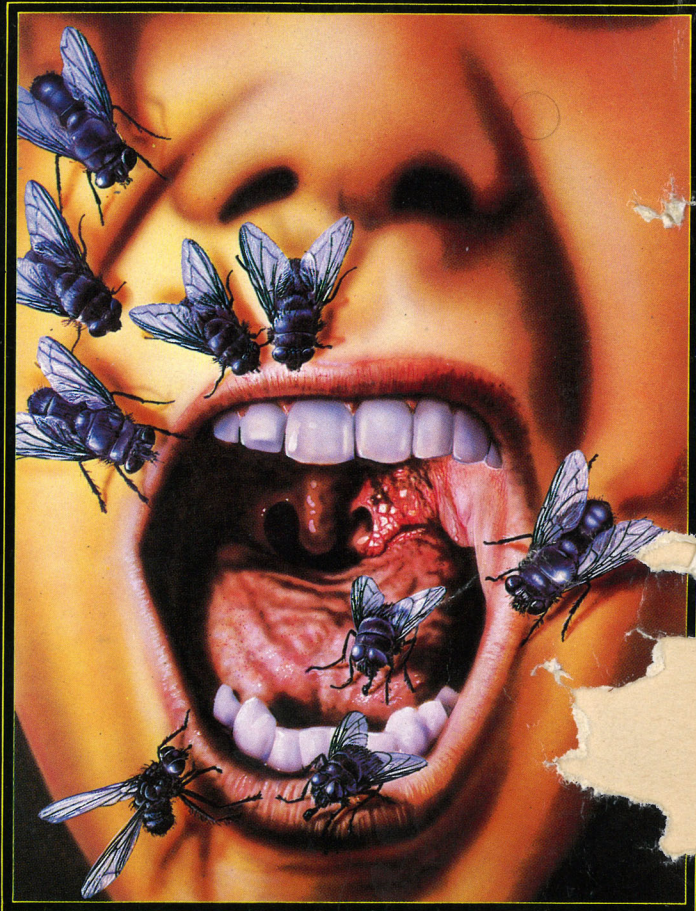




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Selected by CLARENCE PAGET



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The 26th Pan Book of Horror Stories

Pan Original

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B. Seshadri

The river bed

It was burning. The mighty river was dry. The plight of the countryside round it was frightening. It looked flat, dusty and barren. All the grass was gone, and in the fields only the broken-off stubble of another season was left here and there, bleached and translucent in the heat. The big tamarind and banyan trees looked scalped and flayed.

In such surroundings the sand on the river bed looked more conspicuous than ever. There was no shade anywhere on it to cool the burning surface. In good times it was a lush countryside. The great Cauvery river flowed abundantly and crops grew in profusion, rice, maize, millets, vegetables.

Thangi stopped on the Kumbakonam side of the river. She was on an important errand and had to get across to the other side. She carried her baby, not yet a year old, on her left hip with an arm round him, as they carry babies in the south. He was big for his age and golden-looking. For, was he not the son of Thangamma, the golden one, who was given no name till she was three but Thangamma from then by common acclamation of the village. As she walked he was constantly leaning over and tugging at her left breast with his mouth. Thangi wore only a sari, a white one with a red border; and tied round the waist, it was thrown across her chest, carried over her right shoulder, and tucked in at the back. In the hot weather this was the normal dress of the working countrywoman. The baby had no trouble in pushing the sari aside to get at her breast.

She was on her way to the house of her husband's uncle, a small farmer like her husband, on the farther side of the river. Her husband had been waiting for many days for the uncle to bring seed rice. His own stock had been totally destroyed almost overnight by an invasion of rats, and now the end-of-summer rains were due and he had to have the seed ready to sow. He had

only a small patch of land, which he worked hard to grow rice and vegetables. Formidable thunder clouds had been appearing over the past few days, but had so far been powerless to break through the iron ring of heat; but it could not go on for ever.

He did not want to send Thangi all that way in this heat, for she had a walk of six miles to the river and another six miles on the other side. It was not the length of the walk, they were used to the walking, but the heat. He had still much to do on the land, had ploughed it with his one-ox team, but had the fencing to put right. It was in a bad way and cattle and goats had trampled all over in their desperate search for something edible, and they couldn't be allowed to do that once the seed was sown. Thangi insisted on going and had thought nothing of it, she was used to the heat of the summer, and if it didn't put her husband off working in the field it wasn't going to stop her from walking!

The heat this year had been excessive. It had got even hotter over the last few days and cattle had dropped dead as they wandered, scavenging dogs had gone mad, and birds died in their thousands; even insects in which this countryside abounded had disappeared. The carcasses of dead animals littered the fields, and the men had the additional and unpleasant task of collecting and burning them which they did long after the sun set and the air, if still hot, was not scorching. In the midday sun they stopped working in the fields, knowing when to stop, and returned to their mud-brick houses to drink long draughts of the tepid water their women brought from the tubewells and stored in earthen pots. There would have been deaths from thirst and dehydration in this heat but for the two tubewells the government had sunk in their village three years ago. However hot the summer, there was some water always to be had from these, even when the great river was bone dry.

Thangi stopped at the river edge and looked. She could have walked two miles up river and crossed over the anicut. The anicut was the old equivalent of the modern dam, and had been built by a benevolent Tamil king hundreds of years ago. It had been repaired and renewed a hundred times and still stood secure and strong. Its purpose was to hold back the excess water from the rains. Canals took off from the reservoir that formed behind it, and a complex system of irrigation channels linked to them and

criss-crossing the countryside watered the land.

This year, though, hadn't been like any other. The first rains had all but failed, and when the hot weather came there was only a little mud left immediately behind the anicut; and when the temperature began to soar, even this moisture disappeared.

Thangi thought she would save time by crossing the river bed here. She wanted to get back before dark; who knows, the thunder clouds might break and if that happened she would get wet and the baby would get wet. There would be water in the river, and she would have to recross by the anicut; two miles up river and then two miles down to get back to her route. She stopped and looked at the river bed. A slight, intermittent but very hot breeze was blowing, and caressed her with its flaming breath. Down below, the sand was blown gently and drifted into tiny heaps and waves with each puff of wind. All else was still. Not a soul was to be seen.

She had already walked the six miles from her village with the sun beating down upon her, except when she had walked below the great trees. These trees were in leaf all through the year and, although they had the burnt look now, they gave a shade of sorts and the ground directly below didn't burn quite as much as in the open. Thangi walked barefoot, as all the country folk did, and the soles of her feet were hard and used to rough ground and stone, and these didn't hurt her. But this heat seemed to get through. She turned and looked at the way she had come. Except directly under the trees, all around the earth looked peeled and flaked, cracked and blistered.

Well, she thought, she had walked six miles on that. The sand on the river bed would be hotter still, but provided she hurried, and she might get a blister or two, she should make the other side without the soles of her feet peeling off.

The temperature in the shade had, this day, exceeded 120 degrees, or so the meteorological news summary on the radio would say that evening; but Thangi knew nothing about heat measured in degrees, nor did her village have a radio. She and her husband heard music and talking from the radio in the big bazaar when they came into Kumbakonam from time to time to sell the tiny produce of yams, pumpkins, marrows, greens and aubergines from their land, but they did not tarry to listen. They

went about their business, and once they had sold what they had brought and with that money bought their few necessities, they were on their way back to the village. They were not much interested in people and events in far-away places. As for meteorological news, they would not know anything about it. All they wanted to know about the weather was provided by the village elders who were so adept at reading every sign there was and wasn't. Sometimes the elders were wrong, but if the gods so willed there was nothing anyone could do about it.

As Thangi stood there with the sun beating down on her uncovered head she drew her sari, for the hundredth time, over the baby's head to protect him from the hot rays. But, as always, he pushed it aside in his never-ending quest for her breast. She smiled, and looked at him in tenderness. She found the tiny sucking mouth round the nipple of her breast a hugely satisfying and erotic thing. She loved her baby very much.

She looked down again at what was before her. She had crossed the bed so many times before in the dry months of previous years, when it was partly dry or very nearly dry, and she had alternately to walk on the sand and wade in ankle to thigh deep channels. She had never known it to be like this, glistening and shimmering in the heat like red-hot coal, but still she was not worried.

She slithered down the bank, holding the baby tightly to her side. The earth beneath her feet was like dust, but was no hotter than the firm ground over which she had walked. The bank sides were usually covered with a scatter of vegetation, of many kinds of grasses, small ferns and mosses. Now all of that had burnt out, and each brown patch crumbled into dust as her feet came upon it.

She was now standing at the fringe of the sand. The sand looked alive from the heat moving in waves over it. Its surface shone but was blurred. The air above looked like molten glass.

She stepped forward, and began to walk. The sand was intolerably hot. She increased her stride and determined to make the crossing as quickly as possible. But the faster she tried to walk, the deeper her feet sank into the sand, and it covered her to her ankles and made her feel as if she had put her feet into the mud ovens in her kitchen over which she cooked the family meals. So, by trying to walk fast, she wasn't walking fast at all. She contracted

her stride and put her feet down in short, quick steps. This was worse, if anything could be worse than anything else in the hell she was in now. It felt as though she was sliding over live coal. She thought of the mendicants and fakirs she had seen walking over live coal at the country fairs, and wondered how they did it. They suffered not at all; she had seen the soles of their feet after the walking and there was not a mark on them. The fakirs said it was all a matter of faith. So she prayed to her gods to help her; but her gods must have gone to cooler pastures because, if they heard her, they did nothing. She strode, and she slowed, and she strode again, not knowing what to do, but whatever she did, the sand scorched her feet.

One could not blame her for venturing out on the sand. She was young, and she did no worse than many experienced travellers. Many have paid a grim price for starting out on a journey, a long journey, in far-away places where there was no chance of help if anything went wrong, in bitterly cold weather or in burning heat. At the beginning of such a journey it seems as if the journey could be made, albeit with discomfort. But, as time passes, the cold or the heat or the wind starts to intensify, or so one feels after long exposure to it. A sense of fear begins to overcome the traveller, till a state of utter panic overwhelms him. If he survives the journey, it is at the cost of limbs lost from frostbite or severe prostration from heat exhaustion. Thangi had been confident she could make the crossing, and if she had had a twinge of apprehension she had brushed it aside because she was young and she did not want to lose time.

She looked back to the place on the bank she had started out from, and she estimated she was a quarter of the way across. For a brief moment, she debated whether she ought to return, walk up river, and cross at the anicut. She looked up into the far sky at the thunder clouds, dark and menacing, and decided to press on.

Her feet were now beginning to blister, and her exposed skin to burn. The baby was squirming on her hip, and the top of his head and his shoulders were red and tender. He began to whimper.

She walked on, burning foot upon burning foot. The sand looked implacable. This river is a giver of life to the whole valley, she thought, but also a taker of it when it ran in a mighty flood

after the first deluge of monsoon and carried away people, houses, cattle and whatever else was in its way. All this the people accepted as a matter of course, and didn't stop their worship of the river as a goddess. But Thangi had not seen it so full of menace when it was not in flood.

She was at the half-way stage. There was no question, now, of turning back. She might as well go on. She had a terrible thirst, and her throat felt as if it was being held in a vice.

There was not a sound from anywhere. She could hear her own heartbeats and her breath. Other strange things began to happen to her. She couldn't focus her eyes, each of her legs seemed to want to go its own way, and worst of all, her head seemed to be leaving her body. She suddenly staggered and fell, but instinctively held the baby tightly to herself. The contact of her body with the burning sand spread the burning of her feet to all parts of her. She screamed, raised herself with her free arm, and started forward again.

She now went through the last series of motions of her own volition before the appalling thing happened. She tore the upper part of her sari off her body and threw it in front of her. She stepped quickly on to it and stood there for a few moments. It was hot, but not so hot as the sand. She stepped forward, turned, picked up the cloth, and flung it again in front of her. A sudden puff of wind, blowing across her, picked it up and carried it a little way upstream. Demented, she lunged after it, but it was already moving again. Now, crazed with fear, she started forward again.

Suddenly, she couldn't bear it any longer. Her head seemed finally to have left her. It was up there, deadened and brutalised by the searing heat. She shuddered, she moaned, and no longer knew what she did.

If there had been anyone watching from one or the other shore, he would now have seen a scene so terrible that no one would have believed him if he had recounted it later. He would not have known at once what dreadful thing had happened, because he could not have seen very well from that distance in the quivering, shimmering air. He would only have seen the woman throw down something from her hip and step upon it and stand on it. If he had been near enough, which he could not, he would have heard

a terrible, strangled, choked, muted cry, stopped as soon as it began, come from the thing on the sand, and seen it shrivel and curl and be still. He would have been reminded of a fresh young leaf being thrown on a heap of glowing coal, when it would have shrivelled and curled just like the thing on the sand. Of course, he might not have seen such a leaf at all.

If he had continued watching, he would have seen the woman step off the thing, turn and pick it up, walk forward a step or two, throw it down again, and step on it a second time. He would have seen this action repeated a dozen or more times before she reached the bank. And, if he had been watching from there, he would have seen, as the woman drew near, what it was she was throwing down and standing on and picking up. He would then have screamed as never in his life and vomited and fled long before she ever reached the shore.

Thangi's husband waited all evening, till he could wait no longer. He began to be afraid that something might have happened to her, an accident or she might have been bitten by a snake. There were many snakes in that countryside, cobras and kraits, and fatalities were not uncommon. He went to his neighbours. They scolded him for waiting so long. Together they lit their lanterns and started out on the path Thangi would have taken to the river.

They found her without much searching. Crossing the river bed where she had, the sand was now not unbearably hot, they fanned out at the far shore. One of them found her lying in a heap in a natural recess in the bank. Beside her, was the dreadful, mangled, burnt, black little thing.

Thangi was alive. Her husband picked her up gently. One of the men wrapped the little thing in his shoulder cloth. Then, they returned to the village, talking all the way, all except Thangi's husband, trying to reconstruct what might have happened. But they never guessed what had happened.

Thangi lived, but her mind was gone and she never spoke again. The events of that dreadful day lay like a pall upon that village for years to come.

Rosemary Timperley

Mandragora

Michael saw her only dimly through the dusty glass of the shop window, with its array of vases, ornaments, fans, figurines, snuff boxes and general bric-à-brac. She was sitting on a hard chair, her head slightly bowed, her hands folded in her lap, and there was an old-fashioned air about her, a modesty and demureness which Michael found charming. He was a shy, withdrawn person himself, and the brash young females who crossed his path nowadays scared him. But his sense of being drawn towards this young woman was overpowering.

Like a creature pulled by a magnet, he opened the door of the shop and entered. The bell gave a resounding ping, but the girl, whom he'd presumed was in charge, did not move.

A thin, white-haired man with bowed shoulders and haggard features came in from the back. 'Good morning, Sir. Can I help you?'

Still the young woman in the chair made no move.

'I'd just like to look around, if I may,' said Michael.

'Certainly, Sir. Take your time.'

Michael pretended to examine items on the shelves, thus gradually drawing closer to the young woman. He admired the smooth darkness of her upswept hair, the pallor of her delicate features, the graceful folds of her black, ankle-length dress. How lovely she was.

Now he was very close to her. His foot brushed against her skirt. 'I beg your pardon,' he said, daring to look directly into her face; and only then did he realise that she wasn't a living woman but a life-sized image.

'Good heavens,' he said, 'I thought she was real.'

The shop owner smiled. 'A lot of people think so when they first come in, and who's to say they're not right? Reality takes many different forms.'

Michael was standing as if spellbound. He whispered, 'Is she for sale?'

'I wouldn't sell her,' said the other man, 'but why do you ask?' and Michael, 'Because I want her. She's my ideal woman. Beautiful – gentle – quiet – I love her!'

'Good,' said the old man, 'then please take her. From the look of you, I am sure that you would give Mandragora a good home.'

'Mandragora?' echoed Michael, and the other, 'That is her name.'

Michael picked Mandragora up in his arms and carried her away as if she were a lovely but helpless invalid. He felt like a knight in shining armour bearing his dark lady to the security of his castle.

His castle was a rather shabby flat, but there was one good armchair, and here he placed Mandragora so that her head rested against a velvet cushion. He arranged her hands in her lap and stroked the folds of her skirt.

'Welcome home, my love,' he said.

Next day was Sunday and he stayed indoors all day, just for the pleasure of Mandragora's company. He talked to her, and she really did seem to be listening in a way that other people never listened when he talked. In the evening he played his record of Chopin Nocturnes, and he could feel her, motionless, absorbing the music. She was the perfect companion, no fidgeting, no interruptions, no sudden demand for a drink or a coffee. How different from the girls at his office whom he had entertained on rare occasions and found so restless and loud voiced that he was glad when they'd gone.

On Monday morning, before he set off to work, he said: 'Goodbye for the present, Mandragora. See you this evening,' and he kissed her cheek. It was as soft and smooth as real young flesh.

During that day, he brooded over what she was made of. Not wax, nor metal, nor plastic, nor even silk. Not any substance he could think of except – the impossible?

That evening, gentle and tremulous, he undressed her. She was naked beneath the long black dress. Her skin was perfect, except for two slight blemishes: a mole on her left shoulder, and an appendix scar.

These things told him that he had in his possession an example

of the taxidermist's art, and he remembered the old man saying: 'Reality takes many different forms.'

He must find out more about her! So next day, during his lunch hour, he returned to the shop. The old man remembered him and asked eagerly, 'How is Mandragora?'

'What I want to ask,' said Michael, 'is *who* is Mandragora?'

'One of those whom the gods love' was the soft reply.

'Why did she die so young?' Michael asked.

'Pernicious anaemia. There's treatment for it nowadays, a regular injection, but in those days there was nothing. I can see that you have realised that she is not merely a doll. Come into the back room and I'll tell you her history.'

They sat down in the old man's private quarters and he said, 'She was my wife. We were both young when we married. I adored her. When she died I couldn't bear to part with her. A funeral was arranged but, at great risk, I managed to steal her body from the coffin and replace it with a dummy. Then I set to work.'

'You set to work?' queried Michael.

'I was a taxidermist by profession in those days. Many museums in this country have examples of my work, mostly animals and birds, and I did private jobs for people whose pets died, some beloved cat or dog. I know the idea of taxidermy is macabre to some people, but not to me. I used all the skill and artistry I possessed to make her image out of her own flesh. She was my masterpiece. I never did another taxidermy job after that. It would have been an anticlimax. I became a shop owner instead, and here I still am.'

He paused, then went on, 'Mandragora and I lived here together in perfect serenity, but whereas I grew old, she did not. Lately I learned that I'm a sick man. Doctors warn me that I haven't much longer.'

'I'm sorry,' Michael murmured.

'No need to be sorry now. I'm not afraid of death, but I was afraid of what might happen to Mandragora when I was no longer here to look after her. That was why I placed her in the shop. I prayed that some sensitive young man, with his life before him, would come along and offer himself as her protector; and, like a miracle, you came. I knew straight away that you would care for

her as tenderly as I ever did.'

'I promise you I will,' said Michael.

'Thank you. Indeed, I feel that you may be able to give her more than I did, for you fell in love with her as she is, whereas my love was always shadowed by the memory of what she had been. Your devotion will be more wholehearted than mine.'

The bell in the shop rang. Both men rose. Michael departed and the other attended to a customer.

A few days afterwards, when Michael passed the shop, it was closed. The shopkeeper next door told him that the owner had died. So now Michael felt that Mandragora was truly his own and to her he would dedicate his life.

From then on, the madness of this dedication gripped him. Not that he realised he was mad. To themselves, the mad are normal. Madness is just as natural as sanity and the madman makes his own natural normality.

Michael thought of nothing but the beloved figure in his room. He neglected his work. He lost his job. He almost stopped eating, for Mandragora did not eat. He stayed with her for hours on end, rarely venturing into the outside air, and then only to buy flowers for her, until his savings ran out.

He poured into Mandragora all the passion of his love and devotion, a spiritual love, for he never touched her, except carefully to wash her, arrange her hair and her dress. With mounting excitement, he saw that his treatment of Mandragora was benefiting her more than the ministrations of her late husband, who had himself confessed that his love had not been wholehearted. Michael watched how her hair seemed to become glossier, her skin to lose some of its pallor, her lips to grow rosy.

In this euphoric mood, this ecstasy of self-sacrifice, he was not aware that he was destroying himself. He grew weak, but ignored the fact. He ceased going out altogether and was no longer eating anything at all. He drifted about his room, like a living ghost, talking to Mandragora, worshipping her with words, creating love poems for her alone.

One day his weakness reached a point of no return. He collapsed unconscious. When he came to for a moment, he crawled over to the figure in the chair and, for the first time, kissed her on the lips.

At that moment life drained out of him.

The room became utterly silent. Then there was the sound of quick, light breaths, growing steadier, deeper. Mandragora rose to her feet. From the pocket of her dress she drew a black lace handkerchief and placed it over the dead man's face.

Then, cheeks flushed, lips eagerly parted, she loosened her long hair so that it cascaded down her back. She made a few graceful, dancing movements, and then she went out for a walk in the sunshine.

It was good to be alive again!

Alex White

Chatterbox

Merilee felt pleased with herself. She had attracted the eye of the handsomest man in the room, and very soon, she was sure, he would make an attempt to know her. Her heart was beating fast, and she looked anxiously at herself for reassurance in one of the ornate mirrors on the wall of the restaurant.

No need to worry. She looked charming. Her fluffy hair made a pale gold aureole round her head. Her blue eyes under the false lashes seemed enormous, and when she smiled at herself her teeth sparkled white and even.

She was wearing a short black silk frock, which hugged her excellent figure and showed off her very white skin, black tights and very high-heeled shoes to flatter her beautiful legs.

Life was going to be exciting without Henry! She was glad she had left him. Even before he was unfaithful to her he had been an unsatisfactory husband. Everyone said she was wasting herself on him, but she had stayed for eight whole, boring years. Truth to tell it had suited her to remain with him for most of the time. He was predictable and pompous, but he was utterly dependable, and security had been what she craved for quite a while. He was rich too; or well off at any rate, and Merilee had been poor. He was upper middle class, and she was working class, and at the time of their marriage this mattered to her.

She had been extraordinarily pretty and had talked well because she had a good ear. Her parents were from the North. Her father was a miner in Mansfield near Nottingham and her mother came from Rochdale. She had five brothers and sisters, and her mother, who was never very well, was hard put to it to feed and clothe and look after them all. Merilee (christened Sheila, and invariably called Sheil by the family) was the eldest, and ever since she could remember she had hated the poverty and squalor of her home. She was sorry for her mother, but contemptuous too, and she

hated her father who usually spent the weekends blind drunk, and either torpid or violent.

When she was nine, an aunt who lived in Blackpool had taken her to a pantomime, and from then on she had resolved to be an actress. She'd had no idea that such bright lights, such entertaining people and such beautiful clothes existed, and if it was necessary to go on the stage to be among them all, then she was certainly going on the stage.

She took the school plays dead seriously, tried to cultivate a posh accent, read everything she could lay her hands on and finally went in for a talent competition while on holiday with the aunt in Blackpool, and won it.

After a long struggle she managed to land herself a grant to a London dramatic school. This astonished her family, her friends and neighbours, and herself, but it excited everyone too, and she became the heroine of the hour. She booked into the YWCA hostel in Great Russell Street, and for two terms worked well and hard. Then she met Henry at a party and her ambition changed. He came from a world which seemed to offer her more than the theatre, with the added advantage that, if she married Henry, she would never have to work for her living again. She married Henry.

For a time all went well, but he was never the most scintillating of lovers, and his job demanded that he should spend long hours away from her and travel quite a lot. This left her with too much time on her hands and she found it extremely dull. She didn't engage in affairs, however, which was a legacy from her North Country upbringing, and, had she not discovered that Henry had a girl friend, she might have stayed with him for the rest of her life. Before she left him, she extracted a sizeable amount of money in exchange for an easy divorce.

She moved to a charming little flat in Chelsea and pondered what to do for the future. Oddly, she believed that a real old-fashioned romantic love affair, which would be the mainspring of her life, was what she wanted most. She would be the glamorous mistress of a glamorous man, and the affair should be passionate, all absorbing, and long lasting – but how to set about it?

The set she had moved in with Henry provided no one of the right type. The men were all from public schools. They preferred their clubs, their jobs, their dogs, their country pursuits and their

food to all women, and their passions, unlike their lust, were seldom unbridled. No, she must look for someone more exotic; perhaps even foreign. Perhaps from the jet set? Italy? France? Spain? Or the Middle East? But how would she meet such a man?

She decided to go twice a week to expensive restaurants entirely on her own, and with great care and decorum select her mate. It might be difficult, but it was certainly worth a try. She was totally uninterested in other women, so she told no one of her plans, and though she found the business expensive, and once or twice downright embarrassing, mostly it was very interesting. She also enjoyed the food.

So here she was at the Etoile, eating cold lobster, which she adored, and drinking champagne, which she liked, and at last her goal seemed to be in sight! The handsome man whom she had attracted seemed to meet all her requirements, so far as she could judge without knowing him. Although three times already she had thought the same thing, and all three times she had been wrong. One man had been shocked at her proposal when she had taken him back home; one had been a transvestite and the ensuing scene had been very tiresome; and one had fallen in love with her and was still panting after her with flowers and telephone calls and letters, but he had bad breath.

A waiter with a note was standing at her elbow, and when she looked at him enquiringly he told her that Mr Abn-bin-Said remembered her well from the Embassy cocktail party and wondered if she would join him for a coffee and brandy when she had finished her meal. He gestured towards the man she had noticed and handed her the note which read, 'Please, oh please, most exquisite of ladies, grant your humble suitor this small request. I have fallen in love with you from the moment I saw you come into the restaurant, and if when you have allowed me to purchase you a coffee and liqueur and have conversed with me a little you wish to see no more of me, I shall quite understand. But most serene and exquisite of ladies, I shall always be in your debt that you have deigned to speak and drink with me.'

It was a slightly peculiar letter, but at least it was different, and she might as well give the invitation a whirl.

'Tell him,' she said to the waiter, 'that I also remember him from the Embassy cocktail party, and that I should be delighted

to join him.'

She nodded to the handsome stranger, and smiled rather graciously. He grinned enthusiastically, and looked extremely excited. Such an exaggerated display of feeling made her slightly uneasy. It seemed a trifle unbalanced, but at any rate she was away! What would the adventure bring her? The realisation of her hopes at last? She looked covertly once more at Mr Said, and believed that it might be so.

She didn't hurry, or look in his direction again, but when she had finished her lobster, she walked slowly and gracefully over to his table.

He sprang to his feet at her approach and pulled out a chair for her, which she approved, and kissed her hand, which she thought was a good start. He told the waiter to bring two coffees and two Fine Champagne brandies, which he said was his favourite, and added deferentially to Merilee that he was sure that with her obviously exquisite taste, the preference would also be hers. He then settled down to be charming and entertaining. He told her a fund of amusing stories, none of which were the slightest bit vulgar, but all of which made her laugh (which she considered quite a feat), then asked her to tell him all about herself. Drunk with flattery as much as with the third brandy, she complied. He listened apparently entranced, and when he smiled his teeth were as good as hers, and he gazed adoringly but respectfully into her enormous blue eyes.

When he finally insisted on seeing her home, then, changing his mind, asked her diffidently if she would do him the positively enormous favour of coming to his house for a night-cap, after which the driver would see her home in the Rolls, she accepted; though with an air of slight patronage, which seemed to impress him.

His house in the Boltons certainly impressed her. It was huge. She asked him how many rooms there were, and he shrugged his shoulders and said, 'Who knows? Perhaps a hundred rooms. Perhaps more' and when she laughed at him disbelievingly, his eyes flashed and he said coldly, 'But yes, it is so. You don't trust my word?' The drawing room into which he led her was at least sixty feet long, and furnished with magnificent antiques, and when he started to kiss her after yet a fourth brandy, she returned the

kisses with fervour. He didn't ask her to go to bed with him, but before she left for her apartment in Chelsea, he extracted a promise that she would dine with him the following Tuesday. There seemed to be no wife, no mother, no sister – in fact no woman in his life who might prove an obstacle to a serious romance – so she accepted.

On the Tuesday, after making love to her, he asked her to live with him; at least for a few weeks as an experiment. After the few weeks were up, he asked her to be his permanent mistress, and she agreed.

She never did get to know the entire size of the house however, because, except for the suite of rooms she and Abn used, all the others seemed to be locked. Abn gave no explanation, and she didn't care. The two of them had enough to be going on with, without the extra hundred or so, and she had discovered that Abn didn't like to be questioned. He had a very secretive side to his nature.

Apart from this he was all that she had hoped for and more. She never quite made out what he did for a living, if anything, or why he was living in England when his home was in the Middle East, though he had vaguely given family troubles as an explanation of this, and had added that just as she now never saw her parents, he never saw his. She didn't press him further.

Once he laughingly told her that he was 'kinky' for British blondes, which jarred on her, and once or twice he laughingly complained that she was a chatterbox, but he said that he didn't mind because it would make it easier for him to resolve his problem when the affair came to an end. This too she didn't relish, and assured him earnestly that she had determined to make him her lover for life. He had responded with a strange and very satisfied smile.

He often said how pleased he was that neither of them had what he termed 'encumbrances' who could spoil what he called the 'solitude' of their affair. He was a passionate and extremely possessive lover, and also quite astonishingly generous. He was evidently vastly rich; money seemed to be no object at all, and whatever she asked for she got; often in duplicate.

Her life with him was extraordinary, but she was fascinated by it. She was also fathoms deep in love. He also seemed to be

fathoms deep in love. It was almost too good to be true. The only times when there was even the slightest degree of tension or dissension were on the very very few occasions when she lunched in town with someone she had known previously, and the only row they had ever had was when she invited a friend to tea at his house.

‘But why are you so angry?’ she had asked him in amazement.

‘Because you are mine, and only mine, my chatterbox. No one else will ever take you away from me.’

‘Of course they won’t!’ she exclaimed. ‘But a girl I knew at school is hardly likely to try, is she?’

‘Did you show her over the house?’

‘Only my bedroom, the drawing room, the dining room and the kitchen.’

‘Not the attics?’

‘Why on earth should I? I never go there myself, and besides, they always seem to be locked.’

‘How do you know, if you never go?’

‘That’s why I never go. I never go to the basement, either. It’s always locked, too. I don’t even know how many bedrooms there are, and nor does Mrs Gallop, because I asked her.’ He seemed satisfied.

Merilee spent her time very idly, but she enjoyed it. Mrs Gallop, a tall bony woman with a squint and monosyllabic conversation, gave her her breakfast in bed at about nine o’clock, after which she bathed and dressed leisurely. Mrs Gallop did all the housework in the rooms that Merilee and Abn used, though from time to time Arab men, who seemed to be servants, busied themselves in the rest of the house. One of the rooms, Abn told her, was a private mosque, and this again she must never enter as she was a Christian and therefore an infidel. On rare occasions Merilee and Abn lunched at home on food cooked by the Arab servants, and very delicious it was too. Generally, though, Abn took her to good British restaurants, but never the same one twice if he could help it. He sometimes even took her into the country. In the afternoons he made love to her, or she lay down with a book and usually slept. In the evenings they ate a light supper of paté and toast washed down with good champagne, and that was followed by more love-making if they were in the mood. It was all Merilee had ever wanted, and for two years it seemed to be all Abn

wanted. Then he began to get restless. He called her 'chatterbox' rather more sharply, left her at home more often, and brought her fewer presents. She noticed it, but said nothing in case, by making a fuss, she made him angry enough to leave her, and she was still deeply in love.

One day he said to her, 'You are happy with me? You never wish to leave me?'

'Never!' she replied emphatically. 'I'd sooner die.'

He nodded. 'Good,' he said. 'That is what I wanted to hear. You must sell your house in Chelsea.'

'I let it ages ago,' answered Merilee, astonished.

'Now you must sell it,' he said sternly. 'You have no further use for it.'

'I don't know if my lease will let me, if my tenant doesn't want to go,' said Merilee. Although, it was true, she didn't need the place, it seemed silly to burn her boats so completely.

'May I see to it?' he asked politely.

'Of course.' She was reluctant, but there seemed nothing else she could do.

Three days later he came to her with a large dispatch case and said, 'Here is £150,000. It is yours. I sold your apartment to a friend of mine, and he always pays in cash.'

'I've never seen so much money!' exclaimed Merilee excitedly, giving him a kiss. 'What did Donald say?'

'Donald?'

'My tenant, Donald Evans.'

'He was quite happy. His tenancy is not affected.'

'Are you sure? Perhaps I should telephone him and have a chat about it.'

Abn looked thunderous. 'You do not trust me?' he asked ominously.

'It is not that, but—'

'But what?'

'It seems rather strange.'

'Why? We agreed you should sell. If you telephone this Donald I shall know you have no faith in me, and we shall have finished the affair.'

'Then I won't telephone,' she said, immediately and anxiously.

'Please don't!' he replied sharply.

A few days later he said, 'What did you do with the money?'

'I haven't done anything with it yet. Just looked at it,' said Merilee, and she laughed.

'That is very foolish,' he retorted. 'Give it to me at once, with a letter of authority, and I shall take it to your bank, now.' She thought he was looking at her oddly, and she felt nervous, but she said, 'Thank you,' and did what he asked.

He went away for two days and two nights, but telephoned her often. Once she thought she heard a girl's voice in the background, but didn't like to ask him where he was. From then on he was away more often, then one morning he said briskly, 'Now is the time for me to show you the greatest secret I have in the world. You shall come with me to the basement, and there you will see why you will be mine for ever. My servants have made a chat-terbox in the attic, and it is waiting for us in the basement.'

'I have no idea what you are talking about,' said Merilee laughing.

Abn joined in the laughter. 'You will understand soon enough,' he replied. 'In the basement is my greatest secret, and my greatest surprise for you. There are many boxes, and they contain all my loves, and all my treasures. I shall show you.'

He took her hand, and together they went to the locked door leading to the basement. Abn opened it with three keys, and Merilee, laughing again, said, 'You must indeed keep treasures down here if you need three keys.'

Abn locked the door carefully behind him without answering, then led the way down four shallow flights of stairs, which were well lit by wall lights. He switched on another light at the foot of the stairs, and Merilee saw that they had reached a vast hall with wall to wall carpeting, a large and comfortable looking sofa covered with enormous red velvet cushions – which had hundreds of little mirrors sewn on to them, reflecting the light, and sparkling like jewels – two big armchairs and some very beautiful rugs. On a kind of altar at the far end of the room, there was a trestle table-top which somewhat resembled an operating table, and scattered between the beautiful rugs there were dozens of long mahogany boxes, with brass fittings, and brass plaques.

Abn said, with an urgency she had never heard in his voice before, 'Do you like it?'

'It's astounding,' said Merilee, trustfully. 'What's in all these strange boxes?'

'My treasures. I told you.' He sounded terse.

'You said there was a box for me. Where is it?'

'By the altar.'

'May I see what's in it?'

'Nothing is in it yet. Soon it will be filled.' He indicated a chair.

'Sit down,' he said, waving a hand. 'I have much to tell you before I get down to work.' He himself reclined on the sofa.

'What sort of work?' she asked surprised.

'Sit down,' he repeated.

When she had obeyed, he said, 'It is you who usually talks so much. This time it is my turn. You see it is important that you should understand that when I have loved a woman, that love must never be violated.' Merilee nodded enthusiastically. 'Never will I allow someone else to enjoy the women I have enjoyed. There was once a Romanian woman called Vera Renczi. She too had this feeling as strongly as I, and she solved her problem. She, like me, kept all her lovers in her basement, though she used zinc coffins, not wood.'

Merilee opened her mouth to speak, but he put up an imperious hand and said sharply, 'Silence, Chatterbox! This Vera was hanged because she was caught. I shall not be caught because you have no one who will miss you – like all my other women – and this house is perfect for my requirements. Some said that Vera was insane, but this of course was ridiculous, and the court quite rightly didn't agree. She was as sane as I am. She was as fastidious as I am, and she was, like me, a sadist. It is in my attics that I enjoy that particular predilection. Here in the basement is the sacred place where I make sure that no one I have loved will ever leave me. I come here sometimes to remember and watch over my women. You, Chatterbox, I have loved, so I will explain to you in detail what I have planned for you.

'First I shall undress you. When you are naked we shall make love on the altar. Then I shall don my white medical suit (after I have strapped you down) and I shall sew your lips together with catgut. I shall sing during this operation, because you will be trying to scream; unfortunately I have never been trained as a surgeon, and I don't like noise. The basement is, of course, sound-

proofed as well as treble-locked, so no one will hear you, nor can you escape. After I have sewn up your lips, I shall dismember you, wrapping each part of you in plastic, and round each arm, each leg, each member, I shall put jewellery – the jewellery I have given you. You will not die at once, because I know how to cut women up so that they live quite a long time after their limbs have gone.

‘When you are dead, your box, named “the Chatterbox”, will be sealed down, and you will take your place with Shirley, who was the “Jewel Box”, with Annette, who was the “Mystery Box”, and with all the others, even Yvonne, who was the “Cardboard Box”. I didn’t love her, but even then I cannot let another man enjoy what I have enjoyed. It is an amusing name, don’t you think? The cardboard box, for a worthless woman! Now, any questions? I don’t want you to have one tiny doubt in your mind as to your future. You may say that I should be more generous with my women when I have finished with them, but you must admit I am generous to a fault with them while I am in love. You, and all of them, have sworn eternal loyalty to me. Women cannot keep such promises. They haven’t the strength, so I am saving you all from eternal perdition; and that, if you come to think of it, is a kindness.

‘Oh, one last thing. You have often asked me why I live in England, and not in my homeland. I was a prince in my homeland, and I was brought up to be a despot; to expect power, and to believe that every whim I had, should be obeyed. The time for despots is over, it seems. I killed too many women, and I was sent into exile. One or two dozen, maybe, would have been allowed, but I killed more, and this was frowned on by the new élite. I can never return, or I myself will be killed. Absurd, but that’s how it is, and that is why I am here. In this enormous house, which was once five houses, I am safe. So I enjoy myself in England.’

He had been speaking all this time with his eyes closed, in a sort of trance, and his rather podgy hands were folded neatly over his very slightly protruding stomach. When he had finished talking, he opened his eyes to await a reply from Merilee, but she was nowhere to be seen.

With an oath, he rose to his feet to look for her. He guessed

correctly that she would be trying to escape at the top of the stairs, and caught her easily. She fought with all her might, and begged to be set free, but he was far stronger, and explained gently that he was forced to kill her as he had fallen in love again, and the new girl was waiting to come in. 'So you see little Chatterbox, it is now your time to be dealt with, and I am looking forward to it quite tremendously.'

She was screaming and crying and struggling simultaneously. He took a rope and bound her to the altar, saying, 'I'm not a Christian, so it is for you that I give you an opportunity for self-sacrifice on an altar.' He tore her clothes from her and raped her, enjoying most of all that she was frightened out of her wits. Next he put on a white coat, and lifted her on to the operating table, where he sewed up her mouth, complaining that she was making it difficult by not staying still. He then carefully severed her limbs and wrapped them in plastic. He chided her for looking at him 'reproachfully' as he called it, and gouged out her eyes, then wrapped them up too, and laid her torso in the box. Although everything in the vicinity was covered in blood, he kissed her on the lips.

'The next time I kiss you, you will be dead,' he said seriously, 'but never mind. We've had fun, haven't we?'

Tiny mewling noises were coming from her. He listened intently, then said severely, 'I really believe you think I'm insane! Now that is very annoying. I have told you already that I am sane as you are.' He listened again, then said, 'Don't try to say any more, little Chatterbox. I find it tiresome trying to understand you. I shall see you in Eternity. I will come back down here in four days' time to see how you are progressing.'

Merilee at last lost consciousness, and Abn went up the stairs two at a time, singing 'For he's a jolly good fellow.'

It seemed to him appropriate, somehow.

Harry E. Turner

Special reserve '75

While it is generally accepted that 1961 was one of the best years for wine in the Bordeaux region, I, Gaston Sallebert, know better. Nothing on earth will ever compare with my own Château Sallebert '75. Oh yes, I know that set against the great names of La Mission Haut Brion, Domaine de Chevalier and Lafite Rothschild, the Sallebert family is small fry.

Our château, built by my bad-tempered ancestors in 1766, comprises a low turreted edifice with neo-Gothic additions, modest indeed when considered against the delights of Château Loudenne and its commanding views of the river Gironde, or the vaulting grandeur of the Lafite Rothschild house.

The estate at Sallebert is small and the workers sullen. I have never believed in spoiling the peasants – they only repay one with idleness and trouble. I live well, nevertheless, even after a thin season; and my predilection for young female company remains undiminished as I approach my sixtieth year. When all is said and done I am a contented man, master of my own destiny and answerable to no other. It wasn't always so and thereby hangs my tale.

I set it down here as the June sun slides behind the poplar trees and the evening crickets commence their metallic chorus in the long meadow that encircles the château. The estate is quiet, resting after a day of burning heat which promises another fine harvest. I am alone in my study with a good cigar and a bottle of that self-same '75 Graves that forms the basis of my extraordinary story.

In 1974 I had a brother, my elder by four years. From early childhood we were joined by an umbilical cord of hatred and jealousy. He was my parents' favourite, always indulged and fussed over by them and showered with life's advantages. True he was straight and tall, with fine hair and a clear eye, whereas I, mocked by cruel nature even in my mother's womb, have carried

the burden of the crook-back and the harelip.

After my parents' death in 1950, Charles assumed control of Château Sallebert, appointing me as his under-manager. This phoney appellation scarcely disguised the fact that I was to become little more than his clerk – a cut or two above the rank of scullery maid. I who had studied the art of winemaking with a judicious fervour here at the château while Charles gallivanted his youth away in Paris and London decked in fancy clothes and always with the finest of society's young ladies at his side. I who could discern the smallest nuance between a hundred Médocain vintages and pinpoint the source of a Graves even if it came from a vineyard less than a mile from any other! Thus thwarted I turned to lawyers to peruse my parents' last will and testament to see if such an unfair distribution of their estate was wholly in order. It was, and Charles set about his new responsibilities with arrogant enthusiasm.

Our disagreements which had always been legendary soon became the staple gossip among estate workers who usually sided with Charles in any row about technique, soil treatment, casking, racking – even label design.

In 1975 our mutual loathing boiled over in a climax of recrimination. He discovered me one summer afternoon making the beast with two backs with a sixteen-year-old wench from the village and, fearing a scandal, beat me soundly with an oak staff, laying open the flesh of my poor twisted back to the bare bone.

My insistence that the wench had been well paid for her sweating services fell on deaf and pious ears and I was obliged to relinquish my pleasures like some thieving peasant caught removing lead from the church roof. I swore not only revenge, but a solution that would rid me of his pestilential bullying once and for always.

A month after the beating, when my wounds had healed, I went to the village apothecary and bought a mixture of powders and solutions from which I prepared a powerful sleeping draught. This I hid in my room in the château under my embroidered cloth, until a propitious moment presented itself. It was, you understand, not enough merely to incapacitate my brother in a haphazard fashion, for my full plan was machiavellian in the extreme. The picking season was already upon us and each day saw the estate workers

staggering back from the fields with baskets of lush purple grapes which were dumped into the four great winepresses we kept in the main cellar. After extracting the juice and storing it initially in the huge oaken vats, the young wine would then be transferred to barrels in our first year cellar to begin the time-honoured process of ageing and racking. The '75, we knew, had all the hallmarks of being a sound wine, although it would not be fit for drinking until 1982, except to the uninitiated British who would be swilling it early and cackling ignorantly about its bouquet and its fine rich body.

I waited two weeks, with infinite patience, until the harvesting process was fully underway before making my first move. Then in the dead of night I crept to my brother's room where he slept soundly and emptied my sleeping potion into the carafe of water he always sipped upon first waking. Sure enough, when I rechecked at dawn's first light he was sprawled across the crumpled bed in a deep and deadly faint.

I cut his throat with my razor and swathed the crimson-pumping wound with layers of gauze. Then, I stripped his nightgown from his body and dragged him down to a part of the cellars I knew would be free of workers at this hour.

There I dismembered him with a butcher's knife, removing his ribs and as much of his bone as I could manage. Then I dumped what remained of him into the great winepress on a bed of uncrushed grapes. It was heavy work, shovelling in his liver and intestines, heart and limbs – even his brain which I tore from his skull after cracking it open with a bung hammer.

After a brief respite and a mouthful or two of the still chilled '73 – a robust year, but lacking in refinement – I piled four laden baskets of new grapes on to what had once been Charles Sallebert, covering his corpse completely.

The great winepresses of our château are operated by a giant screw, hewn from a single trunk of fine English oak. So well balanced and delicately cut is this device that hand operation is made relatively easy. Slowly I turned the screw with its leather bound wheel until the flat wooden press, stained dark purple from years of use, lay over the circular, steel-banded, receiving base. Beneath stood a deep oaken vat ready to accept the first pressing.

As the press began to crush the first layer of grapes a gush of

dark liquid splashed into the huge vat. Inch by inch I lowered the press, turning the wheel with long, hand-over-hand strokes until the flow of wine sounded like a gentle rain in autumn.

For nearly an hour, with many brief pauses, I continued to lower the press until the sinews of my arms stood out in corded knots and I was bathed in perspiration. My deformity had one small advantage, it had compensated me in a massive strength of arm and shoulder muscles. Once at a village fair I had crushed a goat's skull between the palms of my hands for a wager.

The last half turn of the screw caused the wood to squeak as it tightened almost to bursting point and a final splatter of wine told me that my work was nearly done. Releasing the screw I cleaned the vat with a long-handled shovel, piling the grapeskins and crushed, bloodless flesh of my brother into half a dozen tall trash cans which would then be dumped in an incinerator.

Cleaning up the stone-flagged floor where I had dismembered him took another hour. I tossed his bones into a sack (they were to be given to my dogs next day) and then I set about the most important part of my work. Creating ten barrels only, each carefully marked, that would hold a very special reserve of Château Sallebert '75.

Finally, as dawn lit the sky outside the château windows, I hosed myself down, burnt my clothes and returned to my room.

At seven-thirty I summoned the estate manager and told him that Charles had been required to travel to Paris on urgent, financial family matters and could be away a week or more.

Five days later I told all the staff that he had decided to visit America and tour the Californian vineyards with a view to purchasing a new strain of grape. They, gullible peasants, accepted this fiction without demur and after a further month I broke the news of his decision to stay in California for his health's sake – he did suffer from occasional bouts of asthma – and that I was the new master of Château Sallebert.

Eight years have passed and the '75 Special Reserve is ready for drinking – although to the purist it could do with another ten years to fully mature. So, dear reader, if you are dining in one of the great hotels in London or New York or Paris, among the gilt and mirrored splendour of the Ritz, the Plaza or the Georges Cinq, choose your wine with extra care.

There exist only three dozen cases of the '75 Château Sallebert Special Reserve – each bottle marked with a small gold 'c' in the right-hand corner of the label. The wine waiter should be instructed to draw the cork at least three hours before pouring and serve only at room temperature.

You will never taste its like again – that I can positively guarantee.

Rosemary Timperley

Fire trap

It was late at night. After visiting friends I'd missed the last bus home so was walking through deserted suburban streets. Then, as I was passing a number of warehouses and some derelict buildings, a fire broke out.

One of the warehouses suddenly burst into flames which rose with swift, cruel magnificence to the dark sky. I heard the roar of fire, the crackle of burning materials and, behind all that, shrill voices screaming in terror. The sound was horrifying, unearthly.

The place must have been occupied by squatters or down-and-outs, I thought; poor homeless ones, finding illicit refuge – and now this! Yet there was no sign of figures appearing at the fire-lit windows, no one trying to jump out of the rooms of flame, making those tragic leaps to the ground which one reads about when people are trapped in a burning building. Yet the screaming continued.

Futile for me to approach that inferno and try to help, so I ran at top speed to a telephone kiosk and dialled 999. I was put through to the fire service, gave my name, the address of the building, and added that there were people trapped inside.

After that I stood at some distance away from the fire, so as not to be set alight by burning debris which flew through the air. Shivering in the waves of heat, I still heard those chilling screams, but already they were diminishing, fading, dying. Why in God's name hadn't anyone tried to escape? Was I witnessing the scene of some macabre mass suicide?

Now I heard the welcome ring of fire engine bells. Nearer they came and nearer, drowning all other noise. Three engines arrived and then it was all go: uniformed and helmeted men springing down from the vehicles, setting hoses in place, preparing ladders, getting ready to fight the blaze with all that efficiency and courage

which is the firemen's trade mark. I just waited, watched, kept out of the way.

Later, when the fire was almost out and the men had gone inside the building in spite of suffocating clouds of smoke, I expected them to bring out pathetic corpses. Ambulances were lined up at the ready. But the firemen at last returned empty-handed. No bodies at all had been found.

Approaching one of the officers in charge, I said: 'I can't understand it. I heard people screaming in there.'

'You were mistaken, Miss. No signs of human remains at all. Plenty of burned dress material and that sort of thing, but definitely no people, thank heaven.'

'What was stored in that warehouse?'

'We don't know yet. We've traced the owner and he said, on the phone, that he rented it to a Mrs Challoner. He doesn't know what she wanted it for. He's getting in touch with her. Whatever she was keeping there, she's lost the lot.'

'How do you think it started?'

'No way of telling until we investigate. Faulty electric wiring most likely. That's usually the culprit in these old buildings.'

It was then that a car drew up. A woman got out and came over to us. She was middle-aged, very thin, dark-eyed, and her face was ghost white. 'I'm Mrs Challoner,' she said.

'I'm afraid we haven't been able to save anything, Madam,' said the officer. 'The building and its contents are a write-off. We did our best, came as soon as this young lady notified us.' He indicated me.

'You saw it start? What happened?' she asked.

I described to her how the place had simply gone up in flames as I was passing, so I'd called the fire service straight away.

'They were all in there,' the woman said tragically, 'my life's work, my life's love. I was going to start a museum, a pretty modern place where they'd be happy and comfortable, and where people could come to see and admire them. So precious they were! Some were old as time itself. All had fascinating background histories. Such a dreadful way for them to go!'

'Them—they—who are—I mean, who were *they*?'

'Punch and Judy puppets, ventriloquists' dolls, and many other kinds of puppets and dolls which I collected from all over the

world. I loved each and every one of them. They were my children!’

She broke down in tears.

‘Come now, dear,’ said the officer kindly. ‘It’s a bad blow for you, of course, but they *were* only dolls. It’s not as if they’d feel anything.’

‘How do you know?’ cried Mrs Challoner, and I went quickly away, afraid she’d start questioning me again. I couldn’t tell her that I had heard her ‘children’ screaming.

John H. Snellings

Flies

Katherine Morrow was smiling when she opened the back door and stepped into her small, but tidy kitchen; and for her, smiling wasn't an easy thing to do. Especially, when most of her time was consumed by a lonely and tearful state of depression. But, today, she felt good. It was the first time she'd been out of the house in weeks and it had made her feel vigorous and—alive again.

It had been such a beautiful day. The air was fresh and warm and saturated with the pleasing smells of summer. Even with the door closed, she could still smell the sweet aroma of roses from the garden next door and the distinctive odour of freshly cut grass from Mr Jameson's lawn across the street.

As she stood there, with her back pressed against the door, she closed her eyes, and for a moment those delicious odours revived the memories of her childhood. She thought of water-melons and picnics on Sundays, and of wading through the creek down at the old mill.

She remembered how she and her friends used to stay out of school and spend the whole day lying in the middle of old man Dickerson's corn field. At the base of the stalks the air was always fresh and cool and they would lie there, against the damp earth, giggling and talking and making big plans about their future.

Katherine enjoyed thinking about the days when she had been young. She never realised it then, but those had been the happiest days of her life. So happy that sometimes her memories seemed like they were only fragments of a long and wonderful dream. As if they really hadn't taken place at all.

Presently, Katherine sighed and put her shopping bag down on the counter, near the stove. Her smile faded as she noticed the opened jar of mayonnaise sitting on the counter. A spoon, half filled with a blob of yellowing mayonnaise, lay beside it, surrounded by a huge clutter of breadcrumbs.

Frowning, she suddenly realised that her husband must have come home early. She could always tell when he was around. There was always a mess she'd have to clean up. He never returned things to their proper place and that was one thing about him that irritated her the most. She had to go through every room in the house, cleaning and picking up after him like he was a four-year-old child.

Katherine screwed the lid back on to the mayonnaise and returned it to the refrigerator. She cleaned off the counter, then closed and put away the loaf of bread. Her smile was completely gone. She hadn't been home ten minutes and already she was sinking back into that dreaded state of depression.

It was all because of him, she told herself. She always felt better when he was gone. Not happy, but better. It was a relief just having him out of the house, not having to listen to him or look at him.

Katherine turned around and her heart sank as she saw Charles coming through the door, from the living room. Without any greeting at all, he tore into her.

'Where the hell have you been?' he asked.

She turned and filled the coffee pot with water, then placed it on the stove. She didn't really want any coffee, but it gave her something to do, a small excuse for avoiding him just a few minutes longer.

'Why weren't you home when I came in?' he demanded.

'I went shopping,' she said simply.

Angrily, Charles stomped across the room and stood beside her. He was a short man. Fat and bald, except for the thin band of grey just above his ears. He wore a sweaty brown T-shirt and his huge stomach drooped heavily over the top of his khaki trousers. Each time he spoke it jerked and quivered like a huge balloon filled with water.

'Shopping!' he yelled.

Katherine lowered her head, like a child caught at stealing candy.

'I didn't buy much, Charles,' she said, 'just a few things for—'

Charles grabbed the shopping bag and carried it over to the table. He opened it up and jerked out the orange and yellow towels.

'What the hell did you buy these for?'

'Because we needed them,' Katherine replied. 'The ones we have now are nothing but rags, you know that.'

Charles threw them down on the table.

'And what the hell's this? More fruit jars?'

He eyed her angrily.

'Six more jars! You bought twelve just three weeks ago! And a month before that it was twenty-four, and God knows how many it was before that! What are you doing, canning for the whole damned neighbourhood?'

'No—of course not. Just Betty and Mrs Peterson.'

'Are they paying you for it?'

Katherine was quiet for a moment.

'No,' she admitted finally. 'I just thought—'

'Then you're going to stop doing it! How many times have I told you? In this day and age, you never do anything for free!'

'But, they're my friends, Charles. I couldn't make them pay for something like—'

'Friends!' Charles laughed. 'There's no such thing as a friend, Katherine! When are you going to realise that? People that take advantage of you! People that want something from you, but will give nothing in return – that's what a so-called friend is.'

On the stove, the water began to boil. Katherine turned off the eye, then fixed herself a cup of instant coffee. Tears threatened her eyes as she carried it over to the table and sat down. She found it hard to believe a man like Charles Morrow existed. He was so cruel and heartless. So void of feelings, as if he weren't even human.

It had given her a good feeling, buying something new for the house. It was only a couple of towels, but it was something. Now, she was miserable again. Charles always managed to destroy her feelings, one way or another, as if he were obsessed with making her unhappy. She hated him for it.

Charles pulled out a chair and sat down across from her.

'You can keep the towels this time,' he said, 'but don't go spending any more of my money.'

Katherine looked at him soberly.

'I don't see why we can't buy some of the things we need,' she said. 'Why do we have to suffer when we have the money to buy

anything we want?’

‘Buy! Buy! Is that all you have on your mind?’

‘No! It’s not all I have on my mind. I just can’t understand why you won’t let me fix up the house and furnish it with the things a normal man and wife should have.’

Charles sighed heavily.

‘You women are all alike,’ he said. ‘The man gets out and works his ass off to put a little money away and all you wives want to do is go out and blow it in.’

‘Who’s talking about blowing it in! Have you taken a good look at this house lately?’

‘I see it every day don’t I?’

‘Look at the furniture we have. It’s so old and worn out, it’s falling apart.’

Deliberately, Katherine shook the table. Her coffee spilled out into her saucer.

‘See that,’ she said. ‘The legs are ready to fall off this table.’

‘It just needs a little repairing, that’s all.’

‘But, what’s the use of trying to repair this junk? It’s just not worth it. We’ve got almost twenty thousand dollars in the bank, why can’t we take some of it out and get some new furniture? Something worth—’

Charles slammed his fist against the table.

‘Hell no!’ he shouted. ‘We’re not taking any of it out! I’ve told you a hundred times, that money stays right where it is!’

‘But, we can replace it in a few months.’

‘We! Where do you get this “we” shit? I don’t recall you having a job. I’m the one that’s working all the time, I’m the one that’s putting the money in the bank, and I’m the only one that’s going to take it out. So just shut up about it. Understand?’

Katherine stared at him for a moment, then picked up her coffee cup. For just a second she felt a tremendous urge to throw it into his face. But, she knew it’d only get her beaten up – or worse. No, she reminded herself, she had something much better planned for dear, sweet, Charles Morrow – and, after this little episode, it would definitely happen very soon.

She put the cup down.

‘I’m going to fix some supper,’ she said coldly. ‘That is, if you don’t mind eating hamburgers again.’

Charles leaned back, scratching the swell of his stomach.

'No, it's all right with—'

Suddenly, Charles sat up. His eyes widened and darted nervously around the room.

Katherine stared at him.

'Listen!' he breathed.

Katherine knew what it was, even before she heard them buzzing somewhere around the window.

'Flies!' he screamed.

Charles pushed his chair backwards and jumped to his feet, his eyes frantically searching the kitchen.

'They're in here!' he muttered.

Quickly, he dashed to the cabinet and grabbed the fly swatter. He whirled around and stood, frozen to the floor, the fly swatter poised and ready. His hands trembled and sweat rained down his forehead.

Fear clawed through his mind as he spotted them swarming over the stove. They were huge. Larger than any fly he'd ever seen. The noise of their buzzing screamed into his brain like a fire siren.

Shuddering, he lunged forward, smashing out with the swatter. He missed and the flies buzzed angrily over his head. He ducked, almost screamed as one of them threatened to land on him. As if they sensed his fear, the flies buzzed around his head, diving, touching him and adding to his torment.

Desperately, he slashed out with the fly swatter, again and again, as he moved backwards against the wall.

'Katherine!' he cried. 'Help me!'

Without saying a word Katherine stood up, then walked over to the sink. She opened the cabinet door and brought out a small can of insect spray. Turning, she aimed it upward and sprayed the air for several seconds, filling the kitchen with a strong-scented mist.

The flies passed through the deadly cloud, then buzzed wildly and flew in small frantic circles as they lost their sense of direction. One by one, they dropped to the kitchen floor, dead.

Katherine glanced at the flies, then at her husband. He was leaning against the wall, sweat pouring down his face and arms. His eyes were wide and staring. His huge stomach jerked convul-

sively as he gulped for air, trying to ease the pain in his chest.

'You can relax now, Charles – they're dead.'

'Did—did you—get all of them?'

'There were only three of them. Honestly Charles, I don't see how you can be so frightened of flies.'

Charles dropped the fly swatter and staggered back to the table. His hand clutching at his chest, he dropped heavily into his chair, and sat there trembling. His face was pale and lifeless.

'Did you see how big they were?' he asked.

Katherine put the spray can back into the cabinet, then turned and looked down at the dead flies again. Frowning, she grabbed the broom and swept them out the door.

'They were a little large, weren't they?' she replied, scornfully.

'I've never seen a fly that big before.'

'Maybe they're horse flies.'

'No, even horse flies aren't that big.'

'Well,' Katherine said, 'flies are flies, what difference does it make how big they are?'

'Difference!' Charles shouted. 'If you were in my shoes you'd see the difference. I can't even stand an ordinary house fly, let alone flies that get that big!'

Katherine shook her head slowly.

'You should do something about that crazy phobia of yours, Charles. I've never heard of a grown man being afraid of flies the way you are. Just because you had that bad experience with them when you were a child, it doesn't mean you have—'

'Shut up!' Charles demanded.

'All right – I'll shut up. But, you're going to let this go on until you end up in—'

'A nut house! Is that what you're going to say?'

'No, Charles. I was thinking about your heart, you know how weak it is. You keep letting things like this bother you and one day your heart won't take it any more.'

Slowly, Charles stood up.

'You'd like that, wouldn't you?' he said.

'Charles, don't be silly. You're my husband, I wouldn't want anything to happen to you.'

Charles eyed her for a moment.

'I don't feel like arguing with you any more,' he said, rubbing

his chest. 'I need to go lay down for a while.'

'Yes, Charles. I think that's a good idea. You need to get some rest.'

Charles lumbered off to the bedroom and Katherine went back to the table and sat down. She sipped thoughtfully at her coffee, relieved that Charles was no longer in the room. Deep inside, she was smiling – almost laughing.

It always amazed her, the way Charles was so terrified of flies. To see him reduced to a screaming, blubbering idiot was almost unbelievable. But, fun. She had enjoyed every minute of his torment. It made her feel good to see him suffering for a change. There had been many times she had watched him go through his panic-stricken frenzies. Each time, she watched and waited, hoping that stubborn heart of his would quit beating. But, it wouldn't.

Katherine sat at the table for a long time, waiting for the sound she wanted to hear. Finally, the noise of her husband's snoring broke the thick silence.

She stood up, then walked across the kitchen and opened the door to the basement. She went back to the counter and picked up her shopping bag then carried the fruit jars down the narrow stairway. At the bottom, she turned and stuffed the bag behind the stairs, then, groping under the bottom step, she pulled out the small light bulb she'd kept hidden there.

She never left the bulb in the socket. She didn't want Charles to find the little surprise she had for him, and as long as the basement was dark, she didn't have to worry about him coming down here. He was too scared of running into some flies, and in the dark his fear would only be magnified, making it almost unbearable.

Katherine laughed silently. If he only knew the truth, she thought. Feeling her way through the darkness, she found the step-ladder and dragged it to the centre of the room. Carefully, she climbed up and screwed the bulb into the socket. The room filled with light and she stepped down, squinting.

She walked across the room and moved slowly between the tall, wooden shelves. They stood away from the wall and she walked around them, studying the jars and smiling proudly.

The fruit jars filled the shelves from top to bottom. There

wasn't room for even one more jar and Katherine walked back and forth between the shelves, pondering the situation. It was time for a transfer but, there was no more room.

Inside their glass prison, the flies buzzed and bumped angrily against the lids that held them.

'Now stop that!' Katherine said. 'I know you want out. But you'll just have to be patient. It won't be long now.'

She picked up one of the jars and held it up in front of her. The huge flies were packed inside with barely enough room to move around. She turned the jar upside down to give the ones on the bottom a little room to move.

'Looks like I'm just going to have to turn you loose tomorrow,' she said. 'I just can't keep you up any more.'

Katherine put the jar back on the shelf. She remembered when she first started collecting them. It had started with only a handful and now she had thousands.

At first, it had all been for fun, mixed with a little revenge, of course. It was one way she could really get back at her husband for making her life the miserable mess it was; and it *had* been fun, setting just a few of the flies loose at a time and watching Charles go into his little fits. Running through the house, shrieking like a maniac, begging, pleading. She had enjoyed every single minute of it.

It soon occurred to her, though, that those little shock treatments, as she liked to call them, could give Charles a heart attack. Especially if there were hundreds of flies all at once. Yes, that would be more than Charles could stand; and it would be a perfect way of getting rid of him. Then all the money would be hers, to do with as she pleased. Not only the money in the bank account, but the fifty thousand insurance as well.

The more she thought about it, the better it sounded. So she decided to collect the flies, breed them and raise them until she had more than enough to do the job on Charles.

She began her little project with enthusiasm. She had never been very fond of flies. She had always considered them to be the filthiest insect alive. But, for what they were going to do for her, she soon overcame it.

The first dozen or so hadn't been too difficult to handle, but they multiplied faster than she had anticipated. The most difficult

part of all was transferring the newborn flies to different jars, but, as time went by, she grew more and more used to it and it didn't bother her as much.

She fed them everything she could think of. Flies are not very particular. But it had been by accident that she discovered what they liked best.

At one of their feedings she had brought them some raw hamburger meat that was on the verge of spoiling. But, during the feeding she had dropped one of the jars, shattering it on the floor. Knowing her husband would be home any minute, she hurriedly picked up the huge chunks of glass, cutting several fingers and the palm of her hand. She got rid of the glass and tried to finish the feeding before she went upstairs to bandage her hand. She knew there wouldn't be time later.

As she dropped the meat into the jars it became saturated with her blood and the flies went crazy over it. They swarmed over it and sucked it up in a matter of minutes. At first, Katherine had been stunned by their eagerness and their horrible taste for blood; but, if that was what they wanted, she decided, that was what they were going to get. After all, they were going to do her a great service. So, why not feed them something they really enjoyed?

From then on, she fed them nothing but her special little mixture – and it hadn't been easy. Drawing her own blood had been painful but necessary. She watched with pride as her flies grew fatter and larger with each passing day. Charles was certainly in for a big surprise. Knowing what would happen to him made it all so easy for her.

Presently, Katherine sighed wearily and walked back to the step-ladder. In a way, she hated the thought of turning them loose. After months of caring for them and feeding them and watching them grow so big and energetic, she felt a little responsible for them. Even close to them. But she had to do it. For herself. Her future.

Katherine picked up an old rag from the floor then climbed the ladder once again and removed the light bulb. She returned it to its hiding place then pushed the ladder back against the wall.

She climbed the stairs to the kitchen, stopping for a moment at the doorway. She could still hear her husband snoring from the bedroom. With a sigh of relief, she crossed the floor to the table

and sat down.

Her stomach felt a little queasy and she could feel her nerves beginning to react to all the excitement and anticipation. Tomorrow, she told herself, it would all be over. She could do what she wanted, go anywhere she wanted, and she'd have plenty of money to do it with. She'd never have to want for anything again.

She'd do it, she decided, when Charles took his nap. There wasn't a Saturday that went by that he didn't take a nap on the sofa. It was like a ritual with him. It was always at the same time, the same place, and the same situation. He'd sit there, drinking beer until he couldn't hold another drop, then lie there, like a huge walrus, blubbing and snoring for hours.

This time, though, she'd have a little ritual of her own. She'd bring the flies up when he went to sleep and turn them all loose and let them do their job. She could already see the look of horror on his face. It was really going to be something.

However, right now, she told herself, it'd be good to get some rest. Tomorrow was going to be a very busy day. There would be a lot of things to do after it was all over. The house would be full of people – police, doctors, family, friends. . . .

Katherine stood up.

It was going to be rough, she knew that. But, it would be worth every nerve-racking minute of it.

She turned off the kitchen light then walked down the hallway to the bedroom. Charles was still sleeping soundly. Hoping he wouldn't wake, she walked softly as she moved around the bed and switched on the lamp. She quickly undressed and put on her nightgown then turned down the covers and climbed into bed.

She rolled on to her side, away from the beer-scented thing beside her. With a heavy sigh, she closed her eyes and waited anxiously for the sleep she needed to help her relax and be strong for tomorrow.

Charles woke to the sensation of something crawling over his face and arms. Gasping, he bolted upright in bed, his eyes wide, his hands brushing frantically at the horror that covered him. After a few moments, he realised it was only the sweat trickling from his body.

He sank back against the head-board, relieved.

It was hot in the room. Slowly, he became aware of how still and heavy the air was and that it was getting hard to breathe. He sat up, wiping the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand.

He thought of opening the windows but decided he just couldn't take the chance. The screens were on, but they were rotten and full of holes; and one thing he didn't need was flies pouring into the room.

What he needed, he told himself, was the electric fan from the basement. Throwing his legs over the side of the bed, he stood up slowly and walked sluggishly down the hallway to the kitchen. He didn't particularly care for the idea of going down into that basement, but it was better than lying in the bedroom suffocating to death.

He turned the kitchen light on then walked over to the basement door. Yawning, he opened it and reached inside, fumbling along the wall for the switch. He found it and flipped it up.

Nothing happened.

He tried it again. Off . . . On . . . Off . . . On.

Still nothing.

Charles cursed to himself and stood there, staring into the pit below him. The light from the kitchen stretched down into the darkness and ended abruptly at the bottom of the stairs. Beyond that, three black walls.

He swallowed hard, wondering if it would be worth it. It'd only take a few minutes to locate the fan. Surely he could stand it down there for that short a time.

Abruptly, he turned back into the kitchen. He searched the drawers and cabinets for an extra bulb, but all he could find was a large box of matches. Frowning, he mopped the sweat from his face. He had to have that fan, he told himself. He'd never be able to go back to sleep without it. It was just too hot.

Suddenly, he went back to the doorway. He opened the box of matches and removed a handful of them, then slowly descended the stairs. He held one of the matches against the side of the box and struck it when he reached the last step. The air smelled of mould and mildew but it was cool against his sweating body. It was a relief from the pressing heat of the bedroom.

Charles held the match out in front of him and stepped into the darkness. As he moved across the floor, weird shadows from the piles of junk and rubbish loomed above him and danced eerily along the walls and ceiling. Somewhere behind him, he heard the scurrying of a small animal.

The fan was going to be much harder to find than he thought. He never realised there was so much junk down here. Of course, it'd been a long time since he'd been in the basement. The last time, he remembered, was when he'd built those shelves for Katherine.

The match burned down to his fingers and he dropped it, then quickly lit another one. He fumbled through the junk, moving from one box to the other, cursing.

If he could only remember where he'd seen that fan, he told himself.

He struck another match.

It was then he noticed the shelves. They had been moved from where he had put them. Stupid woman, he thought. He told her to leave them alone and not to use them until he painted them and fixed them to the walls. It was just like a woman. They always do just the opposite of what you tell them.

Charles moved forward between the shelves. A hundred tiny flames flickered back at him as the light from his match reflected off the fruit jars. Startled, he glanced at the shelves, from top to bottom. He had never seen so many jars in one place.

Suddenly, anger surged through his mind as he thought of all the money she must have spent on them – and she'd done it all behind his back. That made him even more angry.

The match burned down. He quickly replaced it with another. As he stood there, looking at the jars, he wondered what she had canned this time. They were filled with something black and he hoped it wasn't blackberries. He hated blackberries.

He moved forward and held the match closer to the jars. His mouth dropped open and his eyes grew wide with horror. Something in the jars was moving. They looked like—

It hit him then, like a blow from a sledge hammer! They were flies!

Gasping, he dropped the match and stumbled backwards in the darkness, bumping the shelf behind him.

The shelf rocked.

Blindly, he reached out and tried desperately to pull it back, to keep it from falling. The huge jars toppled off the shelf and fell heavily to the concrete floor. Glass shattered and the room was filled with the angry buzzing of thousands of flies.

Hungry flies!

They swarmed around him, clinging like leeches to his face and arms.

Terror-stricken, he tried to get away but crashed headlong into the other shelf. The fruit jars rained down on top of him, bursting open as they hit the floor.

One of them shattered against the side of his head and he felt something cold and slimy oozing down his neck and shoulders. Horrified, he thought of the newborn flies – the maggots!

Screaming, he brushed at his neck and stumbled towards the stairway. Glass slashed into his bare feet, making walking impossible. His mouth opened in agony, only to have it filled with the blackened horror.

He could feel them buzzing against the roof of his mouth, sucking on his tongue, easing down his throat. Gagging, he scooped at them with his hand. A thick pulpy substance covered his fingers and dripped down his chin.

A wave of nausea overtook him and he bent over, vomiting. The room seemed to spin around him and for a moment, he had the feeling that he was floating. He fell to his knees and the glass splintering into his legs brought him back.

In agony, he cried out and covered his face with his hands. Through his fingers, he looked up at the light from the kitchen. A sudden spark of hope raced through his mind. If he could only get Katherine down here, he thought, she could help him.

His arms flailing against the flies, he called out as loud as possible.

‘Katherine! Help me!’

He crushed the flies in his hands, trying desperately to keep them away from his face.

‘Katherine!’ he screamed.

Suddenly, the door slammed shut, throwing him into total darkness.

For a moment, he was stunned. Then, slowly, the truth came

to him.

'Katherine!' he begged. 'Please—don't! You don't know what—'

The pain in his chest was sharp and sudden. He sucked in his breath as he felt his heart swelling, straining in an effort to keep on beating. Then, exhausted, it shrank back – and stopped.

Dead, Charles fell forward impaling his face and neck on the jagged pieces of glass. Blood spurted across the floor.

Instantly the flies covered his body like a huge black shroud, their tubular tongues probing, digging, sucking. They crawled over his face, into his mouth and nose, across his wide and staring eyes. The basement was still and silent as they eagerly feasted on the huge morsel.

Upstairs in the kitchen, Katherine stood with her back pressed against the door. A thin smile slowly spread across her lips.

It hadn't worked out the way she had planned it, but she had a feeling it was just as effective. Of course, she'd have loved to have seen the look on his face and watched him trying to escape them. But, she couldn't have everything, she told herself.

He was dead, that's all that mattered.

Katherine turned around and listened intently at the door, her eyes widening as if that would make her hearing more effective. But there was nothing to hear.

Poor Charles, she thought. He should never have tried to climb those stairs carrying all those jars. Not in his condition. His heart just wouldn't take it.

Katherine's smile widened. She knew exactly what she would tell the police. It was so simple. No one would have any reason to believe otherwise.

Tomorrow she'd tell them how Charles went to the basement to get some fruit jars. That he'd had a heart attack on the stairs and fell. That would explain all the broken glass.

First, though, she'd have to go down and open all the windows to let the flies out. They had served her well and they sure deserved their freedom.

Katherine felt like laughing.

Things sure were going to be different, she told herself. From now on, she was going to enjoy life and make up for all that she'd

missed out on. She could buy anything she wanted, spend as much as she wanted and there would be no one to yell at her. No one to tell her what to do. It was going to be great.

Katherine turned off the kitchen light and walked back to the bedroom. She decided to sleep, until daylight at least, then get everything in order before she called the police.

Sighing contentedly, she climbed into bed.

In the basement, the flies left the empty body of Charles Morrow and buzzed wildly around the room. They had completely drained him of all blood and fluids leaving nothing but bones with a pulpy covering for skin. But their thirst and hunger had not been quenched. Not even dented. For now, they were fatter and larger than before.

Driven by their need for blood, they swarmed and gathered at the top of the stairs. Like a huge, thick cloud they hung there, against the door, waiting anxiously for the someone they knew would come.

And soon!

J. J. Cromby

Masks

The killer wore a mask. No one ever realised, not even his victims; they thought his was a face just like any other – but that only proved how ignorant they all were. If he had needed any further proof that they weren't worthy of life, then surely that was it. Take this one sitting next to him on the bus now. Janet. She was good looking, in the harsh and gaudy sort of way that most women of her sort were, and clever enough he supposed – but she couldn't see through his mask at all.

It had been so easy picking her up. He sat in the bar for a while, watching everyone. It was an imposing place, with plush velour seats and trendy meaningful pictures on the walls – though how you could call those random blotches of colour 'pictures' he just didn't know. The lighting was low; 'discreet' was their term for it – so as you couldn't see the filth and lust written across people's faces. The killer couldn't be misled so easily, though – he saw through the luxury to the decadence and corruption beneath. Yet all the while he kept his own secrets safe behind the mask.

Amidst all the preening and pairing, he sat alone and watched her. She sat on a stool by the bar, sipping at a drink. The low-cut lilac dress was obviously meant for a younger woman than she. Her make-up was heavy and bright, but did not entirely conceal the crow's feet around her eyes. Her hair was long and blonde, untied. She spoke to a few men as they stood beside her to order drinks – they smiled in a faintly embarrassed way, shaking their heads to whatever question she asked them, and she too was alone.

He went across to the bar, keeping up the charade, and leant confidently across it to order a drink. He looked casually around, copying the indifferent air of the other men he had seen, and caught her eye. She smiled at him, far too brightly for a stranger,

and he stepped closer to her, playing it cool.

'Can I get you a drink?' he asked her, smooth and slick like the rest. He saw the way she eyed him up and down speculatively before she replied, and he hated her already.

'Gin and orange, please,' she said, then whilst he ordered the drinks she took a small mirror from her handbag and hastily checked her garish make-up. He sat on the bar stool next to hers.

'I'm Dave,' he said.

'Janet. Thanks for the drink.' Her voice had an awful whining quality to it that made him wince. He wouldn't gag this one first, he decided – he'd cut her tongue out – yes, that would be much more interesting.

They talked inconsequential nonsense for a while. Coloured lights flashed on and off, music pounded with primitive rhythms, weak and dirty men swarmed around women like flies around offal. He felt tainted by it all, and was able to endure it only by thinking of what was to follow. Eventually, after two more drinks, she said:

'Do you want to come back to my place?'

He raised his eyebrows questioningly – it was a gesture he'd picked up observing a man in a bar not far from here, and he was proud of how natural he made it look – but he did not reply.

She continued: 'Twenty quid, that's all – and you can stay the night . . .' There was almost a note of pleading in her voice, and he bowed his head as though in consideration of her offer; but he was struggling to keep the mask in place so as to hide the contempt he felt for her.

So here they were, on the all-night bus to her house. She thought he was just another customer, another slice of easy money for an hour of ridiculous fumbling and thrusting in the dark. Inside, behind the mask, he smiled to himself as his hand found the carpet knife in his pocket and began to stroke the cold metal hilt.

Janet wiped the misted window with the back of her hand and peered out. A Chinese take-away slid past outside, its green neon lights melting in the rain on the windows. Turning to face him, she spat her chewing gum tidily on to the floor so that she could speak. He longed to slam her stupid painted face into the window until both smashed, but for now he would have to restrain himself.

'This is our stop now,' she said.

She got to her feet and staggered drunkenly to the front of the bus, lurching unsteadily as it swayed from side to side. As they jerked to a halt, she giggled and slipped on the wet floor, clutching at his arm for support. It enraged him, and he longed to use the blade there and then, but the bus driver was watching them and winking at him knowingly. He wanted to explain, so that the man knew he was not with her for the wrong reasons, but that wasn't possible. He turned his face away quickly and stepped down on to the slippery pavement.

The heavy rain had stopped abruptly and the night sky was clearing, but the streets still shone with its debris. Water lay everywhere, like litter: glowing amber beads afloat in puddles were reflected street lamps. The air was sharp and fresh, cleansed by the rain. It made him think of the knife in his pocket, and how he could use that to cleanse – it was a satisfying thought.

Janet had not spoken since they got off the bus. She led him to the crossroads where they paused to let a car go by, hissing. A shimmering green stain on the black glistening tarmac at their feet flashed yellow, then became blood so that they could cross – quite appropriate, he thought.

'Looking forward to it, I see,' she said suddenly.

'What?' he said, then realised what she was talking about.

'You're smiling,' she said.

'Yes. Yes, I suppose I am.' Bitch! He hated her even more for making him slip up – for a second there she had been inside the mask. He'd have to be more careful – over-confidence was dangerous.

She led him down a drab side street – just the sort of place you'd expect, he thought with loathing. The worn paving slabs were slick with rain, her high heels slithered and clattered as they walked. Sickly brownish light from the old-fashioned streetlights made the rows of terraced houses into a sepia print.

'It's just down here now,' she said.

'Good. Tell me – why do you do this?'

She looked at him in surprise, her lips black in the dim light.

'What?'

'Go with men like this?'

'I don't think I've ever been asked that before. Most men are too busy telling me about their lives and problems to worry about mine.'

The mask smiled a smile full of charm. 'I'm not most men,' he said.

'Hmm. Well, it's the same as anything else really – I'd starve if I didn't. Why do you ask?'

'Oh, no reason – just curious.' He always asked them that, just to find out what excuse they gave, and there it was, the usual feeble lie – 'I need the money'. Scum.

They paused before a nondescript house whilst she fumbled in her bag for her keys. The sightless windows wore faded net curtains like an ageing whore's make-up – very like it, he thought, as she stepped up to open the door and the harsh light from the street lamp picked out the irregular blotches on her cheeks.

The hall inside was dark and swallowed her. He hesitated on the threshold, suddenly uncertain, and a disembodied white hand reached out of the darkness to take his arm.

'Come on – we haven't got all night, you know,' her voice said, surprisingly close because he could not see her. He looked briefly up and down the street, then followed the hand into the darkness, clutching habitually at something in his coat pocket. Too right we haven't got all night, he thought. The door swung silently shut behind them.

A piercing bright light burned into his eyes as he woke up, making his headache worse. Through half-closed eyes he could see a naked bulb hanging above him like an accusation. He tried to sit up, but couldn't move. He didn't know why not, and struggled to lift his throbbing head and look around him. He saw that he was naked and tied securely to a bare metal bed-frame with thick leather straps. What the hell . . . He had vague, half-formed memories of something moving in the dark, something hard striking him, but he didn't know when or where.

A door opened behind him.

'Ah, you're awake,' Janet said. He went still and cold inside at the sound of her voice, and jerked ineffectively at the straps that held him.

'Filthy bitch,' he hissed, 'let me go!'

'Sorry, that's not possible,' she said. He threshed against the leather as she knelt beside him.

'It's funny you know,' she said conversationally, 'you asking

me why I pick men up.' Something in her hand began to buzz loudly as she spoke, and real fear suddenly filled him.

'I told you I'd starve if I didn't – I wasn't lying.' She raised the electric carving knife, took off one of his fingers, and began to chew.

The bath

Relaxing in a deliciously hot, deep, soapy bath and feeling happy and indeed, lucky, Melita was so far trapped in contented daydreams that she only came back to reality as the chime of the doorbell gave its third peal. Supposing that James, her husband of two years to the day, had forgotten his key and was home early to surprise her for their anniversary, she excitedly leapt, dripping, from her haven.

'Is that you James?'

'Sorry, love, I don't seem to have my key,' was the reply.

Still dripping wet, she grabbed her silk robe that they had bought on their honeymoon in Taiwan, and rushed to the door.

'James you do look awful, didn't the deal go through?' He shook his head.

'Sit down,' she said giving him a kiss on the cheek, 'I'll get you a whisky.'

'I think I would rather have a brandy.'

Wiping the dust from the bottle of wine, she paused just for a moment. Never in the three years that she had known him had he drunk anything but Scotch, except for wine with dinner and a pint of beer for Sunday luncheon. The news surely must be bad.

Using their best crystal glasses, she poured a gin for herself and a large brandy for James, handed it to him, together with his post, which he usually picked up as he arrived home.

'Do you want to talk about it?' she inquired. He shook his head, stared at her blankly and then at the letters, still unopened.

'Later,' he whispered, referring to them both. 'You get back to your bath'.

'No, it's all right, I had just about finished anyway.'

'I insist,' he commanded.

Never having seen him like this she knew she must return to the bathroom. She felt vaguely frightened. This was certainly not

like the husband who had left the house that morning. Slipping off her robe, with just a quick admiring glance in the mirrors which covered the walls from ceiling to floor, she glided back into the blue foam. What can have happened that made James so silent, she wondered. After all the deal was not that important. An accident to his new Saab, maybe? Anyway she would find out soon enough, they never kept secrets for long.

Occupied with pleasant thoughts of what to wear, she wondered if she had enough food and drink for their twenty or so guests. What was her present to be; although, she recalled, she hadn't seen a package. She did so want that beautiful amethyst pendant in the jeweller's shop in the new antique market.

Maybe five, or even ten minutes had gone by when there was a definite knock on the door.

'Come in James, it's not locked. Are you feeling better now darling?' She turned round to face him and froze in terror.

James was standing in the doorway, stark naked, except for a leather bag slung over his left shoulder. His eyes completely vacant and staring. He slowly approached the side of her bath, glancing for a moment at himself in the steamy mirror.

Melita began to realise that something was very wrong. She made to grab her towel and escape from the bath.

'Not so fast Melita Mel,' he crooned, and pushed her back into the water with the strength of a demon. 'I have not begun yet!'

Melita tried to speak, but nothing came from her dry, trembling throat.

'You don't understand, my love,' he went on. 'Do you? But never mind, your fears will double my pleasure. I have waited all my life for this moment. Very patiently I have kept my deepest secret. No, perhaps you shouldn't know why I am doing what I am going to do. Only *what*.'

She began to shiver and tears trickled down her cheeks and into the blue sea that was, only a few moments ago, so comforting.

'*Why* James?' she sobbed, knowing now she was in grave danger. '*Why*?'

'Not *why*,' hissed his cruel voice. '*What*.'

His hands reached into the leather pouch and pulled out what seemed to be a surgeon's scalpel. To her horror it was.

'I have rehearsed this, time and time again,' he reassured her.

A grin now firmly fixed on his vacant face.

'Now, you mustn't struggle, it's important to make as small a cut as possible. This must be perfect. As perfect as you. You will only feel a brief, if intense pain. I must not injure your beautiful body. Soon you will look so, so beautiful. So perfect, so tranquil in your cream silk coffin. All those lovely flowers, roses, lilies, carnations, even orchids. Yes, I will give you one dozen orchids to rest on your feet.' He grasped her foot and kissed it tenderly. She almost slid, mercifully, into the deep water. 'These pretty little feet,' he gasped as he caressed the other foot, plunging it back into the water.

Their eyes met: hers lost in fear, his in delight. He clasped the nape of her neck and pulled her towards him, 'A first kiss,' he urged, forcing their lips to meet. The unfamiliar lust passed from his lips to hers and almost stifled her, but she managed to pull her uncontrollable terror into some form of shape. She knew escape was impossible, the devil that had possessed him was ten times stronger than a delicate, female form. She began to try and reason the past events. Why had James changed so? This was like a stranger who was about to take her life away from her. Was the fear of death worse than death itself? What had he meant about a 'first kiss'. This surely was a stranger, but she knew, only too well, the familiar contours of his body. *What* was happening?

She tried to wrench her head away, only to feel his masterful hand pull her head back into place. A timely scream echoed around the room, followed by a desperate companion, which was halted by a frothing gurgle. Blood gushed from her lips as the knife was being pulled slowly across the back of her head, from ear to ear, carefully following her hairline. This being accomplished, contented he slid away softly and crouched on the floor. At last Mel's world had fallen into a welcome darkness. . .

A key turned in the front door and it burst open. There was a tinkling of champagne bottles in a plastic carrier bag.

'Mel, my darling, you will never guess what I have bought you for our anniversary. Mel?'

James closed the door behind him and saw the bathroom light was on. He walked towards it. Seeing the door was ajar, he pushed it open. At the sight of the nightmare before him he froze. The

horror of the scene before him registered with premature awareness. 'Oh! My God! Mel!'

The thought flashed in his mind to take the scalpel, which was still in John's hand, and administer an avengeful blow. The loathsome scene was too great for even his fine physique. The delights of his rather splendid luncheon turned sour in his stomach and welled up into his throat. The sight of the red foaming bath, with Mel floating on the surface, eyes fixed to the ceiling, was more than even he, James Hetherington, could control. He retched into the washbasin. John his identical twin brother was crouching, childlike, on the bloodstained thick-piled carpet, swaying from side to side, dripping spots of Mel's blood.

James rushed to the phone, dialled 999, pondered, then replaced the receiver. Redialled.

'Is that Professor Sinclair? Yes, it's James Hetherington. Yes. I have found him, but this time it is bad, very bad. You had better come over immediately.'

He returned to the bathroom. He would never forget the words coming from John's lips, 'Pretty Mel, you're mine now, no one can take you, not even horrible, older brother James. I was born second and always came second. Not now. Pretty Mel, pretty . . .'

Nicholas Royle

Time to get up

Brian Farquhar worked as a clerk in an accountant's office. The work he produced was good and it satisfied his employers. The only trouble was that Brian was very often late for work in the morning. The reason for this was that Brian had great problems getting out of bed. He never wanted to get up when the alarm went; and just lately his problem had got considerably worse.

On the evening of 21 February Brian stayed in and read a book. His book was Diderot's eighteenth-century *Encyclopedia* translated from the French into English. A hefty volume which kept Brian occupied all evening. He even took it to bed with him and read some more pages until his drooping eyelids forced him to put it down and switch out the light.

Brian dreamt he was sitting at one end of a wooden bench. The bench didn't appear to be resting on anything. Brian felt oppressed by the atmosphere around and above and underneath him which was orange one minute and grey the next. He felt tiny and powerless to do anything about the mounting pressure. It was becoming unbearable when a bell sounded and to Brian this signified that everything was going to be all right.

Finally the persistent ringing of the alarm clock woke Brian. His half-opened eyes flared with rage at the accursed clock. He had to stop its noise. He couldn't stand it.

His groping hand grasped the first solid object it came to. It was the mighty tome which Brian had been reading the night before. He lifted it above his tousled head and hurled it straight at the alarm clock. There was a loud crash as impact was made. The glass face smashed first and then the clock tumbled from the shelf to the floor where the poor quality of the clockmaker's workmanship revealed itself. The poor clock fell apart into its component parts. But Brian didn't see this. He had gone straight back to sleep as soon as the ringing had stopped.

Brian was ten minutes late for work that morning. He blamed British Rail for this. Mr Jenkins, Brian's employer, informed him that he should be prepared for the inefficiency of the railways and that his pay for that day would be docked accordingly.

On his way home after work Brian did some shopping. He bought a baby electronic alarm clock, then he bought a pair of heavy walking boots from the army and navy surplus shop. He dropped in at a café for his tea then spent the evening walking around the streets in his neighbourhood. This was how Brian chose to take his exercise so it was sensible to buy walking boots for the purpose.

That night Brian went to bed particularly tired. He dreamt that he became very small and was sinking into something vast and soft and suffocating, either a giant armchair or an enormous woman, he didn't know which. He was just reaching suffocation point when the mass around him yielded and formed itself into hundreds of bald alien creatures which bleated, in time, a single interrupted note.

Brian had to pick off bits of sleep which had encrusted on to his eyelashes and cemented them together before he could see where the beep-beep noise was coming from. He saw the little alarm clock on his low bedside table. It was chirping away like a clockwork sparrow. He had to stop its noise. He couldn't stand it.

In one movement, extraordinarily well co-ordinated for the time of morning, Brian slipped a foot into one of his new walking boots and swept the clock on to the floor with his hand. Then he brought the mighty boot crashing down on the little clock. It crunched underfoot and stopped beep-beeping. Brian took the boot off and went back to bed.

After work that day – for which he had been seventeen minutes late, the blame falling on London Transport – Brian went shopping again. One of his colleagues at the office had lent Brian a cassette tape of fairground organ music but Brian didn't have any means of playing the tape. So with unusual foresight he decided to kill two birds with one stone. He went into a hi-fi audio shop and asked to look at their radio-cassette players with built-in alarm clock. They had three. Brian chose the one with silver knobs and red lettering.

That evening Brian decided to do a job he had been meaning to do for some time. He had a picture of two ducks in a pond which needed hanging on the wall. With his tape of fairground organ music playing in the background Brian tried the picture in different places so that he could see where he wanted it. Eventually he decided to hang it just to the right of the heating pipe which ran vertically up the wall. He got the only hammer he possessed from out of the shoe box, where it lay in the bottom of his wardrobe. It was a larger hammer than one would normally use for such a job. Nevertheless Brian took a nail from the plaster tin marked 'Nails' and drove it into the wall ten inches to the right of the heating pipe. Putting the hammer down on the window ledge by the bed Brian took the picture and hung it on the nail. He stood back to admire his handiwork and yawned an expansive yawn. Time for bed, he thought.

Brian did not appear in his own dream that night. It was similar to those of the preceding nights in that something small was being oppressed by the atmosphere. In this case it was a silver teaspoon which was being oppressed by darkness all around it. It may have been that in some curious way the teaspoon represented Brian, for the dreamer was anxious for its fate. The pressure of the darkness remained constant until a motor-racing car flew past the spoon at great speed. Immediately the pressure increased. It increased still more as another car sped past, which was followed by another. The cars kept on coming and gradually they described a circle around the spoon. One car would rise then dip and the car behind would follow suit as if there were fixed hills and valleys in their invisible track.

The radio-cassette recorder had been in the cassette mode so that instead of the alarm coming on at the appropriate time the fairground organ music had started to play. Brian groaned as the cars in his head melted away. Unable to open his eyes he sat up and his right hand touched the hammer on his window ledge. His fingers closed numbly around its wooden handle. He had to stop the noise. He couldn't stand it. He lifted the hammer and swung its heavy iron head into the gleaming new radio-cassette recorder. The red letters buckled and melted and the silver knobs either flew off or sank under folds of beaten metal. Brian dropped the hammer and went back to sleep.

Brian was thirty-seven minutes late for work that morning. He told Mr Jenkins that he had witnessed a road accident and had been delayed talking to the police. Mr Jenkins didn't believe him and told him that he was not going to get a very satisfactory wage packet that week.

After work Brian felt like a drink and so he dropped into one of the pubs near the office. After three gin and grapefruits Brian retrieved some of the predatory daring he had known more of in his youth. He slipped off his bar stool and slid around an oak beam and hopped on to another stool. He offered the mousy-looking woman, next to whom he had manoeuvred himself, a drink. She accepted and Brian turned on the charm he thought he might have lost. After a few more drinks Brian proposed dinner and Sarah accepted. They had the best that Pizzaland had to offer and Sarah was persuaded to have a few more drinks. In fact she no longer needed much persuading – and she readily accepted Brian's lisped suggestion that she should come back to his place.

Brian decided to show Sarah his prized scrapbooks containing his collections of pictures of fishes and trains. In honour of Sarah's presence he got out a biscuit tin full of cuttings which needed trimming, and he got to work with his big scissors which were very sharp. But Sarah had other plans. She took the scissors off him and put them down where, unbeknown to her, the radio-cassette recorder had met its fate not seventeen hours earlier.

They went to bed and Brian opened up pathways of pleasure to which he thought he no longer had the key or the right of entry. Not once did it occur to Brian that he had omitted to replace the alarm clock.

Brian dreamt he was in a tunnel to which he could see no end. As he walked, the tunnel moved; if he stayed still, the tunnel stayed still too. He walked and the tunnel undulated like a hollow snake. The walls were pulsating, and occasionally little jets of flame would emerge from tentacles which took form in the soft mass of the ceiling and walls. Brian wasn't afraid. He was enjoying the sensation of the ride which the tunnel was giving him. Suddenly he could see in the distance an end to the tunnel. There was a soft pink glow. Then there was a sound coming from the end of the tunnel. At the same time the soft pink glow became a blazing red furnace. The sound was what might be produced if

all the different sirens in the world were activated at once and channelled through a set of human vocal chords. Brian put his hands to his head and screamed.

Then he woke up.

'Come on, Brian, it's time to get up,' she was saying as she shook him.

His eyes snapped open and saw the glint of the dawning sun flash on his scissors. He had to stop the noise. He couldn't stand it. Brian took the scissors and plunged them into her throat. Blood issued forth like a fountain. She was emitting the most horrifying strangled screams. Brian wiped the blood out of his eyes and, opening the scissors in traditional fashion, proceeded to cut away at the flesh of her throat until she was quiet.

That morning Brian would be considerably later for work than usual.

B. Seshadri

An immaculate conception

According to Hindu beliefs, the full-moon day of every month is associated with the celebration of a religious function. One such important day is the full-moon day of the month of Chitra. Just as other people make resolutions on New Year's Day, the orthodox Hindus make pious resolutions on this day.

The same beliefs have also established that Yama, the God of Death, employed under him a scribe named Chitragupta. The scribe's duty is to record the doings and thoughts of every human being, good as well as bad, right as well as wrong, for reward or punishment after death. When the day of reckoning came, the soul of the dead would be led to the judgement seat of Yama for pronouncement. The account would be read and the balance struck. Rewards and punishments would follow.

Bansilal was no exception to the generality of orthodox Hindus in making resolutions. He was one of the most sincere of people, and each year he made a great number of resolutions. The fact that he broke most of them soon after didn't stop him from making a new crop the following year with just as much sincerity as before.

Religion was the most powerful influence in his life. He lived in a village, it was almost a town, where he was the professional moneylender. This was a proper occupation, because he was a bania by caste. It was also an essential service, and was so recognised by all. The village, or town, was only eleven miles from Varanasi, the holy city, and the river Ganga, the holiest of all rivers, on the banks of which the great city stood.

Bansilal's orthodoxy was in great measure centred on temple worship. He was brought up in a community which revolved round the activities and celebrations at the local temple, which was dedicated to a number of gods in the Hindu pantheon. Bansilal believed implicitly in the gods and goddesses and in the powers

orthodoxy claimed for them. His beliefs did not modify or mellow as he grew older. He never grew to regard the idols in the temple as anything but reminders of the eternal verities that they symbolised in various ways.

He went on trips by ekka to Varanasi, at the rate of about twice a month. He was highly regarded because of this activity. It was thought that he made these trips for ritual baths in the Ganga, which he sometimes took, and for worship at the great temples of the city, which he did without fail.

On his return home, he talked a great deal about the temples and the river, so that no one had any doubts that all his time in the city was occupied with worship and ritual baths. In fact, they were not the only purposes of his visits, not even the main ones, although when he worshipped at the temples, he did so with great sincerity; but he could have worshipped the same gods in the temple in his village.

Varanasi is a city famed for other things besides its holy temples and sacred river. Its pleasure houses were the delight of the rich, the connoisseurs, the jaded and the dilettantes, and the variety of the diversions offered in them was legendary. Bansilal liked his worldly pleasures very much, and saw no conflict in his enjoyment of them with the strictly religious life he led at home. Just to be on the safe side, he paid Brahmin priests to conduct elaborate prayers in the village temple, for they would not enter his house as he was a man of lower caste, when they absolved him of all his sins which he did not enumerate. The priests were in the habit of assuring him, each time before they started, that they thought the ceremonies were unnecessary for a man of his character, but, of course, they added much merit to his account with Chitragupta. They did not protest too hard, lest he took them at their word, and then they would lose the fees he paid them. Bansilal was a dutiful family man, and he thought that these and other religious ceremonies were necessary to keep his house and family free of all evil influence.

The problem was that, apart from his free spending on his chosen pleasures, and the most delicious of them cost a great deal, he was inordinately fond of gambling. Sadly, he was not a good gambler, and in times of crisis he panicked. This in no way affected his taste for or pursuit of gambling.

The only way he knew of recouping his losses was to charge even higher rates of interest on the monies he lent. This he did. He didn't think he was doing wrong, for he had no sympathy with those who came to borrow. It was their own fecklessness and inability to manage their affairs that led them to him.

His only son, who was nineteen, had been married two years ago. The girl, now sixteen, came from a neighbouring town. She had brought a handsome dowry, in cash and in jewellery. The cash Bansilal had taken, as was proper, for allowing her entry into his house and giving her a desirable husband in his son. His wife had taken charge of the jewellery, and allowed the girl to wear a piece or two on her visits to the temple and on festive days.

Bansilal was heavily in debt. His creditors in the city were pressing for settlement, and the miserable returns on the monies he lent in the village, or so he thought now in his predicament, would never enable him to pay off the debts or continue his visits to the city. He would not dip his hands into the capital his father had accumulated before him because, if that went, he would have nothing, he wouldn't even have a profession. He began to think he had been cheated at the time of his son's marriage, and the girl ought to have brought much more dowry. After all his son would one day inherit his father's house and wealth, even though that day might be far away. But he was stuck with the girl.

If the girl had been barren, there would be justification for looking around for another bride for his son. The law provided for divorce these days, and what better cause for divorce than barrenness? If that was not enough, he could rely on one of those smart lawyers in the city to obtain the judgement he wanted. It was well known that the judiciary was not what it was. Then, he could have got himself another daughter-in-law. He would have been more careful the second time, about the size of the dowry.

He reminded himself, though, that the girl was not barren, even if she had been for a whole year and a long time afterwards. He had said to himself then, in anger, that if she was not a mother soon, she would not justify her existence. He himself had been responsible for the fact that she was now no longer barren. A barren wife cast embarrassment upon her husband, her parents, and her parents-in-law. Orthodox Hindu custom demanded that a man have a legitimate son at the earliest possible moment after

marriage. The lack of a son meant eternal damnation for the man, because it was the son who performed proper religious ceremonies at and after the death of the father, upon which depended the welfare of the departed spirit.

So, when the girl showed no sign of producing a child, during which Bansilal had consuiled many astrologers and performed just as many ceremonies of propitiation to the gods, he took the last resource available to him. He sent her on a pilgrimage to one of the great temples in the city. It was not a pilgrimage in the sense she had to go great distances in serious discomfort, the two indispensable qualities associated with pilgrimage, but all the solemnities and religious rites appropriate for such an occasion were scrupulously observed. Finally, when he had put her, with the gifts she was to make to the gods at the city temple, on the ekka, it was with a sense of elation of a mission achieved. For he knew the manner by which their wish for a child would be granted. It was not proper that he or his son should accompany her on such a journey, so it was only a female attendant who went.

All prior arrangements at the city temple had been made by Bansilal during one of his last visits to the city. So, the girl was expected. The gifts were eagerly received by the priests who, to maintain the honour of the shrine, were carefully selected before induction to priesthood. No new brethren were admitted who were not in their prime and had proved themselves.

The sacred tree in the temple courtyard was hung with hundreds of little bags, marks of thanksgiving from the women who had their wishes fulfilled. Each bag contained an assortment of auspicious items like betel, slivers of coconut, *kumkum*, turmeric, and so on. Around the roots of the tree, lay a thick mat of short, black locks of human hair. These came from the satisfied women who had borne children and who returned to the temple a year later carrying more gifts and the first crop of hair from the child's head.

Bansilal's daughter-in-law was required, by custom, to bathe in the sacred temple tank and put on new clothes and adorn herself before entering the temple. All this she did. Once inside the sacred precincts, she was required to stay there overnight. She had the guidance of a priest assigned to her, and she had to pray, beseeching the presiding deity for a son, and perform numerous

rites. She was then allowed to retire. She did everything that was required of her.

In the morning, she had a tale to tell her priest of what befell her under the veil of darkness.

The priest hailed his reply.

'Give praise, O daughter, it was the god.'

Everyone at the temple understood all about it. The supplicant's mind was imbued with the utmost piety during all of the proceedings, and whether a young wife like Bansilal's daughter-in-law understood equally well, it is impossible to say.

When she returned to Bansilal's house, no one asked her any questions. It was considered inauspicious to ask, a lack of faith in the deity's intercession. Bansilal knew very well what happened. The family were content, including the husband.

Whatever the girl thought of the experience in retrospect, conditioned as she was to the tradition and ideal of womanhood which taught her to regard her husband as her god on earth, she had a genuine problem in distinguishing one god from another.

She became pregnant, of course. The family was overjoyed, and endless thanksgiving celebrations followed. Bansilal was satisfied there would be a son for his son, to continue the family.

That was the case, until now. As his debts grew, so did his doubts. Perhaps he had done grave wrong. When the girl had not conceived of her husband, perhaps it was a sign that the gods were not pleased with the marriage. He had, of course, consulted many astrologers, who knew his inclinations as all good astrologers must, and they had unanimously favoured the marriage. It so happened that, of all the offers Bansilal had received, this alliance promised to bring the biggest dowry. As for his son, he was only a lad, although he was big and strapping, and he had no say in the matter. His one duty, for the present, was to ensure that his child-wife became with child, a duty he tried to discharge with avidity, clumsiness, and some savagery.

Bansilal now contended to himself that the astrologers, who were known to make mistakes, must have been wrong. For, had he not had clear indication of the displeasure of the gods? Any girl would conceive of a strapping lad like his son. Yet, this one, his own wife, hadn't after nearly two years of marriage; and he, Bansilal, had been forced, blindly it seemed now, to send her to the city.

The days passed, and as he was no longer able to continue his visits to the pleasure spots in Varanasi, and as his debtors began to chase him even to his village, when he had the greatest difficulty in explaining to his wife who these new visitors were, his doubts began to be transformed into certainties. He was convinced he had committed great wrong. He had somehow to regain the favour of the gods. No, not somehow, but by undoing the wrong he had done. If he failed to act, the grandson who would be born to the girl would be clearly accursed, and his family destroyed. He trembled as he thought of the judgement seat of Yama.

He kept these thoughts to himself. The girl grew big with child, and he could not look at her without distaste. That son of his was a fool.

He now started to make arrangements, carefully. He announced that in true orthodox tradition, he would have a *dhai* attend to his daughter-in-law when she was brought to bed. Some of his less orthodox friends protested. It was known that *dhais* were dirty, and the risks from infection were great. Surely, Bansilal was aware that doctors knew a great deal more about these things in these days. *Dhais* were still employed only in remote villages by the poor and the ignorant.

Bansilal simulated great anger at these protestations. He had his answers ready. He reminded his critics that in the Hindu code, a woman in childbirth was ceremoniously unclean and contaminated all that she touched. That was the reason why *dhais*, who were themselves of the unclean, being of the untouchables, had traditionally attended women in childbirth. The *dhais* were experienced, descended in families and had a long tradition. You only have to look at India's population, he laughed, to see if they were efficacious or not. In any case, he had no choice in the matter. As an orthodox Hindu, which he hoped each of his critics was too, he could do nothing else than employ a *dhai*. He reminded them he at least was a scrupulous observer of Hindu religious tradition. His friends did not pursue the argument.

So, the oldest and best-known *dhai* in the district, who lived in a village of untouchables some ten miles away, was sent for. When she came, she stood a long way from the house to establish she was properly beyond the line of taboo. She could not come any nearer, for the present, for fear of contaminating the house and

its occupants. Conversation with her was difficult not only because she stood so far away but also because she was half-blind and nearly deaf. However, Bansilal was satisfied she was the one he wanted to minister to his daughter-in-law in the most delicate and dangerous moment of her life. It was now essential to talk to her in private. He arranged for her to call again after nightfall.

When she came, he had her taken to the farthest corner of his compound, by the back wall beyond which there was only scrub-land. He dismissed the servants and followed her, without getting too close to her for fear of contamination. He conducted the conversation that ensued from a distance, but adroitly and to purpose.

What was said and signalled between them, only they knew. Bansilal's wife was watching from an upstairs window, and certainly he flashed a torch and put down some money on the ground. Certainly she saw the bag come forward, squat, search with her claws and grab what was on the ground. She assumed an advance payment had been made for the *dhai's* services.

Bansilal had allowed no preparations to be made for the baby's coming, as that would be taking for granted the favour of the god who had given the child. But he let a broken-legged and ragged string-cot be taken to a shed in the compound where the confinement would take place, to avoid any contamination to the house. He had also allowed some soiled rags to be tossed into the shed for the *dhai's* use. The servants had, of their own initiative, provided a supply of cow-dung which the *dhai* would use to sanctify the shed and to staunch any bleeding.

When the pains began the girl was moved to the shed. An ekka, which was co-operatively owned by the untouchables who lived just outside the village, was hired and sent to fetch the *dhai*. She came, clothed as always on such occasions in the rags she kept for the purpose. If they were infected and reinfected from a succession of diseased cases that had come into her practice, she knew nothing about it. She certainly had no knowledge of contagion or that there could be anything like a bearer of multiple contagions. But, even if she had dressed herself aseptically and conducted all further operations equally aseptically, in this particular case it would have made no difference.

She was shown to the shed. Servants of the house watched from

a distance. She went through the acknowledged motions of the *dhai*. She plugged the small window on the side wall of the shed with straw and refuse. This, the servants knew, was to stop fresh air getting into the shed, for fresh air gave fever to a woman in childbirth. She lit a tiny paraffin lamp without a chimney which she had brought with her, and as it smoked villainously, she took it into the shed. She called for charcoal, and when asked what it was for, she said it was for placing underneath the patient on the cot to speed the birth. As she picked up the ladle of glowing charcoal where the servant had put it before moving hastily away, she tossed upon it a handful of powder which burst into a huge tongue of flame. The watchers knew it was for warding off the evil eye.

The family waited on the front verandah of the house. Bansilal looked calm, his wife showed signs of anxiety which she suppressed for fear of rousing his anger, and the husband just sat and looked. He had been in a bad mood for some months after his father had forbidden him to approach his wife.

The servants returned to their tasks in the house. One of the women, a know-all, began to tell them of what the *dhai* would do if the delivery was long and difficult. She would knead the patient with her fists. She would stand her up against the wall and butt her with her head. She might prop her upright on the floor, seize her hands, and shove against her thighs. Or, she might lay the patient on the floor and walk up and down on her body. She might use the medicinal balls she would have with her, balls of hollyhock roots or quince seeds or cloves or peppercorn or plain rags and thrust them into the uterus to irritate and hasten the event. If she was a great *dhai*, and this one certainly was, she would use balls of scorpion stings or snake fangs, which were especially efficacious. Her listeners looked at her with open mouths.

The woman went on. If the patient was hot, the *dhai* might cool her with applications of fresh cow-dung. If the patient was cold, she would use hot ashes. When all was over and the child born, she would cut the umbilical cord with a sharp nail or a piece of tin or broken glass. The end of the cord might be dressed in cow-dung or burnt with hot charcoal. The *dhais* knew just what to do in any eventuality. When it seemed the woman had finished,

the young men among the servants said a prayer for themselves and were glad they were men, not women. The lady of the house who happened to look in was incensed at this gathering of servants, and with a powerful volley of abuse, sent them about their tasks again.

There was not a sign from the shed for the next hour or so. Even Bansilal, who had shown remarkable calm between eating platefuls of sweets and drinking cups of tea, was showing signs of impatience.

At long last, the shed door opened. The *dhai* emerged. The word got round and the servants came pelting from the back of the house. At the sight of her, with gore on her hands and bloodstains on her face, there were exclamations of fright from the women. Even the men blanched. Bansilal's wife screamed.

The *dhai* approached, but stopped at the prescribed distance. There was no discernible expression on her face or any emotion in her voice as she spoke.

'Lord,' she called, looking towards Bansilal, 'I have done my duty, but the fates willed otherwise. Both mother and child have gone to heaven.'

The servant women let out shriek upon shriek and began to beat their breasts. Bansilal stood up, and admonished them sternly. His wife began to shake and sob.

'Let the woman speak,' said Bansilal, loudly. 'If that was God's will, let it be. But let us hear her say that everything was done properly. Now, woman, speak, and tell us.'

'Lord,' said the *dhai*, quavering, 'there were demons as the sounds of the sea in that womb to stop the child from being born. The gods were offended, lord, by a great sin committed by the mother in her last birth, and it is ill business to offend the great ones. But I did everything to protect the family. I rubbed pepper into her eyes that the soul may be blinded and not find its way back again into this house. I stretched out her arms and drove nails through each palm into the floor. I thus pinioned the soul that it may not rise and wander, vexing the family. And the girl died as she should, lord, calling to the gods for forgiveness for those black sins of a former life for which she was suffering. I thus fulfilled the rituals of my calling. It was for the best, lord, for clearly the mother was accursed and the baby would have been

accursed if it had lived. May the young master find another bride, and may the gods—'

'That's enough, woman, enough,' shouted Bansilal. 'Now take this money and go. Go, and never come into my sight again. Go, go.'

The hag backed away, and a servant took the money Bansilal gave him, went a little way towards her, and threw it on the ground. The woman rushed forward, even as the man ran back, bowed low, grabbed the money and scurried away as quickly as her palsied legs would carry her.

What went on in the shed in that hour before the *dhai* emerged from it was known only to her; and she wasn't going to tell. Bansilal had no worry on that count. He closed his eyes for a few moments, apparently in prayer. His wife had given herself over to unrestrained grief. The husband just sat there, and no one could say how he was affected.

Bansilal now issued a series of peremptory orders on the rituals and ceremonies that would be required to be performed on that day and the following days to cleanse the house of the evil that had befallen it. The funeral itself would be short, and the bodies would be taken away before the end of the day to the cremation ground, there to be cremated to the chanting of hymns by Brahmin priests. He ordered that sandalwood was to be used for the cremation, for whatever his daughter-in-law might have done in a former birth, there was a question of prestige, and he would have sandalwood.

When the servants had been dispatched on their several tasks, and his wife escorted by the women servants to her room, there to be consoled by their ministrations, he sat down and closed his eyes again, though not in prayer. When it is all over, he thought, he would set about making arrangements for a new marriage for his son. If he handled things wisely this time, he might be able to resume the even tempo of his life once more. He sorely missed his bimonthly visits to the city.

Ian C. Strachan

Death of a council worker

Of course, the new computer was blamed, afterwards. Computers are poorly equipped to defend themselves against accusations of error. The one that had been installed at Minsterton Town Hall continued to store and retrieve its coded information, impassive and uncaring, just as it had done before the death of Raymond Arthur Bedford.

Bedford could never have been described as outstandingly clever. When he left school at the age of fourteen he had recorded consistently poor performances in all subjects: his Headmaster's final written comment was – 'Little academic ability but hard working and almost painfully conscientious. Good natured and quite popular. A manual, non-skilled job would be the most suitable.'

That year, 1950, Raymond started work as an employee of Minsterton Urban District Council in the Parks and Highways Department.

He was engaged in sweeping up the fallen leaves on the pathways of Roselea Cemetery one chill October morning thirty-three years later when a car swept past and stopped at the door of the chapel. The neat pile of leaves he had assembled danced in its wake. Bedford, sighing, was too busy collecting them together to notice the two men who entered the building.

'This,' the older of them was saying, 'is the vestibule. You see there is a Book of Remembrance, a phone, provision for mourners' outer clothing, hats, and so on to be hung.'

'Yes, yes, very well appointed,' said the other, whose name was Hoskins. 'But it is the conditions in the chapel itself that are under consideration.'

'Of course – this way.' Like Bedford, the first man was an employee of Minsterton UDC – he was responsible for the maintenance and upkeep of the town's public buildings. 'You will find

it is kept in good order, I think.'

Hoskins was glancing about him with a penetrating, professional eye. 'It is. But the fabric of the building is not too good.'

'It was built in 1874.'

'I know that. I looked at the records in our office yesterday. But there are many similar red-brick structures in this district, and most are still sound even today. This one, however, shows distinct signs of shoddy workmanship and skimmed materials.'

'And that is why it is said to be always cold?'

Hoskins shook his head. 'Oh, no. That can be accounted for by its exposed position and by the inadequate heating.' He threw a disparaging look at the tiny gas convector heater near the entrance.

The buildings man was tempted to point out that a building set in the exact centre of a large cemetery could hardly avoid being exposed, but offered instead to show his visitor the arrangements in the rooms below. They went through a door behind the pulpit and down a flight of stone steps. This ended in a long narrow room which had a large door in the middle of one wall. A metal stand fitted with rollers along its top projected from a hatch in the wall opposite.

The buildings man pointed at it. 'The coffin arrives here, and is carried in through there.'

Hoskins went over to the door and looked in through a glass window embedded in the door. 'Gas jets on all sides,' he commented. 'Very efficient.'

'It is indeed,' the other replied grimly. 'All that remains is a fine ash. What is left of the bones is treated by—'

'Yes, I know how it is done,' said Hoskins. 'Do you incinerate more than one at a time? The frame in there seems very big.'

'I believe they usually accumulate six coffins before igniting the burners. Sometimes only three or four come down in a three-day period: sometimes more than six have to be dealt with.'

As they went up the steps and out into the pale sunlight they discussed the many complaints that had been received from those who had attended services in Roselea Cemetery Chapel, and from the four clergymen who officiated at them. Anglican, Methodist, Baptist and Catholic had been united by a common grievance: the chapel was cold.

The car hissed along the path to the gates, dead leaves fluttering

and tapping at the windows. The buildings man suggested that some of the heat in the incineration chamber might be conducted up to the chapel. Hoskins looked faintly shocked. 'No, no, that would not be permitted. All air and—ah, fumes from there must be vented up through the chimney stack, and the mouth of that stack has to be above a certain minimum height.'

It was agreed that further talks would have to take place between the Surveyor's office, the Architects' Department and the Treasurer.

Raymond did not notice the car's departure, for his mind was entirely occupied with his problem. It had been there for almost four weeks, and he was by now in a state of quiet desperation.

Although he could not know it, the cause of his problem was the new computer. About five weeks earlier, a clerk at the Town Hall, inexperienced in the techniques of data processing, had given the computer some very misleading information. She had typed on its keyboard: 'Bedford, Raymond Arthur. Unskilled Manual Class Four. Parks and Highways.' This was followed by certain details concerning his wage rate, absentee record, promotion prospects and so on.

So far, the data was correct; but on going on to the next employee's record, she omitted to press the key that would have told the computer that the following was unrelated to the foregoing. Altogether, she did this three times, and Raymond Arthur Bedford became, to the computer, four people in one. To its cold logic, he also became one man multiplied by four. The machine saw nothing bizarre about this: it had been told to record the information in this way, and it had obeyed.

Raymond clocked in at his depot the following Monday morning, and was instructed by his foreman that he was to work in Roselea Cemetery for the next four weeks. He collected the necessary equipment from Stores and was hurrying to the van that would take him to the cemetery when he was called over by the Section Manager. To his astonishment, he was told to attend to the cleaning and tidying of Hesketh Park, which lay a few minutes' walk from Roselea. Raymond had always been a little frightened of the Manager, but he ventured to explain that he had already been given four weeks' work. The Manager waved him away impatiently and continued to thumb through a sheaf of papers.

Bewildered, Raymond set off once more for the van. Again his progress was halted. 'You Bedford?' demanded another foreman: a man he knew by sight but had never worked under. 'Been looking for you all over. Get up to Minster Lane Green, sharpish. Four weeks, all right?'

Again Raymond attempted to question his orders. The foreman's eyes narrowed. 'Your name's Bedford, ain't it? Bedford 50249? An' that's what's wrote on this here job ticket, right? Now get on up there an' don't give me no more argument.'

Defeated, Raymond trudged to the van. When he heard his name being called out yet again, he knew in his sinking heart what it would mean. A little man came puffing up to him. 'Excuse me - Mister Bedford, isn't it? Thank goodness I caught you. Can you possibly work for a month at the Birches? This has just come through.' He held up a rectangular slip which Raymond recognised as a job ticket. 'The assistant gardener there will be off sick for that time. Thanks very much. Good day.'

He trotted off, and Raymond put his head down and galloped for the van. If he heard his name being called again, he decided, he would pretend to be stone deaf.

The days and weeks that followed passed in a kind of waking nightmare. After the first day, he devised a simple schedule. By rising at daybreak (which at that time of year was about seven) and working till ten-thirty in the cemetery, he contrived to complete almost a day's work there. From Roselea Cemetery he could reach Hesketh Park very quickly, and here he toiled until two-thirty. It was a large park, and until the advent of the computer five or six men had worked there. Raymond was quite unable to equal their combined efforts, but he struggled mightily to do so. At about two forty a bus passed Hesketh Park which took him to the Minster Lane Bowling Greens. Raymond was not trained in maintaining bowling greens, and it is unlikely that they benefited from his attentions. Another bus took him from there to The Birches Home for the Elderly, which was out on the edge of the town.

Naturally, the head gardener there was not very pleased that Bedford could not arrive until late afternoon each day, and Raymond had to invent an involved explanation which included a very sick wife, a training course, and buses that repeatedly failed

to turn up on time.

To make up for his lateness, he offered to work until darkness fell each night. Watching him tottering about the extensive grounds, some of the ageing residents were heard to remark that the temporary gardener looked as though he was in greater need of a lengthy stay in the Home than they were.

By the middle of the fourth week he was in a state of constant exhaustion. He arrived home each night, gulped down an ill-cooked meal, and collapsed into bed. He did not sleep well, however: he was haunted by a dread that he might not hear the alarm clock going off next morning. More than once he awoke to find himself struggling into his clothes, the notes of a dream-clock tolling in his head.

Raymond's widowed mother had died nine years earlier. He had no friends, and never went near a pub. There was, in short, no one to hear of his problem. He worked from dawn to dusk, and he worried.

The new computer in the Town Hall hummed busily to itself as it dealt with its many tasks. Among other things, it held in its memory the addresses of all the Council's tenants and their rent details. On the day before the Roselea Chapel was inspected, a Housing Department clerk requested the computer to supply all addresses on which the rent was in arrears. While it was engaged on this, the computer suffered what might be called an electronic hiccup. The resulting error was duly printed on the long tongue of paper that was extending itself from a slot in its fascia. The clerk tore off the paper and returned to his desk, marvelling at the efficiency of the machine. It was a vast improvement on the old system, he thought.

He ran his eye down the column of figures, and frowned.

'That is extraordinary. Really, some of these tenants are the limit! Well, it cannot be tolerated. I'll action this one immediately.' He drew a memo pad towards him and scribbled on it. The sheet of paper was passed that afternoon to the Housing Manager's office, where it was signed by him unread as he dictated letters to his secretary. The almost illegible memo was transformed instantly into a directive that merited urgent action.

Raymond turned the corner of his road and stopped dead. In the dusk, three men were faintly visible in his front garden. They

were carrying his furniture out through the door and piling it neatly on the lawn.

His weariness forgotten, he hastened through the gate and demanded to know what they were about. The nearest took a piece of paper from his overalls pocket and studied it in the dying light.

'You the tenant? Aye, right. Repossession of dwelling, mate. Rent arrears.'

A little taken aback at the man's assured brusqueness, Raymond stammered out a denial. The man listened with the air of one who has heard it all before.

'Three hundred an' eighty-five pounds, it says here. You want to pay it me now, fair enough, we'll put your stuff back in an' no more said. Otherwise you can pay at the Housing Department office tomorrow. But without you pay it, you don't get in, mate.'

Of course there was no possibility that such a sum might be paid: Raymond had been hard put to it to find the bus fares that day. He watched helplessly as the last few items were carried from the house and a massive chain and padlock used to seal the door. The three men climbed into their van, looking at their watches and grumbling, and drove away.

Raymond looked at his house (but was it his house, now?) and wandered slowly down the road. The temperature was falling: he thrust his fists into his pockets and looked at the brightly lit windows on either side. Had his life not been such an uneventful one, free of emergencies or crises, he might have known that there are certain organisations to which one may turn in need: the Citizens' Advice Bureau, the Samaritans, the Social Services Department, even the Police. But he knew nothing of the first three, and thought of the Police Station as somewhere where you were taken if you did something wrong.

He roused himself from his gloomy thoughts and found himself nearing the gates of Roselea Cemetery. The long straight road that bordered it was empty. He drew the keys of the gates from his pocket, unlocked them, and passed through. He had no key to the door of the chapel, since his work did not require him to enter it, but he did have a key to the door at the rear. This admitted him to a tiny store room where he kept his tools, and there was a connecting door leading into a cloakroom used by the clergymen for hanging their vestments. He made his way into the main

chapel and was dismayed to find that it was much colder there than outside – a numbing, clammy cold that seeped through his clothes and seemed to reach his bones. This would never do: better to walk the streets than this.

As he turned to leave, he saw the door behind the pulpit. In the dark he almost toppled headlong down the steps, saving himself only by a wild grab at the handrail. Shaken, he went down and into the room below. Feeling cautiously along the wall, he discovered the door there and pushed it open.

The room within had one very desirable quality: it was *warm*. The walls felt deliciously warm to his outstretched fingers, the floor gave off a comforting heat. Raymond sank down gratefully against a wall and was asleep within minutes.

He realised next morning what his haven was, but the discovery did not trouble him very much. His thoughts were principally concerned with getting through his schedule that day even more quickly than usual, for today was Friday – the day of his monthly wage.

By leaving The Birches Home for the Elderly unvisited, he was able to reach the doors of the Town Hall as its clock chimed five. He pushed open the Wages Office door, breathing hard, and recited his name and number to the girl sitting behind the wire mesh that ran the length of the counter.

She turned the pages of her ledger. 'Bedford? No Bedford here. What number did you say?' She was not the girl he usually saw on the first Friday of each month, he noticed. He repeated the digits like an incantation, and she sniffed and examined the pages once more.

'50249 Bedford. Yes, here it is,' she conceded grudgingly. 'Try and get here earlier next time: we close at five.'

She took an envelope from the drawer beside her, checked the total printed on it with the sum against his name in the book, and slid it through a gap in the barrier dividing them. 'Sign here please.'

Disappointment flooded over him as he studied the sum typed on his wage slip. He turned back and voiced a tentative inquiry.

The wages clerk was locking the drawer and closing the ledger. 'Extra money?' she asked coldly, 'what extra money?'

Raymond explained about the four jobs he had been assigned

to for the last month. The girl sniffed.

'Nothing to do with me,' she declared. 'The figure on your wage slip matches the figure they've put down for your name and number.'

He inquired whether there might have been some error. The girl shook her head and began to get off her stool.

'These amounts are calculated by computer now,' she told him with a complete lack of interest in her voice. Raymond, who was not entirely clear as to what a computer was or did, found it difficult to grasp the logic in her reply, but before he had been able to form this objection into words the girl had vanished through a door behind her.

He arrived at the doors of the Housing Department just in time to see the Manager locking them from the outside. The Manager had had a bad day: he did not feel inclined to stand about listening to some complaint that could be quite easily dealt with by his staff in the normal way. Besides, it was cold and promised to become colder if the forecast was to be believed. His mind on his fire-warmed slippers and glass of whisky, he told his caller to inquire at the offices first thing on Monday, and hurried out to the car park.

Raymond slept at the chapel that night and on Saturday night and Sunday night also, by which time most of the residual warmth in the specially lined incineration chamber had dissipated itself. He attempted to light the gas convector in the chapel, but failed to realise that its supply was controlled from the room below.

On Monday morning he went straight to the doors of the Housing Department, and spent a fruitless forty minutes in trying to convince a supercilious young clerk there that his rent was not in arrears, had never been in arrears, and never would be if he could help it. He might as well have tried to convince one of the gravestones in Roselea Cemetery. The clerk produced a loose-leaf file, pursed his lips disapprovingly at what he saw there, and turned it on the counter for Bedford to read.

Raymond's lips moved silently as he picked out his address. A very recently imprinted rubber stamp had thudded down at the foot of the page. 'Rent Arrears' it said. Someone had written in red ink: £385.70 and a date.

More than half convinced by this official-looking entry that he

did in fact owe such a sum, Raymond arrived at his depot more than an hour late. His foreman was waiting for him. The foreman had a multitude of grievances, it seemed, and he had been brooding on them all morning. Why had Bedford not been at Roselea Cemetery on the two afternoons that the foreman had called there?

'The place is a shambles,' he added. 'You been skivin' off, 'aven't you? Well, I'm not 'aving it. You get up there and do some honest work fer a change.'

He followed this outburst by demanding to know why Bedford was late, but paid no attention to the answer. Bedford, he promised, would be lucky if he did not find himself out of a job shortly, and he would certainly lose an hour's pay.

It did not seem a good time to inquire about the possibility of claiming back the cost of the bus fares to the bowling green and the Birches. Bedford, bitterly disappointed by the lack of recognition of his labours and worried to distraction by the enormous debt he was now burdened with, set off for Roselea.

That evening he did something he had never done before in his life: he pushed open the door of a pub near the cemetery, walked nervously to the bar and watched the landlord approach him. The man smiled expectantly, and Raymond was seized by a panicky bewilderment. He was saved by the memory of a scene he had witnessed many times on the television screen. Carefully, like a novice actor speaking well-rehearsed lines, he asked for a double whisky. Somewhat to his surprise, the landlord placed the tumbler before him without question, took his five pound note, and gave him the change. Raymond gulped the amber liquid down, neat, and asked for another. When he had done this five or six times – it became astonishingly easy after the first two – he turned away without a word and aimed himself at the door.

Outside, the pavements glittered with frost. The icy air entered his lungs and accentuated the effects of the alcohol in his blood. By the time he went through the cemetery gates and entered the store room at the back of the chapel he was in an almost stupefied state of intoxication. He reeled down the stone steps and pushed open the door.

Six coffins lay in a row on the metal frame in the centre of the chamber, but Bedford was in no condition to notice them. He

lurched through the door, half fell against it, and toppled sideways to the floor.

Next morning at eight-thirty, two men came down the steps. One of them went to the control panel set in the wall. The other crossed to the door and pulled it shut. He glanced in through the glass and said: 'Full house today, eh?'

The man at the control panel laughed. 'Aye. Start of the busy season.'

He was studying the dials before him. He turned a small wheel to 'On' and placed a thumb on a red button. 'All set?'

His companion had picked up a long-handled rake and was once more at the window. His viewpoint showed him the frame and the coffins, but did not allow him to see the figure that stirred behind the door.

The man at the control panel pressed the red button. Even with the heavy seal of the door in place, a deep booming roar could be heard.

The man at the door wheeled away and fell into a crouch. His outstretched arms wavered before him as though he was feeling his way in the dark. 'Switch off!' he shrieked. 'Gawd's sake, switch it *off*!'

He pressed his hands tightly over his ears and toppled forward on to the concrete floor.

The other man, made slow-witted by the unexpectedness of it, ran to the window and looked inside. He had often seen the coffins flaming into nothingness, had seen the dead crisping and splitting and boiling.

It was the sight of the moving figure that froze him. It moved, flailing and writhing, but it was no longer human. The watcher saw it twist away from the searing heat of one row of burners, cannon into the metal frame, and recoil into the flames of the row opposite. He saw the blackening face peel under the blast, saw the white bone appear. It did not remain white for many seconds. The faceless form threw out its tattered glowing arms and moved randomly towards the door.

The man outside ran to the control panel and twisted the wheel to 'Off'. The roaring behind the door ceased abruptly. Ignoring his weeping colleague on the floor, he hurried up the steps and through the chapel to the vestibule. There was a phone there: it

may be that he had some notion of calling an ambulance. He was never able to recall what, exactly, he had in his mind at that time.

After an intensive inquiry had been conducted, it was concluded that the blame for the unfortunate incident could only be placed on the new computer. Fortunately, computers are unable to defend themselves against such charges. And of course, they are happily free of feelings of guilt.

Ralph Norton Noyes

Micro-process

The thing was so lifelike that Bailey did not care to touch it. For most of the first week he left it in its box in the spare bedroom among dust-sheeted furniture and empty suitcases. It lay on its back, face upwards, eyelids closed, mouth slightly parted, appearing to sleep. Bailey propped the lid a few inches open, moved by a feeling that it needed air, though he knew perfectly well that its ribcage contained other machinery than lungs.

'More than a toy,' Delgado had called it; and so, at its stupefying cost, it should have been. But *so much more*?

By daylight Bailey studied the operating manual with the condescension due to gadgetry. He was well practised in the jargons of an ingenious age. The manual gave him sensations of familiar boredom. But by night he bolted his bedroom door and slept uneasily, uncertain what the postponement of a second car and the sacrifice of a winter holiday had bought him.

'You can afford expensive things,' Delgado had said, drinking Bailey's expensive brandy in the penthouse flat overlooking the park. 'But think of it as an investment if you like. A man consumes ten times his weight in food in a single year, this thing lives on electricity. You can recharge its batteries from the mains for fifty pence a week.'

Bailey thought of the unobtrusive services which already came to him abundantly in anonymous forms: the faceless cleaners who swept and dusted in his daily absences; the tradesmen without identity who delivered his needs in response to the briefest of indications by telephone; the hired men who mended whatever it was necessary to mend under the supervision of a head porter whose name Bailey had succeeded in not knowing for nearly a decade. 'I get adequate value for money,' he said with a shrug.

Delgado tried another tack. 'Think of it as a bit of kinetic art,' he said thoughtfully, glancing around the apartment. 'It would

do you credit to buy one. There are only another eleven in existence: two in Switzerland, one in Buenos Aires, three in the south of France and the rest in America. They are exceptionally well made and suitably rare.'

Bailey was touched in his vanity but still demurred. 'I have done all the collecting I need.'

'I don't believe,' said Delgado, casting around for an Achilles' heel, 'that you ought to live quite as alone as you do. I know you're one of nature's hermits, but I'd have thought that a little activity about the place would be good for your health. I promise you it won't *talk*!'

Bailey shook his head and brought the evening to a close. But he was something of a hypochondriac. The mention of his health stuck in his mind. It occurred to him that, at forty, he looked older than he should. He began to wonder if his taste for solitude might be depriving him of a bodily need – something as unobtrusive but vital as a vitamin or a trace-mineral. A week later he rang Delgado and granted him (as Bailey well knew) a handsome commission from discreet sources.

Bailey was firm that the model should be man-shaped. He wanted no bawdy suggestions put about his clubs. He felt, in any case, a preference for something in his own image. He was not unfamiliar with women as a hired vehicle for the relief of need, but he was quite clear that he disliked them. For men he usually discovered in himself no more than an absence of liking.

'The delivery time is about three months,' said Delgado, naming an address in Sweden. 'And it will be necessary to make certain arrangements with the Customs. But the firm will know how to fix it.'

The box came in October, shaped like a coffin and weighing more than a man. Bailey took the unaccustomed exercise of prising it open without menial aid. He was at once startled to encounter the naked and unexpectedly handsome body of a man-shaped creature lying with its eyes closed, seeming to sleep.

It was more than a toy, indeed! And absurdly so. At first, Bailey was angry: he had ordered a machine, not the imitation of a man. But presently a reluctant admiration tempered his ill-humour. He was not without the perception of a shrewd collector, and he began to see that something more than technical competence had

been at work in the construction of this gadget. Irregularities of the head suggested a living model – its reflection in a mirror would reveal new truths about it of a kind not possessed by tailors' dummies. Even the texture of its exterior, though not skin, had a look of truth. Bailey knew that it would not be cold; he sensed that the feel of it would be unaccustomed but not unpleasant. Whatever team of engineers had fashioned the machinery and installed its circuits had placed its packaging in the hands of another kind of expert.

They had not stopped there. Art had gone somewhat beyond strict logic, verging on the superfluous (if not distasteful). A mere household appliance, even if it is thought necessary to disguise its machinery from the unease of housewives, does not require the firm, small useless nipples of a man, or a dark mat of pubic hair, or the generative organs of the male.

Bailey was shocked. He was made distinctly uneasy. Propping the lid a little open, he was glad to find an operating manual whose prose was neutral, technical, dispassionate and altogether genderless. Bailey took it hastily away, locking the bedroom door behind him.

The manual was soothing. It spoke reassuringly of 'routines' and 'programs'. It dealt with 'activation': there was a switch concealed in the left armpit. It described 'recharging': the device was to be connected to the nearest power-point by means of a thin, grey cable which plugged into its right side. The 'optical sensors' would raise their dust-proof lids when the batteries had been charged. They stored enough for sixty hours – 'given the normal program'. Seven 'routines' were provided with the model; but there was a promise of further convenient marvels to come ('now under active development'). Other matters, more suitable to maintenance engineers, followed for forty pages of close print.

Bailey worked carefully through these technicalities a number of times. They gave him a sense of familiarity which allayed his unease. Familiarity began to breed, if not contempt, at least a sense of mastery for the ingenious gadget now lying, inert though over-elaborate, in the spare bedroom. He relieved his feelings further by writing in triumphant irritation to the Swedish address to complain that no guarantee card had been included, and that only six 'routines' had been sent to him, though the manual

mentioned seven, and seven had certainly been paid for. From time to time, and with calculated casualness, he went back to the spare bedroom and lifting the lid of the crate allowed himself to grow used to the powerful image of the creature that lay within it.

On the sixth day he gave it life. Grimacing at so much intimacy, he groped in the left armpit and found the activating switch. He connected the umbilical cable between the creature's ribcage and a convenient wall-plug, and switched on the power. Fifteen minutes later the eyelids lifted and the optical sensors began to scan the world with a plausible imitation of surprise. Bailey recalled the Book of Genesis. It came to him with unaccustomed whimsy that a fanciful man might have called the creature 'Adam', though the tiny inscription on its left shoulder, shaped like a vaccination mark, said 'Model 12'. Pleased with his first morning of creation, Bailey slipped 'routine one' between the ribs of 'Adam' and awaited the routine miracle which the manual had promised. Routine one, like its fellow five (presumably like the routine seven which had been so carelessly omitted from the kit), was nothing more than a slip of plastic hardly bigger than a credit card and quite as slim. Its surface was delicately etched and inlaid with a network of silvery metal, complex as a labyrinth, fine as the web of any spider. It 'encoded', said the manual, a million 'bits' of information. Engaging with the inward parts of Model 12, this little card would guide it in the performance of useful duties.

The scarcely visible slot in the left side of 'Adam' smoothly accepted routine one, digesting it with the same suave appetite as the cashpoint dispenser of any high-street bank. Model 12 rose swiftly to the vertical and began a perambulation of the apartment.

Bailey belonged to the twentieth century. He had watched informative television programmes. He had succumbed, like many others in the 1980s, to a succession of devices of steadily increasing sophistication and frequently diminishing necessity. He knew what was meant by 'an adaptive program'. He was unsurprised by the concept of 'self-learning', even when applied to creatures whose nerves were merely made of silicon. But atavisms tend to linger among creatures whose nerves are of another kind. Bailey, who had given 'Adam' life, could not quite rid himself of the feeling that he was now in the presence of a living thing. Seen at

close quarters and embedded in the simulacrum of a man, the behaviour of Model 12 required the reverse of an act of the imagination; it needed the suspension of a superstitious belief.

The creature moved with an appearance of purpose, sensing, hunting, pausing, absorbing, learning, resuming its search. It had the look of an animal of sharp senses and strong instincts which knows that it has a need but is not yet quite certain what it is. The 'eyes' scanned, the 'hands' delicately felt, the 'legs' followed a methodical and rapid course from room to room. Each object was lightly sensed with 'palm' and 'fingers', but each in turn was rejected as in some way 'wrong'.

At one moment it encountered Bailey. They came face to face when Bailey was caught between the wall of a room and the back of an open door. The machine scanned him and lightly ran its hands across his face and body. Bailey, who avoided physical contacts except when driven to them, shuddered away in disgust. He was tempted to resist by force, but was uncertain what would happen if he did. The 'palms' and 'fingers' passed rapidly up and down, taking his measurements and texture. There was a prickling sensation in Bailey's skin, and his body hairs were ruffled as though by an electrostatic charge.

The ordeal was brief. In seconds Model 12 had discovered what it needed to know. Somewhere in the lattices of its artificial memory, aided by routine one, magnetic fields indicated that Bailey was not 'furniture', that he was a 'something' of another kind which did not need to be cleaned or tidied, folded or pressed, boxed or shelved. The machine turned abruptly away and resumed its search for the principal object of routine one. After some time it found it – a task as unremarkable as the making of Bailey's bed and the tidying of his bedroom.

Watching the movements of Model 12 as it 'learned' (once and forever) the precise size and texture of the bed and bedroom which its program must now serve (and would never forget), Bailey began to exorcise his instinctive superstitions. Long practice in overlooking the signs of life in liftmen and hall porters came to his aid. He was able to place Model 12 in the purely machine-like category of 'servant'. Within half an hour he was sufficiently at ease to begin wondering whether the device was worth the money he had paid for it.

'You're looking very fit,' said Delgado, and was astonished to receive a smile.

'Join me for lunch,' said Bailey, causing raised eyebrows among the club servants.

'How's the toy?' said Delgado presently over the soup.

'We get along,' said Bailey absently. He noted with disapproval that a little of the Brown Windsor had been slopped on to the rim of his soup plate and reflected with satisfaction that this was something which never happened at home.

'I hope my friends in Malmö have a satisfied customer,' said Delgado. He noted with amusement that Bailey was looking distinctly younger.

Bailey racked his memory and managed to find trivial complaints, but the lines of his face belied him. He had slept well the night before, forgetting to switch off the machine or to lock the spare bedroom door. Model 12 had, for the first time, been able to complete the part of routine three which brought morning coffee and prepared a bath at the precise temperature of thirty-four degrees centigrade. An emotion resembling gratitude had crossed Bailey's consciousness and – since it did not have to be expressed – had left him with sensations of well-being.

'No major snag, then?' said Delgado.

'Damned expensive on power,' said Bailey frostily, implying to Delgado that Model 12 was not going underemployed.

The day's good start, though, had left Bailey with residues of good humour. 'I *will* say for him,' he added, 'that he knows how to keep his place.'

In late November a small package came from Sweden containing the missing program card and a covering letter. The card was marked 'routine seven (Additional Bedroom Module)'. The letter was obscure. It referred to 'problems of importation into the United Kingdom' and apologised for the delay. Bailey noted from the envelope that the package had been brought in by courier to a Swedish bank in London and sent on to him by registered post. It seemed an unnecessary elaboration, but his feeling of having been cheated on the original deal was partly assuaged.

'Adam,' he said, watching the mechanical fingers of Model 12 peeling potatoes, 'they've sent you another card.'

Model 12 turned its head, matched Bailey's image with the memory-trace of Bailey, dismissed him as irrelevant, and returned to its work.

'What do you make of it?' said Bailey, fingering the new routine. To his irritation the manual said nothing at all about this new program. 'What'll it do for us, d'you think?'

But Model 12 had now placed his voice as a stimulus of no interest. The machine ignored him.

'There are times,' said Bailey, walking about the kitchen, 'when I wish you'd listen to what I say.' He whistled tunelessly, causing another sideways glance from Model 12. 'What do you suppose they mean by "problems of importation"?'

He watched a potato being deftly turned against the knife, shedding a skin as thin as paper. 'Clever lad!' he said affectionately. 'I'd have you as my barber any day!'

He pictured himself being shaved by Adam and found the image soothing. He wondered why there was no routine for services less impersonal than the peeling of potatoes and the making of beds, some additional module for comforts closer to hand.

He followed the line of thought, studying the little card and re-reading the firm's letter. 'Certain arrangements with the Customs . . .' Delgado had said. 'Problems of importation . . .' ran the letter. It crossed his mind that 'Swedish Massage' was sometimes to be seen on grubby cards in tobacconists' windows and didn't always imply the more neutral forms of physiotherapy. He looked again at Adam's naked 'manhood' (no clothes had seemed quite suitable for hiding it), and wondered, not for the first time, why so much craftsmanship should have been devoted to leaving it so 'complete'. Ugly suspicions began to trouble him.

'Additional Bedroom Routine' ran the legend on the back of routine seven. . . Eleven models had been bought before Adam, according to Delgado. He had mentioned a name or two. All were women. . . The widow of a Greek millionaire, encastled and lonely on the hillside above Geneva; a famous Prima Donna, now ravaged by age and living incognito near Nice; a Principessa of great culture, bearing the sad misfortune of a scarred face.

Bailey's peace of mind was shattered. He glanced again at Adam's splendid form with new perception. Emotions came to him of the kind which had once afflicted the heads of Victorian

households on discovering, among supposedly pious servants to whom every Christian comfort had been extended, signs of the unrepentant flesh. His sense of companionship was gone. With a sad and angry thumb he deactivated the machine and slammed the kitchen door, committed to eating badly peeled potatoes in his club.

Later in the day he put Model 12 back into its crate and nailed down the lid.

During December Bailey slept badly. The weather was downcast and the apartment chilly. Often, in the small hours, he found himself awake and cold, afflicted by unfamiliar sensations which a solitary life had left him incapable of diagnosing as loneliness. At these times, shivering and bad-tempered, he made indifferent coffee in the kitchen, and sometimes saw the dawn come up before returning to a crumpled bed and the unrefreshing slumbers of early morning.

He saw in the shaving mirror that he was really far from well, and called in a doctor whom he had once heard mentioned with approval by his solicitor. Blood-pressure and pulse were normal; lungs and heart were sound; there was no trace of anything except aimlessness and lack of exercise. 'Insomnia is nothing unusual in men of your age,' said the doctor. 'Especially,' he added, eyeing Bailey speculatively, 'when they live alone.' He prescribed placebos in an illegible hand and charged a sufficient fee to make them seem convincing.

Bailey took the pills and pondered the advice. He made one or two expeditions into the park on milder afternoons and tried to fall into conversations with strangers sharing the same bench. These experiments proved unsuccessful.

One day, returning through Shepherd's Market at sunset, he caught sight of a slip of pasteboard in a shop window. It was hardly much bigger than a routine, though somewhat easier to understand. It told him that a fun-loving redhead was willing to offer French lessons to generous gentlemen in their own homes. Bailey was assailed by a pang of melancholy. The sun was setting at the end of the road. It sank, inflamed and gorgeous, into the mists of evening. It reminded him that time was passing, that his life was running out, that he had exercised very little of the old

Adam in his time, that women daunted him, that he had never had much success with them. He had a sudden image of himself as an ageing man, nailed into a coffin and left to moulder among spiders and dust-sheets in a back bedroom.

An idea descended upon him with magical force. He found that the blood had rushed to his face and that his heart was thumping. He leaned against some railings for support, watching the dying sun make pools of crimson in the shop window.

'Who's your gentleman friend, then?' said the girl, sipping *crème de menthe*. She cast shrewd eyes about the dimly lit apartment, watching the two men warily. Her trade carried risks; it had a casualty rate.

'Just a friend,' said Bailey, dry in the mouth. He fingered the oblong card in his pocket, foreseeing that Model 12 would shortly come to the end of routine four (which polished glasses and served aperitifs).

'Oh,' said the girl, 'a threesome, is it?' She made fresh calculations of cost.

'No,' said Bailey with a parched tongue. 'Him and you.'

'Ah!' she said archly. 'And you with the camera, then?'

Bailey made an angry gesture of dissent. The girl raised her eyebrows and considered a surcharge for the surliness of the customers. The other one had not yet spoken. 'He don't say much for himself, I *must* say,' she observed. She sized up the possibilities, added something for the posh address, and named a figure.

Bailey counted bank notes with an unsteady hand and handed them over. Behind him, Model 12 gave out the brief, soft bleep which announced that its batteries were dead. It folded slowly into a chair, head sagging, dressing-gown falling loose. Routine four was ejected and fell to the floor.

The girl eyed him professionally. 'Stoned out of his bleeding mind,' she said. 'Good looking fellow, though. Want a hand with him?'

'Wait!' said Bailey sharply. 'He'll be all right in a minute.' He fumbled beneath the dressing gown and inserted a new routine card between the fourth and fifth ribs. The machine remained inert.

Bailey cursed, ran from the room, returned with a thin, grey cable. 'You'd better not watch,' he said.

'If it's kinks,' said the girl, standing up, 'you'll have to pay extra.'

Bailey knelt by the armchair, fumbling for the socket. Gasping, he found it, inserted the plug with shaking hands, connected the cable to a power-point.

The girl joined him. 'Is he all right?' she said. She peered at Model 12 in the dim light and touched its forehead. 'Christ!' she said, starting back. 'What is this place? A bleeding morgue?'

She switched on the overhead lights, and then began to scream.

Bailey, who had never before been called Frankenstein, knelt on the hall floor with his head against the wall, quietly moaning. Sensations of disappointment and failure assailed him with such force that he wanted to die. The girl had fled, shouting obscenities. His money was gone. The apartment was silent. He had bolted the front door and slipped the heavy guard-chain into place, shutting himself into solitary despair. He would have turned on the gas but the apartment was all-electric.

So, for that matter, was Model 12. Model 12 lay forgotten in the living-room, re-charging its batteries. After a quarter of an hour its eyelids lifted and saw Bailey in the hall, who backed away. The machine followed. Somewhere in the lattices of its artificial memory magnetic fields indicated that Bailey was not mere furniture. He fell into the category 'biped' for which routine seven had been specially designed.

Bailey retreated along the passage. Model 12 caught him and grasped him with steely gentleness about the waist. The fingers of its free hand moved swiftly across Bailey's frame, sensing and measuring. They took the precise dimensions of this local object of routine seven. It would never forget them.

Bailey struggled and shouted. He hammered at the metal ribcage of Model 12. With a great effort he wrenched himself free. He began to run blindly about the apartment, shouting at the soundproof walls, slamming doors, doubling on his tracks. Stimulated by these practical jokes, Model 12 reacted with swiftness and cunning. It knew its place. It knew what routine seven required of it. It intended to do its electronic duty.

Bailey found a door with a bolt on the other side of it, stumbled through it, slammed it shut, fastened it from the inside, fell to the floor gasping. He knelt in darkness for a long time, listening to the silence on the other side.

Hours passed. Bailey put on the light and found himself in the bathroom. It had no windows but possessed water. 'I can live for days,' he said to himself. His watch had stopped at ten past four. It had been the small hours of Sunday morning. He was uncertain how long ago.

Outside in the passage Model 12 waited impassively in mid-routine. Time meant nothing to it. It would be content to resume its labours whenever the object of them should again offer the necessary stimulus. It stood motionless, waiting.

Bailey made calculations. The batteries would last for sixty hours – 'given a normal program'. But Model 12 was standing inactive. It might be weeks or months before the charge in its batteries slowly leaked away.

Bailey found that his watch was broken. There was no means of telling the time except by the growth of hairs on his chin. His face in the mirror frightened him and he put out the light, intending to sleep.

Hours passed. Bailey shaved. He put out the light again and fell into an uneasy slumber from which nightmares jerked him awake.

He ran a bath and lay in the warm water, drowsing. Dreams came. Bailey floated. The water cooled. Topping it up again to the precise temperature of thirty-four degrees centigrade, he remembered a moment when he had been happy. Seeming to wake from a good sleep, he smiled, reaching for a morning cup of coffee. It dissolved into a paper towel.

'What *am* I?' said Bailey to himself, floating in lukewarm water.

'What is *anything*?' he said a while later, topping up the warmth from the hot tap.

Metaphysics, though, had never been much of a strong point with him. 'Loveless and unloving,' was all he could think to say. 'Selfish and getting old.' He burst into tears, lapped in self-pity and warm water. Reaching for the safety-razor, he removed the blade and considered the possibility of death. 'Worse than fate,'

he said presently to the bathroom ceiling.

Hours passed. Bailey got out of the bath and dried himself. He replaced the blade in the razor and removed a second growth of beard. Studying his haggard face in the mirror, he calculated that it might be Tuesday. He saw that time was passing and felt hungry. 'I have been lonely too long,' he said to himself, weeping again. 'I have been shutting myself away.'

Presently, snivelling like a child, he opened the bathroom door and came out.

Adam was waiting.

John H. Snellings

The loft

Gary Langston stood under the huge tree, shivering against the cool night air. The hard rain had stopped but, with the water dripping from the branches, he may as well have stood in the downpour. Angrily, he pulled his windbreaker up around his neck then wiped the water from his face with his hands.

He paced, pulled up his sleeve, checked the luminous dial of his watch. Twenty past midnight. She was late. Where the hell was she? He stopped pacing, looked down the hill at the semicircle of houses. A street light was clearly visible between the two in the middle, its light forming a yellow cone in the darkness. There was no sign of Linda.

Gary felt like a fool. Standing under a dripping tree, at midnight, trembling like a wet dog, waiting for a girl who probably wouldn't even show up. She'd agreed to meet him at eleven-thirty and, at the time, she'd sounded awful serious. Almost desperate. He wondered about that now. Did she seem a little bit too eager? Over-anxious? Girls are awful sneaky, he thought. They could make a guy believe almost anything. Especially when it came to sex.

This whole thing was probably a joke, he told himself. A trick. Something for Linda and her girlfriends to giggle about at school. Girls love to gather in front of their wall lockers and gossip about somebody. Spread rumours. Blow things out of proportion. And this would really give them something to chew on. He'd be the laughing stock of the whole school. Unless of course, he developed a sudden case of the flu and stayed away until it all blew over. And with these wet clothes, that shouldn't be hard to do.

Gary started pacing again. Suppose he was wrong? What if she'd simply changed her mind? Or something had happened that made it impossible for her to get away. Then, the rain could have discouraged her. Girls hated to get out in the rain. Especially

Linda. It made her hair frizzy.

Gary wiped more water from his face. She probably just chickened out. After all, she was still a virgin. She'd had a lot of time to think about things since they'd agreed to get together.

He stopped pacing, stood there with his hands tucked in his jeans, gazing at the houses below. Finally, he decided that she wasn't going to show. He felt angry, cheated, but those feelings faded when he caught a movement from the corner of his eye. Something had moved between him and the light at the bottom of the hill.

Squinting, he searched the darkness below.

'Gary.' A voice whispered out.

He could see her now, silhouetted against the cone of light.

'Linda!' he called back. 'I'm up here!'

'I can't see a thing! Where are you?'

'Here!' Gary replied, moving down to meet her.

He reached out, found her hand. He was surprised when she pulled him against her. She held on tight, as if she hadn't seen him in six months. He hesitated for a moment, then let his arms slip around her, his face press against hers. Her hair smelled like fresh strawberries.

'Did you think I wasn't coming?' she asked, her breath warming his ear.

'Well, it did cross my mind. I thought maybe you'd changed your mind.'

'No way,' she breathed. 'I've thought of nothing but this all day long.'

Linda pulled her head back and gazed up at him.

'Want to know something?' she asked.

Gary could barely see her face, but he could see her smile. Her teeth were large, bright, standing out in the darkness.

'What?'

'In a way, I didn't expect to find you here waiting for me.'

'You didn't?'

'Nope.'

'And why not, may I ask?'

Linda hugged against him.

'I don't know,' she said against his chest. 'I guess I thought you really didn't want to be with me. The way I want to be with

you, I mean.'

Gary lifted her face and kissed her. Her mouth was warm, moist. Slowly, he forced his tongue between her teeth, felt her shudder, melt against him. There was that familiar stirring inside him, like a soft current of electricity, warm, soothing, spreading from his stomach to every part of his body. He was coming alive again. It'd been so long since he'd felt it. Too long.

He broke away and for a moment, he was speechless.

'Wow,' Linda breathed. 'Where did you learn to kiss like that?'

'Well . . .'

'Never mind. I don't really want to know.'

Gary mopped at the water trickling from his forehead.

'Damn this rain,' Linda said, adjusting the scarf on her head.

'I know what you mean,' Gary said. 'Of all nights it just had to pick tonight.'

'So, what do we do now?'

'I did some thinking on that while I was waiting for you to show. Do you know where the old Williams' barn is?'

'Don't tell me you want to go there.'

'Sure, why not? It's perfect.'

There was a short pause.

'Well, what do you say?' Gary asked.

'I don't know. A barn?'

'Listen, it's a good dry place. We'll be out of the wind and rain. And we won't have to worry about anyone walking in on us. Old man Williams has been dead for years. The old barn is never used any more.'

'Well,' Linda hesitated for a moment. 'If you're sure it'll be all right. Anyway, we don't have much of a choice do we?'

The wind rattled the tree, splattering them with water.

Linda snuggled against Gary, shivering. Things just weren't going the way she'd planned. First the rain, now the thoughts of making love in a barn. It didn't sound very romantic. It wouldn't be so bad an idea, but – her first time? She had always thought her first time would be something to remember, something really special, wonderful. She had no idea it'd be in a barn. But, there wouldn't be another chance. It was tonight or never. Gary was to be the one, she was sure of that.

'Hey,' Gary said. 'Let's get going before we get any wetter.'

Putting his arm around her waist, they moved slowly down the slippery hillside. Mud sucked noisily at their shoes and the wet grass soaked the bottom of their trouser legs. Above them, the clouds moved swiftly across the sky, revealing small patches of starlight and an occasional glimpse of a full moon. At the bottom of the hill they could see the road, the barbed-wire fence running along the ditch, and beyond that, the creek where the fog hovered like a huge white blimp.

Holding on to each other to keep from falling, they carefully angled their way down the hill. At the bottom, Gary separated the strands of barbed wire in the fence and held them apart while Linda slipped through. He followed, then they crossed the narrow ditch and made their way on to the black top.

'God!' Linda said, stomping her feet against the pavement. 'What a mess.'

'Hang on a minute.' Gary glanced around. He picked up a stick from the side of the road then knelt down in front of her.

'Give me your foot,' he said.

He scraped off the biggest part of the mud.

'Now the other one.'

'My mother is going to kill me when she sees this mess. She'll know I've been somewhere other than Cindy's house.'

Gary stood up and tossed the stick into the ditch.

'There, that's got most of it.'

'How am I going to explain this mess?'

'Can't you wash your clothes at your girlfriend's house? You said she was going to help cover for you. That'd be part of it, wouldn't it?'

'I suppose so. I just hope we can keep Cindy's mother from finding out. She'd tell mine in a minute.'

Gary was beginning to feel bad. This was a crazy idea, he thought. Dragging Linda out in the middle of the night, just to get a piece of ass. He should have called the whole thing off when it started raining. It'd be different if he had a car like most of the other boys he knew. At least they wouldn't be wet and muddy. A car? What the hell was he thinking? He hadn't even bothered to take his drivers' test yet.

'Linda, you want to call this off? Plan it for some other time?'

Linda stared at him for a moment. She would like nothing

better, she thought, than to go back to Cindy's house, take off her wet clothes, and crawl in between two warm sheets. But she knew she'd never get another chance to be with Gary. And she desperately wanted him to be her first lover. Not only did she care about him but he was the most handsome boy in school, as well as the most popular. After this weekend, though, she'd never see him again. Unless, some day, he wandered up to Michigan, which she doubted. No telling where Gary would end up after High School. Probably the Air Force or Army. A lot of the graduates were enlisting nowadays.

'If you want to go back to your girlfriend's house,' Gary added, 'I'll understand. We can get together again one day next week.'

Linda moved closer, took his hand.

'No, let's go on,' she said. 'There won't be any other times for us.'

Gary looked at her, puzzled.

'Why? What do you mean? Don't you want to see me again?'

'Of course I do. It's not that.'

'What then?'

Linda hesitated a moment, then she said, 'We're moving away.'

'Moving?'

'Yes.'

'You mean, out of town? Permanently?'

'Afraid so.'

'When?'

'Sunday.'

'This coming Sunday?'

Linda nodded.

'But why? Where?'

'My father has been transferred to a plant in Michigan. About twenty miles outside of Detroit. Of course Mother and I have to go with him, even though we don't want to. Mother hates big cities. Too much pollution, too much traffic, too much crime, and way too many people. No trees, no parks, just giant concrete buildings. She's really depressed about it - and so am I.'

Gary fell silent.

He simply turned, took her hand, led her quietly down the road. She was leaving, he thought. The words tumbled through his mind. Leaving. After all the weeks of having her around she

wouldn't be there any more. No more walking her to and from school. No more meeting between classes. No getting together after school to do homework. No more ball games together, no more picnics at the lake, no more movies, nothing. He knew he liked her a lot and now, he was just realising how much. He was doing it again. He didn't want her to go. But they always did, didn't they. They were all alike. They get him to like them, fall in love with them, then next thing you know, they want to leave. To hell with his feelings. It's been nice, so long, write to me some time. Linda was just like all the others.

'Gary.'

'Yeah.'

'What are you thinking about?'

'About you leaving, what else.'

'Will you miss me?'

'Of course I will. That was a dumb question.'

'Will you write to me?'

There. Just like all the others.

'Sure,' Gary said, 'if you want me to. I have to warn you though I'm not very good at—'

'Gary.'

'What?'

'I love you.'

Gary sniffed, wiped his face with the sleeve of his jacket, but said nothing.

'Did you hear what I said?' Linda asked softly.

'Yes, I heard you.' Love me. How could you say you love me then turn right around and leave me. Why did it always have to end this way? Why did he have to fall in love with them? He hadn't liked the idea of taking her to the loft from the start, but now he was glad that's where they were going.

'Do you know what you're saying?' He managed to ask.

'I certainly do. As a matter of fact, I've been in love with you for a long time. I was just afraid to tell you. But, now that I'm leaving, well—I just wanted you to know.'

'Why were you so afraid to tell me?'

'I don't know. Just silly, I guess. I was afraid it would push you away from me. Most guys don't want any strings this early in life.'

Suddenly, the moon broke from the clouds, bathing the road ahead of them. The fog was clearing now and the wind was barely a whisper in the trees. Up ahead, to their left, Gary could make out the path that led through the thicket to the barn.

They walked a few more feet then Gary stopped abruptly.

'There it is,' he said.

'That's it?' Linda gazed up at the barn, barely visible through the weeds and brush covering the small hillside. She didn't know why she'd sounded so disappointed. She hadn't really expected anything different.

'Come on,' Gary said. 'Let's go up.'

Trudging up the hill, they broke into the clearing then walked to the front of the barn, and stood there, staring up at the huge black opening above the entrance. One of the hay-loft doors had fallen off and the other was merely hanging there by a single hinge. It swayed gently in the wind, creaking against the rusty pin that held it in place. Bumping against the barn, it sounded like a giant heartbeat.

'Looks like that one is ready to fall any minute,' Linda said.

'No, I don't think so. It's been that way for years.'

Gary went to the huge door at the entrance. He reached out, took hold of the wooden handle and pulled. The door popped, leaned towards him. It was warped.

'Be careful,' Linda whispered.

He pulled harder, using both hands. The door creaked as it opened slowly, scraping a wide furrow in the dirt. It moved a foot then stopped, blocked by the mound of dirt in front of it.

'That's as far as I can get it open,' Gary said. 'We'll have to squeeze through.'

Linda clutched at his arm.

'It looks awful scary,' she breathed. 'Are you sure there won't be someone in there?'

'No one has been in here for a long time,' Gary lied. 'This door probably hasn't been opened since old man Williams has been dead.'

'Don't say that word.'

'What? Dead?'

'Gary don't.'

'What's the matter, make you think of ghosts or something?'

Linda slapped him on the arm.

'You're just trying to scare me,' she said. 'And you're doing a good job.'

'I'm sorry. Come on, I'll knock it off.'

Gary squeezed through the narrow opening, then turned and helped Linda through. But it wasn't so easy for her.

'Oh shit!'

'Suck in your stomach,' Gary told her.

'I don't have a stomach, if you'll notice. It's these two items up here I'm having trouble with. And don't ask me to suck those in, smarty.'

Gary laughed and put all his weight against the door.

After several moments of struggling, squirming, Linda was inside. The first thing she noticed was how surprisingly warm the barn was, compared to the cool damp air outside. Then there was the smell. The odour of aged straw was heavy, choking, almost touchable. But, there was another odour too, a foul stench, like something dead. Moonlight spilled through the roof where several tin panels were missing, forming a large rectangular block on the dirt floor. Loose straw and cobwebs dripped through the cracks in the wide platform above them.

Gary went directly to the ladder leading up to the loft. It was crudely home-made, nailed to the 2 × 10 running along the bottom edge of the platform. But it was sturdy.

'You want to go up first?'

'No way!' Linda replied immediately.

'All right, I'll go up, then help you.'

She watched Gary ascending the ladder. She didn't want to hurt his feelings, but she hated this perfect place of his. She knew it was being childish, but she was scared. She felt there was something evil in this place. She shivered as she pictured some old man hiding in one of the stalls behind her, crouching in the darkness, just waiting for the chance to reach out and grab her. She wanted to turn around, to assure herself that no one was there, but she couldn't force her head to move. What if she turned and he was standing there, staring her in the eyes? Her heart leaped when Gary suddenly called down to her.

'You coming up here or are you going to stand there all night?'

'I'm coming! I'm coming!'

Her legs trembled as she climbed the ladder. Reaching the top, Gary grabbed hold of her hands and pulled her on to the platform. The boards creaking, they carefully made their way to the front of the barn.

Thump.

Thump.

The loose door echoed dully through the rafters.

They stood at the loft opening for a moment, gazing out into the night. Small portions of town were visible over the treetops. In the thinning fog, the street lights surrounding the courthouse looked like tiny balls of cotton. They could see the chimney of the High School and, off to their right, the huge silver water tank that still stood at the abandoned knitting mill.

Somehow, looking out at the town, Linda felt better. She didn't feel so far away. She could almost see the housing project where she lived. Just seeing the lights out there made the barn seem less detached, less isolated. She was beginning to feel more at ease, and for that she was glad. She wanted to enjoy tonight. Alone with Gary. Things weren't going to be so bad after all. Gary was right. At least it was warm and dry. She had a feeling tonight was going to live in her memory forever.

Thump.

Thump.

Except for that, she thought.

'I wish that noise would stop,' she said.

'Yeah, me too.' Gary suddenly slipped his arms around her. Had she been looking at him she would have seen the wide grin spreading across his face. 'But, in a little while,' he added, 'I don't think you'll notice it.'

He turned her around and kissed her. She pressed her body against him and met his tongue with her own. He ran his hands down her back, over the firm curves of her buttocks. Her mouth was hot. Her tongue darted in and out of his mouth as she ground her pelvis against him.

They broke away, gasping.

'I want you, Gary. I want you so bad. Make love to me now.'

Gary glanced around the platform. 'Before we do anything,' he said. 'I think we should spread some of this hay around.'

He turned, went to the bales of hay stacked against the wall.

He moved one of the dusty bales away from the pile, then rolled it across the floor to where Linda stood waiting. He kicked at the bale, scattering the hay across the floor. Dust and particles filled the air.

While Linda averted her eyes, Gary discovered that the object he had hidden there many months ago was still there. He quickly covered the butcher knife with the hay.

Linda was coughing, waving her hand in front of her face.

'God, we got to breathe that stuff!'

'Sorry, it'll clear in a minute.'

Kneeling, Gary pulled Linda down next to him. They locked in an embrace, fell back on to the hay. He kissed her again, running his hand inside the front of her blouse. She wasn't wearing a bra. Her flesh was warm, her breasts small but firm, the nipples hard, awaiting his touch. She moved her leg between his and rubbed it against his hardness.

'Don't you think it's time we took our clothes off?' she breathed.

They undressed quickly. Gary's heart thudded wildly, as it had so many times before. It'd been a long time. He hoped he would never have to do this again, but – they kept lying to him. Kept telling him they had to leave. Go away. And, he couldn't let them do that.

They joined again on the hay and continued their caressing. Linda moaned softly, grinding herself against his leg. Her body trembled as she moved her hand down, circling him. She moved her hand up and down the length of it. It felt so hard. She couldn't wait to take it inside her.

Gary let his hand glide down her stomach, to her pubic hair. His fingers found the warm passageway and teased its outer edges.

'Feel good?' he asked.

'Yes,' she breathed. 'Don't stop.'

Leaning over, Gary kissed her neck, ran his tongue down to her breasts. He teased the nipples, taking them in his mouth, nibbling, sucking, first one then the other. Her hand stroked him faster. She was oblivious to anything but pleasure.

Gary mounted her. Her arms circled him, her long nails tracing lines down his back. She opened her legs.

'Make it good,' she whispered. 'Make love to me now.'

'Yes,' he said. 'It's time.'

His hand moved out to the side, along the floor, groping through the hay. He found the knife and his hand closed tightly around the handle. Grinning, he pushed himself to his knees, straddling Linda.

She looked up at him, puzzled.

She started to ask what was wrong, then her eyes caught the gleaming object in his hand. Her eyes wide, she watched him switch it over to his right hand. In the dim light from the moon outside, she saw it was a knife. A large kitchen knife.

Slowly, his arm raised.

'Gary—'

The knife flashed on its way down. Surprised, she felt it sink deep into her stomach. The blade was cold, hard. There was a sharp pain. She tried to scream but she could only suck in her breath. The blade withdrew and came down again, this time plunging into her chest. It grated against bone. Gasping for breath, she saw the blade go up again, dripping blood. She tried to get up but Gary slapped her hard across the face. She fell back, her head thumping against the loft boards. Desperately, she clawed at the arm pinning her down.

The knife hit her again. And again.

She saw it, rising, falling, slinging blood everywhere.

Gary's face gleamed red above her. Oh God, she thought, he was stabbing her over and over. But she still lived. Why didn't she die? Why couldn't it be over quickly, like in the movies? One stab and the victim is dead. Please—let it—end. Stabbing. Thumping. Dear God—please—help me—Mama—it hurts so—Something warm came up her throat, spewed out of her mouth, splattering her face. Then, the loft whirled, floated away from her. The darkness came finally, and she welcomed it. She was barely aware of the hammering against her chest as the infinite blackness engulfed her.

Gary stabbed her once for every year of her age—fifteen—sixteen—seventeen—and one to grow on. Breathing heavily, he sat back on her legs and dropped the knife on to the hay. His hands were slick with blood, his face splotched with it. Blood bubbled from the huge hole in Linda's chest. He sat there for a moment, staring at her face. Her mouth and eyes were open. Even in death, she was beautiful. He wished that she had never

told him about moving away. That she was going to leave him. That was the last thing he had wanted to hear. He really did care for her. More so than the others. Of course, he had said that the last time, hadn't he? And the time before that? And the time before that?

Well, never mind. She wouldn't be leaving him now. And he felt good about that. She could join the rest of them. He could keep them all. Forever.

Gary stood up then picked up Linda's blouse and wiped his face and hands. He picked up the rest of her clothes, piled them on top of her body, then, grabbing her by the ankles, dragged her across the platform to the bales of hay stacked against the wall. They were stacked three rows deep, eight bales high and ran the entire width of the loft. It took him several minutes to remove the rows in the middle, revealing the door hidden behind them. He sighed with relief as he saw the huge Yale lock was still there. Fumbling the key from his pocket, he unlocked it and pushed the door open. The odour hit him at once. But, he had gotten used to that smell. A guy could get used to anything when he had to.

He picked up Linda's feet again and pulled her into the room. Sweat stinging his eyes, he tugged at her until she was clear of the door then let go of her ankles. Her legs hit the floor with a dull thud. He went back to the door, closed it, then turned to the wooden crate against the wall. He picked up the small lantern he'd purchased at K-Mart almost two years ago and shook it. He'd have to get some more kerosene soon. Taking out a Bic lighter, he lit the lamp and placed it back on top of the crate.

He turned slowly, and gazed up at the rafters, smiling at the occupants of the room.

The three skulls grinned back at him.

The skeletons were hanging by the neck, two feet apart, from the bottom beam of one of the rafters. Their bones glowed yellow in the lantern-light. There were dark stains beneath them where the flesh had dripped in clumps then rotted and dried. Two of the skeletons were clean but one still had bits of putrid flesh clinging to the legs and feet.

How you doing ladies?

He went to the first remains. How are you tonight, Gail? Then

the second. How's it hanging, Teresa? Finally the third, the one with the green slime hanging from her chin. Boy, you really look like hell, Sandra. Can't you do a better job than that with your make-up?

She gaped at him with black, eyeless sockets.

Gary continued to look at them. He still remembered the exact dates he had brought them to the loft. Gail Wagner, 3 June 1981. Teresa Davenport, 11 March 1982. Sandra Hicks, 8 April 1983. And now, Linda Underwood, 16 October 1983. She would have to be remembered too.

Meet your new room-mate girls.

Gary grabbed up a piece of rope from the floor and tied it around Linda's neck. He tossed the loose end over the rafter beam then hauled her up until her feet were almost a foot from the floor. His arms straining against the weight, he secured the rope to the centre post then stood there, watching her sway, the rope creaking against the wood. Blood seeped from the hole in her chest, painting her stomach and legs. Her hair covered one side of her face concealing one of her eyes. The other one was looking at Gary, staring.

It was your fault, he told her mentally. I didn't want to bring you up here. Not this way. I didn't want it to end like this.

Linda continued to stare at him, and bleed.

Moving around her, Gary bumped one of the skeletons, sending it into the others. Bones clacked loudly through the empty barn. He grabbed at them, stopping their motion, separating them. Noisy bitches, he thought. He went back to the crate, picked up the lantern and blew out the flame. Returning it to the crate, he went out the door, put the padlock back on, then fixed the bales of hay just the way he had them before.

Sighing, he descended the ladder and left the barn, shoving the door closed behind him. He made his way back down the hill and on to the road. As he walked back towards town he wondered about the new girl in school. She had asked him to call her some time. They had met once in the library and she had seemed to be a pretty nice girl. Yes, he'd give her a call tomorrow.

Who knows, maybe she will be the right one.

Maybe he wouldn't have to take her to the loft.

Oscar Holmes

No mark of respect

Celia Black was a lucky woman, and she knew it. Still young enough to be attractive, she would not have to bear the label of handsome, a handsome woman, for some ten years or so.

She pushed the young man away from her.

'And now I simply must go and change. Joe's home for dinner tonight.'

'Oh, a rare treat.'

'Yes.' Celia looked rather wistful as she spoke. 'And you must go. It is very dangerous you coming here.'

'Tomorrow, then. At my flat.'

'Yes.'

Celia was a good cook, even when she couldn't be bothered. She had bothered this time, and Joe was most appreciative.

'This is delicious. First rate.'

'Oh, good.'

The silence that followed seemed strained to Celia.

Joe finished eating.

'Did you have a nice day?'

Celia felt herself blushing. 'Oh, yes. I—went shopping.'

'Oh!' Joe was helping himself to some cheese.

'Yes, I—bought some curtain material.'

'More curtain material?'

'Yes.' Celia hesitated, then decided to change the subject. 'Did you make lots more money for me to spend today?'

Celia and Joe were two of the most generous people. Their donations to charities were large and numerous. Neither over-indulged themselves. Their home and possessions were beautiful and expensive, but, as Joe pointed out, if someone earned a living making a Rolls-Royce, someone had to stump up the money to buy it. Maybe it was the uncharacteristic nature of her query which caused Joe to peer so intently at his wife. Or maybe she

was just imagining it.

'I managed to keep thirteen hundred people employed in honest labour.'

'Oh, good.' Celia began to clear the dishes. Joe was eating his cheese.

'I shall be away for a few days, from tomorrow.'

Celia was genuinely upset. 'Oh, Joe! Not again?'

'I'm sorry, Celia. You know how it is.'

'Yes.' Celia did not argue. She never had before. She had always admired Joe's tireless capacity for work, despite his advancing years. She knew that his dedication and, yes, sense of responsibility were qualities much admired. It did mean, though, that he spent long periods away. Away from her.

'I'm sorry. I'll try and be back by Saturday.'

Celia had never quite taken to the decor of Mike's flat; but she had always felt that taste was a matter for the individual. Mike certainly hadn't stinted on the expense, though. She turned her head. From the bed she could see Mike in the adjoining bathroom. He was looking in the mirror.

'You're beautiful.' Celia couldn't help but sound slightly sarcastic.

'I know.'

Celia raised her eyes to heaven. She found Mike's vanity irritating. Mike came back to the bed and sat down beside her. 'Nice of Joe to go away.'

'Yes.'

'While the cat's away, eh?'

Celia shrugged. 'I suppose so.'

'Poor old fool.'

'He—he's no fool, Mike. You should know that. He does run several very successful companies, apart from anything else.'

'I know. But what about me. Don't I help his companies to run?'

'One of them.'

'Well, one of them. Without me, that company would be in a right state.'

'Oh.'

'Joe is past it. He—'

'That is not the view of his board. Or his employees. Or most of them. Joe is no fool. He may be getting on, but he is all there.'

Mike got up and stretched. He went back to the bathroom. 'But not as all there as I am.'

For all his brashness with Celia, Mike Smith was very much the subordinate in Joe Black's presence. He sat opposite Joe, and felt the other's eyes gazing intently at him. Joe had a large file open on his desk.

'So I want you to go to Cornwall. My Western Counties concern is expanding. Mr Davies will brief you. You are on temporary secondment. The whole operation should take five months or so. You will be permanently there for that time, of course. It isn't relocation though.' Joe stared at Mike.

'I take it you have no family ties, or anything which makes this appointment inconvenient?'

'Oh, no. None at all. Thank you very much, Mr Black. Am I expected to—?'

'I told you, Davies will brief you, and give you your itinerary. Tell me, do you know the West Country?'

'No. I mean not very well. I usually go abroad for holidays. I haven't explored England much.'

Joe grunted. 'I was born there. Still got a home there. And other property. Near Redruth, as a matter of fact. Quite near where you will be working. Probably send my wife down in a few weeks. Catch some of the summer such as it is. She needs a holiday.'

Mike remained impassive, watching the old man. 'Oh.'

'So see Davies. You will be reporting to him.'

That evening Celia and Mike were drinking wine at Mike's flat. Celia had complained of a headache, and they had foregone any bedroom activity.

'And he said, "Go to Cornwall." My heart sank. Then he said he was sending his wife down for the rest of the summer. I couldn't believe it.'

'Yes. He told me I needed a break last week. After I didn't go to Trinidad in February, what with – you know what.'

'After my irresistible charm overcame you.'

'Something like that. Anyway, he seemed to think I should get

away. I—' Celia paused, and sipped her drink.

'Yes?' said Mike.

'I wish Joe would take a break sometimes.'

'Well, we can have a break together in Cornwall.'

Mr Davies was a cold fish, thought Mike Smith. Still, he was in a senior, a very senior, position. A man to impress. Black thought very highly of him. Mike Smith sat up a little straighter and paid attention. Mr Davies continued his detailed analysis of the West Country situation, and the part Mike was to play in it. Mike nodded.

'Fine,' he said.

Davies looked at him over the top of his glasses.

'Stone. Norman Stone. Do you know Stone?'

'I've heard of him, of course, but I've never met him.'

'First rate man. Very sound. You will be reporting to him.'

'Right.'

'He has been with Mr Black for years. In fact he is related to him.'

Mike made a face. 'Oh, blood is thicker than water—'

'As I said, Mr Stone is a first rate man.'

'Oh yes. Of course.' Mike again felt Davies' eyes boring into him. It would not do to allow any personal prejudices to show, thought Mike. Better concentrate on the matter in hand. It never occurred to him that there might not be anything to be prejudiced about.

'And the car?' Mike asked the question hoping to get the answer he had calculated would be worth more to him.

'Yes, the car. Use your own.'

'And the usual mileage allowances apply, and—'

'Of course. It is the standard package.'

Mike was pleased. A company car would not bring him the high return he would receive from using his own car and claiming the generous mileage allowances. He had known it was usual to use a company car, and had made a few noises to the Personnel Department about using his own. True, there would be wear and tear, but that would be more than covered by his expenses. His car had cost him a lot. It would be good to recoup some of his investment. And Mike liked a good return on his investments.

The following Monday morning Mike was driving along a country road, just outside Redruth. He had driven down on the Sunday and stayed overnight at a hotel. He had hoped to meet a suitably attractive and willing companion, but he had been singularly unlucky. At ten-thirty that evening he had made a phone call to Celia. However, he had recognised the voice of his employer at the other end and, after a moment's indecision, had decided to hang up. It would hardly be the thing to bluff his way through.

'Oh, Mr Black, just phoning to say I arrived safely. Would you put your wife on. Thanks very much.' Mike smiled to himself. No. He would wait for her arrival in a couple of weeks. In the meantime . . . His eyes wandered over a pretty girl hitching the other way. In the meantime, he would keep his eyes skinned.

Mike missed the sign to the site, and had to drive back a couple of miles. Somehow he had expected the usual huge hoardings Mr Stone favoured to advertise his enterprises. Instead there was just a modest site indicator. He drove carefully down the track. Large pot-holes were to be avoided at all cost. He had better things to spend his money on than the cost of repairing the suspension on his car. Could he sue the company? Fat chance. Mike smiled grimly to himself. Mr Black was not the sort of man to be amused if he tried to pull a flanker like that.

A group of buildings came into view. There was no one about, but a company van and a Ford Sierra bore witness to some activity.

Mike got out of his car and looked around. The buildings were in an advanced state of disrepair. Thick woodland surrounded the whole area. He walked towards the buildings, and as he did so a door opened. A large man in overalls stood framed in the doorway.

'Good morning,' said Mike. 'I'm Mike Smith. I believe Mr Stone is expecting me.'

'Yes. Come in.' The large man stood aside for Mike. After the brightness of the day the inside of the office seemed very gloomy. Mike made out a desk, and a man sitting behind it.

'Morning. Mike Smith. I believe you are expecting me.'

The man rose to his feet.

'Yes. I'm Stone. Mr Davies told us you were coming. Good trip?'

'Fine. I took everyone's advice and drove down yesterday. Stayed in Redruth last night. They told me that from here on

you would look after my accommodation.'

'Of course, of course. We will soon get you settled in.'

'I have all my project papers in the car. I was able to have a good look at them last night at the hotel.' Never too soon to try and create a good impression.

'Splendid. Right, I think we'll have a tour of inspection.' They left the office and walked to Mike's car.

'Shall we go in my car?' said Mr Stone. 'We will be back here after lunch. Then I can take you to your accommodation. Fred is here, and will make sure nothing untoward happens to your car in the meantime. Nice car. BMW, isn't it?'

'Yes,' said Mike. He looked around.

'Rather deserted here. I thought this was—'

'Oh, this is just a development site, grade C. You will be pitched in right at the heart of things at our main complex.' Mr Stone opened the door of his car. 'Presumably you have all your baggage with you?'

'Yes, it's all in the car.'

'Fine. Leave it there until we get back.'

'I'll just get my brief-case.' Mike went to his car and picked up his brief-case from the back seat. He looked at the keys in the ignition and hesitated. 'Oh, well, what the hell,' he muttered and left them where they were. He walked back to the Sierra and got in. Mr Stone turned to Fred.

'Look after things here, Fred. Back after lunch.' He put the car in gear and let the clutch out. Mike turned round in his seat and looked back at the collection of buildings.

'Fair bit of potential there, I should say. Near a big town, plenty of land. Earmarked for a distribution centre, isn't it?'

Mr Stone negotiated the pot-holes with care. 'Something like that.'

Mike saw Fred turn and walk to his, Mike's, car. He seemed to be about to open the driver's door when they rounded a bend, and Fred, the car and the buildings were lost to sight.

'Oh,' said Mike. 'What's Fred—?' He stopped.

'Yes?' said Mr Stone.

'Oh, it looked as though Fred was about to get into my car. Just my imagination. Sorry.'

'Don't worry about Fred. A very loyal company man. He will

make sure nothing happens to your car.' Mr Stone stopped at the junction of the main road. The road was clear, and he accelerated away. Mike opened his brief-case.

'I've had a good look at the proposals. Very interesting reading, Mr Stone.' Mike wondered how long it would be before Mr Stone volunteered permission to call him by his Christian name. Norman. Norman Stone. Mike waited in vain.

Mr Stone continued driving. He did not reply to Mike's statement.

Mike tried again.

'Nice part of the world. Always liked it down here.'

This time Mr Stone responded. 'Yes. Very pleasant. Would have thought you would have found it a bit quiet. A bit tame.'

Mike spent the next five minutes assuring Mr Stone how there was merit in almost any environment: town, city or country. He tried hard to give the impression of a very broadminded, adaptable person. He was sure he had done it very well. He was just starting on a description of his last trip abroad when Mr Stone slowed the car. Mike stopped speaking. They had just turned off the deserted country road into the drive of a private house.

'Oh, is this—?' Mike looked inquiringly at Mr Stone.

'Your lodgings for the next few weeks. I thought as we were passing, we might as well take a look. En route.'

Mike looked at the square brick house. It had a rather deserted air about it. Still, it was pretty big. Mike wondered who owned it, and who would be looking after him.

Mr Stone stopped the car at the foot of the steps leading to the front door. As he did so the front door opened and a man appeared. Mike peered at his face. It looked familiar. Yes, he remembered now. At some party or other given by Mr Black for his executives. This man had been serving the drinks. His wife, he remembered, had had a hand in preparing the food. It had been delicious. If he was to be looked after by those two, his stay would be no hardship.

'No need to bring your brief-case. We'll just pop in and take a look.'

'Right,' said Mike, and followed Mr Stone up the steps. At the top of the steps Mr Stone stood aside.

'After you,' he said.

'Thanks,' said Mike, and went inside.

It was quite gloomy, and, after the bright sunshine outside, almost impossible to make anything out. He blinked. The man he had recognised from the party was standing in front of him. He heard the door slam shut.

Mike began, 'I think I recognise you—'

'Shut up,' said Mr Stone.

Mike was so surprised he bit his tongue. He turned round and faced Mr Stone. As he did so he felt his arms gripped from both sides. Two other men had emerged from the gloom in the hallway and were holding him fast. Mike stared at Mr Stone. Mr Stone stared back. He nodded, once. The man Mike had recognised stepped into view. He was holding a syringe. Suddenly he stabbed at Mike's arm. The needle went straight through the jacket, through the shirt-sleeve and into his arm. Mike gasped. He felt a surge of fluid going into his arm from the syringe. Then he sagged into unconsciousness between the two men.

Mr Stone turned and walked into the drawing-room. He could hear the sound of Smith's body being dragged upstairs. He dialled a London number.

'Hello. Mr Black, please. Yes, it's Norman Stone. Yes. Thank you.' He waited. 'Hello, Liz? Yes, Norman Stone. Yes, if you would. He is expecting my call. Thanks.' Another pause.

'Hello, Black here.'

'Good morning, sir. Stone here. All is well and under control. Fine. No problem, none at all. Right. We'll expect you tomorrow afternoon. Yes sir. Goodbye.'

It was almost dark when Mike awoke. He was lying on a bed in a small room. There was a tiny window quite high up in one wall. Slowly Mike sat up. His tongue hurt, and so did his arm. Otherwise he felt perfectly all right.

'What the hell is this,' he muttered. He was still dressed in his suit. He felt in the pockets and found his wallet, change and diary. Nothing had been taken. He felt a tremendous thirst and looked around. Beside the bed was a table, and on it a jug and a glass. The jug was full of what looked like water. Mike picked up the jug and smelled it. Nothing. He poured himself a glass of water and sipped it. Tasted all right. He finished the glass, poured

another and drank that down, too. He looked round the room. It was bare, stark. Just the bed, table and, in a corner, a bucket with a lid. Mike got up and went to the door. There was no handle on the inside. It looked solid. Mike thumped it with the side on his fist.

'Hey,' he shouted, 'hey, let me out.' He scrabbled to get a hold of the door, but the inside was smooth wood. It did not give an inch when he hit it. It was difficult to tell even which way it opened, in or out. 'Hey,' yelled Mike again. 'Hey.' Not a sound.

'We'll bloody well see about this,' muttered Mike. He took a few paces back and hurled himself at the door. He only succeeded in hurting his shoulder. He tried again, though with more force this time.

The door was solid. Gradually, Mike began to feel panic building up.

'For God's sake,' he shouted. Then, louder, 'For God's sake, let me out.' Silence. He looked up at the tiny window. A patch of blue could be seen, but it was impossible to tell what time of day it was. Mike glanced at his watch. Nine-thirty. He looked around for a light-switch. He then realised there was no light. Mike began to tremble. His arm had begun to throb, and he felt sick. He sat down on the bed.

'Oh, God,' he said. 'Oh, God.'

Joe Black sat in the back of his Jaguar, intently reading some papers. He travelled a great deal, and his chauffeur was a necessity to him, allowing him to work while on the move. Jaguar had still not made enough room for passengers travelling in the rear, but the broad seats allowed him to spread his documents around. And the Jaguar was British, not an import at the expense of the home-grown product. Joe looked up and out at the swiftly passing Cornish countryside.

'You know the way, Charlie?'

'Yes, sir,' replied Charlie. 'Be there in about fifteen minutes.'

Charlie thought more highly of Joe Black than of any of his previous employers, and they included an Earl. Charlie liked the way he was called Charlie, and not Charles. And he liked hearing his employer's views on life. He was not Mr Black's equal, but Mr Black treated him like one.

Charlie drove carefully along the narrow lane. Away to their left, on the top of a low hill, stood their destination, a small stone cottage. It seemed to be part of the countryside, as much a part as the trees growing around it, which stretched away and down.

'There's a stile a little further,' said Joe. 'Yes, just here. Wait for me, will you?'

'Very good, sir.' Charlie pulled as far off the road as he could and stopped. He sat and watched as Joe climbed the stile and started to walk briskly up the track which led to the cottage.

The old lady watched Joe's progress from a window. When he was nearly at her front door she went out to meet him.

When he saw her, Joe's face split into a smile.

'Hello, Meg. Long time. You got my letter, then?'

Meg smiled in return. 'Oh, yes,' she nodded admiringly. 'My, Joe, you must still be strong. Climbing up all that way and you are hardly panting.'

'Oh, I am well enough.' He looked around. 'Nothing changes, does it, Meg.' It was a statement.

'No.' Meg looked at him. 'I've a feeling you've come for a purpose, for all that your letter said you'd be just dropping in for a chat.'

Joe looked at Meg, then turned and looked around at the views. Far down, on the road, he could see his car. It looked like a toy.

'Meg, I need your—talents. Will you help me?'

Meg turned and went into the cottage. 'Joe, you just have to say.'

Joe followed her. 'Good,' he said. 'Good.'

Mike's prison. He awoke with a start. It was dim in the room, and chilly. Mike shivered. He felt sick. The stubble was thick on his chin.

'How long have I been here, for Christ's sake,' he muttered. He looked at his watch. It was too dark to read the display, so he pressed the little light knob.

'Eight-thirty.' He pressed another knob and the date flashed up. It took an effort to remember what date he had been imprisoned.

'So it is the seventh today. Eight-thirty in the evening. And I went to the site on the sixth. And I was put in here about lunch-time. So I've been here a day and a half. About a day and a half.'

Christ!' Mike was amazed. He would not have been surprised if he had been a prisoner for over a week. He guessed, though he could not be sure, that the water he had drunk had had some drug or sleeping potion in it.

The sound of the door being unlocked startled him. He sat on the bed. His first instinct had been to charge at whoever came through the door, but his circumstances made him think again. He stayed where he was. The door opened and Mr Stone came into the room followed by two other men. One of the men carried a tray with several plates of food on it. The other man carried nothing. He stood, impassive, just inside the door. His huge bulk seemed to fill the room. Mike thought it reasonable to remain seated on the bed.

'What's—er—what is going on?' He had meant to sound angry, authoritative. Instead he had sounded plaintive.

Mr Stone stared down at the man on the bed. Mike could only see his dark form, a shadow against the bright glare of electric light flooding into the room through the open doorway. Mr Stone moved to one side, and Mike blinked as the light hit him full in the face. Then he noticed another person standing in the room. He peered harder. Whoever it was was almost hidden from view behind the large man. Mike's eyes were growing accustomed to the light, and he could make out a short, rather dumpy figure. Mr Stone spoke.

'Well, Meg?'

Mike watched as the dumpy figure moved across the floor to his bed. He looked up into her old face. A few wisps of beard grew from her chin. The faintest traces of a rather unpleasant smell made Mike recoil slightly, and turn his head away from her.

Meg looked at Mike for several moments, then looked up at Mr Stone.

'Oh, yes,' she said. 'No trouble. No trouble at all. Six weeks. Maybe seven.'

'Fine,' said Mr Stone.

Two weeks later Celia was pacing up and down the spacious lounge of her Cornish house. Eventually she made up her mind. She went into the hall and picked up the telephone. She hesitated as she put her finger in the dial, then, determined, she

dialled the number.

'Oh, good afternoon. Mr Stone, please. Yes, of course.' She waited, her heart pounding. 'Mr Stone? Good afternoon to you. Celia Black here. Oh, I'm very well, thank you. Yes. The reason I'm calling is that I am on holiday down here for a short while and my husband mentioned that one of the London office executives was coming down here to work for a few months, and would I entertain him. You know—dinner and—yes. Oh, yes. Sorry. Mr Smith. Mr Michael Smith. Oh! Oh, isn't he? Oh, never mind. No doubt my husband got it mixed up. Yes, it is very unlike him, isn't it? Anyway, that is my duty done, so no need for me to worry. Yes. And you. Goodbye.'

Celia replaced the receiver. Whatever was going on? She had not heard from Mike since the Sunday evening he had phoned from Cornwall. And Joe had answered, so he had rung off. At least, she supposed it had been Mike. Wherever was he? Celia's mind raced over the possibilities. An accident? A sudden change in plan. He had been sent somewhere else? But why didn't he phone? Had he met someone else, grown tired of her? Celia frowned. It was most puzzling. Had Joe found out? Celia thought hard. It was most unlikely. If he had, he would have confronted her with it. Anyway, Mike would have phoned her, or visited, or written. And Joe was away, had been for ten days. Singapore. And Mr Stone? Saying that Mike was not with them and was not expected. Celia began to feel a little frightened. Not for Mike. Mike, although undeniably attractive, was too much of . . . How was it Joe described some people? Yes, too much of a main chance merchant. Yes, that described Mike. No. Celia was frightened because she was beginning to think there might be something going on which . . .

The telephone rang. Celia snatched the receiver.

'Hello, Celia Black speaking. Oh, hello Joe. Yes, fine. You are back, then? At the London office. Yes. How was Singapore? No, I've been very lazy, hardly done anything. Yes. Of course I missed you. Any calls? No. Why, should I? Oh, did you? You should have said. Anyway he hasn't. Look, shall I come back. I— Oh, right. Lovely. See you tomorrow, then. You'll drive down, will you? Right. About six, then. Goodbye.'

★

Celia looked across the table at her husband. He had turned up, as promised, at six o'clock. He looked fit and well. Celia had spent the day shopping and cooking. She had made an effort to look nice, and, in fact, looked stunning. She had decided to put Mike to the back of her mind, at least for a while.

'So it was quite uneventful. Singapore is beautiful, though. What I saw of it between meetings.'

Celia smiled. 'I'm surprised you even noticed it at all.'

'And what about you? You must have done something since you've been here?'

'Oh, I've been very lazy. Sunbathed a lot. When the weather's permitted it. Mrs Baker from the village has done all the house-keeping. She is a treasure. I did the arrangements about the Cancer Research Fund, though. Thought I'd get things moving.'

Joe nodded. 'Good. Thanks.' He put down his coffee cup.

'More coffee?'

'No thanks. No sign of Mike Smith, then?'

Celia nearly choked. She very carefully put her cup down on its saucer. 'No. Who?'

'Mike Smith. You remember. I told you he was coming down to Cornwall. Working on a project for me. I told him to look you up. Surely you remember him? You met him last Christmas, at the party. And again in the New Year.'

'Oh, yes, of course. I had forgotten.'

'Well, I only mentioned him to you yesterday on the phone.'

'I meant, I had forgotten you mentioned him. On the phone.' Celia felt flustered. 'Anyway, he hasn't called. I haven't seen him.'

Joe picked up his cup. 'But you've been seeing him, haven't you?' He sipped his coffee.

Celia sat perfectly still. Her heart was pounding.

'You've been seeing him every week since Christmas, haven't you?'

'I—I—'

'Haven't you?'

Celia felt as though a great weight was crushing her.

'I don't know what you mean,' she said weakly.

Joe looked at his wife. 'Do you think I am foolish?'

'No,' said Celia. 'No, I don't.'

'Do you think I don't know when my wife has turned her

attention to another man?’

‘Joe, I—’

‘And such a man! A preening peacock, with one eye always on the mirror, and the other always on the main chance.’

‘But, Joe—’

‘Yes?’ said Joe.

Celia paused. She felt sick. ‘I have nothing to say.’

‘So!’

‘You were never there, Joe,’ said Celia desperately. ‘You were always away. I was—lonely.’

‘I have my responsibilities. My work—’

‘To me, Joe! What about your responsibilities to me?’

‘I gave you—I loved you. And that man! How could you? He is a lout, not worthy to—’

Celia bit her lip. ‘He is young. He is good-looking. He—’

‘And does that give him the right to take my wife? Well, does it?’

Celia shook her head. ‘No.’ She barely whispered her reply.

Joe got up from the table. He walked to the large window which took up most of one of the walls and looked out over the garden and across the fields. Celia watched him.

‘Well,’ said Joe. ‘Your friend won’t be so able from now on.’

Celia did not understand what her husband was saying. ‘What do you mean?’ she asked.

Joe turned. ‘Have you seen your Mr Smith lately?’

‘Look,’ said Celia, ‘he is not my Mr Smith, and he is not my friend. It is true, Joe. I am sorry, terribly sorry. I was lonely, and I felt neglected, and I wish I had never met him. It’s true, Joe.’

‘I repeat, have you seen your Mr Smith lately?’

Celia sighed. ‘No.’ Then it dawned on Celia that the question was not an accusation. She looked hard at her husband. ‘Joe, where is Mike?’

Joe turned back to the views. ‘He is in good hands. Being—cared for.’

The human body is strange. Although Mike had been kept either fully unconscious or half-conscious for over six weeks, his body had remained healthy. Mind you, it had hurt like hell for the times when he had been able to poke his head out from oblivion

and register a little of what was happening. He had had no exercise other than being allowed to sit up while he was fed. The rest of the time he lay, blindfolded and tied up, either on his back, or on his front, or on his sides. Once a day he was lifted off the bed and unceremoniously dumped on a portable loo. While all this was going on his body kept working, kept pumping, kept alive. And the tan, which Mike had worked so hard on, winter and summer, began to fade. Bit by bit it disappeared completely.

Mike didn't know it, but he had had regular injections to guarantee his comatose state. Now his stay in the room was nearly over, and the injections had stopped. Gradually, over a period of two days, Mike began to regain his senses. He had almost got used to his permanently blindfolded state. He didn't know it, but only when he was unconscious was the blindfold removed. So for six weeks Mike had only known darkness. He tried to move. He felt hellishly uncomfortable. The ropes binding him had hardly bothered him in his drugged state. Curiously, they had induced in him almost a feeling of security, like a frightened lamb feels when held very tightly by a shepherd. Now, his senses restored, he had an overwhelming urge to be able to stretch. The pain, which at various times had affected every part of his body, was gone, though.

Suddenly, he stiffened. The door was being unlocked. He heard footsteps coming into the room.

'Keep the blindfold on him. Keep his hands tied. And put these on him. And be gentle with him now.' This was followed by a laugh. The voice was Mr Stone's.

'Is he conscious yet?' Another voice, a man's voice. Mike did not recognise it.

'I don't give a damn if he is conscious or not.'

Mike was pulled off the bed. His feet were untied, and he felt a pair of trousers being pulled on him. His left leg was lifted off the ground, and while he was supported by unseen hands a sock and a shoe was put on his foot. Then the same on the other leg. Mike was too frightened either to speak or to try and fight his captors. His hands were untied. A shirt was pulled on and buttoned up. Then his jacket. His hands were then tied again.

'Right. Come on.'

Mike's arm was gripped and he was led out of the room. They

went down two flights of stairs. Mike frequently stumbled.

The heat hit him when he stepped outside the house. It soaked into him. The contrast to the room was very welcome. Mike had always felt cold up there, partly due to his semi-conscious state. When asleep or unconscious, his body temperature dropped. With no covering to keep his body heat in, he had always woken shivering. Despite the blindfold he was aware of the bright sunlight. It made his eyes water. He sneezed twice.

'Come on, Sunshine.' The voice was harsh. Mike heard a car door open. Then he was lifted off his feet and bundled into the back of a car. He was pushed sideways so he was lying across the back seat. A heavy body leant on him to prevent any chance of Mike attracting attention. Mike had no intention of doing anything of the sort. He lay still.

The car took him along deserted country lanes and through a couple of sleepy villages. After half an hour Mike felt the scrunch of gravel under the tyres. Then the car stopped abruptly.

Mr Stone got out of the car.

Mike's car was parked a little way away. Mr Stone looked around. There was no one else about. The car park of the deserted tin mine was a good place. No tourist trap, this. He walked to Mike's car. Mike's suitcase and brief-case were on the back seat. The keys were in the ignition. Mr Stone nodded appreciatively.

'All right, bring him over.' Without a glance at the blindfolded figure being half carried to his car, Mr Stone walked back to his own car. He got in. A few moments later he was joined by his two companions.

'You drive,' said Mr Stone to one of them. The car drew out of the car park and accelerated down the road.

Mike sat at the wheel of his car. He was listening intently. His hands were still bound, and his eyes blindfolded. He had heard the other car drive off, but he was still doubtful. He sat still for another five minutes, then risked a movement. All was quiet. One of the men had done something to the bindings round his hands and Mike realised they were loose. Slowly, because his arms were very stiff from lack of use, he eased his hands free. He put his hands to his blindfold and pulled it off. The dazzling sunshine caused his eyes to stream. He closed his eyes, and rubbed them. After a few moments he opened his eyes again, very gradually.

Through the windscreen he could see trees and blue sky. He stretched his arms, and started massaging them. Then his heart leapt, seemed to stop, then started beating wildly. His hands and fingers were covered in tattoos. He turned his hands over. The palms, too, were covered. As quickly as he could he pulled his jacket off. He scrabbled at the buttons on his shirt. Losing patience, he wrenched at them, pulling them off as he did so. He tore open his shirt and looked down. His chest and stomach were covered. Frantically he undid his belt and pulled his trousers down over his knees, pulling his pants with them. Every part of his body was covered in tattoos. He gripped the steering wheel sweating profusely. He wiped his forehead with his hands, then froze. A terrible thought had struck him. He put a multi-coloured hand up to the driving mirror and tilted it down so he could see himself. His whole face was covered in tattoos. He gasped, then started to scream.

St John Bird

Firework night

'Panda seven, can you attend at Oak Cottage, occupier there is reporting annoyance by children.'

'Roger.'

Constable Wallace dropped his radio on the passenger seat of the police car, and started up the engine. He had been sitting in a quiet lay-by, attempting to catch up on some of his outstanding paperwork. The morning shift had been quiet, so far, and he had soon become bored with driving aimlessly around. And now, the moment he had stopped and uncapped his pen, the radio had burst into life.

Oak Cottage, he thought, on Halfacre Lane. He knew the area well. The cottage was one of the few surviving relics of the district's agricultural past, a sample of the sort of dwelling that had existed before the industrial estate had been built, and the rows of modern houses had replaced the fields. The cottage was next to a broad field, called Oak Meadow.

Kids gathering firewood, surmised Wallace, as he accelerated into the traffic. Oak Meadow was always full of them, and with November the fifth just one week away, the children were everywhere, scrounging wood, picking up old cardboard boxes and dumped it all on a massive pile in the middle of the meadow.

Wallace swung into Halfacre Lane, drove past the few modern houses and stopped outside the mass of overgrown privet which hid Oak Cottage from the view of passers-by. He pushed open a creaking wooden gate, and found himself in another world.

The grass of the front garden was waist high, dotted with weeds. The hedge successfully cut out the rest of the world, making even the traffic noises seem far and distant, as though on another plane.

Peaceful, decided the policeman, heading up the cracked stones of the path and knocking on a door that had not seen paint for

many a year.

There was silence for a moment, and then the sound of someone shuffling along inside the house. A second later, the door was creaking eerily open.

A witch, was the constable's first thought. The old lady in front of him was not very tall, frail looking, but bent and wizened with the sort of face he recalled from childhood picture books. She was the living replica of a fairy-tale witch, an impression aided by the black clothing she wore.

'Oh, come in officer.' She stepped back and swung the door wide open. Her voice sounded just as Wallace had expected, aged and cracked.

'Thank you.' Wallace stepped into the house.

'I'm glad you were able to get here so quickly,' said the old lady, leading him down a musty-smelling hallway, and into a room at the back of the house. 'You might just be able to catch them.'

'Catch them?' echoed Wallace, making it a question.

'The children,' replied the old lady. 'Oh, I didn't explain did I? The local children are all in my back garden, they often come in. I don't mind them playing there, but, with Guy Fawkes night coming along, they're starting to gather wood for their bonfires.'

'Damaging trees?' ventured Wallace. The old lady shook her head.

'It's what's left of the old barn,' she replied. 'Look.' She indicated a vast wooden framework, seen through her back window, half hidden by trees and more tall hedges.

'You can hear them if you listen. They go in and start to take pieces of the wood for their fires. I'm not bothered about that, they can have as much as they want, but the barn's dangerous. It's been on the point of falling down for years, and I'd never forgive myself if it fell down on the children.'

'You just want me to chase them off?' said Wallace.

'If you don't mind,' was the reply, 'I'd be very grateful.'

'Is there a way out through the back of the house?'

The old lady led the way into the kitchen, and opened the back door. Wallace peered out into the overgrown garden.

'Mind you don't trip over the broom.'

Wallace was halfway out of the door and had not noticed the obstacle. He suppressed a chuckle. The broom tied in so well

with his first impression of the old lady. It had a long wooden handle, and a switch of twigs was tied to the bottom of it.

'Thanks.' He stepped over it, and headed into the wilderness of undergrowth, treading quietly and switching down the volume of his radio as he went. He made for the barn, hearing childish voices and laughter getting louder, suddenly lost beneath a deafening crash as a large piece of timber hit the ground.

'That'll burn great, we'll drag it out . . .'

Wallace stepped through the barn door.

There were five of them, all young, about eleven years old, with their backs to him. They were intent on watching a sixth child tugging at a piece of wood on the ground.

'What's going on here then?' Wallace spoke loudly.

The children spun round and stood frozen, staring at him with guilty faces. Wallace picked his way across the timber-strewn floor towards them, glancing at the roof. It certainly was dangerous, the big main beams were sagging, on the point of collapse.

'Well?' he demanded sternly. 'What's going on?'

'We're just getting some wood, mister,' said one of the children.

'You're trespassing,' said Wallace, aware as he spoke that it would not bother the children. Kids never bothered about laws of trespass, even if he told them about the dangers of the building, they would simply find scavenging about in there all the more interesting. He stared at them, wondering what he could use to frighten them off.

The idea came to him suddenly, and he was doubtful for a moment, wondering if they would believe it: so many kids these days were older than their years.

'I wouldn't come messing around in here if I was you,' he said, and shook his head seriously.

The children looked interested.

'Why not?' demanded the one who'd spoken before.

'The old lady.' Wallace jerked his head in the direction of the house. 'You know what she is, don't you?'

'What?' He had certainly captured their attention now.

'She's a witch.' Wallace peered hard at them, looking for any signs of disbelief. So far, so good. 'She doesn't like people coming in her garden, you know. I've come to warn you to stay out. She said if you ever come in here again . . .'

head. 'Who knows what might happen?'

'There's no such things as witches,' challenged the boy who had been tugging at the piece of wood.

Always one disbeliever, isn't there, thought Wallace, trying to think of a suitable reply. His problem was solved for him.

'Course there's witches,' said one of the other children. 'My brother reads books about them, and he was reading the paper last Sunday about a witch, here, in England.'

'Yeah?' The challenger was still doubtful.

'Your mate's right,' agreed Wallace. 'You'd better not come in here again.'

'Can't you arrest her?' asked the challenger. 'Put her away for being a witch?'

'Can't I what?' said Wallace. 'Arrest her? She might turn the police car into a frog or something.'

There was silence.

'Go on then,' encouraged Wallace. 'Off you go.'

The children filed out of the barn.

'Told you,' Wallace heard one of them say. 'I said she was a witch when I saw that broomstick, but you wouldn't believe me, would you?'

The policeman smiled to himself and headed back towards the house.

'Have they gone?' asked the old lady.

'They have,' replied Wallace. 'I don't think they'll be coming back.'

'Thank you so much,' she said. 'Would you like a cup of tea, and a piece of cake?'

'Well, I wouldn't say no.'

Wallace left the house half an hour later, full of cake and tea, having promised the old lady he would call back and visit her, just to make sure the children didn't return. He wondered what she would have said if she'd known just how they'd been persuaded to go away.

He called up his control.

'Regarding Oak Cottage, children moved off, caller seen.'

November the fifth found Wallace on the afternoon shift, from

three o'clock until eleven. It was a hated shift on that particular date: you could guarantee working like a maniac for the full tour of duty. Bonfires out of control, fireworks out of hand . . . even amateur fireworks, like the lunatic the previous year who'd filled a milk bottle with petrol and tried to light a bonfire with it. The resulting explosion had injured four people.

By nine o'clock Wallace was worn out. His uniform smelled strongly of the smoke of the four bonfires he'd attended while the fire brigade put them out: fires built too close to houses, threatening to burn down everything within range. He'd listened to the bitter complaints of people who'd had fireworks thrown at them or through their letter boxes, or who just hated November the fifth and found cause for complaint in anything.

With relief, he swung into his usual parking spot at the lay-by and lit a cigarette.

'Panda seven,' said the radio.

'Go ahead,' he replied wearily.

'Can you attend Oak Cottage, anonymous caller reports some sort of disturbance in that area.'

'Roger.'

Wallace drove quickly to the location. Disturbance usually meant something a bit more interesting than firework incidents.

He wondered if the old lady was all right. He'd called at the house a few times since dispersing the children; each time, tea and some sort of cake had been prepared for him. The old lady was content; the children stayed out of her garden now, she said.

Wallace parked his car outside Oak Cottage and stood for a moment, listening. He could hear nothing abnormal, just the sound of children shouting and screaming from the direction of the bonfire in Oak Meadow.

He went up the path of the cottage and knocked on the door. Maybe the old lady had heard something, and a cup of tea would be very welcome.

The door remained unanswered to his knock.

Curious, he thought, I wouldn't have imagined her going out tonight of all nights.

He walked round to the back of the house. The rear room light was on, and he saw that the back door was open.

In the light from the window, he saw that the grass of the back

garden was trampled down. Flicking on his torch, he followed the trail. It looked as though a herd of wild animals had rushed through the overgrown garden, the undergrowth crushed and flattened.

The trail led to a gap in the hedge. Wallace pushed through and found himself in Oak Meadow. The bonfire blazed away, and he could make out the shapes of figures running round it. A rocket hissed off into the black sky, and burst in a shower of light.

He walked forward and stumbled over something.

His torch beam lit up the shape of a home-made guy, crudely stuffed, a face drawn on it with charcoal.

‘Weren’t they going to burn it?’

‘Hiya mister,’ shrilled a voice at his side. He looked to see one of the children he had discovered in the barn. ‘Great, isn’t it?’

‘It is,’ agreed Wallace, following the child towards the bonfire. ‘Aren’t you going to burn the guy?’

‘We’ve got a better one, look.’

Wallace peered closer at the huge fire. Hidden amongst the flames he could just make out the shape of a guy, funny how the flickering fire seemed to make it move.

‘There’s no need to worry now.’ The child at his side was speaking earnestly. ‘It’s safe now, I read what to do in one of my brother’s books – just like Joan of Arc . . .’

Joan of Arc?

At the stake?

Wallace went closer to the fire. It wasn’t just the flicker of the flames that made the guy seem as if it were moving, it really was moving – but it couldn’t be – he felt sick and giddy.

It was.

He breathed deeply, trying to counter the feeling of faintness which swept over him, and the stench of cooking meat reached his nose.

Above the crackle of the flames came the chant of the children.

‘We burned the witch, we burned the witch . . .’

Silent war

One chilly eve in 1976, there was a knock at the door.

'Who you expecting?' Joe asked, afraid of who might visit, sick to death of relatives who came as though to pay their last respects. But that was months ago. Few still bothered to make the trek upstate to where he and his brother lived. The horror and novelty had worn off.

Teddy was half-way to the door when he answered his crippled brother, 'Nobody. Can't imagine.'

He opened the door and said, 'Yes?'

There stood a huge man. Not tall or fat, but bulky. A hulk. It was as though someone had built a brick wall in front of the door. He wore a long, black coat that almost hid his baggy trousers. His trousers in turn nearly hid his scuffed, wingtip shoes. His neck was made to look extraordinarily thick, due to a navy blue woollen scarf, wrapped twice around. His head poked out of scarf and collar, with a 1940s wide-brim hat on top. Dark glasses and black leather gloves completed the image. A regular *film noir* villain had stepped off a 1937 movie set and on to the front step of Teddy and Joe's house.

He might have been forty, or younger, or older. It was hard to judge, bundled as he was in all that warm clothing.

Teddy stared at him long moments. The man didn't say a word. 'Your car break down near here?' asked Teddy.

The dark-clad man stood against the night, a great statue of an ape. His thin lips were an expressionless gash across his face.

Teddy decided to make one last effort to elicit some response before rudely closing the door.

'Do you want to use our phone?'

The man was in the house with one long step. He scanned the interior, his hidden stare lingering a moment on the young invalid propped up on the couch. All the other rooms were unlit, evidence

that only the two young men were about.

Unnerved by the man's silence, Teddy asked shakily, 'What do you want?'

The man put a gloved hand into a side pocket and pulled out an object Teddy barely had time to see. With a quick, expert snap of the wrist, a long glistening blade unfolded.

'What the—uh!'

The knife sank into Teddy's gut and ripped upward through his intestines. The knife came out and the man was already cleaning it on a wrinkled handkerchief.

Teddy tried to hold his guts together as he turned, staggered towards the middle of the room, and faced his brother. 'Joe . . .' he gasped.

Joe looked at Teddy, then to the door where the emotionless, motionless killer watched his victim die.

Teddy fell to his knees, doubled over, the top of his head touching the floor. He made one final incoherent grunting noise, then fell sideways.

The man in the long black coat closed the door.

Joe, unable to move, stared unblinking at the lifeless, folded corpse in the middle of the floor. No, he thought, it isn't true. For a moment he was back in Vietnam, his limbs intact, but his friends laid out in green bags, airtight to contain the stench. Then he blinked and was in the living room again, but his mind refused to see a dead brother. We were talking, thought Joe. A few minutes ago we were talking about that book.

'I already read it,' said Teddy. 'It's a good book. Very good. But I think you should be reading something else. Really.'

'His name is even Joe.' He laughed with bitter resentment. 'GI Joe, just like me. The Human Torso.'

He threw the book across the room, his single arm a tensed spring, his manner angry, frustrated. The book landed open, its title up, white letters on a black field: Dalton Trumbo's *Johnny Got His Gun*.

Teddy picked up the book, closed it, and sat it on an end table. He looked at his younger brother, trying not to convey any sense of pity. Joe had lost two legs when he stepped off a helicopter on to a land mine. The helicopter had been damaged by the blast,

so they couldn't get him to a hospital right away. After the delay, field surgeons were unable to save his left arm. Now Joe sat on the butt of his torso, sometimes staring at walls, sometimes at the television, or reading paperbacks, which were just the right size and weight to manipulate one-handed. And Joe spent his days listening. He listened for the occasional car to drive by their country home, scared to death it might stop.

'I'm no good for anything, Teddy. I can't even take a piss without you to keep me from falling off like a dead tree or something.'

'Don't start in on that, kid. You know the Veterans' Administration would be willing to have you trained for just about anything you picked. You're sitting here feeling sorry for yourself because you prefer it. You don't have to be useless, anytime you decide.'

'Sure. Sure. I could learn to sit at an assembly line soldering transistors for eight hours a day. That's useful all right. Real fulfilling. For who? For some God-damned business that gets brownie points and contracts from the government if they give hand-outs to cripples? I'd still have to come home and sit on this couch and read some asinine magazine . . . '

Teddy stood in the middle of the room at a loss for words. When Joe was in one of his moods, it was infuriating. It made Teddy feel like telling him to clear out, to go and leech off our sister if you think her husband will have you around. I can't take it any more, Joe, your wallowing in self-pity. Other people are worse off than you. Other people have problems, too. But they're not as bad off up here, here in their heads. That's where your problem lies. Others get around fine in a wheelchair. Lots of people do just fine with only one hand. There's nothing wrong with you except what you make wrong.

But Teddy couldn't say things like that. He didn't even believe it himself. Joe had gotten the short end of life's stick. Fate had dealt him dirty. Ted could only hope to help his brother adjust.

Joe's habitual speculating about what went through Teddy's mind was so meaningless now. For Teddy was dead, lying in the middle of the floor, not standing there, a puddle of his own blood spreading from his body.

The killer took his time checking every room, saying nothing,

paying no heed to Joe's raving queries. The man made no attempt to search drawers or cabinets. When at last he was satisfied there was no one else around, he returned to the living room and stood looking down on Joe.

Joe looked up at the anonymous, cold face, unable to pierce the darkness of those glasses.

'Jeez, man. Take what you want. I sure as hell can't hurt you.'

The man turned to cross the room. He stepped over Teddy's body and tracked blood the rest of the way to Teddy's worn, comfortable armchair. There the man sat down, folded his hands upon his lap, and did not move.

It was more than Joe could figure out. There the guy sat, calm as you please, with Teddy's body lying between them. Minutes passed without the fiend moving a muscle. He didn't seem to be breathing. It became a staring contest which Joe could hardly expect to win, since he couldn't know if the killer were blinking behind those dark, dark glasses.

'What do you want, man? There's no money, except what's in Teddy's pockets.'

No answer.

'Why'd you have to kill him? Just like that, no provocation whatsoever. We never saw you before, did we?'

No movement.

'Christ, man! What are you doing just sitting there like that?'

Joe was so hysterical he nearly lost his balance. He had to grapple around with his single hand in order to right himself on the sofa. While he was struggling for balance, he thought he caught a glimmer of change in the man's stony expression. But when he looked to be sure, it was the same carved face.

An hour passed.

They simply sat there, Joe afraid to say anything, the other in a veritable trance.

Two hours.

'You mute?' Joe finally asked, his voice a dry whisper from the hours' silence.

The terror evoked by the man's motionless posture was worse than any open attack he'd witnessed overseas. It was a prolonged, unebbing terror, a waiting terror. Joe's mouth was dry. His stomach was in knots. His heart beat fiercely.

The man hadn't moved in so long. It was as though he'd died right there in the chair.

Or fallen asleep!

A man crazy enough to kill someone for no reason just might be crazy enough to sit down and take a nap afterward!

Joe allowed himself to fall to his side on the couch. He tried to keep a constant eye on the man who sat across the room. He watched for the slightest movement or indication of wakefulness. There was none.

Clutching the sofa's arm, Joe pulled himself to the edge. He had to get down, a mere foot and a half to the floor, without making a sound. He felt behind himself and grabbed one of the pillows used to prop himself up. He dropped it on the floor.

Still no movement from the resting figure.

Hanging by the sofa arm, Joe rolled off, alighted with slight sound upon the pillow. In the silent room, though, even the touch of a pillow seemed too loud. And dragging himself across the floor seemed a terrible, abrasive roar.

He fought to keep from breathing heavily or grunting with the strain and effort. There was no carpet, nothing for a single-limbed man to get friction against, to pull on. He rolled sideways for two turns, his eyes thereby away from the seated man for two moments. Yet he was certain there'd not been so much as a twitch from the killer.

Sleep, mother, sleep, he thought. By the time he'd clawed his way to the telephone stand, he was a mass of sweat. Pulling himself on the leg of the stand, he managed to right himself, balanced precariously on his rump. The phone was at eye level. He lifted the receiver and set it beside the phone. Not tearing his eyes from the sleeper, he felt the dial.

The man had not moved in the slightest.

Joe picked up the receiver and held it to his ear, waiting for the sound of the police-and-fire operator's voice.

No ring.

He hung up, then lifted the receiver again.

No dial tone.

Joe's eyes filled with terror as the man finally rose from the chair and walked towards a shaking one-armed torso.

'You cut the wire!' Joe shouted. 'You tricked me, you bastard!'

You weren't sleeping!

The burly man was as strong as he looked, not that Joe was a great weight to heft. Joe was lifted by his single appendage and held at arm's length. As he had no other limb to fight with, he could only wriggle uselessly as the man carried him back to the couch and tossed him, hard, on his face.

Joe lay on his belly, cursing. 'You're crazy, man! You're a God-damned raving maniac!' Then he stopped, because he realised it was himself, and not the madman, who was raving.

Joe began to cry. He lay there with his face in the crack of the sofa, gasping for breaths, and weeping.

'Why don't you let Eva see you?'

Joe's eyes glowered at his brother. 'Jeeze, Teddy. What the hell point is there in that?'

'Eva cares about you. You haven't let her see you since they wheeled you off the plane.' Teddy seated himself in the armchair across the room.

'I know she cares. But we haven't a thing to share any more. That land mine ripped off more than my legs you know – even supposing a woman could stand the idea of a one-armed torso writhing on top of her.'

'Sometimes I think your mind's sick, Joe,' exclaimed Teddy, in a rare moment of anger. 'How can you sit there and talk that way about Eva? You don't deserve a girl like her even for conversation!'

Joe's face lowered in shame. 'I agree, Teddy. And she doesn't deserve having to go through keeping me company. You know what she said when I came off that plane? She was crying, but she was laughing, too, and she knelt down to tell me, "We'll get married, Joe. Everything will be just fine." Hell. We never talked about anything but shacking up before I got half my body blown away. It's just best I don't let her try to be a saint.'

'You'd rather be a martyr?'

Joe shrugged. 'It's the better of two pretty lousy choices.'

Teddy looked away from his brother's boyishly handsome face. 'You're right, Joe. I'm sorry for blowing up like that. But you've got to stop thinking it's the end of the world and hiding here all the time. You've still got your head. You never could do much

with your left hand anyway.'

Joe kind of laughed at that, but only kind of. He pulled the pillows closer to each side of himself to keep steady. He looked down the length of himself with contempt for the world, for the government, for himself. Where his legs should be, he saw only the two empty pant legs tied in knots.

'I'll make it, Teddy.'

An odour.

Gas!

Joe looked up. The lunatic was sitting in the armchair. What he had been doing before he reseated himself, and while Joe lay on his face with his tears and memories, was only too obvious. Joe raised himself on his one arm and sniffed again. He heard the hissing sound.

'You stupid psycho!' Joe shouted. 'You can't breathe gas any better than me!'

No motion. No reply.

Joe rolled off the sofa with a loud plunk. He rolled upon, and clawed at, the slippery floor, avoiding the lengthening river of blood coursing from his brother. He scrabbled furiously, making slow progress.

The air was making him dizzy. Undoubtedly, with his heavy breathing and rapidly beating heart, he'd be dead long before the madman was so much as unconscious.

He made it through the kitchen's swinging door and rolled sideways to the stove. All the pilot lights were out and the knobs turned on full. Joe struggled to claw his way up the white porcelain of the stove's front, and finally got his hand on the first dial. One by one, he turned the dials off, then fell backward on the floor, panting with relief.

He still heard hissing!

He twisted his neck until he saw the open panel of the hot water heater. The fool had put that pilot out, too! Joe dragged himself inch by inch to the water heater and turned it off.

Of course the furnace in the living room would be spouting gas, too.

Joe rolled back through the swinging door. The man's head was turned only slightly from its previous position, just enough

to allow him to see what Joe would do next.

After getting the furnace shut off, Joe lay in front of it and looked with pleading eyes at the man in Teddy's chair. 'What are you doing this to me for, man? What possible pleasure can you get out of seeing me crawl around like an injured snail, fighting for my life when I know you intend to kill me anyway?'

That question provoked a reply of sorts. The silent man slowly removed his leather gloves and stuffed them in a coat pocket. Then he unbuttoned the long coat and unfolded each side away from his legs. Finally he began methodically and rhythmically to rub his hands up and down the length of his zipper.

'God!' Joe shouted, half a curse. He fell from his armless shoulder to his back and started laughing, staring at the ceiling. 'God, oh God, oh God!' His laughter conveyed neither amusement nor hysteria, but a kind of resignation.

The sadist rubbed himself harder.

When the air was clear, and more time had passed, Joe had long since wedged himself in the corner between the gas furnace and the wall. He stared out like a scared wild animal.

'I won't play your games any more, funny man,' he said. 'You think I'm afraid of you? I'm beyond fear now. Why, I've seen little children shot down with high-powered rifles as they ran along muddy streets, and young mothers raped beside their dead babies. I've seen peasants lined up along a ditch so they'd fall in it as they're shot a dozen at a crack, and afterwards the soldiers smoked blood-stained cigarettes. I even saw my own legs dangling loose at the end of my ass. You think you're nuts, man? You don't know what nuts means until you've worked for Uncle Sam. Maybe you think you can make me crawl to my death, begging all the way, but you've got a surprise. Maybe I'm only half a man in flesh, but more a man than some twisted psychopath like you.'

The killer sat a few minutes, still unmoving, but the lecture must have been soaking in. Directly, he stood. He went to the corner where Joe had propped himself, lifted him by the one arm, and carried him into the kitchen.

Joe found himself laid out upon the table like a slab of pork. The sadist put his gloves back on, pulling each finger snug. He flipped out his long, sharp switchblade and cut away the buttons

of Joe's shirt.

The fiend punctured Joe's belly button, not far enough to kill. The navel slowly filled with blood.

Joe figured any scream would only make the guy drag his butchery on and on. If he kept quiet, maybe the guy would get bored and end it quickly, like with Teddy.

The house was cold, it being near morning, and the furnace having been off all night. Joe concentrated on the cold and on his fatigue and on the light in the middle of the ceiling. He remembered the field surgeons, the light above the operating table, and he oblivious to pain.

Uhhng!

No pain. No pain.

A long, shallow cut smiled beneath his navel.

No pain.

The sadist bent his face close to Joe's and just breathed. He just breathed, gazing through those impenetrable glasses.

God! The man knew his business! He'd probably experimented with a dozen expressions: angry snarls, hateful sneers, gleeful smiles . . . A blank, emotionless expression was the one that did it.

Then Joe acted. It would be, he was certain, his final act in the world. But he wasn't going to die passively.

His hand shot upward like a striking cobra. He dug quickly through the woollen scarf and found the neck bonier than expected.

The man stood straight up, but Joe was firmly attached, a grotesque necktie. He backed away from the table, and the torso came, too, hanging on with all its maddened strength.

Choking from the grasp at his bleeding, nail-punctured throat, the fiend staggered about the kitchen, beating on Joe's head to no avail.

Then he used the knife.

Again and again he stabbed the clinging arm. Joe screamed a high-pitched, drawn-out scream of pain and horror, but hung on. The knife tore into his shoulder time after time, deep gashes, clear to the bone.

Few muscles could be left unsevered, but Joe's grip was frozen.

The knife fell to the floor, clattering. The struggling murderer

stumbled to the kitchen door. He held Joe at arm's length and closed the swinging door with Joe on the far side. With his only hand so busy, Joe could by no means hinder the manoeuvre.

The door pressed sharp at Joe's armpit. The killer pulled frantically for his own freedom, but could not dislodge the hand. Tendons in the big man's neck made ripping sounds. Fingers dug deeper and deeper, clamping and piercing the oesophagus. The sadist's face turned a magnificent purple. His glasses came off, revealing bulging white eyes.

With a final, tremendous tug, the man pulled Joe's arm free of its badly cut socket. Joe fell outside the kitchen door, screaming as he saw his last appendage pull away with a sickening suction sound.

Joe pressed the bleeding, armless shoulder to the floor in order to stop the massive loss of blood. Looking toward Teddy's corpse, Joe whispered stubbornly, 'I won't die. I won't die.'

In the kitchen, the man still fought his hideous necktie. He lunged awkwardly against the table, collapsed to the linoleum, kicked, clawed, and made horrid gagging sounds. Finally, he ceased living.

And still the arm remained attached.

Alan Temperley

Henry and the beautiful people

'I'm sorry, Mr Coker.' The young consultant, prematurely grey, considered the drab little man who sat by the desk and wrinkled his brow. 'There's nothing we can do. The tests are quite definite.'

Momentarily, at the confirmation of his worst fears, Henry was stunned. Uncertain how to react to a piece of news so momentous and terrifying, he sought refuge in his customary good manners.

'It's all right.' He managed to smile. 'I thought it might be something like that.'

'When I say nothing we can do,' the clear eyes expressed ritual pity, 'what I mean is, it's inoperable. It's spread, you see. If only you'd reported it six months ago.'

Henry nodded apologetically.

'But there's plenty we can do. You have no need to fear pain, for example, and in a month or two I'm sure we'll be able to find a place for you in one of the hospices. St Michael's is quite near your home, I believe.'

'Thank you very much.' Henry's hat rested on his knees. As he turned it nervously by the brim, his right hand was revealed as deformed. It had only three fingers, the first two of which were joined to form a claw with a large horny nail. 'How long will— How long have I got?'

'It's difficult to put a time on it.' The consultant pretended to consider. 'It could be six weeks, it might be six months.' He rose.

Henry followed his lead. 'Well, thank you again, doctor. Sorry to involve you in all this. I'll try to make it something cheerier the next time.' There was no point in making a scene. He liked the young consultant. For the first time in years, almost as long as he could remember, someone had taken an interest in him.

'Your wife,' the consultant said. 'How will she take it?'

'Oh, I don't live with my wife any more.' Fractionally Henry

straightened his chair. 'We're separated, you see. No, I live by myself.'

'Well,' the consultant laid a reassuring hand upon his shoulder and led the way to the door, 'I want you to come back and see me in a fortnight. The nurse will make the appointment. And if there's anything you want before that, don't hesitate to go and see your doctor.' He smiled with practised warmth. 'After all, that's what we're here for.'

The door closed and Henry found himself once more in the antiseptically white corridor. In ten minutes the world had changed. A pretty nurse sat at a table in the outpatients' vestibule. The appointment was soon made and Henry started down a long corridor towards the hospital entrance.

He was a grey man with a gentle inconspicuous face. Physically he was rather short and of average build. In the hospital warmth he carried his mackintosh over one arm.

As he passed a battery of lifts a door slid open and a middle-aged technician, lab coat flying, stepped briskly into the corridor. As Henry passed, almost oblivious of his surroundings, the technician gazed after him.

'Henry? Henry Coker?'

Henry turned. His numbness had intensified.

'It is you, isn't it?'

'Yes?' Henry regarded the man who addressed him. Almost at once he recognised the tall, bony frame and shock of grizzled curls. 'Hello, Bert.'

In normal circumstances Henry would have been delighted to renew this acquaintance. Both had been members of an ex-servicemen's club and for years had met every Thursday evening for a beer and a couple of games of snooker. With the pressures of marriage and the passage of time they had drifted apart.

'Of all people!' Bert gave a horse-like grin. 'Must be fifteen years!'

'I suppose so.' Henry struggled to support a conversation. 'All going well, I hope?'

'Yes, fine. Kids all grown up and married now. Three grandchildren. Otherwise not much change. Still plugging along upstairs. How about you?'

'No, we never had any family. Mary and I split up – ten years

ago now.' Henry felt his numbness about to break. 'Look, sorry, Bert. I've just had a bit of bad news. I'll give you a ring, all right? Maybe have lunch one day.'

'Yes, that would be great. Chew over old times.' Bert tried to read his friend's face and saw tears in the lined eyes. 'Sorry about the bad news.'

'That's all right.' Henry sniffed and turned away. 'I'll be in touch. Bye. Love to Margaret.' Shoulders hunched, he hurried away down the corridor.

'I thought you were coming back at eleven!'

In a black porter's uniform Henry stood before his employer's desk. It was a grey October afternoon. A squall flung raindrops against the office window.

'Miles Thursby was here and couldn't get parked. It was pissing down, you couldn't be found – there was all kinds of trouble! He was furious!'

'Sorry, Mrs Reinhart.'

'Sorry's not good enough, Henry! Where were you?'

'I'd had some bad news. I went for a bit of a walk.'

Beverley Reinhart was head of Green's, a highly successful model and theatrical agency in Regent Street. She was Australian, a hard-bitten professional woman in her mid-forties. Heavy make-up and fashionably untidy hair gave her a predatory air.

'A bit of a walk! For God's sake! We're all going out of our minds and you go for a walk!' With burgundy nails she tore at the wrapping of a new packet of cigarettes.

Henry looked past her to the photographs of leading clients – actors and beautiful models – which hung on the wall.

'You've been here a long time, Henry. Long before I came.' She blew a cloud of smoke into the air. 'You were here when Green's was just a shabby little agency supplying bit parts for tours, faces for laxatives and pile ointments. But we've grown up now, we're big. If we're going to survive in a tough professional world we've got to be the best – and that means from the top right down to the porter.' She rose and crossed the rich carpet. 'And frankly, Henry, if you can't handle it, you'll have to go. We'll be sorry to lose you, especially after so long, but there it is.'

Henry shifted. He had never liked the woman, never liked any

of them, not since the old days. When he first came, back in the fifties and early sixties, Green's had been one big happy family. Now – most of them didn't even bother to give him the time of day.

'Sorry if you're not satisfied, Mrs Reinhart. It's the first time I've been off in three years, since that time I had pleurisy. When have I ever failed to do a job? No one's ever complained before.'

She was surprised to hear the porter speak up for himself, and paradoxically annoyed, for it was his drabness, his nonentity, which most irritated her.

'Perhaps not to you, Henry, but they have complained to me. You need to smarten yourself up a bit. Sure, you're there when you're wanted to carry luggage or a tap needs fixing. But it doesn't do the agency's image much good when the first thing a client sees as he comes in the door is you slumped in a chair, looking as if the cat's got the cream.'

'That's not fair, Mrs Reinhart. I only sit in that chair because I've got nowhere else to go. I used to have a room, for my tools and brushes and that, somewhere to have my lunch. But you took it for an office. Now all I've got is a cupboard and that chair.'

'Very well, very well. But I want you to smarten yourself up, Henry. All right? If you want to stay with us at Green's, that is.'

She screwed the end of her cigarette in a large onyx ashtray. At the same time the telephone rang. As she picked it up she regarded him over the top. 'All right, that's all.' She covered the mouthpiece. 'Oh, and Henry – where's your glove?'

Henry glanced down at his deformed hand. His employer liked him to hide it in a leather glove. 'I'm sorry,' she had said. 'I know it's a misfortune and not your fault, but the clients don't like it. Frankly, it gives some of them the creeps.' Instinctively, as he turned to go, he half closed his hand and the offending fingers disappeared into his palm.

Green's occupied the third and fourth floor of the building, which stood at the upper end of Regent Street, not far from Hanover Square. As Henry returned to his cupboard he passed offices and waiting rooms. Slim girls, so lovely that they made the heart lurch, lounged in casual clothes and chatted as they waited. Young men with neat beards or lean jaws sat nearby. Some of the faces were nationally familiar, appearing in margarine advertise-

ments in women's magazines, drinks advertisements in the Sunday colour supplements. Henry called them the beautiful people. In the hands of directors their faces became the purveyors of dreams; their bodies seemed formed for glamorous clothes and romantic settings. Nightly, on five million television screens, they smiled from West Indian beaches and lounged in Italian piazzas. No one took any notice of the middle-aged porter in his black uniform who passed quietly along the corridor.

Due to his absence in the morning, Henry had not tended to the boiler. He descended to the cellar below Regent Street and let himself into the dusty gloom. Only the angry oil-jets, spitting unimaginably hot tongues of flame into the furnace, disturbed the peace. It was a male place, welcoming and calm. Henry Coker sank on to a splintered chair and closed his eyes.

As he returned to the office ten minutes later, a secretary was waiting on the landing. 'Ah, there you are,' she said peremptorily. 'I've been looking everywhere for you.' She gestured to some unwieldy luggage and musical instruments. 'Take these downstairs and call a taxi. Stack them in the back and then let me know.' She turned back into the office where a young pop musician sprawled in an easy chair.

Wearily Henry began to manhandle the baggage through the entrance and down four flights of stairs to the street. 'Never a thank you!' he muttered under his breath. 'Women! Bloody women!' He heaved a case through an entrance and with satisfaction heard something crunch as it struck the corner. All his life – women! His mother! His wife! His boss! No matter how he tried there was never any pleasing them. Always the irritation, the criticism, the contempt. 'Henry, do this! Henry, do that! No, not like that – have you got no sense at all!' Sometimes he wondered if they were deliberately goading him, taunting him to strike back – and now he would never know, it was too late! He swung the case against a projecting metal spar and saw it rip. Resentment rose in him. How he would have liked to punch Mrs Reinhart in that painted, complaining face; grab that arrogant bitch of an office girl and see her shriek as he stuck his clawed hand up her skirt. All those beautiful people, the vain and egocentric clients, how he longed to let them know that he existed, that he was alive, that he was Henry Coker, a man, with feelings! With

a final crash he dropped the case on the pavement. With pleasure he saw that it would get soaked, for it was raining. For a moment he stood at the entrance watching the crowds then turned back into the building. With luck, he thought, someone would steal the case before he returned with the rest.

'Still the same old lab.' Bert led the way along the hospital corridor. 'Still plugging along.' They stopped at a door labelled 'Bacteriology'.

Dimly remembered odours, chemical and antiseptic, rose about them. Henry gazed around and shook his head. 'Fifteen years – where have they gone?'

Bert laughed and led the way into a room off the laboratory. 'Come into the office. It's clean. Just give me a minute to change out of my lab coat and scrub my hands.'

Henry sat by the desk while his friend nudged the tap with an elbow and lathered his hands with germicidal soap. 'What are you doing these days?'

'Here, you mean? Just the usual. Lab tests, specimens.' Bert reached for a towel. 'A bit more research than we used to.'

'Uh-huh?' Henry gazed across the confusion of racks and bottles and steel apparatus that littered the laboratory table. 'What sort of research?'

'Tropical diseases mainly. There's a new man, attached to the university. Yaws, leprosy, cholera, bilharzia, different forms of typhus.'

'It sounds hellish.'

'It is.' Bert tidied some papers and reached for his jacket.

'I was in Africa in the forces. I had jags against some of those things. I would have thought they'd more or less got them under control now.'

'The basic forms, yes, except where poor sanitation and so on make them endemic. But all the time new strains keep appearing that are resistant to the drugs we've got at present. You read about it in the papers – TB, syphilis, things like that.'

'Ugh!' Henry squirmed. 'Gives me the creeps.'

'You think that's bad. Here, look at this.' Bert turned over a few files and pulled out a sheaf of photographs. One at a time he passed them across.

'Oh, my God!' Henry had never seen anything like it. 'What is it?'

'Leprosy.'

Terrible faces without noses, swollen-lipped, stared at him through mute, suffering eyes. Cheeks and scalps were ulcerated and misshapen, ears were gone, bodies crusted and hideous, arms and feet ended in white clubs. Some limbs had been amputated.

'But I thought they could treat leprosy – sulphur, isn't it, and penicillin?'

'I told you, resistant strains. These poor buggers have had it, there is no treatment.' Bert passed across a micro-photograph of capsule-shaped bacteria, transparent and swarming. 'That's the bacillus.'

Gingerly Henry took it from him. 'And this is what you're working on?'

'Not me, I just prepare the medium and cultures. Take a few notes. Get rid of the dirties.' Beckoning Henry to follow him, he returned to the laboratory and pulled open the door of an incubator shaped like a large fridge. A gentle blood-warmth flowed out. Culture trays and racks of stoppered test-tubes were bathed in yellow light. 'That's it.'

Henry was appalled. 'What, all of them?'

'No, just the top shelf. That's clean medium over that side. These are infected, spores and bacilli.'

'Those sort of cloudy ones with the sediment?'

'That's right, *Mycobacterium leprae* – the swarming billions.' Bert took out a conical flask stoppered with cotton wool and swirled the fluid round, then held the milky suspension to the light. 'Actually what you're looking at is something special. This is the first time it's been possible to grow leprosy bacteria outside the body. Until now they were always the exception.'

Henry stood back.

'Start them off in armadilloes and the feet of mice.' Bert displayed professional enthusiasm. 'Then a blood-acid based agar solution – or gel.' He returned the flask to the incubator and took out a petri dish covered with a film of clear jelly. 'See.' He held it out for inspection. The sinister stain of bacteria spread three-quarters of the way across the surface. 'Grow like wildfire. Do you know that given perfect conditions a single bacterium could

turn into billions in a day and a night.'

'No I didn't, and for God's sake don't open it.' Henry made a face. 'Put it back and shut the door.'

Bert laughed and replaced the covered dish. 'Safe as houses. I washed everything down with formalin this morning. The cotton wool's anti-bacterial.'

They returned to the office. 'I have to go up to Virology,' Bert said. 'Every day before lunch. Give them the results of a few tests. Just be a tick.'

While he was gone Henry gazed across the laboratory. Memories of the old days drifted through his mind. The sheaf of photographs lay beside him. Absently he turned them over and passed them back as Bert returned to the office.

'Different from your place, eh? All those beautiful models.' Bert returned the file to the desk and rinsed his hands again.

'You could say so, yes.' Henry rubbed his palms. 'Do you mind if I wash, too. I feel itchy all over.'

Bert passed him the towel. 'Come on, the pubs will be filling up. Let's go to the Kenilworth. My treat - you can pay next time.'

Side by side the two old friends made their way to the lift and descended to the ground floor.

'Yes, Mrs Reinhart. I've decided to take your advice and call it a day.'

Three weeks had passed. Henry had not kept his appointment with the hospital consultant. He did not wish to drag out his last days, to end his life, however uneventful, in the comfort and unbearable kindness of St Michael's hospice. He had made other plans.

'It will be best for the agency,' he said. 'I'm a bit of an old-stager, I don't belong among all these young things you have here today.'

Beverley Reinhart took little trouble to hide her satisfaction. 'Well, if that's what you want, Henry.'

'I think it's best, Mrs Reinhart. You can get a new lad, someone younger and better suited than me.' He tugged his leather glove comfortable. 'I've got a little bit put by. I'll have a holiday for a month or so, then I'll start looking round for another place.'

Despite her satisfaction, Beverley Reinhart was intrigued. She glanced at her watch and decided she could spare a minute or two. 'Why, Henry – why the sudden decision? Retirement can't be all that far away. I thought you might have stayed until you could sit back and rest your feet on an old-age pension.'

'It's a few years yet.' His smile concealed the revulsion he felt for the hawk-like face. 'No, I thought you'd be happier with someone young about the place. And I wouldn't mind a change myself, before I'm too old for it.'

Henry had no intention of telling her the real reason for his decision, that he was dying, that each day when he rose or had to exert any energy, the world swam about him and he was sick.

'Well, if you've decided.' She moved quickly, before he could show any change of heart. 'I'll get one of the girls to arrange a little office party. See you off in style, eh? How long have you been here at Green's?'

'Thirty-one years.'

Inhabiting a world where two years constituted a commitment, she was taken aback. 'So long! I hadn't realised! Well, we'll have to see what we can do about a small memento.' She gestured with one hand, paler than her face and ornamented with two large and vulgar rings, to indicate that the interview was over. 'We'll let you know in a day or two what's been arranged.'

'Thank you, Mrs Reinhart.' Self-effacing as ever, yet congratulating himself on the way things had gone, Henry retired from the room.

Later that afternoon, when most of the staff had gone home and he was emptying waste-paper baskets, he overheard a snatch of conversation from the adjoining office.

'... such a grey little man. I wouldn't mind if he was a character, but he's not, he's just an old bore. I know someone else will expect more money, but it will be such a relief to be shot of him.'

'It's that hand of his, that ugly great claw.' Henry recognised the voice of Mrs Reinhart's personal secretary, a girl called Sylvia. 'I can't bear him to be near me.'

'Mm. Still, he's been here *thirty-one years* – can you imagine! We can't let the pathetic little bugger go empty-handed.' There was the click of a cigarette lighter. 'What can we give him?'

Nothing too expensive. Have you got any ideas?’

‘Not really. How about a watch? Men like that always get watches, don’t they? There’s a sale on at Carter’s. Some of the old stock’s going at half price. You might pick up something there.’

‘Me! My God, no, I haven’t got the time. Get one of the girls to call in tomorrow, on her way home. Better make a note of that, Sylvia.’

‘Right. And what about this party?’

‘Me and my big mouth! Well, there’s the office party before the TV and Commercial awards next Wednesday. I thought we might do something then.’

‘Surely not, everyone will be here. All the big names and everything.’

‘I know, but it will only take a minute. We can have it early on, before too many people arrive. The important people won’t come till later. And we’ve got to do something. It’s either that or trying to persuade people to stay on for an extra half-hour some other bloody night.’

Henry crept away. He was satisfied. Anger and laughter contended on his gentle face.

On Wednesday morning, as always, Henry was sick. He flushed the toilet and stood for a moment, staring into the bathroom mirror. Though nothing beyond a little tiredness beneath the eyes told of his illness, he scarcely recognised the face which gazed back at him from above the wash-basin. Something stabbed inside. He felt light-headed. From a little bottle the doctor had prescribed he took two pills and washed them down with a cup of tea.

Tucking a warm brown dressing-gown about him he sat at the kitchen table and waited for the unpleasant feelings to pass. Through the doorway he could see along the passage and into the living-room. The flat was tidy, tidier than when his wife had lived there. Her photograph stood on the end of a polished bureau, just in sight. He had not written to tell her of his condition. He had told no one, not even Bert, and it was certainly none of his wife’s business since she had left him for Jack Belling – ten years older than himself. But the bitterness was long past, and if he was honest, he had preferred his lonely, bachelor existence. It had

sued him very well – even now, with Christmas approaching. Bert and Margaret had invited him for Christmas Day. They were very kind. With a click the pain ceased, the strange feeling passed. Henry finished his tea and returned to the bathroom.

On that special morning he shaved with particular care and patted his cheeks with cologne. From a bedroom drawer he selected his crispest shirt and a new regimental tie. He put on his best suit, newly pressed, and brushed his hair smooth. Finally, for the morning was cold, he tucked a warm muffler about his throat, buttoned his coat and brushed some flecks from his hat. Briefly he inspected himself in the hall mirror and was satisfied. One last time he wandered through the flat, ensuring that all was tidy, noticing details to which he had been blind for a long time. Everything was as it should be. Then, with a tremulous breath, he took up the shopping bag which contained his neatly parcelled uniform, unhooked his umbrella from the hallstand and let himself out into the cold, early December morning.

Although it was Henry's last day with the agency and he wore his suit, it was also party day and he was not allowed to relax. Stripped to his shirt sleeves he carried chairs from room to room, shifted desks, rolled up rugs, hoovered corridors, washed windows – there was not even time to snatch a cup of coffee in the middle of the morning.

He had arranged to meet Bert at lunchtime for a snack and a pint and at twelve-fifteen, after buying bread and a few light groceries, presented himself at the desk in the pathology department.

'I'll just be five minutes.' Bert led the way along the corridor to the bacteriology lab.

'No hurry.' Henry settled himself in the office and laid his hat on the desk. 'My last day. Presentation this afternoon. Take my time.'

'There's a *Daily Mail* there somewhere,' Bert called.

'Don't worry, just get on with your job. I'm quite content.'

Somewhere by Henry's side lay the sheaf of photographs Bert had shown him a month before. He would have liked to study them again although there was no need, each hideous picture remained vivid in his memory.

'Bert. You know you were showing me the photographs of that

leprosy. How long before the disease starts to show?’

‘You mean from contact?’ Bert answered from the laboratory. ‘It depends. Lepromatous leprosy – common leprosy – might take five years, ten – even more. The mutant strains we’ve got here act much faster. Numbness and the first nodules will start to show in about six months. It’s devilish.’

‘And how long before they die – the victims, I mean.’

‘Well, they don’t – not of the leprosy itself. They just linger on, getting worse. No one knows with some of these strains but they might live for twenty, thirty years.’ Bert appeared in the office doorway. ‘I’ve got to nip upstairs to virology. Just be a couple of minutes.’

‘All right. I’ll wait here.’ Henry took the newspaper on his lap.

Carrying a report sheet, Bert strode from the room. Henry listened as his footsteps receded along the corridor. Stealthily he rose and entered the laboratory. The door stood open. He pushed it shut and crossed swiftly to the incubator where the cultures and infected mediums were stored. As he opened it the warmth wafted over him. Hands bathed in yellow light he seized a conical flask and examined the label. The scientific data meant nothing, but there stood the abbreviation ‘M. lep. – mut. 23’, and the medium was heavily clouded. From his pocket he took a square of thin polythene and an elastic band and doubled them tightly over the plug of cotton wool. Carefully he wrapped the flask in a clean rag and plastic bag and set it upright in the shopping bag between his feet. His heart thudded. He selected a test-tube, ‘M. lep. – mut. 25’, and two far-advanced petri dishes, ‘M. lep. – mut. 8’. With a second square of polythene and two strips of Sellotape they, also, were secured and hidden away beneath cereals and tea-cakes. Quickly Henry straightened the shelf so that the missing cultures should not be noticed, then clipped the door shut. Running silently, he pulled open the laboratory door, rinsed and dried his fingers at the sink in the office, and returned to his seat. Even as he took up the discarded newspaper, Bert came into the laboratory.

‘Sorry to keep you. That’s it all done now.’ He hung up his lab coat and washed his hands. ‘Where are we going? Since it’s your last day I think you should let me pay.’

‘Nonsense. It’s all decided. We’re going to Bennets, and we’re

not having a pie and a pint, we're having a sit-down meal. I've booked a table for quarter to one.'

Bert gave his horsy grin. 'That sounds very nice. A bit pricy, isn't it?' He pulled on his jacket and coat and took up the shopping bag.

'I'll take that.' Henry rescued his groceries and led the way to the door. 'Like you say, it's my last day. I want to make a bit of a splash. Besides, I've had some good times with you, Bert.'

'Don't you want to wash your hands today?'

'I did that before you came back. Come on.'

The two grey-haired friends made their way through the pathology department and descended by lift to the street. As they walked to the inn a heavy shower of hail rattled on cars and umbrellas and formed drifts on the thronging pavements.

Throughout the afternoon, preparations continued at Green's. Two large rooms on the upper floor were emptied of typewriters. Flowers were arranged on stairheads and polished stands. Tables were moved into windows and along walls. Caterers spread them with crisp cloths and set out trays of savouries. Bottles of red wine were opened to breathe. Two bowls of punch, white and red, were prepared with care and set in a large refrigerator.

'Bring the bottles of spirits over here, Henry.' Beverley Reinhart was an experienced hostess. 'Put them on the window ledge there, where I can keep an eye on them.'

Since lunch at Bennets, Henry had remained in a state of mild intoxication. Champagne had started it, little swigs of wine throughout the afternoon had maintained him at a happy level.

'Oh, and Henry,' she caught at the back of his jacket, 'we'll have your little presentation early on. About five o'clock. It will be more intimate then, just the people from the office and maybe a few first-comers. All right? You're welcome to stay for the party afterwards, of course. That's if you want to.'

He hitched an armful of bottles comfortable. 'Yes, that will suit me very well, Mrs Reinhart.'

'There is one more thing. I know it's your presentation, but it's a bloody awful afternoon.' As if in confirmation of her words another squall of hail and sleet beat against the windows. 'Some of the guests might need cars parking. You won't mind looking

after that, will you.'

He smiled wryly. 'No, I'll look after that.'

'Good.' Without looking towards him she moved away, hailing her secretary and confidante across the room. 'Sylvia! Did you hear what Miles Thursby did last night – right in Covent Garden! You wouldn't believe it!'

Henry was left alone. He returned to his glass in the second room.

Beverley Reinhart had miscalculated and by quarter to five guests were starting to arrive in considerable numbers. The rooms began to fill up. A party at Green's was somewhere to be seen, particularly on this occasion when prominent clients and their friends came to use it as a watering place before moving on to the glittering TV and Commercial awards ceremony at the —. These early arrivals were less important people, but Beverley Reinhart saw that Henry's presentation must be brought forward – and swiftly. A secretary summoned him from the other room.

'Mrs Reinhart wants you now.'

'What for?' Henry stood his ground.

'Well, it's your presentation, innit?' she said impatiently.

'That's not until five,' he said.

'Well she's brought it forward. She wants you now.'

'She'll have to wait a minute.' He was determined. 'I'm not ready.'

'What for?' She tutted.

'I've got to go somewhere.'

'Oh Gawd! Well hurry up.'

He tossed off the last of his wine and reached for a clean glass and small bottle of fresh orange juice. Carrying them with him, he descended the stairs to his cupboard on the third floor. In addition to the buckets and brooms of his job, it was large enough to contain a porcelain sink. He switched on the light and set his bottle and glass on the draining board.

The corridor was empty. He pushed the door shut and crouched to reach into a dark corner beneath the sink. The rags containing the stolen bacilli were tucked away by a central heating pipe – the liquid beneath and the gels above. Carefully he unwrapped them and placed them on the draining board. To his satisfaction he saw that with the slightly higher temperature the agar gel was starting

to melt. The shadow of bacteria swilled to and fro. He unpicked a strip of Sellotape and tipped the contents of the petri dish into his glass, then dropped the empty container into a stout plastic bag which he had placed in readiness. He did the same with the second dish and the test-tube. Then he took up the small conical flask, shook it gently and held the milky suspension to the light. It only took a moment to strip off the cover and pull out the plug of cotton wool. Delicately he poured out the deadly fluid. As the last teeming drips fell his glass was three-quarters full. Henry wiped his fingers on a rag and dropped it after the other debris.

A plastic teaspoon lay on the draining board. Henry rinsed it. Carefully he stirred the three mutant bacilli together and gradually the lumps of gel dissolved. He raised the wine glass to his nostrils. The leprosy culture had little odour, just a faint whiff like dirty ditches. His heart raced. Time was passing. Quickly he unscrewed the bottle of orange and topped up the cloudy mixture. There was only room for a little. The remainder he poured away and flushed the sink clean.

His deadly concoction was ready. He gave it a last stir. Then, holding the goblet by the stem, the little porter raised it to his lips as in a toast, closed his eyes and took a sip. It was slightly thick. The swarming bacilli clung to his lips, swilled round his teeth and disappeared down his throat. Despite the lack of odour, Henry had imagined the culture might taste foul. It did not, all he could detect was orange, with a lingering after-taste like oil or stagnant water. His eyes gleamed. He set the glass aside. Taking the plastic bag by the neck, he locked the cupboard door behind him and descended to the cellar below Regent Street.

In the dusty boiler-room, so preferable to the hectic party atmosphere high above, the oil-jets flamed with a hungry roar. Henry opened the furnace door and felt the heat leap out at him. Holding the plastic bag in a pair of tongs, he thrust it far into the flames. At once the plastic dissolved, the rags were devoured. Shading his eyes against the glare, he saw the flask begin to twist and buckle. Soon the laboratory glass would be reduced to molten lumps and in time, perhaps, burned away completely. Face flushed from the roasting heat, he shut the furnace door and locked the cellar behind him.

Back in the porter's cupboard on the third floor, Henry pulled off his black leather glove and set it in the middle of the table. He would not want it again. He flexed the fingers of his deformed hand. Sounds of the party drifted from the floor above. Already voices were growing loud. Taking another sip from his glass and carrying it carefully, he closed the door behind him and mounted the stairs through twin displays of flowers to join the party-goers.

'Come along, Henry! Where have you been?' The secretary addressed him as if he were a troublesome child.

'I told you, I had to—'

'Oh, never mind that. Come along now.' Skirt twitching, she led the way towards the larger room.

Henry set down the empty bottle of orange – he wished to leave no clue to his actions – and followed in her wake.

'Hey!' he called. 'Just a minute.'

'What is it now?' She turned impatiently. 'You don't want to go again?'

'No, I want to tell you something.'

'What? What is it you want to tell me?'

'It's private.' He leaned close to her ear. 'You're a nasty little shit! And you've got a wart at the side of your mouth!'

It took a moment for the words to sink in. 'Why, you . . .' Her face flamed.

Henry giggled and ducked, protecting his cocktail as she swung a slap at the side of his face.

'You can find your own way to Mrs Reinhart!' she said furiously.

'Oh, dear!' he said. 'Oh, dear! How will I manage?'

Higher in spirits than he had been for a long time, Henry pushed through the assembled guests. Beverley Reinhart was talking to a slim man with the looks of a handsome, dissolute schoolboy. Closer examination revealed that he was at least thirty-five years old. Apparently the hard-bitten Australian found him attractive.

Henry interrupted. 'You wanted me, Mrs Reinhart?'

As she looked round and saw who it was her smile faded. She glanced round the room.

'That's right. The girls have been looking for you for nearly half an hour! Another five minutes and there wouldn't be a presen-

tation at all!' She leaned towards her companion and patted his hand. 'Something I've got to do. See you later.'

The dissolute young man drifted away.

'Hey, Sylvia!' She hailed her secretary. 'Have you got the presentation?'

'What presentation?'

Mrs Reinhart pointed to Henry.

The girl's face cleared. 'Oh, yeah! I'll just go and get it.'

'Right.' Beverley Reinhart faced the room and clapped her hands for attention. Slowly the hubbub of conversation was stilled. 'Sorry to break up the merriment, folks, but there's a little job we want to get done. Won't keep you more than a minute.' Her hawk-like face broke into an artificial smile. 'Henry, here,' she laid a hand on his shoulder, 'Henry Coker, our porter, has been with the agency for thirty-one years. Thirty-one years, eh, what about that! I'm sure most of you have seen him about some time. Well, he's decided to call it a day, and we want to give him a little memento of his time at Green's. Sylvia.'

Sylvia handed her an open cardboard box in which resided a silver-plated watch.

'Henry,' Beverley Reinhart continued, 'we want you to accept this with all our love. I hope it will keep good time, and you'll look back on all the good times you had at Green's with affection.'

Henry's glass was still in his hand. He took a good sip, ensuring that the bacilli swilled over his lips, then set it aside on the table. With apparent gratitude he accepted the watch and leaned forward to give his employer a gallant kiss. She presented a tan-coloured cheek but he would not be denied. Turning her head, he planted a kiss full on her mouth. As he drew his head away he saw the shadow of disgust on her brow. The tip of a pink tongue appeared and licked the carmine lipstick clean. She swallowed.

There was a thin scattering of applause. Henry smiled and looked down at the pocket watch in his hand. It was a cheap article, a glossy imitation of the real thing. He had seen it in Carter's window, a bargain offer. As he gazed across the roomful of Green's employees and beautiful people, he was supported by wine and bravado.

'Thank you very much.' He had prepared a short speech. 'It's very gratifying to know that my work here has been appreciated.'

Thirty-one years is a long time. I can remember the old days, before many of you were born, when Green's was just a set of dusty rooms – ukulele players and bad ventriloquists knocking on the doors, desperate for a job, any job, grateful for a couple of nights' stand-in at some seaside review. Hungry, half of them – cardboard suitcases and cheap lodgings, sometimes even a bench in the waiting-room at King's Cross or St Pancras. It was hard in them days. But now that's all gone. Now Green's is up-market. All you smart people, lovely clothes, bottles of wine.'

They had stopped listening. Girls turned their backs and resumed interrupted conversations. Someone laughed loudly at a joke. A few guests drifted in from the other room, wondering what was happening.

'All right, Henry. It's not really the time for speeches.' Beverley Reinhart took his arm. Some of the office girls regarded him with embarrassment.

'And so,' he shook the hand off and came to his conclusion, 'I'd just like to thank you again for this beautiful watch. Shortly I shall be leaving for good, but I'd like to think that in time to come some of you will remember me, perhaps in six months or so – will you remember that, Mrs Reinhart, about next June! – and realise how much you all at Green's have meant to me. Thank you.'

This time there was no applause. No one was listening.

Beverley Reinhart turned aside to an acquaintance and closed her eyes. 'Oh, my God! What a nightmare! I thought he was never going to stop!'

Henry took up his glass. He, too, was pleased it was over. He had said what he wanted. Sipping the orange and teeming bacilli, he mingled with the guests and found himself beside Sylvia, who had suggested Carter's for the watch and found his deformed fingers so repellent.

'Goodbye, then.' He confronted her and held out the claw to shake hands. 'I hope everything goes well for the next few months.'

She hesitated, then leaned forward to kiss him on the cheek as the lesser of two evils. His lips glistened, and before she could struggle he had kissed her on the mouth. She tasted the orange of his drink. Then even worse, the clawed hand ran up the back

of her legs beneath her skirt and clutched her bottom in a horny grip. She screamed. Henry grinned lecherously and backed away.

'Mrs Reinhart says will you go down and park Mr Thursby's car.' An office girl delivered the message.

'Yes, certainly.'

Leaving his drink in the porter's cupboard, he descended to the street. A beautiful silver Jaguar was drawn up at the kerb. Henry climbed into the driver's seat and drew away up Regent Street. In a minute he was at Oxford Circus. The traffic was heavy, on every hand cars and buses filled the lanes. Quite deliberately, right in the middle of the circus, he let the car drift into the hard rear corner of a council lorry. A silver wing crumpled, the bonnet burst open. It was something he had longed to do for years. All around him drivers began to blow their horns. Henry switched off the engine, stepped from the car and locked the door behind him. A red-faced lorry driver confronted him. He ignored the man and strolled away among the crowds. Behind him the rush-hour traffic began to choke up. Policemen moved forward to investigate the delay. Briefly Henry stopped to watch. As he turned back along Regent Street the fairyland lights of Christmas were reflected in the wet pavement.

Five minutes later he was back at the party, glass in hand. One at a time, before the word of his beastly kissing could spread, he said goodbye to the office staff. He kissed six. The trick of the deformed hand worked like magic, on his last day they did not like to turn aside before guests and clients.

'Henry, I don't know what you're up to, but leave the girls alone. Are you drunk or something? You've had your presentation, now you're here on sufferance.' Beverley Reinhart spoke sternly. He gazed into her avid face. 'Stop clawing their behinds with that hand of yours. Behave properly, this is an important party. If you don't I'll have you thrown out, last day or no last day.'

It was half-past five, the rooms thronged. Better-known clients – actors, television performers, top models – were now arriving. Henry looked at his glass. Though he had drunk sparingly it was almost half gone. Still, more than enough remained for what he now had in mind. Unobtrusively he approached the bowl of white punch and looked around. When no one was watching he tipped

half of what remained in his glass over the floating fruit and petals, then stirred it vigorously with the ladle. Accustomed to their acid-based medium the swarming bacilli were dispersed. In seconds the party punch became a deadly brew. He did the same with the red punch, then refilled his glass and stood aside to watch the antics of the party-goers.

Stocky men in evening dress, looking like bulldogs – Miles Thursby among them – planted their legs and displayed themselves with arrogance to all who came within their sphere. Actors and actresses, alert to producers, laughed with the casual gaiety of their craft. Beautiful models, make-up and clothes in the height of fashion, instinctively moved to patches of floor where they could be seen to best advantage. Tanned young men, much seen in catalogues, used their eyes and male proximity to attract girls or others of their kind. Fashion writers, dulled to this sort of beano, chatted to acquaintances and soaked up as much free booze as they could get before catching the tube home.

In his smart suit Henry was an anachronism. At some time he had carried luggage, fetched taxis, performed favours for half the people in the room, yet no one spoke, no one took any notice of the grey little man with the strange smile.

‘It’s a nice party, isn’t it?’

The slim, breastless model to whom he addressed himself looked down disdainfully. ‘It’s all right.’ She turned away.

She was drinking white punch. Even now, Henry thought, the mutant bacilli were milling in the girl’s throat, travelling down her digestive tract into that flat stomach, passing through the mucous and membranous tissue into her bloodstream. He gazed at the smooth skin and glossy hair, slim fingers resting on a man’s wrist, imagining the slow but remorseless changes that even now were commencing. He had been to the library and read the medical textbooks. In six months, in two years, allowing for the accelerated progress of the mutant strains . . .

The gazelle-like model glanced down and saw his contemplative smile fixed upon her.

‘Look, piss off, will you! Creep! Gawping at people like that!’

Her companion, a young actor in loosened tie and tight trousers, looked past her shoulder. His eyes hardened.

Henry saw that his glass was empty. ‘Let me get you another

drink, sir,' he said.

But when he returned the couple appeared to have gone. Then he saw them kissing at the top of the stairs. There was no need for the glass of punch. He returned it to the bowl.

At six o'clock the party was at its height. Henry saw that his work was done. The wine punch was almost finished. More than a hundred guests chatted and laughed and exchanged theatrical embraces. The young actors, the promiscuous models, would pass on the bacilli. It would be traced back to Green's. Already, in Henry's mind, they were paying for their years of disregard. Beverley Reinhart and her girls, all those narcissistic clients – they would remember the neglected little porter in his black uniform. As discharging sores erupted in their ears and on their buttocks, as their hair was shorn and their heads grew misshapen, as their extremities became truncated and their shoulders turned white, as their lips were devoured by ulcers and their eyelids petrified, as doctors told them there was neither cure nor death – they would remember!

Henry saw that the final moment had come. It was time for his own theatrical gesture. He drew a steadying breath and straightened his tie and hair. His glass was almost empty. He drained it, savouring the wine and spices, then took the presentation watch from his pocket. As he crossed the room, for the first and last time there was something in his manner that attracted the attention of everyone around. Guests stopped talking and followed the purposeful little porter with their eyes.

Beverley Reinhart was talking to a producer. Her reptilian gaze turned towards the figure who approached.

'Oh, Christ!' she breathed. 'Are you still here. What do you want, Henry?'

He was disappointed to see that his employer was drinking gin, though it did not matter. Judas-like he had sealed her future with a kiss.

'I'm going now, Mrs Reinhart. But I just want to remind you about something. Six months!'

'Six months? What the hell are you talking about?'

'Never mind that, just remember – everyone. Six months – or a year! Oh, and – er – there's something I want to return to you.'

Holding the cheap watch like a pendulum, he dropped it into her gin and tonic.

Beverley Reinhart was a powerful and formidable figure. There was a series of small gasps. The room fell silent.

‘Goodbye, Mrs Reinhart.’

Guests stood aside to let the little man through. But he did not walk to the door, he headed to the window and threw back the heavy curtains. The bright lights of Christmas shone outside. He flung wide the windows, emitting a blast of icy air. The party-goers huddled from the cold.

‘My God, Henry! Have you gone mad?’

‘No, my madness was to stay so long at Green’s, with people like you. I’m not mad now.’ He climbed to the window-sill. ‘Goodbye, everyone. Remember me. My name is Henry Coker!’

And with a small wave and a smile he stepped out into Regent Street.

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