanderson confirmed your impression? That Mr. Tourneur is really Gunning, a laborer or something on one of the crofts here. Is he a native?"

"No, my lord. I understand he's been here over a year. They say he's a Londoner, and that he had consumption, but the old woman up there's looked after him for some reason, and he's all right now."

"Yes, of course. The old lady. I was forgetting about her. Is the name Miss Lemuel?"

"That's right, your lordship."

"Very well." Wexton turned to Mrs. Winckworth. "I'm afraid it all hangs together. Don't you agree?"

Mrs. Winckworth's head was lowered. "There seems no other rational explanation," she said dully. Then suddenly there was a spurt of emotion in her voice. She threw her head back. "I'm not such a blazing idiot. I'm not in the habit of being taken in by two-a-penny con men. There's something fishy in all this!"

Maguire had not gone. He was hanging about as if he had not said everything there was to be said. The word "fishy" prodded him into speech again.

"Fishy, madam!" he exclaimed: "Fishy! You've said it!"

Perhaps Lord Wexton didn't like idiomatic language when used by his inferiors.

"Is there any more need for Maguire to stay, Peter? We've got to talk things over here and now. That poor old lady up there—all this could lead to something pretty unpleasant for her, you know."

"The poor old lady!" repeated Maguire. "Excuse me, your lordship! I think I ought to tell you, madam—"

"What's on your mind, Maguire?"

"The kitchen's in a dreadful state, madam. Old Mrs. Cunning-

ham's fainted once already. One or two of the maids have had hysterics."

"I don't see what it's got to do with them, Maguire."

"Begging pardon, madam, in a manner of speaking, it has. Madam," he said, his voice rising in a sort of Irish keening, "madam, they do be saying she's a witch and she's in league with the Divil!"

"Now this is too much!" exploded Bob Wexton. "Who's a witch, for God's sake? This Mrs. Cunningham?"

"No, your lordship. The old woman from up the croft."

"This Miss Lemuel?"

"Yes, your lordship."

Wexton turned to Mrs. Winckworth with a bitter smile.

"You see, my dear Peter, what comes of taking a house up among these insane Highlanders? They're stark staring mad. For God's sake why weren't you satisfied with a decent villa near Bognor?"

But Mrs. Winckworth was not listening to him. She had her eyes fixed on Maguire, and there was a great deal of sadness in them. Despite her robustness, she was a sensitive woman.

"Who's been saying this sort of thing about the poor old lady, Maguire?"

"It seems they've been saying it for years and years, madam, ever since she came here. I know it's all nonsense, madam, please don't think I hold any faith to it, but you asked me. There was a curse on the place, she said. Old Mrs. Cunningham, that is. She seems to know quite a lot about it. But did that stop this Miss Lemuel coming to take it over? It did not. No," he said loudly, but that left him suspended in mid-air. He looked around a little helplessly.

"And that proves that Miss Lemuel is a witch?" Mrs. Winckworth asked quietly.

"Not only that, madam. There's all sorts of things, Mrs. Cunningham said. She said she had a servant some years ago named Lily who stole her silver, and she made a wax image of her, and held it before the fire; so it wasted away, and she died."

"Very convincing. Anything else?"

"Oh she was talking away twenty to the dozen, every time I went downstairs. So was old Cunningham, and Sanderson, too. But I've had a busy night, madam, as you know. I've not had time to stand about listening to people gossiping."

"But you can tell me one thing, perhaps. Are you listening, Bob? We can have that drink in a minute. A double brandy, I think."

"Of course I'm listening, Peter."

"Tell me this then, Maguire. Supposing this man, Gunning, is pretending that he's somebody he isn't—"

"Somebody who's dead, Peter," Bob Wexton pointed out.

"Quite so. Supposing Gunning is pretending that he's the old lady's dead nephew come back to life again . . . that's the suggestion, isn't it, Bob?"

"That's it."

"Well, Maguire, what has Gunning's behavior got to do with Miss Lemuel being, as they say, a witch?"

"They say she's bewitched him, madam."

There was a silence. The silence continued for quite a long time. Then at last Mrs. Winckworth brought out a few words under her breath.

"Oh I see. I see. That's the idea, is it?"

In a voice almost as low as hers, Maguire replied:

"Yes, madam. That's the idea they have in their minds."

"Maguire!"

"Yes, madam?"

"You do realize this is perfectly revolting nonsense?"

"Of course I do, madam."

"You'll let them know that's how I feel about it?"

"Yes, madam."

"I'll take a very dim view of anybody that goes around talking such rubbish. You'll see that gets round the others, too, will you? You'd better go in to the gentlemen now, Maguire. They all had cigars, and brandy, and things?"

"Yes, madam."

"Well, see they help themselves to whiskey and soda. I'll come in when I'd like them to join the ladies."

"Very well, madam." He went off. She turned to Wexton.

"Well, Bob, what do you make of all this?"

"The most dreadful poppycock. Of course, don't you?"

"Of course. But it's all odious whichever way you look at it."

"I shouldn't be too upset about it, Peter. A London spiv comes up and imposes on the credulity of an old woman, and thinks himself just a little cleverer than he is . . . No, Peter, it's an old story."

"Did he seem like . . . a 'spiv' to you?" She was fastidious about certain words, though there were some, hearty and as brief, which she could bring out with the greatest gusto. She held the word 'spiv' away from her nose, in inverted commas, as it were, like something on a pair of tongs.

"Well, Peter, frankly, no. And he didn't talk with a London accent, either. Did he?"

"No, he didn't. But I wasn't thinking about him at the moment. I was thinking about her. I was thinking it's all pretty odious for her."

"Yes, she's having a tough break. She seemed a decent old stick when I met her at the Savoy that time . . . a bit the memsahib type, but none the worse for that, I suppose."

"You see what the credulity of country people is capable of, even today, in the middle of the twentieth century?"

"Not country people—Highlanders," he said scornfully. He may have had a bad experience some time at the hands of some Highlander, male or female.

"No," she said. "Not only Highlanders. It could happen in Essex or Lancashire. I shouldn't be surprised if it could happen in Balham, too."

"I shouldn't lose any sleep over it, Peter. There's nothing *you* can do about it."

"You're not being very smart tonight, Bob. Don't you see the real horror of it? Don't you see that wretched old woman is probably firmly convinced by now she's a witch? That's how witches

have been made since time began. If I were old and a bit eccentric, and had no friends and lived alone for long enough—don't you see that they'd make a witch out of me? And in course of time I'd believe them myself? I'd become fully convinced I was a witch. I'd have black cats and call them my 'familiars.' I'd stick pins in dolls. I'd make pacts with the Devil. Don't you see how wicked, wicked, it all is?" Tears stood in her eyes. Her hands were trembling as she spoke.

"You mustn't upset yourself like that, Peter! I won't have it! You'll have to leave all this to me! *I'll* tackle it!"

She took herself in hand with a visible effort.

"No, Bob, no!" she murmured.

He did not seem to hear her.

"Shall we see those old caretakers of yours, and find out what they have to say?" he asked.

She reflected for a time.

"No, Bob," she said at length. "For the time being we'll talk to as few people as possible. We mustn't let them think we're taking it seriously—if it *is* serious . . . if there isn't any perfectly rational explanation for all this. There's one thing I must do as soon as possible. I'll go up to the croft tomorrow and seek out this young man."

"I'll go with you," said Bob Wexton.

"I *must* go alone. I want to tackle this my own way. It might take a long time. You'll only be here a week or two. Forget about it."

"Peter! Edward Tourneur was my friend!"

"Yes, Bob dear, I'm sorry!" She reached her hand out for his. "Forgive me! But this young man, Gunning—if that's his real name—isn't. It might be"—an idea wanly occurred to her—"it might be some odd game they're both playing together, Miss Lemuel and Gunning. Or there *might* be two separate people, after all," she said pathetically.

"I told you, Edward Tourneur's dead," he said sharply.

"Of course. Of course." She passed her hand backward over her hair. "Anyhow Gunning, if that's his name, has been a guest at

my table. I'm entitled to repay the call. Perhaps I could see Miss Lemuel, too."

"There can't be any doubt she's the Miss Lemuel I met in London. But it couldn't do any harm if I made one hundred per cent sure. Let me come up with you?"

"Please, Bob," she begged, "for the time being let me handle this alone! I know it's the right thing to do! *Please!*"

"I'm scared, Peter!" he said quietly.

"Pouf! Poppycock!" She was abruptly her normal self again. She got up from the chair. "Come, Bob, shall we join the gentlemen?"

CHAPTER 10

Next morning at about eleven-thirty Mrs. Winckworth set off to Skurr nan Gillian, driving the little Italian "mouse," the *Topolino*, which was less grandiose than the other cars, and would take the hill roads better. She drove herself. This was not an undertaking, as she had already made clear, for which she wanted the presence or help of other people.

In due time she came to the gate which shut off the open moorland from Skurr nan Gillian land. She got out, drove through, shut the gate again, and drove on, first through the open land of heather and bracken, then alongside the cleared land and the harvest-fields. A couple of men were working at the hay lower down, too far off to question whether or not this place was Skurr nan Gillian. In any case, it could not be any other. But when

suddenly a woman appeared from between the gnarled trunks of the orchard close at hand, it seemed well-mannered to put the question to her. She was a rather loutish-looking woman, with hanks of black hair lying across her brick-red face. Her sleeves were rolled back. There was a basket of apples over one arm. She wore no stockings on her coarse fat legs, criss-crossed with scratches. This was undoubtedly the creature who had talked so oddly to Layton when he went up to explain that Mr. Tourneur had been kept for dinner.

Mrs. Winckworth braked the car.

"Excuse me," she called out. "This is Skurr nan Gillian, isn't it?"

The woman nodded. There was undisguised hostility in her eyes. Perhaps she did not like to see a strange woman about the place.

"Is Miss Lemuel anywhere about?" (It would be seemly to ask for the owner of the place.)

The woman shrugged her shoulders. She was not going to commit herself.

("Dear, dear!" Mrs. Winckworth said to herself. "What a clod! I'll have to keep at it now I've started!".)

"Then could you tell me if Mr. Edward Tourneur's here?"

Then the woman behaved in the oddest fashion. "Find out!" she said. Then she stuck her tongue out as far as it could go. Then she turned and lurched off back into the orchard again.

"That's a nice beginning," Mrs. Winckworth muttered. "How very strange everything is!" She drove on. Below her shone a reed-fringed pool in the mellow September sun. Someone had taken in hand the job of cleaning it out, for a mass of scum and leaves was piled up along one bank. Around a small plantation the road curved beyond a paddock and a garden to a small white-washed house, blanketed under its thatched roof. She stopped the car, for there he was, the young man she had come to see, on the lawn in front of the house, tinkering with an up–ended bicycle resting on its saddle. He was in his shirtsleeves. He seemed to be wearing the trousers of the same brown pin-striped suit he had worn at Ben Voith.

She opened the car door, got out, and went over towards him. There was no sign of recognition in his eyes.

"Good-morning," she said.

"Good-morning, madam," he replied.

She felt faint. The lack of recognition in the eyes, the mode of address, were frightening, uncanny. In these first moments the stark dilemma was crystallized. Either the young man was acting, in which case his talent was positively ghoulish, or indeed he did not recognize her, and that was a situation at least as horrible.

But she must not feel faint. This was no time for being girlish. She must take this situation fully in hand, even if, like a hot poker, it burned her.

"Why do you call me 'madam,' Edward?" she asked. "I'm Peter Winckworth. You dined with me last night. It *was* you, wasn't it?"

An extraordinary sadness and despair came into the young man's eyes. He looked like a small child overtaken in a street by some monstrous dark schoolmaster who has filled his days and nights with gloom.

"My name's not Edward," he said. "I'm Jim Gunning."

"But I met you in the grounds of my house. You came and dined with me and my friends. Do you mean to tell me you have forgotten that?"

He turned his head away.

"I don't know anything about it," he said.

"Please excuse me," she begged him. "But do you expect me to believe that?"

He jerked back on her suddenly, fury in his eyes.

"I don't care a damn what you believe!" he shouted. Then he turned from her again, and strode over to the further side of the house, turned, and disappeared. She stood there for some moments, and was quite certain she would fall if she found nothing to give her support. She staggered over to the car, her hands fanning the air before her, as if to wave away the darkness that threatened to engulf her like a vast cloud of gnats. She did not know how long she stood there, holding on to the door-handle; then slowly the

cloud of darkness thinned, and she saw from out of the fringes of it an old gaunt woman approach her, her eyes flickering with a green fire which seemed to burn quite brightly, though this was high noon. A collie dog was at her heels. He stood there, gazing at her and adoring, as if she were Diana, and he a young votary.

"I beg your pardon," said the old woman. "I was not aware you had been asked here."

"You must excuse me," said Mrs. Winckworth. "I'm your neighbor, from Ben Voith down below there."

"I'm afraid I've never been on calling terms with my neighbors," said the old woman. There was no compromise about her. Old she was, but firm as a rock, straight as a tree. The green eyes burned.

"My name is Mrs. Winckworth. I take it you *are* Miss Lemuel?"

"You're quite right. Yes? To what do I owe this visit?"

"Can I talk here? You may find what I have to say very disturbing."

"There's nothing you can say which will disturb me, Mrs. Winckworth. But if you prefer to come into my house, by all means do." She inclined a finger towards the dog and without another word she turned and made for the house. Mrs. Winckworth followed, first through the porch door, then to the kitchen-door and down the step into the kitchen. She was relieved to find the young man was not there. It would be awkward to talk before the young man, Gunning, or Tourneur, or whoever he might be (though he could not be Tourneur, for Tourneur was dead).

"Please sit down," directed Miss Lemuel, indicating one of the easy chairs before the hearth.

"Thank you," Mrs. Winckworth murmured. How loudly the clock on the mantelpiece tick-tocked away! It was the sort of clock which, when you hear it for the first time, almost maddens you, it ticks so loudly. Then you never hear it again.

There were three cats in the room, one of them a smoky-grey Persian, of extraordinary beauty.

"How beautiful!" murmured Mrs. Winckworth. No witch's cat, she said to herself. No witch's room. The boy's books, the photo-

graph of the boy on all the walls. Was that a photograph of the same boy in Air Force uniform, with the lock of hair over his forehead? Certainly it was not the young man who had been a guest at her house, the young man up here, mending the up–ended bicycle!

"Cigarette?" asked Miss Lemuel. She had not yet sat down. Her eyes had followed the visitor's eyes as a trolley-pole follows the electric wire.

There was a box of cigarettes on the small table before the hearth. "A glass of sherry?" Evidently Miss Lemuel found it incumbent to behave like the lady she was by nurture, once she had taken a visitor under her roof.

"Well, I think that would be extremely kind of you," said Mrs. Winckworth. (She felt immensely like having a glass of sherry. It was becoming clear the old woman was just an eccentric. The bark was a lot worse than the bite.) Miss Lemuel went to the dresser where the bottles and glasses were and poured out a glass. "Thank you," said Mrs. Winckworth, raising her glass. "Yourself, Miss Lemuel?"

"No, thank you. Not in the middle of the day." She sat down facing Mrs. Winckworth. "Well? What have you to say? I'm a very busy woman." (The halcyon interlude was to be brief.)

Mrs. Winckworth put down the glass of sherry.

"I'll get down to it at once. I met a young man in the grounds of my house yesterday evening, around six o'clock. He was, of course, trespassing."

"Yes?" Miss Lemuel's eyes did not blink.

"We got into conversation. He told me his name was Edward Tourneur. I understand that that was the name of your nephew who was killed in the War?"

"That is so."

"I'm aware this must be extremely painful to you, but I have no alternative but to deal with the matter. You see that, Miss Lemuel?"

"I gather you found Gunning, my odd-job man, trespassing on

your property. It is up to you whether you prosecute. I am not legally responsible for Gunning's behavior."

"Then there is no question that the young man I met, Gunning, you say his name is, was masquerading as your nephew?"

"I did not say he was masquerading."

"I invited him to my house to meet my friends. We found him charming, and I asked him to stay on to dinner. I sent my chauffeur to let you know. During dinner he told an elaborate story in which you were involved, Miss Lemuel! How he dropped a copy of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* from his plane, following a remark you made. How you went up to London to attend an Investiture at Buckingham Palace when he received the D.F.C. If that's not to be called masquerading under false pretenses, I don't know what is."

"Are you threatening us, Mrs. Winckworth?"

Mrs. Winckworth flushed.

"Please! I beg you: nothing was further from my mind. But you must agree that some sort of explanation is due to me and my friends. He was recognized by several of my servants. They had had drinks with him down in the village. I am no snob. If you knew anything about me you might accept that. But the matter has caused me the very greatest embarrassment."

"I found the death of my nephew a good deal unpleasanter than that."

"Miss Lemuel, if there is any way I can be of help, you have only to ask me. I must ask you on your side to help me."

"I am not in the habit of accepting help from anybody, either from strangers, friends, or anybody. I want that to be perfectly clear."

There was nothing to do but to go on as if that had not been said. Mrs. Winckworth continued:

"I must inform you how I came to learn that the young man sitting at my table was not Edward Tourneur. There happened to be a late-comer to my dinner-party who knew Edward Tourneur. He was, in fact, a member of his crew."

"Oh!" For the first time Miss Lemuel showed some genuine interest.

"It was only by an accident that he did not come up to Skurr nan Gillian when your nephew invited his crew up here. But you met each other the night of the celebration at the Savoy."

"What was his name?"

"Old Smythe. Bob Smythe. He was your nephew's navigator."

"I remember him."

"He's Lord Wexton now. He was introduced at dinner as Lord Wexton, so that the name meant nothing to . . . to . . . For Heaven's sake, Miss Lemuel! Who *was* it that sat at my table? I have the right to know! If you had any idea of the sort of thing they are saying about all this . . . my guests, the servants . . . it's already spread all over the village."

"I have a very good idea," said Miss Lemuel quietly, "of the sort of things they are saying."

"It's not possible?"

"Oh yes, Mrs. Winckworth, it is. I've been here a great many years longer than you. I know exactly what they're saying. They're saying about me, as they've said for a good many years, that I'm a witch." She paused. There was a contemptuous smile on her lips. "Isn't that so?"

"Well . . . I know . . . up here in the Highlands . . ."

Mrs. Winckworth was acutely embarrassed. She was blushing down to her collar-bones. She lifted her shirt-collar away from her damp neck, and tugged at her tie.

"Please don't try to spare my feelings," requested Miss Lemuel. "Nobody has ever done that since I came into these parts. But I've come through."

"I can quite understand how bitter it's made you, all this."

"Not at all." She smiled, and at once the face had a curious haunted sweetness. "I'm a very happy woman, one way or the other."

"Yes, of course. It's a very beautiful place," stammered Mrs. Winckworth.

"And they say you were visited by a werewolf last night? Isn't that so, Mrs. Winckworth?"

"I thought they were all quite mad. Are you going to tell me what it's all about, Miss Lemuel? I appeal to you."

"Of course I will. It's extremely simple. May I go back a little?"

"Please."

"Gunning first came up to Glamaig just over a year ago. He was a consumptive in a bad way, and he had just run off from a Sanatorium where they threatened to perform a drastic operation on him. He came up here hoping to get some sort of odd job on a farm. He felt if he could tackle the illness his own way he would pull out of it. He had a small hemorrhage, and they turned him out of the room he was staying in, down in the village. No one else would take him in. He was in a state of suicidal despair when I met him on the moor. I needed an odd-job man, and I was too old to be frightened by the thought of the wandering tubercle bacillus." She paused. "There was another thing—"

"Yes?"

"I have never recovered from the grief caused in me by my nephew's death. Edward was English, this young man was English. They had both been in the war. Though Gunning was only a working class boy, there was something of the simple charm about him that there had been about Edward. I took him on. It suited both of us."

"Yes, Miss Lemuel, I see that perfectly."

"I tried to make him perfectly at home here. He ate his meals with me. If I ever had any class-consciousness, Mrs. Winckworth, I've lost it long ago. He was eager to work, but I made him go slow. His health steadily improved. He is married, you know, and has a small boy. I was making preparations for them to come and visit him."

"How awfully nice of you," murmured Mrs. Winckworth.

"And all the time Gunning got more and more interested in my nephew. I think it started as a way to avoid thinking of his own illness, and to drown his longing for his little family. But

the charm which Edward had always exerted when he was alive, began to impose itself from the other side of the grave. You will think it a fantastic word to use, Mrs. Winckworth, but I can use no other. It was a sort of love-story. The living Gunning fell in love with my dead boy. He would make me sit up for hours at night telling him everything I could about the boy's birth, his schooldays, his friends, his exploits in the Air Force. He came to know almost as much about Edward as I do myself. It was uncanny. It became a sort of obsession. I think I am at fault. I should have tried to check it, as I saw it gaining possession of him. But I think you will understand, Mrs. Winckworth, and maybe you will sympathize." It was not at all the same Miss Lemuel talking now as the forbidding old lady she had first met. She was a poor sad lonely old creature. Tears were in her eyes. Miss Lemuel continued: "Maybe you will sympathize," she repeated. "It gave me a certain sort of ghostly happiness, the only happiness I had known since poor Edward died. I loved talking about him. There had been no one in the world I could talk to about him before. Gunning saw a number of Edward's photographs and school trophies stuffed away in cupboards. He brought them out and insisted on putting them up all over the house. As you see." She raised her eyes to the various souvenirs of Edward around the room. "Before his collapse, Gunning began to insist on laying three plates at the table, instead of two, a third place for Edward. I thought that was going too far, but I had not the heart to discourage him. I had told him, for instance, that Edward was passionately fond of honey. He always laid out a pot of honey for Edward on the tea-table." She was silent. It was almost more than Mrs. Winckworth could do to prevent herself breaking into tears. She bit her lip quite hard, and dug her finger-nails into her palms. Miss Lemuel's head was turned away, too. The mouth seemed to be working desperately. It seemed as if in a moment even that rigid face must break down and be awash with tears.

"You talked about a breakdown," Mrs. Winckworth brought out hurriedly. "You mean a mental breakdown?"

"Not at first. We had arranged for Gunning's wife to come up

in March or April. Apparently the excitement was too much for him. He had a most dreadful hemorrhage, and nearly died. The doctor thought it would be highly dangerous to let his wife come up to see him. We managed to pull him round. It was an almost miraculous recovery, the doctor thought."

"I saw him just now, mending a bicycle in front of your house; and last night, too, of course. I must say he looked as fit as a plough-boy. You must have worked wonders with him, Miss Lemuel. How splendid you've been! After all, he's only a stranger."

"He recovered physically, as you see. But I sometimes think it would have been better if he had died."

"You mean his body recovered, but his mind . . . ?"

"Yes, he lost his grip on his mind. He was a very strong young man in his heyday. He had been a professional boxer. He was intensely ashamed of his malady. I might say, a thing which quite often happens among the lower orders. It was for that reason he refused for a long time to go to a doctor, and finally ran away from the Sanatorium."

"I see. Yes?"

"I take it that he devoted the last dram of his subconscious self to pulling his body round after the hemorrhage prostrated him. The effort left his mind enfeebled and untended. You will understand that this is just a hypothesis?"

"Of course. But it sounds most feasible. So that is how the obsession came to him?"

"Yes, the obsession first took complete hold of him a couple of months after the big hemorrhage occurred. Yes, something like two months. He got up one night, and he was not Gunning any more. He was Edward. It was the dead of night, and I was terrified. But I thought the only way was to treat him patiently and kindly, as before."

"It is, of course, frightfully interesting, Miss Lemuel, isn't it, the whole thing?" said Mrs. Winckworth, with something approaching enthusiasm in her demeanor. "*Frightfully* interesting!"

"But a little frightening to live with," said Miss Lemuel sadly.

"Of course! Of course! Oh Miss Lemuel, I think you are really a very wonderful woman!" She leaned forward and patted her on the back of her hand. "Forgive me! I can't help it! You've been so dreadfully maligned!"

"You get used to that, Mrs. Winckworth!"

"I think it's infamous!" She already saw herself vowed to a campaign for the establishment of Miss Lemuel in the hearts and high esteem of the local peasantry. "To think what you've been *doing* for the young man! I wonder what they'd call it—the doctors, I mean? A case of schizophrenia, isn't that it, Miss Lemuel? Split personality—a sort of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde."

"I'm afraid those scientific words don't mean very much to me. As for Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde—no. That does *not* fit the case. Mr. Hyde was a bad man. You remember, an extremely bad man."

"What ought we to do, Miss Lemuel? You know I'd be only too proud and happy to help in any direction. Do let me assure you of that."

"I think I'm managing myself as well as can be expected," said the old woman. (That was a flick of the tail of the other Miss Lemuel.) "A case like this takes time, endless time, and endless patience."

"Don't you think we might consult some . . . mental specialist, Miss Lemuel?" asked Mrs. Winckworth, quite a lot deflated.

"It is kind of you to take all this interest in the matter, Mrs. Winckworth," observed Miss Lemuel acidly. "But I'm not aware I've discussed with you the various remedial steps I have taken, and propose to take."

"No, of course not." Mrs. Winckworth plucked at her shirt-collar. The atmosphere was becoming sultry again.

"I'm sorry you had that unfortunate experience last night," declared Miss Lemuel. "In one of the earlier phases of the obsession, Gunning had been talking of a visit to Ben Voith, where they used to welcome Edward with open arms in the old days. I was disturbed by that, and did all I could to keep my eye on him, as soon as I felt another attack was impending. But, as you know,

he gave me the slip. I shall do all I can to prevent such an accident occurring again."

Miss Lemuel was obviously dismissing her. Mrs. Winckworth rose from her chair. The old woman rose after her.

"I couldn't persuade you to take another drop of sherry?" asked Miss Lemuel.

"No, thank you. I really must be going. I do want to say how touched I am by your extraordinary kindness." An idea knocked at her brain. It knocked so imperatively, that she knew she must give utterance to it. "Miss Lemuel, I beg you not to think I'm being impertinent. But tell me. Do you think there is any hope of a cure for Gunning? Along what lines may it be hoped for?"

"I don't think you're being impertinent. You ask, and I'll tell you. The young man suffers the delusion from time to time that he has become my nephew. That's so, isn't it?"

"Indeed."

"The delusion derived from the fact that he thought and talked about Edward unceasingly, night and day, over a period of many months."

"Yes."

"I have undertaken the reverse process. When the delusion takes possession of him, I talk to him about Gunning, about himself. I have naturally learned a great deal about Gunning's affairs during these months. The phantom Edward is already interested in Gunning, and feels quite affectionately about him. I am not an alienist, but I already see signs of improvement. Do I answer your question, Mrs. Winckworth?"

It was impossible for Mrs. Winckworth not to behave as she then behaved, for she was an impulsive and good-hearted woman. She threw her arms round the old woman's neck and bestowed a hearty kiss on her shrunken and leathery cheek.

"You're a pet!" she exclaimed, and flung herself out of the door, lest she should after all break down into that storm of tears which had been threatening for some time now.

"Good-day, Mrs. Winckworth," Miss Lemuel called out after her, and rubbed her cheek hard with her handkerchief.

Lunch had been ready for some time by the time Mrs. Winckworth had returned to Ben Voith, but no one was in any hurry. It was pleasant to sit about drinking gin or whiskey after a morning by the river or on the moors. It was only Bob Wexton who kept on getting up, going to the door, coming back, sitting down again.

"Oh there you are, Peter!" he said when she came in. "At last!"

"Good lord!" she chaffed him. "Did you expect me to come hopping in like a toad?"

Something of the shining exaltation with which she had left Skurr nan Gillian was dimmed by now, but she was still feeling happy and excited.

"It's all too bloody odd," he said. "I was worried."

"You're not to be worried any more," she requested. "I've got it all straightened up!"

Tony, the ex-commando, came up, swishing a drink around in his glass.

"What are you two conspiring about?" he wanted to know. "I hear there's a witch up the hill, and that young man who was in to dinner's a werewolf, or a poltergeist, or something. I want to be in on this!"

"You will, Tony darling, you will," she promised him. "Isn't it time for lunch?"

"Yes, madam," said Maguire, who was hard by. "It's been ready for some time."

"Come along, everybody," she insisted. The others rose.

"Tell me about it," muttered Bob Wexton. "Can't you tell me in a few words?"

"Oh, my dear, it's all far too complicated. But it's all right. I assure you it's all right." Then she stopped. The vivacity went out of her face. "Not that it's all right for that poor boy from London. Let's go in now, we'll talk later."

They went in to have lunch, but the question of the poltergeist was not raised during the meal. The others saw that Mrs. Winckworth was preoccupied, and that Bob Wexton had made himself, or been appointed, a partner to her preoccupation. They had little

doubt but that Edward Tourneur, last night's unexpected guest at dinner, was at the bottom of the mystery. For mystery it was. Or matchless trickery it was. The main facts, and several of the main theories, had gone abroad. There was a beating of wings in the air.

Lunch came to an end, and after a perfunctory cup of coffee, Mrs. Winckworth went off towards the door. She nodded to Bob Wexton and he rose and followed her.

"The Nonsense Room," she said. The Nonsense Room was a sort of surrealist boudoir, which had been designed for her by a sister-and-brother pair of smart interior decorators from Knightsbridge. It was a good room to choose, because nobody would burst in on them there. It was cordially detested by everyone. There were feathery things and shell things scattered round in profusion; a hosier's glass legs for the display of silk stockings dangled from the ceiling; a scarlet costumier's bust rotated on a pedestal. Underground Railway notices and notices indicating lavatories, stolen by over–jovial undergraduates, decorated the walls. Objects from the canvases of Dali and Magritte, laboriously rendered in three dimensions, were displayed in cabinets—alarm clocks dropping like omelettes, skulls inhabited by toads or clusters of wasps, books which provided eyes by which they could read themselves.

Mrs. Winckworth and Bob Wexton sat down.

"Yes," said Bob grimly. "We won't be disturbed here."

"This room cost a lot of money," said Mrs. Winckworth. "I'd like to get just one half-hour's use of it before I blow it up."

"I quite agree. The room *is* a bit screwy. But is it quite as screwy as the business of poor Freckles' ghost?"

"Compared with the business of Jim Gunning and Edward Tourneur, this room is Little Bo-Peep. Yet it's as sane as Euclid, really."

"You'll explain then?"

Mrs. Winckworth explained. She gave every detail of her visit to Skurr nan Gillian as far as she could remember it, and as far as she could reconstruct it, repeated every word of her conversa-

tion with Miss Lemuel. When she came to the end, they were both silent for quite a long time.

"Well," she asked at length. "What do you make of it?"

"You're quite right," he said. "It all hangs together hideously. Like a madman's dream."

"But there's one thing that comes out of all this very clearly indeed. Miss Lemuel's a much maligned old woman. Don't you agree, Bob?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I suppose that's true, if the account she gave you is the exact account of what happened."

"But what other explanation can there be, Bob? For God's sake, tell me. Unless you're going to agree with my old caretaker, and just simply say she's a witch."

He looked her straight in the eyes.

"She seems to have bewitched you, my dear Peter."

She flushed, and sat twiddling her thumbs for some time.

"I'm not a fool," she said at length.

"Neither is Miss Lemuel," he said somberly.

"Well, then, what ideas have you got on the subject?"

"None. I'm not happy, that's all. Are you?"

"It's not got anything to do with us, really," she pointed out. "Although . . . although . . ." She stopped.

He concluded the sentence for her.

"Although if there's any dirty work going on, we ought to do something about it. Isn't that what you wanted to say?"

"Yes. Just that."

"I'm in it another way, of course," Bob Wexton pointed out. "Edward Tourneur was my pal. We would all have cut off a hand for him."

"But Edward Tourneur's out of it. She made that quite clear."

"Then I don't like to think of the poor kid's memory being mucked about this way. It's about time poor old Freckles was allowed to rest in his grave. I have an odd sort of feeling, I can't tell you why—I have a feeling that old woman's stirring about in his grave with a stick."

"Easy, Bob. You make me shiver. There's another thing. This young Gunning's got a wife and a small boy. How does the wife feel about all this? Does she know anything? She might be going crazy with anxiety, whether she knows anything, or whether she doesn't."

"It's all so very complex," breathed Bob. "It's on so many levels." He bent forward and beat his temples with his fists. "Where do we go from here?"

There was a knock on the door, and Lacey, the first parlor-maid, entered.

"Excuse me, madam," she said. "A clergyman's called, the Reverend Mr. Merrilees, he said his name is. He would be very grateful, he said, if he could have a few words with you."

Mrs. Winckworth and Bob Wexton looked at each other.

"It's about this business," she breathed. "I feel it in my bones."

"Of course it is. What else could it be?"

"Shall we have him in?"

"It's perfectly logical. That's where we go from here. The Church."

"Ask Mr. Merrilees to come in, Lacey, will you?" Then a panic assailed her. "Wait a moment!" she surveyed the decorations of the Nonsense Room. Before her a framed panel proclaimed: *"Ladies' Cloak Room."* "We can't have him in here, can we?" she asked fearfully.

"It'll broaden his mind," said Bob, "if it needs broadening."

"Show him in, please," requested Mrs. Winckworth. A minute later he was shown in. At all events his manners and self-possession were up to the sturdy Presbyterian standard. He showed no more surprise at the surrealist trappings than if the room were upholstered in brown rexine and decorated with Millais. He was a handsome fellow; tall, broad-shouldered, a vivid streak of white thrusting midway down his black Vandyke beard. He wore a clerical collar and black silk stock above his sports coat and breeches. His hands were well-tended.

Bob Wexton rose.

"Good-afternoon, Mrs. Winckworth," said Mr. Merrilees. "I

must beg you to forgive the intrusion. I'm Merrilees, the Presbyterian Minister from Glamaig."

"Yes, indeed, Mr. Merrilees, how do you do?" said Mrs. Winckworth, holding out her hand. "This is Lord Wexton. Please forgive all this . . ."—she pointed to the nonsense around her—"and sit down. The chair's just a chair. It's for sitting on."

"Thank you, Mrs. Winckworth. It's very kind of you. I hope not to detain you too long. I have a feeling you know what I've come about." He threw a troubled glance in Bob Wexton's direction.

"Yes, Mr. Merrilees. I think we have an idea what you've come about. Lord Wexton is particularly interested in the matter. His name's not been mentioned to you?"

"I've not heard all the details yet. But I've heard enough."

"The story's been pretty quick in reaching you, hasn't it?"

"I've already had a telephone-call from Father Melrose, who has the Roman Church at Invercoire, across the bridge. I've not heard one story but ten stories. Mrs. Winckworth, I should be very much obliged if you would tell me exactly what happened."

"I propose to tell you what I know. So will Lord Wexton. Won't you Bob? But forgive me, Mr. Merrilees, if I first ask you your *locus standi* in the matter—apart from being one of the local ministers?"

"Certainly. You have every right to ask, Mrs. Winckworth. Your inquiry is very proper. In the first place, this extraordinary thing has happened in my parish. Further, Miss Lemuel has lived in my territory for a great many years, though, of course, she has never attended our services. She was not a member of any Church in these parts; you may know that?"

"I didn't know, but I can well believe it."

"In fact, she has always prided herself on being a free-thinker. I don't know if she would have repudiated the title of atheist."

"Has this much bearing on the matter . . . of this young man who was here last night?"

"You must be patient with me, Mrs. Winckworth. I think it may have a good deal of bearing on the matter."

"Excuse me," Bob Wexton broke in. "Your parishioners, or at least some of them, seem to have a very different idea of Miss Lemuel than the one you suggest. They seem to think of her as being anything but an atheist. They are convinced she does, indeed, believe in a supernatural power—the power of the Devil."

"So do all good Christians," Mr. Merrilees pointed out. "But they do not worship him."

"Do you seriously believe Miss Lemuel is a devil-worshipper? A witch, in fact? For that's the word that is being freely used about her."

"And used about her for a long time," confirmed Mr. Merrilees.

A blush suffused Mrs. Winckworth's cheeks. The tide of color was slowly creeping down her neck towards her collarbones.

"Mr. Merrilees," she asked. "Do you seriously believe, in this day and age, in the existence of witches? Frankly I must say I'm shocked. I seem to remember that there were few places in Europe where the hunt after witches was so bloodthirsty as in Scotland. But that was centuries ago. Honestly, I never expected to hear—"

"Mrs. Winckworth," the minister interrupted. "I must beg you not to upset yourself. I have not come here to propound my own views, at all. Let me say at once that in the ordinary sense, I don't believe in witches. But please, let us forget that aspect of the matter. The real reason why I came here was the belief that I might be of some assistance to that unhappy young man from London, at present employed by Miss Lemuel. He is a long way from his wife and family, and from any man of God from his own parts who might have felt it his duty to try and help him. And frankly, I conceive exactly that to be my duty. I have already met the young man. I tried to be of some use then, in the eye and under the hand of God. I left him knowing that I had succeeded in being of little use to him, or none at all. I have bitterly reproached myself since, for taking no further steps in the matter, though I am aware what obstacles would have been put in my way. It is true I had the joy to see him in attendance at one of my

Sunday services. But that was only a fitful gleam of blue in this excessively dark sky! I have been remiss and indolent."

There was obviously a streak of morbid guilt-consciousness in the make-up of Mr. Merrilees, which possibly operated in fields where his share of real guilt could be only illusory. Any explorations along those lines could not be useful, thought Bob Wexton.

"You seem to have some facts to impart to us, Mr. Merrilees," he said. "Will it be more helpful if you imparted them to us now, or shall we tell you to the best of our ability exactly what happened last night?"

"And this morning," added Mrs. Winckworth.

"And this morning," Bob Wexton repeated.

Mr. Merrilees pondered for some moments.

"I'll tell you briefly what I've heard from my parishioners regarding young Gunning and the two farm lads who came before him. Yes, there have been two other young men employed by Miss Lemuel in the same capacity as Gunning since her nephew died in the early autumn of nineteen-forty-five. One was a rather romantic young clerk from Glasgow with dim Gaelic ideas in his head, after the pattern of Fiona MacLeod. The other was a lazy young lout from Argyll who thought he was on to a good thing. They both took fright up at Skurr nan Gillian, nobody knows why, and were seen making off as fast as their legs could carry them. Most of that's tittle-tattle, and I won't waste your time with it. Then I'll tell you of my meeting with Jim Gunning one evening on the bank of the Groban, about half a mile from here. Then, if you'll be good enough to give me an account of these recent events, we may have the matter in some sort of perspective."

He started off, first dealing with the local hearsay, with some of which Mrs. Winckworth and Bob Wexton were already familiar. Then he described Gunning's mood at that encounter by the riverbank of which Gunning had spoken to Miss Lemuel a number of months ago.

"The young man's despair was, of course, very painful," said Mr. Merrilees. "And it's not uncommon for simple intelligences, untrained in theology and metaphysics, to ascribe their woes to

the Devil. The Devil has whispered his arguments and seductions into the ears of the profoundest philosophers and the holiest saints; into the ears of One more sublime than all of these. *And Jesus, being full of the Holy Ghost, returned from Jordan, and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness; being forty days tempted by the devil.*

"Gunning's references to the Devil were callow and pathetic in the extreme. And I should not be surprised, as I have already suggested, that in his wretchedness some ideas along these lines may not have murmured in his brain before his meeting with Miss Lemuel. What frightened me, I might say appalled me—"

But Mrs. Winckworth could contain herself no longer.

"Really, Mr. Merrilees! This is preposterous! Are you suggesting that this old woman deliberately trapped this young man in order to make a devil-worshipper of him? We are speaking under this roof in strictest confidence, but surely an allegation of this sort would be considered in the last degree libelous? I don't know if you've ever met Miss Lemuel—"

"Peter, dear!" begged Bob Wexton. "Hold your horses! Mr. Merrilees had not made any such allegation. He's trying to get to the bottom of things, and so are we! And the only way to do that is to sift out the facts!"

"Facts!" exploded Mrs. Winckworth.

"Yes, dear, facts!" repeated Bob Wexton. "There are other facts in the universe besides two and two makes four, and a cabbage costs a shilling!"

The situation looked somewhat threatening. The two friends were glaring at each other with hostility. Mr. Merrilees stepped in hastily.

"You were asking me if I had ever met Miss Lemuel, Mrs. Winckworth? Not very often. Her background was Episcopalian, as far as I've been able to gather it. She'd been established here for several years before I came to Glamaig, and though I'd heard rumors of her hostility to every form of Christianity, I felt it my duty to call on her soon after my arrival, for she resided in my parish. She was excessively rude to me; but I assure you," he said

earnestly, "I have not let that prejudice me against her. There are some people to whom all clergymen are like . . . are like . . ." He sought for an analogy.

"Like pollen," Mrs. Winckworth suggested with a smile, "to sufferers from hay-fever." The little breeze between herself and her friend had subsided. He had her hand, and was patting it affectionately. "I'm rather like that myself with clergymen, Mr. Merrilees, if you'll forgive my candor."

"It is not the question of *your* spiritual well-being that has brought me here," he said, unsmiling. He had many good qualities, but perhaps they did not include a sense of humor.

"Well, if it's any consolation," she told him, "I nearly got thrown out myself this morning by Miss Lemuel."

"She does not seem to welcome too close an investigation into her affairs," said Bob Wexton. The conference was back on its proper level again.

"We were speaking of this . . . this diabolism . . . I find myself compelled to use the word . . . of which I found certain traces in this very ordinary young Cockney working-man. It was not merely a mood in him. There are moods in which we are all diabolists, and it is only the Love of God that retrieves us from them. But supposing it is not God we have been asked to love, but the Devil? I tell you, what I detected in him was a certain rudimentary creed, a philosophy, of Devil-love. And I swear to you by my creed that it was not from within himself he drew that appalling doctrine, for he is a simple young man, loyal, generous, modest, chaste . . . I am certain that is the sort of young man he is . . . I swear to you it is from outside himself the doctrine came, the black and deadly heresy rendered into doctrine. I ask you, whence? Who had thus indoctrinated him?" He rose to his feet. "I request you, both of you, in the name of God, to let me have as exact an account as you can convey to me of these recent happenings at Ben Voith and Skurr nan Gillian." He stood there staring at them for some time, then he sat down.

Neither Mrs. Winckworth nor Bob Wexton felt like speaking. They seemed oppressed; it was almost as if they were afraid to

speak, for the responsibility was too grave, and it was a responsibility neither had sought.

"You'd better start, I think, Peter," said Bob Wexton at length. "Let's try and keep it straight in the order of time."

"Very well," she said gravely. "But before I begin, I must make a general comment, Mr. Merrilees. You declare your sympathy for the young man, Gunning. So do I. I think by now we've got a fairly clear picture of what has happened, on the top level, so to speak. At least *I* have, and I've already told what I know to Lord Wexton. Gunning is an unhappy and unfortunate young man. I am full of sympathy both for him and his wife. I propose to do everything in my power for them, everything I will be allowed to do. But I must say this, too. I consider Miss Lemuel an unhappy and unfortunate old woman. I am just as sorry for her as I am for Jim Gunning, excepting that she has been hounded and execrated for years, and is therefore even more pitiable. If there really were such things as witches, your people would have made a witch of Miss Lemuel long ago. I suppose there are times when the wretched creature actually believes herself she is a witch. It's a well-known process, isn't it, Mr. Merrilees? There's nothing you've said which conflicts with the idea that fundamentally she's just a decent old body, perhaps even a bit silly in some ways, though God knows she can be cantankerous and rude. I'm quite ready to believe she was so crazy about her nephew, Edward, that when he died all sorts of grotesque ideas began floating around in the fuddled twilight of her mind. But I'm convinced that while he was still alive she was just a rather touchy and eccentric old woman, nothing more. I think if the hand of friendship had been held out to her, and left there, even though she snapped at it at first—I'm sure she would have taken it and kept it. She would have been the typical Doer of Good Deeds, the Opener of Garden Fêtes, the Provider of Funds for Crêches—though she would not have done it under church auspices. She has a thing about churches and chapels, as many people have nowadays, you know that, Mr. Merrilees. You say she had a philosophy of Devil-worship. Do you really think that's right?"

"A sort of Manichaeism, I suppose I should call it," Mr. Merrilees murmured.

"Manichaeism? Yes. I know the word. I'm not at all surprised. I've met quite a lot of it among my undergraduate friends from time to time. I could tell you about a Black Mass I went to once at West Kensington, but it would shock you, and it was all rather cheap; and very expensive, too, if you want to know. It made me rather sick."

"Miss Lemuel," said Mr. Merrilees quietly, "was no undergraduate."

"Perhaps you're wrong there," Mrs. Winckworth flashed back at him. "Perhaps she never actually outgrew St. Hilda's because she never went there."

"Peter, dear. This isn't getting us anywhere," interrupted Bob Wexton. "Forgive me, darling, won't you? Do tell Mr. Merrilees what happened last night and this morning. I'll chip in when I think I ought to."

"Very well, Bob. This is what happened, Mr. Merrilees, and exactly how it happened." She told him. As he promised, Bob Wexton chipped in when he felt he ought to. They talked for half an hour, three quarters of an hour, an hour. It had by now become a long tale, and a complex one. Silence followed. Then Mr. Merrilees spoke again.

"Do you really think that's the whole truth of this, Mrs. Winckworth?"

"I certainly do!" she replied. The emphasis was perhaps excessive.

"Do you, Lord Wexton?"

"No!"

"Neither do I, Lord Wexton!"

Mrs. Winckworth pursed her lips.

"You men!" she said contemptuously. "Any pretext to gang up against a woman. I mean both of us. Miss Lemuel and me!"

"You mustn't take it like that, Peter!" Bob Wexton said shortly. "Too much is at stake!"

"Yes," confirmed Mr. Merrilees. "The welfare of an immortal

soul. Two immortal souls, if the other is not lost beyond redemption."

"You're forgetting the soul of my poor old pal, Edward Tourneur," breathed Bob Wexton. "Where does he come in all this?"

"I don't know! I don't know!" There was a suspicion of a break in Mr. Merrilees's voice. "I'm out of my depth!"

"You're out of mine, too!" declared Mrs. Winckworth, in a down-to-earth voice. "There's one other thing we've lost sight of."

"Yes?"

"This wife of young Gunning's, and his small boy. They at least are very much alive. Miss Lemuel assured me she was anxious to do everything possible for their well-being."

"Of course," said Bob Wexton. He did not sound convinced.

"What do you mean 'of course'?" exclaimed Mrs. Winckworth. "Do you think she's lying; or am I?"

It seemed possible quite a little fracas was on its way.

"Please, my friends!" begged Mr. Merrilees. "Let's consider calmly if there's anything we can do, and ought to do. Of course, there's the medical aspect of the case to consider."

"Of course there is," agreed Mrs. Winckworth. "She had the doctor down several times. What did she say the name was? Dr. Muir, from Invercoire. The young man seems to have had the best attention."

"That's not quite what I meant, Mrs. Winckworth," said the minister.

"Oh yes, I remember," she said rather bitterly. "You've had another specialist from Invercoire on the telephone this morning. The Roman Catholic priest, wasn't it?"

"He was acting according to his lights. He told me he considered the so-called obsession of Gunning to be a case of demonic possession."

"What?" They were both nearly startled out of their chairs.

"Poppycock!" growled Mrs. Winckworth. "It's all getting more and more like a lunatic asylum!"

"For Christ's sake!" muttered Bob Wexton. "For Christ's sake!" Then he relapsed into silence.

"The priest's made up his mind pretty quickly, hasn't he?" asked Mrs. Winckworth. "All this only happened last night."

"There have been rumors for some time," Mr. Merrilees said. "Did you meet Miss Lemuel's woman—Agnes, I understand they call her?"

"I had a brief and very unpleasant encounter with her."

"A relationship has developed between her and a young crofter, who works up at Skurr nan Gillian. His name is Kinross, James Kinross. Some two or three days ago this Agnes suddenly broke down in Kinross's arms and began to tell him about certain dreadful things she'd witnessed up there. Kinross is a Roman, as gross and simple a man as you can find in these parts; but he felt it his duty to inform Father Melrose, his priest. The woman Agnes has not returned to Skurr nan Gillian."

"What does Father Melrose suggest, then?"

"He suggests what it is his canonical duty to suggest—exorcism by Bell, Book and Candle!"

"Well, I'll be damned!" shouted Mrs. Winckworth. She threw her hands up in the air, and made a noise like a deep-sea beast rising to the surface of the water. But that was not action vigorous enough for her. She got up from her chair, and strode from end to end of the room under the dangling glass leg, from the costumier's bust to the table with the skull-shaped glass eye, and back again. "And they call this the Twentieth Century!"

Mr. Merrilees looked from the lavatory notices to the molten clocks, from the molten clocks to the carved hand tapering down into celery-fronds. He shrugged his shoulders. It did not seem to him that the Twentieth Century was impeccable in taste or intelligence.

Bob Wexton was muttering something under his breath. Mrs. Winckworth turned on him suddenly.

"What's that you were saying? Were you talking to me?"

Bob Wexton shook his head.

"No, Peter no!" he murmured. "I was only saying: 'Poor old Freckles!' I mean . . . he was such a decent pleasant sort of bloke.

It's so sickening to think of him tied up in this way with all this mediaeval mumbo-jumbo!"

Mrs. Winckworth turned back on Mr. Merrilees with white lips.

"There you are, you see! How *can* you come out with such gibbering nonsense?"

"I protest, Mrs. Winckworth. I beg you to be fair."

"I'm sorry. I'm very sorry."

"It was not I who invented the formula, or proposed the treatment."

"Treatment? What of? Do they *really* believe in such performances? *Bell, Book and Candle!* Preposterous! It's beyond belief!"

"No, Mrs. Winckworth. It's not beyond the belief of many millions of Roman Catholics. I'm no expert on the proposed treatment, and I can only tell you in the most general terms what the conditions are which they hope to effect by their treatment. Perhaps you would be interested to hear Father Melrose's views on the matter?"

"Oh, my God!" Mrs. Winckworth exclaimed. She threw her hands up in the air. "Little did I know when I asked that young man in for a dry martini . . . Please go on, Mr. Merrilees. We'll have Father Melrose in later, I've no doubt."

"That's up to you!" Mr. Merrilees said sharply.

"Yes, of course!" She blushed slightly. "What were you saying?"

"Although it embarrasses me to be the exponent of the Roman view in such a case, I imagine . . . I imagine . . ." he was not finding it easy to put into words thoughts so alien to him.

"Yes?" asked Bob Wexton quietly.

"They would declare that there are two entities involved, one being Gunning, the living Londoner, and the other . . ."

"No!" exploded Bob Wexton. "Not Edward Tourneur. No! I won't have it! He's dead! Let him rest!"

"Quite right, Lord Wexton," said Mr. Merrilees softly. "I think we are all in substantial agreement on that point—Father Melrose and I, and you two. We hope and believe that in Christ's

bosom the soul of Edward Tourneur, who died for his country, has rest. The other . . ."

"Yes, the other?"

"—is not Edward Tourneur at all. I think I expound Father Melrose and his Church correctly when I say that in their view there is a demon about, one of the countless cohorts of Lucifer's fallen angels. Whether he had been evoked by the incantations of this old woman—"

"God Almighty!" Mrs. Winckworth ground her teeth. Bob Wexton took her hand and squeezed it hard.

"Quiet!" he said. "Listen!"

"—or whether he has been despatched by his Master to lure this old woman and young man to their eternal damnation could only be discovered by examination. I repeat. I am trying to interpret the Roman point of view of these phenomena."

"So Jim Gunning is periodically possessed by a devil?" asked Bob Wexton.

"That would be their idea."

"And would Miss Lemuel imagine him to be a devil, or would she imagine him to be the spirit of her dead nephew?"

"She doesn't think anything of the sort!" Mrs. Winckworth broke in wretchedly. "She says Gunning's deranged. She says he's suffering from a split personality."

"Peter, dear, at the moment we're not discussing Miss Lemuel's views," Bob Wexton pointed out patiently. "Not yours or mine, either. Not even Mr. Merrilees's. Mr. Merrilees is trying to give us the orthodox Roman Catholic view, to the best of his ability. Could you answer my question, Mr. Merrilees? Would Miss Lemuel imagine this . . . this creature to be a devil, or would she imagine him to be the spirit of her dead nephew?"

"That is not a matter for theological exegesis, Lord Wexton. The answer depends on the sort of person Miss Lemuel is, or has become. It is possible she is convinced the actual spirit of her dead nephew comes back to her from time to time in the body of Gunning. If, on the other hand, she has vowed herself to the Devil's service, it would not outrage her to imagine that Gunning

is possessed from time to time by one of the devil's own henchmen. You realize, I am floundering in the dark."

"What remains miraculous, Mr. Merrilees," Bob Wexton went on thoughtfully, "is the way this Cockney working-man, a lower ranks soldier, is capable of taking on the character of my old friend, a public-school boy, a gentleman, an Air Force Officer. As Miss Lemuel herself said of him—he came to know as much of Edward Tourneur as Edward Tourneur did himself."

"Miss Lemuel explained that completely to my satisfaction," said Mrs. Winckworth rather coldly.

"I think Father Melrose would be of the view that the devil that came out of hell to occupy Gunning's body would be quite grateful for any work done in advance by Miss Lemuel. Though, of course, being supernatural, he would not depend on it," Mr. Merrilees said, with the ghost of a smile.

"Miss Lemuel told you, Peter," Bob Wexton murmured, "that it was Gunning who showed this profound curiosity about Edward's past life? Isn't that so?"

"Yes. She said his delirium, or obsession, derived from the fact that he's been talking and thinking of Edward Tourneur unceasingly for some months. She said Gunning fell in love with the charm Edward exerted from the other side of the grave." There was considerable embarrassment in her voice. "She called it a sort of love story."

There was a choking sound of contempt in Bob Wexton's throat.

"Love story!" he brought out. "*Freckles!* Now, promise, Peter! You won't go off the handle!"

"Yes? I promise."

"I quote your own words: 'Pouf! Poppycock!' "

Mrs. Winckworth grimaced.

"When I come to say a thing like that, with my own lips," she admitted, "I must say, I've got to admit . . . it sounds far-fetched."

"Methinks Miss Lemuel doth protest too much," asserted Bob Wexton. Mrs. Winckworth shrugged her shoulders helplessly. "Don't you both agree it's much likelier it happened the other

way around? I mean, that *she* talked Edward, Edward, Edward, to *him*, till she was blue in the face?"

"That she indoctrinated him with Edward," suggested Mr. Merrilees.

"That's the ticket. What's that book now? Do you remember? Where they put a sort of radio under people's pillow, and it goes on talking softly into people's brain all the time they're sleeping, all night long? Do you remember, padre?"

Mr. Merrilees did not remember.

"One of Aldous Huxley's, was it?" asked Mrs. Winckworth tentatively. "*Bravo, New World!* Something like that, was it?"

"Something like that," thought Bob Wexton. "What were we talking about?"

"Bells and things!" declared Mrs. Winckworth. "Candles!"

"Bell, Book and Candle!" corrected Mr. Merrilees.

"That's right. They'd treat it with Bell, Book and Candle! How would they do that?"

"The treatment is highly technical, Mrs. Winckworth, and I am no expert on it. I should be very surprised if at this stage even Father Melrose knows very much about it. He would have to call in his Bishop, I suspect, and there would have to be a consultation on a high level. But I tell you, frankly, I'm completely at sea. The whole thing is out of my terms of reference, so to speak. I am not a Roman, and I repudiate the premise on which the proposed ceremonial is established. I fail to see how it has any relevance at all, even from the Roman point of view, when the personages involved are not Roman. And that's true of all three of them, of course."

"All three?" asked Mrs. Winckworth.

"Yes," said Mr. Merrilees. "Miss Lemuel, Jim Gunning, the ghost of Edward Tourneur . . . that is, assuming it is the ghost of Edward Tourneur that is involved, not a demon from Hell."

"*You're* not suggesting, are you, Mr. Merrilees, that the ghost of Edward Tourneur's been hanging around Glamaig?"

"I repeat, I'm not expounding my own views at all. I'm trying to explain what lies behind Father Melrose's impulsive recom-

mendation on the telephone this forenoon. You realize, he had no time to think out the matter. He spoke to me in considerable stress of mind."

"So *you* believe this Bell, Book and Candle stuff is all nonsense, too?"

"All I've said is that I don't understand, from *their* point of view, how the ghost of a non-Roman (still assuming we're dealing with Tourneur's ghost and not with a demon) is susceptible to a sprinkling by Romish water, and will flee screaming from a mixture of Romish signs and incantations."

The significance of the attitude perhaps unconsciously expressed by the conversion of the word "Roman" to "Romish" did not escape either Mrs. Winckworth or Bob Wexton. Mr. Merrilees was to be understood as having his feet down to earth.

"But supposing the Church decides the case involves a demon and not poor Edward's ghost . . . Do you think that would be more orthodox?"

"In the Roman Church there is not more or less orthodox, I believe. There is either orthodoxy, or heresy. I think the orthodox view would be that this is a demon. But I warn you again, I'm in unfamiliar territory."

"Would a demon be amenable to exorcism . . . that's the simple word, isn't it?"

"I should imagine a demon is neither Catholic nor Protestant, Christian nor Pagan, Jew nor Gentile. But I think I'm right in saying that the state of mind or soul called demonic possession has been cured or alleviated by exorcism . . . in various modes, not only the mode of Roman exorcism."

"It seems to boil down to this," suggested Bob Wexton, "that the malady Gunning is suffering from, whether you call it demonic possession or schizophrenia or anything else, is amenable to treatment, if only you find the right treatment. You said you were satisfied with the medical attention Gunning has received, Mr. Merrilees. You meant the physical malady, of course?"

"I've the utmost confidence in Dr. Muir of Invercoire. He's an

excellent G.P. But the malady has changed. He seems to have recovered from the tuberculosis."

"So he believes," Mrs. Winckworth pointed out. "But as Miss Lemuel told me, and as we all know, you've got to watch your step very carefully with tuberculosis. It may seem to be completely cured—then, before you know where you are . . ." She did not complete the sentence.

"Isn't that one way she's keeping him there?" asked Bob Wexton quietly.

"Oh, Bob. You make me sick!" she burst out.

"But she *is* keeping him there, Mrs. Winckworth, isn't she?" asked Mr. Merrilees.

"I told you why," she replied shortly. "Entirely for his own sake. She has cured him of his consumption, or at least patched him up and made a good working job of him. She's now tackling the other job." She had swung round again to the side of the absent woman. She was a natural supporter of the incoherent, or the absent who cannot speak up for themselves.

Bob Wexton pursed his lips.

"Did you say anything, Bob?"

"No!"

"Don't you believe her?"

"You know what I think."

"Well?" Her manner was truculent.

"*I don't* believe her!"

She suddenly felt weak and empty. She didn't want to argue. She felt it would be rather pleasant to cry.

"Just because she's a poor friendless old woman . . ." she muttered.

"Peter, dear," he said very earnestly. "You mustn't talk nonsense! I told you I liked the old lady when I met her! What have *I* got against her? But we mustn't be sentimental. It seems likely that something perfectly horrible happened inside her after Freckles died. You remember how long drawn out the agony was—for both of them. It might have corrupted—no, not corrupted . . . what's the word I'm looking for, Mr. Merrilees?"

"Debauched?" he suggested.

"Wizard!" Bob Wexton brought out, falling back on an earlier idiom. "Debauched! That's exactly the word! The long drawn out agony might well have debauched her. Do you agree, Mr. Merrilees?"

"Isn't it only a question of degree how far she was debauched already?"

"We won't go into that. That's theology."

"Quite so," Mr. Merrilees agreed. "We have to be practical," he said, the shadow of a smile on his lips. "In the first place, it seems to be abundantly clear that Gunning is a case for a mental specialist, a psychoanalyst, if you like. You see, we are not quite so old-fashioned here in Glamaig as you Londoners seem to think." He spoke with a pride which was a little naive and quite touching.

"I suggested that to Miss Lemuel," Mrs. Winckworth reminded him. "Don't you remember?"

"Yes, I remember you told me. And she turned the suggestion down?"

"Yes. I mean, no. As a matter of fact, she left me in some sort of doubt about it. She said something to the effect that I wouldn't be aware what steps she'd taken in the matter. What do you think that means?"

"It seems to mean, as you say, that she wished to leave you in doubt about it."

"Why should she object to a mental specialist being brought in?" exclaimed Bob Wexton. "What harm could it possibly do?"

"There's another sort of doctor I would like to see called in," said Mr. Merrilees. "One who has every right to be there."

"Who on earth do you mean?" asked Wexton.

"Don't be foolish!" exclaimed Mrs. Winckworth tartly. "He means the wife. Don't you, Mr. Merrilees?"

"I do! Did you suggest that his wife should be brought up to see how he is? After all, she's a good deal more concerned in the matter than Miss Lemuel, who is only his employer, you remember, even if she *has* been very kind to him."

"It didn't occur to me. No. That's not quite right. Miss Lemuel

had said at one point that she'd invited Mrs. Gunning to come up to Glamaig in the Spring, and that Gunning's consequent excitement brought on his hemorrhage. Apparently, even the doctor thought so, too. So I thought it better not to make the suggestion."

"It's possible the excitement might have been bad for him, *then*. Only the chest specialists could say anything on that matter. But the malady is different now. It needs different treatment, other doctors. My own feeling is that the wife might well prove to be the best doctor of all. What do you think, Mrs. Winckworth?"

"Miss Lemuel's sure she has it all under control," stated Mrs. Winckworth. "Her view is that the delusion was produced by Gunning's excessive preoccupation with Edward Tourneur. She has adopted the reverse process and is convinced it will effect a cure. She talks to Edward Tourneur about Gunning, makes him think of nothing but Gunning, night and day. There's already a marked improvement, she says."

"But Mrs. Gunning could talk to him about Gunning much more convincingly than Miss Lemuel," observed Mr. Merrilees. "Isn't that so?"

"We don't know how Gunning-possessed-by-Tourneur would react to her, do we?" observed Bob Wexton.

"No, we don't!" admitted Mr. Merrilees. "But it ought to be tried out! If the obsessive personality, which we must refer to as Edward Tourneur, is anything like the original Tourneur, he will at least be very polite to Mrs. Gunning."

"You should have seen him with the women," sighed Bob Wexton. "They loved him!"

"But how about Gunning himself? If we find her, we can either let him know she's coming—"

"No!" decided Mr. Merrilees. "He might try and run away."

"If Miss Lemuel would let him," inserted Bob Wexton.

Mrs. Winckworth ignored that.

"—or we could spring her on him suddenly."

"Of course!" declared Bob Wexton. "The well-known shock treatment."

"Mightn't that be dangerous?"

"It certainly would! To the obsession!"

"What do *you* think, Mr. Merrilees?"

"I think that the sooner Mrs. Gunning is brought up to Glamaig, the sooner there's a chance this dreadful problem will be resolved."

"So you're both absolutely agreed on that?"

"We are."

"Very well. That's settled. We'll find out where Mrs. Gunning lives, and send for her."

"We might talk it over with Fergusson first," said Mr. Merrilees cautiously. He was, after all, a Scotsman. "He's a psychiatrist in Inverness."

Mrs. Winckworth pulled a beaded Victorian bell-cord, from which dangled a bunch of dried Dyak skulls.

"We'll get Mr. Fergusson on the phone," she said, "and bring him over."

"Quick-action Peter!" murmured Bob Wexton. "Good girl!"

"Thank you, Mrs. Winckworth. Forgive me for saying so, but I think you are a very generous and warm-hearted woman: you don't let grass grow under your feet."

"You've said it," observed Bob Wexton heartily.

"There's only one thing," said Mr. Merrilees with a sigh.

"Yes?"

"I could only wish you were a congregant of my Kirk."

She smiled at him mischievously.

"You must get to work on me, Mr. Merrilees." Lacey entered. "Oh, Lacey, will you get me Mr. Fergusson, of Inverness, on the telephone. He's a doctor, a specialist. What address did you say?" Mr. Merrilees provided the address. "Put him through here, if he's in."

Mr. Fergusson was in. A long conversation followed. Mr. Fergusson was intensely interested and hoped he would soon be allowed to see the patient. In the meantime he had nothing against a meeting between Gunning and his wife. On the contrary he considered the attempt to keep them apart unwise and ill-founded.

"Thank you, Mr. Fergusson. You'll hear more from me."

"Not at all . . . Mrs. Winckworth. I have the name right? Thank you. Good-day."

"That settles it," decided Mrs. Winckworth. "We'll get into touch with Gunning's wife at the first possible moment, and give her just as much of the facts as she ought to know at this stage. She'll be with us in two or three days. Oh, by the way, I wonder how we'll get the address? I don't think it will be easy to get it from either Gunning himself, or Miss Lemuel."

"That will be easy," smiled Mr. Merrilees, as he rose from his chair. "Just go down to the Post Office, and see Robbie the Postie, or failing Robbie, see his sister, Jeannie the Postie. The addresses Robbie doesn't know, Jeannie will. Glamaig is a small place. Well, I must be going now. Goodbye, Mrs. Winckworth. Thank you, and God bless you."

"We'll need Him," she said, "if He's around."

"Now, now," he wagged his finger at her. "He'll be around." He dropped into the vernacular. "Dinnah fash yersel'." And off he went.

Mrs. Winckworth was a woman of immense energy. The door had hardly closed behind Mr. Merrilees than she was up and at the door again.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

She opened her eyes.

"To the Post Office."

He dug his heels into the carpet.

"You have a cup of tea first, or I tie you down with a rope."

They had a cup of tea, and off they went to the Post Office. It was Robbie the Postie who stood presiding over the scales and the pages of stamps. From the little room within came the heavy thumping of a piano. A false note was struck. The stamps almost changed color.

"No, no, no!" came a female voice, evidently the voice of Jeannie the Postie, who not only sold stamps but gave piano-lessons. "Like this! La, la, la, la, la!" the voice sang. Then the notes were played correctly.

There was a customer. Mrs. Winckworth and Bob Wexton waited. The customer went.

"Yes, ye'r ladyship?" asked Robbie the Postie. This was the first time the new tenant of Ben Voith had honored the Glamaig Post Office with a visit. He knew she was plain Mrs. Winckworth. But sometimes the tenants of shooting boxes, more particularly the American tenants, were flattered by the error.

"Just Mrs. Winckworth," she pointed out.

"Ach, o'coorse. Ah beg ye'r pardon, madam."

"I'd just like you to do me a little service, would you, Mr. . . . er . . . er?"

"The name's Malcolm. But Robbie the Postie wi' dae. It's done for thirty-five years."

"Thank you. Would you, Robbie?"

"Aye?"

"Do you know anything about the sad business up at Skurr nan Gillian?"

"Aye, madam." He shook his head. "Thon's a verra sad business indeed."

A customer came in, Mrs. Winckworth paused. The customer's business was despatched. The customer left.

"He's not very well off, you know, this young man."

"Aye, he's just the odd-job-man up there. Or that's what she tuk him in for," he added darkly.

"I feel I'd like to get into touch with his wife." She lowered her voice. "He's been away from his own job so long. I'm sure she could do with a little help."

"As sure as daith, madam."

"You wouldn't have her address?" she asked casually, taking a pencil from her handbag.

"No, madam. I havenae." He seemed quite put out by it. "Never a jot or trace o' it."

"What? He never writes home?"

"He used tae write quite often, but always to the ae address." He put his hand to his mouth and looked round, as if conscious that he was committing a breach of postmasterly decorum.

Thump, thump, thump, thump, thump, went the piano-keys within. La, la, la, la, la, went the teacher's voice.

"To the ae address," he repeated. "A man's name, a Mr. Eustace Davies, % Birmingham G.P.O."

"That's the way Gunning kept in touch with his wife, I suppose?"

"Ah dinnae ken, madam," he said without hesitation.

"Don't any letters come to him from her, with a London post-mark?"

"Never," he said promptly. He looked through a sheaf of letters that had evidently recently come in, and were waiting to be collected for delivery. "Here ye' are," he said. "Twa. There was three in the last lot." He held out one addressed in a man's handwriting.

Mr. Jim Gunning
Skurr nan Gillian
Glamaig
Braemore Bridge
Ross-shire

The envelope bore the Birmingham post-mark.

"Is it always the same handwriting on the envelopes?" asked Mrs. Winckworth.

"Maybe," said Robbie. He was beginning to feel he was behaving rather improperly.

She turned to Bob Wexton.

"I suppose Birmingham G.P.O.'s the only address he's given her. They're forwarded from there."

"Looks like it," agreed Bob Wexton.

"She seems to be getting a bit anxious, judging from the way the letters are coming in."

"He's obviously not replying as fast as he ought to," he added.

"Well—er—Robbie." She turned back to the counter. "You can't help us any more?"

"Sorry, madam. May I say welcome to Glamaig?"

"Thank you. You've been very kind. Come, Bob." They turned

and made towards the door. Thump, thump, thump, went the pupil on the piano. La, la, la, sang Jeannie the Postie. They got out of the Post Office and into the road.

"What do we do now?" she asked disconsolately. "He certainly does wrap himself around, that young man. Like a cocoon. Or a hedgehog."

"Obviously we must write to this Mr. Eustace Davies, % the Birmingham G.P.O., and ask him if he knows Mrs. Gunning's London address, and if he would please let us have it."

"Do you think it would be any use?"

"No. I don't think so. Concealment is the whole point of an accommodation address. That's what they call it, I think."

"I'll write anyhow. But I agree with you. I don't think it'll get us anywhere. What will?"

"There's only one thing you can do," said Bob Wexton. "You must write a tactful letter to Miss Lemuel. Though my view is that'll be just as much use as the letter to Birmingham."

They got home. To Birmingham she wrote as follows.

"Mr. Eustace Davies,
% Birmingham Post Office.
"Dear Sir,

You will be surprised to receive this letter from a total stranger. I am a friend of Jim Gunning, whom I have reason to believe you know. He is at present very ill, and I am most anxious to contact his wife both on his behalf and on hers. I am given to understand you are likely to have Mrs. Gunning's address. I will be most grateful to you if you would be kind enough to forward it to me. I assure you that in days to come both Mr. and Mrs. Gunning will bless you for it. If you desire assurance about my *bona fides*, I am certain that can be supplied to your complete satisfaction.

I remain,

Faithfully yours,
Ethel Winckworth"

Mr. Edward "Tosher" Davies was faithful to Jim Gunning according to his lights. He tore the letter up, as he had once before torn up a letter from Sal Gunning, and as before, placed the fragments in the waste paper bin.

"So that's the name of the tart he's living with up there," he murmured. "Some blokes have all the luck," he reflected dourly, remembering the storms that troubled the dark pond of his restricted home life in his Birmingham pre-fab. "Posh note-paper, eh? Telegraphic address, eh? And they used to say *I* was the fiddler!" He spat on the Post Office floor.

There were three envelopes in the pigeon-hole from Gunning's wife in Holloway. He removed the outer envelopes and, as usual, dropped the stamped letters they contained into the letter-box. From Gunning in Scotland there was just one envelope. He opened it. It just contained the ten-shilling-note allowed him monthly for his services. There was no letter for forwarding to Mrs. Gunning. There had been none for two or three weeks now. Before that there had been a considerable drying up of the stream. He pocketed the note.

"Seems to me things is coming to an end between them two," he muttered. "What with posh tarts pushing in their noses. Well, perhaps, after all, I'm not so badly off with my own old woman," decided Tosher Davies.

Mrs. Winckworth's letter to Miss Lemuel went as follows:

"Dear Miss Lemuel,

"I want to write and thank you for your hospitality to-day at Skurr nan Gillian. You completely cleared up the mystery of what happened in my house last night, and frankly I shall go to bed easier for it.

"There is one matter I would like to bring up and I ask your forgiveness in advance, for I am afraid you will think I am an interfering busybody. But the fact is I am deeply moved by all the trouble you have taken on Gunning's account, who is, after all, only an employee of yours. I should be honored if you would

allow me to extend a little help towards Gunning's wife, for they are a working-class couple, with a child, as you told me, and it is possible that a little outside help might be welcome. I have no other excuse to offer but the fact that I have more money than I know what to do with. Further, I gather that the tenant of Ben Voith is allowed by tradition to extend help where it is needed among the local peasantry.

"I should be grateful if you would send me Mrs. Gunning's address in London. And I do hope you will let me know if there is any direction in which you think I can be of use.

Sincerely yours,
Ethel Winckworth"

The reply came by post two days later, in that script delicate as the tendrils of bindweed.

"*Madam,*

"I appreciate your letter, and the offer contained in it. The present writer is of the opinion that you are misinformed on the subject of her material status. As for forwarding the address of her employee's wife, I am of the opinion that such a request should be made directly to the employee involved.

"With compliments, madam,

Your faithful servant,
Deborah Lemuel"

It took Mrs. Winckworth several hours before she had the courage to show the letter to Bob Wexton. Her cheeks burned, and kept on burning, exactly as if they had been slapped again and again.

She produced it at length.

"Read this, Bob!" she said. He read it. "What do you think of it?"

"There's only one word for it. I don't think I've ever used it since I left my prep school."

"Yes?"

"Sucks!"

She smiled wryly.

"What a holy terror she is!"

"Holy?" he stressed.

"Let's not start on *that*, please! What do we do now?"

"That's easy. We must go to Gunning, and ask *him*."

"Try it!" she said.

He paused, and thought a moment.

"My God!"

"Yes?"

"How the hell can I go up to a young married man in North Scotland and ask him where his wife lives in London?"

"It is rather difficult," she admitted.

"He was a boxer, though that doesn't worry me so much. He'd probably shoot. And that's no way of getting anybody's address."

"So?" she asked.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"So. Search me."

"I'll have to talk to Gunning again." She set her mouth hard.

"You're running your head into a stone wall." He put his hands on her shoulders. "Ought you to go on with this, Peter? Ought you? I, at least, was old Freckles's pal. But it really isn't any affair of yours. It might be very painful, before it's all over."

"Try and stop me," she requested.

"No," he said. "Not with your face set like that. I'll come with you."

"Do as you like," she said.

Before talking to Jim Gunning again, it was necessary to get into touch with him again. And that did not turn out to be at all easy. The letter she had received from Miss Lemuel made it quite clear she would be unwelcome at Skurr nan Gillian, whether or not she would be allowed to see Gunning there. A direct letter was not likely to receive any better treatment than the letter to Miss Lemuel, assuming it would get into his hands. Then she must see Gunning outside the confines of Skurr nan Gillian. But

this countryside was vast. It might take months before she came up against him somewhere. And she could hardly go cruising along the roads and beating the moorland spaces in the hope of accidentally meeting someone, particularly if he was not in the least anxious to meet her. The village was more hopeful, but even the village, though small, covered a large area. Gunning had been known to take a drink from time to time at the Glamaig Arms. She went down for two or three days to the vicinity of the Glamaig Arms, and kept her eyes open. But that, too, was an inconvenient operation, which could not go on indefinitely. She realized there was no help for it but to take Maguire into her confidence, Maguire being the only servant with whom she had discussed the matter, apart from her own invaluable Hyland. She told Maguire she was anxious to get into touch with Gunning, for she hoped she could be of help to him. Would Maguire, therefore, spend extra time at the Glamaig Arms, and, if Gunning turned up, would he telephone her at once?

The days went by. Jim Gunning was not seen anywhere. It was almost certain he was aware something had gone wrong inside him. He was miserable, and ashamed, and frightened. He was probably lying low. He might lie low indefinitely.

As for Bob Wexton, he had been gone for a week or more now. They had wanted him back urgently at his office in London.

"Peter," he had begged her. "Let this thing go. It's too big for you to tackle alone."

"I'll carry on," she said. "It seems a little more worth while than laying in stocks of black market whiskey for bright people from Bolton Street."

"It's not a job for a layman," he insisted. "It's a job for the doctors—or the theologians."

"I'll report progress," she told him.

There was still no progress to report five or six days after he left. Feeling quite depressed, she went to the telephone, and had a word with Mr. Merrilees. That was a little inconvenient, for he had no telephone at the Manse. He had to be brought to a public telephone in the road just beyond his garden-gate.

"Is that you, Mr. Merrilees?"

"Yes, it's me, Mrs. Winckworth. Any luck?"

"None at all. I'm at a dead end. I have an idea. I don't particularly like it."

"Yes, Mrs. Winckworth?"

"Not long ago I was forced to use a Private Detective Agency, in connection with . . . with certain of my private domestic difficulties."

"I understand."

"It shouldn't be at all difficult for them to find out Gunning's address in London. I gather he was quite a well-known professional boxer before the war. What do you think, Mr. Merrilees?"

He paused before replying.

"I think the same as you. I don't particularly like it."

"Have you any ideas, Mr. Merrilees?"

"Let us put our trust in God, Mrs. Winckworth," he suggested. "Something will turn up quite soon."

Mr. Merrilees was a good and true prophet. It was Sal Gunning that turned up. She arrived at Braemore Station some three days later.

CHAPTER 11

It was about June when the letters from Jim started falling off. There was very little in them, and they were funny: you didn't know what to make of them. Well, the poor boy needs all his

strength to get over his hemorrhage, Sal Gunning said to herself, and it takes a long time.

Then one or two letters came which were so miserable she got more alarmed than she had ever been before, and that was saying a good deal. Jim assured her he was fine and fit, and pretty nearly as strong as he had ever been, but it would be dangerous to get away now. He even said it was impossible. What did he mean it was impossible?

She began to feel Jim was hardly reading through her letters at all—he was only just skimming through them. She wrote him a number of things which at one time would have got pages and pages out of him. As, for instance, she told him how Dickie, who had been "playing up," had acted silly when no one was looking with a boiling kettle, and had spilled half the contents on his foot. The skin had come up in one great big blister. She had written his father all about it, and he had made no comment on it. Then the old boy from the ground floor front next door, Mr. Furnivale, the night-watchman, had been knocked down by a car and killed at the corner of their own street. She had given Jim the full details of that, too. But nothing. Not a word about it. Silence.

Sometimes she wondered if something had happened to Tosher Davies—if he had died, or moved to another town, or something. In that case the letters would not be forwarded either way any more, between Jim and her, or her and Jim. For her own part, she had always put a return address on her envelopes, both to Tosher and to Jim, so that her own letters, at least, would be returned to her in case of accidents. And then suddenly, another of those short dead letters would come from Jim, referring to some small thing maybe, which he could only know about if he was still getting her letters. The less he wrote to her, the more she wrote to him, cajoling letters, chatty, pathetic letters, assuring him that it was all right—even if he did not feel like writing she would understand—if only he would send her a line or two now and again. It was hard sending letters like that out into a darkness which they did not seem to penetrate.

And then she wrote something to him in three successive letters,

and there was still silence. And she knew at last that, if Tosher Davies was sending them on, Jim was not reading them. They were piling up somewhere, at some far off Post Office, or on the table by his bedside.

She told him she needed money—was there anybody he could ask who could find a few pounds for her? It was not true that she needed money. She had enough. But the idea came to her one night of tears and heartbreak that he could not possibly ignore such a request, not possibly, if he read the letter which contained it.

She said to herself, if he doesn't answer this third letter, I don't care what happens to me or Dickie or anybody in the wide world, I am going to find out where my Jim is, and go to him, for he needs me.

He did not answer the third letter by the day she had set. She had already for some time worked out the way she would find out where he was. She packed a small fiber suitcase while her mother was out shopping, put on her hat and coat, and waited for her mother to come in.

Her mother came in before long, young Dickie tagging on dutifully behind her, holding the string-bag of vegetables. He had been as good as gold lately. He could see that his mother was more worried than she had been before. Her face was pale and pinched. Often she did not seem to know he was in the same room with her, she was so quiet; and that made him quiet, too.

"What's the matter, mummy?" he would ask, taking her hand, and looking up into her eyes. Then he would go straight to the point. "Haven't we got a Daddy any more?"

" 'Ush, you little villain!" his granny would say, and clout his behind good and hard.

A bitter look would come into the old woman's eyes, balefully directed towards one of the two Jims that kept perpetual company in her mind's eye. The bitter look was not for ordinary-Jim, the son-in-law that had given her a home when some of her own sons and daughters who were in a better position to look after their old ma, and had more rooms in their house, had turned

their stony faces away from her. It was for extraordinary-Jim, mystery-Jim, who had so pig-headedly refused to return to his wife and kid, the way all other husbands do after a prolonged spell in hospital.

There sat Sal Gunning, on a kitchen-chair, with her hat and coat on, and her fiber suitcase beside her, waiting for her mother to come in.

Her mother came in, Dickie with her, each with a bag of shopping. Her mother knew at once what the hat and coat and the suitcase meant. This was no time, she realized, for tears or for recrimination.

"Well, Sal, so you're going to him?" she asked.

"Yes, Mum."

"Do you want a cup of tea before you go?"

"No, Mum. I've had one."

"Mummy, mummy, where are you going?" asked Dickie. It was only he who showed any sign of excitement. "Are you going to see Daddy?"

"Yes, Dickie."

"Won't you take me, Mum?"

"No, Dickie, it's too far."

"Tell Daddy he's a bad Daddy. He should come home."

She bent down to the boy and kissed him. He was much too heavy for her now to lift him off his feet, the way he had been building up.

"Goodbye, Dickie boy. You will be a good boy. You won't play up, will you?"

"No, Mummy. I promise."

"I've told them at the firm, Mum," Sal said. "I told them after dinner, when there was no letter. I'm going now."

"All right." The old woman lifted the suitcase.

"I'll take the bag, Mum. Let me take it."

"*I'll* take it," said the old woman sternly. "I'll put you on the bus. Come on, Dickie. You don't need to take the groceries with you. Put them down."

There was only one link in the whole world between Sal Gunning and her husband, and that was the counter at the letter office in the G.P.O. in Birmingham. So Sal went to Paddington Station, and took the next train to Birmingham, which left some forty minutes later. In the train it occurred to her that the G.P.O. in Birmingham might be shut when she got there, for she had no idea when G.P.O.'s shut.

"If it's shut, it's shut," she told herself. "I'll find myself a room in a hotel, and go to the Post Office tomorrow." She was aware that the job she had set out to do was not likely to be smooth and easy like making blancmange.

At Birmingham Station she put her bag away, then asked a kind-looking porter and a kind-looking woman traveller whether they knew if the G.P.O was open. One said it was, the other said it wasn't. So she took a taxi. On this job she knew she must not be particular to a shilling or two. The letter office of the G.P.O. was closed till eight o'clock next morning. It was only open for telegrams.

"Very well," she told herself. "I'll be here at eight o'clock tomorrow morning."

When she got to the Post Office next morning, she felt it was a bit silly to arrive so soon. She already had the feeling that she was not likely to receive much help from the clerks behind the counter. The thing she had come to Birmingham to do was to get hold of Tosher Davies. Eight o'clock in the morning was no likely time for any Tosher Davies to turn up.

She went up to the clerk at the Poste Restante counter.

"Excuse me," she said. "I want to make enquiries about a Mr. Eustace Davies what calls here for letters."

"Davies, did you say?" He went up to the pigeon-hole marked "d" and started flipping through the letters. "Davies with an an 'e'?"

"Yes, please."

He had a letter in his hand.

"Eustace did you say?"

"Yes, please." Her heart was pounding away.

He handed over a letter to her without a word, and turned to the next client, a dapper young man in a hurry. It was a letter from herself. So Tosher Davies had not been in to pick up letters for a few days. There was no letter the other way, from Jim to herself. But it was not letters she had come for. She had come to get into touch with Tosher Davies. The dapper young man had run off. She felt a frightful fear that perhaps, by a wild coincidence, the dapper young man might be Tosher Davies. That was easily the sort of young man Tosher Davies would be. Then she told herself not to be silly. If he had been Tosher Davies, the clerk would have got the letter back from her.

"Excuse me, please," she said to the clerk again. He was sorting a stack of letters into their pigeon-holes.

"Yes, Miss?" She let that go by.

"This is a letter *from* me," she said. "Please put it back. It's *for* this gentleman I want to see, Mr. Eustace Davies." She reversed the envelope. "This is me," she pointed out. "Mrs. Sal Gunning."

"I'm sorry," he said. "My mistake." He put the letter back. A minute or two later he was conscious she was still hanging around.

"Is there anything more I can do for you?" he asked, rather irritated by the girl's persistence.

"I really wanted to know if you could tell me how to get into touch with this here Mr. Davies," she said haltingly.

"I'm afraid I can't," the clerk said shortly. "Write him a note and ask him to meet you." (That oughtn't to be too difficult, he said to himself. She's not a bad-looker.)

"I *have* written to him and he doesn't answer," she said. A faint haze was on her eyes.

"I'm sorry, miss. Madam, I mean. I'm afraid there's nothing I could do about it."

"But you've *got* to. My husband's ill. Mr. Davies is the only one that knows where my husband is."

The clerk was beginning to get a bit dizzy. She seemed a nice little woman, and he felt sure it was all on the up-and-up. Though you could never be sure. There are odd people who come asking

for letters at G.P.O.'s and sometimes they say and do odd things when they get them. (Last year, for instance, a woman asked for a letter, read it, and dropped dead.) By this time one or two of his colleagues from neighboring counters were looking on and listening.

"Look here, madam!" he said, toughening up. "I've got my work to do. I'd like to help you if I could; but I can't. Besides,"—he raised his voice—"I don't know this Mr. Eustace Davies. You see, so many people come here asking for letters."

She had already made up her mind.

"All right, then. I'll wait about here till he comes."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"O.K. by me. If you've got nothing better to do with your time. Yes, sir?"

"Any letters for Walsh—K. P. Walsh?" asked a newcomer. There were no letters for Mr. K. P. Walsh.

Then another idea suddenly occurred to the clerk.

"You intend to wait about here till this Mr. Eustace Davies next calls for his letters?"

"I've got to! I must!"

"You'll be going out to meals," he said ironically, "or will you bring your meals in with you?"

"Please," she said with dignity. "I'm not going to interfere with you. Don't interfere with me!"

"Oh my God!" The young man was very near the breaking point. "I suppose if you want to hang about you can," he said.

"Thank you."

"You'll get tired. We don't keep any chairs for people to wait about in. Do you realize it may be days?"

"I'll wait till he comes and asks for his letters."

"You'll have to have a chair! You'll have to have a chair!" The young man felt a wave of hysteria rise in him. "Mildred!" he said, addressing the young lady at the stamps and postal orders counter just alongside. "I'm going to see Mr. Jenkins! Hang on for me, will you?"

"O.K. Stan!" said Mildred, and Stan disappeared through a door behind him.

About ten minutes later Stan reappeared with an older, and more distinguished employee of the Post Office. He had pince-nez, his coat was dark, and his trousers were herringbone-striped. Stan remained at his post behind the counter, but the other gentleman came all the way round to Sal and drew her to one side. Then he addressed himself to her politely.

"Good-morning, madam. I understand you wish to establish contact with a gentleman who calls here for his mail?"

"Yes, sir."

"While of course we here are anxious to do everything in our power to be of use—"

"Please," begged Sal. Her lips were almost white with pent-up emotion. "Please don't make difficulties. There's nothing dodgy about what I'm doing. My husband is terribly ill . . ." she opened her hand-bag and showed him the main pocket bulging with letters and documents . . . "and I've got his letters here, and you'd see for yourself, if you read them, and these are letters from the Sanatorium . . ."

"I do beg of you not to upset yourself, madam." The Post Office official was really quite bewildered. His daily round rarely—in fact, never—had brought him face to face with a young woman suffering from such a stress of emotion as this one; a young woman, moreover, so transparently honest. It was not his business to interview emotional young women. His business was to conduct the affairs of his department as efficiently as possible. Did it make for efficiency to have a tragic-eyed young woman hanging around the place for days, maybe for weeks, till one of His Majesty's citizens came and claimed his letters, as he was legally entitled to do, without let or molestation?

Here was a poser, and he was not grateful to the young woman for putting it before him. He had enough on his hands. On the other hand, what harm would the young woman be doing? What crime could she be accused of? Did she constitute a nuisance by

hanging round? Could it be said she was loitering with intent to . . . with intent to do what?

He had lost sight of the young woman, in a manner of speaking, during his scrutiny of the problem she presented to him. He looked at her again. Good heavens! She had her handkerchief at her face. She was crying. The tears were falling in a full and steady stream.

The official cleared his throat. A British Civil Service official, an official, above all, employed by the Postmaster General, could behave in only one way.

"Madam," he said, "so long as you give me your undertaking that there will be no awkwardness, of course you can wait here till the gentleman comes. Of course." He bowed slightly, went behind the counter, and disappeared to the invisible place where his desk was. Five minutes later, a small boy of the office-boy type appeared, bearing a chair. Stan, the clerk, made a gesture towards Sal, who was powdering her face. The small boy came round and placed the chair near Sal on the public side of the Poste Restante counter.

"Mr. Griffiths sent this, missis," the small boy said.

"Thank you," Sal breathed faintly, and sat down.

There she sat all morning, looking out for people who looked as Tosher Davies might look. (She knew his age. It was more or less the same as Jim's. She had some conception of his type.) At lunch-time she went out for a quick sandwich and glass of milk. Then she came back again and took up her watch, having satisfied herself that Mr. Davies had not called during her absence. Some other female was occupying her chair. But people do not usually wait about for long in post-offices, certainly not longer than they can help. The female vacated her chair and went off. Sal sat down, and watched, and listened. She went out for tea. She was away no time, then she came back again and resumed the watch. She did not attract much attention from the public, for the post-office public has its own affairs on its mind. It does not deduce there is anything anomalous about a young woman sitting on a chair.

When the letter-counter closed, she went off and had a meal, and to try and drown her loneliness and misery she went off to the pictures. It would have been more cheerful to have gone into a pub, all the more as the film was a revival of a haggard story of how Robert Taylor made Irene Dunne blind in a car-crash, and then stood weeping on the cliffs of Montmartre, in Paris, his tears dropping onto the rocks of the River Seine below. It was something like that. The film bored her and made her more wretched than before, for she did not want to see Irene Dunne blind in any picture.

A pub would have been more cheerful. But Sal would never have gone unattended to a pub in Holloway, excepting the Black Swan, so she certainly would not go alone to a pub in this Birmingham. So she went to the pictures, and then to bed in that clean little Commercial Hotel she had found, and then she got up and had breakfast, and went back to the Post Office. Her chair was waiting for her. Stan at the counter greeted her with a "Good morning," and she replied "Good morning" and at the same time slipped him the packet of twenty cigarettes she had brought for him. Stan blushed, and did not know what to do, for employees in Post Offices receive tips or presents very rarely indeed. He decided to take the cigarettes and say nothing, for otherwise he was certain he would hurt her feelings.

So there Sal Gunning sat and waited for another day. She was aware that she was the object of considerable interest on the part of the various clerks behind the counters, whenever there was a lull in the swirl of their activities. There would be a pointing of thumbs, a whispering behind hands, especially when someone came in to take over a shift. But she would have borne much more than that for Jim. The crashing of tempest, and the howling of beasts in the wilderness, would not have put her off.

And then Tosher Davies came.

Really, it might have been a lot worse. It might have been worse by days and days. A young man came up to the counter. He did not have black oiled hair, but he had browned oiled hair. He looked like somebody tied up with bookmakers and boxers' managers.

He went up to the letter counter. Stan was off duty by this time. But Stan's successor well knew what was what. In fact he knew Tosher Davies's name before Tosher Davies mentioned it. He had quite often handed his letters over. A wink went from the clerk to Sal. Sal got up from her chair.

"Eustace Davies!" said Tosher succinctly. The young man was about Jim's age, with a long nose twisted slightly to the left.

The clerk went to the "d" pigeon-hole, took down the letters, ran through them.

"Here you are!" said he.

"Thanks!" said Tosher, and turned to go off. He found a young woman, rather small, rather pretty, with big eyes goggling up into his face.

"You're Tosher Davies!" breathed the young woman. Tosher Davies! The inconceivable Tosher Davies, the faceless, the mythological, the Keeper of the Secret!

"Well, I'll be scapa flow'd!" said Tosher. " 'Oo are you?"

"That letter in your hand," gasped Sal. "It's from me! I'm Jim Gunning's wife!"

"Strike me dead!" said Tosher Davies. " 'ow the 'ell—" Then he became aware of the profound attention that was being paid to the incident, not only by the clerk behind the letter counter, but by every other clerk within sight. It was the awareness of the born "fiddler" of anybody anywhere paying any attention to him. With the born "fiddler's" caution he dropped his voice. " 'Ere!" he said. "Come this way!" He took her to the farthest corner of the hall. She was trembling on her feet, like a nearly-knocked-out boxer. "Steady! Steady!" he bade her. "Well? Wot's all this abart? 'Ow the 'ell did you know 'oo I was? Steady!"

She pulled herself together.

"I've been waiting till you came and asked for your letters. I can't believe it's you!"

"It's me right enough. Eustace Tosher Davies. 'Ow long 'ave you been waiting?"

"Today and yesterday."

"All day?"

"All day. I'd have waited the whole week, the whole month."

"You know your own mind, don'cher?" he said, with grim admiration.

"Mr. Davies. You've got to help me, and my Jim. You've got to. I've wrote to you twice, but you never answered my letters."

" 'E told me not to," he said a little uncomfortably. "Any'ow, wot do you want?" The memory of his promise to Jim Gunning came back to him.

"I want his address. You're the only one that's got it. He's ill. He needs me. I must go to him." She had seized the lapels of Tosher's coat. The tears were streaming without stint down her cheeks.

" 'Ere, 'ere! I've told you already! 'E's asked me not to give no one 'is address, and no one means *no one*!" He was glaring at her because he felt in his bones she would get him down. There didn't seem to be anything you could do about those tears, whether you were a Civil Service gentleman with a white stiff collar and herringbone trousers, or a hard-boiled fiddler with padded shoulders and high-hitched trousers showing yellow socks. "I can't give you no address!" he barked at her. He remembered that Jim had actually warned him of this very situation. He'd said that his wife might even make out he was ill and all she needed his address for was to go and look after him. " 'E's my pal!" he explained, to justify his conduct. " 'Im and me was like that." He placed alongside of each other the index-fingers of both hands. "If 'e wants you to 'ave 'is address, why the 'ell don't 'e let you 'ave it 'imself? Why does 'e send me ten bob a month . . ." Then he stopped. A pang of grief thrust into his heart. If he gave this dame the address she asked for, it was curtains to that ten bob a month. Not much, but easy money, and reg'lar.

"Please, Mr. Davies. Don't think about any money. Not now. I've got all his letters here. Can we go somewhere, and you can see for yourself why he doesn't want me to have his address? He's had consumption, and he's ashamed. He's funny. If you knew him in the army, you'll know what I mean. He can't bear people being sorry for him, or doing anything for him when he's ill. That's why

he ran away from that Sanatorium. He didn't want even me to be there to look after him, though it was my place, wasn't it, Mr. Davies, you know it was."

"Wait a minute, Mrs. Gunning," he implored her. All this was much too much for him. "You've no need to tell me all this 'ere. You *are* Mrs. Gunning, ain'cher?"

She was prepared for that. The identity card was among the papers.

"And you swear on your mother's dead body that it ain't got nothing to do with no other woman? I won't go poking my 'ead into married peoples' business wot concerns nobody else. I've enough on my plate, *thank* you."

"There never was a better husband in all the world, Mr. Davies. And I've been a true wife."

It was impossible to resist the frankness of those eyes, washed with tears as they were. It was impossible to resist the sincerity in her voice, the dignity in her bearing.

Tosher Davies sighed deeply. Ten bob a month. Nice clean easy money. Well, nothing can last for ever.

" 'Ave you got a pencil?"

Had she got a pencil? She had thought of that, too. There was a pencil and a little note-book in the handbag. But her fingers were in such a terrible state of fumble and dither, that the handbag fell to the floor, spilling out all its papers, its comb, its powder-puff, its everything. He stooped and picked it all up for her.

"Now, now," he warned her. "There's no need to create! Pencil? Note-book? I thank you," he enunciated, in the comic manner of Mr. Askey.

He wrote:

% Miss Lemuel
Skurr nan Gillian
Glamaig
Braemore Bridge
Ross-shire.

She took the pad from him with trembling fingers.

"Oh!" she cried. "Oh! Oh! Oh!" Almost it was a series of little yelps.

"Take it easy, gal!" he ordered, with mock roughness. "Take it easy!"

"Ross-shire?" she asked faintly. "Where's Ross-shire?"

"Scotland," he told her. "You don't know nutten'!" That was said in American, and was funny. "Hi!" he called out. "Where you going? Wot's the 'urry?"

But she had pushed open the spring doors.

"Thank you, Mr. Davies!" she called out over her shoulder. Then she was gone.

CHAPTER 12

North of Perth there was a delay on the line, and the train was a couple of hours late. There was time then for a bite of early lunch at Inverness, though Sal didn't feel very much like eating; but she ought to, she thought—she hadn't eaten for many hours. She had been too excited, and too frightened, to eat. It seemed an enormous long way up to Edinburgh, for she had never before been further than Norwich. These mountains, these vast tracts of heather further north, looked like something on the other side of the moon somewhere, like Jim had once written to her. She got on the train at Inverness, as one might get on to a vehicle propelled by a new motor principle, and got out at Braemore Bridge shortly before two o'clock.

She waited about uncertainly on the platform a little while as

passengers got on and off, and packages were taken out of the van. She noticed a low blue-upholstered arm-chair showing up out of its swaddling of straw and canvas and rope.

"That's quite a bit like our chairs in the front room," she told herself, and all of a sudden she wanted to cry. "Don't be soppy!" she ordered. It would be time enough to cry when she did it on Jim's shoulder, and he was pulling his fingers through her hair, as he did sometimes. She wondered what she had better do with her suitcase, and decided to put it away until she knew where Jim and she would spend the night. You never know. They might be speeding away home tonight from this same station. So she talked to herself on getting off at Braemore Station. So she had talked to herself all the way from Birmingham to Braemore Bridge. But she was frightened, very frightened. What state was he going to be in, when she found him? Would he be weak and thin, coughing his lungs up? He had told her in letters his chest was fine now, he could take on a job as a boiler-maker. Was he telling the truth? Somehow she felt he was. He just didn't tell lies to her. What was wrong then? Why had he been acting so funny these last few months?

She had answered herself over and over again. It's one of these humps he gets, like he used to, when he wouldn't come back from work, but would go for some beer straight away, and not come back till the early hours of the morning. But this time it's not lasting days. It's lasting weeks and months.

Don't worry, Jim. I'll make you snap out of it. You'll see.

She went up to a porter who was trundling luggage away from the van.

"Can I leave my bag here, please?"

"Yes, Miss, wi' pleeshure," said the porter. (People always gave her that "miss," and she a married woman with a boy of eight. But you can't go flashing your wedding-ring in their faces, can you?) "Put it on ma wee trolley, will ye?" He took the bag up to the office, deposited it, and gave her a ticket. She handed him over the money. He was about to move on to deal with his packages, when he sensed the young woman was feeling rather lost, and

wanted to ask him something. She was a stranger, and a townswoman, and judging from the bag and the clothes she wore, not to mention the pale bewildered little face, it was clear she was not the sort of young woman who goes trudging heftily through the Highlands.

"Is there aething I can do for ye, miss?" he asked kindly. It was Fergus, a kind man among porters.

"Please," she said. "Can you tell me how to get to . . ." she opened her hand-bag, and took out her note-book—"to Miss Lemuel's place. Skurr nan Gillian," she read out, evidently not clear how you pronounced it.

"Och, aye, indeed!" said Fergus. He felt a thud of excitement in his veins. Who could this young woman be? It would not be a new house-woman for Miss Lemuel, would it, to take the place of fat Agnes, who has been pulled out of the place by young Jamie Kinross? Now he came to look at her a bit more closely she was older than he thought. Aye, there was the wedding-ring on her finger. She talked London, didn't she? She must be the wife of thon poor Jim Gunning. Aye, that was it!

"Pardon me asking," said Fergus, "but ye wudnae be Jim Gunning's wife, wud ye?"

"Yes. I'm Sally Gunning." It was nice of the porter to show this interest. He had bright blue eyes, and fresh cheeks and a kind face. The sky and the sea were blue and fresh too. The sun was shining. The mountains and the woods looked lovely. No wonder you wanted to stay here for months and months when once you got here. "Is it a long way from here?" she went on, "this place where my husband's working?"

"Aye, atween twa and three mile."

"Can you tell me, please, how I'd get there?"

He stood there, scratching his head. Then a thought occurred to him.

"Aye," he said. "There's a chair arrivit today for Skurr nan Gillian. It's been done up at Inverness. Wait, will ye, missus?"

He sped off down the platform and out into the station yard.

Andy Creich, the carter, was strapping the blue chair into place in his cart, along with two or three other parcels.

"Hi, Andy!" said Fergus. "Are ye goin' straight up to Skurr nan Gillian with thon chair?"

"No," Andy replied. "Ah was going down to the Strath first. Ah was going to take the chair when ah came back."

"Listen, Andy," said Fergus, dropping his voice. "It seems the auld witch has sent for the wife of poor Jim Gunning. She's seen sense at last."

"I shouldnae wonder it was the law she was seeing. Thon's a gran' wumman, thon Mrs. Winckworth," he said warmly. "For a Sassenach."

"Will ye no stop bletherin', Andy, an' gie us lesso' yer crack! Thon young wumman's waiting. She looks tired and anxious. Will ye no' go to Skurr nan Gillian first, an' tak' her with ye?"

Andy peered towards Sal through his steel-rimmed spectacles. He seemed to like the look of her.

"Aye, that I will, sure as daith. Tell her to come along, will ye?" He turned to finish his job of roping the chair, then turned again almost at once. "It's a guid thing his wife has come, ah'm thinking. Aboot time, too!"

"Aye," Fergus agreed and went back on to the platform. "It'll be a' recht, missis," he said. "Andy Creich will tak' ye straight awa'. He was going there in ony case in an hoor or so. Are ye sure ye willnae hae y'er bag, noo? You willnae be spending the necht up there?"

"I don't know," she said, her finger-tips playing nervously. "I don't know."

"Ye'll better hae it," he said. "An' if ye come back, ye come back." He got the bag out again, and led her out to Andy Creich and his cart.

"Ah'm recht glad ye've come, missis," Andy said, limping up from behind the cart. "Thon's a fine lad, thon husband o' yours."

"Aye, that he is," confirmed Fergus. She blushed with pleasure. That was Jim all over. Wherever he went, people always liked him.

"Good-day, missis, an' guid luck to ye!" said Fergus. He stowed her bag away on the cart.

"Oh thank you, thank you!" said Sal, her eyes filling. She opened her handbag and started fumbling about for coins.

"Nay, missis, I wouldnae hear o' it," said Fergus, and disappeared. What a *nice* man, she thought. How nice this carter was, too.

"Jump in, Mrs. Gunning," he bade her. "Wud ye like to sit up here aside me? It's more friendly, maybe." He helped her up. "Fine, fine!" he said, and cracked his whip, and they were off.

Clop-clop-clop! went the horse's hoofs. She saw a shop or two go by, a house, a public-house. Was that the pub Jim had often told her of? How funny to be up in this place where Jim had been all this time, and it's not strange, really, it's just a pub, and that's a church-spire over there, and these are kids going to school with satchels. It's been this place where Jim's been all this time. It might have been a thousand other places. But it was this place, and if I'd known where it was, I could have got into a train in London any day and gone to Braemore Bridge, and got off, and gone to him.

But I didn't know it was this place. Jim wouldn't tell me. He had the hump. Just think of it, Jim's just a mile or two up there, on the other side of that hill. Jim himself, my Jim.

What's this man with the spectacles talking about? I don't know if I want him to talk or be quiet.

"I beg your pardon?" she murmured. "What was you saying?"

"Ah was saying it was me tuk your Jim up tae Skurr nan Gillian, how long wull ut be, noo? It was Spring, ah'm thinkin'. April, May o' last year."

"April, I think it was. Excuse me, is he all right now?" The question had slipped out before she knew it was on her tongue.

"He'll be a lot better for your coming, missis."

She would have liked to ask him about this old lady, this Miss Lemuel, who had taken Jim on all those months ago, and had been so kind to him. His letters used to be full of her once, but there'd been not a word about her for months, now. It seemed like he had

the needle on her. Anyhow there wasn't much point in poking her nose into things now. She would see them both quite soon.

They had turned up into the moor now. All that was heather, surely. And a lot of yellow blossoms on these bushes. Big ferns and pine-trees down below there, near the river. A stream. A black pond. White puffs hanging on grass-stalks.

On the other side of that slope is Jim. And yesterday he was nothing, he was not there. He was like a fly at night on the other side of a window. Like the wind up in the top of the chimney. And there he is, just beyond there. I'll take him to me. He'll be my Jim again. I'll make him right.

The road went down. Then it went up again. There were trees of different colors on the line of the hill. Ahead was a wire fence that came down across the cart-track, and went down further towards the valley. Beyond the fence it was not wild heather and big ferns. It was cleared. It was grass, and it was cut-down fields. Beyond the fields, were some trees, and beyond the trees you could just make out the white walls of a house, with its thatched roof, and its chimneys.

Her heart almost stopped beating. She seized Andy Creich's arm.

"Is it . . . is that . . ." she brought out.

"Aye, missis," he said. "Thon's Skurr nan Gillian. Ah hope ye'll find him a'recht," he said.

"Of course I will," she breathed. They had reached the wire fence and there was a gate in it. The carter jumped off his seat, came back, and drove through. Then he shut the gate again, and drove on.

They had not gone more than thirty yards when they saw that someone lay in the shade of a yellow-flowering bush, just off the path, most of his body sloping away into a small hollow between the roots of heather. It was a man. His head and shoulders were not visible for some moments. Then she was aware that those clothes were his, the brown suit with the pin stripe. It used to be his best. He was wearing it for every day now. Those thighs were his. Those legs were his. She tugged at the carter's coat so des-

perately that she might have torn it from him, had the sleeves been weak at the seams.

"It's him!" she cried, in a strangled voice. "Let me down! It's my Jim!"

"Aye, missis, that's him, sure as daith!" murmured Andy Creich. He pulled on the rein, and the cart stopped. "Will ye be a'recht, missis . . ." he began. But she had already jumped off the cart on to the track. "Ah'll go in an' deliver ma goods!" he called out to her. It would be a proper thing, he decided, to let this meeting take place without any onlooker. He turned his head from the spectacle of the young wife, kneeling already by her husband's side, and drove on towards the house.

It was him! Dear sweet God in Heaven, it's my Jim!

"Jim!" she breathed. "Jim!" But she did not wish to waken him. He lay there sleeping so soundly, his head pillowed on his arms folded behind him. There was a smile at the corner of his mouth. He looked so well, thank God, he was as brown as a berry.

She clasped her hands together, as she had not done for many years, and looked up into the bright blue sky.

"Thank you!" she murmured, then brought her eyes down to look on her love again. She smiled, too, seeing that smile on his face. What was he thinking of, lying there, smiling? It must be of her, and the larks they used to have, at Southend and Clacton; and once they had ten whole days together at Butlins, and what fun it was every blessed day, swimming, dancing, concerts! How well he looked! But he'd changed. He was different somehow. Of course he was different. How can a whole year and a half go by, without bringing a difference? She herself had changed in that time; who doesn't?

Shall I let you have your sleep out, and just wait here till you get up? No, Jim, that's asking too much. I can't wait any longer. I've waited so long already . . . She bent down and lightly kissed his forehead.

"Jim," she breathed softly. "Jim!" The feel of the skin of his forehead was somehow different to her lips, what with all this sun, it must be, and the sea-wind. She kissed one cheek, then the other;

not quite so gently now, thinking he might awaken to her kissing, and how wonderful that would be. But no. He slept soundly—almost too soundly. She hoped he wasn't tired out. She hoped his employer wasn't making him work too hard.

"Jim," she called more loudly, and seized his shoulder and shook it. "Jim!" she called out again. "Jim!"

Then at last he opened his eyes. He blinked, seeing a young woman's face between his own and the sky. Then he shut his eyes tight, and opened them again, as if to make quite sure he was not dreaming.

"Hello!" he said. "Who are you?"

Her heart was beating wildly, wildly.

"Jim!" she cried. "It's me! It's Sal!" He was being funny, of course. He was playing up.

"Who?" he asked, and winked slightly.

"It's me! Don't be silly, Jim dear! It's Sal! Aren't you going to kiss me?"

He did not move his head from the hands folded behind it. He looked at her quizzically.

"Sal?" he asked. "That's a pretty name! Kiss you? That's quick work, isn't it?"

Were they Jim's eyes? Was that Jim's voice? A vein was throbbing in her throat, as if it would burst there.

"I'm sorry, Jim dear," she pleaded. "I know I should have sent you a wire. You're not cross with me, are you?"

"Certainly not, my poppet!" It was *not* his voice. It was *not* his words! God, dear God, what's wrong? Jim couldn't play such a wicked trick on me! He couldn't! He couldn't! He couldn't!

"Are you the new woman?" he asked. He looked at her critically. "You don't look the type, I must say! You're a Cockney, aren't you? But you'll do!" And again he winked at her.

"Jim!" she suddenly screamed at the top of her voice. "Jim! It's me! It's Sal! Don't you know me?" She beat on his shoulders with her small fists. "It's your wife! It's your own Sal! I've come to make you better! Jim! Jim!" She threw her head upon his chest, sobbing most desperately.

"What the hell's all this?" growled Edward Tourneur, throwing the young woman off his chest. "What's it all about? Leave me alone, will you, for Christ's sake?"

She recoiled from him, and stared up into his face, balancing her body upon her palms.

"Jim!" she breathed. "Jim! Don't you *know* me?" And then the hideous perception flooded into her body through all its pores. The next words came from her lips so quietly, Edward Tourneur may, or may not, have heard them.

"Are you mad, my Jim? Is that what's happened?"

Suddenly the young man lost all interest. He turned on his side away from her.

"If you're after the job," he said, "you'd better go up to the house there."

"Jim!" she shrieked. "Jim!" and clawed desperately at his coat, his hair. He switched his head round sharply.

"Let go, you slut!" he shouted at her.

Her hands dropped nervelessly away, she fell upon her knees, her forehead touched the ground.

"Jim!" she moaned. "Jim! Jim! Jim! Jim!"

Edward Tourneur got up with an expression of disgust.

"You make me sick," he said, and walked off.

Some fifteen or twenty minutes later, Andy Creich was back with his cart again. It had taken him less time than that to discharge his business, but he wished to give the re-united couple as much time together as he could spare. As he approached, he saw the young fellow, a tiny figure, striding far off down the hill. Then he saw the young woman, among the heather, just off the roadside. She lay stretched full length, her hands were twitching like a dying creature. The sound that issued from her lips seemed to him more animal than human.

He reined his horse, and jumped off, and limped over to her.

"You puir wee bairn!" he murmured. "There, noo, there!" You would not have suspected much kindness behind that dour face, or that such softness of voice could issue from under the black

bristles of that moustache. He turned her round, though it was not easy. She was curiously heavy, as if the flesh had been converted by witchcraft into lead. "Let me dry yer eyes!" he said, and took the grimy handkerchief from his pocket. "Dinna fash yersel' so, my puir wee bairn. It'll be a'recht. Can ye stand on ye'r two feet, the noo? There noo. Dinna sae aething. Come. Up here now. Ah'll lift ye into the cart. Ye'll be better off lying stretched oot. Ah'll make ye a pillow of some sacks. Ah'm going to tak ye to a nice kind wumman. An Englishwoman, Mrs. Winckworth, her name is. She's frae London, too. Dae ye no' ken her? She'll look after ye. She'll get ye'r mon back for ye. There noo, dinnae talk! Maybe ye can sleep noo, after ye'r long journey? There noo." He had her stretched out and comfortable, and hobbled round to get up into his own seat. And then he paused a moment, and shook his fist towards the small white house.

"The De'il 'ull turn his back on ye yet!" he muttered fiercely. "Ye filthy auld witch!"

Andy Creich drove round to the tradesmen's entrance at Ben Voith, and tugged at the brass bell-pull. Allan, the pantry-boy, came to the door.

"Is Mrs. Winckworth no' in?" asked Andy, with lowered voice. "Will ye tell her ah've got Mrs. Gunning wi' me, the wife o' the puir laddie from Skurr nan Gillian?"

"They're at the coffee the noo. Ah'll go an' see."

A message came back two or three minutes later.

"She's recht fashit," the boy said. "She says what dae ye mean bringing her visitors roond to the tradesmen's entrance? Ye must go to the front door at once."

"Ach, she cannae mean I maun go roond in my auld cart? She cannae mean that?"

"She does," said Allan. "That's what she said."

Andy Creich threw his hands up into the air, and climbed into the cart. Then he turned round and bent to address his passenger.

"Ye're no' asleep, Mrs. Gunning?"

"No." Very faintly.

"Are ye a' recht?"

No answer.

"Are ye a' recht, lassie? Ye'll be in guid hands the noo."

"Thank you."

He turned again and touched the horse with the whip, and so drove round the house to the front door. Mrs. Winckworth stood on the bottom step, Maguire in close attendance behind her. No tradesmen's cart had ever driven round to the front entrance of Ben Voith before, or of any house that Maguire had served in. It was certain now in the minds both of Andy Creich and Maguire that witchcraft was abroad in the air.

The cart drew up by the steps. Mrs. Winckworth waited as if it were the most sedate and luxurious of limousines. She looked down into the cart on to the slight huddled body of Mrs. Gunning.

"Oh, Mrs. Gunning," she exclaimed. "I'm so glad you've come up to Glamaig! I can't tell you how welcome you are! Maguire!" she called out. "Please help this gentleman with Mrs. Gunning!"

Andy Creich descended from his seat, Maguire from the steps. Between them they got Sal out of the cart and on to the gravel path. She looked like some wretched little tramp who had been sleeping out in a ditch all night, but her face was the face of a woman who has spent many hours in the waiting-room of a hospital, not knowing whether some dear one was dying or dead. Mrs. Winckworth came up to her, as if Sal were gowned by Redfern and she was on a round of visits among her shooting friends. She held out her hand.

"How are you? It's a dreadful journey, isn't it? I've been trying so hard to get into touch with you!"

Her brain was working furiously. It was clear something horrible had happened. Surely the girl could not have been just brought in from the station? She could not possibly have arrived at the station in that condition; however unpleasant the journey. What had happened then? She must have asked to be taken to Skurr nan Gillian the moment she got to the station. What had happened there? Something quite dreadful. She would find out soon, she

hoped. But the young woman was in a state of near collapse, if you could not say she had collapsed already.

Mrs. Gunning put out a limp hand, with no more strength in it than a handkerchief. The eyes seemed to have difficulty in concentrating, as if there were practically no vision in them.

"Pleased to meet you," she murmured.

Mrs. Winckworth put her arms round her waist and helped her up the stairs. Maguire went up ahead. Andy Creich went back to his cart.

"I'm so glad they've brought you around here," Mrs. Winckworth was saying easily. "It was most sensible of them." Maguire had opened the doors now, and they were inside the lounge-hall, which was empty. That was the first thing she had done, the moment she had recovered from the incredible announcement that Sal Gunning had arrived at Ben Voith—she had sent her guests scurrying off out of the way. If Mrs. Gunning's arrival was not the answer to prayer—Mr. Merrilee's prayer, to be exact—then prayer had never been answered before, and never would be.

"You'll sit down here, for a moment, won't you, Mrs. Gunning? I insist on your having a cup of coffee, before you go off to your room to freshen yourself up. Maguire, get another cup, will you? No, get some more coffee, boiling hot! And you must have a sip of brandy." She went over to a sideboard. "Oh, yes, I insist." She poured out a glass, and held it out to Sal's lips. "There now, just a sip."

Sal sipped, and choked a little, but the warmth was agreeable in the veins of her chilled body. She looked up gratefully.

"Who are you, madam?" she whispered. "You're so nice."

"You mustn't call me 'madam.' Just Mrs. Winckworth. What's your Christian name?"

"Sal."

"What a charming name! I'm old enough to be your mother, so I'll call you Sal. May I?"

"Yes, please."

"And now you want to know who I am, don't you? Of course you do."

"The man in the cart said he was taking me to a lady, and she was from London."

"Yes, it helps an awful lot to be with someone from your own town. We Londoners do stick together, don't we?"

But the sentiment touched a mournful chord. She recalled another Londoner up on the hill, and the nightmare that had taken place in the broad blue daylight. She turned away, and thrust her face into the softness of the chair behind her. Her shoulders heaved with her sobbing.

At that moment Maguire entered. Mrs. Winckworth put a finger to her lips and gestured towards a coffee-table. Maguire tiptoed forward, put the coffee down, then tiptoed out again. Mrs. Winckworth let Sal cry for a minute or two, then put her hand on to a shoulder.

"Sal, my dear," she murmured. "I know something frightful's happened. You're going to tell me all about it. I'm going to help you. You have other friends here, too. We may be strangers but we won't be strangers long. I'm going to pour you out a cup of coffee. Here, Sal, you must drink it." With gentle force she brought Sal's head around from the chair. "Just dry your eyes with this handkerchief, there's a good girl. Now, have your coffee. Sugar? Of course. Have a lot. Three lumps. It's good for the nerves. Then I'll take you up to your room." She went over and pressed a bell. Maguire, who was hard by, entered. "Tell Lacey or someone to get a room ready for Mrs. Gunning. Two hot water bottles." She thought hard for a moment. What room? It should not be one of the grander ones, which might depress her. Oh yes, the grey room. It was a sort of secretary's room, for the sort of guest who cannot go to Hammersmith without a secretary. It had its own bath. "Tell them the grey room," she said.

"Very well, madam." He withdrew.

"A biscuit or anything?" asked Mrs. Winckworth.

Sal shook her head.

"No? Very well. You'll have a little meal later in your room. As soon as you've tidied yourself up."

"Oh, madam. You're so awfully kind." The words came from Sal in quite a rush. "What are you doing this for?"

Mrs. Winckworth ignored the "madam." "Mrs. Winckworth" might come more easily later. In the meantime the question *did* come out at her with a bit of a bump, like someone coming unexpectedly round the corner. What *was* she doing this for? It was a question to be answered.

"What am I doing it for?" She smiled. "I don't know. I suppose I'm that sort of person. And besides . . ." she paused. "I suppose I like doing things."

"I see," murmured Sal, her eyes drooping again and her lips twitching. The least mental effort in an unfamiliar direction was an effort almost more than she could make.

Mrs. Winckworth suddenly realized she must get the worst of it out of the girl at once. It was like having to slap someone violently to prevent him passing out into a coma.

"Sal," she said urgently. "You must tell me. Who did you see up there? Was Miss Lemuel unkind to you? Was it Jim you saw?"

"I saw Jim!" she cried, "and it wasn't Jim! It wasn't Jim! It wasn't Jim!" She threw herself into Mrs. Winckworth's bosom, and sobbed and sobbed, as if her heart could never mend again.

"I see," breathed Mrs. Winckworth. The whole story was clear now. In a sense there was nothing more to be learned. "There now," she said softly, patting Sal's head. "I thought it might be that all along. It's only a bit of a mental breakdown that poor Jim's had. It's quite nasty, of course it is. But we'll deal with it, Sal. We'll deal with it. But we must get you right first. Of course it's been a dreadful shock to you. We've been trying to get your address, so that we could break it a little. But you're here now. You must get over it, my dear. We can't do anything without *you*, you know. Come now, Sal, come! You're going to have a little bathroom all to your own self. If they've not finished your bed, you can tidy yourself up a bit first. Have you got a bag, my dear?"

"In the cart," Sal's muffled voice brought out.

"Of course. They'll have put it in your room for you already.

Maybe they'll have unpacked it. Come now, Sal. You're all right, aren't you?"

Sal rose to her feet, and swayed a little, and recovered.

"I'm all right, Mrs. . . . Mrs. Winckworth," she said, with the ghost of a smile shining through her tears. "And thank you. Thank you so much."

"Come, my dear." And she led her new guest out of the room, and up the stairs, to the wing housing the grey room.

It was one-thirty in the afternoon of the second day following Sal's arrival. Miss Lemuel and Jim Gunning sat at the table, finishing luncheon. There had not been much conversation between them; there rarely was, these days. It was for Edward Tourneur that Miss Lemuel reserved her discussion of day-to-day events at Skurr nan Gillian.

But today there was a matter to discuss which concerned Jim Gunning; or at all events, a matter which concerned Jim Gunning in the first place.

"Will you have some tea today, Gunning?"

Formerly she used to prepare the tea without asking about it, for she knew the way he liked it. Or she would ask him to prepare the tea himself. But not now.

"No," he said. Neither his manners nor hers were now as easy or as proper as they had been.

She took out her black and white handbag.

"I have a letter here," she said.

"All right." He held out his hand for it. It was, of course, still another letter from Sal to add to the unread heap on the table in his room. He could not bear to read them. He could not bear to destroy them. There they were.

"No," she told him. "It's not addressed to you. It's addressed to me."

"All right." He had no further interest in the matter.

"It's from Mrs. Winckworth, of Ben Voith," she said.

He was silent. His face went ugly and sullen.

"Is that the one who came up here?"

"Yes."

"I told her . . . I told her . . ."

"Yes? What did you tell her?"

". . . that I went down to her place. *He* did, I mean. You know, don't you?"

"Yes, I know. Mrs. Winckworth told me. I've kept my eye on Edward ever since. I've every reason to believe he won't go again. What did you tell her, Gunning, when she came up here?"

He was getting a bit flurried. He only remembered he had been rude to her, a thing he hated, a thing he had never been in the old days. He could not remember clearly what he had said to her.

"I told her it wasn't my fault I went to her place," he said.

"But it *was*, you know, in a sense," she insisted gently. "It *was* your fault."

"How was it my fault?" He scowled blackly.

"You gave freedom of action to Edward. You signed a document to that effect."

"To hell!" he muttered, under his breath.

"What did you say?"

He raised his voice.

"I said: to hell!"

She thought it better not to rebuke him.

"As I've told you, I hope to avoid the embarrassment for both of you again in the future, both Edward and yourself."

"Thank you," he said, thin-lipped. "What about this letter? What do you want to show it to *me* for? It's got nothing to do with me. You can work it out between you."

"She has a visitor at Ben Voith."

"Well?"

"You must prepare yourself for something of a shock. I have nothing to do with it."

He thrust his chair back.

"Who is it?" He felt a contraction at the base of his neck. "Who is it?" he asked, his voice much louder this time.

"Your wife," she said.

His fists were clenched before him on the table. He looked her straight in the eyes with inconceivable hostility.

"She's been here?" he said through his teeth. "How did she get the address? Did you give it to her?"

"No, Gunning, certainly not. I deplore her arrival. I think it highly inadvisable."

"You do, do you? I'm not surprised at that. Well, how did she get here?"

"I haven't the faintest idea."

"Where is she?"

"She's at Ben Voith, with Mrs. Winckworth. Do you wish to go down to see her?"

"No!" he shouted. "No! Tell her to go back!"

"It would be a little unkind," Miss Lemuel said softly, "now she's come all this way."

"I don't want to see her! I daren't!" His voice broke. "Not when I'm me! Not when I'm him! I don't want to see her! I mustn't!" He put his head between his hands. "Oh Sal, Sal!" he moaned.

"Mrs. Winckworth tells me she proposes to call here tomorrow with your wife, at eleven o'clock." She had the letter in her hand, and waved it towards him. "She has not even the grace to ask me if it's convenient. She says your wife insists on your leaving Skurr nan Gillian, and returning with her to London. What's your idea about all that, Gunning?"

He lifted his head from his hands, and looked towards Miss Lemuel with anguished eyes.

"Let me go, Miss Lemuel! Please, let me go!"

"No!" she said coolly. "No!"

His head drooped again.

"What do you want me to do, Miss Lemuel?"

"I think it would be better to see them, Gunning. That is, if you're still yourself when they come. If Edward's here, he can look after himself."

"What do you want me to say to them?"

"I've told Mrs. Winckworth that I'm taking the care of your

mental condition in hand. I said I've made a good job of the physical condition, and that's true, isn't it?" He made no reply. "Your wife will be able to confirm how very much better you are physically. I hope to make as good a job of this . . . this delusion, they call it, this obsession." She tittered softly.

"All that's a lie, of course," he said.

"No. Not altogether," she whispered. "I'm very largely bound up with the improvement in the tuberculosis. Which is not final and irrevocable, as you know. Don't you?"

"I know. What *are* you going to do, Miss Lemuel?"

"I'll die someday. It may be quite soon. After all, I'm an old woman."

"Then I'd be all right, eh?" he muttered. "When you're dead."

"Yes," she told him. "You know already, Edward wouldn't have the least interest in coming back if I weren't here."

"So it will be all right when you're dead," he said again.

She laughed, showing her gums.

"Don't consider that an invitation to murder me," she requested. "That would leave you exactly where you were before. I mean, exactly where you would have been, if we hadn't held up the rot. You would fall immediately into a state of the most advanced consumption . . . 'galloping', they call it, don't they? The lungs will be a mass of watery jelly, except, of course, it would not be water. Like Monsieur Waldemar, you remember?"

"Stop!" he shouted at the top of his voice. "Stop! I'll see them!" He got up so violently, the chair cracked down behind him. Hunish started barking wildly. But Hunish was a coward. He would not attack a sick child. The two smaller cats rose from the places where they had been curled up, and streaked towards the windows. Only Twilight did not move from Edward's chair, gazing with cryptic eyes, rimmed round with golden amber.

"Temper, temper!" Miss Lemuel reproved him. "Calm yourself, Gunning! These tantrums are unseemly!"

He picked up a fruit-dish from the table, and for one moment it seemed as if he would throw it at her. She gazed at him, unflinching, like the great cat on the chair not far away. Then he

hurled it with all his force at the wall in front of him, and flung out of the room.

It was a few minutes before eleven o'clock next morning. Miss Lemuel and Jim Gunning sat in the kitchen waiting for their visitors. Miss Lemuel was smoking, but not Jim Gunning.

She flicked the ash on to the ash tray before her.

"You'll need a good deal of self-control," she assured him.

"I know," he murmured.

"When you actually see her in the flesh with your own eyes, it will be different. You can go off now, if you prefer it. But that will only delay matters. You'll have to see her sooner or later."

"I'll see her," he whispered.

Silence fell between them. It was broken only by the sound of an approaching car.

She raised her head.

"There they are!"

He did not move.

The sound of the car grew louder. Under Jim's suntan a yellow gleam showed, like the discoloration of jaundice. His fingers were stuck about his knees like pointed twigs. The car braked in front of the porch. Miss Lemuel rose.

"I'd better bring them in," she said. She went out. Mrs. Winckworth was helping a younger woman out of the car. It was a bigger car than last time, but Mrs. Winckworth was again the driver.

"Good morning, Mrs. Winckworth," said Miss Lemuel. "And is this Mrs. Gunning? Good morning, Mrs. Gunning."

"Good morning," said Mrs. Winckworth. "It's very kind of you to be waiting for us."

"It would have been a little more convenient had you given us more notice. This is one of the days when one can get a good deal of work done on a farm. But perhaps you wouldn't understand that, Mrs. Winckworth. I do hope you had a pleasant journey, Mrs. Gunning? I've heard so much about you. Please come in, ladies, won't you!"

She preceded them through the porch door and along to the kitchen door. Mrs. Winckworth was behind her, and Sal behind Mrs. Winckworth. She opened the door. Jim Gunning stood near the hearth, his thighs supported against the chair he had been using. Mrs. Winckworth moved towards him.

"How do you do, Mr. Gunning?" she said, and advanced towards Jim, holding out her hand. He reached out and took it, but there was no force in his grip, and he let it drop away.

"Pleased to meet you," said Jim.

"You know about the lovely surprise we have for you?" She turned to the door, but Sal had not appeared yet. "Sal!" she called out. "Come along, my dear! She's shy, as you might expect," she said to the others softly.

"*Do* please come in!" urged Miss Lemuel. Mrs. Winckworth stepped back towards the door quickly, in case she should be needed. Then at length Sal stepped down into the kitchen. Her eyes found Jim's at once. He stood there, shambling, his limbs all over the place, his eyes fixed on his wife with an intensity of grief that was almost beyond enduring. He looked like a ghost on the other side of Lethe, gazing towards the loved ones he has lost for ever.

"Aren't you going up to her to give her a good sound kiss?" prompted Mrs. Winckworth. "Come along, Sal! He's out of practice! You both are, of course!" she corrected herself. He removed himself from where he stood and came over to his wife. She came over towards him. He kissed her lips, but it was the way a body is kissed before the lid is screwed down.

"Hello, Sal!" he said. "How are you?"

"Hello, Jim. How are *you*?"

They were both silent for some moments, gazing at each other. Sal spoke again.

"You look fine," she said. "I've never seen you look so well."

"Yes, I feel fine. How did you get the address?"

"Tosher Davies," she murmured. "I waited about in the Post Office in Birmingham till he came and asked for letters."

"Oh I see," he said. "I see. I never thought of that. How's Dickie?"

"He's fine."

"And the old woman?"

"She's fine, too!"

"And Wally, and Peggy, and . . ." But he did not seem able to reel off any more names for the time being.

"They're fine, too. So's Bert," she added.

"Do please sit down, ladies, won't you," demanded Miss Lemuel. "I'm sorry there are only these two easy chairs." (There had been need for only two, lately.)

"Thank you very much, Miss Lemuel," said Mrs. Winckworth. "I couldn't deprive you—"

"Oh I like this wooden chair. I'm very fond of it. Won't *you* sit down, Gunning?"

"I'll stand," he said.

"Yes, of course, you will. You want to be by your wife, don't you?"

"Yes," he said, and came up within two or three feet of her chair.

"Well?" said Miss Lemuel. "We won't waste time, will we? I'll have to go off to my work quite soon. There's no need for you ladies to go, of course. Gunning will prepare a meal for us all, if you care to stay. I can't tell you how useful he's been, Mrs. Gunning. There's nothing he can't turn his hand to. You must miss him dreadfully."

"Yes," she whispered.

"And, of course, you would like him back with you at the earliest opportunity?"

"Yes."

Miss Lemuel turned to Mrs. Winckworth.

"I take it that's what you've come about?"

There was a stab of joy in Mrs. Winckworth's heart. The old woman was going to be reasonable, after all. Was it possible she had, after all, been horribly misjudged?

"Yes, Miss Lemuel. Quite so. That's exactly what we have come about. There should be no difficulty."

"Good heavens, no. If Gunning wishes to terminate his employment here, he's perfectly free to do so. Aren't you, Gunning?" He was silent. "Aren't you, Gunning?"

"Yes."

Sal turned in her chair.

"So you'll come back with me, Jim?" she breathed.

He bit his lip, and clenched his fists, and brought up a sigh from the last depths of his heart. Then with his eyes he indicated Mrs. Winckworth.

"Ask that lady," he said. "She understands."

"There's no reason why Mr. Gunning shouldn't return with his wife, is there, Miss Lemuel?" asked Mrs. Winckworth.

"We discussed the matter at our previous meeting," said Miss Lemuel, "did we not, Mrs. Winckworth? From my point of view, he is perfectly free to go. But perhaps it would not be wise from his."

"But he looks so fit, madam," protested Sal, a faint tinge of color coming into her cheeks. "And he's my husband. I want him back."

"That is for you two to decide between yourselves," said Miss Lemuel. "I will have no difficulty in finding other help on the croft here."

Sal rose from her chair.

"I can't sit still, Jim, I can't!" she exclaimed. She went up to him and took his hand between hers. "You're coming, Jim, aren't you? I can look after you just as well as anyone else."

"Forgive me for butting in here, Miss Lemuel," said Mrs. Winckworth. "I have your permission, haven't I, Sal?"

"Yes, please."

"I've thought over what you said, Miss Lemuel. I mean about the treatment you are applying to Mr. Gunning's condition." She turned to Jim. "Please forgive me for discussing your intimate affairs in this way. I am a perfect stranger to you all. But your wife was brought to me in a state which would have distressed you

dreadfully if you'd seen her. I've done what I can to put her on her feet, and I feel justified in trying to be of use to her."

"You came here without invitation before Mrs. Gunning ever came to Glamaig," Miss Lemuel pointed out.

"That was not my fault," Mrs. Winckworth rejoindered coldly. "I came for an explanation of certain extraordinary events in my house."

"And you got it."

"Yes, I got it. And since then Mrs. Gunning arrived, and has asked me to help her. That is so, Sal?"

"Yes, Mrs. Winckworth."

"Very well. We were talking about the treatment you are applying to Mr. Gunning's condition."

"Permit me," interrupted Miss Lemuel. "I want to avoid distressing both Gunning and his wife. But the case is not very simple any more. I take it you have informed Mrs. Gunning that it isn't only a case of Gunning's physical condition?"

"She found out for herself, Miss Lemuel, in the most agonizing circumstances."

"For God's sake!" cried Jim, and tore his hand from Sal's, and went over to the dresser, where he stood with his back towards the three women.

"Yes, of course," said Miss Lemuel. "You implied it in your letter. It was a most unfortunate business. I keenly regret I was not there to break the shock for you, Mrs. Gunning. But you see," she went on brightly, "you see what we have to fight against."

"We!" cried Mrs. Winckworth bitterly. "We! Mrs. Gunning feels you've been far too kind already. If there's any fighting to do, she's anxious to do it herself from now on."

"What's *your* view, Gunning?" asked Miss Lemuel. "Come on now! Turn round!"

He did not turn around.

"You know what I think," he muttered.

"Mr. and Mrs. Gunning, I say again, must decide this for themselves," said Miss Lemuel. "As I've told you, my chief interest has been Gunning's well-being. Also—and I've admitted

this frankly to you, Mrs. Winckworth—I'm a lonely old woman, and looking after Gunning has been something to fill my mind. It's been a godsend. However, the matter should be considered from Gunning's point of view. There's no doubt of that. He is the sick man."

"Christ!" came from Jim Gunning. He was pounding the dresser with his fist. All this was clearly intolerable to him.

"I quite agree with you, Miss Lemuel," observed Mrs. Winckworth. "Let us disregard Mrs. Gunning for a moment. Let us disregard the fact that her husband has been away from her for nearly two years, and that her small boy needs his father again. Let's examine it from Mr. Gunning's point of view. The original illness was tuberculosis. Let's face it. It's a word people avoid, but there it is. You've made an excellent job of it between you, Miss Lemuel: you and Mr. Gunning. It's quite conceivable that if he'd stayed on in the Sanatorium Mrs. Gunning told me about, he might have been dead by now. Evidently Mr. Gunning was the wrong sort of patient for sanatorium treatment. He seems to have completely recovered, or very nearly."

"Tuberculosis is a deceptive condition," said Miss Lemuel. "Isn't it, Gunning?"

He said nothing.

"The only people who can satisfy us on that point are the specialists. Surely you agree, Miss Lemuel? If it is considered desirable that Mr. Gunning should have an extension of the fresh-air treatment, without the fuss of nurses and thermometers he so much dislikes, there's a small farm of mine near Hindhead where he can stay till he gets the final All Clear. I should be proud to have him there. He could help my excellent Wilkinses, who run the place, exactly as he helps you here, Miss Lemuel."

"I am getting a little tired of all this, Mrs. Winckworth. I told you that it's not the physical condition that now causes anxiety."

"Perfectly. I quite understand. As for the other . . . business, Mrs. Gunning insists on proper professional treatment. That's so, isn't it, Sal?"

The girl nodded.

"Please, Mr. Gunning." Mrs. Winckworth addressed herself to the silent figure by the dresser. "I want you to take special note of what I'm saying. Are you listening?" No sound came from him. But he could not fail to hear. "The case seems to me quite clearly one for psychoanalysis. It may be, or may not be, but that's how I feel about it. Psychoanalysis may be a long and costly business. It may involve attendance at a qualified psychiatrist's every day each week for several years. But, Mr. Gunning, it will be worth it. I will be very proud and happy to arrange it for you. I shall consider it far and away the most worthwhile thing I have ever done with my ridiculous money, of which I have far too much! Please let me, Mr. Gunning!"

"Oh, Mrs. Winckworth!" this was an excited cry from Sal. "But you're wonderful! You never told me all this! Oh Jim! Jim!" she cried, and ran over to him. "Jim!" She pulled at his arm trying to make him turn around. "Isn't she wonderful? She's the most wonderful woman in all the world!" The tears were rolling down her cheeks. "Jim! Why don't you talk to me? Jim! Jim! Turn around! Jim! Jim! Jim! Jim!"

At last the name dwindled on her lips, and died. There was complete silence among the four humans there. The dog whimpered. One of the cats shook himself so noisily, the sound seemed to come back from the walls again. The clock clucked like a death-watch beetle.

Then once more Sal spoke, but quietly this time, she was almost inaudible.

"Jim, dear, aren't you coming back with me?"

Then at last he turned. There seemed no eyeballs in his eye-sockets, only grey darkness. He put his two hands upon her shoulders.

"Sal, dear," he said. "I'm not coming back."

"Why?" she cried suddenly, at the top of her voice. "Why?"

"I can't tell you, dear," he whispered. "I can't tell you!" He bent down and brought his lips to the centre of her forehead. "Good-bye, Sal! Give my love to the kid, and everyone!" Then he

moved out of the room, slowly, heavily, as if he had an iron ball and chain manacled to his feet.

"Jim!" she called, staring after him, wild-eyed. The door closed behind him.

She stared after him incredulously, then slapped both her cheeks hard, as if to make quite sure this was not an unthinkable, untellable dream. Then swiftly Mrs. Winckworth rose from her chair and came over to her. The girl fell at her feet, and threw her arms around her knees. Her face was gaping and contorted.

"Please, madam!" she brought out through her dreadful sobs. "Please, madam! Help me! Help me! Help me!"

"Come, dear," murmured Mrs. Winckworth. "Come, sit down for a moment! Then we'll work this out!"

But the girl did not move. She knelt there, sobbing, the tears running in deep rivulets down her cheeks.

Miss Lemuel rose from her chair.

"Excuse me, ladies!" she said. "You're perfectly at liberty to stay here as long as you like. I think I ought to warn you, however. I think Gunning may return . . . with the personality of my nephew. One begins to understand the signs, you know. You *must* excuse me. In the absence of my woman, so much falls to my hands these days. And Gunning's work, too, is less reliable than it has been. You think you ought to go? Well, I've no doubt you're both busy too." She went towards the door and opened it for them. "Good-bye, ladies, good-bye." There was no handshaking as they went.

"Good day," said Mrs. Winckworth, her face flaming red with fury. "You've not finished with us yet, madam! Come, Sal, my dear, come!"

They went out and drove off.

CHAPTER 13

It was an hour or so after midnight, two nights later. Miss Lemuel lay wakeful in her bed. It was partly the bright moon. The curtains never kept out a moon as bright as this. She had not had a wink of sleep so far, though usually she slept well, when once she had consigned her head to the pillow. Not even Hunish was there. Lately he had taken to spending his nights in the barn, as if he felt himself too old to put up with the interrupted sleep that the appearance of Edward Tourneur meant for him. For even before Edward appeared, he would raise his head, his nostrils twitching, the whites of his eyes showing, and then, before he was actually there, he would be off in a flash, his tail between his legs.

Not even Hunish was there. She was lonely, and oddly apprehensive, somehow. Well, it is hard not to feel like that, when it is after midnight, and you have not slept a wink, and you must be up in only a few hours.

The door-handle turned. This must be Edward, of course. Ah, that was better. They could have a nice long talk. There was quite a lot she had to tell him. He could make a pot of tea, China tea, with a petal or two of jasmine-blossom floating in the fragrant brew.

The door opened, and Edward entered, fully dressed. He came over slowly to her bedside, and stood there, bending down towards her. His hands were by his side. From between the curtains

a shaft of moonlight struck slanting across his face, like a white-hot bar.

"Good evening, Edward," she said. "Or of course I should say Good morning, shouldn't I?"

He did not reply.

"Yes, Edward?" she asked after a moment or two. "Yes?"

He did not answer.

"Edward!" she cried more sharply. "Is anything wrong?"

Still there was silence. A hideous fear assailed her.

"You *are* Edward, aren't you?" She could not tell who it was until he spoke.

But he did not speak.

"Tell me!" she whispered. "Tell me who you are!" She clutched at the collar of her nightgown. "You're not Gunning, are you?"

Silence.

"Now you won't be a foolish young man, will you? You don't think it will help you if you murder me? I've told you what would happen. You understand that quite clearly, don't you?"

Silence.

"Why don't you speak? Say something, Gunning! *Or are you Edward?* Please tell me which you are? I've been so kind to you, whoever you are! Speak, won't you? Speak!"

But the young man still stared down at her, and stared his fill, and then turned towards the door, and went out.

He will come back tomorrow morning, she told herself. But he did not come back the next morning, nor all the next day. That night she was filled with the most ghastly fears.

Had it been Edward? What would he be doing now, if he were Edward? Might he not make his way down to Ben Voith and perform some hideous mischief? Might he not seek to murder Gunning's wife, as being a deadly danger to him? And once having tasted blood, when would the lust be slaked?

What spirit has come up out of the vast deep?

She lay writhing in torment all night long. Her bedlinen was

soaked with sweat, expelled through the pores of a skin even so desiccated as hers.

Lord Satan, will you not help me? Will you not come to my side?

But there was no help anywhere. Another morning came. She heard the footsteps of the young man approaching. She heard the outer and the inner door open. He was moving towards the kitchen. She rose from her bed, and opened the door, and cried out to him.

"Gunning!" she cried. "Gunning! Is that you? Where have you been!"

"Shut your trap!" said Gunning. It was his voice. "Or I'll shut it for you!"

She crept back more abjectedly than Hunish, to her bed.

CHAPTER 14

On the afternoon of the next day there was a small convention of people interested in the case of Jim and Sal Gunning in Mrs. Winckworth's study at Ben Voith.

The principals were, of course, not there. Jim Gunning was up at Skurr nan Gillian, it was to be presumed, and Sal Gunning was drowsing in her room, lulled by her second daily dose of valerio-bromide. It could be said there was a third principal: their small son Dickie, and he was a long way away.

Present were Mrs. Winckworth herself, and her secretary, the admirable Miss Hyland, smart in her Worth outfit, a pad on her

knee. Behind her was the Reverend Mr. Merrilees, from Glamaig. Two other clerics were there: Father Melrose, the parish priest from Invercoire, and Father Risborough, a Jesuit priest, a friend of his, who happened to be on a fishing holiday close by. Also present were Dr. Muir, the doctor who had been brought in by Miss Lemuel when Jim suffered his hemorrhage; Mr. Bantock, a lawyer from Tain, whom Mrs. Winckworth had already had occasion to consult on other matters of local reference; and Mr. Fergusson, the psychiatrist from Inverness, who had been given the facts of the Gunning case on an earlier occasion. They had all lunched together, they had talked straight through the afternoon, they had had tea, and they had talked for a full hour after tea. But they had not made much progress. Each contributed his point of view to the symposium, expounded in one or two cases with learning, in one or two cases with eloquence; even with both. But neither eloquence nor learning seemed likely to deliver them from their impassé.

Father Melrose had lost no time at all in reiterating to the assembled company the view he had conveyed to Mr. Merrilees when he had first telephoned him on the matter.

"I say again, gentlemen, the case of this poor young man is with manifest clearness a case of demonic possession. I've discussed it from every angle with my friend, Father Risborough here, and he's of exactly the same view. Isn't that so, Father?"

Father Risborough nodded. "I may make one or two reservations later." His grey intelligent eyes twinkled behind the gold-rimmed glasses. He stroked his smooth blue chin as tenderly as if it were a roll of silk, or as if someone had crashed a fist into it. Father Melrose continued:

"Of the existence of possessive demons, and of the absolute efficacy of exorcism, the demons that the Lord Jesus Christ encountered and the exorcism with which He expelled them, are all the instance I need to quote, though Father Risborough, who has studied these phenomena, is in a position to add numerous similar instances, in many lands and throughout the centuries." With a vigor that implied that he considered the whole discussion rather

frivolous, Father Melrose brought his fist down on the table, and his voice out of the cavern of his chest. "There is only one sovereign therapeutic, we say, and that is exorcism by one of the ancient and hallowed formulae. It will interest you to know that, on Father Risborough's advice and with his help, I have drawn up a dossier containing all the facts I have been able to assemble regarding the Gunning case, along with the results of my inquiries into the character, the previous history, and the local reputation, of Miss Lemuel. This dossier has been submitted to His Lordship, the Bishop of Aberdeen."

He stopped. The rest of the company were silent. It was clear they wished to hear what Father Risborough had to say. Father Risborough, it could be said, was more metropolitan in his demeanor, and a shade more conscious.

"I should like to state," he announced, "that I am in general agreement with my friend, Father Melrose here, and I thank God that in His wisdom, I was privileged to be in these parts when this strange and damnable business came to a head, for I humbly hope my brother and I may be of service. But I must state this, too. I am not so completely convinced as he is that we are dealing with a case of demonic possession. I think it probable, but not absolutely proven. None the less, I thought it wise that the dossier should be made up and despatched to his Lordship with the utmost speed consistent with scientific accuracy. For you will know that in these matters nothing less than scientific accuracy will content the authorities of Holy Church. If there is any doubt that this is a case of demonic obsession by the time Father Melrose receives word from his Lordship, the matter will be held in abeyance till a final decision is made." He lifted his spectacles and looked around upon the company. He had a sheaf of notes on the table before him. "Perhaps the gentlemen here, and you, madam, will permit me a few general remarks?" There was a murmur—it was hardly more than that—of assent. He went on. "I regret I had no longer notice of this meeting, or I would have made it my business to send for several volumes on the subject I have in my library in Marylebone. I wish to draw your special attention to

the work entitled: 'Possession, Demoniacal and Other,' by Professor Oesterreich, one time of Tubingen, which is as excellent a compendium as I know of demonic obsession, though the approach is regrettably secular and rationalistic. This work I have fortunately been able to locate in the Free Library at Inverness. More valuable, because more in line with Christian truth, is the work of two Swabian doctors, Kerner and Eschenmayer, *Geschichter Besessener neuerer Zeit,* which appeared a century earlier. From Kerner, as quoted by Oesterreich, I would like to quote in my turn:

" '*Some of these patients, when the demon manifests himself and begins to speak in them, close their eyes and lose consciousness as in magnetic sleep; the demon then often speaks through their mouths without their knowing it. With others the eyes remain open, and the consciousness lucid, but the patient cannot resist, even with his full strength of mind, the voice which speaks in him; he hears it express itself like a quite other and strange individuality lodged within and outside his soul.*' "

"It is possible that the type of possession of which Gunning is the victim is the first; subject to correction from you, Mrs. Winckworth,"—he bowed to her courteously—"for you are the one person present who has actually seen Gunning in a state of possession by the demon that has given itself the name and assumed the qualities and history of poor Edward Tourneur."

"That is so," murmured Mrs. Winckworth quietly. "Gunning passes out of the consciousness of himself, and apparently the consciousness of Edward Tourneur enters into him."

"Or shall we say," Father Risborough observed, "that a familiar enters into Gunning's body to achieve final mastery over Miss Lemuel's soul? At all events, calamitous as the type of possession is from which Gunning suffers," he continued, "it is perhaps less agonizing than the type, often enough recorded, when the two personalities, the possessed and the possessing, the human and the demonic, occupy the body simultaneously, and engage with each other in dreadful contest, foul with mutual execration and contumely. We assume from what we have heard," continued

Father Risborough, "that the poor young man is spared at least this abominable civil war."

"You are right," Mrs. Winckworth assured him, "so far as my knowledge goes. In the encounters with the possessed Gunning which both his wife and I have experienced, I imagine there has been no awareness of the one personality of the actual doings of the other."

"How tragic it all is!" murmured Mr. Merrilees. "Oh, how tragic!" and he shook his head mournfully from side to side. Despite the Vandykian gravity of his exterior, he was easily moved to tears. The tears now were standing in his eyes.

"And your suggested cure," Mr. Fergusson, the pyschiatrist, was asking with total dispassionateness, "would be exorcism, you two gentlemen say, according to one of the ancient formulae?"

"I repeat," stated Father Risborough. "If the case be finally proved to be one of demonic possession."

"I have not the least doubt," Mr. Fergusson considered, "that the method in certain cases has proved efficacious and will prove efficacious again. I take it it would be essential that the patient should be a member of the Roman Catholic Church?"

"True, true." Mr. Merrilees nodded.

"That does not apply in the present instance?" Mr. Fergusson continued.

"It does not," confirmed Mr. Merrilees.

"Neither Gunning nor his wife are great church-goers," Mrs. Winckworth put in.

"There is a virtue in holy water, specific and absolute," said Father Risborough, quietly.

"On the other hand its application might conceivably affect a patient adversely in certain instances, as for instance, a violently anti-Catholic Methodist in the Bible Belt of America, or in such a case as the Jewish author, Ansky, renders in *The Dybbuk*, a play of possession among the pious Chassidic Jews of Eastern Europe?"

"I don't recall an instance," murmured Father Risborough, "of the specific being tried in such circumstances. If it were tried, I am prepared to believe the results might astonish Mr. Fergusson."

"I should not be astonished," Mr. Fergusson said noncommittally. "As a practicing psychiatrist, I merely express the view that it is unlikely any course of treatment could have universal validity. On the other hand I don't dispute for a moment that exorcism as performed in the Middle Ages anticipates, in certain respects, both the practice and doctrine of modern psychoanalysis."

"Thank you," murmured Father Risborough, with an almost icy politeness. "The rationalistic Oesterreich expresses the same view. I beg permission to make one more quotation from the same author:

" 'The *principal exorcism of the* Rituale Romanum *published by order of Paul V is enclosed between long prayers at the beginning and end and in the middle is inserted another prayer, so that the whole is divided into five parts: prayer, exorcism, prayer, exorcism, prayer, again interrupted in many places by readings from the Scriptures. From the psychological point of view this construction is by no means inept. While the exorcism seeks to work upon the demon by threats and commands, the prayers are designed to help the possessed person, reinforcing his desire to be delivered from the demon, and increasing his confidence in the divine power which is invoked. Nevertheless cures by a single application of exorcism appear to have been rare; exorcisms last as a rule for days, weeks, months and even years. The impression made upon the possessed by the conjuration is further enhanced by signs of the cross and the winding of the priest's stole round his neck together with layings-on of hands; sacraments, holy water and other sacred objects are also used. The exorcist must speak as is formally prescribed,* constanter et magna cum fide.' "

"Exactly," proclaimed Mr. Merrilees. "*Magna cum fide.* There you have it. Faith is everything. And Faith is prayer. I must be permitted to express my doubts about Faith attached to intermediate objects, whether the object be an ancient ceremonial, or an African witch-doctor's necklace of cowrie-shells. I don't doubt that a course of psychoanalysis, such as Mrs. Winckworth so generously offers to provide for young Gunning, might prove bene-

ficial. But we are not dealing here only with sickness, which is the province of doctors. We are dealing also with sin, and the young man has sinned gravely. For sin there is only one remedy—and that is prayer. I would like to say that prayers have been ordained in my Church every Sunday from now on for the recovery of the unhappy young man."

There was an ominous shuffling in the throat of Father Melrose, and Mrs. Winckworth turned urgently to the lawyer, Mr. Bantock.

"What's your view, Mr. Bantock? Is there no way in which the law could exercise some influence in the case? Does the law leave us entirely without protection?"

Mr. Bantock judiciously placed together the finger-tips of both hands. "I don't see," he observed, "how the law can attempt to operate except in two directions. One would be calamitous; the other doesn't come into any sort of consideration." He tapped the outstretched index of his right hand with a pencil. "*One:* the attempt might be made to prove Gunning insane on the grounds that periodically he suffers from complete schizophrenic delusions, becomes totally irresponsible and might commit a grave mischief. But that would benefit no one. On the contrary it would cause atrocious suffering to the unhappy young man himself and everybody connected with him. And until Gunning has, in fact, shown himself in any way an active menace to anybody, such a step would be most impracticable.

"*Two:* With respect to Mrs. Gunning herself, she could threaten a suit for separation, and ultimately divorce, on the grounds of desertion. But that, I gather is the last thing in her mind?"

"She would sooner cut her throat," pronounced Mrs. Winckworth. She turned to Dr. Muir. "What is your view of Gunning's actual physical condition, as opposed to his mental condition?"

"It is nearly six months," replied Dr. Muir, "since I last attended Gunning as a doctor, but I have caught sight of him subsequently once or twice in the countryside. He seems to me to have made an excellent recovery from the lung condition, but I can not say I was speechless with surprise, though the hemorrhage had been

copious and seemed very serious. I informed both Miss Lemuel and the patient that I'd known complete recovery from conditions in which hemorrhages just as serious had occurred. It's certain, however, that Gunning was plunged into the depths of despair by his mishap. His morale was at so low an ebb that I wouldn't have been in the least surprised to see Gunning go under. I must state that Miss Lemuel has certainly known how to build up again in Gunning his belief in his recovery. I suggest that that's one reason for the hold she seems to have on him; his gratitude amounts to something like an obsession."

The hold she seemed to have on him. Everyone was agreed that Miss Lemuel had somehow cast a spell over Gunning which he found it impossible to break. There was no other explanation for the grisly words he had uttered up on the croft, when his wife had implored him to return to her: "I'm not coming back!" he had said. "Why?" the wife's desperate query was. "I can't tell you! I can't tell you!" Mrs. Winckworth had stated she had never heard words so heartbroken or so heartbreaking. Why could Gunning not tell his wife? Why? To and fro the discussion went, to and fro and round and around. The Protestant and the Catholic clergymen were agreed that somehow Miss Lemuel had made Gunning believe himself to be in thrall to the Devil. There were endless discussions on how that might have been achieved. But each propounded different methods, as had been said, for the resolution of the thralldom.

"I am not in my own element," hazarded Dr. Muir, "and, I repeat, I'm a simple country doctor. But may I suggest we may be dealing with a case of straightforward hypnotism?"

"The seeds of the malady were brought with him to the Highlands," Mr. Merrilees insisted, "long before any hypnotic influence could have been exercised."

"To me the most interesting feature of the case is the extraordinary authenticity of Gunning's impersonation of Tourneur," observed Mr. Fergusson. "I hasten to say the impersonation could be non-volitional, as well as volitional, though volition in this case seems definitely to have come from Miss Lemuel. Gunning

has been like an actor who has made himself word-perfect in an enormous role. I might even compare it to the case of an agent in wartime who is briefed in the history and personality of some dead or captured officer in the enemy's army. The agent is then dropped into enemy territory, where he has been known to play his part so perfectly there are times when he himself is in doubt who he is, and what army he is serving."

"That doesn't get us much further," noted Mr. Bantock, "in the direction of finding out *why* Miss Lemuel planted this alien personality in Gunning's body—always assuming she did. There's one possible explanation that I put forward with some diffidence. Is it possible that Miss Lemuel might have found out some discreditable secret in Gunning's past life, perhaps some woman he has kept? Wouldn't that explain the accommodation address we've been told of? People don't use accommodation addresses unless they have a secret to cover up. Miss Lemuel, therefore, might be exercising some sort of blackmail on him. I go further. I know how unpleasant the suggestion is, but isn't it possible that Miss Lemuel—herself, doubtless, a frustrated woman—is enamored of the young man, who is said to be very personable? Legal and medical history could quote many instances of such distressing infatuations."

Father Risborough stroked his chin delicately, as if a noisome insect had alighted there for a moment. Mr. Merrilees looked quite shocked.

"Horrible!" he muttered.

"Not at all impossible!" murmured Mr. Fergusson.

"Poppycock! Absolute poppycock!" snorted Mrs. Winckworth.

So the discussion went on and on, becoming more and more speculative: now drying up in arid sands of speculation, now seeping into a noisome morass of criminology or the subconscious. Nobody could propose to end it, for no suggestion at once acceptable to all parties to the discussion, had yet been proposed by anyone.

Then suddenly Mrs. Winckworth got up from her chair. You

would almost have thought she was on fire, so violent the movement was, and her cheeks flared so red.

"I've got an idea!" she cried out. "Please everybody go out! Please go into the hall, and get drinks! Order more tea, Mr. Merrilees! I've got to do some heavy telephoning at once! Get ready, Miss Hyland! Please, everybody, *do* go! I don't want to do the telephoning in front of you! I don't want to hoodoo it!"

Questioning, but not daring to dispute her orders, out everybody went, none bold enough to challenge her inspiration. They moved with extraordinary speed, considering they were a group of such solid and mature gentlemen.

There was not, of course, and there would not be, any slip-up in the telephonic and telegrammatic labors of the admirable Miss Hyland. A private plane was waiting on the Invercoire air-field at eight next morning, which was the earliest moment a plane could be put at Mrs. Winckworth's disposal. Her car and driver were waiting for her in London. The brief formalities were concluded, and Mrs. Winckworth got into the Daimler.

"As quickly as you can, Wilton," she ordered. "You know where to go, I think?"

"Yes, madam," he said impassively. You might have thought from his demeanor his destination must be the Berkeley, or Claridge's, or Mrs. Winckworth's London flat in Lowndes Square. But it was not. It was thirty-seven Territon Street, in a London region called Holloway. He had found on the street-map where they were, this Holloway, and this Territon Street.

The Daimler, the nice old-fashioned wagon that she was, moved swiftly and smoothly toward Holloway.

"When you get to the corner of the street," Mrs. Winckworth said, winding down the glass partition, "stop, will you, Wilton? It might be better not to drive straight up to number thirty-seven."

"Thank you, madam. Miss Hyland has already made the same suggestion."

"Oh yes, of course!" Mrs. Winckworth wound the glass partition up again. "Of course! As if the admirable Miss Hyland would fail to think of that! The almost too admirable Miss Hyland!

Besides," (she thought), "he would have thought of it himself! I hope I haven't hurt his feelings!"

Wilton stopped the car at the corner of the street leading into Territon Street.

"I consider it might be better to stop here, madam," he said. "The car might attract a little too much attention farther up."

"Yes, of course. I don't expect to be too long." He held the door open for her, and she stepped out. She wore her most modest suit. It was so simple and unobtrusive it was not likely to provoke adverse comment.

"Up the street and on your left, madam," he said. "I will keep a look-out."

"Thank you, Wilton, and wish me luck."

"I wish you luck, madam."

That was always a little ritual between them when she went to the races, or on any other speculative occasion. She walked up the street, and turned left. She found thirty-seven without difficulty. There were two bells in the left-hand door jamb. The lower had no name attached, the upper had the name "Gunning" neatly printed in copying-ink inside a little brass frame.

She pressed the bell. Half a minute later she heard the sound of feet descending the staircase which seemed to face the door. The door opened. An old woman stood there, a colored shawl round her shoulders. A small boy stood immediately behind her, peering up curiously.

"Yes, missis?" the old woman said. "Are you the missis?"

"Yes, I'm Mrs. Winckworth. Did you get our telegrams—Mrs. Purdom . . . isn't it? And is this Dickie?" She pinched his cheek playfully. He speculatively suspended his normal reaction. "I've got some chocolates for you!" she asserted hastily.

"Hard ones?" asked Dickie.

"I shouldn't be surprised!"

"Come in, missis, will you! Talk about getting tellygrams! I should say I 'ave got your tellygrams!" She closed the door behind Mrs. Winckworth. "Up the stairs, please! And you just go back into your own room, and mind your own business!" She was

addressing two old ladies, much older than herself, who had poked their heads out from behind the two ground floor doors. "What a to-do!" continued Mrs. Purdom, as they climbed the stairs. "Two tellygrams in one morning, one after the other!"

"The telegrams came separately, did they? That's odd. They were sent off together!"

They had reached the door of a room on the right. "People's got to take us as they find us," exclaimed Mrs. Purdom. "The other room's the sitting-room, but Dickie and me's sleeping in there. So come into the kitchen, will you?"

"But, of course, Mrs. Purdom, why not?"

They entered the kitchen. It was surprisingly neat and tidy, seeing how many purposes the room seemed to serve.

"Have you come from my Daddy? Where are them chocolates?" asked Dickie in one breath.

"You just let the lady alone, and don't poke your nose in before you're asked to!" commanded Mrs. Purdom sternly. "Sit down, missis!" Mrs. Winckworth sat down. "Now the first thing is how's Jim, and how's my Sal?"

"They're both all right. Not so all right as they should be, of course. That's why I've come here."

"Is he coughing like he was?"

"No. I should think his chest is practically cured."

"What's wrong with him then? What's he been up to all this time? No monkey-business?" The ending struggle was going on in her mind between nice ordinary-Jim and the new mystery-Jim. Mrs. Winckworth was on to it quickly.

"Certainly not! No monkey-business of any sort. All that's wrong is a bit of depression. A sort of melancholia."

"Nerves, like?"

"Exactly."

"What do you and Sal want me and Dickie to do?"

"Mrs. Purdom, we want you to do exactly what we suggested in our wires. He knows nothing of my journey to you. I have the feeling that if he sets eyes on Dickie here—very suddenly, *you* know, like a film—it will make him snap out of his nerves. It's

not certain. With nerves nothing is certain. But the doctor thinks it might work the trick. And it will mean an awful lot to your daughter. The thing is to—to get cracking. Have you started to pack yet? Can I do anything to help you?"

"Lord in 'eaven! I only just got your tellygrams less than a hour ago. I don't know whether I'm standing on my 'ead or on my 'eels. Can I make you a cup o' tea, Mrs. Winckworth?" That, society. A cup of tea would go far towards inducing clarity when situations seemed just as much as you could stand up to.

"Here's the stove," said Mrs. Winckworth. "Here's some matches. Ha, I see the kettle. Mrs. Purdom, may I suggest to you that you pack up for young Dickie and yourself while I make the tea. Yes, I see the canister."

"I ain't got nothink to pack up," declared Mrs. Purdom. "You are a rush-pot, missis, ain't you? Rush-rush! Rush-rush!"

"Just a few bits and pieces for you and the boy!" said Mrs. Winckworth. "Ah, but wait till I tell you!" she smiled roguishly. "Talk about rush! We've got a special airplane waiting for us, over in Kent!"

"What!" screeched Mrs. Purdom. "A *airplane*!" It was not the specialness of the airplane, but the thought of the conveyance itself that practically obliterated her. After a time, she came up to the surface, breathing heavily. "A airplane!" she managed to gasp out feebly.

It was Dickie who took the matter in hand. He, too, had had the breath knocked out of him. He had recovered.

"Oh, grannie!" he cried, his eyes shining like bright lamps. "Oh, grannie! An airplane! We're going up in an airplane! Oh grannie!" he jumped up and down like a madman, clapping his hands.

Suddenly Mrs. Purdom gave way. She realized she was up against forces of destiny far beyond her powers to question, still less control.

"All right, missis," she breathed. "I'll go and get one or two things for the boy. Hi, you, Dickie!" She had strength enough to seize Dickie hard by the arm. "You come along with me, and

stop playing up! You'll find the milk in that meat safe, missis, just outside the winder! Come on! Out you go!"

The journey to Glamaig started very suspiciously, if a little frighteningly.

"Grannie!" whispered Dickie, as his eyes fell on Wilton, the chauffeur, standing beside the Daimler. "Is he reel, Grannie?" He was not convinced that he was real, even when he saw his legs move, and his hand open the door.

"I fought he was one of them waxworks!" breathed Dickie, nestling down under the rugs.

"Quiet!" demanded Mrs. Purdom. "Don't be rude to the gentleman! I'll tell your Daddy!"

"Daddy won't hit me!" vowed Dickie. "Not when he's been away all this long time!"

"And here are the chocolates, Dickie!" said Mrs. Winckworth. She removed the lid. "Both hard and soft!" she pointed out, testing them with her fingers.

Really Miss Hyland was uncanny. She was supernatural. Rossshire crawled with witches.

It was a dizzily ascending spiral for young Dickie Gunning. First Wilton, who was not a waxwork; then the box of chocolates; then the ride in the Daimler; then the airport; then the airplane; then the ride in the airplane, which did not turn out quite as exciting as he had hoped, for there was no air-crash: He had never read of in comics, and seldom seen in films, any ride in an airplane which did not end in a crash. But there was none. Miss Hyland had not provided it.

Mrs. Purdom was in a state of coma from first to last, pierced from time to time with sudden spasms of terror. She had her face covered with her colored shawl for most of the time, till at last, to her unspeakable surprise, she realized the journey was over, she was all of one piece, Dickie was all of one piece, and a gentleman had opened up the exit-door, and Mrs. Winckworth was helping her out.

"Well, I wouldn't ever!" she breathed faintly. She did not expound what she wouldn't ever. "How's he been?" she suddenly asked, with an upsurge of grandmotherly solicitude.

"He was a bit sick," said Mrs. Winckworth. "But he's all right now."

"I had a paper bag to be sick in," announced Dickie.

"Ah, is that you, Layton?" This was for the chauffeur. "Thank you. We have practically no luggage."

There were brief formalities again, and less than an hour later they were drawn up before the portals of Ben Voith.

"Mummie! Mummie!" shouted Dickie. He was the one who saw her first.

The car stopped. Layton helped everybody out. Dickie rushed into his mother's arms. The movement was so violent he almost knocked her off her feet.

"Steady, Dickie, steady!" murmured Mrs. Winckworth.

"Hello, Mum, how are you?" asked Sal. "Was it all right in the plane?"

"You're looking pale, gal. What's wrong with you?" asked her mother.

"Change of climate, Mrs. Purdom," Mrs. Winckworth assured her. "It takes different people different ways. Is that you, Maguire? Is there a little lunch laid on?"

"Yes, madam. Layton telephoned from the airport. This way." He held the door open for Mrs. Purdom, for Sally Gunning, for Dickie Gunning. All these proceedings seemed to Maguire to be going on somewhere else, in Thibet, say, or one of the further planets.

CHAPTER 15

The little luncheon was served in the staff dining-room, under the presidency of the housekeeper, Mrs. Hopwood, for Miss Hyland felt the surroundings would be less distracting to the appetite than the mahogany and crystal of the dining-room proper. Mrs. Winckworth, of course, ate with her guests. Dickie behaved like a perfect little gentleman. His grannie had never been so proud of him. His mother, too, smiled at his decorum with wan pleasure. Mrs. Hopwood looked at those blue eyes, the wavy dark red hair, and, bending over towards Mrs. Winckworth, whispered in her ear:

"Isn't he a dear little boy, madam? Like a little angel from heaven?"

Dickie heard the tribute. He had heard it on the lips of admirers before. He always was sharp of hearing when words were uttered in his praise, less sharp when the words were critical. He opened his blue eyes even wider. His newly-washed cheeks shone with an even rosier lustre.

"My Daddy'll be very pleased I'm so good," he said primly.

That was too much for Mrs. Hopwood. She might have broken down altogether if not for that Grannie of his, that Mrs. Purdom. "Little angel from heaven!" she repeated. "And I don't care who knows it!" The suggestion was that she did not care even if that Mrs. Purdom heard her.

For her part, Mrs. Purdom was showing increasing signs of

restlessness over these too audible tributes. Mrs. Purdom and Mrs. Hopwood from the first were mutually disapproving. They had not spoken a word to each other, but these situations do not require words to manifest themselves. Mrs. Purdom had developed the view that Mrs. Hopwood was hoity-toity and la-di-da, two qualities which she at least could distinguish from each other, and which she found most distasteful. Mrs. Hopwood had made up her mind that the accent, the clothes, and the swollen legs of Mrs. Purdom were more than she should be asked to tolerate at her table. Mrs. Gunning one had to be kind to, poor thing; the small boy bowled one over; but this old trout was too much of a good thing.

"A little angel from heaven," ruminated Mrs. Winckworth, unaware of these secret tensions, "to catch a demon from hell! At all events that's how dear Father Melrose feels about it. Well, who knows? Perhaps he's right!"

She addressed the family from Holloway.

"What do you think, all of you? Would you like to have a little stroll in the garden, or shall we go and see Jim first? Perhaps we could bring him back with us. Wouldn't that be lovely?"

"Is Mummy coming?" asked Dickie.

"Mummy's tired," said Mrs. Winckworth, who had decided Sal ought not to come. "She didn't sleep too well. No, she'll wait for us here."

"No point in wasting time," proclaimed Mrs. Purdom. "We can go traipsing about when we come back." The remark was intended to make clear to Mrs. Hopwood that Mrs. Purdom was unimpressed by the patrician amenities of Ben Voith. Holloway she had been born in, Holloway she lived in, and Holloway was good enough for her.

"Are we going to stay here?" Dickie wanted to know. "Always?"

His grannie looked daggers at him. His mother smiled uncomfortably.

"As long as you like, Dickie," Mrs. Winckworth said graciously. "We'll go then, shall we? Say good afternoon and thank you to Mrs. Hopwood, Dickie." Dickie said Thank you, Sal said

Thank you, Mrs. Purdom said Humph; then they rose from their chairs and went.

It was the Lanchester this time, whose narrow, well-sprung body suited the moorland tracks. Dickie was a little disappointed. "There's no glass wall in this one!" he protested. "Hush!" his grannie said. "And mind your manners!" Once more mountains, tracts of heather, long bright estuaries, deployed before the bemused eyes of grandmother and grandson.

"Ooh!" said Dickie.

"It's all right rahnd 'ere," said Mrs. Purdom. "Not 'arf!" That was for her a cataract of praise.

"I'm so glad you like it," murmured Mrs. Winckworth. She was tense with apprehension and nervousness. She had achieved this seizure of the Londoners with incredible outlay of nervous energy on the part of a number of people; above all, herself. Was it going to be a fiasco? What new ingenuity of discourtesy would Miss Lemuel invent? Was it just a middle-aged woman's sentimentality to believe that a child might prevail where a grown-up had failed so utterly?

For supposing Jim was not there? One would have to wait, maybe for hours, till he came in. Maybe it would not be he that came in, but Edward Tourneur. What would one do then? Nothing to do but turn tail. And then? Would one return tomorrow, or the day after, or the day after . . . if Miss Lemuel would tolerate the recurring onslaught . . . ?

They had reached the grounds of Skurr nan Gillian now. Layton had opened the gate, and closed it, and was driving through.

"This is the croft where Jim's been all these months," said Mrs. Winckworth, her heart beating unquietly. "And that's the house itself. Do you see there? With the thatched roof?"

"There ain't 'arf a lot of nothing round 'ere!" observed Mrs. Purdom. "It wouldn't 'arf give me the creeps! I wonder 'ow 'e's stuck it all this time. Not a pub, not a cinema, not a dance-'all, nothink arahnd anywhere for miles and miles!"

The pool was just below them.

"There's a boat!" proclaimed Dickie. "Can I go for a row on that boat with my Dad?"

"We have a nice boat, too, at Ben Voith," Mrs. Winckworth informed him. She was feeling quite sick. "And here we are!" The car stopped. Layton got down and opened the car door.

"Shall I see if anyone's in, madam?" asked Layton.

No, decided Mrs. Winckworth. Of course that would not do at all, though it would be much easier if Layton went in before them. But it would be exactly not the thing to do. The whole point was to shatter Jim's resistance with the sudden shock of his child's totally unexpected appearance.

"We'll go in ourselves, thank you, Layton," she said. "Come along, Mrs. Purdom. Come on, Dickie." The porch door stood open as ever. "Straight through here," she said. They walked through to the main door and looked for bell or knocker. There was neither. Mrs. Winckworth rapped with her knuckles. There was no reply. She knocked again, with her fist. Still no reply. She opened the door and went in along the lobby. "If he's in," she murmured, "he'll be in there, in the kitchen." She knocked at the kitchen door, once, then a second time. Still there was no reply. She turned to the others. "I think we'll go in," she said. She opened the door, and looked in. Jim Gunning stood there, facing the door. She turned back again to the others. "He's here!" she said. "Come straight in, both of you! Your daddy's here, Dickie!"

The child rushed forward, his arms outstretched, an incredulous happiness in his eyes. His father stared towards him, his arms, too, outstretched. Then suddenly a shadow and a terror were in the air. A cat fled through a window, as for its life. A rigidity came into Jim Gunning's jaw. A shivering took possession of his whole body. Then the shivering ceased. The jaw snapped loose. A different pair of eyes stared out of the skull.

The child stopped dead, as if a bar of iron lay athwart the room at the level of his thighs. His eyes goggled. His mouth opened. For two seconds there was silence in it. There was silence in the whole room. The clock seemed dead as stone. There was silence on the mountain-side, silence on the whole land. Then

suddenly the clock clanged. Suddenly a wild scream thrust forth from the child's throat, like a moving rod of sound. He screamed and screamed with one long continuous screaming, a scream of innocence outraged by graveyard wickedness, of young life defying antique death.

Edward Tourneur winced, and clapped his hands to his ears.

"Who brought that brat here?" he demanded icily. "For Christ's sake take that filthy brat away!"

Black thundercloud possessed Mrs. Purdom's face. A lightning of illumination glared and flickered across her eyes.

She went up to Edward Tourneur.

"So you don't know your own son any more? You don't want to 'ave nothink to do no more with your own wife, eh? You're a dirty deceiving bastard, that's what you are!" She slapped his face resoundingly: first one cheek, then the other. He took out his handkerchief from his pocket, wiped his cheeks with it, and smiled at her coolly. Then the fury came into his cheeks again. He turned savagely on the child, who was still screaming, screaming, as if he must crack his throat. "Stop squalling, will you?" he yelled, "or I'll break every bone in your body!"

The child turned in an access of terror to his grandmother.

"Grannie! Grannie!" he screamed. "Take me away! It's not Daddy! It's not Daddy!"

She stooped and picked him up, heavy youngster though he was. He put his arms about her neck.

"Come, my little chick!" She murmured into his ear. "Come, ducks! We're getting aht of this!" She took him out of the kitchen, along the lobby, and out of the house, into cleansing air and sun. She held her burden lightly, sturdy as a wrestler. Mrs. Winckworth followed, almost impotent with chagrin and misery, Mrs. Purdom turned on her.

"Yes, madam," she yelled, above the child's undiminished screaming. "Get us out of this, double quick! Do you 'ear? Tell 'im to take us to the nearest railway-station 'ere and now! None of your bloody airplanes, thank you!" She directed her attention to the child again. "Pipe down now, Duckie, pipe down!" He took

no notice. "Come now, pipe down!" She slapped his back and his cheeks hard till the screaming became less.

Mrs. Winckworth signalled to the driver to get to the wheel. Even in her own abysmal discomfiture, she suffered for the driver's embarrassment. "Sorry, Layton," she said to him. "Have a double whiskey when we get somewhere!" Then more loudly she shouted to him: "Drive to the station, Layton! We'll find out about trains!" It was better for the time being to seem to accept the situation as the old woman imposed it. In the car some of the pieces might be put together somehow.

"Will you get in, please, Mrs. Purdom?" asked Mrs. Winckworth. "The child's a bit better now, I think. He might fall asleep." The boy was now quiet, except for an occasional heaving and snuffling. His head was averted from her.

Mrs. Purdom got into the car, and settled the boy against her bosom, his arms always around her neck.

"If I knew the way, I'd walk!" she growled harshly.

Mrs. Winckworth took her seat, closed the door after her. Layton moved off.

"I can't tell you how sorry I am, Mrs. Purdom. I beg you to believe that."

The old woman sniffed, and said nothing.

"Now you see how ill Jim is, don't you, Mrs. Purdom? It was hard to explain to you, but you can see for yourself—"

"Don't talk to me about that man!" Mrs. Purdom broke in. "I don't ever want to 'ear about 'im again. If ever 'e comes back to our 'ouse, I'll bash a flat-iron in 'is face. We'll manage! We don't want none of 'is dirty money wot 'e gets from that old woman of 'is, 'e's got there! And 'im with a wife like my Sal, and a kid . . ." The small boy was beginning to whimper again. She turned her attention back to him. "Don't fret, Dickie boy. We've done withaht 'im for a long time already, and none the worse for it. Maybe some time you'll get another Daddy, wot knows 'ow to appreciate a girl like our Sal!" she proclaimed. That seemed about as severe a condemnation as she was capable of uttering.

She held the boy in silence; the silence continued for a minute or two.

But it was impossible to let it continue indefinitely, Mrs. Winckworth realized. The longer it continued, the harder it would be to break.

"You must realize I did all this with the best intentions in the world. I hoped—"

"Them as pokes their nose into other people's business must expect what they get!" pronounced Mrs. Purdom oracularly. She was quite implacable. "Thank you very much!" she added with withering sarcasm.

"May I not give orders that we go round by way of my house? Then we can discuss the matter with your daughter, and maybe . . ." If only they were allowed to get back to poor Sal, the situation might be retrieved, she thought. They might, for instance, get the doctor in, and maybe Mr. Merrilees, the minister, and between them they might make some sort of an impression on the old woman, and give her some sort of an idea of Jim's condition, in a way she herself had totally failed to.

The old woman's jaw set hard.

"Drop me at the station!" she demanded. "Then tell 'im to go back and bring our Sal!"

"But Mrs. Purdom. There's no train for two or three hours. Then you'll not be able to get any further than Inverness tonight." (She was not sure of the facts, at all, but this account of the transport situation might just possibly serve as a deterrent.)

"Then we'll get to this Inverness," said the old woman, "and go on tomorrow."

"I must really beg you again, Mrs. Purdom. Let's go round by way of my house, then, if your daughter wants to go with you, she can pack her bag, and go. *Please!*"

"Your 'ouse?" exclaimed Mrs. Purdom. She hesitated the fraction of a moment. Then: "Not me!" she decided finally. It is just possible that the thought of the la-di-da Mrs. Hopwood was the item that tilted the balance.

"The small boy," Mrs. Winckworth floundered. "Do you think

he is in a condition to be kept waiting about at stations for hours and hours?"

"That's our look-out!" The jaw was firm as a rock.

Suddenly a last ridiculous desperate consideration came up into Mrs. Winckworth's mind.

"If you think," she started with unconvincing bluster, "if you think we've got enough petrol to go gallivanting about all over the place, this way and that way, and everywhere . . . you're mistaken," she concluded lamely.

"We'll walk!" said Mrs. Purdom.

Mrs. Winckworth gave up. She leaned forward to the driver.

"Yes, straight to the station," she said.

In course of time Mrs. Winckworth was back at Ben Voith again. Sal sat waiting for her in her room, inert with anxiety.

"What happened, Mrs. Winckworth? Where is he?" she whispered, as Mrs. Winckworth entered.

"We had bad luck," Mrs. Winckworth said, shaking her head. "We got in just as the change was happening. He didn't recognize them." That was all she thought it necessary to let her know for the time being.

Sal took out her handkerchief, and cried quietly.

"I was afraid something like that might happen, Mrs. Winckworth," she moaned. "What are we going to *do*? What *can* we do? Will he ever get better? My poor, poor Jim!"

"Miss Hyland has already been in touch with one or two of the best mental experts in London," Mrs. Winckworth assured her. "It'll be all *right*, my dear. It'll be all *right*. But it takes time."

"Yes. It takes time." She looked up piteously. "God knows how long it'll take, and I can't go on staying here, being a nuisance to you. Then there's Dickie, and Mum. Where are they? Was Dickie frightened? Did you take Dickie away quickly? What did Mum think?" The questions rolled over each other like tumbling marbles.

"You will stay here as long as it's necessary, my dear, and as long as you care to. Don't let me hear a single word more on *that*

subject. This is a big house, and we'll manage. But as for your mother . . ."

"Yes?"

"I'm afraid she was awfully upset. She thinks the whole situation is bad for the boy. He's upset and frightened. And I'm afraid she's right. Perhaps I was a little hasty about the whole thing. But it was a gamble, Sal. It might have come off."

"Of course it might. Where's Mum? Where's Dickie?"

"She insisted on being taken back to the station. I suggested she could go back by 'plane again, but she seems to have had enough of airplanes."

"She's a bit old-fashioned, you know," explained Sal.

"So I gathered. She sent a message that you're to pack your bag at once and go and join her in the station and take the train to London."

"I can't, Mrs. Winckworth," Sal wailed. "I can't leave Jim!"

"I thought you'd say that," said Mrs. Winckworth with grim satisfaction. "That's settled, eh? You don't leave Jim!"

"Of course not! How can I? I must be here!"

"Very well! What chance is there of making your mother change her mind? It's going to be very awkward with the boy, you know. There'll be long waits for trains."

"If she's made up her mind," said Sal, "that's her lot." (That was a phrase meaning the decision was irrevocable, Mrs. Winckworth decided.) "But how'll she manage? She's never been further than Clacton-on-Sea." Then suddenly she remembered, as a major calamity, the few things they had brought, and which were here, in her room at Ben Voith. "And what about Dickie's other pair of shorts? And his brush and soap? And Mum's blouse and skirt?"

"I shouldn't worry about anything. I'm going to get a parcel of food made up for them. Then Miss Hyland will take everything in hand. She'll spend the night with them in Inverness, and put them on the train for the south. She'd take them to London, if your mother would let her. Anyhow, she'll have a word with the porter. She won't forget *anything*."

"You're not angry with Mum, Mrs. Winckworth, after all you've done?"

"Certainly not, my dear. It's all a bit *different* for your mother, I suppose, this way of doing things, airplanes, and all that. But what a wonderful old woman she is! And what a sweet boy, too! I'm going to give you a special dose of that medicine tonight, Sal. I want you to have a good night's rest."

"You'll let Mum know, won't you, how I feel . . . about not leaving Jim?"

"I'll send Miss Hyland along immediately. Your mother's expecting you to act like this, my dear. Really she is. She'd have acted the same way herself, if she'd been you. You know that, don't you?"

"You're wonderful!" breathed Sal Gunning with accents hitherto reserved for her film favorites, Miss Lockwood and Miss Bergman. "You're just marvelous!"

"Tosh! Fiddlesticks!" proclaimed Mrs. Winckworth.

When Miss Lemuel came in from her work in the fields that evening she found her nephew, Edward Tourneur, in an extremely wretched condition. Even before she got into the room she heard him swearing violently, and there was a sound as of fists banging violently against the wall.

"What's the matter, Edward my dear?" she asked, full of solicitude. "You look dreadful. What is it? Toothache?"

He turned to her, his face twisted like a screwed-up rag.

"So you've come, have you? Where the hell have you been?"

"Edward! My dear! What on earth's the matter with you?" She came closer to him.

"Speak up!" he yelled. "I can't hear you! This goddam screaming in my ears!" He shook his head violently, as if to shake the clamor out of his brain. But he was no more successful this time than he had been a hundred times already.

"How did it happen?" she cried. "Can you hear me? When

did it come over you? Tell me, Edward? Then perhaps I'll find something I can do!"

"Who's that bloody little brat that came here? And the old hag with him? Are they more of your perishing resuscitations? Couldn't you leave me alone? I was quite happy where I was, damn and blast you!"

She put her hand to her heart. It was exactly as if the point of a dagger had been thrust through the thin flesh there, between the ribs. He had never raised his voice to her in all his life before, let alone sworn at her so loutishly.

But he was not alive, of course. And he was under extreme stress. She must ignore it.

"Who?" she asked. "A small boy? And an old woman? I don't know! I've not seen anybody today! We've been working away off, down the hill!"

"Who *were* they? That snotty-nosed little bastard—he set up the most hideous screeching. And it's still here! Still here! Inside!" He beat the sides of his skull with his fists. "I can't get rid of it. It's not stopped for one single moment! I've been up on the moor, trying to get rid of it, trying to run away from it. But it's no good! It's inside! It won't stop!" He banged the sides of his skull with his fists. "What have you done to me? What have you brought me here for? Let me go! LET ME GO!"

He stood there, swaying a moment or two. Then suddenly he collapsed into his chair, the tears travelling in swift runnels down his cheeks.

"Let me go! Aunt Deborah!" he begged. "I want to go back!"

She was beside him now. She drew up another chair. She was wiping his tears away with her handkerchief. "You poor boy!" she murmured. "You poor, poor boy!" She felt at once a dreadful grief for him, and a dreadful exultation. He was her little boy again, the boy his father had brought to her more than a score of years ago, and had left with her; the boy who had come up north with her and marked out Skurr nan Gillian to be their home. He was her little boy again, and he was in pain, and he was crying.

What's wrong with a small boy crying? Even the toughest small boy will break down sometime.

"Listen, Edward, my dear!" she spoke into his ear. "Don't fret, laddie! I've got something that'll send you to sleep. I'll give you a good big dose. By the time it's worn off, the noise will have stopped. Or perhaps you won't hear it. Don't you see, Edward? It won't be *you*! *You* won't be worried by it, Edward my dear! I'll get the medicine for you now! Wait, it's in my room! Go up to your bed," she told him, "and lie down! Do you hear me? Up to your bed, my dear, and lie down! Then I'll bring it to you!"

He flung her hand sharply away. The handkerchief it held which was mopping away his tears, fell to the ground. Then sombrely, with implacable hostility, he gazed into her eyes.

"It had better put me under, you bitch!" he said. "Or you look out!"

He went to the stairs that led to his room, and began to climb them. She stared after him, her mouth a round black plum of blackness. Then, after several minutes, she got up from her chair, and dragged her body off towards her own room. It seemed to halt behind her, heavy and sullen as a lead coffin.

She, too, had taken a few drops of the narcotic, convinced that otherwise she could not possibly sleep. But it did not work well, and she heard him coming down the stairs. She heard him open the kitchen door, then open the door of her own room. She did not, she dared not, open her eyes.

"Is that you, Edward?" she breathed.

"It's gone on long enough!" the voice of Gunning said.

"Are you Gunning? Can't you sleep? Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Talk louder!" He shook his head violently, as if to shake the appalling, the undiminished clamor, out of his brain.

"Can't you sleep? Is there anything I can do for you?"

"My kid's still screaming! I can hear him! Inside here!" He banged the side of his skull with his fists, exactly as Edward

Tourneur had done. "It's inside! It won't stop! Can't you hear him?"

"No!" her mouth went. "No!"

"Shall I kill you?" he asked.

She made no reply.

"I'm asking you a question? Shall I kill you? Answer!"

"Yes. It would be the best thing!"

"It would, would it? So you've not finished with me yet, eh? You'd like me to end up a murderer? You'd like me to take the drop for you? A nice parting present *that* would be for my kid, wouldn't it? A nice little lump of rope."

"I'll do what you want me to do, Gunning," she said.

He did not hear her.

"I don't mind how I die! Anything's better than this!" He shook his head as if to dislodge a huge vulture that was perched on it, digging its red beak into his ears. "All right, I'll hang! I don't care a damn! But first I'll get that bloody contract out of you! I ain't going to leave *that* behind for you! I don't care what happens! All right! I'll cough my lungs out! They'll run out of me like water! I'll be dead in two days! Who the hell cares? It's better than this!" He hooked his left fist against the side of his forehead, so violently it seemed it could hardly fail to crack it. "Where's that bloody contract you got me to sign, you bitch? Where is it?"

They befouled her the same way: Jim and Edward. They burned with the same hatred. She looked round the room, she stared towards the door. There was no Helper anywhere. It was all over, all lost; all over, and so soon. The dear one had come back to her for so brief a time.

"The contract," she said. "I'll tell you. You know Edward's book-shelf by the hearth? There's a book on the second shelf: *Captain Cook's Voyages.*"

"Yes?"

"There's a pocket inside the cover. There's a map inside it. Unfold that map."

"All right. If you're up to some monkey business, I'll break every bone in your body before I finish you. Understand?"

She nodded. The movement was so faint it was hardly to be seen.

He went out of the room, the screaming in his head walking inside him like his skeleton, beside him, like his shadow. The warning. The counsel. The future articulate. Conscience articulate in infant shrillness.

He went into the kitchen. He felt in his pockets, for he was in his clothes still. He found a match, and lit the candle that always stood on the dresser. The light seemed to give to the screaming a new shape. It was the shape now not of his skull, but of the room. The center of his skull was still the center of the screaming, but it was thinner in density now, like a gas that escapes from a small receptacle and is diffused through a larger one. It was not only audible now, but in the candle-rays it had become visible, as the walls of the room were visible.

He walked over to the book-shelf, and looked on the second shelf for the volume of voyages. There it was, *Captain Cook's Voyages*. He put his hand on it. It did not crumble into ash or liquefy into jelly. A boy's book, an ordinary book, presented to Edward Tourneur of Transitus A, Eastwood College, for Public Spirit. The screaming lessened, as a diffused pain seems to lessen when at last the probing tongue, or a fingertip, locates the focus from which it radiates.

He opened the book, and found a pocket inside the cover. Inside the pocket was a folded map of Captain Cook's explorations of Australia. He opened up the map, and found lying against the central fold a single lined sheet of paper, with one rough edge, where it had been torn from an exercise-book. He reversed the sheet and saw the writing on it, executed in Miss Lemuel's delicate script, the graph of a voyage longer than any Captain Cook had undertaken, so far as his records tell. As, without fear, he brought the sheet closer to his eyes, he was conscious that the screaming that had first filled his skull, then had escaped from his skull into the room, was now escaping from the room by all its vents, by

window and chimney and door, into the vast night, and becoming thinner, thinner, thinner, each moment. He held the contract where the candle-light illumined and exposed it, and read it from its first to its last word.

". . . it is understood that the contract becomes null and void, and the malady from which I am to be delivered, will return into my body in the degree which it would by that time have attained, if the contract had not been drawn up and signed."

He raised his head from the contract, and stood there, waiting, looking round, listening. The screaming in his ears was now faint and remote as the whining of ridges. Then smartly he tore the sheet of paper into two, then into four, then he placed a corner of the fragments into the candle-flame, and let them burn, and burn down, until there was a danger that his fingers must burn too. Then he let the puff of black ash fall to the floor, and with his foot he scrubbed it out, as you might scrub out a noxious insect to make certain not the slightest atom of life remained in it—and total silence, blessed silence, befell his brain: the silence of snow-fields, the silence of green things as they grew.

He did not move yet. He stood there, and thrust out his chest and breathed deeply, as he used to stand breathing deeply in the old days in the gymnasium, during the exercises that were to put him into trim for his next fight. He clenched his fists and banged his chest hard, as if to make sure, make quite quite sure, that no mischief had been set afoot there. The ribs resounded, sonorous as a bell. Then he cleared his throat again, to make quite quite sure that no thin scurf of blood had formed there, with the taste of tin and damp bath-brick he had several times known. But the throat seemed dry and tough and decent as leather.

He was aware of a gratitude so profound there had never been any gratitude in all his days to equal it. It took to itself no direction and localized no recipient. He was grateful for his delivery. It was his mode of prayer. He stood with head bent in this hueless silence, until at last he heard sound again and saw color. He saw his wife quite clearly bending over the fire in the kitchen in Territon Street, in Holloway, lifting a kettle. The light glowed

and puffed in her fine silky hair. In that same instant, with another faculty, he knew she was only a mile or two away from him, in Ben Voith, the house of that woman who had sought to save him. He saw Sal, but he heard Dickie, among his trains in the big bedroom, supplying them out of his own throat with the huffing and hooting and whistling that they lacked.

"It was you did the trick, Dickie!" he murmured. Tears scalded his eyes. "What a mug I was! You'll understand, won't you, Sal? It wasn't half funny, when you come to think of it!" In the cleared hollow of his skull he heard a laughter break like a water-spring in a morse code staccato, Ha, ha! Ho, ho, ho! Ha, ha! A derisive laughter heard long ago; derisive, glorious—retrieving sanity, proportion, human dignity, from the last pit of the valley of the shadow.

He picked up the candlestick, and turned to the door, and went out of the room. He knew his love was not far away, but there was another woman to whom he must say a word of farewell.

Miss Lemuel lay long and rigid upon her bed. The bottle of opiate with which earlier that day she had sought to soothe the tumult in Edward Tourneur's skull, lay on the table beside her, drained to its last drop. She was still alive, for the lips were moving faintly, and sound was issuing from them. It was impossible for a layman to say whether she was still conscious, or whether this was the unconscious babbling of coma. Jim Gunning brought his ear down towards her lips.

"I loved him," she seemed to be saying, "I loved him." But he could not be certain they were the words, or if they were words at all.

He placed the candlestick down on the table.

"What's my job now?" he asked himself. "What should a bloke do?" He knew, even before he asked himself, that it were better for her sake that she should be dead. He did not believe she had the Friend and Master to help her that she had boasted of. Somehow, she had been fooled, as she had fooled him.

Whether or not it was a better thing for her that she should

be dead, he knew that there was only one thing for him to do, to try and save her if he could. He must try and get that stuff out of her. Suddenly an event in their rooms in Holloway some three or four years ago, came into his mind to instruct him, here on the dark croft on the moors above Glamaig.

Everyone else being busy with something other than Dickie, Dickie had climbed up on to a chair, and started nosing about among bottles and packets and things on a wash-stand. He had found a small box of intriguing pills, and he had swallowed the whole lot. In quite a few seconds he had an extraordinary feeling in the pit of his small stomach. He started howling, and the empty pill-box in his hand told the tale. Sal lost her head: he himself, Jim, had not the faintest idea what to do. But the old woman was off at once to the kitchen where she mixed mustard with warm water, to make the simplest of emetics. That was enough to be going on with. Sterner measures were taken later.

Jim Gunning went off into the kitchen, and mixed the same emetic. He felt the chance of its reviving Miss Lemuel was one in a hundred, but it had to be tried out. He was back in her room with a tumbler half a minute later, and put it at Miss Lemuel's open mouth. He raised her head and tried to pour it down her throat, but it was useless. He put his fingers back there, but that, too, was useless, quite useless.

"I'll have to get the doctor," he told himself, "like she got the doctor for me that time. I can't do nothing more myself." He smiled wryly. There was no telephone now as then. "Perhaps if she could think just now," he reflected, "she'd be happier now than she ever was before, that there's no telephone at Skurr nan Gillian."

"The car's mucked up," he remembered. "I'll have to go down to the telephone booth on the Strath Road. I can't leave Agnes behind with her. There's no Agnes any more." He looked down beside the bed, he looked round the room. Not even Hunish was there, not even the unbudging Twilight, the Persian cat with gold-rimmed eyes. All gone. All gone. He himself would see the last

of her soon. Edward Tourneur had gone, if he had ever been. From now on, she would be alone for ever and for ever.

He made the best time he could, tough though the going was, over field and moor, swamp and wood and stream. The red telephone booth glared in the darkness like a sheet soaked in blood. He rang for the operator, but it was several minutes before he got any reply.

"Hello, yes?" at length a voice asked querulously.

"Hello, operator. This is Jim Gunning, of Skurr nan Gillian. Give me Dr. Muir. Urgent."

"Ach, Jim Gunning, is it? Is it true?"

"Is what true?"

"That the auld wumman's deid?"

Jim stood and gasped for breath as if someone had caught him in the stomach with a sack of flour.

"She's not dead. She wasn't dead when I left her. What made you think she was dead?"

"They were talken' aboot it the necht in the Glamaig Arms. There's been signs and portents."

"Oh, for God's sake!" Jim shouted. He had no right to stand around blathering while mad Highlanders talked of signs and portents, and up on the croft an old woman lay with a belly-full of opium, or whatever it was. "Give me the doctor, will you?"

"Verra weel. Hang on!"

He was put through.

"Is that Dr. Muir?"

"Yes. Who's that? Can't it wait?" The voice was not amiable.

"I'm Jim Gunning, of Skurr nan Gillian. Miss Lemuel's tried to do herself in. She's taken an overdose of sleeping-draught."

"Good God! Did you try to do anything?"

"I tried to give her an emetic, but I couldn't make her take it. She looked pretty near done for."

"All right, I'll come straight away. Where are you?"

"I'm at the road-box near Ben Voith."

"You'd better come back with me. Have you phoned the police yet?"

"No. I'm going to phone them now."

"Good. Walk on towards the bridge, will you? I'll pick you up." Dr. Muir put down the receiver. Jim was about to replace his own receiver before ringing up the operator again, when it occurred to him there could be no doubt the operator was listening in. He put his mouth to the mouthpiece.

"Hello, operator! Are you there? Are you listening?"

"What dae ye mean am ah listening?" asked the operator, scandalized.

"Put me through to the police station."

"Verra weel." He was put through.

"Is that the police station? Is that Donald Kerr?"

"No, it's Bruce Tay. Who's that?"

"I'm Gunning, of Skurr nan Gillian. I'm reporting an attempt at suicide."

"So it's true then?"

Jim stopped, and breathed hard.

"You've heard too, already?" he gasped.

"There was an awfu' crack going on in the Glamaig Arms the necht."

"But it only happened an hour ago, maybe less. She may be alive still."

"She'll be deid afore daybreak."

Jim clenched his fists. He felt like banging his skull hard against the side of the telephone-box.

"I tried to give her an emetic. It was no good. Then I came down and phoned Dr. Muir. He's coming straight away. He's going to pick me up." The only thing to do was to talk and behave as matter of factly as possible. Otherwise he'd get down on all fours and start barking at the sky.

"Tell him tae pick me up, too," said the policeman. "Ah'll be ootside the station."

"Is that O.K.? Have I done everything I should do?"

"Ye've done fine, mon! Are ye a'recht yersel'?"

"I'm fine, thank you. Just one more thing. Would you know if my wife's staying at Ben Voith? Is my kid there? Is that lady looking after them?" Mad though Bruce Tay was, mad though they all were, no doubt he could still answer a sensible question sensibly.

"She is, mon, sure as daith. She's looking after her like her ane mither. The auld wumman tuk the bairn back home today."

"Oh!" Jim paused a moment. "Will it be all right if I ring my wife up? I think there'd just be time."

"Why no'?" the policeman asked. "I ken no reason why no'."

This time there was no pretence at the telephone-exchange that the operator was not listening.

"I'll put you through to Ben Voith at once," said the operator. "Haud on!"

Jim hung on. It was not long before Ben Voith's attention was attracted. They were still awake. They kept late hours at Ben Voith.

"Hello! Who's that?" asked a voice at Ben Voith.

"This is Jim Gunning, of Skurr nan Gillian. I've been told my wife's staying in your house. Please, I know it's late, but could she come to the telephone, please? I've only got a few moments."

There was a sensible pause, presumably for consideration of the matter.

"Hello?" said the voice.

"Yes?"

"I'll go and have a word with Mrs. Winckworth. She'll deal with it. Hold on, will you?"

"I'll hold on."

One minute passed, two minutes, three minutes. They seemed a great many minutes. Of course Sal was in her bed. They had to get her out. She had to slip on a few things. She had to get to the telephone. At last, at last, there was the sound of footsteps approaching, the vibration in the lifted receiver.

"Jim! Is that you, Jim? Are you all right? Oh Jim, Jim!"

"I'm all right, Sal. Are you all right?"

"I'm fine! What's happened? Where are you?"

"I'm in the telephone booth near Ben Voith. The old woman's tried to do herself in. She's probably dead by now."

There was a tiny scream at the other end of the telephone. That seemed to indicate that Sal, at least, had not known about anything in advance. But Sal was English. You wouldn't expect *her* to know somebody was going to die, hours before that somebody had any idea about it herself.

"What's she done herself in for? Are *you* all right?" Then a pause. "Jim, Jim *you* didn't have anything to do with it?"

"No, Sal, no, love. You don't need to worry about *that*. I'll tell you all about it. So you got the kid over, and the old woman? They say she's taken him away?"

"Yes, Jim. He got frightened. You know what Mum is. Jim, will it ever happen again? Tell me! You know what I mean?"

"It'll never happen again. It can't."

"You're just near by, Jim, aren't you? Shall I come out to you?"

"The doctor's coming over from Braemore Bridge. He's picking me up and taking me back to Skurr nan Gillian. You know how it is, Sal. They have to take notes, and all that madam."

"When will I see you, Jim?"

"I'll be with you as soon as I can. Maybe before daybreak. Isn't it wonderful, Sal?"

"Jim, I can't believe it, not till you're here with me."

"As soon as I can, love."

"I'll be waiting. Oh Jim, Jim!"

Jim Gunning was on the bridge first. A moment later Bruce Tay, the policeman, came up on his bicycle.

"Ah'll leave it here," said he, "in the ditch. Naebody will want that auld thing. Are ye a'recht, Gunning?"

"I'm all right, Mr. Tay," Jim stated. "Don't be afraid. There'll be no monkey-business. What's all this here?"

"What d'ye mean, Gunning?"

"Come off it. You know what I mean."

Bruce Tay cleared his throat.

"Let me remind ye, young mon," he said a little pompously,

"ye're talken to an officer o' the law." But officers of the law do not usually put up a fierce show in Highland villages. He was not very impressive.

"Please, Mr. Tay," begged Jim. "The doctor'll be here in a minute or two. I want to know what all this business is. *You* know about it. The bloke at the telephone-exchange knew about it. I'm in this thing, you know."

"Ach, wheesht ye noo. We a' ken how much it's got to dae with *you*. Thon's the way it happens in these parts, when a body's going to dee. Folk ken aboot it afore it happens. That's a'."

"Well? What happened? What did they know?"

"It's a' a wee bit daft, I ken it recht weel. But as I tauld ye', they were cracken' their heids off the necht in the Glamaig Arms. Ye ken Meiklejohn, the carpenter?"

"I do."

"He said while he was asleep early in the mornen', he heard the noise o' his ane plane, planin' awa', and his ane saw, sawin' awa', doon in his ane workshop, and him up in his bed the whole time. It was the speeruts, he said, that prepare a speerut coffin, afore he's asked tae prepare a real coffin."

"He didn't say it was Miss Lemuel's coffin? That'll be the doctor's car, won't it, coming along the bridge?"

"Aye, thon's the doctor's car. No, he didnae. But Jamey Kinross was in the Arms, too. He sayed he was walken' back to Skurr nan Gillian this verra evenin', tae pick up a few things for puir daft Agnes; an' he saw the 'deid can'le,' he sayed, clear as the pump ahint the bar. It was no' fluttering along the track, the way it does when a coffin's tae be carried tae holy burial. It was flutterin' roond and roond, like a flitterbat, as if it knew there'd be no consecrated groond for it to rest in."

"I see," murmured Jim. "I see." He shrugged his shoulders. It was very very funny, in a frightening way, to hear a big beefy policeman in the dead hours of the morning yapping away about dead candles fluttering around like flitterbats and the ghosts of planes and saws and hammers knocking together ghost coffins. Ah,

thank heaven, here was the doctor's car . . . if it wasn't a ghost car, carrying off the spirit of Miss Lemuel.

The searchlights threw their light over them. The car drew up.

"Good evening . . . Bruce, is it?"

It was Dr. Muir right enough, not the spirit of Miss Lemuel.

"Aye, it's Bruce."

"Good evening, Gunning. Jump in beside me, will you?"

"Thank you, doctor."

They turned right and drove along towards the point where the track for Skurr nan Gillian branched from the main Strath road.

"Are you feeling all right, Gunning?" asked the doctor.

"Doctor, let me tell you. I'm all right. Nothing's going to get in your way. That's what you want to know, isn't it?"

"Thank you for being so frank, Gunning. That's just what I wanted to know. Perhaps we'll have a few words later?"

"I hope to be going back to London soon. But there'll be time."

"Thank you, Gunning."

Silence fell upon them. They were up in the moorland now. A great white owl disturbed from a gate-post clattered round the car and flopped clumsily away. Now and again the headlamps converted the eyes of sheep into hopgoblin emeralds. The eyes of a strayed cow were disks of burning amber.

Bruce bent forward and touched Jim on the shoulder.

"Would that be one of Miss Lemuel's Belties?" he quivered. The night journey was doing him no good at all.

Jim turned his head.

"I shouldn't be surprised," he replied. "It was Miss Lemuel's Belties first brought us together, the old lady and me."

"Ach, aye," sighed Bruce, and relapsed. Then a few minutes later he leaned forward again.

"I didnae tell ye, Gunning," he said.

Jim turned again.

"What?"

"I thocht I heard the 'deed drop', masel', this evenen', after I went hame frae the Glamaig Arms."

"What's that?"

"You've been hearing things and seeing things?" asked Dr. Muir. It seemed to be a phenomenon he was familiar with.

"I *only thocht* I heerd it," insisted Bruce unhappily.

"*What?*" insisted Jim.

"It's a drop of water they hear when someone's going to die, very dull and heavy. So you didn't hear it, Bruce?"

"No, it was only an auld tap wi' a worn-oot washer."

"I'm not surprised," murmured Dr. Muir. "Here's the gate in the fence." Jim got out, opened the gate and closed it after the car passed through.

"She'll no' be worrying aboot gates openen' and closen'," whispered Bruce. Already there was an air of decay and dereliction in the dark fields of the croft; already there was the odor of the dust of death in the air. The car braked, the three men got out and entered the house.

"She's here, doctor," murmured Jim. "In the room where you saw me." He opened the door, and went in and lit the candle on the table. The doctor followed. They waited a moment or two for the policeman, but the policeman lingered out in the porch there. He seemed disinclined to enter. Dr. Muir went to the door.

"Come in, Bruce!" he called sharply. "It's your job."

"Ah was comen'," murmured Bruce. "Ah just stopped."

The rays of the candle lit up the old woman's face where it lay upon the pillow, grey and rigid, like the sculptured effigy of a great lady whose lord had gone forth upon crusades, though it was not the cross this lady had embroidered upon her linen. The doctor held her pulse and put a small mirror to her lips. He touched with a finger-tip lightly the wide staring eyes. They were dead as glass. The old tired deluded heart was mute as clay. With two finger-tips he pulled down the two eyelids, then lifted the sheet to cover her face.

"All that's over," the doctor said. "Do you want to ask Gunning any questions, Bruce?"

"Aye," said Bruce. His face was almost as colorless as the corpse's. "It's me place to, Doctor!" he cried suddenly. "Can ah no' question him ootside? Ah can see tae write by the headlights."

Dr. Muir shrugged his shoulders.

"Very well." He turned to Jim. "You'll want to come away with me, Gunning?"

"Yes."

"Right. I suppose you have some things you'd like to pack up?"

"Yes. There's a toy truck I've made for my boy. No, I'll leave that. There are a few other things."

"No! Not now!" cried Bruce. He was going to bits. "He can tak' them tomorrow. Better leave everything. Ah'm going oot." He staggered towards the door, his hands winnowing the air before him. A moment or two later he was in the open.

"He's remembering," Dr. Muir said.

Gunning raised his eyes.

"What?" they asked.

"They'll all be talking of it tomorrow, all over the countryside. The curse on Skurr nan Gillian, the Goodman's Croft. *She* didn't believe in it." (He nodded towards the dead woman under the sheet.) "Perhaps they were right, and she was wrong. I don't like it here. Let's go." He made for the door. "Will you put the candle out?"

Jim bent towards the table, finger and thumb extended to squeeze out the flame. Then he stopped, the finger and thumb still apart.

"The animals," he said suddenly. He had not been odd-job man on a farm for a year and a half without becoming part of a routine. "I'll put out some milk for the cats, and a bowl of water for Hunish. But I'm not certain they'll be back, any of them."

"That may well be. Nothing will come back. The cows will be sold, the garden will run to seed, gorse and heather will cover the cleared land." Jim looked sharply at the doctor. Were they all a bit screwy, these Scotsmen, he asked himself. "In a few years little rowan-trees will be thrusting up through these floors. Swallows will be nesting up in those beams."

"Very likely," said Jim. "What I'm thinking of is milking the cows and feeding the chickens tomorrow morning. We pass

Hughie Ross's croft on the way back. Will you stop, please, so I can wake Hughie up, and tell him?"

"Oh yes, yes!" The doctor shook himself, like a dog picking himself up from a dream. "Come along, Gunning. There's nothing more for us to do here."

Jim looked round and thought for a moment or two.

"No," he murmured. "No more honey for Edward."

"What's that?"

"I think that's everything, doctor." He brought the tips of thumb and finger together and squeezed out the candle-flame. They went out, helped the policeman into the car, and drove off. Bruce was not at all in good shape.

Jim Gunning got out of the car, and opened the gate of Skurr nan Gillian. The car drove through and he closed the gate and climbed back beside Dr. Muir. A minute or so later, the doctor slewed round from the wheel.

"How're you feeling, Bruce? Would you like another nip?"

"Ah've never felt better in ma life," declared Bruce testily. "Ah feel fine. But ah wouldnae mind another nip at a'. Why should ah?"

The doctor passed the flask behind him. Bruce helped himself and returned it.

"You, Gunning?" asked Dr. Muir.

"Thank you!" Jim took a swallow.

"Me, too!" said the doctor, wiping the mouth of the flask. "It's all very unhygienic, you know. Here goes. I want to drink your health, Gunning. You've had a pretty tough time. Your health!"

"Thank you, doctor," murmured Jim. "You'll put me off at Ben Voith, won't you?"

"Of course. She'll be waiting. I saw her today."

"She's a good kid, doctor. Isn't she?"

Dr. Muir removed one hand from the wheel, and patted Jim's back.

"She is! Good luck to you both!"

The gnarled and tusked heraldic griffins stared towards each other across the gates of Ben Voith. Against the pillar of the left-hand griffin, Sal leaned, waiting for him. The dawn was coming up beyond the Firth. A young breeze was blowing, puffing out Sal's fine hair.

"I'll drive just beyond the gates," muttered Dr. Muir. "Then you can walk back to her." They would both prefer, the doctor knew, that there should be no strange eyes to witness their coming together.

"Thank you, doctor," Jim whispered. "Good-bye. Thank you. So long, Bruce."

Ten, twenty yards beyond the gates, Dr. Muir stopped the car. Jim stepped out; the car drove on. She came towards him. They were in each other's arms. When at last their mouths parted, she let her head fall back to look long into his eyes.

"It *is* you, Jim, isn't it? Isn't it? It can't ever be anybody else?"

"It's me, Sal. Just me, always."

She placed her fingertips on his forehead.

"Just you!" she murmured. "Nobody else."

"Just me!" he said again.

Then she clenched her fists and beat upon his chest as hard as she knew how.

"And all this is all right, too?"

"Yes, Sal, it's fine."

"We're going to check up on it," she said sternly. "No silly business!"

"What you say, goes, Sal."

"Oh, Jim, Jim!" They were speechless for several minutes. When their lips were free for speech again, they found they were moving along the drive towards the house.

"Where are they?" he asked suddenly. "How is he?"

She knew, of course, who he meant.

"Like I told you," she said, "it was all a bit too much for Mum, like. Airplanes, and things."

"But the kid? He was frightened, wasn't he? He was scared out of his wits."

"It wasn't you," she said placidly. "He won't remember a thing."

"You're sure, Sal?"

"He'd better not," she proclaimed grimly. "He'd be spanked. I don't think he will."

"Is there a championship coming up?" Jim asked suddenly.

"Of course!" she reproached him. "Tom Wingate's having a crack at Jackie Hamilton, for the feathers. Didn't you know?" She could have bitten her tongue off.

"I've been a bit out of touch," he murmured. "I'll take him!" he said.

"Who?"

"Dickie, of course. Ring-side seats."

"Me, too," she insisted.

He kissed her full and deep on the mouth.

"You, too," he said. "I'll buy you a new train, too, as well as him."

She smiled, then: "I suppose you'll get round Mum, sooner or later," she brought out somewhat dubiously. "She wasn't half in a stew."

"We'll manage," he said. The situation could be tackled when it presented itself. "You've fixed yourself up pretty posh, haven't you?" They were on the edge of the lawn that sloped down to the pool. Two swans were coming up from behind a palisade of reeds, their breasts facing the risen sun. A marsh-hen came clucking in from somewhere, feathered the water, and hid itself in a rushy tangle. Over their heads a cedar thrust forth a benign arm.

"It's not half dusty, is it?" she agreed, a proprietary note in her voice. "Hello!" she cried. "There she is!" They were not far from the main entrance now, where Mrs. Winckworth stood, framed between the pillars of the portico.

"Hello!" cried Mrs. Winckworth. She saw that the young people at last, at last, had become aware of her existence. She had had practically no sleep that night, but she looked as fresh and sleek as a seal, with her black hair brushed back, and her trim

black coat and skirt, and her ebony stick. She came down and approached them.

"Hello!" she said again. "How *are* you both?" It was as if she had never in her life heard of the existence of Edward Tourneur, who had been dead for some time, and Jim Gunning, who was coming to her now, a bit awkwardly, not knowing quite what to do with his hands.

"Mrs. Winckworth, this is my Jim!" said Sal. "This is Mrs. Winckworth!" She pointed to her as if she was showing off a notable Dalmatian, long of limb, firm in the neck.

"How do you do?" said Mrs. Winckworth, and put out her hand.

"Pleased to meet you!" said Jim Gunning. They shook hands. It was quite, quite forgotten they had once shaken hands before.

"There's just a pot of tea for you both," said Mrs. Winckworth, "and some eggs, and a rasher or two of bacon. *Miss Hyland*," she breathed mysteriously. She was not one for taking credit to herself.

"Thank you," the two young people murmured.

"Then you can have a bit of sleep, both of you. I don't want to set eyes on you. Not for days and days." She bent down and kissed Sal. "Good luck!" she said. "You, too!" she proclaimed sternly, and kissed Jim hard on the lips.

"Wipe that lipstick off!" she ordered him. "What will your wife say?" Then she turned back and disappeared into the house.

"She's all right, isn't she?" said Jim, a little breathlessly.

"Yes," Sal murmured. "She's all right. Come, Jim. We'll have a cup of tea, shall we?"

"A cup of tea," whispered Jim, taking his wife by the hand. A cup of tea with her would be balm for deep wounds.



Louis Golding was born in Manchester, England in 1895. His father was a profound scholar, and a descendant of a long line of scholars. After his education in Queens College, Oxford, Louis Golding held the only formal position he was ever to occupy—literary editor of *The Saturday Review*. After holding the position a mere fortnight, he started on his present career as a world traveler—a career he pursues to this day. He has traveled over a great many of the remoter regions of Central Europe and the Mediterranean countries, finding there the background for many of his most lasting works.

He is the author, among other books, of *Five Silver Daughters*, *Magnolia Street*, *Mr. Emmanuel*, *Days of Atonement*, *Forward from Babylon*, and *The Glory of Elsie Silver*. At present he headquarters in London, England, but he is as likely to be in Egypt or in Southern California when HONEY FOR THE GHOST appears.