

THE FIFTH PAN BOOK OF
HORROR STORIES

Selected by
Herbert van Thal

HORROR HORROR HORROR



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OF HORROR STORIES**

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Edited by
HERBERT VAN THAL



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THE MAN WITH THE MOON IN HIM

by William Sansom

A FULL moon would soon be rising to shed a cool brilliance over our hot, aching summer city.

Somewhere across the night of the world it waited to edge up over the rooftops, first a birth of light in the sky, then a thin gold rump mounting above chimneys swimming towards it, finally the enormous and splendid low-hung lantern itself.

People would stand at open windows and gaze at it, watching it 'rise', never thinking that it was instead they who dizzily descended round towards it, themselves forever falling away. Lovers in the parks would stare entranced, feeling its platinum heat burn in their veins, watching its light drip white on the buildings like a warm summer-night snow.

But the moon is not only beautiful, it has other strengths. Its terrible pull alters each month the shape of whole oceans. Millions upon millions of tons of salt wet water go creeping up and down the world as from somewhere, radiant and invisible, it pulls. Just as, like a restless sleep, it pulls at the smaller tides in human veins.

And just as, at five o'clock in the afternoon, long before it rose, still unseen and unknown, it pulled at the veins of a lonely young man in a raincoat deep beneath the earth in the tiled passages of the Underground.

He was alone. He was so alone that he might not have had a name. The name was written down in many registers, on letters and on small bills, and inside the greasy collar of his mud-coloured raincoat, and even on the register of one of Her Majesty's preventive institutions – Les Baynes. But on this summer night, with no girl, no friends, no money and no home, he might neither have had name nor identity. Hundreds of people passed him by but no one noticed him. He might not have been there.

But he was indeed there, and in many ways his presence was more powerful than usual. The moon knew he was there. He was strangely excited and overconscious of himself. He felt strong and daring. He had spent his last three pennies coming down on to the Underground platforms here – wisely, wisely, his mind told him.

He stood against the white tiles, by the slot machines and a line of cinema advertisements, on the up-line platform. At this time of the afternoon the platform was fairly empty. Not many people were yet travelling up to the West End. On the other side it was different – those who had left their work early were swelling the down-trains, and a growing swarm of footsteps echoed from the escalator hall. But his side was left empty.

It lay in a separate tunnel. Single people sometimes wandered in and stood apart, facing the big curved advertisements across the line. The suave dark-metal live-rail quietly beckoned from the pit in the centre. But nobody liked to look at this for long – they looked away to left or right or at advertisements. They looked ill at ease: and because they were few, they looked also as lonely as he was. He could stand them like that. It was not the same as above, in the streets, where everybody seemed bent on some purposeful, companionable errand, and only he had none.

On the five o'clock empty platform, tiled and hard as a bright lavatory, clean and dry as the inside of a giant porcelain gun-barrel, with the hot smell swerving in from tunnels, with the sound of trains themselves like a blast of thunderous air pushing in from the dark hole at the end – on this platform there stood three people as well as the young man. A painted-up girl in light-coloured clothes, pink angora, a short white skirt, high white shoes under dark stockings. Farther on, a man in creased grey, bowlered and sober, with a worn briefcase, a parcel, unpolished shoes. Further still, a Negro in a pale suit – in that tubular bluish light looking oddly out of context, like a man in a negative photograph.

The young man in the raincoat – he was Irish-looking, with upstanding oiled black hair, blue eyes rimmed with short dark lashes, a raw red skin that had stepped straight

off the bog or out of the pub, either – the young man glanced over these figures, found the men gloomy and innocuous, and fixed his eyes on the girl.

‘Tart,’ he muttered out loud. ‘Going up West, starting early.’ Then he saw she carried a small square makeup case. ‘Striptease,’ he corrected himself.

From far along the tunnel came the first growling of a train. He had his eyes on the girl. He felt vaguely possessive – there she was private in her clothes who would be publicly naked. His excitement mounted. In the pocket of his coat he gripped something, getting it ready. The two other men stepped back from the platform edge. He looked quickly over his shoulder across the escalator space to the other platform to see if the coast was clear. Sometimes not all the passengers went up the stairs, sometimes someone had passed his station and came through to take the opposite train back, sometimes some idiot bumpkin thought it was a junction and came wandering about looking for somewhere or other. But now it was empty there, no train. Yet perhaps a train was coming in now? Perhaps its noise was covered by the close roar of his own train which he could see surging round the bend of the tunnel, hard, busy, hungry, its red hammer-head bursting out small then suddenly tall as it ranged to a stop along the platform? Like a suddenly tamed beast it stood there shivering its whole long red flank and with a sighing hiss opened empty glass doors.

But no train came in on the other side, and no one got out here.

The girl, the grey-suited man, the Negro – all three walked in. The doors closed, the engine gathered itself rattling to a start – and then the whole immense enterprise groaned off, big thing gone suddenly small away in the tunnel hole, and the young man was left alone.

This was his moment. . . .

With a last glance over the other side – still empty – he drew his hand and the pencil-stub from his pocket and swung round on the wall. Gripping the stub hard and awkwardly between finger and thumb, he wrote quickly on the

white space of an advertisement a single big-lettered obscene word. His lips moved as he wrote. He wrote quickly, as if he were swallowing down food – and then he heard from over the way the first whisper of another train. He took a risk, reached out and scrawled the word again huge on the next poster, pale pencil-lead among the dark print of film actors' and directors' and distributors' names. 'That'll show the bleeders,' he lipped, and his mouth hung open greedy as an animal's.

But he was not pitting his strength simply at those film people – he was addressing the whole world, everybody, with their high-sniffing noses and their lifted eyebrows, their restrictions, their society, their No.

As the first people alighted from the train on the other side, he had the pencil-stub back in his pocket, dropping it loose like a sweet, avoiding it guiltily although it was deep in his own dark pocket. He side-stepped quickly to the machines and pretended to read what was offered : but then moved away in case someone might think he was tampering with them. He stood on the weighing machine and looked hard at the arrow not registering his weight.

He bubbled hotly inside himself as he heard the people patter off up and away. Perhaps there'd be another chance to do it before the next train came in?

There was. And he went through the whole action several more times, as several more trains came and went – the alert, the attack, success and the sweet secret guilt.

The guilt – and the cleverness. He was up to all the tricks, he knew when there were cleaners about, he could hear the clank of a pail and a mop a hundred feet off as the old girl in dark blue slacks and her pink satin blouse, hair done up tall in a turban like a Brixton-Jamaica mammy, came clacking along on floodhigh heels. And along at each end of the platform those polished wood doors could always hide a supervisor, he was up to that too, he didn't want old grim-face coming asking questions. So he kept a close eye on those doors while he waited for a train to pass. But he always found time to glance back proud at his own work, the pitiful pale lead scrawl among such heavily printed

names. It never looked pale or pitiful to him. He only chose the white spaces, where it stood out clear – some old probationer fool had once told him he didn't really want to write the words, he only wanted to make his mark on the space, and so what? If you wanted to write a word you didn't choose a written-on piece, did you? Only this old misery had kept on saying no it was the other way round, you didn't want to write the word at all, you wanted to fill the space and the word was what came to your mind, like people write their names. Well, and so what?

Thinking this, which always got him furious, for when they give you a sensible reason for things, it chips a bit off the pleasure somewhere – he waited for the next train to draw out and then swung sharply round on a poster with a big girl in a low-cut dress glaring her teeth out from a frame of red balloon lips, and he saw enough white space there in the picture of the girl, not on her bosom so carefully shaded but right in her teeth, and he stabbed with the stub at her teeth, and stabbed so hard he lost his grip on the pencil, it shot from his hand, he jerked back to catch it and only hit it hard with his hand like a racket and the stub went flying away through the air to fall on the platform, to roll winking on the dark grey stone surface, to dribble across the white line, and – he saw it with his heart heaved into his mouth – hover wobbling for a second before falling over into the pit. He ran forward after it – then stopped himself just in time, swaying on the edge like a man on a cliff.

The pencil lay down near a purple sweet carton, a piece of oiled rag, a torn newspaper. Its polish winked up at him from the dirt. It lay quite near the platform edge on his side of the first rail. The live-voltage rail was raised a good foot or two off, above the deeper pit. It was his only pencil. Could a man get down there, lie full length, without a train hitting him? Wheels, flanges – safer in the deeper pit like a coffin under the polished steel? But could it be risked – he looked skilfully up and down the platform – between trains?

Chamber-pots, he thought looking at the china insulators, rows of pos, and half-hating, half-loving he giggled. Like many other people he had wondered about this before, in a

way desiring it; and now he was already down on one knee on the very edge, on the white line and peering down before his heart began thumping, a shiver of fear emptied the soles of his feet, and he drew back just as a voice boomed hollow along the tiled tube : 'Keep away from that line. What's up, lost something?'

A peak-capped figure was hurrying towards him from the end of the platform, but still a long way away, and his clever guiltiness stood him smartly up to wave, shake his head, and stroll carefully at ease off into the arch towards the escalator. Once out of sight he ran, and ran right up the escalator so that when the official reached the bottom he was well out of reach and call.

At the top he gave up his ticket – wondering for a moment whether he could claim his twopence back. But now he was too excited. He saw freedom ahead in the sunlit archway. And gloating on what he had done and on the narrowness of escape, he hurried out from the smell of tiles and stale air into the summer evening.

But round the first corner he stopped. He felt the let-down coming on. The evening air was stale as the tube. He had a muffling and swelling in his head like a hang-over. A big emptiness bit inside like a drinker's wish for more drink and his hands scratched at the emptiness in his pockets. It was a small thing gone, a mean stub of wood and lead. But it was irreplaceable. And it would be absolutely impossible to get a pencil for nothing in the whole length of that busy street. In everybody's pocket and purse there were pencils. Pencils no one would give a second thought to. Yet there was no legitimate way of getting these pencils away from people. You might borrow one, pretend to need to make a note, stop a passer-by – but the owner of that negligible length of wood and graphite would stand waiting. The post offices had only pens. The pencils in the employment exchange were chained. You might borrow a pencil from someone and run – but that was asking for trouble. And he hated trouble, or more deeply, he feared trouble, feared even effort and risk of any kind; it was indeed this fear of facing

things that had conditioned him into secret and sideways ways, into peering through windows, into writing secretly on walls. In the smallest matters, he avoided a straight approach. He hated facing eyes. With girls, for instance, he found difficulty in going through with the ordinary bantering approach. His secret thoughts were too big to let him face their eyes.

The feeling of great pity for himself came on, he was near to tears as he stood and watched the people pass, all with somewhere to go, something to do – all seeming to have come to terms with the evening. Only himself in all the world left out. The sun was falling towards six o'clock – still high, but past its prime of afternoon, it cast a lost and weary light over the street of buses and vans and cars and people. At this point before evening things seemed to have lost their sparkle, it was an in-between time, it echoed back the old days when it was time to leave the dazzling play streets and go to wash before supper, when the smell of dust and asphalt was still sweet but somehow used up, tired as his tired feet.

He stood there empty as this empty time of day. He yearned for even an hour ago, as if this were all the past. He put all the blame on that pencil. He looked up the street, at the mixed red and brown and concrete-grey buildings, at all the mess of wire and lamps and poster, at the traffic and the Odeon and the red Woolworth's and turned away, it all looked so sour and stale, the well-known dull buildings and the street of people. He turned and walked in the other direction to where the Common, yellow with clay and scrubbed with gorse, straggled right down to the pavement. He walked up a path between gorse bushes to where a thicket of may-trees huddled together to make a paper-strewn urban grove.

The sounds of summer traffic came singing, a confused music like the metal echo of water-pipes. Through the dusty leaves he saw the far blue sky. He stood there not knowing what to do – craving to do something. Although it was so warm that the underbush smelled – of dead grass and metal, and dust, and petrol – nevertheless he still wore that rain-coat, hot and sweetsour, damp beneath the arms. It was a kind of protection, an anonymity. He stood and looked

down at an old white and blue-rimmed jug, patched with rusted iron where the enamel had chipped. He kicked it over. It made no sound. The earth was too dull even to bring a ring from an old tin. He turned and walked away. The heat in his head ached, he felt he could break inside for excitement. But excitement for what? He was surrounded only by the dead desolate Common, by the suburb pretending to live.

Houses were built right up against the edge of the Common here. He walked down the hard clay path, ridged with old rain rivulets, to where the dung-brown brick garden walls rose. He stood in the shadow of a tree and looked up at the windows. Perhaps some girl back from the office was changing for the evening, for the dance. He heard the sound of plates being washed. A radio talked out the news, wide and loud, like the voice of a man in a huge hall. Lace curtains, blackness between, faced him over the roof of a shed. Slate roofs above: and above them, that vague yearning of a sky. It was all pitilessly still.

The sun somewhere behind him fired into bright gold one of the closed glass windows. Jewel-bright, sadly westering, it threw into emphasis all the tired brick around. The house-backs rose in a grim terrace against the blue above – never, never would they move, they were set in their etched dull check of brick like dead houses buried in a steel engraving, they grated with a despair of the past, and something in the sight of them pulled harder at that man's inside already pulled by the moon, something which set the craving higher than ever. But a craving for what? He did not know. So it became a girl.

He turned away and walked down the slight slope back to the High Street. The suburban pall faced him – just enough brightness in the new shops, in two cinemas, in a fried fish shop and a restaurant and two large corner licensed houses and a radio shop flickering silent television screens, just enough brightness in all this to tempt – but so many miles away from the West End where these things were set packed tight together, street after street, satisfying, available.

A group of young men were strolling by, special hair-cuts, white shirts, boasting suits. They talked loudly, impressing each other. They were less intent on looking for a girl than on impressing themselves on the world, on stirring things up. In this they looked dangerous. But they were in control. They were not like Baynes, edging by dull against their brightness, a mud-coloured shadow of a man with the moon in him.

He glanced up shiftily as they went by, waited for them to pass before he spat. Then he saw the tail of a queue outside the fish shop – and a pair of red high heels.

As his eyes saw them his feet went forward, he was cutting along the pavement to stand in the queue exactly behind this woman with the shoes, his chin a few inches only from the rolled back of her hair. He smelled her scent, the soapy scent of an English bedroom, mixed with the summer scent of her, warm girl, yearning out to him.

The queue shuffled forward. He kept close behind. People now pressed close against his back – but he kept back away from the girl, so conscious of her that to touch would have seemed designed and if she turned to make some simple complaint, 'Don't push', he might panic with guilt. So he kept back.

Yet she knew. His breath, his breathing? Or just his presence, his hot mind penetrating the back of her head? Once she turned round, glanced quickly up – and in that glance perhaps saw only health in his red face and thick black upstanding hair, for a second later her hand came up to the back of her hair to put it straight. He noticed on one white finger, young and thin and innocent, a meagre ring with a cheap and very small false gem : it looked pitifully cheap, humble : he wanted to smash it.

People came out with fish wrapped in paper, and now nearly inside the shop the smell of fry overcame the girl's scent and with this some of her presence went, he woke up to the fact that he was in a queue and penniless. He read No Plaice Tonight on a blackboard and saw he could ask for this when his turn came. But they might have one portion left? They might keep him hanging there waiting while

they looked for it and the girl escaped? He stepped from the queue, pretending to shake his head regretfully at the notice, and left the shop. Next door was a photographer's. He stood looking at photographs of wedding groups, brushed-up grooms with touched-up faces, and brides who had lost their figures in big white wedding dresses as if anticipating what was to come – bright pathetic couples enjoying their moment before the years of toil and words, but now to Baynes simply pictures of people who had banded together, who were on the side of order and restraint and all the social niceties that said No. He swore at them, just moving his wet lips, and kept a sideways eye on the fish-shop.

The girl came out and turned his way. His insides paled. He thought she was going to speak to him but she went past. He turned to walk casually after her. Now he kept near in by the shop windows. He kept his head down – but his eyes were still on her, looking up under the lids like dead eyes. She walked not fast but with decision, in the centre of the pavement, the set of her heels jolting her whole body busily.

She rounded the last shop in the line and turned up on to the common. His mouth fell open with surprise.

She was walking exactly where he had come from! He gasped at the coincidence of this. It was commanded, it was fate – and with the certainty that superstition brings he hurried faster after her, seeing clearly the grove of dark may-trees higher up through which she must pass.

At that time of day there were few people on the Common. People coming home from work took the main asphalted path away to the right: and it was yet too early for evening strollers to walk out on this quieter path, a kind of lovers' lane, that ran along near the row of high garden walls. Yet everywhere the signs of trampling humanity were scattered – initials chalked on the walls, a scattering of cigarette cartons and whole sheets of blown newspaper, and this litter gave the place a more deserted look. A great crowd had come and gone and would never come back.

He was beginning to breathe fast. He took care to walk

away from the path, taking a roundabout way over the grass. He had thus to walk twice as fast, on that warm evening with his raincoat stale and muffling its own rubber heat round him. He could only see the girl's back. Of this, what he saw markedly was the waist, slender between shoulders and hips, the place where she might snap – and then also he saw the slightly bent forward set of her shoulders, not broad, but young and weak, so that they seemed in their thin fragility to call for protection, and at the same time for its opposite, hurting and crushing.

She disappeared behind a straggle of bush growing higher towards the may-grove. He took a last quick look round. He saw from a long way off a man standing and possibly watching him – but this only aggravated, made him act with greater speed, so that now breaking into a run but quiet, quiet on his toes, bending low on long knees, he passed after her into the earth-smelling shadow of the may.

Tangled, disordered, shapeless, those trees nevertheless cut out the day, they made a place of shade privately their own. It was quiet inside, quiet as the dead smell of last year's sodden autumn's leaves and the silent ring of that rusted, mud-bedded enamel jug.

He leaped at her from behind clutching with both arms, swinging her round to face him. She made no sound but for a little sob deep inside her open mouth. The fish in its newspaper fell squashed between them. He butted her face up with his chin and looked close into her eyes.

They stared up at him neither frightened nor furious nor even surprised – they stared up unresisting, soft eyes looking a long way into him and beyond.

Her mouth had fallen a little open, she seemed to be pressing herself against him, giving to him. He swung out one arm from her shoulder to hit her in the face, to blot out her eyes. She stared up at him with the innocence of a child about to be struck – when the child has trusted yet faces a sudden wind of anger, and is all wonder at this, held at ease in a moment of suspended curiosity, but not detached, rather in some way most attached with all the strange love of victim for assailant.

His hands dropped to his sides. All he had wanted had fallen flat into soft pulp. How to impress himself on what was soft and unresisting? On what would not wrestle itself away from his strength? On what in fact had ceased to be there at all . . . ?

He was suddenly jolted aware of the real fact of standing with a girl in his arms in a straggle of trees, and realized now that it was her bag she was pressing at him, and from her lips there was indeed a word coming :

‘Take . . . take . . .’

He did not know what to do or to say and pulled from the cloud of his mind the first thing that came to it :

‘A pencil . . . could you please lend me . . . a pencil?’ before she fell, in a dead faint, to the ground.

I’LL LOVE YOU – ALWAYS

by Adobe James

WHEN I was a kid in Batesville, we used to think the old Morgan plantation house was haunted.

The thought of ghosts didn’t deter me, however, when I had a chance to buy it last autumn.

I was sick of New York – its heat, noise and humidity, and tired of the nine shows a week I had to direct in a hot, vacuum-packed theatre.

Five per cent of the play was mine. It would run for another year – with or without me – so I pulled out and went back to Batesville.

When the real estate agent mentioned the Morgan plantation, I knew he had a pigeon. We drove out a tree-lined road, turned off through the fields, and crossed an old wooden bridge with a somnolent stream beneath it.

The car stopped and he pointed. I could see the house standing forlornly at the end of a long-neglected drive. It had tall slender Georgian columns that were almost hidden by huge overgrown tree roses. The circular driveway swept

up through acres of weeds where once an emerald green lawn had served as a rich velvet welcoming carpet.

There were even magnolia trees – sweet smelling, statuesque flowering sentinels for each side of the house.

And in the centre of it all, peering over the top of the high grass, was a stone blackamoor with his hands outstretched for all eternity to receive the visitor's reins.

'I'll take it,' I said.

The tall, stoop-shouldered real estate agent pushed the straw hat back on his bald head and drawled, 'Wal now, don't yew think yew all ought to go in the house?'

'Not necessary – the appraiser said the main house was in good condition.'

He scratched his head thoughtfully, 'It's going to take a little bit of money to fix this here place up,' and nodded to emphasize his statement.

I had to smile at the difference between his sales approach and that of the big city boys who would have been chasing their tails and doing handstands in an effort to keep a buyer from seeing the bad things about the place.

Looking at the house once again, the late afternoon sun was softening the lines of the mansion. In my mind I could visualize how it must have appeared before the Civil War – how it would look again. 'I'll take it,' I repeated.

'Wal, okay then, Mistah Spencer. I'll have the papers drawn up sometime next week.'

Ten days later it was all mine. I hired half a dozen men to handle the repairs and gardening chores, and had three women cleaning up inside. For the next two weeks, the smoke from the weeds and the accumulated dust of fifty years cast a pall over the countryside.

Pierre Savore flew down from New York to do the interior decorating. The little Frenchman positively flipped when he saw the spiral staircase and hundred-year-old Parisian tile floor of the reception hall. With ten bedrooms, a 35 by 55 foot dining-room, and a study the size of my entire New York penthouse, Pierre was kept busy at the drawing board and on shopping expeditions for several weeks.

While all this was going on, I had my first visitors. Walking through the grounds one day, I stumbled across two wide-eyed frightened kids nervously fishing at the lower end of my property.

When I stepped out of the bushes and said, 'Hi,' they dropped their poles and ran, refusing to heed my calls to come back. All I'd wanted to do was tell them they could fish there any time they wanted to!

Then there was a newspaperman, Tod Johnson, whom I vaguely recalled as a hard-drinking, bible-quoting reporter when I was a delivery boy for the *Batesville Beacon*. He wanted to do a 'local boy makes good' story on my buying the Morgan mansion.

After three drinks on the front porch, he withdrew from his shell and began talking about people that I had practically forgotten.

I tried to sound properly shocked when he said Joe Dohr had been killed in the war – not actually remembering the man or the name.

'And there's Vernon – Vernon Moore who you went to school with. Well he married a widow with money over in Montgomery County and they went to California. Runs a motel out there now!' He prattled on and on, stopping only to ask me if I would mind if he had another drink.

I was fidgeting, trying to think of an excuse to send him on his way, when Tod started talking about the Morgan plantation.

'You haven't seen her, have you?' He peered out of his glasses with an expectant look on his lined face.

'Who?' I asked puzzled.

'Sally – Sally Morgan! You remember – she's the ghost here.'

'I don't recall . . .'

'Oh sure, you remember,' Tod said matter-of-factly, 'she was married to Johnny Morgan when the Civil War broke out. She loved Johnny, but also "loved" several cousins and most of his friends. Sally even took up with a couple of the niggers. They say her husband didn't know what was going on. Later – after he had gone away to fight and the Union

soldiers got down here – she took up with the Yankee officers. Damn near wore out the entire Union Army,’ Tod cackled and coughed as he choked on his liquor.

The paroxysm passed and he wiped his lips with the back of his hand, ‘Anyway, Johnny heard about it when he was in the hospital up North. He escaped, walked 250 miles home, and shot her at the top of the stairs. Sally fell down them,’ he motioned with his hand as if something were rolling and bumping, ‘and then she laid at the bottom and cussed Johnny. Said he’d never have another woman again. She died and they buried her the same day.’

He was quiet for a minute, his Adam’s apple doing an Irish jig as he finished the drink. ‘Well, old Johnny didn’t pay no attention and after the war married a Stuart girl. They came back to this house after their honeymoon. Servants were lined up on both sides of the hall to greet the new mistress. When Johnny and his bride started walking up to the bedroom, Sally appeared at the top of the staircase. The Stuart girl screamed, and then she and all the servants ran out of the house like a bunch of stampeding giraffes. Johnny was transfixed – he’d shovelled the dirt on her himself – so he knew she was dead. He couldn’t move. Sally walked downstairs in a thin nightgown and embraced her husband. Bob Roy, the butler, got up enough nerve to return to the house and see what was going on. He told how the master had tried to make the ghost go away, but she wouldn’t. Finally they went upstairs to their bedroom. When Johnny came down just before dawn, he was mad – completely loony – and killed himself in the stables a few minutes later! Soon as the shot rang out, the servants heard Sally laughing. Since then she’s taken more than twenty men, including a psalm-singing Methodist minister down here to visit a friend.’

We were both silent for a second. The story all came back to me – although when I was a kid I hadn’t heard the lurid details of Sally’s sex life. The gang from New York will love this, I thought, a haunted house with a nymphomaniac ghost.

Tod was watching me and saw the disbelief and laughter

in my face. He sighed, 'I wouldn't believe it now, either, if it weren't for a couple of things.'

'Go ahead,' I said, amused disbelief in my voice.

He started counting on his fingers, 'One – Sally's been seen quite a few times since then, most recently about a year ago; two – you're the fifth person to own this place in the last twenty years; three – all the previous owners said it was haunted except one man who didn't say anything – he just killed himself!'

After Tod left, I wryly looked at the empty bottle of Scotch and could well understand why the newspaperman believed in ghosts.

At the end of the month, the plantation had begun to assume some semblance of an estate. Pierre arrived from New York with fabric samples, cheques to sign and an entourage of a half dozen people who had heard of 'Dan Spencer's folly'.

I entertained them that night in the hotel dining-room, and over coffee revealed the saga of Sally. The story received a warm reception, and I knew it would make the rounds of the New York parties next week. Sure enough, the tale was mentioned in Earl Wilson's and Winchell's columns a few days later.

Progress in the house and on the grounds proceeded at such a pace that it was possible to move in a week later.

That first night in my new home I sat by the fireplace in the study and read a play sent by my agent. A feeling of contentment and peace enveloped me.

I was happy.

I listened to the wind whisper softly in the trees outside and watched the flames lick the logs with lazy tongues. Suddenly, I knew why so many poems had been written about home.

I was 'home' for the first time in my life!

Then I went to bed. The big canopied affair was a relic of ante bellum days. 'This must have been Sally's playground,' was my last thought before dozing off.

The light awakened me and for a moment I was unable to become oriented. Then I saw her – a breathtakingly beau-

tiful creature with full moist lips, hair that cascaded down her back like a strawberry coloured waterfall, glowing green eyes, and voluptuous happy breasts that stood out like two golden tears frozen immobile on her chest.

The negligée was thin. It revealed every fabulous promise of her body, every secret valley of delight.

I sat up, demanding stupidly, 'Who . . . what are you doing here?' Not a particularly original line, but it was all I could squeeze through my suddenly choked-up throat.

With lips reflecting the candlelight, she said huskily, 'You're Dan Spencer, the director – aren't you?'

Then it all clicked into place. I relaxed and tried to grin – of course! For a frightened second or two I had thought she was Sally. But now it all figured. She knew my name; obviously the gang from New York was playing a gag.

'Who sent you, honey,' I finally asked, unable to take my eyes off the cellophane-like garment she was wearing.

The girl looked puzzled – genuinely surprised at my question and countered, 'What do you mean? I came by myself.'

The accent sounded genuine. So – either she was a damned good actress, which I doubted because I hadn't seen her before; or a local girl with dreams of her name in lights who figured the fastest way to a contract was a romp through Innerspringsville.

I continued to watch as all this was going through my mind. Her body, her bearing, her voice . . . she didn't have to sleep with a director to get a part; I would have given her one any day of the week – for nothing!

Finally, I spoke again, not really putting my heart into it. 'You're making a mistake. My name's Spencer all right – and I'm a director, but I don't even know you, Miss . . . Miss?'

What the hell – how coy can you get when a strange young lady starts panting!

' . . . Leland – Miss Leland! That's my name.' Her eyes ran up and down my figure outlined by the sheets. I saw her smile, then she leaned forward suddenly and blew out the candle. There was darkness first and then the covers moved and the bed swayed a little. She was beside me – warm and

real as no ghost could ever be.

With the ghost question out of the way, there remained only the worry about a paternity suit and/or a husband walking in behind her!

'Miss Leland' was gone sometime before I awakened the next morning. I couldn't remember much about what happened except that I felt as if I had been wrestling a cage full of hang-nailed, sabre-toothed tigers all night long.

It was a wonderful feeling!

She didn't show up the following evening. I was disappointed. After tossing around sleeplessly for a couple of nights thinking of her, I decided to ask a few questions and try to locate her.

The men working in the yard scratched their heads, spit, looked puzzled and said they'd never heard of a woman by that name in Batesville. The house servants weren't any help either.

Like a happy dream, Miss Leland returned on the fifth night – slowly opening the door and smiling at me as I read in bed. 'You've been looking for me?' She sounded as pleased as a cat with a saucer of warm milk.

I nodded. The girl put her hands on those wonderful hips, cocked her head to one side and asked, 'Now why should you all be looking for little ole me? Hummm?'

I told her.

She laughed, and then with breathtaking suddenness, stepped out of her gown, flipped the light switch and crawled in beside me almost before it got dark.

We had a ball.

My visitor was there the next night, the following night and the night after that. I loved every minute of it.

At the end of twelve such evenings, I still didn't know any more about the girl than I had after her first visit. Each time I pressed for details, she would answer in that soft Southern drawl, 'It isn't important, honey.'

Then, unaccountably, 'Miss Leland' disappeared. I started asking questions again – and got no further than before. I wanted to find the girl for a variety of reasons, all of them physical. Sleep was impossible during her absence, and,

dammit, I was lonely.

The loneliness of the place was broken when Pierre and three of his 'helpers' came down with two moving vans containing drapes, new furniture, paintings, rugs and other expensive little knick-knacks for the house. The Frenchman had done a good job – as I knew he would. He busied himself around the house, ordering workmen and helpers around like a pint-sized first sergeant.

The house was transformed in a week. Pierre dismissed his assistants on a Thursday.

She came that night – breathless, her eyes sparkling with some inner starlight, and a week's stored-up passion.

'Who's your cute friend,' she asked, without preamble.

'Which one?'

'The little man with the big soft brown eyes,' she grinned, licking her lips nervously.

'Leave him alone, baby. You've got me,' I said.

She pouted. 'I know I've got you.' Her eyes narrowed. 'But he plays hard to get. I like that . . . you – you're too eager.'

'Me eager,' I exploded. 'My God, woman, I suppose you think those scratches down my back were done by me!'

The girl looked concerned for a second and then pulled me around so she could see the love wounds. 'Poor baby,' she crooned, and kissed the marks. Then she bit – hard and deep and painfully.

That night before she left, I asked her to fly up to Boston with me for the opening of a new play. Shaking her red hair solemnly she said, 'Oh no, I couldn't do that.'

'Why not,' I demanded.

'It's impossible. I couldn't.' She began crying, 'Please don't go. I don't know what I'd do without a man . . . you . . . around.'

She sat upright in bed, looking at me with fierce concentration. 'Tell me you love me. Say you'll love me always. Please . . . Dan. You don't have to mean it, just say it.'

The moonlight sifted in through the shutters and was reflected by her tears. She was beautiful – there never had been such a beautiful woman before. I found myself saying

as I kissed away the tears, 'I love you . . . I'll love you . . . always.'

Seconds later, sighing happily, she slid out of bed. 'I have to go. Take care of yourself in Boston. Come back to me. Please . . . I've never loved anyone before, Dan. You've got to believe that – I've never been in love with anyone before this.'

The door closed behind her. 'I love you,' I whispered, and the odd part is, for a second, I almost believed the statement.

Pierre was very angry the next morning, bouncing into the dining-room like a ruffled bantam rooster.

I started to say 'good morning', but he interrupted and snapped, 'All right, Dan. A joke's a joke, but you've carried it too far. Who's the girl?'

Stunned – all I could mutter was, 'What girl?'

'Don't act innocent! The one you . . . the one you had crawl into bed with me this morning.'

He was serious and furious. The girl! Surely she couldn't have spent most of the night with me and then gone on to his room. It was impossible. 'Describe her,' I said.

Pierre was trembling – mostly from suppressed rage. He described the girl . . . it was the same one.

'What happened?' I had to ask the question; I didn't want to know the answer.

'Nothing. Do you think I'm going to take up with the first little tart that climbs into bed with me. I have morals! The slut! She even had the nerve to claim I was playing hard to get.'

So! She had gone down the hall – still damp from love's exertions, and visited Pierre hoping for more affection.

'I'm sorry, Pierre. Truly sorry. But I don't know who she is. I've tried to find out, but no one claims her.'

The Frenchman realized I was serious. His anger was still evident, but no longer directed at me. 'Women,' he snapped, 'why is it that some are like animals – insatiable – in heat twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.'

When he calmed, I said I would be going away overnight to Boston and asked if he cared to come along.

'No, I still have work to do in the east wing. I'd like to

finish everything by tomorrow. Incidentally, Clara Kennett of Estate Beautiful is coming down with a photographer. She wants to do a layout with photographs of you in it, so try to get back as soon as possible.'

I told him I'd be back late the next day and in a short time was on my way. Driving through Batesville, I decided to stop in at the newspaper and talk to Tod about the girl.

'Nope,' he said slowly, looking very perplexed, 'there's no one around here by the name of Leland.' Tod was getting suspicious. 'Why do you want to know. Is it important?'

I thought for a moment and finally decided against telling him anything else.

'No?' He cocked his head to one side like an inquisitive terrier. 'Well, it doesn't matter. I'll try to check it out and let you know when you get back from Boston.'

Going to Boston was a mistake – maybe the worst one I ever made. The play had been a flop – an atrocious piece of nonsense that lost half its audience before the first-act curtain dropped. The weather was miserable – the hotel room overheated, and I wound up with a case of food poisoning.

When I got back to Batesville, the skies were darkening and it looked as if we were in for an early autumn storm. I went directly to the newspaper office. Tod jumped up excitedly when I entered, knocking over a chair in his eagerness.

'Dan,' he shouted, 'I've got something.' He'd been drinking; I wished I could have said the same for myself.

'Good,' I replied.

'Listen – it's important. Now where – did – you – see – this – girl?' He spaced out the words like a teacher instructing an idiot child.

'I'd rather not say, Tod.'

He glanced at me slyly. 'It doesn't matter,' he said, reaching into his desk drawer and pulling out a picture. He held it out to me, his hand shaking in excitement, 'Is this the one?' Tod asked, his voice almost inaudible.

It was the girl, only . . . she was wearing stage clothes! I looked closer; hell, she looked as if she were playing the part of Scarlet O'Hara.

One glance at my face gave Tod his answer. He danced a little jig, hopping on one foot and then the other. 'I knew it . . . I knew it! It was in the house, wasn't it? She's a red-head, and has a body like this . . .' He used his hands to shape curves in the air.

I sat down suddenly in the chair, desperately afraid of what was coming. 'All right, Tod. What do you know?'

'It's her . . . Sally! Her maiden name was Leland! Sally Leland! Oh, God bless us. You've seen her!' He laughed and slapped his pants leg. 'That'll teach you to start believing in ghosts.' His laughter died when he saw my dismay. Immediately, he was contrite. 'I'm sorry, Dan. I didn't mean to make fun of you.' He was still mumbling apologies when I turned without a word, and stumbled blindly out of the little print shop.

Blue-black thunderheads were piled up all around the horizon and there was an ominous feel to the sky. Muted kettle drums of thunder were sounding down by the river when I got back to the house. Pierre was nowhere in sight. I went upstairs and had just finished packing when the storm broke.

The wind moaned through the shutters and I could hear rain pounding, scratching, clawing like a wild animal on the roof. The lights flickered, dimmed, and then came on strong and bright again. Thunder was booming outside . . . it was as though I suddenly had been placed in the middle of an artillery engagement.

I didn't know what to do but realized I had to get away from the house and think. The servants had started a fire in the study before they left for the day. I sat before the fireplace trying to decide on a course of action. My mind was still shrouded in a cloak of unreality and numbness when I heard Pierre moan.

I ran towards the stairs. He was half-standing on the first landing, his face drained of colour, lines of exhaustion acidly etched on his features. His eyes were rolling like those of a maddened calf. 'Dan,' his voice was a feeble croak. He took a step towards me, missed his footing, and rolled down the stairs.

‘Pierre, my God, what’s happened to you?’

‘Her . . . it was her.’ He shuddered, the tremors running through his body as though he had touched a high voltage wire.

The little Frenchman tried to get to his feet. He clutched my trousers, pathetically, ‘Keep her away. Don’t let her get at me again,’ and began sobbing.

I shook him, trying to get some sense out of his babbling, ‘Snap out of it. What the hell happened?’

‘She . . . she came to my bed last night . . . and then, all . . . all night long . . . she,’ his eyes rolled hysterically, ‘I’m not a strong man, Dan. She’ll kill me! Get me out of here, please!’

I pulled him to his feet, ‘All right. We’ll go. Pack your bags.’

His terror returned, worse than ever. ‘No. No. Let’s get out now. She’s up there.’

His fear was contagious. I could feel Sally’s presence; it was no longer a warm sensual thing, but now something evil, animal-like, as if the gates of Hell had swung open and the denizens of that region were loping through the black night in quest of prey.

The lights dimmed again – stayed dim for about thirty seconds – and then slowly died, leaving only the fireplace as a source of illumination.

‘Dan,’ Pierre screamed in panic. ‘She’s coming!’

‘All right. All right!’ I tried to soothe him, my voice jittery, ‘I’ll take the bags out to the car.’

He insisted on sticking right alongside me when I went out. Through the lightning, I could see that little gullies of rainwater were already washing away the lawn. We were soaked within seconds. A blaze of excruciatingly bright lightning blinded me as it struck the magnolia tree at the side of the house. It split, and before my eyes could grow accustomed to the darkness, the tree fell crashing across the hood of the car, missing the two of us by inches.

A feeling of indescribable horror descended upon me. I’ve lived in the big city and been schooled – there isn’t any such thing as a ghost. Yet, Sally existed! I didn’t doubt for a

second that it had been Sally who called down the lightning bolt. Too, I instinctively knew that if we tried to cut across the lawn she would block our way again – this time perhaps even more violently.

I felt sick inside as I stood on the porch watching my home being destroyed. The lawns, the flowers, the shrubs, were being savagely pounded down to the ground by the weight of the hail and water. There was a crashing sound of splintering glass as the new greenhouse was demolished.

I ran into the house; Pierre moaned and followed me, afraid to stay by himself. Behind us the door slammed shut with a finality that was terrifying.

The smell of Sally was in the air, her passion throbbed even above the noise of the storm. I stood rooted by fear and indecision at the bottom of the stairs. Finally I called, 'Sally! Sally Leland, where are you?'

Only the creaking and banging of storm shutters answered me.

I pleaded again. It was stupid and melodramatic but I didn't feel like a fool. There was a part of my chilled trembling brain that knew she was listening . . . somewhere. I turned back to the big oak door. At the edges of my consciousness, I could hear her muffled laughter. Water, blown by the wind, had caused the old wood to swell and the door wouldn't open – no matter how hard we tugged or pulled. I knew even before I tried that Sally had blocked all means of escape.

I went back to the foot of the stairs. 'Sally, let us go . . . please let us leave.'

Muffled laughter again – louder this time. A feeling of impending disaster twisted my entrails in a giant hand of terror.

Pierre, helpless, fell at the foot of the stairway. He was shuddering, his hands clenched and unclenched in fear.

'Sally,' I called, 'listen to me . . . please.' There was no answer at first and then slowly, above the sound of the storm, I could hear it.

A humming – inhuman unearthly singing like that sung by a black widow spider who has woven her web tightly

around her helpless mate and is happily preparing to feast.

There was only one thing to do.

I left Pierre lying on the floor and walked slowly upstairs.

A soft note of surprise crept into the humming . . . almost amazement. I was frightened; but Sally had to be met on her own battleground.

I entered the master bedroom and laid down. The storm outside raged like a violent maniac, and the magnolia tree at the other side of the house fell, carrying with it the entire west wing and the kitchen.

My door opened. She was standing there, head cocked to one side, puzzled.

'Hello, Sally Leland,' I said, my voice sounded strong above the storm.

The green eyes glowed for a second and then narrowed. She spoke and it was a question full of surprise and indecision, 'You aren't afraid?'

I shook my head negatively, my eyes glued to the thin negligée. In spite of the terror, I could feel desire building up inside me once again. I made a move towards her. The wind screamed outside and something hit the roof with a force that made the house shake.

Sally held up a hand to stop me. 'Dan,' I'd never heard her voice so uncertain, 'why are you up here?'

'Why do you think?'

'Tell me,' she demanded.

'Because I love you.'

Like a hurt, bewildered little girl Sally said, 'No one has ever loved me . . . just my body! You aren't any different . . . I don't think.'

'You're wrong about me, Sally. I know all about you . . . your lovers during the last hundred years. You're supposed to be dead, but to me, you're more alive than any woman I've ever known. I know all this . . . and I still love you.' Suddenly I knew what I was saying was true, and perhaps the realization showed in my voice.

She looked deep into my eyes, probing my heart, then bit her lips and blinked to restrain the tears. 'No one has ever loved me before, Dan.'

I stepped forward to take her in my arms. She dodged, pushing me back. 'Wait, please . . . I have to think.'

I put my hands on her shoulders. They were soft and warm. She moaned, 'No . . . not yet.'

Then Sally smiled, and in a strained serious manner said, 'Let's go downstairs, Dan.'

We walked arm in arm down the spiral staircase to where Pierre was lying unconscious.

'You worked the poor bastard half to death,' I said with forced laughter, 'he can't handle you the way I can.'

'You've always been too eager. Besides, he plays hard to get,' she said, absent-mindedly, not returning my grin. Sally turned towards the back of the house where the storm was banging things around. Her voice was husky, almost sad, when she said, 'Tell me once more how you feel, Dan.'

'I love you, Sally. I'll love you always.' It was the absolute truth!

She blinked again, and then apparently reaching some decision, walked to the front door. 'Come here,' she demanded. I went to her side. 'Open it!'

Puzzled, I did as she ordered. The door opened easily under my hand. Wind-driven rain hit me in the face like shotgun pellets and I almost lost my balance. For a second, I was stunned as I gazed at the destruction outside. Her voice came again, this time incredibly sad, and lonely, I guess, 'Goodbye, Dan.' And then the door slammed behind me.

'Sally, let me in,' I yelled.

Only the shrieking wind answered my cries.

'Sally. What about Pierre?'

Almost insane, I ran around the house to the back, trying to find a way in. It was no use. The place was locked up tighter than Fort Knox.

I only vaguely recall crawling through mud and slime, climbing over fallen trees and fences, and finally making my way to the highway. Around midnight, I stumbled into Batesville.

I found Tod working in his office; he had decided to reset the front page and give details of the unexpected hurri-

cane. I blurted out that a friend had fallen on the stairs and I was afraid to move him in case there were internal injuries. It was a lie; his eyes told me he knew it had something to do with the ghost.

Tod, a deputy sheriff, and an ambulance attendant accompanied me back to Morgan mansion. It took us almost an hour to drive the four miles.

Tod took one glance at the ruins of the place in the headlights, and whispered, 'My God.' I was speechless. The house looked as if it had gone five hundred years without a coat of paint. Storm shutters were hanging askew on the windows, the entire west side of the roof had been ripped off, a pool of muddy water covered the area where my lawn and flowers had been growing . . . and the front door was swinging aimlessly to and fro in the wind.

There was no sign of Pierre . . . not then, or later!

The deputy and the coroner listed it as possible accidental drowning while wandering around in the storm.

I guess I'm the only one who knows what really happened to Pierre – and, possibly, Tod might have some suspicions, but he keeps his mouth shut.

You know, I keep thinking about the old proverb, 'One man's paradise is another man's hell.' There's a lot of truth in that axiom. I would have been happy with her in that sexy little paradise. She was a passionate wench – a violent, but wonderful, woman – and her demands were great. But as far as that's concerned, my demands are great too!

However, through some perverted reasoning of her own, possibly because she was in love with me, Sally took Pierre to be her stud in that nether-nether land of ghosts and their playmates.

And that's the most horrible thing about it all. It's such a gruesome joke that I sometimes laugh out loud; and I hope you'll forgive me if my laughter has a hysterical ring. It's such a joke on me . . . on her . . . and on Pierre.

Sally – warm, passionate Sally – wanted someone 'to make love to her . . . always!' So, she chose poor old Pierre. See, I'm laughing again!

Sally thought Pierre was being coy, but the little French-

man wasn't playing hard to get. Not at all! It's just that he was as queer as a three dollar bill!

'Always . . .' Man! For Pierre, that's going to be a hell of a long time.

COMMAND PERFORMANCE

by C. A. Cooper

THE FOLLOWING is a transcript of a tape-recording made at a London seance last year. A search made immediately afterwards revealed the body of Charles Manning, a priest, in the cellar of The Towers, scene of a mysterious double murder in 1741. The girl Marie was never seen again. I print the transcript without comment; the reader may form his own conclusions :

My name is – or was – Charles Manning : I was a clergyman. A rather ordinary clergyman, I fear, gentle and courteous and orthodox and probably quite useless. My one serious contribution to the search for religious truth was a ponderous and closely-reasoned paper intended to destroy once and for all the doctrine of original sin. 'As if', I wrote scornfully, 'an innocent child could come into the world laden with an ancient and terrible guilt!' Ah, how fiercely our minds reject what they fear to be true!

I had all my life been rather subject to what are called moods. These would descend on me suddenly and without apparent reason, and everything around me and within me would all at once seem strangely stale and sick and empty. As I grew older these moods became increasingly insistent, and although I fought grimly to prevent them interfering with my work I soon realized that people had begun to notice that the depressed and confused state which was now almost permanent was beyond my power to conceal. I lost my place in Mass, I broke down in the middle of a burial service, I dried up while trying to preach a sermon. Amusing, you are thinking. But then you do not know the hideous

Fate that was padding ever closer at my heels; you do not know that this bespectacled, rabbit-like little priest, reciting the first words of the confession a dozen times in succession because he cannot recall what follows, is dogged by a Monster.

And then there was Marie. A feverish longing for something fresh and alive and warm and untainted by this deadly sense of emptiness was the prime symptom of my condition, and quite suddenly the whole force of this undefined yet maddening desire was poured into a single passionate infatuation, hopeless yet inexorable, tender yet afire with the wildest sensual lust. How long and tormented was that night when first I knew that I loved Marie! And how eagerly I recalled, over and over again, the minutest detail of our first meeting! I was in my study, I remember, feeling even more wretched than usual, and suddenly there was the lightest of knocks on the door and there she was before me. It seemed that a mutual friend had suggested that while she was in my parish she call to see me. And then we had got to talking, and I think I must have loved her almost at once, for something in her irrepressible flow of high spirits seemed to draw me out of myself. Perhaps it was the air of gentleness, almost of sadness, that lingered somewhere beneath the surface of her manner, as though she only laughed thus at the little quirks and twists of life because she knew all too well of the deeper thing that underlay them. At any rate, I remember that for the first time in years I was completely and unthinkingly happy. And I remember many other things, too, of the weeks that followed – the visits from Marie that became more and more the most important part of my life, the sudden acute awareness of my bald head and silly little gold spectacles during a rare gap in the conversation, a sight of Marie wandering, alone and young and beautiful, in the autumn sunshine, the final inescapable recognition of the true nature of my feelings, the anguished nights alone and racked by love. It seemed that in Marie was the epitome and quintessence of everything I had ever wanted, the symbol of every vision of sweetness and peace that has ever tormented the soul of

man; and in her arms perhaps I could find release, release from a misery and strife which I could not even pretend to understand, but which was slowly crushing me to death within myself.

But I was a priest, a man of close on fifty, and Marie was hardly more than a child, and I knew what I had to do. I arranged for an itinerant preacher to take over my parish for a month and beat a panic-stricken retreat to the country.

'The Towers' had been to let for years, and I suppose now it was knowledge of this that had unsettled me so badly in the first place, before Marie came and brought matters to a head. Not that I was at the time in the least interested in it, consciously. I had simply noticed that 'to let' advertisement in a local paper on one of my occasional trips to Cornwall – always, since earliest childhood, to the same part of Cornwall – and the name stuck oddly in my mind, although to the best of my knowledge I had never seen the place. Shortly afterwards had come the sense of numbness and isolation, and the cruel one-sided love-affair; and somehow I had chosen The Towers as a place of retreat without a second thought, making all the necessary arrangements by post and not troubling to make a single inquiry about the place which was to be my home for a month. No doubt I rationalized this impulsiveness to myself in some way, but I can no longer recall how. In any case, such doubts as I had must have been blown aside when I saw the place; for I recognized it! Why, it was the old grey building on the hill, the one I had gazed at for hours on end on my student bicycle trips! I was disproportionately elated at this coincidence, and waltzed in absurd gaiety through the massive oak door. It crashed shut behind me.

'The poltergeists are restless tonight,' I joked, and danced on up the hall and into the kitchen, where I proceeded to make an exuberant and ridiculous display of lighting the huge old fire and cooking supper. But this mood did not last. It disappeared suddenly while I was eating. I became aware of the night wind howling mournfully outside, of my own isolation in this strange and gloomy old house, of the

huge darkness looming around the uncertain circle of fire-light in which I sat; and I was filled, not so much with fear, as with disbelief. It seemed suddenly absurd and impossible that I, a quiet suburban priest, should be sitting all alone in this unfamiliar place. A sense of unreality possessed me. I thought of the events that had brought me here, and they were centuries old; I thought of Marie, and she meant nothing to me.

But perhaps you know something of what I felt. Perhaps you have sat too long in the hot sunshine, being forced at last to stagger indoors, sweating and faint. The coolness, the sudden release from the intolerable heat outside, instantly soothe your body; but something seems dislocated in your mind. You see around you the things that are with you every day of your life, but somehow they no longer stand in the close relation to you they did. You have lost contact with them; puzzled and amazed you strive to shake yourself back into the world they inhabit, the world of reality. But all is in vain. Suddenly you perceive that the link between man and his world is a feeble thing, sustained by some inner psychic organ which – like the heart – beats unconsciously but fallibly. Now that link is stretching, weakening, breaking, growing fainter with every passing moment. Visions of madness arise before you. It is as though an alien presence – dead, huge, oppressive – were crushing down into your mind. You fight back grimly, recalling those things which were once most important to you – a well-loved tune, a familiar face; but nothing can break the iron tyranny of your mood, and you can only control your alarm until such time as the crisis has passed.

Thus it can be in your own home. Imagine then a man suddenly brought to such a pass in a dark and ancient house in which he is alone, and you may have some idea how I felt. It was as though I had been suddenly plucked from the world I knew – the world of friends and sunshine and polite talk and Church services – and trapped inside a huge and bizarre dream; or as though that familiar world had vanished altogether, to be replaced for all eternity by this grotesque and inescapable darkness. Panic swept over me in

waves; a panic born, not of the eerie scene around me, but of my own inability to comprehend it or anything else as real. I started from my chair and blundered through the darkness out into the hall. It was impossible to see my hand before my face, and for a moment I paused, listening to the wind, and oddly soothed by the cosy completeness of the dark. For darkness is anonymous and ambiguous: it belongs, not to any one place, but to all places. Within it you are free, unconfined by time or space, but nursed in a cradle of infinite and universal peace.

My eyes grew accustomed to the dark; oak panellings, inky doorways, peered back at me dimly. I crashed around in search of the oil-lamps I knew were there, turning everything round me a shadowy and unsteady yellow. A picture in the hall caught my eye; a harsh black-bearded face glowered from it.

'Good evening,' I muttered bitterly. The sense of panic was worse now, but I had analysed it and I was trying to control it. A long period of overwork and emotional strain, a sudden change of environment – these things had been too much for me, I told myself. I reached the bottom of the stairs, and lit another lamp. The stairway was dilapidated, sinister; a nameless fear struck me with the force of a physical blow the moment I saw it. I wanted to scream, and I wanted to pray, but God seemed a part of that other world that was vanished, so I merely buried my head in my hands, fighting my fear, and all the more terrified because I could not understand what was happening to me. Then at last I felt a little calmer, and ventured to peer dazedly around. Everywhere was an air of ruin: the ghastly simile of a mouldering human corpse forced its way into my mind, with the banisters of that horrid stairway as the yellowing ribs. Monstrous shadows writhed about the walls, yet of them or anything they might hide I was not afraid. My fear was undefined, and therefore the more dreadful.

The thought of flight crept into my mind. Outside was moonlight, and the cool night breeze, and the lights of the road across the valley: the road that might bear me back to the world I knew, to a hospital, to Marie. Marie! The

very thought of her suddenly drove all else from my mind : for what seemed an eternity I was rooted where I stood, conscious only of my love for Marie, and of a fearful and overwhelming grief.

Then I was calm. All emotion was drained from me, even fear. I turned like an automaton and stumbled towards the cellar, and only a small and ineffectual part of me wondered how I knew the way, or why I must go. There was a huge stone slab over the steps down, and my hands were bleeding before I had pulled against the pressure of the rusty counterweights and cleared the opening. I descended slowly, but without the difficulty that comes of unfamiliarity; even the crumbling ruin of the fourth step down was expected.

I reached the cellar floor. Erebus itself could not have been darker, but my lamp revealed a huge vaulted brick place, floored roughly with stone, and entirely bare. Water dripped musically from the roof; moss blotched the walls.

I advanced to the centre of the floor. Something inside me said that even now I could escape, could tear myself from the clutches of this nightmare and flee. But a sense of inevitability, of destiny, prevented me. Some Power had brought me here, was even now drawing together the final threads of the net that encompassed me, and I could no more escape it than I could escape myself. I spoke, knowing not what I addressed.

‘Why am I here?’ I asked. The words were doubtful, uncertain; they echoed metallically about the walls. And in reply came a single shattering crash, as of a thousand iron traps clanging shut. I started violently; a hoarse scream jerked from my lips; my heart hammered madly against my ribs. I tried to reason, to throw back the renewed onslaught of animal terror that beat upon my sanity; and a new and hideous thought seared into my brain.

I bounded up the steep stone steps three at a time, and ere I reached the top my upstretched hands encountered a barrier. I clawed wildly above me, searching for the opening that had been there, but in every direction my fingers found only stone. I raised the lamp above my head, and the

slab that guarded the entrance to the cellar had slipped on its rusty iron grooves, sealing me within as surely as if I had been in a coffin. For the lever that worked the counterweights was outside, and I was trapped by half a ton of stone upon which I could not by any contortion exert an effective upward leverage.

The thought of death never once entered my head, though with none for miles around aware of my presence that seemed certain, and in the peculiarly unpleasant form of starvation. Rather was the terror that now possessed me an Absolute fear, an unutterable shuddering dread such as mere death cannot command. For now I knew – knew with a ghastly and intolerable certainty – that I was utterly and helplessly ensnared by a hideous Doom, that before me lay horror such as mortal man cannot endure unless it be at the price of his sanity. And something deep within me knew what form that horror was to take, yet fought in vain to convey its knowledge to the wild confusion of protest that was my conscious mind. Some ancient and loathsome Memory, some primal and implacable Knowledge, was stirring into life within my soul; and against its warning I raised the barrier of screaming revulsion, of complete submission to the very extremity of fear. I ran across the cellar; my eyes had found a tiny grating high in one wall; and I smashed heavily into the wall beneath it. Then I scratched my fingers into the very bricks, grovelling in the slime for handholds, biting with my teeth. . . .

But I prefer not to linger on this. Few men, I think, would care to face themselves as they are when fear has stripped from them the trappings of humanity. Suffice it to say that presently I found myself sobbing by the wall, frenzy defeated by the one thing that can defeat it – physical exhaustion. Around me was darkness, unbroken and complete, for the lamp had smashed to the floor in the moment I found myself trapped; and the tiny opening above me afforded, from this angle at least, not the faintest glimmer of illumination. Yet this was not the comforting, peaceful, dark I had found above, for still the water tinkled from the roof, and its echoes told me of the fearful place in which I

was entombed.

Then it began : the torment for which I had been born, the culmination and the cause of the psychic compulsion that had drawn me here in my youth, that had buried me here for my death. First there were muffled voices, hard to place, but seemingly outside and above the cellar; and I knew that they were not the voices of the living, because it was not meant that I should survive this ordeal without some supernatural and hideous Revelation, some inexorable atonement whose shape I already dimly recognized. One of the voices was that of a man, mad with rage : the other was a girl's sobbing, pleading, screaming in anguish. It seemed she was being dragged nearer against her will. I heard the sound of a blow, of struggling feet, of a gasp of pain. Then came the creaking of the stone over the cellar entrance, and a wild confusion of light and shadow broke out over the steps. Two forms, one forcing the other down the steps, came into view; and despite the dim feebleness of the man's lamp I could see them clearly. The man was huge in build and had a bushy black beard : I recognized him from the portrait I had seen in the house. The girl's hair was long and golden, and her slight blue dress had been practically torn from her shoulders in the struggle, but I could not see her face. She was crying out all the while for mercy, and on the rotten fourth step missed her footing : at which the man, with grunt of triumph, pushed her savagely in the back, so that she fell headlong. Her head cracked sickeningly on the bottom step, and she rolled on to her face and was still. Blood oozed through her hair. The man looked down on her for a moment, breathing heavily, and then made off : the stone crashed behind him.

I gazed on this cruel scene in utter helplessness, for well did I know that nothing I could do would be of any use, that the sights I saw were but photographs upon my mind of things that had already been. Nor was I given time to consider how these might relate to me, for fear and horror now overcame me altogether, and I fainted. At least, I suppose I must have fainted, for at my next recollection the scene before me had changed. The girl was fettered to an

iron ring near one wall of the cellar, and it was clear that she was terribly injured. Her head hung forward, and great blotches of blood marked her dress. Some time seemed to have elapsed in my vision, for certain signs suggested that she had been fettered thus for several days.

Again, however, I was not given time to think, for hardly had I become conscious when heavy footsteps sounded above, and the entrance-stone creaked back. Out of the corner of my eye I saw the girl peer up, and then the man with the beard climbed into the cellar. He moved slowly and with difficulty, as though carrying some heavy burden, and a chill of anticipatory horror swept over me as I perceived the black, awkward bundle across his shoulders. He reached the bottom of the steps and dumped the black thing a yard or so in front of the girl, standing unsteadily over it and glaring at her with an expression of the most hideous malignity. When he spoke his voice was cracked with an evil and gloating relish.

‘How long has it been, Eleanor?’ he asked : ‘Or perhaps you’ve lost track down here.’ He giggled. ‘Well I’ll tell you. It’s six days you’ve been here, and not a bite to eat the whole time.’ Again that vile giggle; and I ground my teeth in rage. But I was helpless, powerless to intervene, forced to watch the whole ghastly atrocity as though it were a stage-play. I clenched my fists, and shuddered, and glanced down at the bundle in its sinister black cloth; for I had guessed what was to come.

The man picked up a corner of the black cloth; and I saw that in his other hand was a short, heavy whip.

‘In fact,’ he said, ‘you must be getting quite hungry’; and with a sudden savage jerk of his arm he tore aside the cloth.

‘Then eat!’ he shouted, and I saw that under the cloth was the body of a man. ‘You preferred him to me as a lover, so the least he can do is feed you now he’s dead!’ And he laughed – a wild, maniacal sound, the inhuman cracked cackle of a devil triumphant.

Words can never convey the horror, the sense of outrage, that possessed me then. But I could do nothing – nothing :

the hellish torture needs must continue inexorably to its end. I wanted to turn aside, to stop my ears, to do anything that would force this damnable cruelty from my mind; but something kept my gaze rivetted to a scene which, if it had been harsh before, was fast becoming nightmarish.

For upon seeing the body the girl gave a scream of utter despair, and throwing herself down on her knees burst into a torrent of sobbing that must have wracked her already weakened body to the very limits of its strength. Few and incoherent were the words she spoke in her frenzy, but from them I gathered that the man with the beard was her husband, that the dead man was not her lover but her brother. She was, it seemed, the victim of an insane and misplaced jealousy; and at last, beating her hands hysterically on the stone floor on which she knelt, she launched again into a wild plea for mercy. One might have expected this pitiful spectacle to melt the heart of Satan himself, but the man merely grew angrier, twitching the whip in sullen impatience, and growling ominously. Then with a sudden violent oath he struck her with all his might across the shoulders. She sprawled forward, but straightaway struggled bravely to her feet, and in a last desperate bid for mercy staggered towards him with arms outstretched. He struck her again with the whip, this time across the face, and such was the force of the blow that she reeled sideways and, tripping, fell upon the body.

‘Eat!’ screamed the madman, in a perfect ecstasy of triumph; and abandoning such self-control as was left to him he began to beat her with a frenzied savagery such as I had never imagined possible in man or beast, all the while shrieking out for her to eat. This macabre climax brought me to my feet in spite of myself, and suddenly I found myself standing behind the man with the beard. The naked bestiality of what was happening was affecting me strangely. I found myself breathing heavily – not with indignation or horror, but with a repulsive fascination. It was as though I could feel this man’s anger and rage and hate, as though his fury was my fury. The muscles of my arms twitched in sympathy with the rise and fall of the whip, my foot jerked

as though it longed to trample, to kick, my lips curled back in a snarl, and I leaned forward to view more fully the bloody and cowering body of the girl, who was plainly in her death-agony. At which precise moment she looked up; and the face that ran and glistened with blood, the face that had one cheek split like an over-ripe tomato, the face in which one eye screamed terror while the other was lost in a soggy pulp, was the face of Marie.

Shock hit me like an ice-cold blow. I glared, stupefied. And then I saw the whip raised on high yet again. Reason deserted me.

'Monster!' I screamed, and snatched at the man's arm, knowing even as I did so that my hands would pass through him as if through air. But they did not. They encountered something solid, real. The man turned, and beneath its beard the face that gaped and glared in sudden fear was my own face. For one long shattering moment all was confusion, and my heart seemed to explode like a bomb, but as I fell to the floor many things became clear – the reason I had been born again as a mild little priest, and the reason Sir Humphrey Fitzgerald had died of fright as he murdered his wife in the cellar of his home, The Towers, in 1741.

THE TREAT

by M. S. Waddell

THE HEADLINE in the paper read 'GOLDMAN TO HANG'. He squinted over the shoulder of the man standing before him in the queue, the thick black lettering capturing his eye.

So Goldman was to hang after all. A smile of knowing satisfaction crossed his face. Goldman to hang. All's well that ends well. He deserved it of course. Goldman deserved it if only for his clumsy stupidity. All it needed was organization after all. If you organized things correctly you could kill as many people as you wanted to.

'Here, shall I let you have it, mate?' the man turned, glaring up into his face. 'Can't afford to buy one of your own, then?'

He smiled awkwardly.

'Never think of buying their own these people,' the man addressed the queue. 'Too many people without manners going round the streets these days.'

The bus pulled up at that moment and he climbed aboard thankfully. If that chap had known who he was talking to . . . He seated himself in the front of the bus, upstairs, and prepared to enjoy the journey.

He was a man of ample means but he prided himself on keeping his pleasures simple. There was room for only one extravagant pleasure in each man's life, he told himself, so long as he had that he could not complain. The bus ride to the station was something that he enjoyed. He liked to sit on top of the bus watching the people on the pavements below, their necks craning in the bus queues.

Anyone of them might be the next one. There was no way of knowing. It was not a matter of his choosing. It was always happening, it was up to them. Any house, any street, any face, any time.

He clutched his Robin Hood hat in a gloved hand as he descended from the bus to the pavement, briefcase flapping. He walked jauntily, feeling himself a worthwhile person.

He looked a worthwhile person. There was an air of quiet prosperity in his dress. His black patent leather shoes gleamed with polish, his striped trousers had a razor edge crease. His suit was not new, not old; but well cared for. It was not quite in fashion but not far behind.

He stopped at the entrance to the station and bought a paper, excusing himself the luxury – he normally bought only *The Times* in the morning – the evening papers he considered a waste of money. Not that he needed the money. It was a question of principle. That which was wasteful was a luxury by definition.

'GOLDMAN TO HANG'. He scanned the page eagerly as he settled into his place on the train. The appeal had been rejected. He had thought all along it would be rejected. If

they managed to get themselves caught they didn't deserve a reprieve.

When you thought of a man like Goldman . . . you could sympathize with him but there was no question of feeling any respect for him. Goldman's technique was so bad. The whole murder had been crude and clumsy. He was an oaf, a man who killed for a few hundred pounds, a man who panicked at the vital moment and sealed his own death warrant. A vulgar man who had tackled an art he did not begin to understand.

Most of them you could respect, sometimes, if they were merely unlucky, admire. Of course if they got caught at all they were failures in a sense. Still, a real murderer left his mark on the crime, some original angle to killing that made the thing his own. Jack the Ripper for instance, he had created his own trademark. People knew all about his murders but they couldn't touch the murderer. The Ripper was a man after his own heart.

He found himself gazing over the top of his paper at the man opposite.

'A killer ought to have an angle of his own,' he said dreamily.

The man opposite looked up from his paper with a startled expression on his face.

'That's him,' said the portly policeman to his colleague, as they watched him leave the train. 'When you think of it they're all amateurs compared to him.'

The young policeman was unimpressed. 'You'd never think it, would you?'

'Oh, I don't know. It takes all sorts to make a world, even the like of him.'

They watched as he passed them. He saw the expression in their eyes as they watched him and it amused him. He grinned at the portly policeman.

'Creepy character,' said the young policeman. 'I shouldn't care to split my bread with him.'

The portly policeman scratched his nose reflectively and said nothing.

'He must live an odd life,' the youngster continued. 'Knowing a thing like that you wouldn't think people would want to have anything to do with him, would you? Just in case, eh? ...'

'They don't know. Even his wife doesn't know.' He frowned at the young man. 'Mind you don't let out about it either. It's more than your job or mine is worth if it gets out we said anything about him.'

'I don't see why he should be privileged to silence.' The younger man said.

'He's in a class of his own,' the portly policeman grunted. 'A class of his own, and don't you forget it.'

He lived in a new house at the end of a long row, all gleaming windows and concrete. He had a garden, front and back, which allowed him to indulge in another small luxury, his roses.

'Harris Red', which was his pride and joy, had made quite a stir when he announced it the year before.

He slipped quietly through the front door, anxious to reach his room undisturbed. He clutched the evening paper tightly as he mounted the stairs. He could hear his wife talking in the kitchen, cooing to baby Harold.

He wanted to check the dates because it was important to keep free of social obligations. It would never never do to have a social engagement on the night before. Of course he wouldn't know for certain until he received the letter, but he could work it out roughly. When you'd had the sort of experience he had had, you could make a pretty accurate guess at dates and places.

He slipped into his room, his study as his wife liked to call it. It was fortunate that she agreed so readily to his having a room to himself. There were things that had to be kept private, even from her. There were things he did not want her to know about. Not that Cathleen could complain; after all, he had provided her with a house that was well fitted out, roomy. It was a good respectable area and they had plenty of friends. He was a good husband to Cathleen - she had never denied that.

He locked the door of his room carefully behind him and went across to his desk. He unlocked the top and rolled it back. He fingered his fat leather scrapbook with satisfaction. It meant a lot to him, this scrapbook. It was the symbol of his other life, the record of his climb to the top, the history of the very peak of his achievements, all that was fine in his life, all that was enjoyable.

He unfolded the paper carefully. 'GOLDMAN TO HANG' glared at him, the photograph of Goldman's flat, vicious face. The man was strong, a brute. That might make the whole thing more interesting in the end.

He snipped the photograph neatly out of the paper, trimming the edges neatly. He pasted the back thickly and pressed it down on a blank page of the scrapbook. Next he snipped away down the columns of newsprint, rearranging them to allow for the insertion of the final notice and the letter.

His wife knocked timidly on the door.

'Are you in there, dear?'

He snapped the book shut. Blast the woman!

'Yes, dear.'

'I thought I heard you coming up the stairs.'

She was waiting outside, waiting for him to let her in. He did not want her to see the newspaper. She would want to know why he had bought it, what he had cut out. She did not know about the scrapbook. Quickly he crossed to the grate, rumpling the newspaper into a bundle.

'Can I come in, dear?' she rattled the door.

'Just a minute,' he called.

He bent before the fire and held his lighter to the edge of the paper. He stood up and waited for it to finish burning before he crossed to the door and unlocked it.

'Your dinner is getting cold,' she said reproachfully, her thin face peering up at him. 'Is there anything wrong, dear?'

He smiled. 'On the contrary, Cathleen. Things have been going very well.'

'That's nice, dear,' she said as he preceded her down the stairs.

He waited for her at the bottom, smiling kindly. 'Oh, yes,' he said, 'things are looking up.'

The letter was waiting for him at the office. They always sent the letters to the office now, marked 'Private and Personal'. He waited until he was quite alone at the end of the afternoon before he opened it.

What he read gave him cause for satisfaction. There was no doubt about it, people recognized the worth of a craftsman. The amateurs might get the publicity, he thought happily, but they knew where to come when they wanted a good clean job done.

He took a personal pride in his hobbies, that was the secret. Just as the 'Harris Red' was a source of pride to him whenever its name was mentioned in a gardening journal or a local paper, so it was when his services were recognized when a quality performance was called for.

The money meant nothing to him. Moralizing, he thought to himself that it should never be done for money alone. That robbed it of artistic merit. He liked to think of himself as an artist. He liked to think that there was a certain delicacy, a certain refinement in the execution of his work that made him stand out head and shoulders above the others.

Tonight was no night for taking work home from the office. Resolutely he took the papers on the Wesley share transfer from his briefcase and slipped the carefully folded letter into their place. Tonight he deserved a treat. Tonight he would go through the scrapbook, all by himself in his room.

He lifted his office diary from the desk. An appointment with Maxwell, that was all. Maxwell would have to be put off. Maxwell was unimportant anyway. He owed himself some relaxation after all. If a man in his position couldn't afford the time for a little pleasure, who could?

He marked the date, the 11th of February, with a thick black circle. The girl was half witted, he reminded himself, but at least she knew what the circle meant. Better to be sure. He wrote carefully across the page. 'Please note that I

can fulfil no engagements on this date.' He picked up a pen and roughed out a letter to Maxwell, breaking his appointment and suggesting a future date. At least the girl was capable of copying.

He rested his hands on the desk before him, musing. Fine hands, strong hands. In the tradition of the service. Of course it was no longer so important to be strong. The thing was less primitive now, more mechanized. But the basic principle remained the same. No one could alter the basic principle. Skill was the important factor, coupled with experience and a flair for the work. Perhaps that was the most important part . . . to be a good hangman you had to have a flair for the work.

Peters, the warden, had never made any secret of his attitude to Harris and his work. Not that what Peters thought made any difference. Peters, after all, was not capable of telling the difference between a good job and one that was bodged.

Not many people could tell the difference. It wasn't a thing that a layman could judge. It was only when a man was standing waiting on the trap that he was likely to think about it seriously.

To the court and counsel, the judge and jury, the papers and the public, the important thing was that a man was to die; that their safety was to be protected.

A man was to hang. How he was to hang mattered only to the hangman and his assistant and the man himself.

The hangman, Harris, ate a hearty breakfast. As he rested in the room set aside for him in the Warden's quarters he reflected on Peters's brusque greeting, of the cold efficiency with which the guards conducted him down to Goldman's cell to take his measure.

No one said any more to him than they could possibly help. No one touched him. They walked apart from him in the corridors as though touching him might dirty them.

But Goldman would come to appreciate him. Goldman would come to know that only Harris's skill lay between the quick snapping of his neck, an almost instantaneous death,

and the throttling bone-wrenching cracking agony that could result from a slight miscalculation.

Harris knew what a bodged job looked like. He savoured the memory. It was something he could never risk, because he would lose the job if he did. Old Simpson had bodged one, just before they took him off the list. Harris had watched him, knowing that there was going to be a hitch, restraining himself from warning Simpson. He was only the assistant. He would not have to bear the responsibility. He wanted to see what would happen.

So they pulled the trap and the body went down and the rope jerked, and jerked, and jerked. He stood by Simpson as they watched the victim jig, his head wrenched on one side, his tongue protruding, a wretched gurgle coming from his throat as he dangled, kicking. He was alive for a few short moments, his bulging eyes staring up at them. Those few seconds made all the difference, wriggling on the end of a rope, alive and staring up at them through the trap.

That finished Simpson. Simpson was a bungler.

Harris wasn't a bungler. This was his thirty-first, a reflection that brought him pride and pleasure, thirty-one clean breaks.

Goldman might be interesting. He was a heavy man, the type who might take it into his head to struggle at the end. The ones who fought against it were the best, better than the drugged weaklings who struggled too soon and were carried to the trap, half dead with fear.

People with vigour and strength, people who desperately wanted to hang on to life were the most enjoyable. People who had something or someone to live for. Then there was something in their eyes, something animal and forsaken as they took up position over the drop.

He was smarter than they were, even the best of them. They had to go out and look for people to kill, they had to kill suddenly in secret. Their victims had little or no time to think about it.

His was a better way. The victim knew, awaited his coming. The time and the place was set, the crowds waited outside. He could watch the faces of the others as the victim

went through the trap, as they heard the dull thud and the crack of bone.

It was almost time. He put down the cup of tea and rose to make the final preparations before going down to them.

Perhaps today he could draw it out a bit, fumble as he arranged the knot around Goldman's throat. Why not? Didn't he deserve a treat now and then?

CLAIR DE LUNE

by Seabury Quinn

'Nom d'un nom, friend Trowbridge!' – and one of the truly great characters of fantastic writing is on the hunt for some new horror, outrage or supernatural skulduggery. For a quarter century, dapper Jules de Grandin and his reserved sidekick pursued astonishingly varied forms of evil through the pages of Weird Tales, Trowbridge staunch and baffled, de Grandin peppery, ingenious, and even debonair. WT is no more, but it is a pleasure to revive Jules de Grandin and see him once again in action against the powers of darkness.

MY FRIEND de Grandin turned to me, brows raised, lips pursed as if about to whistle. '*Comment?*' he demanded. 'What is that you say?'

'You understand me perfectly,' I grinned back. 'I said that if I didn't know you for a case-hardened misogynist I'd think you contemplated an *affaire* with that woman. You've hardly taken your eyes off her since we came.'

The laugh lights gleamed in his small, round, blue eyes and he tweaked the ends of his diminutive wheat-blond moustache like a tomcat combing his whiskers after an especially toothsome meal. '*Eh, bien*, my old and rare, she interests me —'

'So I gathered —'

'And is she not one *bonne bouchée* to merit anybody's

interest, I demand to know?’

‘She is,’ I admitted. ‘She’s utterly exquisite, but the way you’ve ogled her, like a moonstruck calf —’

‘Oh, Dr Trowbridge, Dr de Grandin!’ Miss Templeton, the resort’s hostess and all ’round promoter of good times, came fairly dancing towards us across the hotel veranda, ‘I’m so thrilled!’

‘Indeed, Mademoiselle?’ de Grandin rose and gave her a particularly engaging smile. ‘One is rejoiced to hear it. What is the cause of your so happy quivering?’

‘It’s Madelon Leroy!’ In ordinary conversation thrilled, delighted laughter seemed about to break through everything Dot Templeton said, and her sentences were punctuated exclusively with exclamation points. Now she positively talked in italics. ‘She’s coming to our dance tonight! You know, she’s been so *frightfully* exclusive since she came here — said she came down to the shore to rest and didn’t want to meet a soul. But she’s relented, and will hold an informal reception just before the hop —’

‘*Tiens*, but this is of the interest, truly,’ he cut in. ‘You may count upon our presence at the soirée, *Mademoiselle*. But of course.’

As Dot danced off to spread glad tidings of great joy to other guests he glanced down at his wrist. ‘*Mon Dieu*, friend Trowbridge,’ he exclaimed, ‘it is almost one o’clock, and we have not yet lunched. Come, let us hasten to the dining room. Me, I am almost starved. I faint, I perish! I’m vilely hungry.’

Two tables away from us, where a gentle breeze fanned through a long window facing the ocean, Madelon Leroy sat at luncheon, cool, almost contemptuous of the looks levelled at her. She was, as Jules de Grandin had remarked, a *bonne bouchée* deserving anyone’s attention. Her first performance in the name part of Eric Maxwell’s *Clair de Lune* had set the critics raving, not only over her talent as an actress, but over her exquisite, faery beauty, her delicate fragility that seemed almost other-worldly. When, after a phenomenally long run on Broadway she refused flatly to consider Hollywood’s most tempting offers, she stirred up

a maelstrom of publicity that set theatrical press agents raving mad. Artists were permitted to sketch her, but she steadfastly refused to be photographed, and to thwart ambitious camera fiends and newsmen she went veiled demurely as a nun or odalisk when she appeared in public. *Clair de Lune* had closed for the summer, and its mysterious, lovely star was resting by the sea when Jules de Grandin and I checked in at the Adlon.

Covertly I studied her above the margin of my menu; de Grandin made no pretence of detachment, but stared at her as no one but a Frenchman can stare without giving offence. She was a lovely thing to look at, with her dead-white, almost transparent skin, her spun-gold hair, unbobbed, that made a halo of glory around her small head, and great, trustful-seeming eyes of soft, cerulean blue. There was a sort of fairylike, almost angelic fragility about her arching, slender neck and delicately cut profile, and though she was not really small she seemed so, for she was slender and small-boned, not like a Watteau shepherdess, but like a little girl, and every move she made was graceful and unhurried as grain bending in the wind. With her fragile fairness outlined against the window, she was like some princess from a fairy tale come wondrously to life, the very spirit and epitome of all the fair, frail heroines of poetry.

'*Une belle créature, n'est-ce-pas?*' de Grandin asked as the waiter appeared to take our order, and he lost all interest in our fair neighbour. Women to him were blossoms brightening the pathway of life, but food – and drink – '*mon Dieu,*' as he was wont to say, 'they are that without which life is impossible!'

Miss Leroy held court like a princess at the reception preceding the ball that evening. If she had seemed captivating in the shadowed recess of the dining room, or on the wide veranda of the hotel, or emerging from the ocean in white satin bathing suit, dripping and lovely as a maid, she was positively ravishing that night. More than ever she seemed like a being from another world in a sleeveless gown of clinging, white silk jersey that followed every curve and small roundness of her daintily moulded figure. It was

belted at the waist with a gold cord whose tasselled ends hung almost to the floor, and as its hem swept back occasionally we caught fleeting glimpses of the little gilded sandals strapped to her bare feet.

Her pale-gold hair was done in a loose knot and tied with a fillet of narrow, white ribbon. About her left arm, just above the elbow, was a broad, gold bracelet chased with a Grecian motif, otherwise she wore no jewellery or ornaments.

She should have been completely charming, altogether lovely, but there was something vaguely repellent about her. Perhaps it was her slow and rather condescending smile that held no trace of warmth or human friendliness, perhaps it was the odd expression of her eyes – knowing, weary, rather sad, as if from their first opening they had seen people were a tiresome race, and hardly worth the effort of a second glance. Or possibly it might have been the eyes themselves, for despite her skilful makeup and the pains obviously taken with her by beauticians there was a fine lacework of wrinkles at their outer corners, and the lids were rubbed to the sheen of old silk with a faintly greenish eyeshadow; certainly not the lids of a woman in her twenties, or even in her middle thirties.

‘Dr Trowbridge,’ she extended a hand small and slender as a child’s, rosy-tipped and fragile as a white iris, and, ‘Dr de Grandin,’ as the little Frenchman clicked his heels before her.

‘*Enchanté, Mademoiselle,*’ he bowed above the little hand and raised it to his lips, ‘*mais je suis très heureux de vous voir!* – but I am fortunate to meet you!’

There is no way of putting it in words, but as de Grandin straightened, he and Madelon Leroy looked squarely in each other’s eyes, and while nothing moved in either of their faces something vague, intangible as air, yet perceptible as a chill, seemed forming round them like an envelope of cold vapour. For just an instant each took stock of the other, wary as a fencer measuring his opponent or a boxer feeling out his adversary, and I had the feeling they were like two chemicals that waited only the addition of a catalytic agent to explode

them in a devastating detonation. Then the next guest was presented and we passed on, but I felt as if we had stepped back into normal summer temperature from a chilled refrigerator.

'Whatever —' I began, but the advent of Mazie Schaeffer interrupted my query.

'Oh, Dr Trowbridge, isn't she adorable?' asked Mazie. 'She's the most beautiful, the most wonderful actress in the world! There never was another like her. I've heard Dad and Mumsie talk about Maude Adams and Bernhardt and Duse, but Madelon Leroy — she's really tops! D'ye remember her in the last scene of *Clair de Lune*, where she says goodbye to her lover at the convent gate, then stands there — just stands there in the moonlight, saying nothing, but you can fairly see her heart breaking?'

De Grandin grinned engagingly at Mazie. 'Perhaps it is that she has had much time to perfect her art, Mademoiselle —'

'Time?' Mazie echoed almost shrilly. 'How could she have had time? She's just a girl — hardly more than a child. I'm twenty-one in August, and I'll bet she's two years my junior. It isn't time or talent, Dr de Grandin, it's genius, sheer genius. Only one woman in a generation has it, and she has it — in spades! — for hers.'

The little Frenchman studied her attentively. 'You have perhaps met her?'

'Met her?' Mazie seemed upon the point of swooning, and her hands went to her bosom as if she would quiet a tumultuous heart. 'Oh, yes. She was lovely to me — told me I might come to her suite for tea tomorrow —'

'*Mon Dieu!*' de Grandin exploded. 'So soon? Do you mean it, *Mademoiselle*?'

'Yes, isn't it too wonderful? Much, much too fearfully wonderful to have happened to anyone like me!'

'You speak correctly,' he agreed with a nod. 'Fearfully wonderful is right. *Bon soir, Mademoiselle.*'

'Now,' I demanded as we left the crowded ballroom and went out on the wide, breeze-swept veranda, 'what's it all mean?'

'I only wish I knew,' he answered sombrely.

'Oh, for goodness' sake,' I was nettled and made no attempt to hide it, 'don't be so devilishly mysterious! I know there's something between you and that woman — I could fairly feel it when you met. But what —'

'I only wish I knew,' he repeated almost morosely. 'To suspect is one thing, to know is something else again, and I, *hélas!* have no more than a naked suspicion. To say what gnaws my mind like a maggot might do a grave injustice to an innocent one. *Au contraire*, to keep silent may cause great and lasting injury to another. *Parbleu*, my friend, I know not what to do. I am entirely miserable.'

I glanced at my watch. 'We might try going to bed. It's after eleven, and we go back tomorrow morning. This will be our last sure chance of a night's sleep. No patients to rouse us at all sorts of unholy hours —'

'No babies to be ushered in, no *viellards* to be erased out of the world,' he agreed with a chuckle. 'I think you have right, my old one. Let us lose our troubles in our dreams.'

Next morning as, preceded by two bellboys with our traps, we were about to leave the hotel, I stepped aside to make way for two women headed for the beach. The first was middle-aged, with long, sharp nose and small, sharp eyes, dark haired, swarthy skinned, with little strands of grey in her black hair and the white linen cap of a maid on her head. Her uniform was stiff, black bombazine and set off by a white apron and cuffs. Across her arm draped a huge, fluffy bath towel. She looked formidable to me, the sort of person who had seen much better days and had at last retired from a world that used her shabbily to commune secretly with ineffectual devils.

Behind her, muffled like an Arab woman in a hooded robe of white terry cloth, a smaller figure shuffled in wooden beach clogs. The fingers of one hand protruded from a fold of the robe as she clutched it about her, and I noted they were red-tipped, with long, sharp-pointed nails, and thin almost to the point of desiccation. Beneath the muffling hood of the robe we caught a glimpse of her face. It was Madelon

Leroy's, but so altered that it bore hardly any semblance to that of the radiant being of the night before. She was pale as March moonlight, and the delicate, small hollows underneath her cheekbones were accentuated till her countenance seemed positively ghastly. Her narrow lips, a little parted, seemed almost withered, and about her nose there was a pinched, drawn look, while her large sky-hued eyes seemed even larger, yet seemed to have receded in her head. Her whole face seemed instinct with longing, yet a longing that was impersonal. The only thing unchanged about her was her grace of movement, for she walked with an effortless, gliding step, turning her flat hips only slightly.

'*Grand Dieu!*' I heard de Grandin murmur, then, as she passed he bowed and raised his hand to his hat brim in salute. '*Mademoiselle!*'

She passed as if he had not been there, her deep-set, cavernous eyes fixed on the sunlit beach where little wavelets wove a line of lacy ruffles on the sand.

'Good heavens,' I exclaimed as we proceeded to our waiting car, 'she looks ten – twenty – years older. What do you make of it?'

He faced me sombrely. 'I do not quite know, friend Trowbridge. Last night I entertained suspicion. Today I have the almost-certainty. Tomorrow I may know exactly, but by tomorrow it may be too late.'

'What are you driving at?' I demanded. 'All this mystery about —'

'Do you remember this quotation?' he countered : '*"Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose"*'?

I thought a moment. 'Isn't that what Voltaire said about history – "the more it changes, the more it is the same"?''

'It is,' he agreed with another sober nod, 'and never did he state a greater truth. Once more I damn think history is about to repeat, and with what tragic consequences none can say.'

'Tragic consequences? To whom?'

'*On ne sait pas!*' he raised his narrow shoulders in a shrug. 'Who can say where lightning designs to strike, my old?'

We had been home from the shore a week or so, and I was just preparing to call it a day when the office telephone began to stutter. 'Sam, this is Jane Schaeffer,' came the troubled hail across the wire. 'Can you come over right away?'

'What's wrong?' I temporized. The day had been a hot and tiring one, and Nora McGinnis had prepared veal with sweet and sour sauce. I was in no mood to drive two miles, miss my evening cocktail and sit down to a spoiled dinner.

'It's Mazie. She seems so much worse —'

'Worse?' I echoed. 'She seemed all right when I saw her down at the shore. Lively as a cricket —'

'That's just it. She was well and healthy as a pony when she came home, but she's been acting so queerly, and getting weaker every day. I'm afraid it's consumption or leukemia, or something —'

'Now, take it easy,' I advised. 'Mazie can't dance every night till three o'clock and play tennis every afternoon without something giving way. Give her some toast and tea for dinner, put her to bed, and see she stays there all night, then bring her round to see me in the morning —'

'Sam Trowbridge, listen to me! My child is dying — and not dying on her feet, either, and you tell me to give her toast and tea! You get right in your car this minute and come over, or —'

'All right,' I placated. 'Put her to bed, and I'll —'

'She's in bed now, you great booby. That's what I've been trying to tell you. She hasn't been up all day. She's too weak —'

'Why didn't you say so at first?' I interrupted rather unreasonably. 'Hold everything. I'll be right over —'

'What presents itself, *mon vieux*?' de Grandin appeared at the office door, a beaded cocktail shaker in his hand. 'Do not say that you must leave. The martinis are at the perfect state of chilliness —'

'Not now,' I refused sadly. 'Jane Schaeffer just called to say Mazie's in a bad way. So weak she couldn't rise this morning —'

'*Feu noir du diable* — black fire of Satan! Is it that small

happy one who is selected as the victim? *Morbleau*, I should have apprehended it —'

'What's that?' I interrupted sharply. 'What d'ye know —'

'*Hélas*, I know nothing. Not a thing, by blue! But if what I have good reason to damn suspect is true — come, let us hasten, let us fly, let us rush with all celerity to attend her! Dinner? Fie upon dinner! We have other things to think of, us.'

Her mother had not overstated Mazie's condition. We found her in a state of semi-coma, with sharp concavities beneath her cheekbones and violet crescents underneath her eyes. The eyes themselves were bright as if with fever, but the hand I took in mine was cold as a dead thing, and when I read my clinical thermometer I saw it registered a scant eighty, while her pulse was thin and reedy, beating less than seventy slow, feeble strokes a minute. She rolled her head listlessly as I dropped into a chair beside the bed, and the smile she offered me was a thin ghost of her infectious grin which did no more than move her lips a little and never reached her eyes.

'What's going on here?' I demanded, noting how the epidermis of her hand seemed dry and roughened, almost as if it were chapped. 'What have they been doing to my girl?'

The lids drooped sleepily above the feverishly bright eyes and she murmured in a voice so weak that I could not catch her reply. 'What?' I asked.

'Le — let me go — I must — I have to —' she begged in a feeble whisper. 'She'll be expecting me — she needs me —'

'Delirium?' I whispered, but de Grandin shook his head in negation.

'I do not think so, my friend. She is weak, yes; very weak, but not irrational. No, I would not say it. Cannot you read the symptoms?'

'If it weren't that we saw her horse-strong and well fed as an alderman less than two weeks ago, I'd say she is the victim of primary starvation. I saw cases showing all these symptoms after World War I when I was with the Belgian Relief —'

'Your wisdom and experience have not deserted you, my

old one. It is that she starves — at least she is undernourished, and we would be advised to prescribe nux vomica for her, but first to see that she has strong beef tea with sherry in it, and after that some egg and milk with a little brandy —'

'But how could she possibly have developed such an advanced case of malnutrition in these few days —'

'Ha, yes, by damn it ! That is for us to find out.'

'What is it?' asked Jane Schaeffer as we came down the stairs. 'Do you think she could have picked up an infection at the shore?'

De Grandin pursed his lips and took his chin between his thumb and forefinger. '*Pas possible, Madame*. How long has she been thus?'

'Almost since the day she came back. She met Madelon Leroy the actress at the shore, and developed one of those desperate girl-crushes on her. She's spent practically every waking moment with Miss Leroy, and — let's see, was it the second or the third day? — I think it was the third day she called on her since she came home almost exhausted and went right to bed. Next morning she seemed weak and listless, rose about noon, ate a big brunch, and went right back to Miss Leroy's. That night she came home almost in collapse and every day she's seemed to grow weaker.'

He eyed her sharply. 'You say her appetite is excellent?'

'Excellent? It's stupendous. You don't think she could have a malignant tapeworm, do you, or some such parasite —'

He nodded thoughtfully. 'I think she might, indeed, *Madame*.' Then, with what seemed to me like irrelevance: 'This Miss Leroy, where is it that she lives, if you please?'

'She took a suite at the Zachary Taylor. Why she chose to stay here rather than New York I can't imagine —'

'Perhaps there are those who can, Madame Schaeffer. So. Very good. She took up quarters at the Hotel Taylor, and —'

'And Mazie's been to see her every day.'

'*Très bon*. One understands, in part, at least. Your daughter's illness is not hopeless, but it is far more serious than we had at first suspected. We shall send her to the Sidewell Sanatorium at once, and there she is to have complete bed

rest with a nurse constantly beside her. On no account are you to say where she has gone, *Madame*, and she must have no visitors. None. You comprehend?"

'Yes, sir. But —'

'Yes? But —'

'Miss Leroy has called her twice today, and seemed concerned when she heard Mazie could not get up. If she should call to see —'

'I said no visitors, *Madame*. It is an order, if you please.'

'I hope you know what you're doing,' I grumbled as we left the Schaeffer house. 'I can't find fault with your diagnosis or treatment, but why be so mysterious about it? If you know something —'

'Alas, my friend, that is just what I do not,' he admitted. 'It is not that I make the mystery purposely; it is that I am ignorant. Me, I am like a blind man teased by naughty little boys. I reach this way and that for my tormentors, but nothing can my reaching fingers grasp. You recall that we were speaking of the way that history repeats itself?'

'Yes, the morning we left the shore.'

'Quite yes. Now, listen carefully, my friend. What I shall say may not make sense, but then, again, it may. Consider :

'More years ago than I like to remember I went to the Théâtre Français to see one called Madelon Larue. She was the toast of Paris, that one, for in an age when we were prim and prosy by today's standards she made bold to dance *au naturelle*. *Parbleu*, I thought myself a sad dog when I went to see her!' He nodded gravely. 'She was very beautiful, her; not beautiful like Venus or Minerva, but like Hebe or Clytie, with a dainty, almost childlike loveliness, and an artlessness that made her nudity a thing of beauty rather than of passion. *Eh bien*, my *gran'père* — may the sod lie lightly on him! — had been a gay dog in his day, also. He was summering near Narbonne that year, and when I went to visit him and partake of his excellent Chateau Neuf and told him I had seen Larue he was amazed.

'For why? Because, *parbleu*, it seems that in the days of the Second Empire there had been an actress who was also the toast of Paris, one Madelon Larose. She, too, had danced

à découvert before the gilded youth who flocked about the third Napoleon. He had seen her, worshipped her from afar, been willing to lay down his life for her. He told me of her fragile, childlike beauty that set men's hearts and brains ablaze and when he finished telling I knew Madelon Larose and Madelon Larue were either one and the same or mother and daughter. *Ha*, but he told me something else, my *gran'-père*. Yes. He was a lawyer-physician, that one, and as such connected with the *préfecture de police*.

'This Madelon Larose, her of the fragile, childlike beauty, began to age all suddenly. Within the space of one small month she grew ten – twenty – years older. In sixty days she was so old and feeble she could no longer appear on the stage. Then, I ask you, what happened?'

'She retired,' I suggested ironically.

'Not she, by blue! She engaged a secretary and companion, a fine upstanding Breton girl and – attend me carefully, if you please – within two months the girl was dead, apparently of starvation, and Madelon Larose was once more dancing *sans chemise* to the infinite delight of the young men of Paris. Yes.

'There was a scandal, naturally. The police and the *sûreté* made investigations. Of course. But when all had been pried into they were no wiser than before. The girl had been a strong and healthy wench. The girl was dead, apparently of inanition; Larose had seemed upon the point of dissolution from old age; now she was young and strong and lovelier than ever. That was all. One does not base a criminal prosecution on such evidence. *Enfin*, the girl was buried decently in Père Lachaise, and Larose – at the suggestion of the police – betook herself to Italy. What she did there is anybody's guess.

'Now, let us match my story with my *gran'père's*: It was in 1905 I saw Larue perform. Five years later, when I had become a member of *la faculté de médecine légale*, I learned she had been smitten with a strange disease, an illness that caused her to age a decade in a week; in two weeks she was no more able to appear upon the stage. Then, I ask to know, what happened? *Parbleu*, I shall tell you, me!

'She hired a *masseuse*, a strong and healthy young woman of robust physique. In two weeks that one died – apparently from starvation – and Larue, *mordieu*, she bloomed again, if not quite like the rose, at least like the lily.

'I was assigned as assistant to the *juge d'instruction* in the case. We did investigate most thoroughly. Oh, yes. And what did we discover, I damn ask? This, only this, *morbleu* : The girl had been a strong and healthy young person. Now she was dead, apparently of inanition. Larue had seemed upon the point of dissolution from some strange and nameless wasting disease. Now she was young and strong and very beautiful again. *C'est tout*. One does not base a criminal prosecution on such evidence. *Enfin*, the poor young *masseuse* was decently interred in Saint Supplice, and Larue – at the suggestion of the police – went to Buenos Aires. What she did there is anybody's guess.

'Now, let us see what we have. It may not amount to proof, but at least it is evidence : Larose, Larue, Leroy; the names are rather similar, although admittedly not identical. One Madelon Larose who is apparently about to die of some strange wasting malady – perhaps old age – makes contact with a vigorous young woman and regains health and apparent youth while the younger person perishes, sucked dry as an orange. That is in 1867. A generation later a woman called Madelon Larue who fits the description of Larose perfectly is stricken ill with precisely the same sort of sickness, and regains her health as Larose had done, leaving behind her the starved, worn-out remnant of a young, strong, vigorous woman with whom she had been associated. That is in 1910. Now in our time a woman named Madelon Leroy —'

'But this is utterly fantastic !' I objected. 'You're assuming the whole thing. How can you possibly identify Madelon Leroy with those two —'

'Attend me for a little so small moment,' he broke in. 'You will recall that when Leroy first came under our notice I appeared interested?'

'You certainly did. You hardly took your eyes off her —'

'*Précisément*. Because of why. Because, *parbleu*, the

moment I first saw her I said to me, "Jules de Grandin, where have you seen that one before?" And, "Jules de Grandin," I reply to me, "do not try to fool yourself. You know very well where you first saw her. She is Madelon Larue who thrilled you when she danced *nu comme la main* at the Théâtre Français when you were in your salad days. Again you saw her, and her charm and beauty had not faded, when you made inquiry of the so strange death of her young, healthy *masseuse*. Do not you remember, Jules de Grandin?"

"I do," I told me.

"Very well, then, Jules de Grandin," I continue cross-examining me, "what are this so little pretty lady doing here today, apparently no older than she was in 1910 – or 1905? You have grown older, all your friends have aged since then, is she alone in all the world a human evergreen, a creature ageless as the moonlight?"

"The devil knows the answer, not I, Jules de Grandin," I tell me.

'And so, what happens next, I ask you? There is a grand soirée, and Mademoiselle Leroy gives audience to her public. We meet, we look into each other's eyes, we recognize each other, *pardieu*! In me she sees the *juge d'instruction* who caused her much embarrassment so many years ago. In her I see – what shall I say? At any rate we recognize each other, nor are we happy in the mutual recognition. No. Of course.'

Next afternoon when we went to the sanitorium to see Mazie we found her much improved, but still weak and restless. 'Please, when may I leave?' she asked. 'I've an engagement that I really ought to keep, and I feel so marvellously better —'

'Precisely, *Mademoiselle*,' de Grandin agreed. 'You are much better. Presently you shall be all well if you remain here, soak up nourishment *comme une éponge* and —'

'But —'

'But?' he repeated, eyebrows raised in mild interrogation. 'What is the "but", if you please?'

'It's Madelon Leroy, sir. I was helping her —'

'One does not doubt it,' he assented grimly. 'How?'

'She said my youth and strength renewed her courage to go on – she's really on the verge of a breakdown, you know – and just having me visit her meant so much —'

The stern look on his face halted her. 'Why, what's the matter?' she faltered.

'Attend me, *Mademoiselle*. Just what transpired on your visits to this person's suite at the hotel?'

'Why, nothing really. Madelon – she lets me call her that – isn't it wonderful? – is so fatigued she hardly speaks. Just lies on a *chaise* lounge in the most *fascinating* negligées and has me hold her hand and read to her. Then we have tea and take a little nap with her cuddled in my arms like a baby. Sometimes she smiles in her sleep, and when she does she's like an angel having heavenly dreams.'

'And you have joy in this friendship, *hein*?'

'Oh, yes, sir. It's the most wonderful thing that ever happened to me.'

He smiled at her as he rose. '*Bien*. It will be a happy memory to you in the years to come, I am convinced. Meanwhile, we have others to attend, and if you gain in strength as you have done, in a few days —'

'But Madelon?'

'We shall see her and explain all, *ma petite*. Yes, of course.'

'Oh, *will* you? How good of you!' Mazie gave him back an answering smile and nestled down to sleep as sweetly as a child.

'Miss Leroy's maid called three times today,' Jane Schaeffer told us when we stopped at her house on our way from the sanatorium. 'It seems her mistress is quite ill, and very anxious to see Mazie —'

'One can imagine,' Jules de Grandin agreed dryly.

'So – she seems so fond of the dear child and asked for her so piteously – I finally gave in and told her where you'd sent Mazie —'

'You *what*?' De Grandin seemed to have some difficulty in swallowing, as if he'd taken a morsel of hot food in his mouth.

'Why, what's wrong about that? I thought —'

‘There you make the mistake, *Madame*. If you had thought you would have remembered that we strictly forbade all visitors. We shall do what we can, and do it quickly as may be, but if we fail the fault is yours. *Bon jour, Madame!*’ He clicked his heels together and bowed formally, his manner several degrees below freezing. ‘Come, Friend Trowbridge, we have duties to perform, duties that will not bear postponement.’

Once on the pavement he exploded like a bursting rocket. ‘*Nom d’un chat de nom d’un chien de nom d’un coq!* We can defend ourselves against our ill-intentioned enemies; from chuckle-headed friends there is no refuge, *pardieu!* Come, my old one, speed is most essential.’

‘Where to?’ I asked as I started the engine.

‘To the sanitorium, by blue! If we make rushing-haste we may not be too late.’

The blue ridge of the Orange Mountains drowsed in the distance through the heat-haze of the summer afternoon, and the grey highway reeled out behind us like a paid-out ribbon. ‘Faster, faster!’ he urged. ‘It is that we must hasten, Friend Trowbridge.’

Half a mile or so ahead a big black car, so elegant it might have belonged to a mortician, sped towards the sanitorium, and his small blue eyes lighted as he descried it. ‘Hers!’ he exclaimed. ‘If we can pass her all may yet be well. Cannot you squeeze more speed from the *moteur?*’

I bore down on the accelerator and the needle crawled across the dial of the speedometer. Sixty-five, seventy, seventy-five – the distance between us and our quarry melted with each revolution of the wheels.

The chauffeur of the other car must have seen us in his rear-view mirror, or perhaps his passenger espied us. At any rate he put on speed, drew steadily away from us and vanished round the turn of the road in a swirling cloud of dust and exhaust-smoke.

‘*Parbleu, pardieu, par la barbe d’un port vert!*’ swore de Grandin. ‘It is that she outruns us; she makes a monkey of —’

The scream of futilely-applied brakes and clash of splin-

tering glass cut his complaint short, and as I braked to round the curve we saw the big black sedan sprawled upon its side, wheels spinning crazily, windshield and windows spider-webbed with cracks, and lenses smashed from its lights. Already a thin trail of smoke was spiralling from its motor. '*Triomphe!*' he cried as he leaped from my car and raced towards the wrecked vehicle. 'Into our hands she has been delivered, my friend!'

The chauffeur was wedged in behind his wheel, unconscious but not bleeding, and in the tonneau two female forms huddled, a large woman in sombre black whom I recognized as Miss Leroy's maid, and, swathed in veilings till she looked like a grey ghost, the diminutive form of Madelon Leroy. 'Look to him, Friend Trowbridge,' he ordered as he wrenched at the handle of the rear door. 'I shall make it my affair to extricate the women.' With a mighty heave he drew the fainting maid from the wreck, dragged her to a place of safety and dived back to lift Madelon Leroy out.

I had managed to drag the chauffeur to a cleared space in the roadside woodland, and not a moment too soon, for a broad sheet of flame whipped suddenly from the wrecked sedan, and in a moment its gas tank exploded like a bomb, strewing specks of fire and shattered glass and metal everywhere. 'By George, that was a near thing!' I panted as I emerged from the shelter I had taken behind a tree. 'If we'd been ten seconds later they would all have been cremated.'

He nodded, almost absent-mindedly. 'If you will watch beside them I shall seek a telephone to call an ambulance, my friend. . . . They are in need of care, these ones, especially Mademoiselle Leroy. You have the weight at Mercy Hospital?'

'What d'ye mean —'

'The influence, the — how do you say him? — drag? If it can be arranged to have them given separate rooms it would be very beneficial to all parties concerned.'

We sat beside her bed in Mercy Hospital. The chauffeur and maid had been given semi-private rooms, and under his direction Madelon Leroy had been assigned a private suite

on the top floor. The sun was going down, a ball of crimson in a sea of swirling rose, and a little breeze played prankishly with the white curtains at the window. If we had not known her identity neither of us could have recognized the woman in the bed as lovely, glamorous Madelon Leroy.

Her face was livid, almost green, and the mortuary outlines of her skull were visible through her taut skin – the hollow temples, pitted eye-orbits, pinched, strangely shortened nose, projecting jawline, jutting superciliary ridges. Some azure veinlets in the bluish whiteness of her cheeks accentuated her pallor, giving her face a strange, waxen look, the ears were almost transparent, and all trace of fullness had gone from the lips that drew back from the small, white, even teeth as if she fought for breath. ‘Mazie,’ she called in a thin, weak whisper, ‘where are you, dear? Come, it is time for our nap. Take me in your arms, dear; hold me close to your strong, youthful body —’

De Grandin rose and leaned across the bed, looking down at her not as a doctor looks at his patient, nor even as a man may look at a suffering woman, but with the cold impersonality the executioner might show as he looks at the condemned. ‘Larose, Larue, Leroy – whatever name you choose to call yourself – you are at last at the end of the road. There are no victims to renew your psuedo-youth. By yourself you came into the world – *le bon Dieu* only knows how many years ago – and by yourself you leave it. Yes.’

The woman looked at him with dull, lack-lustre eyes, and gradual recognition came into her withered face. ‘You!’ she exclaimed in a panic-stricken, small voice. ‘Hast thou found me, O mine enemy?’

‘*Tu parles, ma vielle,*’ he replied nonchalantly. ‘You have said so, old woman. I have found thee. I was not there to keep thee from absorbing life from that poor one in 1910, nor could I stand between thee and that pitiful young girl in the days of the Third Napoleon, but this time I am here. Quite yes. Your time runs out; the end approaches.’

‘Be pitiful,’ she begged tremulously. ‘Have mercy, little cruel man. I am an *artiste*, a great actress. My art makes thousands happy. For years I have brought joy to those

whose lives were *triste* and dull. Compared to me, what are those others – those farm women, those merchants' daughters, those offspring of the *bourgeoisie*? I am *Clair de Lune* – moonlight on soft-flowing water, the sweet promise of love unfulfilled —'

'*Tiens*, I think the moon is setting, *Mademoiselle*,' he interrupted dryly. 'If you would have a priest —'

'*Nigaud, bête, sot!*' she whispered, and her whisper was a muted scream. 'O fool and son of imbecile parents, I want no priest to whine his lying promise of repentance and redemption in my ears. Give me my youth and beauty once again, bring me a fair, fresh maiden —'

She broke off as she saw the hard gleam in his eyes, and, so weak that she could scarcely find the breath to force the epithets between her greying lips, she cursed him with a nastiness that would have brought a blush to a Marseilles fishwife.

He took her tirade calmly, neither smiling nor angered, but with an air of detachment such as he might have shown while examining a new sort of germ-life through a microscope. 'Thou beast, thou dog, thou swine! Thou species of a stinking camel – thou misbegotten offspring of an alley cat and a night-demon,' she whispered stridently.

Physicians grow accustomed to the sight of death. At first it's hard to witness dissolution, but in our grim trade we become case-hardened. Yet even with the years of training and experience behind me I could not forbear a shudder at the change that came over her. The bluish whiteness of her skin turned mottled green, as if already putrefactive micro-organisms were at work there, wrinkles etched themselves across her face like cracks in shattering ice, the lustre of her pale-gold hair faded to a muddy yellow, and the hands that plucked at the bedclothes were like the withered talons of a dead and desiccated bird. She raised her head from the pillow, and we saw her eyes were red-rimmed and rheumy, empty of all sight as those of an old woman from whom age has stolen every faculty. Abruptly she sat up, bending at the waist like a hinged doll, pressed both shrivelled hands against her withered bosom, gave a short, yelping cough like that of

a hurt animal. Then she fell back and lay still.

There was no sound in the death chamber. No sound came through the opened windows. The world was still and breathless in the quiet of the sunset.

Nora McGinnis had done more than merely well by us, and dinner had been such a meal as gourmets love to dream of. Veal simmered in a sweet and sour sauce, tiny dumplings light as cirrus clouds, and for dessert small pancakes wrapped round cheese or apricot and prune jelly. De Grandin drained his coffee cup, grinned like a cherub playing truant from celestial school, and raised his glass of Chartreuse *vert* to savour its sharp, spicy aroma.

'Oh, no, my friend,' he told me, 'I have not an explanation for it. It is like electricity, one of those things about which we may understand a great deal, yet about which we actually know nothing. As I told you, I recognized her at first sight, yet was not willing to admit the evidence of my own eyes until she recognized me. Then I knew that we faced something evil, something altogether outside usual experience, but not necessarily what you would call supernatural. She was like a vampire, only different, that one. The vampire has a life-in-death, it is dead, yet undead. She were entirely alive, and likely to remain that way as long as she could find fresh victims. In some way – only the good God and the devil know how – she acquired the ability to absorb the vitality, the life-force, from young and vigorous women, taking from them all they had to give, leaving them but empty, sucked-out husks that perished from sheer weakness, while she went on with renewed youth and vigour.'

He paused, lit a cigar, and : 'You know it is quite generally believed that if a child sleeps with an aged person or an invalid he loses his vitality to his bedfellow. In the book of Kings we read how David, King of Israel, when he was old and very weak, was strengthened in that manner. The process she employed was something like that, only much accentuated.

'In 1867 she took sixty days to slip from seeming-youth to advanced age. In 1910 the process took but two weeks or

ten days; this summer she was fair and seeming-young one night, next morning she seemed more than middle-aged. How many times between my *gran'père's* day and ours she did renew her youth and life by draining poor unfortunate young girls of theirs we cannot say. She was in Italy and South America and *le bon Dieu* only knows where else during that time. But one thing seems certain : With each succeeding renewal of her youth she became just a little weaker. Eventually she would have reached the point where old age struck her all at once, and there would not have been time to find a victim from whom she could absorb vitality. However, that is merely idle speculation. Mademoiselle Mazie had been selected as her victim this time, and if we had not been upon the scene — *eh bien*, I think there would have been another grave in the churchyard, and Mademoiselle Leroy would have reopened in her play this autumn. Yes, certainly.

'You ask to know some more?' he added as I made no comment.

'One or two things puzzle me,' I confessed. 'First, I'm wondering if there were any connexion between her unnatural ability to refresh herself at others' expense and her refusal to be photographed. Or do you think that was merely for the sake of publicity?'

He studied the question a moment, then : 'I do not, my friend. The camera's eye is sharper than ours. Skilled make-up may deceive the human eye, the camera lens sees through it and shows every little so small imperfection. It may well be that she did fear to have her picture taken for that reason. You comprehend?'

I nodded. 'One thing more. That afternoon you told Mazie that you were sure the memory of her friendship with the Leroy woman would always be a thing to cherish. You knew the cold and spider-like nature of the woman; how she sucked her victims dry so pitilessly, yet —'

'I knew it, yes,' he broke in, 'and so do you, now; but she did not. She was attached to this strange, beautiful freak; she adored her with the ardour no one but a young, impressionable girl can have for an older, more sophisticated

woman. Had I told her the whole truth not only would she have refused to believe me, she would have had an ideal shattered. It is far, far better that she keep that ideal, that she remain in happy ignorance of the true quality of the person she called friend, and cherish her memory for ever. Why take something beautiful away from her when by merely keeping silence we can give her happy recollections?"

Once more I nodded. 'It's hard to believe all this, even though I saw it,' I confessed. 'I'm willing to accept your thesis, but it did seem hard to let her die that way, even though —'

'Believe me, my friend,' he cut in, 'she was no really-truly woman. Did you not hear what she said of herself before she died, that she was *clair de lune* – moonlight – completely ageless and without passion? She was egotism carried to illogical conclusion, a being whose self-love transcended every other thought and purpose. A queer, strange thing she was, without a sense of right or wrong, or justice or injustice, like a faun or fairy or some grotesque creature out of an old book of magic.'

He drained the last sip of his liqueur and passed the empty glass to me. 'If you will be so kind, my friend.'

THE SINS OF THE FATHERS

by Christianna Brand

Sin-eaters flourished throughout Wales up to the end of the seventeenth century; but, though they were less common, they continued long after that, possibly up to as little as a hundred years ago.

THE NIGHT was dark but the wind that rustled the stunted branches of the scrub oak in the hanging forest was balmy and warm; it was not against the cold that the rider hugged his jacket so close about him, slipping down from the saddle, walking forward, reluctant and slow, towards that

ruined place. It had been a small cottage once, cosy and warm; but the years of desertion had let in the wild rain among the stones that formed its simple walls, softening the clay that bound them, tumbling-in the blue-grey slates of the roof, opening wider the wide chimney to the heaped and mountainous twigs of the jackdaws' nests, almost as long abandoned as the place itself. . . .

Yet, where nowadays not even the jackdaws built there came from the unglassed window a glimmer of light, and at the sound of the pony's hooves, unshod, on the grass outside, someone came to the door and a woman's voice called – though faintly : 'Who's there?'

He stopped, shivering, clutching across his breast the edges of his coat as though the close woven wool of his own mountain sheep might hold some magic to keep his body from harm; and, without preamble or greeting, called back in their native Welsh : 'I come for the sin-eater.'

'Then you may go back,' she said. 'He cannot come.'

'Not come?' There was sickness abroad, many were dead, the sin-eaters were being kept busy. He grew anxious, urgent, coming closer, the pony's single rein looped over his arm. 'He must come ! I've been searching three days, I can get nobody else. The sin-eater from Tregarron himself is sick, the one at Cilycwm died yesterday. . . .'

'I did not know,' she said; and in her voice there seemed the faint echo of a new despair.

He was hardly surprised. 'Living so isolated here —'

She interrupted bitterly. 'All sin-eaters live isolated. Our men take your sins upon them, and for that you cast them out.'

He shrugged. Who would wish to associate with such as they? – men pre-doomed for all eternity, heavy with the load of other men's transgressions. 'We pay. And there is – a good meal.'

A good meal – the worse the sinner, the better the banquet. They spread out the food upon the dead man's bosom, and from there you ate the meal and with it the dead man's sins. And the dead, made innocent again, went directly to glory; and you were paid and kicked out to live a pariah

till they had need of you again. 'At any rate,' said the woman turning back into the doorway, 'my man is sick, he can't come.'

He dared not go back without a sin-eater. 'I can get no one else. The time is passing, my master must be buried tomorrow, the mistress is distraught lest he go to his grave with his sins still upon him.' He insisted: 'Is he so very sick? There is nobody else.'

In the ivy of the ruined outbuildings, tumbled now almost into the ground, an owl called, eerily hooting; all about them the dried brown leaves of the scrub oak rustled and whispered, driven by the warm night wind. The woman stopped in the doorway. She repeated. 'Nobody else?'

'Who else could I get now? They must bury him tomorrow.'

She considered a long time. She said at last: 'Where are you from?'

'Only from Cwrt-y-Cadno. Not too far.'

'How do you know what's too far?' she said. She looked past him at the rough little, stout mountain pony. 'If - I say *if* - he comes, he must ride the horse.'

He gave a rough laugh. 'What - I walk while a sin-eater rides my horse?' But if the man were too weak to walk. . . . 'Very well - let him ride.'

'Both ways?' she said. 'You will bring him back again?'

'Yes, yes,' he said. 'Both ways.' Once the man had done his work, they could see about that. There was a heap of stones close by and he went and sat down upon it, gingerly, hugging his jacket about him - no need, however great, should drive him closer to that chill, grey place where the light glimmered, faint as a moonstone, cobweb covered, through the hole of the window. 'Go and tell him. And let him make haste. I can't wait all night.'

'I'll tell him.' But she turned back once again. 'Both ways?'

'Both ways, both ways,' he promised impatiently. He added - for suppose the man were truly too sick to come, suppose he were to die upon the road - 'What ails him?'

'He is hungry,' said the woman and went into the cottage.

The glimmer came from rushlights, made from the reeds that grew by the river's edge – the green skin peeled back, the pith dipped in melted mutton fat, forming a sort of wick. Through its feeble flickering you could discern a second doorway, leading to an inner room. From this room there came now a boy – a boy or a man, from the gaunt, gangling height, the foolish, gentle face, you might never be quite sure – even the hair, a wild thatch almost to shoulder length, was of ashen pallor, so bleached as to seem the white hair of old age. She glanced towards the inner room, questioning.

He shrugged, hopelessly. A thin arm was crook'd across the flat belly, his face was streaked with tears. 'Mother – it's terrible to have not enough to eat. My father lies there sick, moaning, and all I can think about is that I am hungry.'

She took his hand in hers – the poor, thin hand, fingers noded and brittle-looking as the twigs from the long-abandoned jackdaws' nests. 'You shall eat,' she said.

'Eat, Mother?' There had been no meal in that house for many days.

She gestured with her head to the dim figure sitting outside on the heap of stones. 'He has come for the sin-eater.'

'But my father —'

She looked into his face : a strange look, intent, compassionate, yet fiercely resolute. 'Ianto,' she said. 'You must go with the man.'

'I?' He was terrified, panic-stricken, freeing himself from her grasp to beat the air in front of him with meaningless gestures like a child deprived of its toy. 'I couldn't! I couldn't! To eat a dead man's sins. . . .'

She fought, head back, to get possession of his flailing hands. 'Hush, now hush : listen ! You are hungry —'

'To eat from a dead man's breast ! The food would choke me —'

'Ianto, they pay you also, they will give you money. . . .'

But he only struggled and whimpered, rearing away from her, oblivious to reason. 'I'd rather starve – I'd rather starve. . . .'

They were all starving. The husband had been ill for many weeks; she dared not leave him long enough to go

forth and try to earn or beg – or steal – in the far away villages : the nearest town was twenty miles or more. The boy was too witless to send; and with increasing weakness, she had lost gradually even the will to try. ‘If not for yourself, Ianto, for all of us. For him.’

The poor, vague eyes, unfocused, came at last to rest, looking wretchedly back into hers. ‘If he has no food – will he die?’

She turned away her head from the innocent gaze. She knew that his father must die, whether he ate or no. But she said, ‘Yes.’

‘Then – if just for this once. . . . And they will pay me. . . ?’ But he broke down again, sobbing and trembling. ‘To eat from the breast of a corpse. . . . To take the sins!’

‘But, Ianto – this is what I am trying to say to you.’ She caught his hands again, urgently whispering. ‘To take the sins, you must eat from the body. But if you don’t eat the food there, if you bring it away —’

‘Not eat?’

‘Eat nothing there, Ianto. Not one scrap, not one crumb ! Say the prayers. Tell the people to let you alone with the body while you eat. But don’t eat. Bring the food away with you.’

‘And so, in that way, I should not eat the sins?’ But still the poor, feeble intellect staggered at the thought of the ordeal to be endured. ‘To see a dead man. . . ! To say the prayers, to wail and scream. . . ! To be left alone with him. . . !’ He implored : ‘Mother – must I go?’

She bent all her strength to uphold her will against his. ‘Yes. You must go.’

‘And bring back the food? Bring it here?’ It was dreadful to see the gentle face lose its innocence, the dawn of idiot cunning in his eyes. ‘But not for myself, Mother? Isn’t that it?’

‘The money —’

‘I don’t want the money,’ he said. ‘But the food. . . .’ His thin arm hugged the aching emptiness of his belly.

‘I don’t want the food,’ she said. ‘It’s not for me. I shall not touch one crumb of it, not one crumb. . . .’ But she could

not prevent the turn of her anguished heart towards that inner room where her man lay moaning : the turn of her anxious eyes. The boy said : 'Ah, no – not for you. For him!'

'You shall eat it all,' she said; and bent her head, guiltily, not meeting the return of his innocent, foolish faith and joy.

He went with the farm servant : trembling. His mother had thrown a woollen shawl about his head and shoulders, the man saw only the old-young face, hooded, and the wild white hair. But the widow, meeting them at the farmhouse door, held her lantern high and cried out : 'What is this you have brought me? This is no sin-eater, this is a boy.'

'He can eat as well as another, I suppose,' said the man. But he was abashed at having been tricked, sought further to rehabilitate himself. 'Better, perhaps. A boy is young and strong to bear the burden of the sins.'

'Do you call this strong?' she said, pushing the boy before her into the lighted kitchen, turning the poor, thin, zany face to hers. You could see her heart sink within her. 'And as for young – is this poor child to take on the evil of a grown man's whole days?'

'He is the sin-eater,' said the man, shrugging. 'Let him eat.' He threw himself down on the high-backed oak settle at the open hearth where, despite the oppressive heat of the night, a fire spluttered and sparked. 'At any rate, there's no other. I have searched three days; and, as it is, have had to walk all this way while he rode my horse – *and* hold him on, half the time, from tumbling off.'

'He is weak,' said the woman, and looked at him pityingly.

'I am hungry,' said the boy.

The corpse was laid out in the little parlour where candle-light glowed from the tall dresser with its rows of gold lustre jugs. A white sheet was pulled up to the chin, a china dish balanced upon the dead breast; and heaped on the dish was food, thick slices of bacon, pink and glistening white, cut from the home-cured joints that hung from the beams in the kitchen ceiling; brown faggots, home-made also, aromatic with herbs; eggs boiled and shelled, raw onions sliced across,

fresh-baked bread, spread thinly with the butter that the farmhouse wives so salted that the hired servants would not take too much of it : great wedges of cake, dark and sticky; slabs of crumbling white cheese. . . . The boy stood looking at it and slavered at the jaws.

The family, hastily summoned, crowded in after him and stood with bent heads round the bier : the old, accustomed, calm; the young shying like frightened ponies in the candlelight that flickered in the shadows so that, beneath its shroud, the body seemed to move. They waited for the boy to speak.

The boy could not speak. His heart was like water within him, his mouth drooled saliva at the sight of the food. An old man said at last : 'Shall we not begin?'

The widow had protected his youth from their scrutiny, keeping him in shadow, muffling his old-young face again into its woollen shawl. Too late now to find another; she had done her best – she wanted no argument. She prompted him, murmuring, fearful, the opening words of the sin-eater's terrible prayer.

He had heard his father rehearsing it often enough – the sibilant muttering, the pauses while the food was gobbled down, bit by ceremonious bit, the crescendo of importunity, storming heaven, the shriek of horror, real or pretended, as the prayer at last was answered, the sins transmitted to the living from the dead : the precipitate flight, eerily wailing, staying only to pick up the money, by custom flung after the outcast into the farmyard mire. But the words. . . . The howl of a fox he could imitate so that the vixen cried back to him, the hoot of an owl, the scream of the kite, but these sounds had no words; he knew no words. . . . He began to mumble, desperate – imitating, ape-like, a meaningless babel of sound. They shifted their feet, uneasily – only half listening, only half watching him, afraid of the moment to come, part of that moment yet wishing to be no part of it, giving him, deliberately, only a divided attention; yet conscious, and with a growing consciousness, that all was not as it should be. The widow made small, urgent, hidden gestures towards the body. The time had come to eat.

The butter was yellow in the candlelight, gleaming gold

sovereigns of it ringing the brown batch loaves; his bowels melted within him, inside his mouth his cheeks seemed to sweat saliva. He stretched out a shaking hand towards the food. . . .

But his mother's voice hissed in his ear : 'Not one scrap, not one crumb !' His hand dropped back.

She had counselled him, hastily, feverishly coaching him in the part he must play, knowing him not capable of improvisation. Now, obedient, he stumbled through the simple sentences. 'You must all go. I am one that eats alone.'

The old men were astonished, protesting. 'The sin-eater eats before witnesses.'

The boy repeated : 'I am one that eats alone.'

'Witnesses must be present to see it, when the sin passes.'

'You shall hear it,' promised the boy, 'when the sin passes.'

The shriek of mortal terror, the terrible wailing. . . . 'If we stand in the next room,' urged the widow, abetting him, 'we shall hear when the sin passes.' This sin-eater was not as other sin-eaters, in her heart she doubted his efficacy; but he was the best she could do, her husband must be buried to-morrow, she prayed again for no argument; and meanwhile, uneasy but indomitable, drove them all out, reluctantly shuffling, into the kitchen next door.

Ears pressed against oak, they heard the mutterings again, wordless, unmeaning. Then silence. The boy, obedient, was stuffing his threadbare pockets with the food, was lining the torn shirt with it, close up against his naked body, fat against thin - white, glossy fat pressed close against the hard rib-caging that painfully ridged the blue-white skin. . . . The faggots, crushed by the all-concealing shawl, exploded, dry and mealy, aromatically fragrant, the hard white whites of the eggs were slippery and cold; pressed between narrow oval slices of batch bread, the butter oozed and melted, yellow as gold. He set up a shrill chanting, importuning heaven in a stream of wordless sound, for the shifting to himself of the dead man's sins.

When we hear the scream, said the old men, avidly listening, it will be the sin passing.

The chanting ceased. Within the little parlour, the boy

was nerving himself for the screaming. There was nothing to scream for, he had not eaten the food, the sins would not pass to him : and yet he must somehow open his mouth and, weak and sick as he was, find the strength to begin. In its corner, the grandfather clock ticked away the minutes, urgently; pale against dark gold of old lustre, the candlelight flickered from the tall oak dresser; uneasily the dead man lay, shifting beneath his shroud with the shifting of the shadows. On the still breast, the dish lay empty.

His mouth opened, he dragged up a deep breath from his labouring lungs; lurched, sick and trembling against the bier, knowing that he had no strength, no power, no will to meet the task before him – crouched there, shuddering, and did not know how to start screaming. . . .

But the lurch against the bier had shifted the weight of the dish, tipped it crazily, unbalanced now as it was by the loss of the food. He saw the beginning of the slow slide, impeded by the folds of the shroud, but inevitable nevertheless; and flung out a hand to save it. His fingers grasped it, he hung over the corpse clinging to the edge of the dish; but, heavy, and greasy with bacon fat, it slid inexorably out of his hands and a moment later had crashed into a thousand fragments on to the scrubbed white stone of the floor. . . .

He let out one startled yell : the door burst open, they all stood gaping : and, hysterically screaming, he thrust his way through them and was out – out into the night air, under the stars and fleeing down the mountain side to the place he called his home. If they flung gold after him, if the servant recollected his promise of safe conduct, he waited for neither. After the long strain of the night, panic had him fast; and, faint with lack of food, yet he rushed on and on, stumbling through the hanging forests, across the rough grassland, plunging through the river, waist high; the scrub oak again and so at last collapsed, sobbing, outside the ruined cottage, at his mother's feet.

She could not wait even to comfort or assist him. She burst out : 'Have you brought the food?'

He dragged himself to his feet, painfully; began to unwrap the shawl, to extract from beneath it the poor, battered rem-

nants of that once splendid feast – the crumbled faggots, the split and bulging eggs, the fine white bacon gone limp and greasy now from long contact with the sweating body. She took it from him silently, piece by piece, scraped with a cupped palm the melting butter from the hollow of his waist, scraped it off again on to a crust of bread. She said at last : ‘Is this all of it?’

All of it. Not one morsel eaten, not one crumb. His heart rose light as a bird at the thought of it – the mission accomplished, temptation resisted, the reward, untarnished, now to come. But the cunning crept back, frightened, defensive, as she took the food and turned away into the house. ‘Where are you taking it? It’s mine, you promised.’ Famished, exhausted, he began to drag himself after her. ‘You’re not going to eat it yourself? You’re not giving it all to him. . . ?’

‘You shall have it,’ she promised. ‘All of it. All of it.’

The sins of the simple farmer – what are they? An ounce of mutton underweight, a drop or two of water in the milk : a woman coveted, a word in anger, a curse, a blow. . . . But the sins of the sin-eater – the long accumulation of sin upon sin, of sins unrepented, unshriven, unforgiven, of sins stolen from dead men’s souls for gain : who shall take on the sins of the sin-eater?

She had known all along that he was at the point of death; and now the mother came out and took her son’s hand and led him, innocent, through to the inner room where the father lay : with the food spread out upon his naked breast.

MESSAGE FOR MARGIE

by Christine Campbell Thomson

THE FAIR girl in the pale blue coat twisted her gloves in her hands and seemed unwilling to leave the room. The others filed out into the linoleum-covered hall but she still lingered, half in and half out of the doorway.

Blocking any attempt to return to the seance room, the

medium, a stout woman in black with a lace stole over her shoulders, raised her eyebrows a trifle.

'There was no message for me,' the girl said, diffidently.

Half-suspiciously, half-kindly, the medium looked at her. She knew the type; it didn't do to let them think themselves neglected but it wasn't always easy to get a contact for a newcomer; generally the delay paid off: it brought them again and again.

'Wasn't there?'

The girl shook her head. Her young, childlike face was framed in a blue hood that matched her coat, and both were one shade deeper than her very blue eyes. She looked rather like a harebell, thought the medium, who was not entirely without poetry in her soul. 'A breath of wind would puff her away.' She forgot, or did not know, that the harebell bends to the fiercest gale or the heaviest foot and rises triumphant when all is over.

'Were you expecting someone special?' she said, tentatively. Her sharp experienced eyes took in the probable cost of the blue outfit, the gold charm bracelet on one slender wrist and the good quality handbag that looked likely to contain a wallet stuffed with notes.

'Yes. . . .'

'Why not come again next week? Sometimes they can't get through the first time – not expecting you, you see. Most of the circle are regulars. Mrs Burrage recommended you, didn't she? It is your first time?'

A sharper note had crept into her voice. A faint suspicion showed in her eyes. Hadn't she seen this girl before somewhere? There was a familiar suggestion about her – but not in those clothes – not quite like that. Some of those young policewomen were quite attractive when they were properly made up. . . .

'My very first time at any seance,' replied the girl, and the quality of her tone left no doubt as to the truth of the words.

'Ah . . . and who were you expecting?'

Fishing in very shallow water, but inexperience coupled with emotion will sometimes betray a great deal and nothing is too small grist for the mill of a South London medium try-

ing to earn an honest living and by no means always able to make contact with her guides. When they failed, it was necessary to fall back on the known and the inferred, and, at worst, on the complete guess.

'Just – just my brother . . . He passed over – last year. . . .'
'I see.'

Lie No. 1, thought the medium. Or perhaps hardly a lie. They all called them brothers or sisters. Wouldn't admit to having lovers. Got her into trouble perhaps . . . the medium sniffed a little. She estimated the girl's age at around twenty.

'An accident. . . ?'

'Ye-es.' The girl evidently assumed the sniff to be contempt for her lack of even a semblance of mourning. 'He – he didn't like black. . . .'

'Well, that's right enough, dearie.' She was on firm ground now and regaining control of the situation. 'The spirits always tell us they can't abide sad colours and sad faces. After all, they say they're in a beautiful land where it is always sunshine and blue skies – and – and —' She caught herself up sharply.

No need to use up material that rightly belonged to those who'd paid for it. All that could come next time – and very nicely, too. It was the regular form of the first contact chat – reassuring, that's what they all found it. And the others in the group expected it for a newcomer; gave her the freedom of the circle, so to speak – a kind of admission ticket to the play. Worst of being so regular with those reports from the Other Side; they crept into the everyday speech until before you knew where you were you'd ruined the work for the next sitting.

A clock struck four and she turned sharply.

'You'll have to go now, dearie. There's another group coming in shortly and I've got to have my cuppa and a bit of a rest. I need something to keep up my strength with all these sittings . . . they're a terrible strain. . . .'

'Of course. I must go. Thank you.'

'Come again next week. You're booked into that group now at two-thirty so don't mix it. I can't take more than a certain number at a time. The spirits don't like it. They can't

cope. See how you were left out this afternoon ! But I'll have a word with them and see if we can't get you a message right at the beginning of the sitting next time. See you Saturday. Ta-ta for now. . . .'

She turned on her heel, appearing even larger than life as befitted one who could summon spirits from the vasty deep and instruct them in what order to deliver their communications, and swayed through the sitting-room into the kitchenette which was so small it could barely contain her and the necessary fixtures. Forgetting to shut the sitting-room door behind her, she stood like a giant bat outlined against the light.

The girl in blue fumbled her way along the hall to the front door. As she reached it, it was pushed open from the outside by a faded-looking woman in black who edged against the wall as though afraid of being seen and recognized. Behind her came a round-faced, red-cheeked dumping of a woman who cried brightly,

'Look, there's still someone from the last sitting. We aren't late after all. I told you Robinson's clock was fast.'

She pushed her way through, nearly crushing both her companion and the girl in blue, who were on opposite sides of the hall. As she went by, the medium switched on the light from a control inside the sitting-room and both the newcomers' faces were illuminated. With a gasp, the girl lowered her own so that her features were masked by her hat. She slipped quickly and silently down the steps into the late afternoon.

'And that,' she remarked to herself, 'was, believe it or not, Ada and Lucy . . . fancy them going there ! School Welfare workers ! Lucky they didn't recognize me, though I don't suppose they'd mention it. Still, you never know, and that medium was bent on finding out all she could about me. Wonder whose message they're hoping to get ! Lucky I'm not in their group,' she chuckled to herself. 'That would have torn it !'

The following Saturday afternoon the girl was back at the seance. The medium recognized her at once although this time she was wearing dark glasses and a pull-on hat. The

chance of meeting Ada and Lucy either on the doorstep or in the street was one she was not prepared to risk unprotected.

'I expect there'll be a message for you today, dearie,' she said comfortingly as the ill-assorted group took their places in a rough circle. Hands were linked, a gramophone wheezed out 'Abide with Me' and someone switched off the lights. The seance had begun.

Messages came as usual, but in spite of the medium's assurance of her personal intervention, nothing and no one contacted the girl. A silence fell; the medium breathed even more stertorously; the circle, feeling that they had had their money's worth, began to fidget; someone was on the point of breaking the link when the voice came – a voice they had never heard before. It was harsh, as though it was coming from a distance and with considerable effort; it was young, and, as everyone was prepared to swear later, it had an urgency, a vitality, usually painfully lacking in the supposed voices of their own dead.

'Margie!' it called. 'Margie!'

The girl in blue raised her head at once. Her neighbour swore long afterwards that the hand she was holding turned as cold as ice – like the hand of a corpse, as she dramatically described it – it felt like no living human hand.

'Margie!' the voice repeated, and the medium groaned.

'I'm here, Tom.' The words were distinctly uttered and there was no tremor in the tone.

'Good – not easy – to speak – come again. . . .'

The medium stirred and sat up, and the circle automatically broke its contact. There was excitement on most faces; this was something like! A novelty. Everyone of them, and some had been half-hearted, determined to come without fail on the next Saturday.

'So you got a message, dearie?' the medium wheezed as she said a careful farewell to her clients; every word was weighed, every indication of pleasure or displeasure or disappointment carefully noted, to that there might be good and fruitful results at the next sitting. Mrs Goldstine seemed to think her husband ought to have stayed longer – greedy,

some of these foreign women, thought the medium. Miss Alsopp was in tears; she had had a wonderful message of love and hope from her mother; another one would do no harm.

'Yes – thank you. . . .'

'What you wanted?'

'Well . . .' the word was drawn out, hesitant.

'I know.' The woman spoke quickly to forestall criticism. 'The first time they come through it's difficult – for them, I mean. They can't always make contact easily; have to practise just like you have to practise to talk a foreign language. Next time there'll be a real message, I expect. . . .' Her eyes were greedily devouring the girl's face. Yes, she was a certainty for two or three more sittings. Played carefully, maybe even longer.

'Tiresome little thing,' the medium said to herself when the door had been finally closed. 'Doesn't give away much. How'm I supposed to find out what sort of message she wants? Tom . . . I heard that meself, coming round. But who is he? Brother? Not likely. She's a deep one, she is. Cagey. And died young, too. Car smash – ton up boy, maybe? P'raps I could risk something about speeding. . . .'

She felt justifiably annoyed. After all, she couldn't be expected to do it all herself with the help of her Guide from time to time. This year he was a Chinese – he called himself a Mandarin – not that the medium was very clear what they meant, connecting it, as did most of her circles, with a type of orange; still, it sounded classy. Last year he'd been a Red Indian. One had to keep up with the fashions and it wasn't as if the same crowd came year after year. Three months was about their limit, as a rule, and that meant hard work starting new circles each quarter or thereabouts.

'I'd like a nice regular group once a week at three guineas a time and a crystal ball,' she muttered, putting the kettle on. 'Posh place in the West End and real ladies. . . .' Not for nothing did she study the columns of the journals carrying advertisements of her own trade and the allied professions.

Margie dutifully turned up at the next two sittings, but Tom was a disappointment. He identified himself boldly.

Told Margie that he was always thinking of her and that she was to do her stuff – but what that stuff was and his own relationship still remained a mystery. A passing hopeful reference to motor-bikes brought no response – in fact there seemed something perilously like a guffaw.

Margie knew, but she wasn't telling. She went about her daily life, all through the week, teaching in an infants' school, 'mothering' the babies, occasionally exchanging words with Ada and Lucy, blowing noses, counting heads, superintending milk and biscuits and lunches, handing over her charges to mothers at the gate, all in her usual unperturbed way. But that was the outward form. Inwardly she was in a turmoil.

Tom had communicated; he wanted her to do her stuff; Margie guessed what it meant but the means to the end was still uncertain. She brooded over it, planning, discarding, wondering. She brooded so much that, with the extra stimulation of the weekly contacts, she began to believe him present with her at home. She started to talk to him as if he were there; little short simple sentences. And she was certain that she got replies – and without the help of any medium. She found that it was easiest to contact him after school when the light was fading; she sat beside her open window in the dusk and could have vowed she saw him coming up the garden path – looking just as he had done that September of last year when he left the house to meet his friends and never came back. Once his presence was so real that she got up and opened the french window to let him in, but there was no one – just the gentle patter of autumn leaves falling on the stones.

She sat back again, disappointed, but with a smile on her lips.

'I know what you want me to do, Tom,' she said, half-aloud. 'I've always known – but I didn't know how. Now tell me how. . . .' and she sat there in the gloaming with her head a little on one side, listening – to something?

Every Saturday afternoon she went to the seance and joined in the circle; the composition changed slightly with the weeks, but the newcomers were much of the same stamp

as those who left it. Mrs Goldstine went off, complaining bitterly; Miss Alsopp had become so lachrymose that the medium suggested she was disturbing her mother's rest; she was certainly disturbing the circle. Mr Wesson, who took her place, was anxiously waiting to make contact with his wife; he wanted her advice about the future of the house: should he redecorate or sell as it stood? Mrs Essbridge longed to talk with an uncle whose will was missing and believed to be in her favour.

There was seldom a message for Margie. The contact was there, but that was all. The medium knew no more of her than she had done before. But she did know that she was sitting with another whose powers were equal to if not greater than her own. Now Margie sat at her left hand and the guide seemed more familiar and the voices and the messages seemed stronger. Like called to like.

'D'jever think of doing this yourself? Seances – circles, I mean?' she asked one afternoon, keeping Margie back when the others had gone.

'No – o. . . .'

'You'd be a success. You've got the gift. I can see it, watching you; I can feel it when you take my hand. You'd need to learn the ropes. I could put you wise. We might make a do of it together. It's a lot of work for one. You'd get a Guide if you asked . . . I could speak for you.'

There was something alarming in the girl's quiet appraisal as she looked the older woman over. The medium stirred restlessly.

'Seems a shame to waste a gift like yours. Wants cultivatin' – training. There's money in it. Look how these old girls come week after week – so do you for that matter. But you ain't had your message yet?'

'No. . . .' Margie seemed to be considering. 'Not yet. But I think it's coming soon.'

'Who's Tom?' the medium blurted out, unable to contain her curiosity.

'I told you – long ago. My brother.'

Still the same fiction. Well, if she liked to play it that way. . . . Suddenly the medium felt exhausted. It was, as

she said, a tiring job, and a lot of people didn't appreciate what you did for them. Sometimes you were genuinely under control and sometimes you weren't, and when you weren't you had to make up something. Couldn't let the clients down, or they'd never come back. That's why it was so necessary to know something about them – know what they wanted. That young woman could be useful – anyone would confide in her; she'd got that look – daughterly, sort of – you'd trust her, confide in her. She could get the inside dope without trouble.

When she turned to speak again, she found that Margie had left.

That night Tom came as Margie sat by the window. As a rule she did not expect him on a Saturday after the seance; she knew that it was an effort to contact her there. But that night he arrived. The weather was turning colder and it grew dark earlier; his time was directly after tea instead of just before supper. He seemed to have gained solidity; she could almost see him with her physical eye. And there seemed something urgent about him. With a start, Margie remembered that the next Saturday would be the first anniversary of his passing over.

'What do you want me to do?' she asked.

And this time there was a voice that answered : Tom's voice, stronger than at the seances, but not yet quite of this world. Gravely she listened, nodded, and promised to obey.

She arrived at the next circle meeting in the same unobtrusive manner as usual; her suppressed excitement did not show in her gentle greeting and she took her place at the medium's left hand without comment. The sitting began like all the others. A hymn, greetings from the Other Side, platitudes and trivial messages. Quite suddenly the tension increased and grew almost unbearable. The medium slumped down in her chair, her head thrown back, her mouth open, and her breathing loud and deep; she would have been an unlovely sight had it been possible to see more than her outline.

One of the women in the circle gasped and another hushed her peremptorily. A voice was coming through from the

Other Side – but not the pleasant soothing voice of Kung Foo, the Chinese, with his measured cadences and flow of philosophical axioms. This was a young, stronger voice, a rougher one – and it had a horrible quality to it – a quality combined of urgency, pleasure and revenge.

‘Margie ! Margie ! Now – do it now !’

There was a slight scuffle; no one saw the girl in blue detach her hand from that of the medium but they all felt the circle break and they all heard the strangled scream. Someone switched on the lights. And then every woman in the room screamed in unison.

The medium’s head still lolled back on the chair but now there was a scarlet band across the greying, flabby flesh of her throat – a band which was spreading and dripping as they looked.

And beside her, laughing softly and continuously, was Margie, the gentle little girl in blue. At first they thought she was suffering from hysteria, but then they saw the razor blade in its crude handle still grasped between her fingers. . . .

When the police searched her handbag there was nothing there but a cutting from a newspaper a year and a day out of date; it reported the capital punishment of a young man and beside the report it showed a picture of the woman whose evidence had been instrumental in convicting him. Even in the blurred reproduction of the popular press it was impossible not to identify the medium.

THE OTHER PASSENGER

by John Keir Cross

THE SPARKS FLY UPWARD

SITTING LIKE this, with the blank sheets before me, trying to coordinate things before setting them down, I see, above all other images, that wry and beastly figure as it burned : the head lolling grotesquely on the shoulder : the

arms outstretched and nailed to the crosspiece of the frame that had, in the children's excitement, gone all askew; and I, only I, in all that cheering company, with any notion of what was behind the leering mask.

The flames rose slowly at first, I remember : then, as the straw and the twigs caught properly alight, roared round the sagging clothes and played on the whole crooked figure. I sniffed the air in a sort of ecstasy of relief – and realized immediately, thinking in grotesque parallel to Lamb's 'Dissertation Upon Roast Pig', why I did so . . .

Where to begin? The evening in the fog? The first time I heard the sound of the piano come creeping along the corridor? The scene on the platform of the Underground with Miller, and the terrible scream rushing through the crowd to me? Or farther back still, to the first vague premonitions?

I remember, long ago, when I was a student, going to a party. We were very young. We sat round the fire with the lights out, playing a game we called 'Horrors'. The idea was for each guest to describe the most horrible thing he could think of. We each took our turn – I remember I had something naïve, about a skeleton. It was good fun – we laughed a lot. We had all taken part except one shy pretty girl who sat on the outskirts of the circle. In a silence she said, in a low voice :

'Shall I tell you the most horrible thing I can imagine? You waken suddenly in the night. You have that ineffable feeling that there is someone else – some *thing* else – in the room with you. You stretch out your hand for the matches, to investigate. And, quite quietly and simply, the match-box is placed in your hand. . . .'

We all fell silent. As for me, something swept over me – a sudden expression had been given to something I had known always secretly. For the first time I had a real overwhelming, haunting sense of – well, call it what you may want to : I have my own name.

We go, you see : and with us goes always Another Passen-

ger. He is beside us in every deepest action and speaks through us in every fateful announcement. There is no escaping him or his influence. His voice whispers suddenly in the night, his presence intangibly lingers at our shoulder when we feel ourselves most alone. He is the Man on the Back, the Secret Sharer. He is the Worm that Dieth Seldom, the Great Sickness.

Yet in it all there is, I suspect, a terrible paradox. We do not hate him. We fear him, perhaps : but secretly in our hearts, we still love him. He may be the Worm : if he is, he is Brother Worm.

We go : and he – the Other Passenger – is always at our side. Always, always, always – to the grave : and perhaps beyond it.

My name, I should tell you, is John Aubrey Spenser. I am a pianist, thirty-five years of age. I was, when all this began, engaged to be married. My fiancée's name was Margaret du Parc, daughter of Georges du Parc, the violinist. She was (perhaps you have seen portraits of her? – there is a famous one by de Laszlo) most exquisitely beautiful. Yet God knows my own remembrances of her now are all vague enough. That has been the most devilish part of it all – I forget things. I forget good things and only remember old agonies. I remember inconsequential torments from my childhood days, for example, and so everything mounts to a deep, ferocious resentment.

I was born in Scotland – an illegitimate child. My father was an extraordinary man – morose, untidy, clever, lazy. He was one of the Spensers of Barnhall in North Perthshire, a big farming family – old puritans, with the fear of God and a love of the Devil in them. My father's father, the head of the family, was a dour, powerfully characterd man : autocratic, hard-working, firm in his belief that a man should beget and keep on begetting. Hence there were fourteen children – my father the youngest.

The old farmer's death was typical of his life – precise, sparing in emotion, with not a word wasted. As my father used to tell me the story, he came in one night from the

fields and stood for a few moments silently in the farmhouse doorway. Then he heaved a great sigh and said, in a perfectly matter-of-fact voice :

‘Aye, Barnha’ will need a new maister in the morning.’

Forthwith he collapsed in a heap and by the morning he was dead.

The farm went to my father’s eldest brother, Finlay, a typical phlegmatic Spenser. They still tell the story in the Barnhall district of how, when his young son Geordie had been killed in France in 1915 in the First World War, he appeared wild-eyed on Barnhall Station and slammed his wallet down on the booking-desk. He had no hat or coat, but under his arm he carried his big double-barrelled rabbit gun.

‘I want a ticket for France,’ he said. ‘By Goad, I’ll get they de’ils for killing oor Geordie ! . . .’

My father was the schoolmaster in a little two-teacher school in the country – the dominie, with the school-house thrown in. A terrible house – damp, draughty, with no drains and a big pump in the yard to provide the water supply. We used to have to wrap great lumps of brown felt and straw round the pump in winter so that it shouldn’t get frozen. I used to think it was some sort of live thing when we did that.

When my father got that school his sister Bertha went to keep house for him. She had a maid to help her, and there was my father stuck away in the country with no woman but Aunt Bertha, so he couldn’t help going after the maid – there wasn’t anything else to do. Anyway, I was the result of that. When my mother became pregnant my father tried to get her out of the way, but he bungled it (as he bungled everything) and my Aunt Bertha found out. There was a scene – my father told me later, before he died, that she gave them both hell – particularly my mother. She had the poor little thing sent to her people and gave her some money, and when I was about two she had me brought up to the school-house. My mother’s people were too poor to object – what the hell did they want me for anyway? – and there I was, with Aunt Bertha pretending to the Minister and anybody

that was curious that I was her cousin's orphan.

There wasn't any maid in the house now, and as soon as I was old enough to lift an axe, my Aunt Bertha began. I think I was her revenge – against everything. She kept a strap hanging up beside the mantelpiece – one of my father's shaving-strops, with an iron buckle on it. She used to hit me with it if I didn't get the sticks split quickly enough. But that was nothing compared with some of the things she used to do. If I wet the bed she used to make me stand outside in the frost in my nightshirt till she decided it was dry. That was a favourite punishment of hers – making me stand outside in the cold. Sometimes it was so bad I couldn't close my fist to knock on the door and ask to get in again. Another of her punishments was not to give me anything to eat. She would send me up to bed without anything, and I had to lie under one old blanket and listen to her down below in the yard wrapping up the pump. I hated her. She was a big thin woman, very angular, and she used to wear long woollen drawers like a man in the winter time. We went to Church every Sunday and I could hear her singing beside me in a deep man's voice, and sometimes the Minister came to tea and she sat in immense dignity with a big cairngorm brooch on her dress and gave him slices of black bun.

I didn't see much of my father in those days. He hated Aunt Bertha as much as I did. I remember once, during a meal, she was haranguing him, and suddenly he picked up the oil-lamp and threw it at her. It didn't hit her, but the lamp got smashed against the wall and there we were in the dark, dead quiet for a minute or two, and then she began again, just where she had stopped. I was terrified. Then I remember the door opening and my father's silhouette in the frame, and then we could hear him pacing about in the next room, swearing to himself. He used to spend most of the evenings like that – walking backwards and forwards in his study. He drank a lot. Sometimes the footsteps stopped and we heard him muttering, but they would begin again – perhaps, even, he would start singing. You can picture Aunt Bertha and me sitting there and just listening to him all evening, she bolt upright with that great cairngorm at her

breast like a huge sore.

When I was old enough to go to school it was worse. I had to do my jobs in the evening or early morning – no matter what the weather was like, I was out in the yard chopping wood, with an old storm lantern to see by. One of my jobs was to empty the dry-closet, and she used to wait till it was dark before she told me to do that. I used to hate going down to the foot of the garden with my lantern and digging a hole and struggling to lift up the bucket. It was so heavy I had to strain and strain, and when I was about eight one of the boys at school told me about hernia, and I was sick with fear every time, but I strained till I was crying because I was so terrified of her . . .

Aunt Bertha died when I was eleven. When she was ill my father and I used to sit downstairs, very quiet, but both of us were hoping she would die. And when she did, the moment she did, I felt guilty somehow – for wishing it – as if I had caused it. Then the next day I thought : O God – no more sticks to break ! . . . and I began to cry in a silly relief. And then for a time my father and I managed in a sort of way, the two of us, in the school-house, but with his drinking and some other things too in the district, matters had gone too far with the authorities and my father got transferred. It was no sort of promotion – simply a transfer, to a school in Glasgow. We moved about two months after Aunt Bertha's funeral. I remember helping my father to pack his books. He was most methodical about them – I have often thought how strange that was. They were all classified and catalogued . . . Lord, I can just see him ! – standing there peering at some book or other, turning over the pages with his long crooked fingers and his yellow hair falling over in front of his eyes . . .

But all this is irrelevant – except in that it is these old haunting things that I remember nowadays, and nothing of the good times. Nothing of Margaret, beyond the vague association of something warm and good – ineffable and forlorn, too, like an echo. Oh the facts are there – I remember, detachedly, the facts. But nothing of the essence

– no hint at all of that since that devil came on the scene and destroyed every good thing between us.

The Other Passenger. The man in the Dark . . .

I remember – it was, most surely, the first time – walking in Bristol. Five years ago. I was booked for a concert and had decided to travel from town the evening before it. The train was two and a half hours late – there was a heavy fog.

When I got out at last at Temple Meads Station it was to find that no buses were running – no taxis, nothing. I set off to walk to my hotel in Clifton. I can't begin to describe the weird, muffled quietness. The fog was so thick I couldn't see the pavement I was walking on. When I reached the City Centre I heard, on all sides, thousands of footsteps. The people were walking home from work – all traffic was stopped.

There were no voices. Occasionally a woman giggled nervously, but no one spoke – there was something awesome in that impenetrable wall of mist. Only those thousands of muffled footsteps going on determinedly and slowly.

I groped my way towards the University. And I remember I was thinking – irrelevantly enough, as one does – of the early days : my breakaway from Scotland after the death of my father, my incredible success with scholarships, my first concert. Impossible to connect myself, as I walked there, with the shivering and weeping boy who had knocked so helplessly on the door of that decaying school-house. Impossible to imagine what Aunt Bertha would have thought – she who had forbidden me to touch the old walnut cottage piano in my father's study till he had interfered growlingly (only for the sake of countering her !) and said I might play if I wanted to – and might even have lessons from Miss Ramsay in the village . . .

I groped on slowly up the hill. And then I became aware that among all those straggling footsteps there was one pair close to my own – almost in time with my own. I peered into the fog. Whoever it was, he was no more than a foot or so away from me.

I made some ineffectual remark – some fatuous statement

about the fog and the discomfort. There was no reply. I walked on. The footsteps continued.

And suddenly a curious fear came over me – intangible, but overwhelming and insistent. I reached out my hand. I moved it backwards and forwards. There was no one there – no one at all beside me. Yet all the time – devilishly and rhythmically – the footsteps were going on. And there was, in the yellow mist, a sort of chuckle, and a whisper.

‘Spenser – pianist. John Aubrey Spenser – pianist . . .’

I stop here for a moment. I read back what I have set down so disjointedly, in such confusion and unwillingness of spirit. What will it convey to a detached reader? Will he have any notion of me? – a picture in his mind? That strikes me as funny – the idea of anyone having a picture of me in his mind. A young man – dark, thin, with narrow temples. It is what they call ‘a sensitive face.’

A young man with a slight Scottish accent. A picture in a reader’s mind. When all the time it might be —

Do you remember, in *Peer Gynt*, towards the end of the play, there is the famous storm scene? Peer is on board ship, returning home at last from his adventures. He stands on the deck watching the storm. Then suddenly he becomes aware that someone is standing beside him at the rail – a Stranger. Peer had thought himself the only passenger on board, yet now he falls into conversation with this mysterious travelling-companion. The man bargains with Peer for his body if he should die in the storm. In the end, unsatisfied, he leaves Peer – he goes down the companionway. Peer asks the ship’s boy who the Strange Traveller is.

‘There is no other traveller,’ says the boy. ‘You are the only passenger.’

‘But someone was with me a moment ago,’ cries Peer. ‘Who was it that went down the companion way just now?’

‘No one, sir,’ says the boy. ‘Only – the ship’s dog . . .’

I cannot concentrate. My mind wanders. I cannot assemble my thoughts. If I were anything of a creative artist I would be able to impose an order on all this. Yet can there be order? I am not concerned with creating a work of art –

I am putting things down. And I am putting them down as they come into my head – and as simply as I can. I cannot be logical – sequence is only a convention after all: there isn't any time or scene, character isn't a progress. What matters isn't what happens or when it happens, it's the accumulation of *things* – bits and pieces, states of mind, a fragment of an eyebrow, five minutes in a tram-car, a pair of shoes that don't fit, a slap in the face, a kiss, a diseased kidney, disgust at a spittle, a woman's legs, desire, the smell of onions – all these piled and piled on top of each other and represented in descriptions of odd encounters, conversations, the contents of a room, a recorded memory. What matters isn't what happens or what is said or even felt – it's the sense from the whole, the *smell* of it. That's why I must simply write as it flows – as if I were talking to you.

Very well, then : things – the things that surround me as I write.

My room is large. I keep it dimly lit because of my eyes. To my left, in the corner, is my piano. It is the most beautiful thing I have ever possessed. The firelight gleams on the polish. Open as it is, it is like the Winged Victory. I compare it with the old cottage piano in the school-house – panels of green faded silk and two ornate brass flanges for candles.

On the wall behind the piano, arranged in steps, is my collection of Blake engravings – the Job series, beautifully reproduced. Over the mantelshelf a portrait of Chopin. On the right-hand wall a caricature of me by my friend Peter Ellacott and a photograph of the de Laszlo portrait of Margaret. Beneath these my books and my music cabinet. For the rest, furniture – some beautiful pieces picked up in the sale rooms. On the little Chippendale table by the fireplace is a small old photo-frame containing a portrait of my mother – her people sent it to my father when she died. The print is faded, the yellow glaze cracked diagonally across at one corner. She was a little, sad-faced girl, with her hair piled up on top. Round her neck there is a locket. Whose portrait, I wonder? Her son, John Aubrey? A lock of his hair?

The desk I write at is the only thing that has stayed with me through the years. It was my father's desk – I retained it

when his few effects were sold at Glasgow. The greenish leather with which it is topped is scored and worn and ink-stained. Scratched roughly on the wood of one of the drawers – as if done absently as he brooded in his strange way – is his name : Edward Spenser.

So, then – my room. I have described it – I have mentioned some of the things that are in it. Yet I have not mentioned – I have not dared to mention —

No. Even now I haven't the courage. I am too compelled by that damnable smile . . .

The fog was the first time – the first real time. Then there were other things – small things. Then finally —

Look : I must be detached. I must set it down without opinion or ornamentation. I must report. I am Spenser – very well then : Spenser and his friend Miller are in an Underground Station. People move on all sides – faces held up for a moment, smiling or agonized, then whisked away into limbo. Noise. A distant distorted voice crying 'Stand clear of the gates.' Miller and I arriving breathlessly at the moment a train starts up and moves out. I swear – I am disproportionately irritated by missing the train.

'The next one doesn't touch our station,' I say.

Miller shrugs – damnably imperturbable. He suggests we sit down.

'If we can,' I grumble. 'There's a devilish crowd.'

One of the devilish crowd suddenly heaves into me and I swear irritably again.

Miller: The poor fellow couldn't help banging into you with that enormous case. You ought to do something about those nerves of yours, Spenser.

Spenser: I know – I'm sorry. It's overwork – I've been practising too hard. And this confounded weather – rain, rain – all the time it's rain. There isn't any end to it.

Miller: Never mind. We can have a drink at the other end – one of Jameson's special rye juleps. Think of that and sit down and be patient. There's room here.

Spenser: Thanks. Have you a cigarette?

Miller: I think so . . . There you are – and don't throw half

of it away, the way you usually do these days. These are special.

Spenser (and I gave a nervous laugh here, I remember): All right – I'll try not to. God – this crowd! You'd wonder where they all get to go to.

(A train is heard approaching in the distance.)

Miller: It's the rain – people prefer travelling underground when the weather's bad. One of those things – must be a headache for the Transport Authorities in bad weather.

Spenser: Here's a train. I don't suppose . . . ? – No, ours is the next one.

(The train draws up. People move in and out of it. There is even more noise as background to our conversation.)

Miller: You should take a rest, you know, Spenser – get away for a few days.

Spenser: How can I? You know I have a concert tour coming off. I must practise. It's all right, Miller – I'll be all right once I get the Chopin *Fantasia* into my fingers. And besides – *(I break off and draw quickly at the cigarette.)*

Miller: And besides what?

Spenser: I don't know. One of two things – queer things. You know – like that night you phoned me – that business down at the Six Bells.

Miller: Oh I wouldn't worry about that. It's the sort of thing that might happen to anyone who was a bit over-worked.

Spenser: I suppose so. All the same it – it worries me. Sometimes I think – oh, never mind.

Miller: Think what, old chap?

Spenser: Oh – the blues, the blues. *(I hated Miller's unctuousness – his hearty 'old chap'.)* I find myself thinking sometimes how easy it would be to – well, shove oneself under a train, for instance.

Miller: Don't be a fool, man. Where would that sort of thing get you?

Spenser (sighing): Nowhere, I suppose. Forget it, Miller. I'm only talking for talking's sake. I get these periodic bouts of depression – always have done.

(Shouts: 'Stand clear of the doors,' etc.; and bustle.)

Miller: Besides, what about Margaret? Chaps that are engaged to be married can't go about chucking themselves under trains. There *are* responsibilities, you know.

Spenser: Yes, I know. Forget the whole thing, Miller. The train's going out — we're next.

(The train starts.)

Miller: You're just about the queerest chap —

(It is at this point, if I remember, or in the middle of some such fatuous remark from Miller, that there is a sudden scream from a woman. A pause in the crowd noises, then they start up more busily. The train moves out and away.)
What's that? What's wrong? . . .

Spenser: I don't know — they're all crowding up to the end of the platform. There's been an accident or something.

Miller: I can't see — confound these people! Don't shove damn you! Come on, Spenser — let's go and see . . .

(The crowd noises thicken. We push our way through somehow — led on by Miller's morbid curiosity.)

Spenser: Miller, wait — it's . . . if it's an accident it's hardly —

Miller: Oh, come on — don't be squeamish.

(We reach the end of the platform. A dishevelled and partly hysterical woman is talking to an official.)

The Woman: . . . but he did — I tell you he did jump! He was standing here — right beside me. They're trying to say I'm imagining it all but I know I'm not. He was standing here, just beside me —

The Official: Who was?

The Woman: The man. And when the train started he jumped down — on to the line — just as it was entering the tunnel. Oh, it was horrible!

(Her lip quivers. She begins to weep. She is trembling violently. The official looks puzzled. He appeals to the crowd. No one else has seen anything at all. He looks down at the glistening line. He addresses the woman, he touches her arm and tries to calm her.)

The Woman (wildly): But I tell you he did jump, he did! He was wearing a raincoat and a soft sort of velvety hat, and he —

(She breaks off suddenly.)

The Official: What's wrong, madam? What are you staring at?

The Woman: That's the man – there! – that's him, in the crowd! That's the man I saw throwing himself in front of the train.

(A pause.)

Miller: Spenser – she's pointing at you! This is fantastic, man – she's pointing at you!

... That was four years ago – nine months after my visit to Bristol and the episode in the fog. There had been other things – little things. One of them I have mentioned already, in the conversation between Miller and myself in the previous section :

Miller rang me up one evening. He was jocose – I thought at first he had had too much to drink. I accused him of that and he immediately became ponderously and jovially indignant.

'My dear Spenser,' I heard his reedy voice exclaim, 'there *can't* be any mistake. I'm not the sort of chap to go about imagining things. I asked you if you wanted a drink and you shook your head. You had a whisky and soda in front of you, half finished.'

'What time was it?' I asked, irritated by his persistence.

'Just before closing time – about a quarter to ten. I went in with Jameson. I said to him "There's Spenser" – I remember it distinctly, 'cos he commented that he hadn't seen you since he'd met you and Margaret at Peter Ellacott's party last month.'

I was in no mood to listen to him going on and on. I repeated that I hadn't been at the Six Bells the night before. He laughed.

'Nonsense, my dear Aubrey – I can't be wrong,' he cried. 'You've been overworking, old man. You must have started playing your wretched piano, then got up by sheer force of habit and slipped out to have one before they closed. What is it they call it? – amnesia ...'

I hung up on him finally. And I went thoughtfully over to

my writing desk and took up a letter I had had a few days before – from Helen Bannerman, Margaret's friend. I found the passage I wanted and read it slowly to myself several times.

'... I didn't know you ever came to this part of the country – I mean, you've never ever mentioned that you knew my corner of Wiltshire. But there you were, as large as life, coming out of the Post Office. Of course, I pulled up the car immediately and went back, but you must have slipped round the corner and got off in that little two-seater of yours mighty quick – there simply wasn't a sign of you. I asked the old lass in the shop if a man had been in and she said oh yes, you'd bought some tobacco : and when she said it was an ounce of Honeymead I knew it simply must be you. Besides, you were wearing that ridiculous velvet hat you favour – I couldn't mistake it. I must say it's a bit thick for you not to have called – I expect you were fantastically busy as usual, but all the same there are the fundamental courtesies ...'

I knew in my heart as I stood there that evening that the day before I received this letter I had been thinking I needed a rest. I had thought that if a few days in the country *could* have been possible ... But I knew it was out of the question. I had gone stoically on with my work. As far as I could calculate it, at the time Helen Bannerman must have thought she had seen me, I was in a bus somewhere between Knightsbridge and the Marble Arch. Miller's talk of amnesia came into my mind. I had a wild notion to try to trace the bus and ask the conductor if he remembered me. But it would have been absurd. And there *wasn't* any doubt – I could never have had the time to get down to Wiltshire – I had been at an orchestral rehearsal that very morning of the supposed encounter ...

And then – the scene in the Underground. And Miller's strained, incredulous voice :

'Spenser – she's pointing at you ! This is fantastic, man – she's pointing at you ! ...'

Yes, fantastic. Fantastic 'as I walked home that night through the empty streets. All about me, it seemed, there

were little evil whispering voices. I felt ill – I found myself shivering. Fantastic that I kept glancing over my shoulder, fantastic that I strained my ears to hear other footsteps than my own in the long quiet street. Fantastic, fantastic.

I mounted the stairs to my flat, slowly, with a year between each step. I was monstrously weary. There was no reality in me – it was all fantastic. The thirty-five years were fantastic, the appalling effort to get anywhere, to do anything, to break away. I saw the weeping boy standing out in the cold, the cairngorm on my aunt's black dress. I saw my father's silhouette in the frame of the door, I saw the yellow hair fall over his eyes as we packed his books on that last day. My father and my mother – all over with them now, they were gone. The shadows coming together and drifting apart.

And as I mounted that dark stairway, I remember, in the few moments that it took me, there came back, suddenly and sweetly and with infinite poignancy, my first small love affair. Irrelevant – fantastically irrelevant. Part of my weariness and the weight of the years and all that was in me over which I had no control . . . I was fifteen – it was before I left Scotland, while I was still at school. Her name was Ellen. We walked – endlessly, with long embarrassed gaps in our conversation. Sometimes, as we walked, I put my arm round her waist – timidly, and after much debate with myself. Once, when we were resting on the grass after a long evening walk, I began to caress her and fondle her. She did not resist and I pulled her gently back until we were lying together, very close, with my arm under her neck. We were quite still and my heart was beating, and I saw, as I looked at her in the twilight, that her eyes were wide open and shining and her lips were parted. And I found myself, I remember, wanting to cry – to put my face against hers and cry, very softly and without passion or effort . . .

*'For he is like to something I remember,
A great while since, a long long time ago ...'*

We go. Somehow we go. And with us goes always that other silent Passenger.

I reached the top of the stairs. I felt in my pocket for the latch-key as I went along the corridor. And then I stood still, my hand outstretched to the door.

Softly, from inside my flat, there came to my ears the sound of a piano. Not my piano – the sound of an old piano: but the music was Chopin – the *Fantasia* on which I was, in those days, so seriously working.

I remember I smiled wryly – I was tired, monumentally tired. I opened the door and switched on the light. There was no fear in me – only an infinite resignation. I knew what I would see – I knew, without hatred, that the old enemy was there – that from now on there could be no peace between us.

He was sitting at my piano – for a moment shadowy as he played. But he rose when I entered, and the music stopped. He advanced, smiling a little. He was, unmistakably, as I had supposed him to be. Dark, thin, and with narrow temples – it was what they call ‘a sensitive face . . .’

Nowadays I have none of that bland, elated remoteness. Not any more. There’s only a quiet rage nowadays – I know what has to be done. Too much has happened, you see – there’s been too much to fight against. Too monstrous an accumulation of sheer things. At every turn I’ve been defeated – defeated over my music, my friends, defeated over Margaret. And defeated hopelessly as I stood in the November frost sniffing the air, with the shrill screams of the children in my ears and the sagging, hideous effigy aflame before me.

I realize suddenly, as I write, that I am speaking as if it were all over and a hundred years gone by. And it was only a few days ago. And it is not all over – not yet – not quite . . .

I look over at my piano – the Winged Victory. I look up at the portrait of Chopin and think of him, haunted too, in his cell at Valdemosa. I look at the Blake engravings – the book of Job. ‘Man is born unto trouble, as the sparks fly upward,’ I remember.

It had been too much of an effort, too great a struggle. I

wonder – has my disease been that I have had too deep a grudge? – that I haven't fitted in? – have been, in secret, a chronic enemy of society? But what the hell! It's been a matter of keeping going – of being out of things and fighting to get in them again and keep in them. The only thing you have is yourself, and there you are, just you yourself, and not one other thing caring a damn. It hasn't been circumstances – one rises above circumstances. You just stand there – it's like being God. And suddenly you have a sort of terror, because there isn't anything to show. In the old days, when I was beginning, I used to walk along the Strand or Oxford Street and look at the people and think: Not one of you knows about me – not one of you knows what it was like emptying out that closet-bucket or standing with my fingers frozen in the darkness outside the house. But that was *me* – and this is *me* . . . And I could have gone and smashed their heads in with an axe, because I wanted them to know about me . . .

It all ties up. I stretch out my hand – to find a match-box, to grope in a fog, to open a door. It all ties up.

And you, I suppose, would put me in a text-book. You would have a label on my forehead. You would have me on a statistic sheet, with the size of my collar, the shape of my brow, the state of my digestion. You would want a cause. You always want a cause – you want a cause for war, a cause for peace, a cause for unemployment, a cause for juvenile delinquency and the spread of venereal disease. But what's a cause? – and where does it begin or end? . . .

All I know is that there are people and things and there's movement. I don't believe there's direction – there's only movement. And I'm a person and I've had to go on being a person.

'The sparks fly upwards . . .' I think of that sagging figure nailed to the crosspiece – and only I with any notion of what was behind the leering mask.

I heard of him again – I saw him again. For these four years I have seen him and heard him. He has walked beside me quietly in the darkness. He has sat with me here in

my room, he has silently pulled at my sleeve at significant moments. I have been aware of him with me at the piano on concert platforms. As I fluffed my music, half-weeping, I have heard his voice whisper in my ear : 'John Spenser – pianist . . .' I have, on the point of saying something, looked up – to find him silently regarding me, the quiet and damnable smile on his lips : and my words have remained unsaid. He has gone in my place – he has done, in a hellishly logical way, the things I have secretly wanted to do : and, having done them, has destroyed them utterly for me for ever.

I have hated him till I have sobbed my hatred out loud – yet I have, at the height of the agony, looked up for him, expected him : and have secretly rejoiced at finding him.

For me, now, there is nothing left in the wake of his destruction. Peer goes home from his adventures. The sun shines on an empty house.

I know what has to be done. An evening's writing, for the sake of getting it all down somehow, and then – I know what has to be done. On the desk before me – my father's desk – the razor is ready. It too, when it is open, is a small Winged Victory . . .

THE GREAT GROMBOOLIAN PLAIN

How long ago since I met Margaret? A month? – ten years? – yesterday?

In actual fact, I find, looking at my diary, it was on the 15th of May, 19—, six years ago. It was at Mrs Wheeler's house – Rosalind Wheeler, the first friend I had when I came to London. I had met Margaret's father before, of course – we had done some concerts together, and a half a dozen broadcasts. A taciturn, elegant man, I found him, but a fine artist.

Mrs Wheeler was giving us tea in her house at Notting Hill. She was, in a mild and harmless way, something of a lion hunter. She introduced people by telling you immediately what they did. 'This is Mr So-and-So, Aubrey. He writes, you know. Aubrey is Aubrey Spenser, the pianist, Mr So-and-So – I am sure you two will have a lot to talk to each other about . . .'

Introduced like that, there never was anything to talk about. Conversation at Rosalind's tea-parties was as dull as anything Letchworth or Welwyn ever produced. But that never mattered – Rosalind had more than enough to say for all her guests.

'This is Margaret du Parc, Aubrey,' said Rosalind. 'She plays the violin – like her father. Or do you professional musicians prefer to say fiddle? I never know. Anyway, dears, you two are bound to have lots to say to each other, so I'll leave you to it. I see that dear Sylvia Ellacott has arrived – Peter's sister. She sculpts, you know . . .'

Margaret and I smiled wanly at each other. We went out into the garden and sat down in a couple of deckchairs. Behind her, I remember, was a fuchsia bush, the little artificial-looking flowers bobbing up and down in the slight breeze.

Within six months we were engaged to be married. Rosalind was delighted – to think that it was she who had brought us together! It was at her house we had met! At one of her parties!

'I knew you had lots to say to each other,' she cried. 'I remember distinctly saying so when I first introduced you . . .'

Now Margaret is no more than a photograph of the de Laszlo painting of her on the wall of my room. There is no bitterness about it – as I said, when I started writing, I can hardly remember. Only the facts. Perhaps (and in admitting this to myself I may, subtly, be touching the very keynote of this whole fantastic thing) – perhaps there was, secretly, from the beginning, a reluctance – a knowledge that between us there never could be anything satisfactory and permanent. It was an elaborate and lovely pretence – a conceit, in the old Elizabethan sense. It was another way of being successful: Spenser, the shivering boy in the cold, the illegitimate son of a drunken Scottish dominie and a servant girl – and the fiancé of the daughter of Georges du Parc, the violinist.

Yes, I knew that all the time, I suppose – or I tell myself I did. I don't know – I don't know anything at all any more.

Like the expanding bookcases in the advertisements – it's all always complete but never completed . . .

We went one summer to St Ives for a month – Georges, Margaret, myself and Helen Bannerman. We had a house just outside the town, overlooking the smaller of the two bays. To reach the shops you had to go through a labyrinth of small cobbled streets with crooked houses, some with nets hung out to dry on the sills. The weather was windy and beautiful most of the time, with enormous clouds lolloping over the sky like huge Dr Johnson wigs and a pale green sea (to quote Helen) like a slightly naughty lady coquettishly pulling back the white frills of her petticoats from shining tawny legs. It was like holidaying in a water-colour exhibition, again as Helen said.

'Where is Zennor?' I remember Margaret asking, about a week after our arrival. 'Is it far away?'

'Not very,' said Helen. '"A limb of a walk," according to Mrs Tregarthen – but she has very short limbs. Three or four miles I should say.'

'I'd like to go there. That's where D. H. Lawrence had his cottage, you know. People are very unexpected, aren't they,' she added. 'One would have thought of something more luscious than Cornwall for Lawrence. I wonder if anyone reads him nowadays? – all that talk about Dark Gods of the Loins . . .'

'I think he was really rather a dreadful man,' said Helen with a mock shudder.

'I'm not so sure about Cornwall,' I remember I said slowly at this point. 'I think it *was* Lawrence's country – the country of his whole generation and attitude. You can see it in his face. Any picture of Lawrence is just like a map of Cornwall. That was his spirit too – rather arid.'

'Arid?' smiled Margaret. 'Well, that's a new one at least. I should have thought arid was the last epithet one could apply to Lawrence.'

'Yes, the last,' I said. 'After all the rest, the last. Arid.'

Margaret looked at me curiously.

'Anyway,' she said with a little laugh, 'we can walk over

to Zennor someday and have a look at it. Apparently there's an inn called The Tinner's Arms where he lived for a bit. Think of it – The Tinner's Arms! It takes all the romance away.'

'Lawrence would soon have put it back,' I said drily. 'He spent his life putting the romance back over things like The Tinner's Arms . . .'

No, the holiday was not a success. I was depressed by the Cornish landscape – the low dry fields with their stone dykes, the bare hills, the derelict towers of the old tin mines. Only the sea I loved – I would sit for hours simply staring at the vast bulk of the water, its magnificent blue, the pure white of the fretting foam. I used to long for a storm – an immense, violent storm, so that I could run out on the rocks and be buffeted by the wind and bathed by the lashing spray. Sometimes, in the evenings, I stood in the garden of our house with Margaret, watching the slow sunsets – the dead, smoky disc sinking behind the horizon and then the changing and fading pastels, mauve and pale green merging to purple . . . and I would debate whether I should tell her, in those uncomfortable silences that fell between us, about the figure I was aware of all the time at my elbow.

I knew what he wanted : I knew, as a small hard fact, what he would make me do. But it was always a matter of putting things off. Impossible not to linger. Because, after all —

No, never mind. It all ties up. One stretches out a hand . . .

*'She has gone to the great Gromboolian Plain,
And we probably never shall meet again . . .'*

Strange. I feel a little light-headed. Beyond it all. Facts – it reduces itself to facts. I could make, almost, a catalogue of facts. Speculation is no longer possible. I no longer think in terms of things like amnesia. How should I explain it? How should I care if he is subjective or objective? You who classify, who label – that must be your task.

It is your task to say :

(1) A woman on an Underground platform has an hallu-

cination that she sees a man throwing himself under a train. It is possible that she was in some sort of telepathic sympathy with the mind of the subject, John Aubrey Spenser.

(2) A man Miller imagines that he sees the subject (John Aubrey Spenser, aforementioned) in a public house, whereas the subject was, to his own certain knowledge, somewhere else altogether at that established time.

(3) A woman Bannerman supposes that she sees the subject one hundred and fifty miles from where, at that alleged moment, he is. The possibility again of some sort of telepathic sympathy between Bannerman and the panel, causing the former – an otherwise healthy and balanced woman – to experience a subjective hallucination (see Dunkelhaus on *Hallucinations*, Appendix II, p. 649) . . .

(4) The panel Spenser – a neurotic type – has the constant sense of another self controlling him and motivating him. The hallucination is so powerful that he contends that this other self has a *fleshy and objective existence*. He even contends that he has touched this Other Self – he has, he says, had his hands (his strong-fingered pianist's hands) round the throat of this Other Self : he has, while the Other Self smiled most damnably, *strangled him in this way to death, thereafter causing the body to be burned . . .*

(5) The panel, Spenser, erstwhile pianist, is therefore mad . . .

No. Facts. A catalogue of facts.

Fact 1: A cairngorm brooch.

Fact 2: A picture of a woman with hair piled up on top and a locket round her throat.

Fact 3: A photograph of a de Laszlo portrait.

Fact 4: A letter, in the possession of Margaret du Parc, violinist, from John Aubrey Spenser, late pianist, breaking off his engagement to her.

Fact 5: A footstep in a yellow fog.

Fact 6: A heap of charred straw and old clothes, the remains of a Guy Fawkes bonfire organized by Eric Jameson, a friend of John Aubrey Spenser, as an entertainment for the children of the district in which he lived . . .

Fact 7: A small razor.

. . . I can picture my friends rallying round. I can picture Jameson and Miller meeting in the Six Bells and in a welter of 'old chaps' and bovine kind-heartedness saying :

'Poor old Spenser ! Gone to bits ! What's happened to his playing ? Never gives a concert now, does he . . . Queer how chaps disintegrate. Probably needed a woman, poor fellow. I suppose we must do something about him – do something to shake him out of it.'

'I'm having a sort of party next weekend at my place at Wraysbury,' says Jameson. 'Fifth of November and all that. Got to do something. I'm having a Guy and fireworks – for my kids and their friends, you know. Could always invite him down to that. I don't suppose he'll come, but he might, you know. It'd do him good . . .'

I did go down to Wraysbury. Since it is facts we are on now, let me say that I went because I had no heart to refuse. I was indifferent. What did it matter if I went or stayed ? So it was easier to go – and I went.

That was a week ago. Since my return on Tuesday I have not once moved out of my flat here. I have – knowing what had to be done – compiled this manuscript. It covers my desk in thirty closely-written sheets. Disconnected, pointless, an amorphous scribbled mass. It was to have been immense – I began, you remember, vastly. The antecedents of the author – the farmer, my grandfather, with his epigrammatic exit line : 'Aye, Barnha' will need a new maister in the morning.' Then my father and my aunt – a portrait of the author as a child. All in order and as it should be. But somehow in this – as in everything – something has gone wrong. I haven't the heart. All that I had wanted to say (more about Ellen, for example, and more about Margaret) – all these things have gone by the board. I emerge as a sort of inverted Proust : *A la Recherche du Temps Trouvé*.

A paragraph – a rest – perhaps a few moments' dozing – an interlude on the piano – a scratch meal – another paragraph. So it has gone. Not what I meant – not it at all.

And now there is only a little more to be said. It is late, and I cannot – I haven't the heart to spin it through another night.

In the street it is quiet. On the mantelshelf the clock ticks slowly. On the wall, in steps, the Blake engravings. 'The sparks fly upward.'

I went to Wraybury. And He – inevitably – went with me.

Facts detached. The story of my life in simple facts.

Jameson's house. Large, modern. It must have cost him a fortune. Furnished expensively in appalling taste. A beautiful piano in the lounge on which they urged me (as a sop) to play. 'Won't you give us a piece on the piano, Mr Spenser?' A blue China carpet on the floor, a ceiling tinted in pale green. A Chinese lacquer motif in the dining-room – too much chinoiserie altogether.

The Jameson children filled the house with an air of excited expectancy. They showed us the boxes of fireworks, they took us out to the yard to see the Guy, all ready propped on a heap of branches for his next day's martyrdom. He sagged from a crosspiece of old creosoted wood, wretched, limp, with a grinning Scaramouche-like face. I shuddered a little as I looked at him with the yellow straw packed round his feet – to keep him from the cold through the long night vigil before him. In the twilight he was tragic.

We went indoors and the children were sent to bed. We adults played cards for a time, and drank Jameson's special rye juleps. Then, yawning, one by one we went upstairs.

Facts, eh? I can give you the facts. It's all I can give you now, as I sit here writing, so near the end. As in a curious far-off dream I see the facts – unreal – the unrealist things there are.

Opposite the door in the little room that Jameson had given me there was a long wall mirror. I stood on the threshold for a long time regarding myself solemnly. Then I closed the door behind me. I turned to the right and the reflection turned in sympathy to his left. I walked over towards the bed, beyond the range of the mirror-frame. And, smiling, the other figure walked with me.

I sat down on the edge of the bed, infinitely weary. He,

still smiling, sat opposite me in a little low armchair of brown uncut moquette.

Indictment 5 above : – The panel, Spenser, is mad . . .

Am I mad? *Was* I mad in that moment in my room at Jameson's house when all the accumulated rage of the thirty-five years mounted up to a pitch of fury? How should I care any more whether it was hallucination or not? All I know is that he *was* flesh and blood. There was no mistaking that he was flesh and blood when I put my fingers round his throat. There was no mistaking that he was flesh and blood when he sagged limply in my arms and I lowered him gently to the floor.

A thousand things were in my mind – a thousand small humiliations. How should I, among all things listed, list those? Can you understand humiliation? Can you understand the humiliation of simply being the shape you are? – of having the colour of hair that you have? . . .

And, as always, coming into my mind irrelevantly, even at that high moment, there was one disconnected incident. It was before I left school – during my last term, when I was fifteen. In my form there was a boy named Gallacher, a barren, vindictive, twisted creature with a permanent grudge against one of the masters, Rivers, who taught Mathematics. One part of our school was in a very old house and the rooms were heated by huge coal fires in the winter time. It was typical of Gallacher that he should go to grotesque lengths and use this fact to gratify his revenge. He began in the school workshop and in the laboratories, heating pieces of metal and holding them in his bare hands until he could touch iron that was not positively red hot. Then, when he considered himself ready, he chose a day when the Algebra lesson was due to follow the mid-morning interval and put the poker in the schoolroom fire for the duration of the break. When the bell rang for class he lifted the poker out, carried it across the room and set it down on Rivers's desk. Then he went to his seat and sat caressing his cheek with his palm to experience the heat that was in it from carrying the poker.

When Rivers came in he saw the poker lying on his desk

and, all unsuspecting, picked it up without hesitation. The pain must have been excruciating, but he gave no sign of feeling anything. Instead he carried the poker back to the fireplace and laid it in the fender. Then he turned and faced us. He was desperately white, and suddenly he threw out his hand towards us so that we could see the great red weal across it.

'You've burned my hand !' he cried. 'Look – you've burned my hand !'

And he stamped out of the room. A few moments later he came back, with the Rector and Iles, the Janitor. Iles stationed himself at the door and spectacularly turned the key in the lock. Meantime the Rector had mounted the master's dais and was surveying the class, while Rivers stood by with his hand wrapped in a duster.

'No one will leave this room,' said the Rector impressively, 'until I have found out who did this abominable thing to Mr Rivers.'

There was silence. One or two of the boys glanced toward Gallacher. He sat with a vacant, stupid smile on his face, rubbing his hand against the edge of his desk. The Rector sat down.'

'I'm quite prepared to wait,' he announced drily. 'I can always get Iles to fetch me in something to eat. You'll have the pleasure of watching me.'

Up to this moment I had taken no great interest in what had been going on. But suddenly, I remember, a peculiar and intangible sensation began to grow inside me. I watched the Rector, fascinated, studying his fresh healthy features and following his eyes as they roved slowly round the room. Then suddenly, without my own consent, as it were, I rose to my feet. The Rector's brows went up.

'You, Spenser? Well, well !'

I was aware that the class was staring at me amazedly. I could see Gallacher, still with the fatuous smile on his face. I knew they all thought I was being quixotic, getting them out of a scrape, and that knowledge suddenly began to annoy me. It was not that that was in my mind at all. I did not know what it was, but it was not that.

I was escorted by Iles to the Rector's room. The old man opened a drawer and took out a short, two-thonged strap of tough leather. He passed it through his fingers and looked at me quizzically.

'Was it you, Spenser?' he asked.

I nodded.

'Why did you do it?'

I made no reply. My heart was pounding, I remember, and I could feel my knees trembling slightly. The Rector went on:

'It isn't usual to punish in the fifth,' he said slowly. 'When it is necessary it means that the punishment must be a heavy one.'

He was looking out of the study window, and now suddenly he turned and said quickly:

'Why did you say you did it, Spenser? You know you didn't.'

I still made no reply. I stared at him foolishly. And suddenly he made a gesture of annoyance and strode to the desk to pick up the strap.

'Ach!' he cried. 'Hold out your hand . . .'

I stepped to the door and put out the light. Then I drew back the window curtains and stared out over the fields. The moon was full. The outbuildings cast long silent shadows on the silvered ground. I shuddered. The frost glistened and sparkled. I thought – I remembered . . .

I lowered my eyes. In the yard below me, huddled and grotesque in the clear blue light, was that stuffed and tragic figure.

For a moment I stopped breathing. Then, quickly, with sly and quiet movements, I went over to the door, opened it, and listened in the corridor. The house was dead. Leaving the door open I tiptoed back into my room and put my hands under the oxters of the thing on the floor . . .

It is late – too late. I fill my pen with ink for the last few pages. I light a cigarette – my last cigarette.

It all ties up. I stretch out my hand for a last cigarette: I stretch out my hand to open a door: I stretch out my hand

sadly, as a last sentimental gesture, to Margaret. I was a man who lived in the dark. I stretched out my hand for a light to see by – and a light was quietly and simply given me.

Why should I waste time now by building up the dramatic climax? I should describe, in detail, with a cumulative atmosphere, the nailing of that terrible thing to the crosspiece, the weeping struggle I had to drape the sagging ancient clothes round its limbs, the ecstasy that was inside me as I packed the yellow straw tightly, tightly round the foot of it . . . But there is no dramatic climax. There is only, all about me, a flow of images.

The piano, open, a Winged Victory. That other small Winged Victory on the desk beside me, half-covered with the pages as I write. A little heap, too, of my father's books on the desk: Jevons on *Logic*, two volumes of Carlyle, Renan's *Life of Jesus* . . . the books I helped him to pack on that last day at the school-house when he stood, remote and statuesque, with the yellow hair before his eyes.

No. There is no climax. If there had been – if it might have been over as I stood there with the children's laughter in my ears, looking desperately for some sign, some diminutive sign – looking till the last smouldering fragment of cloth stopped glowing on the heap of charred and blowing ashes . . . if a climax *might* have been possible . . .

Jevons on Logic. What else but devilish logic is there in it? What else but hell's own logic explains and justifies me as I sit here writing in my room? Would this have been written at all if it hadn't been for logic?

I shiver. The fire has burnt out – there is no glow on the polish of the piano. I stretch my cramped limbs. I stare straight ahead. I know what has to be done. I stretch out my hand to clear the papers from the razor. I open it. The delicate blade shines in the dim light from my standard lamp.

I test the edge on the little hairs on the back of my hand. I must remember what I once read in a book – to hold the head forward, not backwards, as would seem natural. Otherwise the jugular is not severed, and that would be fatal – for both of us . . .

I permit myself a final jest.

'We, the undersigned, do hereby swear that all contained in this document is true. We affirm that we were born, thirty-five years ago, the illegitimate son of a Scottish schoolmaster and a servant girl. We affirm that we are a thin young man with narrow temples – what is popularly called "a sensitive face". We affirm that we are no longer engaged to Margaret du Parc, violinist. We state that we were seen throwing ourself under an electric train, we state that on Monday of this week we underwent ordeal by fire and are, in consequence, purged and purified. We state and confirm these things and sign this document under our hand and red seal this 9th day of November at five minutes to twelve o'clock.

John Aubrey Spenser, *Pianist*,
John Aubrey Spenser, *Pianist*.'

For the last time I pause. I stare straight ahead. I stare to my left. But not to my right. Never, never, never to my right.

Because he is there! He is there – to my right. There was no escaping him – no release in the ordeal by fire. He is there, smiling his damnable, everlasting smile. It is he who has written this story! . . .

I knew he would be there. I knew it when, on Tuesday, I returned from Wraysbury. I knew it as I stood with my hand stretched out to open the door of my flat. Faintly, from inside, I heard the sound of a piano. I could have wept. It was the music that Margaret and I, sentimentally, as one does, had associated always with ourselves – because, as I put it, it was such a perfect description of her.

Debussy – *The Girl with the Flaxen Hair* . . .

THE SPIDER

by Basil Copper

MONSIEUR PINET arrived at the small country hotel just as dusk was falling on a wet October day. All about him was the melancholy of autumn and the headlights of his car stencilled a pallid path across the glaucous surface of the soaking, leaf-scattered road.

M. Pinet was feeling pleased with himself. A representative of a large firm of Paris textile manufacturers, he had previously travelled the flat, monotonous areas of Northern France and had felt his mind becoming as rigid and unyielding as the poplar-lined roads he had daily traversed.

But now he had been given another district; from Lyons in the south to the Ile de France, with an increase in salary as well, and he greatly appreciated the change. The beauty of his new surroundings, moreover the different atmosphere of a novel routine, had released all his pent-up drive; his latest had been a very successful tour indeed and his wallet bulged with the notes and banker's orders of clients.

At present he was about fifty miles south of Paris and had decided that he was too tired to push on to his home in the suburb of Courbevoie. He had already driven all the way from Auxerre and hadn't started until the afternoon, but he had made good time nevertheless. His bags of samples and the long bolts of cloth in the back of his small shooting brake shifted from side to side as he turned on the bad surface of the second class road through the forest.

He was feeling more than usually tired and the traffic in the Paris direction had been even heavier than normal for the time of year. He had reached the outskirts of a small village that was unfamiliar to him and had then spotted the lights of a fair-sized auberge set back from the road, amid clean-smelling pine trees. The chairs and tables of summer were now stacked under canvas between the box hedges, but

there came a welcome glow of light from the hallway and as he ran his car in under the heavy shadow of the trees he could see a zinc-covered bar and a thousand reflections from bottles that looked as though they contained most warming liquids.

There were no other vehicles parked in front of the inn, but that did not worry M. Pinet. He had no particular desire for company; uppermost in his mind was the thought of a half bottle of wine to chase away the dank chill of autumn, a good dinner and eight hours refreshing sleep before pushing on to Paris in the morning.

He parked his car, securely locked it and a few moments later found himself in a delightful-looking hall, containing a bar, some leather stools and a profusion of late summer flowers. A cat lay stretched on the polished tile floor. There was no other sign of life, apart from a man dressed in city clothes who was drinking cognac. He went out a moment after M. Pinet came in, muttering a sotto voce good evening and a short time later M. Pinet saw a big blue Mercedes go by the window, which had evidently been parked lower down the road.

In response to the sharp, insistent bell on the zinc counter, there presently came the shuffling of slippers and the patron appeared. He was all bonhomie and effusive welcome; yes, of course, monsieur could have a room and dinner if he desired. It was the end of the season and he would not find it very gay – there was no one else dining in – but the chef could make him anything within reason. He would have his baggage fetched, if he wished.

All this was very gratifying and as M. Pinet signed the register he should have been pleased. He had brought his solitary valise in with him and after an aperitif he began to forget the dreariness of the autumn evening and the mile after mile of sodden woods outside. He was agreeably surprised, too, at the sumptuous furnishings of the dining-room, which could easily have seated over two hundred people; the patron explained that many visitors came out from Paris to dine during the season. M. Pinet felt he was being unfair, but it was the character of the landlord which spoiled what otherwise would have been a delightful sojourn. He hadn't

caught the man's name, but there was something about him which put M. Pinet off. He was an average-sized man with a triangular yellow face, a bald head and unnaturally large ears. His little eyes sparkled meanly, redolent of greed and insincerity, and his wide slit mouth, which often parted to reveal gold teeth, was the crowning glory of an exceedingly ugly visage.

To M. Pinet's discomfort this individual set out to make himself ingratiatingly helpful and personally waited on him at dinner. Of other staff M. Pinet saw none, though there must have been people in the kitchen beyond, as he frequently heard the low murmur of voices and once a plump woman in a low-cut black frock, possibly the patron's wife, walked by in the distance, giving him a stiff nod.

But first M. Pinet wanted a wash and the landlord indicated the door of the toilet. It was down a short corridor off the dining room; he had to fumble for the light switch and he then saw to his disgust that there was a large brown spider on the floor of the cracked stone corridor.

It seemed to watch him with little metallic eyes and with a sense of bubbling horror M. Pinet felt it crack beneath his foot as he ground it with his heel. He had an innate fear of spiders, almost pathological in its intensity, and the violent physical nausea stayed with him until dinner.

As he opened the door of the toilet and switched on the light there, M. Pinet could not repress a cry of panic. Faugh! There were two more of the monsters here, one on the wall near his head and the other on the floor near the toilet seat. M. Pinet fancied he could almost hear the low scratch of its legs, as it moved experimentally, its strange, blue metallic eyes – the most curious he had ever seen in an insect – seeming to gaze at him with reproach. As it crunched beneath his almost hysterically wielded shoe, the eyes faded as the creature died.

The other fled like lightning to a spot behind the lavatory cistern, wrenching another involuntary cry from M. Pinet's lips.

A moment later the landlord was at his side. He seemed amused and his small eyes were dancing.

'No, monsieur,' he said. 'Nothing to be alarmed about. The damp weather always brings them in from the woods at this time of year. They will not harm you. They are my pets.'

He made a sort of clucking noise with his mouth, which M. Pinet found hideously revolting, and the great brown horror behind the cistern stirred. Before M. Pinet's disbelieving eyes it scuttled on to the landlord's open palm, where he stroked it and crooned to it in a thoroughly disgusting manner.

M. Pinet, pale and disconcerted, excused himself and made shift by washing his hands and face at the washbasin in the corridor. Back in the dining-room he felt better and was relieved to see the patron first put the spider somewhere outside the back door. He was pleased, too, to see this strange character wash his own hands before disappearing into the kitchen.

The dinner was an excellent one and as M. Pinet tipped his croutons into the soup, he felt his spirits revive; the landlord was undoubtedly a somewhat peculiar man but he certainly knew how to produce a fine meal. M. Pinet was by this time so far soothed by his surroundings that he invited the landlord to join him at the table for a drink after his dinner was over.

Contrary to his expectations the landlord seemed to draw more out of him than the information he gained in return. In answer to M. Pinet's point-blank question as to whether he had been at the inn long, the patron replied, 'No, not long. We move around quite a bit, my wife and I.'

M. Pinet did not pursue the subject. He had decided to pay for his meal before going to bed and settle for his accommodation in the morning. He was a methodically-minded man and though it all came to the same thing in the end, he preferred to pay as he went. He had stepped up to the desk in a corner of the dining-room and the landlord's eyes glistened and narrowed in an unpleasant manner as he spotted the huge bundle of notes in M. Pinet's wallet. The latter realized this was a mistake and somewhat awkwardly tried to cover them over with a batch of letters he carried, but this only served to draw more attention by its obvious clumsiness.

The landlord stared at him unblinkingly, as he said, quite without emphasis, 'You have had a successful season, monsieur.' It was a statement, not a question and M. Pinet managed to turn the conversation quickly to the subject of his room. A few moments later he said good night and carried his own bag up to the chamber indicated on the first floor.

The well-carpeted corridor had bowls of flowers on tables at intervals and bright lights were burning; there was an uneasy moment, however, as M. Pinet put his key in the lock of room number 12. All the lights in the corridor suddenly went out, evidently controlled from downstairs, and for a long minute M. Pinet was in total darkness. A faint scratching noise away to his left brought sweat to his forehead but a moment later he was inside his room and light flooded from the ceiling fixture. He locked the door and stood against it for a few seconds, taking in the contents of the room.

It was a prettily conceived chamber and any other time M. Pinet would have been taken with its heavily contrived charm; but tonight, with his nerves curiously shaken, he was in no mood for atmosphere. He merely undressed as quickly as he could, turned up his bed, got out a novel from his valise and noisily cleaned his teeth in the basin in the corner. The mirror reflected back an image that was noticeably pale.

Before getting into bed he heard the faint noise of footsteps outside and looking through the window was disconcerted to see the figure of the landlord, silhouetted against the light from an open door, furtively studying his car. A moment later he moved off and M. Pinet heard a door slam somewhere below him. He got into bed.

The novel was a bad one and M. Pinet was greatly tired but somehow he did not want to sleep. He kept his bedside table lamp burning but despite this eventually drifted off into a doze. Some time later he was awakened by the noise of a car driving away from the inn. Even as he became fully conscious he heard the faint sound of its engine die with a hum in the distance as the trees enveloped it.

For some reason M. Pinet's mind became agitated at this and he felt a great desire to look out of the window to see if his car was still in front of the hotel. Before he could move,

however, he heard a faint scratching noise; his nerves strained as they were, he turned his head with infinite slowness in an effort to locate the sound. Eventually – a quick glance at his watch showed him that it was after two am – he narrowed down the source of the sound as coming from the triangular area formed by the corner of the ceiling farthest from him.

It was in the gloomiest part of the chamber, for the light from the reading lamp extended only a yard or two; to switch on the main light M. Pinet would have to cross over to the door and he was loath to do this, particularly in his bare feet. He compromised by turning up the bedside lamp so that the light shone towards the far corner of the room. There was something there, but it was still so wrapped in shadow that he could not make out what it was.

He groped for his glasses on the table by the bed; to do this he had to lower the lamp to its usual position, and while he was fumbling with this he heard his spectacle case fall with a soft thump on to the carpet at his bedside. He looked down; the spectacles were only about two feet from him but again he had great reserve about stretching out his hand to the carpet.

Dry-mouthed, he turned as the scratching noise came again and a cry was strangled in his throat as he saw the shadowy thing scuttle a little closer towards him across the ceiling; even without his glasses he did not need to be told what it was, but his senses still refused to believe.

Something furry, like a tarantula; bigger than a soup-plate round and with legs as thick as telephone cables. Its legs rustled together as it came across the ceiling with old-maidish deliberation and a thin purring noise came from it. As it edged forward into the brightness of the lamp, M. Pinet saw with sick fear that it was covered with brown fur and had an obscene parody of a mouth. He looked round desperately for a stick or any other weapon; his tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth, denying him the shriek which would have saved him; his pyjamas streamed with perspiration and moisture dabbled his forehead. He closed his eyes once and opened them with an effort, hoping against hope that he was

in the grip of nightmare.

But the obscene, sliding thing was nearer still and M. Pinet gave up hope. He saw now that the creature had metallic blue eyes, like the eyes of the insects he had crushed in the washroom and as they glared into his own with implacable hatred he noticed with a last shock of surprise that they were very like the landlord's.

The insect paused and then launched itself on a thick silken thread; a nauseous stench was in his nostrils, the great spider gave a sibilant rattle and then it was on his mouth, covering his face and eyes with its bloated, sticky carcass. M. Pinet gave shriek after shriek as consciousness mercifully died.

'A most curious case,' said the doctor, washing his hands in the basin of M. Pinet's room. 'Heart sound as a bell, yet he must have died instantaneously from some great shock. Never come across anything like it. There'll have to be an inquiry, of course.'

And the doctor, who was a matter-of-fact human being, gave a heavy sigh. The landlord's wife, who stood just inside the door of the death chamber, timidly assented.

Down below in the bar, the landlord, who lived by the secret fears of his customers, smiled a curious smile. He fondled a thick bundle of notes under the counter.

In the room above, a tiny brown spider, not more than an eighth of an inch across, scuttled nervously across the dead man's forehead. The doctor brushed it impatiently away and it fell out of sight by the side of the bed.

October, 1963.
Rouvray, Cote d'Or.

LUKUNDOO

by Edward Lucas White

‘IT STANDS to reason,’ said Twombly, ‘that a man must accept the evidence of his own eyes, and when his eyes and ears agree, there can be no doubt. He has to believe what he has both seen and heard.’

‘Not always,’ put in Singleton, softly.

Every man turned towards Singleton. Twombly was standing on the hearth-rug, his back to the grate, his legs spread out, with his habitual air of dominating the room. Singleton, as usual, was as much as possible effaced in a corner. But when Singleton spoke he said something. We faced him in that flatteringly spontaneity of expectant silence which invites utterance.

‘I was thinking,’ he said, after an interval, ‘of something I both saw and heard in Africa.’

Now, if there was one thing we had found impossible it had been to elicit from Singleton anything definite about his African experiences. As with the Alpinist in the story, who could only tell that he went up and came down, the sum of Singleton’s revelations had been that he went there and came away. His words now riveted our attention at once. Twombly faded from the hearth-rug, but not one of us could ever recall having seen him go. The room readjusted itself, focused on Singleton, and there was some hasty and furtive lighting of fresh cigars. Singleton lit one also, but it went out immediately, and he never relit it.

I

We were in the Great Forest, exploring for pigmies. Van Rieten had a theory that the dwarfs found by Stanley and others were a mere cross-breed between ordinary Negroes and the real pigmies. He hoped to discover a race of men three feet tall at most, or shorter. We found no traces of any such

beings.

Natives were few, game scarce; food, except game, there was none; and the deepest, dankest, drippingest forest all about. We were the only novelty in the country, no native we met had even seen a white man before, most had never heard of white men. All of a sudden, late one afternoon, there came into our camp an Englishman, and pretty well used up he was, too. We had heard no rumour of him; he had not only heard of us but had made an amazing five-day march to reach us. His guide and two bearers were nearly as done up as he. Even though he was in tatters and had five days' beard on, you could see he was naturally dapper and neat and the sort of man to shave daily. He was small, but wiry. His face was the sort of British face from which emotion has been so carefully banished that a foreigner is apt to think the wearer of the face incapable of any sort of feeling; the kind of face which, if it has any expression at all, expresses principally the resolution to go through the world decorously, without intruding upon or annoying anyone.

His name was Etcham. He introduced himself modestly, and ate with us so deliberately that we should never have suspected if our bearers had not had it from his bearers that he had had but three meals in the five days, and those small. After we had lit up he told us why he had come.

'My chief is ve'y seedy,' he said between puffs. 'He is bound to go out if he keeps this way. I thought perhaps . . .'

He spoke quietly in a soft, even tone, but I could see little beads of sweat oozing out on his upper lip under his stubby moustache, and there was a tingle of repressed emotion in his tone, a veiled eagerness in his eye, a palpitating inward solicitude in his demeanour that moved me at once. Van Rieten had no sentiment in him; if he was moved he did not show it. But he listened. I was surprised at that. He was just the man to refuse at once. But he listened to Etcham's halting, diffident hints. He even asked questions.

'Who is your chief?'

'Stone,' Etcham lisped.

That electrified both of us.

'Ralph Stone?' we ejaculated together.

Etcham nodded.

For some minutes Van Rieten and I were silent. Van Rieten had never seen him, but I had been a classmate of Stone's, and Van Rieten and I had discussed him over many a camp-fire. We had heard of him two years before, south of Luebo in the Balunda country, which had been ringing with his theatrical strife against a Balunda witch-doctor, ending in the sorcerer's complete discomfiture and the abasement of his tribe before Stone. They had even broken the fetish-man's whistle and given Stone the pieces. It had been like the triumph of Elijah over the prophets of Baal, only more real to the Balunda.

We had thought of Stone as far off, if still in Africa at all, and here he turned up ahead of us and probably forestalling our quest.

II

Etcham's naming of Stone brought back to us all his tantalizing story, his fascinating parents, their tragic death; the brilliance of his college days; the dazzle of his millions; the promise of his young manhood; his wide notoriety, so nearly real fame; his romantic elopement with the meteoric authoress whose sudden cascade of fiction had made her so great a name so young, whose beauty and charm were so much heralded: the frightful scandal of the breach-of-promise suit that followed; his bride's devotion through it all; their sudden quarrel after it was all over; their divorce; the too much advertised announcement of his approaching marriage to the plaintiff in the breach-of-promise suit; his precipitate remarriage to his divorced bride; their second quarrel and second divorce; his departure from his native land; his advent in the dark continent. The sense of all this rushed over me and I believed Van Rieten felt it, too, as he sat silent.

Then he asked :

'Where is Werner?'

'Dead,' said Etcham. 'He died before I joined Stone.'

'You were not with Stone above Luebo?'

'No,' said Etcham, 'I joined him at Stanley Falls.'

'Who is with him?' Van Rieten asked.

'Only his Zanzibar servants and the bearers,' Etcham replied.

'What sort of bearers?' Van Rieten demanded.

'Mang-Battu men,' Etcham responded simply.

Now that impressed both Van Rieten and myself greatly. It bore out Stone's reputation as a notable leader of men. For up to that time no one had been able to use Mang-Battu as bearers outside of their own country, or to hold them for long or difficult expeditions.

'Were you long among the Mang-Battu?' was Van Rieten's next question.

'Some weeks,' said Etcham. 'Stone was interested in them and made up a fair-sized vocabulary of their words and phrases. He had a theory that they are an offshoot of the Balunda and he found much confirmation in their customs.'

'What do you live on?' Van Rieten inquired.

'Game, mostly,' Etcham lisped.

'How long has Stone been laid up?' Van Rieten next asked.

'More than a month,' Etcham answered.

'And you have been hunting for the camp?' Van Rieten exclaimed.

Etcham's face, burnt and flayed as it was, showed a flush.

'I missed some easy shots,' he admitted ruefully. 'I've not felt ve'y fit myself.'

'What's the matter with your chief?' Van Rieten inquired.

'Something like carbuncles,' Etcham replied.

'He ought to get over a carbuncle or two,' Van Rieten declared.

'They are not carbuncles,' Etcham explained. 'Nor one or two. He has had dozens, sometimes five at once. If they had been carbuncles he would have been dead long ago. But in some ways they are not so bad, though in others they are worse.'

'How do you mean?' Van Rieten queried.

'Well,' Etcham hesitated, 'they do not seem to inflame so deep nor so wide as carbuncles, nor to be so painful, nor to cause so much fever. But then they seem to be part of a disease that affects his mind. He let me help him dress the

first, but the others he has hidden most carefully, from me and from the men. He keeps to his tent when they puff up, and will not let me change the dressings or be with him at all.'

'Have you plenty of dressings?' Van Rieten asked.

'We have some,' said Etcham doubtfully. 'But he won't use them; he washes out the dressings and uses them over and over.'

'How is he treating the swellings?' Van Rieten inquired.

'He slices them off clear down to flesh level, with his razor.'

'What?' Van Rieten shouted.

Etcham made no answer but looked him steadily in the eyes.

'I beg pardon,' Van Rieten hastened to say. 'You startled me. They can't be carbuncles. He'd have been dead long ago.'

'I thought I had said they are not carbuncles,' Etcham lisped.

'But the man must be crazy!' Van Rieten exclaimed.

'Just so,' said Etcham. 'He is beyond my advice or control.'

'How many has he treated that way?' Van Rieten demanded.

'Two, to my knowledge,' Etcham said.

'Two?' Van Rieten queried.

Etcham flushed again.

'I saw him,' he confessed, 'through a crack in the hut. I felt impelled to keep watch on him, as if he was not responsible.'

'I should think not,' Van Rieten agreed. 'And you saw him do that twice?'

'I conjecture,' said Etcham, 'that he did the like with all the rest.'

'How many has he had?' Van Rieten asked.

'Dozens,' Etcham lisped.

'Does he eat?' Van Rieten inquired.

'Like a wolf,' said Etcham. 'More than any two bearers.'

'Can he walk?' Van Rieten asked.

'He crawls a bit, groaning,' said Etcham simply.

'Little fever, you say,' Van Rieten ruminated.

'Enough and too much,' Etcham declared.

'Has he been delirious?' Van Rieten asked.

'Only twice,' Etcham replied; 'once when the first swelling broke, and once later. He would not let anyone come near him then. But we could hear him talking, talking steadily, and it scared the natives.'

'Was he talking their patter in delirium?' Van Rieten demanded.

'No,' said Etcham, 'but he was talking some similar lingo. Hamed Burghash said he was talking Balunda. I know too little Balunda. I do not learn languages readily. Stone learned more Mang-Battu in a week than I could have learned in a year. But I seemed to hear words like Mang-Battu words. Anyhow the Mang-Battu bearers were scared.'

'Scared?' Van Rieten repeated, questioningly.

'So were the Zanzibar men, even Hamed Burghash, and so was I,' said Etcham, 'only for a different reason. He talked in two voices.'

'In two voices?' Van Rieten reflected.

'Yes,' said Etcham, more excitedly than he had yet spoken. 'In two voices, like a conversation. One was his own, one a small, thin, bleaty voice like nothing I ever heard. I seemed to make out, among the sounds the deep voice made, something like Mang-Battu words I knew, as *nedru*, *metababa*, and *nedo*, their terms for "head", "shoulder", "thigh", and perhaps *kudra* and *nekere* ("speak" and "whistle"); and among the noises of the shrill voice *matomipa*, *angunzi* and *kamomami* ("kill", "death", and "hate"). Hamed Burghash said he also heard those words. He knew Mang-Battu far better than I.'

'What did the bearers say?' Van Rieten asked.

'They said, "*Lukundoo, Lukundoo!*"' Etcham replied. 'I did not know that word; Hamed Burghash said it was Mang-Battu for "leopard".'

'It's Mang-Battu for "witchcraft",' said Van Rieten.

'I don't wonder they thought so,' said Etcham. 'It was enough to make one believe in sorcery to listen to those two voices.'

'One voice answering the other?' Van Rieten asked perfunctorily.

Etcham's face went grey under his tan.

'Sometimes both at once,' he answered huskily.

'Both at once!' Van Rieten ejaculated.

'It sounded that way to the men, too,' said Etcham. 'And that was not all.'

He stopped and looked helplessly at us for a moment.

'Could a man talk and whistle at the same time?' he asked.

'How do you mean?' Van Rieten queried.

'We could hear Stone talking away, his big, deep-chested baritone rumbling away, and through it all we could hear a high, shrill whistle, the oddest, wheezy sound. You know, no matter how shrilly a grown man may whistle, the note has a different quality from the whistle of a boy or a woman or a little girl. They sound more treble, somehow. Well, if you can imagine the smallest girl who could whistle keeping it up tunelessly right along, that whistle was like that, only even more piercing, and it sounded right through Stone's bass tones.'

'And you didn't go to him?' Van Rieten cried.

'He is not given to threats,' Etcham disclaimed. 'But he had threatened, not volubly, nor like a sick man, but quietly and firmly, that if any man of us (he lumped me in with the men), came near him while he was in his trouble, that man should die. And it was not so much his words as his manner. It was like a monarch commanding respected privacy for a death-bed. One simply could not transgress.'

'I see,' said Van Rieten shortly.

'He's ve'y seedy,' Etcham repeated helplessly. 'I thought perhaps . . .'

His absorbing affection for Stone, his real love for him, shone out through his envelope of conventional training. Worship of Stone was plainly his master passion.

Like many competent men, Van Rieten had a streak of hard selfishness in him. It came to the surface then. He said we carried our lives in our hands from day to day just as genuinely as Stone; that he did not forget the ties of blood and calling between any two explorers, but that there was no

sense in imperilling one party for a very problematical benefit to a man probably beyond any help; that it was enough of a task to hunt for one party; that if the two were united, providing food would be more than doubly difficult; that the risk of starvation was too great. Deflecting our march seven full days' journey (he complimented Etcham on his marching powers) might ruin our expedition entirely.

III

Van Rieten had logic on his side and he had a way with him. Etcham sat there apologetic and deferential, like a fourth-form schoolboy before a head master. Van Rieten wound up.

'I am after pigmies, at the risk of my life. After pigmies I go.'

'Perhaps, then, these will interest you,' said Etcham, very quietly.

He took two objects out of the sidepocket of his blouse, and handed them to Van Rieten. They were round, bigger than big plums, and smaller than small peaches, about the right size to enclose in an average hand. They were black, and at first I did not see what they were.

'Pigmies!' Van Rieten exclaimed. 'Pigmies, indeed! Why, they wouldn't be two feet high! Do you mean to claim that these are adult heads?'

'I claim nothing,' Etcham answered evenly. 'You can see for yourself.'

Van Rieten passed one of the heads to me. The sun was just setting and I examined it closely. A dried head it was, perfectly preserved, and the flesh as hard as Argentine jerked beef. A bit of a vertebra stuck out where the muscles of the vanished neck had shrivelled into folds. The puny chin was sharp on a projecting jaw, the minute teeth white and even between the retracted lips, the tiny nose was flat, the little forehead retreating, there were inconsiderable clumps of stunted wool on the Lilliputian cranium. There was nothing babyish, childish or youthful about the head, rather it was mature to senility.

'Where did these come from?' Van Rieten inquired.

'I do not know,' Etcham replied precisely. 'I found them among Stone's effects while rummaging for medicines or drugs or anything that could help me to help him. I do not know where he got them. But I'll swear he did not have them when we entered this district.'

'Are you sure?' Van Rieten queried, his eyes big and fixed on Etcham's.

'Ve'y sure,' lisped Etcham.

'But how could he have come by them without your knowledge?' Van Rieten demurred.

'Sometimes we were apart ten days at a time hunting,' said Etcham. 'Stone is not a talking man. He gave me no account of his doings and Hamed Burghash keeps a still tongue and a tight hold on the men.'

'You have examined these heads?' Van Rieten asked.

'Minutely,' said Etcham.

Van Rieten took out his notebook. He was a methodical chap. He tore out a leaf, folded it and divided it equally into three pieces. He gave one to me and one to Etcham.

'Just for a test of my impressions,' he said, 'I want each of us to write separately just what he is most reminded of by these heads. Then I want to compare the writings.'

I handed Etcham a pencil and he wrote. Then he handed the pencil back to me and I wrote.

'Read the three,' said Van Rieten, handing me his piece. Van Rieten had written :

'An old Balunda witch-doctor.'

Etcham had written :

'An old Mang-Battu fetish-man.'

I had written :

'An old Katongo magician.'

'There !' Van Rieten exclaimed. 'Look at that ! There is nothing Wagabi or Batwa or Wambuttu or Wabotu about these heads. Nor anything pigmy either.'

'I thought as much,' said Etcham.

'And you say he did not have them before?'

'To a certainty he did not,' Etcham asserted.

'It is worth following up,' said Van Rieten. 'I'll go with you. And first of all, I'll do my best to save Stone.'

He put out his hand and Etcham clasped it silently. He was grateful all over.

IV

Nothing but Etcham's fever of solicitude could have taken him in five days over the track. It took him eight days to retrace with full knowledge of it and our party to help. We could not have done it in seven, and Etcham urged us on, in a repressed fury of anxiety, no mere fever of duty to his chief, but a real ardour of devotion, a glow of personal adoration, for Stone which blazed under his dry conventional exterior and showed in spite of him.

We found Stone well cared for. Etcham had seen to a good, high thorn *zareeba* round the camp, the huts were well built and thatched, and Stone's was as good as their resources would permit. Hamed Burghash was not named after two Seyyids for nothing. He had in him the making of a sultan. He had kept the Mang-Battu together, not a man had slipped off, and he had kept them in order. Also he was a deft nurse and a faithful servant.

The two other Zanzibaris had done some creditable hunting. Though all were hungry, the camp was far from starvation.

Stone was on a canvas cot and there was a sort of collapsible camp-stool-table, like a Turkish tabouret, by the cot. It had a water-bottle and some vials on it and Stone's watch, also his razor in its case.

Stone was clean and not emaciated, but he was far gone; not unconscious, but in a daze; past commanding or resisting anyone. He did not seem to see us enter or to know we were there. I should have recognized him anywhere. His boyish dash and grace had vanished utterly, of course. But his head was even more leonine; his hair was still abundant, yellow and wavy; the close, crisped blond beard he had grown during his illness did not alter him. He was big and big-chested yet. His eyes were dull and he mumbled and babbled mere meaningless syllables, not words.

Etcham helped Van Rieten to uncover him, and look him over. He was in good muscle for a man so long bedridden.

There were no scars on him except about his knees, shoulders and chest. On each knee and above it he had a full score of roundish cicatrices, and a dozen or more on each shoulder, all in front. Two or three were open wounds, and four or five barely healed. He had no fresh swellings, except two, one on each side, on his pectoral muscles, the one on the left being higher up and farther out than the other. They did not look like boils or carbuncles, but as if something blunt and hard were being pushed up through the fairly healthy flesh and skin, not much inflamed.

'I should not lance those,' said Van Rieten, and Etcham assented.

They made Stone as comfortable as they could, and just before sunset we looked in at him again. He was lying on his back, and his chest showed big and massive yet, but he lay as if in a stupor. We left Etcham with him and went into the next hut, which Etcham had resigned to us. The jungle noises were no different there than anywhere else for months past, and I was soon fast asleep.

V

Sometime in the pitch dark I found myself awake and listening. I could hear two voices, one Stone's, the other sibilant and wheezy. I knew Stone's voice after all the years that had passed since I heard it last. The other was like nothing I remembered. It had less volume than the wail of a new-born baby, yet there was an insistent carrying power to it, like the shrilling of an insect. As I listened I heard Van Rieten breathing near me in the dark, then he heard me and realized that I was listening, too. Like Etcham I knew little Balunda, but I could make out a word or two. The voices alternated with intervals of silence between.

Then suddenly both sounded at once and fast. Stone's baritone basso, full as if he were in perfect health, and that incredibly stridulous falsetto, both jabbering at once like the voices of two people quarrelling and trying to talk each other down.

'I can't stand this,' said Van Rieten. 'Let's have a look at him.'

He had one of those cylindrical electric night-candles. He fumbled about for it, touched the button and beckoned me to come with him. Outside of the hut he motioned me to stand still, and instinctively turned off the light, as if seeing made listening difficult.

Except for a faint glow from the embers of the bearers' fire we were in complete darkness, little starlight struggled through the trees, the river made but a faint murmuring. We could hear the two voices together and then suddenly the creaking voice changed into a razor-edged, slicing whistle, indescribably cutting, continuing right through Stone's grumbling torrent of croaking words.

'Good God !' exclaimed Van Rieten.

Abruptly he turned on the light.

We found Etcham utterly asleep, exhausted by his long anxiety and the exertions of his phenomenal march and relaxed completely now that the load was in a sense shifted from his shoulders to Van Rieten's. Even the light on his face did not wake him.

The whistle had ceased and the two voices now sounded together. Both came from Stone's cot, where the concentrated white ray showed him lying just as we had left him, except that he had tossed his arms above his head and had torn the coverings and bandages from his chest.

The swelling on his right breast had broken. Van Rieten aimed the centre line of the light at it and we saw it plainly. From his flesh, grown out of it, there protruded a head, such a head as the dried specimens Etcham had shown us, as if it were a miniature of the head of a Balunda fetish-man. It was black, shining black as the blackest African skin; it rolled the whites of its wicked, wee eyes and showed its microscopic teeth between lips repulsively negroid in their red fullness, even in so diminutive a face. It had crisp, fuzzy wool on its minikin skull, it turned malignantly from side to side and chattered incessantly in that inconceivable falsetto. Stone babbled brokenly against its patter.

Van Rieten turned from Stone and waked Etcham, with some difficulty. When he was awake and saw it all, Etcham stared and said not one word.

'You saw him slice off two swellings?' Van Rieten asked. Etcham nodded, chokingly.

'Did he bleed much?' Van Rieten demanded.

'Very little,' Etcham replied.

'You hold his arms,' said Van Rieten to Etcham.

He took up Stone's razor and handed me the light. Stone showed no sign of seeing the light or of knowing we were there. But the little head mewled and screeched at us.

Van Rieten's hand was steady, and the sweep of the razor even and true. Stone bled amazingly little and Van Rieten dressed the wound as if it had been a bruise or scrape.

Stone had stopped talking the instant the excrescent head was severed. Van Rieten did all that could be done for Stone and then fairly grabbed the light from me. Snatching up a gun he scanned the ground by the cot and brought the butt down once and twice, viciously.

We went back to our hut, but I doubt if I slept.

VI

Next day, near noon, in broad daylight, we heard the two voices from Stone's hut. We found Etcham dropped asleep by his charge. The swelling on the left had broken, and just such another head was there miauling and spluttering. Etcham woke up and the three of us stood there and glared. Stone interjected hoarse vocables into the tinkling gurgle of the portent's utterance.

Van Rieten stepped forward, took up Stone's razor and knelt down by the cot. The atomy of a head squealed a wheezy snarl at him.

Then suddenly Stone spoke English.

'Who are you with my razor?'

Van Rieten started back and stood up.

Stone's eyes were clear now and bright, they roved about the hut.

'The end,' he said, 'I recognize the end. I seem to see Etcham, as if in life. But Singleton! Ah, Singleton! Ghosts of my boyhood come to watch me pass! And you, strange spectre with the black beard and my razor! Aroint ye all!'

'I'm no ghost, Stone,' I managed to say. 'I'm alive. So are

Etcham and Van Rieten. We are here to help you.'

'Van Rieten!' he exclaimed. 'My work passes on to a better man. Luck go with you, Van Rieten.'

Van Rieten went nearer to him.

'Just hold still a moment, old man,' he said soothingly. 'It will be only one twinge.'

'I've held still for many such twinges,' Stone answered quite distinctly. 'Let me be. Let me die in my own way. The hydra was nothing to this. You can cut off ten, a hundred, a thousand heads, but the curse you cannot cut off, or take off. What's soaked into the bone won't come out of the flesh, any more than what's bred there. Don't hack me any more. Promise!'

His voice had all the old commanding tone of his boyhood and it swayed Van Rieten as it always had swayed everybody.

'I promise,' said Van Rieten.

Almost as he said the word Stone's eyes filmed again.

Then we three sat about Stone and watched that hideous, gibbering prodigy grow up out of Stone's flesh, till two horrid, spindling little black arms disengaged themselves. The infinitesimal nails were perfect to the barely perceptible moon at the quick, the pink spot on the palm was horridly natural. These arms gesticulated and the right plucked towards Stone's blond beard.

'I can't stand this,' Van Rieten exclaimed and took up the razor again.

Instantly Stone's eyes opened, hard and glittering.

'Van Rieten break his word?' he enunciated slowly. 'Never!'

'But we must help you,' Van Rieten gasped.

'I am past all help and all hurting,' said Stone. 'This is my hour. This curse is not put on me; it grew out of me, like this horror here. Even now I go.'

His eyes closed and we stood helpless, the adherent figure spouting shrill sentences.

In a moment Stone spoke again.

'You speak all tongues?' he asked quickly.

And the emergent minikin replied in sudden English :

'Yea, verily, all that you speak,' putting out its microscopic tongue, writhing its lips and wagging its head from side to side. We could see the thready ribs on its exiguous flanks heave as if the thing breathed.

'Has she forgiven me?' Stone asked in a muffled strangle.

'Not while the stars shine on Lake Ponchartrain will she forgive.'

And then Stone, all with one motion, wrenched himself over on his side. The next instant he was dead.

When Singleton's voice ceased the room was hushed for a space. We could hear each other breathing. Twombly, the tactless, broke the silence.

'I presume,' he said, 'you cut off the little minikin and brought it home in alcohol.'

Singleton turned on him a stern countenance.

'We buried Stone,' he said, 'unmutilated as he died.'

'But,' said the unconscionable Twombly, 'the whole thing is incredible.'

Singleton stiffened.

'I did not expect you to believe it,' he said; 'I began by saying that although I heard and saw it, when I look back on it I cannot credit it myself.'

THE WORDS OF THE DUMB

by Alex Hamilton

JUSTIN THYME allowed the corn flakes to slide off his spoon back into the bowl, and emitted a series of tremulous whistles followed by a prolonged hoot.

His wife at the stove turned resignedly.

'And what was that supposed to be?' she asked.

'Polite request for the sugar, doll,' replied Justin.

'And who are we today?'

'Rock hyrax, native of the Cameroons, related to the elephant but only the size of a rabbit, no tail, lion's face . . .'

'Our flat's too small for the hyrax at breakfast,' she said firmly.

'The hyrax knows no breakfast time,' he replied, rising to reach for the sugar himself, 'he simply lives down this hole and when he pops out, at any time of the day or night, the first you know of him is his opening salvo of remarks on the state of the nation . . .'

The plump little man leaned back in his chair, and again the weird cry sounded in the kitchen.

'For God's sake !' she said, shutting her eyes. A thin dribble of tea ran from the spout of the pot she had uplifted from the stove.

'I think I do the hyrax rather well,' he said complacently, 'seeing that I've never heard one except on tape. Your coatimundi, your aardvark is a doddle by comparison. You can get down to the Gardens and chat with them in person. I'd love,' he said wistfully, 'to pass the time of day with a hyrax. Two hyraxes, to take away the interview feeling.'

She sat down opposite him. She settled knives and fork squarely before her, waiting for him to get on with his first course. She put her face on praying hands, so that her nose pointed at him over the apex.

'Is it alright to ask when a hyrax was last written into a script?' she said. It was not certain whether she was intentionally muffling her speech, but those acute ears of Justin missed nothing.

'One is just a little,' he murmured reproachfully, 'an artist. One has one's little speciality. If writers elect to confine themselves to dogs under the moon, to cocks greeting the dawn, to cats mewling in the fogbound castle, one does not necessarily let them dictate one's whole *idea*. One hopes for enlightenment. One plugs on.'

He balanced the phrases smoothly, lovingly. The beautiful voice, so dark and handsome on the radio before he had taken up with his 'little speciality', seemed to her suddenly fake and rotten. She dropped her hands on the table as a spurt of anger ran through her.

'Well, plug on with your flakes, will you?' she rasped, 'and don't make those bloody animal noises at me in the house

all the time !'

'They pay the rent,' he said, and crunched his flakes.

She poured tea and said nothing more.

She was glad the children were at boarding school now. They would have sided with him. They would have thought it funny. Georgie had even tried one or two noises himself. He was not very convincing, and when Peter joined in they had found themselves ridiculous, and were in danger of choking from laughing. Justin should have seen that it was wrong to encourage them when they were already at the awkward stage, discipline-wise, and the Wilsons, across the landing, were so ready to complain at anything they did. But no use grumbling at Justin. Always a 'law unto himself', he would not mind the children's games. She suspected he might even be pleased if they provoked the Wilsons. He always called them 'the persons from Porthcawl', dating from the night they complained as he was just closing in on the correct pitch of the fighting male hippo. Remembering the incident she flushed again with embarrassment : she had been unable to admit to the Wilsons that Justin was responsible. She had put the blame on Georgie, and he had seen his chance and conned her for hush money.

Hush money. As things were going, it looked as if she would have to dig deeper and deeper to quieten the echoes of Justin's feral music.

From breakfast Justin went into the lounge and closed the door behind him. She washed up the breakfast things, listening for sounds from the lounge, but Justin seemed to be keeping himself in check. Today she fed the cat, though it was normally Justin's job. It was understood that the creature 'liked a chat' first, and of course Justin was delighted, garrulously, to oblige it. She put down the bowl of scraps and watched it. It came and sat beside the bowl, looking straight ahead, paying no attention to her nor to the meal. 'Suit yourself,' she said to it impatiently, 'that's all you're getting.'

But doing the other household jobs seemed to work off the irritation, and when she was 'straight' she went through to tell Justin she was sorry.

He was standing in the sunlight by the open window, with his hands in his pockets. There was nothing he must do until rehearsals in the afternoon. He did not turn round when she came in. His elbows opened out briefly, and then subsided against his sides where they had been. It was like the motion of gills, and in fact he looked quite peaceful. From behind his short squat figure with his broad well-covered shoulders suggested a man of some physical power. She hesitated a moment. On occasions like this, when she had the sensation of intruding, she wondered if, after a dozen years of marriage, she really knew her husband very well.

She said, 'Isn't it lovely and sunny in here? Much brighter than in the other room.'

'It's the bright day that brings forth the adder,' said Justin.

'Darling, I do want you to know I didn't really mean it.'

'Mean what?'

'I'm sorry I got on to you about your silly old hyrax noise.'

'Hyrax words,' said Justin gently.

'Alright then, words. I don't know what came over me. We were up so late last night with all those nightowls from the programme ...'

'Nocturnals,' interrupted Justin, 'not nightowls'.

'Darling, you are impossible. *Nocturnals* then. We were up so late with all the nocturnals from the programme that I just wasn't ready for the fully-fledged adult hyrax so early in the morning. Couldn't you,' she put her hand tentatively on his shoulder, 'arrange to practise just the *baby* hyrax at that time, and get around to the adult when we're all able to give as good as we get?'

He turned round and smiled at her. 'Think of the baby piglet when pulled away from the teat. Not all babies ...'

He lapsed into chuckles. She smiled uncertainly, but she was glad that he seemed to have recovered his natural good humour.

She came forward by the window, and his arm went about her waist. 'Well, anyway, I didn't really mean you to be ...' she murmured.

In answer he made the rolling burble of the dove.

'Perhaps I overdo it sometimes,' he acknowledged, and even while he was speaking a pigeon, type ringdove, landed on the windowhill and cocked an inquiring eye. They both laughed that he should arrive so pat. She felt happy. Justin approached his face to the bird and burred further. It flew away.

'What were you saying to him?' she asked mockingly.

'Telling him that I was sorry to disappoint him,' replied Justin. He was entirely serious.

'Go on with you!' she said.

'It is difficult to communicate something like that with delicacy,' observed Justin, 'but I think I contrived not to ruffle the bird's feelings.'

Sceptically she looked at him, out of the side of her eye. Almost as the bird had done.

'Seeing it's so nice outside,' she suggested, 'instead of hanging about the house, why don't you stroll down to the Gardens and see if you can't communicate some sentiments of great delicacy to some entirely new and extraordinary animal down there, and tell me all about it this evening?'

'I don't think there are any new arrivals,' he said, 'but I have to go down there anyway.'

'Have to go. . . ?'

'Even if it were raining like hell.'

'I don't understand.'

'Call it a duty. Now that I know.'

'Know what?' she asked anxiously. 'Darling, what are you talking about? Have to go down to the Gardens even if it were teeming! I should hope you would do no such thing. I mean, all the animals are there for good, aren't they? There's no need to go down there in all weathers.'

'There's one won't be there for good. He's a caracal.'

'Is that the one with the big radar ears you were talking about?'

'Yes, he was born on the edge of the Kalahari desert.'

'Are they going to ship him back, then?'

'No. They should do, but they won't have the chance. He's going to die first.'

'What's the matter? Is he sick then? You saw him a couple

of days ago, didn't you? I don't remember you saying he was sick.'

'He isn't sick. But he's going to die.'

'Of course he's not going to die! Unless ... are the authorities going to have him put down?'

'No. None of that. He's just going to die. I know, because he told me so. Animals know. Some do, anyway. This one is quite sure.'

'Oh, Justin, you're letting this business of communicating with animals go a bit too far. This is absurd. Absolute nonsense.'

'I can speak their language, in some cases, can't I?' said Justin, 'don't you think that they might find it exciting to tell me things? Animals don't much want to learn. But they do enjoy telling. The things they tell me about, they're the things that matter most to them.'

'Well, while I can still communicate with you, can I tell you that the thing that matters most to me is that, apart from having your stroll down to see your caracal, you shouldn't be late for rehearsal? So get your script, and off you go now.'

In the hall she made him put on his raincoat.

'It's a long day, darling. You might not be home till late, and it's still very changeable. Remember yesterday was nice to start, and became quite overcast by teatime.'

'I'll creep down between two stones,' he smiled.

'Send for me there,' she replied, 'I'll listen for the call, and, darling ...'

'I haven't gone yet.'

'Have some lunch today. The one I packed for you last time you fed to the beasts, didn't you? Well, today I'm not giving you one, so you'll have to go into the cafeteria, and while you're there you can have at least a glance at that script. I know you haven't even opened it.'

'It'll probably only be a collection of cues. Likely I'm a faithful dog again.'

'All the same. It's as well to be prepared.'

'Keep your fingers crossed for the caracal.'

She put up her hand with the fingers crossed, for the cara-

cal, and though she didn't say so, for Justin as well.

He went out into the sunshine, and ambled along the road purring into the hedges, like a tiger. Then he remembered that he might be startling small rodents, and switched to the rustle of that whispering witch the cicada, which would mean nothing to them.

He was still proceeding monotonously with this while waiting for his bus when a man who joined him at the stop asked nervously :

'Excuse me, sir, do you happen to have a transistor radio somewhere about your person? I've been hearing the most unusual sounds, and frankly they do seem to be coming from you . . . somehow. I hope you don't mind my question, but they sound rather frightening and horrible, and I don't mind admitting that I'm right on edge in consequence . . . Sir, I am addressing you !'

Justin was obliged to turn round as the man tugged at his coat. He turned off the cicada's paeon of praise to the sunlight. He considered the man without reply. Then the bus drew up and Justin mounted the platform. As the man who had pestered him seemed not to be interested in following him Justin looked down at the closed face, and unreasonably he thought, 'What a dumb oaf !' As the bus pulled away he leaned out and gave him the full value of the cry of the frightened gorilla. The man at the stop was not to appreciate the fear in the cry : it sounded to him like rank aggression. He stepped back hastily against the iron pole, while the West Indian bus conductor grinned, and shook his head, and - charged Justin threepence.

To begin with Justin sat down inside the bus, on the lower floor, but he was soon irritated by the preponderance of female passengers there, and besides, the stairs looked to him as if they were there to be climbed, so he climbed, and the conductor watched him go suspiciously. It had occurred to him that the humour of his latest passenger might extend to trying to travel a considerable distance for the minimum fare.

But on the top deck Justin was equally unable to settle down. Every time the vehicle stopped, and some people got

off and more got on, he was driven by an obscure impulse to change his seat. The other passengers had, he felt, relationships not only with one another, but with himself. There were lines of attraction and repulsion between himself and all of them. He had vaguely noted this experience once or twice before, but on this occasion the desire to move in accordance with the strength of these forces had become compulsive. And yet the greatest surprise was that he alone in the bus was truly aware of it. One or two others registered these drives faintly, sufficiently to make them hesitate before choosing a seat, but Justin alone moved in obedience to an overall pattern.

He felt the claustrophobia of that moving truck, and wished now he had chosen to walk the short distance to the Gardens. It was so stuffy, with everybody smoking, and nobody willing to open a window, although the spring had been coming in grandly enough for optimism. He moved to the front of the bus and let down the window. He could sense the hostility behind him, but tried to ignore it, and opened his script just to flick through it, in order to put the others in the bus out of his mind. But the hostility forced its way through, destroying his concentration, until he felt it as positively dangerous. It was unpleasant having them all behind him. In some agitation he snapped the script back into his pocket and rose to find a seat at the back of the bus. He was about to sit down in the very rear seat when he felt the conductor gently tapping him.

'You wishing to descend from the bus here, sir?' asked the West Indian.

From the window it was possible to look over the wall into the Zoological Gardens.

'That's perfectly correct,' said Justin smiling enthusiastically, 'thank you very much. I was dreaming. I might have been carried on for miles.'

'No man dreams on for miles on my bus,' said the conductor in delighted appreciation of having won without fuss.

'No,' said Justin, 'we all need bringing back to the real world sometimes, don't we?' and almost without a pause he

turned on an impatient man trying to bump him off the bus and directed at him the growl in crescendo of a wolf disturbed at his food. The other apparently then thought better of his desire to alight at that point, and sat down again to wait for the next stop. Justin stepped off by himself.

While watching the bus move on, he thought about his conduct during the journey, and the items of rudeness which had bracketed it and the only expression he could give to his conclusion was to shake his head, as the conductor had done. At the turnstile an echo of his vulpine snarl recurred in his head. He stopped. 'I don't like it,' he grunted.

'Don't like what?' said the official waiting to take his money.

'Having to give you a fiver for a two bob admission,' replied Justin quickly.

'That's not a fiver!' said the official suspiciously, 'it's a oncer.'

'My mistake,' said Justin, 'they are easy to confuse though, aren't they?'

'Huh!' snorted the official, returning him a column of florins, and depressing the lever which would allow freedom to the turnstile.

And immediately he was inside the Gardens he perceived what the trouble was. It was this mad, metropolitan rat-race that was putting a strain on him. One should not cut oneself off so entirely from the country, from the relaxing greens of England's woodland, from the fresh winds that quickened the spirit, and the sly, secret rivers that slipped everywhere through it. Here inside these walled gardens, only beginning to bloom, it was plain to him how precarious was his chosen profession. Had he had someone else for a wife, someone less dug into her own nest, it might have still been possible to retrench, to go freelance, to sell to the radio his own interpretations of the intricate communication system of the animal world, which his speciality was opening up for him.

It was an exciting idea! It would at least bear thinking on! She was not adaptable. She might have to try to adapt herself. The male must continually be experimenting, whatever pressures the female brought against novelty.

At this time of the morning there were few visitors to the Gardens. The crowds would pour in after another hour, hoping to see the animals fed. They seemed to get an extraordinary satisfaction, while nibbling their own sandwiches, from watching the animals *devour* their food. It was as if the animals were giving rein to a talent which they themselves had lost. Justin stood in the centre of the large half-moon just within the gates and turned his head about, trying to pick out the particular messages from the general holocaust of signals.

Somewhere nearby a moose had calved. On no account was the young thing to stray another yard away from the speaker.

There was a certain hyena cast out from the group. The accusations were too thick in the air for Justin to understand, and the outcast had not yet protested.

There were some guinea pigs nearby grumbling at a draught.

There was a puma pining over a loss.

There were two parrots who finished nothing they started to say. They were stupefied with boredom.

There was a baboon contemplating malice. Friends were encouraging it.

There were two boys laughing at the sexual activity of some monkeys.

There were hippos talking of different rivers.

There was an angwantibo still dissatisfied with yesterday's diet.

Having tuned in, Justin moved slowly past the cages. The condor, enveloped in its own thoughts as closely as in its giant wings, never attempted to communicate, and Justin had given the condor up. But he struck up a sort of acquaintance with a peccary, who thought that the next run looked more interesting than his own enclosure and could not see why he should not be shifted, since that run had not been in use for a fortnight. Justin was able to say only that he agreed, his vocabulary not being extensive enough to promise the peccary that he would suggest it to the keepers. But the peccary was certainly pleased.

Justin without difficulty persuaded an otter to show off in the water, though the otter had begun by saying that the weather was not yet right for displays, and that he liked a larger public. And he had some trouble shaking off two sycophantic goats who assumed that they alone were the cause of his frequent visits. His most interesting exchange of the morning was with two tigers.

They had been recently separated and were now in adjoining cages. They were mother and son, and the son had become old enough to father a litter on his mother if the fancy took him, so now a powerful iron wall divided them. But simply they missed one another, and Justin was touched to watch them hopelessly working at the connecting gate between the cages. The obvious mechanics of the gate were beyond their comprehension. Working in unison, the one shoving, and the other snouting up the catch, they could of course have managed it. . . .

Justin explained to them what they should do.

They listened attentively and then the female hurled herself at the gate, and pressed her great flank in the direction Justin had suggested. But the young male stared at him through narrowed eyelids, and suddenly turned about abruptly, and slunk almost on his belly into the farthest corner of the cage, whence he glared at Justin, until the man tired of trying to help them and walked on. Happening to look back when he had moved on a hundred yards Justin saw the male wriggling in a narrow opening of the gate and leap triumphantly through.

Justin smiled and went to his dinner.

He found it difficult to eat. He kept thinking of the painful situation of his caracal, the meeting with whom he had left till last, since it would have lain on his conscience to have broken into an exchange with the caracal, now that he knew the animal felt he was living in the twilight of his life, without the excuse of pressing business. He pushed aside his pudding, untasted, and untied the packet of food he had brought for the caracal before putting it back in his raincoat pocket, where it would be easy of access. He had about an hour left before he must leave for the studio.

There were plenty of people in the Gardens now, but none around the caracal's cage. A notice near it, on an easel, read 'BLOCK CLOSED', but although Justin looked at the lettering, the two groups of symbols did not register in his mind. It was as if the arrangements of the management of the Zoo no longer bore any relation to his own arrangements with the animals in it. He walked up to the cage and looked for the caracal.

It was not in the forecourt. It must be asleep in its den at the back. He looked about him to see that no keepers were near, and called to the animal quietly. Nothing stirred. He called again, more loudly, though he had never before found it necessary to raise the pitch of the cry very much: the caracal picked up the faintest sounds.

But no keen face flicked around the doorway of the den. The cage remained deserted. There was no response from the caracal. Justin began to be afraid.

He hurled himself against the wire and cried loudly enough to reach the caracal had it been a mile away. But the only result was to alarm a keeper, who came hurrying over and took Justin by the arm.

'Excuse me, sir, but what is your business here, please? This block is closed. Surely the notice is plain enough?'

Justin wrinkled his brow. There was a lot he wanted to ask this man, but his fluency in human terms seemed just now to have deserted him. He only mouthed, and the single syllable 'Jack?' escaped his lips. Jack was the ridiculously inappropriate name by which the Zoo knew his caracal.

The keeper drew him up the path a few yards before letting go his arm.

'Yes,' he said, after a pause, 'well, I was afraid that might be it. That's just the very one that snuffed it this morning.'

Justin was motionless, watching the keeper's lips move. He did not take in what the official was saying, but he knew what the substance was, without listening to the words.

'Jack's dead of something,' continued the keeper, 'crying shame. Just as he was getting on so well. At least I thought so. But you never can tell with these creatures. Take them from their own country, their own part of the world, and it's

as quick as that!’ He snapped his fingers. ‘Of course, until they find out the reason, the block has to be shut off. They’re all in quarantine pro tem.’

Justin said ‘Dead. Jack.’

He walked away towards the gates of the Gardens, with the keeper following on after saying :

‘I know how you feel, sir. Don’t you worry, sir, we’ve all had a little bit of that in our time, here, any of us with a few years in the business. Surprising, isn’t it, how it can get you? You wouldn’t hardly credit that a dumb animal could upset you like that. Not as if it were one of your own, really, and yet . . . it’s real enough, isn’t it? I said to Kenny Roberts, who’s been on this block, that it wouldn’t be the last time he’d be upset, if he meant to stay with us, and the only consolation is that there’ll be another to take his place. It was the suddenness that hit Kenny hard, same as yourself, sir. All yesterday, Kenny tells me, it was sitting here looking down the path, as if it was waiting you know, but otherwise there was nothing unusual about him whatsoever. Nothing to give you any warning at all. But that’s just the way it goes, I told Kenny, only those who’ve been with them every day for a long time sometimes get an inkling.’

Justin walked on without even waiting for the keeper to draw alongside. The sounds of the keeper rolled around him. They were friendly, but they had no meaning for him. He walked out of the Gardens without once looking round.

He could not take the bus to the studio. He could not have endured a repetition of the uncomfortable feelings which had overtaken him on his previous bus journey. He walked all the way, and found that his director was annoyed. Not only the director, but half the cast, repeatedly pointed at the clock.

‘I told you it wasn’t a rehearsal. We’re doing a run-through, and then directly on to tape,’ said the director, ‘anyway, even if it had been only rehearsal, I don’t see why we should hang about for the blinking wolf, not for Siberia overrun with wolves we don’t. Come on, boys and girls, if we’re all here now, let’s get cracking!’

Justin merely looked at him, and strode by habit to his

place in the back of the studio, out of the way till he was called.

'Come on, Justin, for Chrissakes, wake up!' said the director, 'you know you're wanted immediately from the lead in. All right, quiet everybody now. Ready, Justin?'

Justin felt himself prodded forward by his friend Talbot. He opened his script but the words were jumbled on the page. He could not, it seemed, focus them. They all, in the studio, were apparently waiting for him to speak.

Justin spoke. He said, in the language of the caracal, that he was sorry he had not been able to visit on the day he was expected.

At the end there was silence, then somebody tittered.

'Alright, Justin,' said the director, 'that's very funny, but we're a bit pushed for time, and I can't go along with any more jokes today. So, wolf, man, do you mind, wolf away, will you? Do me a favour, scare me? Let's all try to get our thoughts centred on snowy wastes, shall we? Ready? Let's start again.'

Justin stared around at them all. They seemed to be expecting something from him, and he would have liked to comply with their wishes, but he was not absolutely sure what it was they wanted. There was this pause which came after the early music, and then they all looked at him.

He tried, tentatively, the honk of the homebound goose.

He stepped backward, as the director came forward. He felt the arm of his friend Talbot around his shoulder.

'I don't think Justin's very well,' said Talbot to the director.

'Bloody healthy goose, if only we wanted a goose,' said the director suspiciously.

'He's not hearing a word you're saying,' whispered Talbot.

'OK,' said the director resignedly, 'put him in a taxi, will you, Talbot, and try to get back rightaway. Unless someone else wants a try I suppose I'd better have a go at the wolf myself, just for the run-through.'

He imitated the sound of a wolf. It was faintly recognizable. It reminded Justin, in the doorway, of what he had come for. He turned about.

He drew his lips back and the studio echoed to the long rolling whine, followed by the staccato threats of the famished wolf. Justin meant every word he said, personally. He summed up his views of the entire cast, and backed away through the door, before they could hunt him down.

'I'll have his head for mucking me about,' said the director, 'that was intentional, nobody can tell me different. That's the last time he works here, I swear it.'

Talbot put him in a taxi, and phoned Justin's wife. She met the taxi, and paid the fare.

Justin had the feeling that he knew of fantastic things that were to happen in the near future. There were magic things to expound, and warnings that he must give. He tried to convey it all to his wife.

He spoke in the words of a caracal. He tried the words of a hippo. He changed to the words of the great apes. He was fluent. The very words he was using made a new world plainer.

But only to himself. His wife understood nothing.

After an hour she mastered her fear and sat down opposite the chair in which her husband was gaily chattering. She began to perceive that he had retained nothing of human communication but the laughter.

She forced a laugh herself. She would have liked the lights on, but she suspected that he preferred to sit in darkness.

She made a monstrous effort, and mewed quietly. The family cat turned its head slowly, and watched with interest. Encouraged, she tried again.

THE REVENGE

by Adobe James

I DON'T sleep too well these nights.

When I do sink into an uneasy slumber, invariably the same dream haunts me and I awaken with high, thin, desperate screams echoing in my mind.

Sometimes the screams are my own.

There's a particular madness that grips human beings during the autumnal full moons, almost as if the body knows instinctively that winter is approaching and soon there will be less freedom of movement. Police records indicate a higher percentage of suicides, a larger number of 'disturbing the peace' reports, and a much, much greater incidence of crimes of violence – especially rape.

I suppose the moon could be blamed for the entire affair . . . the rape, the subsequent actions of Jack and myself, and the revenge.

Jack Conklin and I had been friends and partners in the Conklin-Rogers Emporium since we were discharged from the army at the end of World War II. Our store expanded at a pace that pleased but also frightened us at times. We had 105 employees, mostly women, and made a point of leaving them alone; but anything wearing skirts – anywhere else – was fair game.

Summing it up – we had money, we had women, we had a ball!

Or, at least thought we did.

It's funny – a man can go for years taking his women as he finds them, accepting the skirts at face value for one night or two, sometimes for an entire month, and then flushing them and their memories down the drain of oblivion as one disposes of an old condom.

One day, however, you may meet someone like Susan, and then the entire concept of life, love and sex changes. Ordinarily, Susan would not be described as long-legged, lithe, well-built or fabulously shaped, although she was all of these things and more. Instead, she was referred to as 'gentle', 'beautiful' and 'serene'. She was the warm personification of promising virginity; this made me want to possess her . . . legally.

She came to work at the store as a summer vacation relief in women's ready-to-wear, hoping to earn enough money to go on to school in the fall.

I was the first to break the unwritten rule about dating employees. I came home from that first evening with Susan

and my stomach was churning from loneliness and desire. Jack took her out the following Saturday – the result was the same. Susan and I went on a picnic a week later. Corny as it sounds, I spent almost an hour with my head in her lap, her warm legs and soft yet firm belly furnishing a heavenly pillow . . . and watched cloud ships sail through a warm blue sky. Never before had I experienced such contentment.

Jack and I even went to church with her – an unprecedented event that raised eyebrows all over the county and made the minister so nervous that he turned over a pitcher of water on his lectern three different times.

Inexorably, however, the scales began to tip in Jack's direction. I sensed it, so did he.

'I'm sorry, Jim,' she said a few nights later after I proposed, 'but I think I'm in love with Jack.' Her blue eyes were made even softer – even larger by her tears. She felt sorry for me; so did I.

And that was it. I served as best man – watched them drive off towards Seagate for their honeymoon – and then went home and tried to get drunk. That was the night before the October full moon. The weather had been fantastic for over three weeks, and the wind blew through my open window, soft and balmy out of the south, carrying with it the smell of a restless land and a savagely contented people.

I looked out over the city. The moon had softened everything, and yet, this very softness was disquieting. Beneath the serenity, one could almost feel the hoarse, excited panting of the town as it laid there waiting for some primeval ceremony to begin.

The phone's shrill jangling cut through my nerves like an electrical current.

'Mr James Rogers, please. Seagate calling!' The long-distance operator sounded as if she were afflicted with oversized adenoids.

'Yes,' I said, wondering what was up; thinking that Jack had been in an accident.

'Is this James Rogers,' the operator's voice had taken on a note of arrogancy, as if she were speaking to a stupid child.

'Yes, speaking!' I said it loudly.

'Go ahead,' she answered, as though doing us a big favour.

There was a sudden new dimension on the line – a sort of hollow echo caused when a person covers the mouthpiece to shut out background noises.

'Jim . . . this is Jack.' His voice was strained, almost too emotional to be articulate. 'Can you come up here . . . right away?'

I heard it then – loud sobbing cries of pain, of hysteria. I wanted to ask questions, but decided against it. I was puzzled and a little fearful.

Over the telephone wires came the sound of a woman's voice, repeating over and over, 'No . . . no . . . help me!'

'Please . . . Jim,' he pleaded, 'I'll explain when you get here.'

I looked at my watch – ten fifteen! 'I'll leave right now.'

'Thank you,' Jack sighed in relief.

I drove madly, outraced a hick-town cop in an old Chevrolet, and covered the two hundred miles in a little less than two and a half hours. When my car turned on to the beach road leading to our summer cabin where they were staying, the moon had turned the sand dunes to lumps of yellow butter and added a mysterious glowing beauty to the sea. This, combined with the muted roar of the surf, gave an ethereal, peaceful quality to everything.

The peace evaporated when I entered the bungalow. The front room was in shambles, couch overturned, a lamp broken and shattered on the floor, the rug out of place.

Jack, dressed in blue swimming trunks, was sitting on the window seat, his face buried in his hands. He hadn't heard me enter. When I said, 'Hello, Jack, what's wrong?' he jumped as if he had been shot.

'Jim! Thank God you're here,' his voice was unrecognizable.

I gazed around the room in disbelief at the disorder. Before I could ask what had happened, Jack motioned us outside.

We walked to my car and stood in the moonlight. I heard Jack swallow two or three times; each time it sounded as if

wood were being scraped against sandpaper. He lit a cigarette and the hand holding the match shook so badly that I had to do the job.

'Someone raped Susan,' he began without preamble or warning.

The words rocked me; my knees suddenly became useless and I had to steady myself against the car.

Jack began to talk rapidly, in a monotone, 'We got here about nine.' He swallowed – the sandpaper noise again – 'Susan and I broke open the bottle of champagne you gave us. We drank it, and then . . . she blushed a little . . . and told me to lose myself for a while until she got into her negligée . . . suggested that I go swimming. I did . . . was gone about twenty-five minutes . . . when I came back . . .' Jack's voice broke. His cigarette dropped to the sand, and his breath came in deep shuddering gasps as he relived the moment, ' . . . when I got back, the lights were out . . . and she was lying on the floor in the moonlight – her white negligée in tatters . . . blood everywhere . . .'

He stopped speaking and stared vacantly at his cigarette glowing on the ground.

I grabbed, shook him, and asked through gritted teeth, 'Is she dead?'

'No,' he said slowly, shaking his head from side to side, 'no . . . not dead – but beaten badly . . . raped.'

'Who?' The question was hardly out of my mouth before we heard Susan's scream.

When we rushed into the bedroom, she was sitting up in bed. One side of her mouth was swollen as though she had been stung by a hornet; the skin was broken under the right eye and an ugly black bruise already covered most of the left side of her face. But it was the blank – almost senseless – look in her eyes that frightened me. She was saying, over and over, with no inflection whatsoever, 'No . . . no . . . please . . . help me.'

'Susan darling, I'm here,' Jack said, kneeling beside the bed, cradling her in his arms. She didn't seem to hear him. A moment later the sobs began racking her body.

There was nothing for me to do, so I went outside. When

Jack joined me twenty minutes later, my first question was a repeat of the last one, 'Who did it?'

'I don't know. Susan said I had been gone only four or five minutes and she was about to put on her negligée when the man came in. She screamed for help, ran out of the bedroom, but he tackled her – stuffed a handkerchief in her mouth, beat her, and . . .'

I saw the lights of another car swing down our road. 'Who's that? Police?'

Jack shook his head. 'Probably Dr Martin. I called him.'

'My God, man,' I said, feeling angry at his stupidity, 'why didn't you call a local doctor? It would have been much faster.'

'Because a local man would have notified the police!' His voice was strong now – filled with murderous hate.

'You mean the police haven't been called?' I was astounded and couldn't believe what I was hearing.

Dr Martin stopped alongside us and got out of the car, carrying the traditional black bag. His face was concerned and became even more so when he saw me.

Jack and the doctor disappeared into the house. I watched the bedroom light go on once more and my mind started working. The moon was way down in the west and the skies were coal black except for the stars. There was something puzzling me; it gnawed at the edges of my consciousness like a persistent hungry rat.

When Jack emerged from the house a while later, I put my doubt into words, 'Jack . . . why haven't you called the police?'

There was cold fury – a frightening savageness that I had never seen in any man before, not even the war – when he answered, 'Because I'm going to kill the bastard that did it.' He paused for a second, then stated calmly, 'And you're going to help me.'

I thought about it. I was a law-abiding citizen, always had been, except for a few socially accepted crimes like adultery, driving and drinking, and occasionally, gambling. The man who had done this to Susan deserved to die; I'd have no compunctions about killing him myself. Rapists in

the state had been getting off with a couple of years in some resort-like prison farm and were eligible for parole after a year and a half. If the state wouldn't take care of punishment, I'd be happy to assist in this case.

But in the midst of all this pouring through my mind, a question arose. 'I thought you said you didn't know who did it?'

'I don't.'

'Well then?'

'Susan will point him out.' Now his voice sounded like hers – lifeless, human, without hope.

Dr Martin walked up out of the darkness – neither of us had seen him come out of the house. 'She'll be all right. I gave her a shot – she'll sleep until sometime this afternoon.' He sighed and rubbed his eyes, 'These things are always nasty . . .,' he was obviously trying to say something, ' . . . I'd suggest you . . . you not . . .'

Jack finished it for him, ' . . . not consummate the marriage for a while.'

'Yes. Let her come to you. She'll be all right . . . in time. I left some sedatives on the table.' He started to leave, then turned back, 'Jack, it would be better if you took her away from here – finish your honeymoon somewhere else.'

And then the doctor was gone.

Now I was beginning to have some doubts about the wisdom of Jack's scheme. 'You think it's a good idea to involve Susan in this . . . any more than she already is?'

Jack nodded curtly, 'Revenge will be the best medicine in the world for her.'

My voice sounded a lot surer than I felt, 'Yeh . . . guess you're right.'

Susan awoke the next morning in obvious pain from the beating, but dozed off again almost immediately. She had some soup for dinner and tried to smile through her cracked and bleeding lips. It didn't come off. Seemingly, she was all right except for the bad bruises, but there was something – a look, perhaps – in the back of her eyes that disturbed me.

Susan slept well that night – which is more than I can say. My mind was muddled. I felt embarrassed about staying

around the honeymoon cottage, but more than that, Jack's plan bothered me. Tomorrow, he planned to broach the subject of her assistance in pointing out the man. It almost had to be a local person because the season was over and there were no settlements within ten miles. The rapist must have been on foot or Jack would have seen the car lights. But what if she wouldn't . . . or couldn't help us? Maybe it would be better if she couldn't!

Susan flinched when he mentioned it the next afternoon, and then I was sure we had made a mistake. But suddenly, there was that look again. Her eyes narrowed, 'Yes,' she said slowly, nodding her head like a rag doll, 'Yes . . . he deserves to die.' She began to cry softly and I left the room.

Jack came out a few minutes later, having pried a partial description from her. 'The man is about our height, very broad shoulders, blond hair like yours, nose about the same as mine, hairy arms . . .'

The following day Susan got up and went down to the beach with us. The effort tired her. She had refused to put on a bathing suit – instead wore a tweed skirt, loafers and a long-sleeved blouse. It was almost as if she didn't want anyone to see her body.

We didn't spot our man – nor did Jack and I expect to. He wouldn't come around here again until he knew we were gone.

The three of us ate by candlelight that night. It should have been romantic, but it didn't come off. The flickering light was not kind to Susan's face – the bruises had turned an ugly yellow and her eyes were discoloured. Right in the middle of dinner, she began talking to herself, her head cocked to one side, 'He should be punished . . . he deserves to die for doing this to me . . .'

Jack reached over and patted her hand, 'You're right, darling, and you'll help us get the man.'

The whole scene bothered me. I felt as if I were watching two not quite sane strangers. Abruptly, I became aware of the change that had taken place in both of them. Jack had grown sullen – introspective. He didn't seem to notice that Susan's personality was changing as though a cocoon of

unreality was being spun around her mind. There was something almost evil about the place – you could feel it.

I put my cards on the table after Susan went to bed. 'Jack, you've got to get her away from here. Go to Hawaii or some place where Susan can recover.'

His violence surprised me as he turned, snarling, 'If you don't want to help us, then get out. Get out tonight!'

'Oh, Jack,' I protested, 'it isn't that. I promised to help. I will. But this isn't a healthy place for Susan. I'm not even sure we're doing the right thing – maybe we should report it to the police. Hell . . . they may even have a list of suspects.'

'No!' It was a strangled shout. I shut up.

The following day we drove slowly through the adjacent areas. Susan scanned each face. When it grew dark we returned home exhausted.

The next day was a repeat performance . . . and the day after, the same. We made ever-widening circles, always moving slowly – watching, watching, watching. We asked questions at gas stations, roadside cafés, grocery stores – and customers in these places grew uneasy under our cold scrutiny.

Revenge is a powerful driving force. I think, in some ways, it must be stronger than love. In Jack, revenge had started as a small spark, but now it was an all-consuming flame, burning brighter than a thousand loves. He drove us mercilessly. We even invaded a church one Sunday night, and the singing stilled as Susan walked slowly down one side of the aisle and up the other, looking into faces.

After ten days of this routine, I was relieved when I was forced to return home. The employees had missed their pay day, and the assistant manager's frantic phone calls had been coming at almost hourly intervals as one crisis after another shook the store.

It took a little over two weeks to clear up the confusion. I stayed in telephone contact with Jack. Each day his voice grew more distant – more inhuman – as that fiery sun of revenge dried up the wells of human emotion inside him.

He sounded so strange on Friday that as soon as I hung up

I called Dr Martin and requested he make a special trip to Seagate, 'Look in on them under some pretext or the other.'

The following day, the doctor came up to the office to see me. 'Jim,' he said, shaking his head ominously, 'if you care for those two people at all, you'll go down there tonight and make them come home . . . even if you have to use a gun on them. They both need psychiatric care immediately.'

I guess it didn't surprise me – it was something I must have known subconsciously.

'All right, Doc,' I said dully, 'I'll see what I can do.'

That was the night of the full moon – almost a month after their wedding. I drove slower this time because I wanted to think. It was late when Seagate loomed up out of the fog. The wind blowing off the sea was cold and smelled of dampness and rot. The cottage was dark. Their car was gone. I went in and put a match to the papers in the fireplace. It was almost midnight before I heard them driving up the road.

The bungalow door opened and they stood there . . . a man and a woman. Both gaunt, almost cadaverous, with no real signs of life in either except for the sullen fires that burned in hollow sockets of the man's face.

'What are you doing here?' Jack asked.

'Hello, Jack . . . Susan!' I tried to make my voice sound gay, but it didn't work out. Neither answered me. 'Susan,' I repeated. She gazed blankly ahead. All grace and poise had deserted her body, all beauty departed from her face. This was a stranger. Inside, I wept silently as one does when looking upon the face of a loved one before the coffin is closed that final time.

'I'm going to take you home,' I said to Jack.

'No, you're not. We have a job to do – even if you've forgotten your promise to Susan.'

I had dreaded this moment. I stepped forward quickly and slapped Jack as hard as I could. My palm stung in pain. He toppled sideways across the sofa to the floor.

Jack came snarling to his feet, head lowered for the charge. I hit him again. He fell, and struggled upright, then reached in his pocket for something. He fell once again as

my fist connected with his mouth. When he moved no more, I went forward and lifted his emaciated body – a feat that would have been impossible a month ago. Together with the unreasoning hatred in his eyes, there was a look of puzzlement, and I knew some glimmer of sanity still remained in that frail shell.

I took his chin gently in my hand and turned it towards Susan; her thin grey figure was standing there just as it had been since she arrived – a mindless robot waiting for an order to make it move. 'Look at Susan, Jack. Look at her, you fool. She needs help!'

I don't know whether it was the fight, my words or the tragic apparition that had once been his wife that got through to Jack, but suddenly he moaned, 'Oh, God . . .' and began shivering. It was the first healthy sign of emotion I had seen in him in four weeks. He clutched me by the knees, 'Jim, help us. Please!'

'Come on,' I said quietly, tenderly, 'we're going home.' I led him to the car as one does a blind person, and then returned to the house for Susan. The fog had disappeared and the full moon was almost directly overhead – it turned the night into a hollow, ghost-like day. Neither of my passengers moved, although I could hear Jack sobbing quietly in the back seat.

I drove quickly up the dirt road through the sand dunes and out on to the asphalt pavement that led to the state highway. The only sound was that of the car. A solitary gull wheeled across the face of the moon and disappeared.

The next hundred miles were covered without a single word spoken. We had stopped at a traffic signal in a small town called Buena Coho when Susan abruptly shuddered into life.

'It's him,' she moaned. 'It's the man, Jack!' She pointed a trembling finger towards the car next to us. I caught the outline of a man's sleepy face and then his car moved off as the light changed.

Jack sat upright. His hand reached over the seat and gripped her shoulder so tightly that I heard his knuckles crack. 'Are you sure, Susan,' he croaked. 'Are you sure?'

'Oh God; yes. It's the man.' Her eyes were rolling in fright and she seemed near the same hysteria as on the night of the rape. But at least she was no longer a robot – Susan had come to life.

I sped up and overtook the car. The moon illuminated the man's features. We all got a good look at him. 'Are you positive, Susan?' I held my breath waiting for her answer.

She swallowed loudly and shook her head wildly, 'Oh Jim, as God is my witness . . . it's the man.' She began weeping, and her body shook convulsively.

'Get him,' Jack ordered.

And now the hatred and desire for revenge boiled through me too. I could feel it permeating the marrow, closing doors of mental reason, giving me new strength – the strength of a mad man. I waited until we were out of the city, letting the other car pull a short distance away from us.

When we hit a desolate section of road about ten miles outside of Buena Coho, I pressed down on the accelerator and the car jumped forward like some hungry leopard unleashed. We overtook him in seconds. I pulled alongside and edged the car to the side of the road. He spun his wheel to avoid us.

We stopped. Jack and I jumped out and ran towards the car. 'What the hell . . .' the man began but could say no more as I yanked open the door and pulled him out. I put a hammer lock on him and felt a savage satisfaction as I heard the yelp of pain and fear.

'Go get her,' I ordered Jack.

He brought Susan over.

'Look at him,' I said, 'is this the man?' I grabbed his hair and pulled his head up so that the moon outlined every feature.

Susan was screaming hysterically. 'It's him. It's him, Jack. Don't let him hit me again.'

The man spoke for the first time after being pulled out of the car, 'What's . . . what's this all about.' His voice was a frightened croak. 'I haven't done anything. Honest . . .'

Jack stepped forward, his face an ugly portrait of hate and hit the man across the mouth with the barrel of a re-

volver. I could feel the gristle and bone breaking under the impact of the blow. A scream gurgled off as the blood coursed down his throat.

'Stop it,' I shouted, pulling the man around so Jack couldn't hit him again. I turned to Susan, 'Honey - be positive.'

'It's him. It's him. It's him!' The last was a shriek that pierced me like a lance.

The man was moaning, 'I didn't. I didn't do anything. I didn't do anything to her. I'm married and got three kids ... and ... and ...'

I looked at Susan again. She was sure - there was no doubt of the identification. That was good enough for me. I swung him around and nodded to Jack, who slugged him again and again until the gun was so slippery from the blood that it fell out of his hand. The accused slumped into unconsciousness.

The sight was causing my stomach to churn. 'Okay, Jack, go ahead and shoot him - get it over with.'

Jack seemed to gain strength as the hatred poured out of his body in frenzied violence. He was in command of the situation. The look was back in his eyes. 'Let him go,' he ordered. I released the bulky figure of the man and it dropped to the ground. 'Take Susan back to the car,' he commanded.

She was crying like a small child, hurt and bewildered, when I led her to the automobile. 'Don't let him touch me again, Jim ... please.'

'He won't, Susan, I promise you.'

At any minute I expected to hear the shot indicating that Jack had reaped his revenge. But none came. I walked back to the scene.

'Hold him,' Jack said.

'Why?'

'Hold him, dammit! He's never going to do anything like this again.'

'Well, shoot him, then.' It was beginning to get on my nerves. The man was regaining consciousness. He whimpered.

'No,' Jack said, grinning, 'shooting's too good, too easy

... 'Then I saw the knife in his hand.

'What's that for?'

'Just hold him . . . you'll see.' Jack bent down and slapped the man a couple of times. 'Wake up, you bastard. I want you to know what's happening to you.'

He groaned; it sounded like the man tried to say, 'Stop, I haven't done anything.'

The statement infuriated Jack and he savagely kicked him in the face and stomach. 'You lying bastard!' Then he looked up at me and repeated exasperatedly, 'Will you hold him . . . or do I have to get someone else to help me?'

I locked my arms in place on the man and watched with a growing feeling of horror as Jack loosened the man's belt, unzipped the fly, and slipped the trousers down over the hips.

'Jack, for God's sake, kill him.' The voice choked – I was surprised to find it was myself speaking.

Jack grinned in the moonlight and shook his head. He said quietly, 'Mister. Hey, Mister. Wake up.' He prodded a few times with the knife and the man's eyes, uncomprehending, opened.

'That's better,' Jack murmured. He held up the knife, 'See this? Well, watch it now.' Slowly he lowered the knife to the exposed belly and I saw reason and fear flicker through the man's eyes.

The stranger was saying, 'Don't . . . don't . . . I haven't done anything.'

'You're a liar,' Jack said in a deadly voice and jabbed the knife a little ways into the groin area; the man yelped in pain and began babbling incoherently.

I relaxed my hold, but Jack glared up at me and growled, 'Tight. Hold him tight!'

I saw the knife flash once in the moonlight and then the man was thrashing around in spite of my hold on him . . . and he was screaming, high thin screams of pain and desperation and bewilderment. I heard the same sounds once before coming from a colt as the veterinarian's knife sliced through the testicles making him a gelding. It's a hopeless, horrible scream as manhood is taken from a male. Then, just

as Jack finished his operation of revenge, the man slumped once more into complete unconsciousness.

Jack stood up. He was smiling. 'Well, it's all over. This is better than killing him. Now he'll have a long time to repent what he did to Susan.'

I turned aside and my stomach spewed out its contents in protest. I forced myself to look at the figure on the ground. The moon shone on the pained face of a man who looked like some kind of travelling salesman. In spite of what he had done to Susan, I felt sorry for him.

'Come on,' Jack said, his voice beginning to sound almost normal . . . and husky with weariness.

I could hear the man's moans as we walked towards the car.

Jack opened the door and moved in beside Susan. She was staring blankly in front of her again, just as she had before we met the man. Her eyes were focused on the windshield wiper blade.

'Susan, honey,' Jack crooned, 'Susan . . . it's all right now. We've had our revenge.'

Silence. Jack looked at me for advice.

'We'll take her into town - put her under Dr Martin's care,' I said.

He nodded his approval. Jack's face was beginning to assume the lines of my old partner. He was bouncing back to the land of the living and normal. Susan would be all right too . . . one day.

We began our homeward trek.

Once, just after we started moving, I thought I heard, from in back of us, the high pitched horrible screaming of the mutilated man.

We drove. Susan showed no animation at all. It was almost as if she were in a coma. Forty-one miles from the scene of our revenge, we slowed down to go through Vernon. Susan stirred and came to life again. We overtook and began to pass a cream-coloured convertible. The moon showed a thin, bald-headed man about sixty, wearing glasses, who was peering nearsightedly over the top of his steering wheel.

Susan stared at him, her mouth open in horror. And then she screamed.

I felt a sudden surge of terror as, like an echo from some persistent demented dream, I heard Susan moan and say, 'It's him. It's the man, Jack.' She pointed a trembling finger towards the car next to us. 'As God is my witness, it's the same man!'

Jack and I exchanged stricken glances. I knew instinctively that the same thought had just occurred to both of us.

Susan's description!

That first night she had said the rapist was blond, and about our height. The man we had forced off the road was brown haired and shorter than either one of us. But in the heat of revenge, we had forgotten her original description.

And now – her voice came strong, full of hysteria and terror as she pointed towards the thin little bald man, 'It's him . . . as God is my witness . . . it's the man. Don't let him hurt me again, Jack.'

Susan saw 'the man' three more times before we reached the hospital!

And now, when the moon is full, or near full, she still sees him – sometimes in a doctor's face, in the psychiatrist's face, in the faces of people in the newspapers, and once, a year later, in a moment that drove Jack to suicide, she pointed a trembling finger towards her husband and cried, 'It's the man . . . don't let him hurt me.'

She's haunted by the man during the moon.

She's lucky! I'm haunted by him every night.

I don't sleep too well any more. The same dream haunts me – like a scene from some witches' drama too horrible to comprehend. A man by moonlight, a flashing knife and high, thin, desperate screams as revenge is accomplished.

THE CONFESSION OF CHARLES LINKWORTH

by E. F. Benson

E. F. BENSON (1867-1940) wrote a large number of books of fiction. The publication of the society novel, 'Dodo', in 1893 caused something of a sensation by its apparent portrayal of a contemporary leader of fashion. If the popularity of this novel has waned, Benson's volumes of ghost stories resist all literary fashions. Few tales equal his in sheer nightmare horror. 'The Confession of Charles Linkworth' is taken from his book of tales 'The Room in the Tower'.

DR TEESDALE had occasion to attend the condemned man once or twice during the week before his execution, and found him, as is often the case, when the last hope of life has vanished, quiet and perfectly resigned to his fate, and not seeming to look forward with any dread to the morning that each hour that passed brought nearer and nearer. The bitterness of death appeared to be over for him : it was done with when he was told that his appeal was refused. But for those days while hope was not yet quite abandoned, the wretched man had drunk of death daily. In all his experience the doctor had never seen a man so wildly and passionately tenacious of life, nor one so strongly knit to this material world by the sheer animal lust of living. Then the news that hope could no longer be entertained was told him, and his spirit passed out of the grip of that agony of torture and suspense, and accepted the inevitable with indifference. Yet the change was so extraordinary that it seemed to the doctor rather that the news had completely stunned his powers of feeling, and he was, below the numbed surface, still knit into material things as strongly as ever. He had fainted when the

result was told him, and Dr Teesdale had been called in to attend him. But the fit was but transient, and he came out of it into full consciousness of what had happened.

The murder had been a deed of peculiar horror, and there was nothing of sympathy in the mind of the public towards the perpetrator. Charles Linkworth, who now lay under capital sentence, was the keeper of a small stationery store in Sheffield, and there lived with him his wife and mother. The latter was the victim of his atrocious crime; the motive of it being to get possession of the sum of five hundred pounds, which was this woman's property. Linkworth, as came out at the trial, was in debt to the extent of a hundred pounds at the time, and during his wife's absence from home, on a visit to relations, he strangled his mother, and during the night buried the body in the small back garden of his house. On his wife's return, he had a sufficiently plausible tale to account for the elder Mrs Linkworth's disappearance, for there had been constant jarrings and bickerings between him and his mother for the last year or two, and she had more than once threatened to withdraw herself and the eight shillings a week which she contributed to household expenses, and purchase an annuity with her money. It was true, also, that during the younger Mrs Linkworth's absence from home, mother and son had had a violent quarrel arising originally from some trivial point in household management, and that in consequence of this, she had actually drawn her money out of the bank, intending to leave Sheffield next day and settle in London where she had friends. That evening she told him this, and during the night he killed her.

His next step, before his wife's return, was logical and sound. He packed up all his mother's possessions and took them to the station, from which he saw them dispatched to town by passenger train, and in the evening he asked several friends in to supper, and told them of his mother's departure. He did not (logically also, and in accordance with what they probably already knew) feign regret, but said that he and she had never got on well together, and that the cause of peace and quietness was furthered by her going. He told the same story to his wife on her return, identical in every detail,

adding, however, that the quarrel had been a violent one, and that his mother had not even left him her address. This again was wisely thought of : it would prevent his wife from writing to her. She appeared to accept his story completely: indeed there was nothing strange or suspicious about it.

For a while he behaved with the composure and astuteness which most criminals possess up to a certain point, the lack of which, after that, is generally the cause of their detection. He did not, for instance, immediately pay off his debts, but took into his house a young man as lodger, who occupied his mother's room, and he dismissed the assistant in his shop, and did the entire serving himself. This gave the impression of economy, and at the same time he openly spoke of the great improvement in his trade, and not till a month had passed did he cash any of the bank-notes which he had found in a locked drawer in his mother's room. Then he changed two notes of fifty pounds and paid off his creditors.

At that point his astuteness and composure failed him. He opened a deposit account at a local bank with four more fifty-pound notes, instead of being patient, and increasing his balance at the savings bank pound by pound, and he got uneasy about that which he had buried deep enough for security in the back garden. Thinking to render himself safer in this regard, he ordered a cartload of slag and stone fragments, and with the help of his lodger employed the summer evenings, when work was over, in building a sort of rockery over the spot. Then came the chance circumstance which really set match to this dangerous train. There was a fire in the lost luggage office at King's Cross Station (from which he ought to have claimed his mother's property) and one of the two boxes was partially burned. The company was liable for compensation, and his mother's name on her linen, and a letter with the Sheffield address on it, led to the arrival of a purely official and formal notice, stating that the company were prepared to consider claims. It was directed to Mrs Linkworth, and Charles Linkworth's wife received and read it.

It seemed a sufficiently harmless document, but it was endorsed with his death-warrant. For he could give no ex-

planation at all of the fact of the boxes still lying at King's Cross Station, beyond suggesting that some accident had happened to his mother. Clearly he had to put the matter in the hands of the police, with a view to tracing her movements, and if it proved that she was dead, claiming her property, which she had already drawn out of the bank. Such at least was the course urged on him by his wife and lodger, in whose presence the communication from the railway officials was read out, and it was impossible to refuse to take it. Then the silent, uncreaking machinery of justice, characteristic of England, began to move forward. Quiet men lounged about Smith Street, visited banks, observed the supposed increase in trade, and from a house near by looked into the garden where ferns were already flourishing on the rockery. Then came the arrest and the trial, which did not last very long, and on a certain Saturday night the verdict. Smart women in large hats had made the court bright with colour, and in all the crowd there was not one who felt any sympathy with the young athletic-looking man who was condemned. Many of the audience were elderly and respectable mothers, and the crime had been an outrage on motherhood, and they listened to the unfolding of the flawless evidence with strong approval. They thrilled a little when the judge put on the awful and ludicrous little black cap, and spoke the sentence appointed by God.

Linkworth went to pay the penalty for the atrocious deed, which no one who had heard the evidence could possibly doubt that he had done, with the same indifference as had marked his entire demeanour since he knew his appeal had failed. The prison chaplain who had attended him had done his utmost to get him to confess, but his efforts had been quite ineffectual, and to the last he asserted, though without protestation, his innocence. On a bright September morning, when the sun shone warm on the terrible little procession that crossed the prison yard to the shed where was erected the apparatus of death, justice was done, and Dr Teesdale was satisfied that life was immediately extinct. He had been present on the scaffold, had watched the bolt drawn, and the hooded and pinioned figure drop into the pit. He had heard

the chunk and creak of the rope as the sudden weight came on to it, and looking down he had seen the queer twitchings of the hanged body. They had lasted but a second or two; the execution had been perfectly satisfactory.

An hour later he made the post-mortem examination, and found that his view had been correct : the vertebrae of the spine had been broken at the neck, and death must have been absolutely instantaneous. It was hardly necessary even to make that little piece of dissection that proved this, but for the sake of form he did so. And at that moment he had a very curious and vivid mental impression that the spirit of the dead man was close beside him, as if it still dwelt in the broken habitation of its body. But there was no question at all that the body was dead : it had been dead an hour. Then followed another little circumstance that at the first seemed insignificant though curious also. One of the warders entered, and asked if the rope which had been used an hour ago, and was the hangman's perquisite, had by mistake been brought into the mortuary with the body. But there was no trace of it, and it seemed to have vanished altogether, though it was a singular thing to be lost : it was not here; it was not on the scaffold. And though the disappearance was of no particular moment, it was quite inexplicable.

Dr Teesdale was a bachelor and a man of independent means, and lived in a tall-windowed and commodious house in Bedford Square, where a plain cook of surpassing excellence looked after his food, and her husband his person. There was no need for him to practise a profession at all, and he performed his work at the prison for the sake of the study of the minds of criminals. Most crime – the transgression, that is, of the rule of conduct which the human race has framed for the sake of its own preservation – he held to be either the result of some abnormality of the brain, or of starvation. Crimes of theft, for instance, he would by no means refer to one head; often it is true they were the result of actual want, but more often dictated by some obscure disease of the brain. In marked cases it was labelled as kleptomania, but he was convinced there were many others which did not fall directly under the dictation of physical need. More espe-

cially was this the case where the crime in question involved also some deed of violence, and he mentally placed underneath this heading, as he went home that evening, the criminal at whose last moments he had been present that morning. The crime had been abominable, the need of money not so very pressing, and the very abomination and unnaturalness of the murder inclined him to consider the murderer as lunatic rather than criminal. He had been, as far as was known, a man of quiet and kindly disposition, a good husband, a social neighbour. And then he had committed a crime, just one, which put him outside all pales. So monstrous a deed, whether perpetrated by a sane man or a mad one, was intolerable; there was no use for the doer of it on this planet at all. But somehow the doctor felt that he would have been more at one with the execution of justice, if the dead man had confessed. It was morally certain that he was guilty, but he wished that when there was no longer any hope for him, he had endorsed the verdict himself.

He dined alone that evening, and after dinner sat in his study which adjoined the dining-room, and feeling disinclined to read, sat in his great red chair opposite the fireplace, and let his mind graze where it could. At once almost, it went back to the curious sensation he had experienced that morning of feeling that the spirit of Linkworth was present in the mortuary, though life had been extinct for an hour. It was not the first time, especially in cases of sudden death, that he had felt a similar conviction, though perhaps it had never been quite so unmistakable as it had been today. Yet the feeling, to his mind, was quite probably formed on a natural and psychical truth. The spirit – it may be remarked that he was a believer in the doctrine of future life, and the non-extinction of the soul with the death of the body – was very likely unable or unwilling to quit at once and altogether the earthly habitation, very likely it lingered there, earth-bound, for a while. In his leisure hours Dr Teesdale was a considerable student of the occult, for like most advanced and proficient physicians, he clearly recognized how narrow was the boundary of separation between soul and body, how tremendous the influence of the intangible was over material

things, and it presented no difficulty to his mind that a disembodied spirit should be able to communicate directly with those who still were bounded by the finite and material.

His meditations, which were beginning to group themselves into definite sequence, were interrupted at this moment. On his desk near at hand stood his telephone, and the bell rang, not with its usual metallic insistence, but very faintly, as if the current was weak, or the mechanism impaired. However, it certainly was ringing, and he got up and took the combined ear and mouthpiece off its hook.

'Yes, yes,' he said, 'who is it?'

There was a whisper in reply almost inaudible, and quite unintelligible.

'I can't hear you,' he said.

Again the whisper sounded, but with no greater distinctness. Then it ceased altogether.

He stood there, for some half-minute or so, waiting for it to be renewed, but beyond the usual chuckling and croaking, which showed, however, that he was in communication with some other instrument, there was silence. Then he replaced the receiver, rang up the Exchange, and gave his number.

'Can you tell me what number rang me up just now?' he asked.

There was a short pause, then it was given him. It was the number of the prison, where he was doctor.

'Put me on to it, please,' he said.

This was done.

'You rang me up just now,' he said down the tube. 'Yes, I am Dr Teesdale. What is it? I could not hear what you said.'

The voice came back quite clear and intelligible.

'Some mistake, sir,' it said. 'We haven't rung you up.'

'But the Exchange tells me you did, three minutes ago.'

'Mistake at the Exchange, sir,' said the voice.

'Very odd. Well, good night. Warder Draycott, isn't it?'

'Yes, sir; good night, sir.'

Dr Teesdale went back to his big armchair, still less inclined to read. He let his thoughts wander on for a while,

without giving them definite direction, but ever and again his mind kept coming back to that strange little incident of the telephone. Often and often he had been rung up by some mistake, often and often he had been put on to the wrong number by the Exchange, but there was something in this very subdued ringing of the telephone bell, and the unintelligible whisperings at the other end that suggested a very curious train of reflection to his mind, and soon he found himself pacing up and down his room, with his thoughts eagerly feeding on a most unusual pasture.

'But it's impossible,' he said aloud.

He went down as usual to the prison next morning and once again he was strangely beset with the feeling that there was some unseen presence there. He had before now had some odd psychical experiences, and knew that he was a 'sensitive' – one, that is, who is capable, under certain circumstances, of receiving supernormal impressions, and of having glimpses of the unseen world that lies about us. And this morning the presence of which he was conscious was that of the man who had been executed yesterday morning. It was local, and he felt it most strongly in the little prison yard, and as he passed the door of the condemned cell. So strong was it there that he would not have been surprised if the figure of the man had been visible to him, and as he passed through the door at the end of the passage, he turned round, actually expecting to see it. All the time, too, he was aware of a profound horror at his heart, this unseen presence strangely disturbed him. And the poor soul, he felt, wanted something done for it. Not for a moment did he doubt that this impression of his was objective, it was no imaginative phantom of his invention that made itself so real. The spirit of Linkworth was there.

He passed into the infirmary, and for a couple of hours busied himself with his work. But all the time he was aware that the same invisible presence was near him, though its force was manifestly less here than in those places which had been more intimately associated with the man. Finally, before he left, in order to test his theory he looked into the execution shed. But next moment with a face suddenly

stricken pale, he came out again, closing the door hastily. At the top of the steps stood a figure hooded and pinioned, but hazy of outline and only faintly visible. But it was visible, there was no mistake about it.

Dr Teesdale was a man of good nerve, and he recovered himself almost immediately, ashamed of his temporary panic. The terror that had blanched his face was chiefly the effect of startled nerves, not of terrified heart, and yet deeply interested as he was in psychical phenomena, he could not command himself sufficiently to go back there. Or rather he commanded himself, but his muscles refused to act on the message. If this poor earth-bound spirit had any communication to make to him, he certainly much preferred that it should be made at a distance. As far as he could understand, its range was circumscribed. It haunted the prison yard, the condemned cell, the execution shed, it was more faintly felt in the infirmary. Then a further point suggested itself to his mind, and he went back to his room and sent for Warder Draycott, who had answered him on the telephone last night.

'You are quite sure,' he asked, 'that nobody rang me up last night, just before I rang you up?'

There was a certain hesitation in the man's manner which the doctor noticed.

'I don't see how it could be possible, sir,' he said; 'I had been sitting close by the telephone for half an hour before, and again before that. I must have seen him, if anyone had been to the instrument.'

'And you *saw* no one?' said the doctor with a slight emphasis.

The man became more markedly ill at ease.

'No, sir, I *saw* no one,' he said, with the same emphasis.

Dr Teesdale looked away from him.

'But you had perhaps the impression that there was someone there?' he asked carelessly, as if it was a point of no interest.

Clearly Warder Draycott had something on his mind, which he found it hard to speak of.

'Well, sir, if you put it like that,' he began. 'But you would tell me I was half asleep, or had eaten something that dis-

agreed with me at my supper.'

The doctor dropped his careless manner.

'I should do nothing of the kind,' he said, 'any more than you would tell me that I had dropped asleep last night, when I heard my telephone bell ring. Mind you, Draycott, it did not ring as usual, I could only just hear it ringing, though it was close to me. And I could only hear a whisper when I put my ear to it. But when you spoke I heard you quite distinctly. Now I believe there was something – somebody – at this end of the telephone. You were here, and though you saw no one, you, too, felt there was someone there.'

The man nodded.

'I'm not a nervous man, sir,' he said, 'and I don't deal in fancies. But there was something there. It was hovering about the instrument, and it wasn't the wind, because there wasn't a breath of wind stirring, and the night was warm. And I shut the window to make certain. But it went about the room, sir, for an hour or more. It rustled the leaves of the telephone book, and it ruffled my hair when it came close to me. And it was bitter cold, sir.'

The doctor looked him straight in the face.

'Did it remind you of what had been done yesterday morning?' he asked suddenly.

Again the man hesitated.

'Yes, sir,' he said at length. 'Convict Charles Linkworth.'

Dr Teesdale nodded reassuringly.

'That's it,' he said. 'Now, are you on duty tonight?'

'Yes, sir; I wish I wasn't.'

'I know how you feel, I have felt exactly the same myself. Now whatever this is, it seems to want to communicate with me. By the way, did you have any disturbance in the prison last night?'

'Yes, sir, there was half a dozen men who had the nightmare. Yelling and screaming they were, and quiet men too, usually. It happens sometimes the night after an execution. I've known it before, though nothing like what it was last night.'

'I see. Now, if this – this thing you can't see wants to get at the telephone again tonight, give it every chance. It will

probably come about the same time. I can't tell you why, but that usually happens. So unless you must, don't be in this room where the telephone is, just for an hour to give it plenty of time between half past nine and half past ten. I will be ready for it at the other end. Supposing I am rung up, I will, when it has finished, ring you up to make sure that I was not being called in – in the usual way.'

'And there is nothing to be afraid of, sir?' asked the man.

Dr Teesdale remembered his own moment of terror this morning, but he spoke quite sincerely.

'I am sure there is nothing to be afraid of,' he said reassuringly.

Dr Teesdale had a dinner engagement that night, which he broke, and was sitting alone in his study by half past nine. In the present state of human ignorance as to the law which governs the movements of spirits severed from the body, he could not tell the warder why it was that their visits are so often periodic, timed to punctuality according to our scheme of hours, but in scores of tabulated instances of the appearance of *revenants*, especially if the soul was in sore need of help, as might be the case here, he found that they came at the same hour of day or night. As a rule, too, their power of making themselves seen or heard or felt grew greater for some little while after death, subsequently growing weaker as they became less earth-bound, or often after that ceasing altogether, and he was prepared tonight for a less indistinct impression. The spirit apparently for the early hours of its disembodiment is weak, like a moth newly broken out from its chrysalis – and then suddenly the telephone bell rang, not so faintly as the night before, but still not with its ordinary imperative tone.

Dr Teesdale instantly got up, put the receiver to his ears. And what he heard was heart-broken sobbing, strong spasms that seemed to tear the weeper.

He waited for a little before speaking, himself cold with some nameless fear, and yet profoundly moved to help, if he was able.

'Yes, yes,' he said at length, hearing his own voice tremble. 'I am Dr Teesdale. What can I do for you? And who are

you?" he added, though he felt that it was a needless question.

Slowly the sobbing died down, the whispers took its place, still broken by crying.

'I want to tell, sir – I want to tell – I must tell.'

'Yes, tell me, what is it?' said the doctor.

'No, not you – another gentleman, who used to come to see me. Will you speak to him what I say to you? – I can't make him hear me or see me.'

'Who are you?' asked Dr Teesdale suddenly.

'Charles Linkworth. I thought you knew. I am very miserable. I can't leave the prison – and it is cold. Will you send for the other gentleman?'

'Do you mean the chaplain?' asked Dr Teesdale.

'Yes, the chaplain. He read the service when I went across the yard yesterday. I shan't be so miserable when I have told.'

The doctor hesitated a moment. This was a strange story that he would have to tell Mr Dawkins, the prison chaplain, that at the other end of the telephone was the spirit of the man executed yesterday. And yet he soberly believed that it was so that this unhappy spirit was in misery, and wanted to 'tell'. There was no need to ask what he wanted to tell.

'Yes, I will ask him to come here,' he said at length.

'Thank you, sir, a thousand times. You will make him come, won't you?'

The voice was growing fainter.

'It must be tomorrow night,' it said. 'I can't speak longer now. I have to go to see – oh, my God, my God.'

The sobs broke out afresh, sounding fainter and fainter. But it was in a frenzy of terrified interest that Dr Teesdale spoke.

'To see what?' he cried. 'Tell me what you are doing, what is happening to you?'

'I can't tell you; I mayn't tell you,' said the voice very faint. 'That is part —' and it died away altogether.

Dr Teesdale waited a little, but there was no further sound of any kind, except the chuckling and croaking of the instrument. He put the receiver on to its hook again, and then be-

came aware for the first time that his forehead was streaming with some cold dew of horror. His ears sang; his heart beat very quick and faint, and he sat down to recover himself. Once or twice he asked himself if it was possible that some terrible joke was being played on him, but he knew that could not be so; he felt perfectly sure that he had been speaking with a soul in torment of contrition for the terrible and irremediable act it had committed. It was no delusion of his senses, either; here in this comfortable room of his in Bedford Square, with London cheerfully roaring round him, he had spoken with the spirit of Charles Linkworth.

But he had no time (nor indeed inclination, for somehow his soul sat shuddering within him) to indulge in meditation. First of all he rang up the prison.

‘Warder Draycott?’ he asked.

There was a perceptible tremor in the man’s voice as he answered.

‘Yes, sir. Is it Dr Teesdale?’

‘Yes. Has anything happened here with you?’

Twice it seemed that the man tried to speak and could not. At the third attempt the words came.

‘Yes, sir. He has been here. I saw him go into the room where the telephone is.’

‘Ah! Did you speak to him?’

‘No, sir: I sweated and prayed. And there’s half a dozen men as have been screaming in their sleep tonight. But it’s quiet again now. I think he has gone into the execution shed.’

‘Yes. Well, I think there will be no more disturbance now. By the way, please give me Mr Dawkins’s home address.’

This was given him, and Dr Teesdale proceeded to write to the chaplain, asking him to dine with him on the following night. But suddenly he found that he could not write at his accustomed desk, with the telephone standing close to him, and he went upstairs to the drawing-room which he seldom used, except when he entertained his friends. There he recaptured the serenity of his nerves, and could control his hand. The note simply asked Mr Dawkins to dine with

him next night, when he wished to tell him a very strange history and ask his help. 'Even if you have any other engagement,' he concluded, 'I seriously request you to give it up. Tonight, I did the same. I should bitterly have regretted it if I had not.'

Next night, accordingly, the two sat at their dinner in the doctor's dining-room, and when they were left to their cigarettes and coffee the doctor spoke.

'You must not think me mad, my dear Dawkins,' he said, 'when you hear what I have got to tell you.'

Mr Dawkins laughed.

'I will certainly promise not to do that,' he said.

'Good. Last night and the night before, a little later in the evening than this, I spoke through the telephone with the spirit of the man we saw executed two days ago – Charles Linkworth.'

The chaplain did not laugh. He pushed back his chair, looking annoyed.

'Teesdale,' he said, 'is it to tell me this – I don't want to be rude – but this bogey-tale that you have brought me here this evening?'

'Yes. You have not heard half of it. He asked me last night to get hold of you. He wants to tell you something. We can guess, I think, what it is.'

Dawkins got up.

'Please let me hear no more of it,' he said. 'The dead do not return. In what state or under what condition they exist has not been revealed to us. But they have done with all material things.'

'But I must tell you more,' said the doctor. 'Two nights ago I was rung up, but very faintly, and could hear only whispers. I instantly inquired where the call came from and was told it came from the prison. I rang up the prison, and Warder Draycott told me that nobody had rung me up. He, too, was conscious of a presence.'

'I think that man drinks,' said Dawkins sharply.

The doctor paused a moment.

'My dear fellow, you should not say that sort of thing,' he said. 'He is one of the steadiest men we have got. And if he

drinks, why not I also?’

The chaplain sat down again.

‘You must forgive me,’ he said, ‘but I can’t go into this. These are dangerous matters to meddle with. Besides, how do you know it is not a hoax?’

‘Played by whom?’ asked the doctor. ‘Hark!’

The telephone bell suddenly rang. It was clearly audible to the doctor.

‘Don’t you hear it?’ he said.

‘Hear what?’

‘The telephone bell ringing.’

‘I hear no bell,’ said the chaplain, rather angrily. ‘There is no bell ringing.’

The doctor did not answer, but went through into his study, and turned on the lights. Then he took the receiver and mouthpiece off its hook.

‘Yes?’ he said, in a voice that trembled. ‘Who is it? Yes: Mr Dawkins is here. I will try and get him to speak to you.’

He went back into the other room.

‘Dawkins,’ he said, ‘there is a soul in agony. I pray you to listen. For God’s sake come and listen.’

The chaplain hesitated a moment.

‘As you will,’ he said.

He took up the receiver and put it to his ear.

‘I am Mr Dawkins,’ he said.

He waited.

‘I can hear nothing whatever,’ he said at last. ‘Ah, there was something there. The faintest whisper.’

‘Ah, try to hear, try to hear!’ said the doctor.

Again the chaplain listened. Suddenly he laid the instrument down, frowning.

‘Something – somebody said, “I killed her, I confess it. I want to be forgiven.” It’s a hoax, my dear Teesdale. Somebody knowing your spiritualistic leanings is playing a very grim joke on you. I *can’t* believe it.’

Dr Teesdale took up the receiver.

‘I am Dr Teesdale,’ he said. ‘Can you give Mr Dawkins some sign that it is you?’

Then he laid it down again.

'He says he thinks he can,' he said. 'We must wait.'

The evening was again very warm, and the window into the paved yard at the back of the house was open. For five minutes or so the two men stood in silence, waiting, and nothing happened. Then the chaplain spoke.

'I think that is sufficiently conclusive,' he said.

Even as he spoke a very cold draught of air suddenly blew into the room, making the papers on the desk rustle. Dr Teesdale went to the window and closed it.

'Did you feel that?' he asked.

'Yes, a breath of air. Chilly.'

Once again in the closed room it stirred again.

'And did you feel that?' asked the doctor.

The chaplain nodded. He felt his heart hammering in his throat suddenly.

'Defend us from all peril and danger of this coming night,' he exclaimed.

'Something is coming!' said the doctor.

As he spoke it came. In the centre of the room not three yards away from them stood the figure of a man with his head bent over on to his shoulder, so that the face was not visible. Then he took his head in both his hands and raised it like a weight, and looked them in the face. The eyes and tongue protruded, a livid mark was round the neck. Then there came a sharp rattle on the boards of the floor, and the figure was no longer there. But on the floor there lay a new rope.

For a long while neither spoke. The sweat poured off the doctor's face, and the chaplain's white lips whispered prayers. Then by a huge effort the doctor pulled himself together. He pointed at the rope.

'It has been missing since the execution,' he said.

Then again the telephone bell rang. This time the chaplain needed no prompting. He went to it at once and the ringing ceased. For a while he listened in silence.

'Charles Linkworth,' he said at length, 'in the sight of God, in whose presence you stand, are you truly sorry for your sin?'

Some answer inaudible to the doctor came, and the chap-

lain closed his eyes. And Dr Teesdale knelt as he heard the words of the Absolution.

At the close there was silence again.

'I can hear nothing more,' said the chaplain, replacing the receiver.

Presently the doctor's manservant came in with the tray of spirits and syphon. Dr Teesdale pointed without looking to where the apparition had been.

'Take the rope that is there and burn it, Parker,' he said.

There was a moment's silence.

'There is no rope, sir,' said Parker.

KALI

by John D. Keefauver

I KNOW WHEN it began, the nightmare, and I know why. I know its past, its present. And I know its tomorrow. I know it will never end.

This I accept. This I bow to. This is mine to live with.

But what I shall never accept, cannot accept, is the abnormality. Blood gives me warmth. The edge of a knife, used, brings relief. Death is a pleasant thing.

The horror is this : *terrible things give me happiness.*

So strange, so terribly strange: I, who have always had an aversion to blood; I, who have always been a lover of animals; I, a gentle man, a teacher of children. I am these things, I swear it. Yet, for the last few weeks – months, I suppose; time has become meaningless – I have fed, as if it were dope, on a nightmare that, shorn of the occult, the mysticism of India, is nothing more than brutality.

A girl, of course. A woman, a quiet, powerful creature, a mysterious, manila-skinned, syrupy-eyed woman of India. Like a flower she came out of the poverty of the land and drew me down into horror, brutality, blood. This was her present. This is my nightmare.

I suppose I should have suspected something, or, at least,

been more hesitant, when she told me her name was Kali. I knew that Kali, to the Hindu, is the goddess of destruction and death as well as of motherhood. But, at the time, I had become too enchanted with her beauty and her gentleness – yes, *gentleness* – to do more than give a passing thought to the name, to the haunting musicality of it.

I met Kali in Calcutta on a hot, summer morning, just under two months ago now. An elementary school teacher in San Francisco, I had saved for many months for a vacation in India. The mysticism, the antiquity, the religion, the humble, unmoving strength of its people had attracted me since childhood, and I had been determined to visit the country. I flew into Calcutta one June evening. The following morning I met Kali next to the Government Tourist Office on Old Court House Street.

I immediately sensed her business. She was an unlicensed guide who simply stood outside the tourist office and collared visitors before they could get inside. Of course, I should have been wary of her because she was not officially connected with the office. But she was a beauty in her sari, an explosion of colour. Asphalt-black hair, glittering teeth, eyes like shimmering puddles of warmth. In short, she was a beautiful young woman, and I was a young man – a hungry man, a bachelor, handsome and intelligent enough to be choosy.

She stopped me cold with her brisk yet smiling, 'Good morning, sir. May I show you Calcutta?' Her English accent clashed strangely with the India of her sari.

'Perhaps,' I said, grinning easily with her. I liked her immediately – unfortunately.

Very quickly then she went through a list of attractions that I, as a tourist, should see, pointing out the merits of each and her qualifications as a first-class guide for them. 'I'm cheap too.' Her laugh popped in me like a champagne bubble – and right at that point, yes, right then there passed between us an understanding, an empathy, a current – call it what you will. It was the thing that men and women since all time have felt when his or her key fits, *exactly*, the other's lock. I wanted to touch her.

Yet, her professionalism, however unbecoming, did not

totally disappear until I told her I wished to visit the Kali Temple. As I look back – as I have done so many times, going over and over each detail of that first meeting and my subsequent deterioration – I realize that of all the tourist attractions she mentioned, she *repeated* only the name of one, Kali Temple, dwelling on it much longer and much more appreciatively than on the others. It was clear that the temple was easily her first choice. Yes, I see it now – too late: she wanted very badly to go there herself.

When I agreed to go with her to the temple, partly to please her and partly because I had read of the goat sacrifices I would see there, she became enchantingly charming and dropped all pretence of professional detachment, and off we went, chatting happily, to Kali Temple.

If only I had retained a sliver of my normal cautiousness (I had, prior to meeting Kali, always considered myself a thinking, rather than an emotional person), I would have hesitated to go with her if for no other reason than that an Indian woman accosting a strange man on the streets, especially a foreigner, was considered, even in a business venture, as a most abnormal and suspicious action in that country. Too, I had shrugged off a negative shake of the head by a tourist office employee; he had come to the door of the office as Kali and I walked away, and I had seen – yet ignored – his glance of warning.

I forget the name of the street the temple was on, but the location is not important. I remember it was some distance from Dalhousie Square, the nerve centre of Calcutta, and that, dodging an occasional sacred cow, we went there by taxi through dirty, narrow streets, choked with carts, white-shawled men, and sari-wearing women. A number of raggedy, filthy beggars were in front of the temple, a glittering, ornate building, its walls surfaced with polished bits of gold and silver-coloured glass, richly incongruous to the bleak poverty which surrounded it. When the scavengers saw me, a foreigner, getting out of a taxi, they swarmed around me. But, seeing Kali, they immediately shrank back, lowering their eyes, frightened. I was astounded. She had done nothing, said nothing; her expression had not changed. Her

very presence frightened the beggars. I was quite impressed at the time; later – now – I curse myself for not recognizing the evil in her. The beggars did; but, of course, they knew her; I did not.

As I look back, I even thought little, if anything, of the obeisance and fear shown to Kali (the woman) by the faithful inside the sparkling temple. When these poorly dressed people shied away from her, evading her eyes, making a way for her approach, I thought it was simply because she was a guide with a rich foreigner. The worshippers quickly laid their *leis*, purchased from flower stalls outside the temple, before goddess Kali and left us relatively alone. It was when I saw Kali's response to the goddess, when I saw the intense, devoted expression that came over the young woman's face her seeming fusion with the goddess – it was here that I suppose I felt the first real uneasiness about my guide.

The goddess, wife of Siva the Destroyer, one god of the Hindu trinity, was a horrible creation. A three-eyed, four-armed, gold-coloured, four-foot-high image, she had a gaping mouth and protruding tongue; metal snakes coiled around her, and she danced on what appeared to be a corpse. Her earrings depicted dead men, her necklace a string of skulls; her face and breasts were smeared with blood. Two of her four hands held a sword and a severed head, the other two, quaintly, were extended in protection and blessing. For Kali, strangely, is the goddess of motherhood, *and* destruction and death.

I felt a mingling of disgust, curiosity, excitement, and, I suppose, fear when I saw the strange image. But as I glanced at Kali, the woman, uneasiness became easily the dominant emotion. She was gazing at the weird goddess with a look of intense concentration, as if she were detached from me, from the faithful, from the world about her. It was as if, yes, as if Kali the woman felt joined to Kali the goddess, fused, as if they had merged in that glittering temple among the filthy, the ragged, and the poor.

I suppose we would have been standing there yet if I had not finally made a move to leave. With my words she seemed to come out of her trance – partially, anyway. She mumbled

something in Hindu to the goddess, then reluctantly led me outside. 'She is so lovely,' she murmured, not looking at me. Even her voice now seemed detached, as if she were talking to only herself. 'So powerful.'

'In a weird sort of way,' I couldn't help but put in.

Kali's expression still had most of its strange, far away – godlike? – quality. 'We will watch the sacrifices now,' she said.

As if she didn't realize I was with her, she started walking across the temple grounds towards a wall that surrounded the area. I followed her, by now thinking that she probably came to the temple every day regardless of whether she had a tourist with her or not.

At the time, I thought my interest in goat sacrifices was purely clinical, intellectual, not emotional, certainly not morbid, or, at least, not any more morbid than the attraction of a highway fatality to the crowd that is drawn to the collision scene. Now, however, weeks later, the nightmare still destroying me, I wonder. Out of all the places I could have chosen to visit in Calcutta that morning with Kali, I chose to see the murder of five black goats to goddess Kali.

Bleating, eyes darting with fright, the young animals, one by one, were brought from a nearby pen by the executioner. He wore a blood-spattered tunic; even his unshaved-face was red-dotted, reminding me of the crimson betel stain you see on the streets of Calcutta, spat out by chewers of the nut. The goats, brought to the temple by the faithful making sacrifices that sunny morning, were placed, one by one, on a wooden contraption so that their necks were stretched for the slice of the knife. Their feet were tied. As each goat was placed on the chopping block, worshippers who had brought that particular animal mumbled prayers in Hindi.

A flash of the knife and the head dropped to the ground, spurting blood. Picking it up, the executioner held the head over small copper cups, letting blood pour into each one. Those who had sacrificed the animal came forward and, dipping their fingers into the blood, each put a crimson spot on his forehead, then went to claim the body of the goat. The body had been hung from a hook in the wall surround-

ing the temple. Guttled, it was taken home and eaten. 'No food is wasted in India,' Kali told me.

The area was fogged with flies. And every few seconds starving dogs darted to spilled blood and licked it hungrily. The executioner, before he killed each goat, chased the dogs away.

I was both fascinated and repulsed. But my feelings were nothing compared to those of Kali. Her expression, her intensity during the sacrifices was one of complete absorption. Her whole body seemed to strain towards the bloody mess. She was not a spectator. She was fused with the sacrifice, swallowed by it. It was almost as if she herself were the executioner, or, I thought later, more accurately, as if she herself were Kali the goddess receiving the sacrificed goats.

As if she herself were receiving the sacrificed goats. If only I had realized that at the time. If only I had *half* realized it. If only I had suspected.

Again, I was the one who had to make the move to leave.

She stayed silent as we left the temple and walked up a street looking for a cab. She walked in flowing dignity, her sari fluttering only slightly, her brilliant eyes abstracted, her expression still dreamlike. 'Were you disgusted?' she finally asked.

'Some. A little. Mainly I was fascinated.'

Although, as a polite guest in a foreign land, I deliberately played down my feeling of disgust at the killings, my statement contained more truth than I realized at the time.

'Really? Most foreigners are horribly disgusted.'

'I'm not the average foreigner,' I grinned.

At my words, at my seeming acceptance of the sacrifice, she did something I'll never forget. She touched me. It was only a slight pressure on my wrist, a quick, gentle touch : comradeship, empathy, the link again, the same thing I had felt when I met her. But as I look back, I know what she meant to tell me : that we were – God forbid – alike.

Her smile was very gentle. 'In the old days,' she said, 'men, not goats, were sacrificed to Kali.'

I nodded. I felt she was waiting for me to say something more – denounce the sacrifice of men? When I said nothing,

her smile grew and, glancing at her more closely, I saw in her eyes a glitter, a powerful sparkling quality, a hunger. Her eyes, as if she were a demanding goddess herself, seemed to swallow me.

And, God have mercy, I wanted to be.

'I'm glad . . . you feel that way,' she murmured. 'Very glad.'

We walked on in silence. Once her hip brushed against me; it was as if fire had touched my soul.

'I want to show you more of Kali,' she said after a taxi had passed. She had not tried to hail it. 'That is my name.'

'Kali?'

She nodded. 'I named myself after the goddess.' She smiled, very gently. 'As I said, the goddess used to like men. This Kali still does.'

'Would you like to come to my room?' she said, not immediately.

Even now I'm not sure if I actually heard the bleat of the goat when I reached Kali's room, or if I imagined it, hearing in my mind, remembering, the voices of the doomed animals at the temple. At any rate, after Kali and I got out of the taxi into a horribly poverty riddled part of the city (streets like sewers of misery), she led me into an alleyway so narrow that when a sacred cow came ambling towards us we had to back up into the street in order to let the bulky female by. Kali lived in a small room in (perhaps I should say *under*) one of a number of unpainted wooden structures that appeared to have been nailed to each other by a drunken carpenter. Her windowless room contained only the barest essentials : a saggy cot, a wooden-legged sofa, a few chairs, a table, a scarred bureau, a lamp, which she lit upon entering. One end of the room was curtained off.

'Please,' she said, 'sit down. I'll bring you a drink.'

She disappeared through a doorway and came back in a moment with a lukewarm glass of dark liquid, but not before I definitely heard again the bleat of a goat. The animal seemed to be very near, and at the time I thought it probably belonged to a neighbour. The sound disturbed me more than

a little : it reminded me, of course, of the bloody mess I had just seen at the temple.

'Drink,' she said.

'Where's yours?'

'Later.'

The stuff tasted odd : tangy yet chalky, heavy as milk of magnesia, salty, non-alcoholic. 'What is it?'

She shrugged, smiling gently. 'It is for you. Drink. It's very good.'

She sat on the sofa beside me and carefully watched me drink half of the liquid. When I put the glass down she slid closer to me, her eyes like honey ; I felt her cheek brush mine, her breath warm and rapid. She caressed my neck, very gently. 'Drink it all,' she said, giving her sari a slight pull, showing golden legs, inching it up just a trifle, not really disrobing, or even starting to, but hinting, implying, smiling, saying, 'Hurry, drink it all, I want to show you . . . Kali.' Her smile, goddam her smile !

I drank, I gulped down the liquid. I was trembling. She was so beautiful . . . and her smile, her hinting, her urging. So I drank, a fool !

A fool ! As soon as I had downed the drink she got up from the sofa and went behind the curtained end of the room. 'Wait,' she said. 'I'll be back in a moment.'

A moment? An hour? I'm not sure. The drink went to work immediately. No sooner had she disappeared behind the curtain than I began to feel myself change into a – as close as I can describe it – a dreamlike state. The room, the things in it, lost their harshness. I seemed to merge with them. My body seemed to be weightless ; when I moved my arm it felt as if it were floating. I felt deliciously warm, particularly in my stomach. I had a great sense of well-being, a godlike quality : all was good and right with the world. I was powerful ; I could do anything. I was a god. My sense of smell went wild : my nose was assailed by strange smells, odours totally new to me – except one : I smelled in that room something I had smelled less than an hour ago at Kali Temple : I smelled a goat. A goat was in the room.

I was not at all disturbed by the realization of the animal's

presence. It struck me as quite normal; I was a god (Siva?), and to me, unto my most high, most powerful presence came all creatures. Come unto me, goat; let me bless you; come to me and ye shall be saved.

Ridiculous? Perhaps now – to you.

Nothing, I tell you, nothing! was out of place, was beyond normality. I swear it! In my condition I did no wrong! I swear it!

And so when I saw Kali come out from behind the curtain dressed as a horrible Kali the goddess, when I saw that she carried a young black goat, when she handed me the goat and a butcher knife, when she told me I was to sacrifice the animal to her, I saw nothing unusual in it. I was a god and all was right with the world. Blood is warmth. Blood is peace. Blood is milk.

Believe me!

As nearly as possible, Kali the woman had tried to appear as Kali the goddess. I have tried to shut the sight from my mind. I cannot, just as I cannot begin to understand why she would do such a thing, *want* to do such a thing. She gave me a reason (as you will see), but her *real* reason lay buried deep within the mystery of India. Call it insanity, if you wish. Who *really* knows? She had devised a set of arms (they looked to be those of a mannequin), which she had attached to her shoulder blades somehow, thus giving herself four arms. Fastened to her forehead by a band was a glass eye. She kept her tongue protruded, her mouth open. What appeared to be stuffed snakes were wrapped around her arms, her earrings and necklace looked as if they were made of bones. One real hand held a knife, the other a human skull (not hard to find in India), and her artificial hands were extended in what could be called protection and blessing. Other than these attachments, she was naked, golden brown in the light of the lamp, shimmering, shiny. She had oiled her body.

And, oh God, I desired the creature!

I remember the warmth of the baby goat in my hands, his trembling and pitiful whimpers, almost human, his struggles; but I, a god, felt only love for this 'child' who had come

forth to be sacrificed, voluntarily, out of love for me, his god, out of love for Kali, his goddess. Oh, the power and love for all mankind I felt. Believe me !

Believe me, as I believed Kali when she pulled back the curtain and stepped upon a small foot-high platform and in a voice murky, muffled, as if she were speaking from a great distance, said, 'I am Kali, goddess of motherhood, bride of death and destruction,' her eyes raised to the heavens, her beautiful breasts lifting.

I believed ! and I was so very, very happy.

'I Kali, accept this sacrifice. In the name of my son, I accept. My only son, my sacrificed son, I accept. I, Kali, goddess of motherhood, bride of death and destruction, accept this goat as I accepted my only son, my sacrificed son.'

I believed ! I accepted the story of her sacrificed son. To me (then !) it was so normal, so magnificent. A sacrificed son. Of course ! Goddess Kali, until about one hundred years ago, accepted men as sacrifices. Of course Kali would sacrifice her own son. What greater glory could there be than this ! What greater glory . . .

Her eyes came down and flowed into me and she said, 'Now.'

Without hesitation, almost hurrying, feeling great happiness, I pulled the blade of the knife across the throat of the goat.

But this is not my nightmare. This led to my nightmare, true. This *started* the torment that is slowly driving me insane, that has driven me to write this . . . confession, I suppose it must be called. But this hell itself was not my nightmare.

The torment – the guilt, the shock, the disgust – came immediately with the murder of the goat. As its blood gushed down my hand, dripped on to my clothes, my dreamlike state, my hypnotic condition, abruptly disappeared. It was as if the act of cutting, along with the actual sight and feel of blood, had sliced, too, into my hypnotized soul and let in the brisk air of reality. As if I had awakened out of a dream,

I suddenly found myself holding a dead goat in front of a hopelessly insane woman.

From that point on, until I reached my Calcutta hotel, nothing is clear. The shock, the realization of what I had done, numbed me – fortunately, I suppose. I remember, hazily, dropping the still-warm animal (I can, even now, hear the dead thump of it hitting the floor), looking in horror at my bloody hands, then turning, half crazed, and running from the room. Somehow – I have no idea how – I reached my hotel. The next thing I remember is scrubbing blood off my hands, for hours it seems, scrubbing long after all traces of it had disappeared, filling and refilling my bathroom sink, trying to scrub away horror, disgust, guilt.

I failed. Horror, disgust, guilt – they remained, they still remain, now, here in San Francisco. I have stopped teaching. It is impossible for me now to associate with the innocent, to have their minds in my hands – bloody hands. I do nothing now but sit in my room and drink, dreading the coming of night – and sleep. I sit in my room and listen – for the sound of a goat.

It began immediately, the nightmare. (I mean the conventional nightmare, the one of sleep, the lesser one.) That first night, the night after the day with Kali, I'll never forget. A night of sleepless horror. I couldn't pry my mind away from what I had done, from every detail of its terror, from my meeting Kali to my rushing from her room. Asleep or awake, it was all I could think about, feel about. And this night was only the first of many.

I cut short my visit to India and returned to San Francisco. The nightmare persisted. I took sleeping pills. The nightmare continued. I sought out psychiatric help. The nightmare did not stop. Every night. Every night. I saw blood on my hands – imagined it. On my clothes, although I had long ago thrown away *all* the clothing I had worn the day I was with Kali. I gave up my teaching job. I began to drink heavily. The nightmare persisted.

Then I found relief – of sorts. A relief that, though doing away with the conventional nightmare, led to one much more hideous. In brief (I must end this), I stopped the lesser

nightmare (if you can call it that) but started one that is now driving me relentlessly insane. Driving me insane *because I find happiness in horror*.

The manner in which I might find relief had been apparent, if not obvious, to me for some time. I, of course, fought doing it – the act – from the very beginning. Each day, however, as my torment increased, I came closer to the act. Finally, after undergoing a number of particularly intense and thorough sessions of psychiatric analyses, all with totally negative results, I decided, my psychiatrist concurring, to try that one thing that might save me.

It didn't. It merely replaced one horror with a far greater one, a horror from which I gained happiness. The second terror did not begin immediately, however. At first, I felt relief, my original nightmare vanished. That first night, after committing the act, I slept soundly, the first such night of sleep I'd had since my day with Kali in Calcutta. The second night after the act, however, I had a trace of my original nightmare; and the third night, an increase of it. By the fourth night after the act the nightmare was back with all its terror.

So I committed the act a second time, in my hotel room again. My reaction to it was repetitious : I gained temporary relief, my nightmare vanished at first, then gradually increased until, by the fourth night, it was back in its full horror.

I repeated the act a number of times. Each act brought the same results. It was obvious that the only way I was to find happiness, even temporary, was to continue doing my barbaric acts *every night for the rest of my life*.

And with this knowledge, this realization of my depravity, I lost all hope.

I am lost. I sit now on the edge of my bathtub, my bare feet inside it. The goat – black, of course – is before me, feet bound, in the tub. I pick up the knife. (What else is there to do?) I bend over the goat. I place the blade against his neck. I cut.

MEN WITHOUT BONES

by Gerald Kersh

WE WERE loading bananas into the *Claire Dodge* at Puerto Pobre, when a feverish little fellow came aboard. Everyone stepped aside to let him pass – even the soldiers who guard the port with nickel-plated Remington rifles, and who go barefoot but wear polished leather leggings. They stood back from him because they believed that he was afflicted-of-God, mad; harmless but dangerous; best left alone.

All the time the naphtha flares were hissing, and from the hold came the reverberation of the roaring voice of the foreman of the gang down below crying: 'Fruta! Fruta! FRUTA!' The leader of the dock gang bellowed the same cry, throwing down stem after stem of brilliant green bananas. The occasion would be memorable for this, if for nothing else – the magnificence of the night, the bronze of the Negro foreman shining under the flares, the jade green of that fruit, and the mixed odours of the waterfront. Out of one stem of bananas ran a hairy grey spider, which frightened the crew and broke the banana-chain, until a Nicaraguan boy, with a laugh, killed it with his foot. It was harmless, he said.

It was about then that the madman came aboard, unhindered, and asked me: 'Bound for where?'

He spoke quietly and in a carefully modulated voice; but there was a certain blank, lost look in his eyes that suggested to me that I keep within ducking distance of his restless hands which, now that I think of them, put me in mind of that grey, hairy, bird-eating spider.

'Mobile, Alabama,' I said.

'Take me along?' he asked.

'None of my affair. Sorry. Passenger myself,' I said. 'The skipper's ashore. Better wait for him on the wharf. He's the boss.'

'Would you happen, by any chance, to have a drink about you?'

Giving him some rum, I asked : 'How come they let you aboard?'

'I'm not crazy,' he said. 'Not actually . . . a little fever, nothing more. Malaria, dengue fever, jungle fever, rat-bite fever. Feverish country, this, and others of the same nature. Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Goodbody, Doctor of Science of Osbaldeston University. Does it convey nothing to you? No? Well then; I was assistant to Professor Yeoward. Does *that* convey anything to you?'

I said : 'Yeoward, Professor Yeoward? Oh yes. He was lost, wasn't he, somewhere in the upland jungle beyond the source of the Amer River?'

'Correct!' cried the little man who called himself Goodbody. 'I saw him get lost.'

Fruta! – Fruta! – Fruta! – Fruta! came the voices of the men in the hold. There was rivalry between their leader and the big black stevedore ashore. The flares spluttered. The green bananas came down. And a kind of sickly sigh came out of the jungle, off the rotting river – not a wind, not a breeze – something like the foul breath of high fever.

Trembling with eagerness and, at the same time, shaking with fever chills, so that he had to use two hands to raise his glass to his lips – even so, he spilled most of the rum – Doctor Goodbody said : 'For God's sake, get me out of this country – take me to Mobile – hide me in your cabin!'

'I have no authority,' I said, 'but you are an American citizen; you can identify yourself; the Consul will send you home.'

'No doubt. But that would take time. The Consul thinks I am crazy too. And if I don't get away, I fear that I really will go out of my mind. Can't you help me? I'm afraid.'

'Come on, now,' I said. 'No one shall hurt you while I'm around. What are you afraid of?'

'Men without bones,' he said, and there was something in his voice that stirred the hairs on the back of my neck. 'Little fat men without bones!'

I wrapped him in a blanket, gave him some quinine, and

let him sweat and shiver for a while, before I asked, humouring him : 'What men without bones?'

He talked in fits and starts in his fever, his reason staggering just this side of delirium :

'... What men without bones? ... They are nothing to be afraid of, actually. It is they who are afraid of you. You can kill them with your boot, or with a stick. ... They are something like jelly. No, it is not really fear – it is the nausea, the disgust they inspire. It overwhelms. It paralyses ! I have seen a jaguar, I tell you – a full-grown jaguar – stand frozen, while they clung to him, in hundreds, and ate him up alive ! Believe me, I saw it. Perhaps it is some oil they secrete, some odour they give out ... I don't know ...'

Then, weeping, Doctor Goodbody said : 'Oh, nightmare – nightmare – nightmare ! To think of the depths to which a noble creature can be degraded by hunger ! Horrible, horrible !'

'Some debased form of life you found in the jungle above the source of the Amer?' I suggested. 'Some degenerate kind of anthropoid?'

'No, no, no. *Men!* Now surely you remember Professor Yeoward's ethnological expedition?'

'It was lost,' I said.

'All but me,' he said. '... We had bad luck. At the Anaña Rapids we lost two canoes, half our supplies, and most of our instruments. And also Doctor Terry, and Jack Lambert, and eight of our carriers. ...'

'Then we were in Ahu territory where the Indians use poison darts, but we made friends with them and bribed them to carry our stuff westward through the jungle ... because, you see, all science starts with a guess, a rumour, an old wives' tale; and the object of Professor Yeoward's expedition was to investigate a series of Indian folk tales that tallied. Legends of a race of gods that came down from the sky in a great flame when the world was very young. ...'

'Line by criss-cross line, and circle by concentric circle, Yeoward localized the place in which these tales had their root – an unexplored place that has no name because the Indians refuse to give it a name, it being what they call a

“bad place”.’

His chills subsiding and his fever abating, Doctor Goodbody spoke calmly and rationally now. He said, with a short laugh : ‘I don’t know why, whenever I get a touch of fever, the memory of those boneless men comes back in a nightmare to give me the horrors. . . .

‘So, we went to look for the place where the gods came down in flame out of the night. The little tattooed Indians took us to the edge of the Ahu territory and then put down their packs and asked for their pay, and no consideration would induce them to go farther. We were going, they said, to a very bad place. Their chief, who had been a great man in his day, sign-writing with a twig, told us that he had strayed there once, and drew a picture of something with an oval body and four limbs, at which he spat before rubbing it out with his foot in the dirt. Spiders? we asked. Crabs? What?

‘So we were forced to leave what we could not carry with the old chief against our return, and go on unaccompanied, Yeoward and I, through thirty miles of the rottenest jungle in the world. We made about a quarter of a mile a day . . . a pestilential place ! When that stinking wind blows out of the jungle, I smell nothing but death, and panic. . . .

‘But, at last, we cut our way to the plateau and climbed the slope, and there we saw something marvellous. It was something that had been a gigantic machine. Originally it must have been a pear-shaped thing, at least a thousand feet long and, in its widest part, six hundred feet in diameter. I don’t know of what metal it had been made, because there was only a dusty outline of a hull and certain ghostly remains of unbelievably intricate mechanisms to prove that it had ever been. We could not guess from where it had come; but the impact of its landing had made a great valley in the middle of the plateau.

‘It was the discovery of the age ! It proved that countless ages ago, this planet had been visited by people from the stars ! Wild with excitement, Yeoward and I plunged into this fabulous ruin. But whatever we touched fell away to fine powder.

'At last, on the third day, Yeoward found a semicircular plate of some extraordinarily hard metal, which was covered with the most maddeningly familiar diagrams. We cleaned it, and for twenty-four hours, scarcely pausing to eat and drink, Yeoward studied it. And, then, before the dawn of the fifth day he awoke me, with a great cry, and said : "It's a map, a map of the heavens, and a chart of a course from Mars to Earth!"

'And he showed me how those ancient explorers of space had proceeded from Mars to Earth, via the Moon. . . . To crash on this naked plateau in this green hell of a jungle? I wondered. "Ah, but was it a jungle then?" said Yeoward. "This may have happened five million years ago!"

'I said : "Oh, but surely ! it took only a few hundred years to bury Rome. How could this thing have stayed above ground for five thousand years, let alone five million?" Yeoward said : "It didn't. The earth swallows things and regurgitates them. This is a volcanic region. One little upheaval can swallow a city, and one tiny peristalsis in the bowels of the earth can bring its remains to light again a million years later. So it must have been with the machine from Mars . . ."

'"I wonder who was inside it," I said. Yeoward replied : "Very likely some utterly alien creatures that couldn't tolerate the Earth, and died, or else were killed in the crash. No skeleton could survive such a space of time."

'So, we built up the fire, and Yeoward went to sleep. Having slept, I watched. Watched for what? I didn't know. Jaguars, peccaries, snakes? None of these beasts climbed up to the plateau; there was nothing for them up there. Still, unaccountably, I was afraid.

'There was the weight of ages on the place. *Respect old age*, one is told. . . . The greater the age, the deeper the respect, you might say. But it is not respect; it is dread, it is fear of time and death, sir ! . . . I must have dozed, because the fire was burning low – I had been most careful to keep it alive and bright – when I caught my first glimpse of the boneless men.

'Starting up, I saw, at the rim of the plateau, a pair of eyes that picked up luminosity from the fading light of the

fire. *A jaguar*, I thought, and took up my rifle. But it could not have been a jaguar because, when I looked left and right I saw that the plateau was ringed with pairs of shining eyes . . . as it might be, a collar of shining opals; and there came to my nostrils an odour of God knows what.

'Fear has its smell as any animal-trainer will tell you. Sickness has its smell – ask any nurse. These smells compel healthy animals to fight or to run away. This was a combination of the two, plus a stink of vegetation gone bad. I fired at the pair of eyes I had first seen. Then, all the eyes disappeared while, from the jungle, there came a chattering and a twittering of monkeys and birds, as the echoes of the shot went flapping away.

'And then, thank God, the dawn came. I should not have liked to see by artificial light the thing I had shot between the eyes.

'It was grey and, in texture, tough and gelatinous. Yet, in form, externally, it was not unlike a human being. It had eyes, and there were either vestiges – or rudiments – of head, and neck, and a kind of limbs.

'Yeoward told me that I must pull myself together; overcome my "childish revulsion", as he called it; and look into the nature of the beast. I may say that he kept a long way away from it when I opened it. It was my job as zoologist of the expedition, and I had to do it. Microscopes and other delicate instruments had been lost with the canoes. I worked with a knife and forceps. And found? Nothing: a kind of digestive system enclosed in very tough jelly, a rudimentary nervous system, and a brain about the size of a walnut. The entire creature, stretched out, measured four feet.

'In a laboratory I could tell you, perhaps, something about it . . . with an assistant or two, to keep me company. As it was, I did what I could with a hunting-knife and forceps, without dyes or microscope, swallowing my nausea – it was a nauseating thing! – memorizing what I found. But as the sun rose higher, the thing liquefied, melted, until by nine o'clock there was nothing but a glutinous grey puddle with two green eyes swimming in it. . . . And these eyes – I can see them now – burst with a thick *pop*, making a detestable sticky

ripple in that puddle of corruption. . . .

'After that, I went away for a while. When I came back, the sun had burned it all away, and there was nothing but something like what you see after a dead jellyfish has evaporated on a hot beach. Slime. Yeoward had a white face when he asked me : "What the devil is it?" I told him that I didn't know, that it was something outside of my experience, and that although I pretended to be a man of science with a detached mind, nothing would induce me ever to touch one of the things again.

'Yeoward said : "You're getting hysterical, Goodbody. Adopt the proper attitude. God knows, we are not here for the good of our health. Science, man, science! Not a day passes but some doctor pokes his finger into fouler things than that!" I said : "Don't you believe it. Professor Yeoward, I have handled and dissected some pretty queer things in my time, but this is something repulsive. I have nerves? I dare say. Maybe we should have brought a psychiatrist . . . I notice, by the way, that you aren't too anxious to come close to me after I've tampered with that thing. I'll shoot one with pleasure, but if you want to investigate it, try it yourself and see!"

'Yeoward said that he was deeply occupied with his metal plate. There was no doubt, he told me, that this machine that had been had come from Mars. But, evidently, he preferred to keep the fire between himself and me, after I had touched that abomination of hard jelly.

'Yeoward kept himself to himself, rummaging in the ruins. I went about my business, which was to investigate forms of animal life. I do not know what I might have found, if I had – I don't say the courage, because I didn't lack that – if I had had some company. Alone, my nerve broke.

'It happened one morning. I went into the jungle that surrounded us, trying to swallow the fear that choked me, and drive away the sense of revulsion that not only made me want to turn and run, but made me afraid to turn my back even to get away. You may or may not know that, of all the beasts that live in that jungle, the most impregnable is the sloth. He finds a stout limb, climbs out on it, and hangs

from it by his twelve steely claws; a tardigrade that lives on leaves. Your tardigrade is so tenacious that even in death, shot through the heart, it will hang on to its branch. It has an immensely tough hide covered by an impenetrable coat of coarse, matted hair. A panther or a jaguar is helpless against the passive resistance of such a creature. It finds itself a tree, which it does not leave until it has eaten every leaf, and chooses for a sleeping place a branch exactly strong enough to bear its weight.

'In this detestable jungle, on one of my brief expeditions – brief, because I was alone and afraid – I stopped to watch a giant sloth hanging motionless from the largest bough of a half-denuded tree, asleep, impervious, indifferent. Then, out of that stinking green twilight came a horde of those jellyfish things. They *poured up* the tree, and writhed along the branch.

'Even the sloth, which generally knows no fear, was afraid. It tried to run away, hooked itself on to a thinner part of the branch, which broke. It fell, and at once was covered with a shuddering mass of jelly. Those boneless men do not bite : they suck. And, as they suck, their colour changes from grey to pink and then to brown.

'But they are afraid of us. There is race-memory involved here. We repel them, and they repel us. When they became aware of my presence, they – I was going to say, ran away – they slid away, dissolved into the shadows that kept dancing and dancing and dancing under the trees. And the horror came upon me, so that I ran away, and arrived back at our camp, bloody about the face with thorns, and utterly exhausted.

'Yeoward was lancing a place in his ankle. A tourniquet was tied under his knee. Nearby lay a dead snake. He had broken its back with that same metal plate, but it had bitten him first. He said : "What kind of a snake do you call this? I'm afraid it is venomous. I feel a numbness in my cheeks and around my heart, and I cannot feel my hands."

'I said : "Oh, my God! You've been bitten by a jara-jaca!"

"And we have lost our medical supplies," he said, with

regret. "And there is so much work left to do. Oh, dear me, dear me! . . . Whatever happens, my dear fellow, take *this* and get back."

'And he gave me that semi-circle of unknown metal as a sacred trust. Two hours later, he died. That night the circle of glowing eyes grew narrower. I emptied my rifle at it, time and again. At dawn, the boneless men disappeared.

'I heaped rocks on the body of Yeoward. I made a pylon, so that the men without bones could not get at him. Then — oh, so dreadfully lonely and afraid! — I shouldered my pack, and took my rifle and my machete, and ran away, down the trail we had covered. But I lost my way.

'Can by can of food, I shed weight. Then my rifle went, and my ammunition. After that, I threw away even my machete. A long time later, that semi-circular plate became too heavy for me, so I tied it to a tree with liana-vine, and went on.

'So I reached the Ahu territory, where the tattooed men nursed me and were kind to me. The women chewed my food for me, before they fed me, until I was strong again. Of the stores we had left there, I took only as much as I might need, leaving the rest as payment for guides and men to man the canoe down the river. And so I got back out of the jungle. . . .

'Please give me a little more rum.' His hand was steady, now, as he drank, and his eyes were clear.

I said to him: 'Assuming that what you say is true: these "boneless men" — they were, I presume, the Martians? Yet it sounds unlikely, surely? Do invertebrates smelt hard metals and —'

'Who said anything about Martians?' cried Doctor Goodbody. 'No, no, no! The Martians came here, adapted themselves to new conditions of life. Poor fellows, they changed, sank low; went through a whole new process — a painful process of evolution. What I'm trying to tell you, you fool, is that Yeoward and I did *not* discover Martians. Idiot, don't you see? *Those boneless things are men. We are Martians!*'

THE SMALL WORLD OF LEWIS STILLMAN

by William F. Nolan

IN THE waiting, windless dark, Lewis Stillman pressed into the building-front shadows along Wilshire Boulevard. Breathing softly, the automatic poised and ready in his hand, he advanced with animal stealth towards Western Avenue, gliding over the night-cool concrete past ravaged clothing shops, drug and ten-cent stores, their windows shattered, their doors ajar and swinging. The city of Los Angeles, painted in cold moonlight, was an immense graveyard; the tall white tombstone buildings thrust up from the silent pavement, shadow-carved and lonely. Overturned metal corpses of trucks, buses and automobiles littered the streets.

He paused under the wide marquee of the Fox Wiltern. Above his head, rows of splintered display bulbs gaped – sharp glass teeth in wooden jaws. Lewis Stillman felt as though they might drop at any moment to pierce his body.

Four more blocks to cover. His destination : a small corner delicatessen four blocks south of Wilshire, on Western. Tonight he intended bypassing the larger stores like Safeway or Thriftmart, with their available supplies of exotic foods; a smaller grocery was far more likely to have what he needed. He was finding it more and more difficult to locate basic foodstuffs. In the big supermarkets only the more exotic and highly spiced canned and bottled goods remained – and he was sick of caviar and oysters !

Crossing Western, he had almost reached the far kerb when he saw some of *them*. He dropped immediately to his knees behind the rusting bulk of an Oldsmobile. The rear door on his side was open, and he cautiously eased himself into the back seat of the deserted car. Releasing the safety catch on the automatic, he peered through the cracked

window at six or seven of them, as they moved towards him along the street. God! Had he been seen? He couldn't be sure. Perhaps they were aware of his position! He should have remained on the open street where he'd have a running chance. Perhaps, if his aim were true, he could kill most of them; but, even with its silencer, the gun might be heard and more of them would come. He dared not fire until he was certain they had discovered him.

They came closer, their small dark bodies crowding the walk, six of them, chattering, leaping, cruel mouths open, eyes glittering under the moon. Closer. Their shrill pipings increased, rose in volume. Closer. Now he could make out their sharp teeth and matted hair. Only a few feet from the car . . . His hand was moist on the handle of the automatic; his heart thundered against his chest. Seconds away . . .

Now!

Lewis Stillman fell heavily back against the dusty seat-cushion, the gun loose in his trembling hand. They had passed by; they had missed him. Their thin pipings diminished, grew faint with distance.

The tomb silence of late night settled around him.

The delicatessen proved a real windfall. The shelves were relatively untouched and he had a wide choice of tinned goods. He found an empty cardboard box and hastily began to transfer the cans from the shelf nearest him.

A noise from behind – a padding, scraping sound.

Lewis Stillman whirled about, the automatic ready.

A huge mongrel dog faced him, growling deep in its throat, four legs braced for assault. The blunt ears were laid flat along the short-haired skull and a thin trickle of saliva seeped from the killing jaws. The beast's powerful chest-muscles were bunched for the spring when Stillman acted.

His gun, he knew, was useless; the shots would be heard. Therefore, with the full strength of his left arm, he hurled a heavy can at the dog's head. The stunned animal staggered under the blow, legs buckling. Hurriedly, Stillman gathered his supplies and made his way back to the street.

How much longer can my luck hold? Lewis Stillman wondered, as he bolted the door. He placed the box of tinned goods on a wooden table and lit the tall lamp near by. Its flickering orange glow illumined the narrow, low-ceilinged room.

Twice tonight, his mind told him, twice you've escaped them – and they could have seen you easily on both occasions if they had been watching for you. They don't know you're alive. But when they find out . . .

He forced his thoughts away from the scene in his mind, away from the horror; quickly he began to unload the box, placing the cans on a long shelf along the far side of the room.

He began to think of women, of a girl named Joan, and of how much he had loved her . . .

The world of Lewis Stillman was damp and lightless; it was narrow and its cold stone walls pressed in upon him as he moved. He had been walking for several hours; sometimes he would run, because he knew his leg muscles must be kept strong, but he was walking now, following the thin yellow beam of his hooded lantern. He was searching.

Tonight, he thought, I might find another like myself. Surely, *someone* is down here; I'll find someone if I keep searching. I *must* find someone!

But he knew he would not. He knew he would find only chill emptiness ahead of him in the long tunnels.

For three years he had been searching for another man or woman down here in this world under the city. For three years he had prowled the seven hundred miles of storm drains which threaded their way under the skin of Los Angeles like the veins in a giant's body – and he had found nothing. *Nothing*.

Even now, after all the days and nights of search, he could not really accept the fact that he was alone, that he was the last man alive in a city of seven million . . .

The beautiful woman stood silently above him. Her eyes burned softly in the darkness; her fine red lips were smiling.

The foam-white gown she wore continually swirled and billowed around her motionless figure.

'Who are you?' he asked, his voice far off, unreal.

'Does it matter, Lewis?'

Her words, like four dropped stones in a quiet pool, stirred him, rippled down the length of his body.

'No,' he said. 'Nothing matters now except that we've found each other. God, after all these lonely months and years of waiting! I thought I was the last, that I'd never live to see —'

'Hush, my darling.' She leaned to kiss him. Her lips were moist and yielding. 'I'm here now.'

He reached up to touch her cheek, but already she was fading, blending into darkness. Crying out, he clawed desperately for her extended hand. But she was gone, and his fingers rested on a rough wall of damp concrete.

A swirl of milk-fog drifted away in slow rollings down the tunnel.

Rain. Days of rain. The drains had been designed to handle floods so Lewis Stillman was not particularly worried. He had built high, a good three feet above the tunnel floor and the water had never yet risen to this level. But he didn't like the sound of the rain down here: an orchestrated thunder through the tunnels, a trap-drumming amplified and continuous. And since he had been unable to make his daily runs he had been reading more than usual. Short stories by Welty, Gordimer, Aiken, Irwin Shaw and Hemingway; poems by Frost, Lorca, Sandburg, Millay, Dylan Thomas. Strange, how unreal this present-day world seemed when he read their words. Unreality, however, was fleeting, and the moment he closed a book the loneliness and the fears pressed back. He hoped the rain would stop soon.

Dampness. Surrounding him, the cold walls and the chill and the dampness. The unending gurgle and drip of water, the hollow, tapping splash of the falling drops. Even in his cot, wrapped in thick blankets, the dampness seemed to permeate his body. Sounds . . . Thin screams, pipings, chatter-

ings, reedy whisperings above his head. They were dragging something along the street, something they'd killed no doubt : an animal – a cat or a dog perhaps . . . Lewis Stillman shifted, pulling the blankets closer about his body. He kept his eyes tightly shut, listening to the sharp, scuffling sounds on the pavement and swore bitterly.

'Damn you,' he said. 'Damn all of you !'

Lewis Stillman was running, running down the long tunnels. Behind him a tide of midget shadows washed from wall to wall ; high, keening cries, doubled and tripled by echoes, rang in his ears. Claws reached for him ; he felt panting breath, like hot smoke, on the back of his neck ; his lungs were bursting, his entire body aflame.

He looked down at his fast-pumping legs, doing their job with pistoned precision. He listened to the sharp slap of his heels against the floor of the tunnel – and he thought : I might die at any moment, but my *legs* will escape ! They will run on down the endless drains and never be caught. They move so fast while my heavy awkward upper-body rocks and sways above them, slowing them down, tiring them – making them angry. How my legs must hate me ! I must be clever and humour them, beg them to take me along to safety. How well they run, how sleek and fine !

Then he felt himself coming apart. His legs were detaching themselves from his upper-body. He cried out in horror, flailing the air, beseeching them not to leave him behind. But the legs cruelly continued to unfasten themselves. In a cold surge of terror, Lewis Stillman felt himself tipping, falling towards the damp floor – while his legs raced on with a wild animal life of their own. He opened his mouth, high above those insane legs, and screamed.

Ending the nightmare.

He sat up stiffly in his cot, gasping, drenched in sweat. He drew in a long shuddering breath and reached for a cigarette, lighting it with a trembling hand.

The nightmares were getting worse. He realized that his mind was rebelling as he slept, spilling forth the bottled-up fears of the day during the night hours.

He thought once more about the beginning six years ago, about why he was still alive. The alien ships had struck Earth suddenly, without warning. Their attack had been thorough and deadly. In a matter of hours the aliens had accomplished their clever mission – and the men and women of Earth were destroyed. A few survived, he was certain. He had never seen any of them, but he was convinced they existed. Los Angeles was not the world, after all, and since he escaped so must have others around the globe. He'd been working alone in the drains when the aliens struck, finishing a special job for the construction company on B tunnel. He could still hear the weird sound of the mammoth ships and feel the intense heat of their passage.

Hunger had forced him out, and overnight he had become a curiosity. The last man alive. For three years he was not harmed. He worked with them, taught them many things, and tried to win their confidence. But, eventually, certain ones came to hate him, to be jealous of his relationship with the others. Luckily he had been able to escape to the drains. That was three years ago and now they had forgotten him.

His subsequent excursions to the upper level of the city had been made under cover of darkness – and he never ventured out unless his food supply dwindled. He had built his one-room structure directly to the side of an overhead grating – not close enough to risk their seeing it, but close enough for light to seep in during the sunlight hours. He missed the warm feel of open sun on his body almost as much as he missed human companionship, but he dare not risk himself above the drains by day.

When the rain ceased, he crouched beneath the street gratings to absorb as much as possible of the filtered sunlight. But the rays were weak and their small warmth only served to heighten his desire to feel direct sunlight upon his naked shoulders.

The dreams . . . always the dreams.

'Are you cold, Lewis?'

'Yes, yes, cold.'

'Then go out, dearest. Into the sun.'

'I can't. Can't go out.'

'But Los Angeles is your world, Lewis! You are the last man in it. The last man in the world.'

'Yes, but they own it. Every street belongs to them, every building. They wouldn't let me come out. I'd die. They'd kill me.'

'Go out, Lewis.' The liquid dream-voice faded, faded. 'Out into the sun, my darling. Don't be afraid.'

That night he watched the moon through the street gratings for almost an hour. It was round and full, like a huge yellow floodlamp in the dark sky, and he thought, for the first time in years, of night baseball at Blues Stadium in Kansas City. He used to love watching the games with his father under the mammoth stadium lights when the field was like a pond, frosted with white illumination and the players dreamspawned and unreal. Night baseball was always a magic game to him when he was a boy.

Sometimes he got insane thoughts. Sometimes, on a night like this, when the loneliness closed in like a crushing fist and he could no longer stand it, he would think of bringing one of them down with him, into the drains. One at a time, they might be handled. Then he'd remember their sharp savage eyes, their animal ferocity, and he would realize that the idea was impossible. If one of their kind disappeared, suddenly and without trace, others would certainly become suspicious, begin to search for him – and it would all be over.

Lewis Stillman settled back into his pillow; he closed his eyes and tried not to listen to the distant screams, pipings and reedy cries filtering down from the street above his head.

Finally he slept.

He spent the afternoon with paper women. He lingered over the pages of some yellowed fashion magazines, looking at all the beautiful photographed models in their fine clothes. Slim and enchanting, these page-women, with their cool enticing eyes and perfect smiles, all grace and softness and glitter and swirled cloth. He touched their images with gentle fingers, stroking the tawny paper hair, as though, by

some magic formula, he might imbue them with life. Yet it was easy to imagine that these women had never *really* lived at all – that they were simply painted, in microscopic detail, by sly artists to give the illusion of photos.

He didn't like to think about these women and how they died.

'A toast to courage,' smiled Lewis Stillman, raising his wine glass high. It sparkled deep crimson in the lamplit room. 'To courage and to the man who truly possesses is!' He drained the glass and hastily refilled it from a tall bottle on the table beside his cot.

'Aren't you going to join me, Mr H.?' he asked the seated figure slouched over the table, head on folded arms. 'Or must I drink alone?'

The figure did not reply.

'Well then —' He emptied the glass, set it down. 'Oh, I know all about what one man is supposed to be able to do. Win out alone. Whip the damn world singlehanded. If a fish as big as a mountain and as mean as all sin is out there then this one man is supposed to go get him, isn't that it? Well, Papa H., what if the world is *full* of big fish? Can he win over them all? One man. Alone. Of course he can't. No sir. Damn well right he can't!'

Stillman moved unsteadily to a shelf in one corner of the small wooden room and took down a slim book.

'Here she is, Mr H. Your greatest. The one you wrote cleanest and best – *The Old Man and The Sea*. You showed how one man could fight the whole damn ocean.' He paused, voice strained and rising. 'Well, by God, show me, *now*, how to fight this ocean. My ocean is full of killer fish and I'm one man and I'm alone in it. I'm ready to listen.'

The seated figure remained silent.

'Got you now, haven't I, Papa? No answer to this one, eh? Courage isn't enough. Man was not meant to live alone or fight alone – or drink alone. Even with courage he can only do so much alone, and then it's useless. Well, I say it's useless. I say the hell with your book and the hell with *you*!'

Lewis Stillman flung the book straight at the head of the

motionless figure. The victim spilled back in the chair; his arms slipped off the table, hung swinging. They were lumpy and handleless.

More and more, Lewis Stillman found his thoughts turning to the memory of his father, and of long hikes through the moonlit Missouri countryside, of hunting trips and warm campfires, of the deep woods, rich and green in summer. He thought of his father's hopes for his future, and the words of that tall, grey-haired figure often came back to him.

'You'll be a fine doctor, Lewis. Study and work hard and you'll succeed. I know you will.'

He remembered the long winter evenings of study at his father's great mahogany desk, pouring over medical books and journals, taking notes, sifting and resifting facts. He remembered one set of books in particular – Erickson's monumental three-volume text on surgery, richly bound and stamped in gold. He had always loved those books, above all others.

What had gone wrong along the way? Somehow, the dream had faded; the bright goal vanished and was lost. After a year of pre-med at the University of California he had given up medicine; he had become discouraged and quit college to take a labourer's job with a construction company. How ironic that this move should have saved his life! He'd wanted to work with his hands, to sweat and labour with the muscles of his body. He'd wanted to earn enough to marry Joan and then, later perhaps, he would have returned to finish his courses. It all seemed so far away now, his reason for quitting, for letting his father down.

Now, at this moment, an overwhelming desire gripped him, a desire to pour over Erickson's pages once again, to recreate, even for a brief moment, the comfort and happiness of his childhood.

He'd once seen a duplicate set on the second floor of Pickwick's book store in Hollywood, in their used book department, and now he knew he must go after them, bring the books back with him to the drains. It was a dangerous and foolish desire, but he knew he would obey it. Despite the risk of death, he would go after the books tonight. *Tonight.*

One corner of Lewis Stillman's room was reserved for weapons. His prize, a Thompson submachine gun, had been procured from the Los Angeles police arsenal. Supplementing the Thompson were two automatic rifles, a Luger, a Colt .45 and a .22 calibre Hornet pistol, equipped with a silencer. He always kept the smallest gun in a spring-clip holster beneath his armpit, but it was not his habit to carry out any of the larger weapons with him into the city. On this night, however, things were different.

The drains ended two miles short of Hollywood – which meant he would be forced to cover a long and particularly hazardous stretch of ground in order to reach the book store. He therefore decided to take along the .30 calibre Savage rifle in addition to the small hand weapon.

You're a fool, Lewis, he told himself as he slid the oiled Savage from its leather case, risking your life for a set of books. Are they *that* important? Yes, a part of him replied, they are that important. You want these books, then go *after* what you want. If fear keeps you from seeking that which you truly want, if fear holds you like a rat in the dark, then you are worse than a coward. You are a traitor, betraying yourself and the civilization you represent. If a man wants a thing and the thing is good he must go after it, no matter what the cost, or relinquish the right to be called a man. It is better to die with courage than to live with cowardice.

Ah, Papa Hemingway, breathed Stillman, smiling at his own thoughts. I see that you are back with me. I see that your words have rubbed off after all. Well then, all right – let us go after our fish, let us seek him out. Perhaps the ocean will be calm.

Slinging the heavy rifle over one shoulder, Lewis Stillman set off down the tunnels.

Running in the chill night wind. Grass, now pavement, now grass beneath his feet. Ducking into shadows, moving stealthily past shops and theatres, rushing under the cold high moon. Santa Monica Boulevard, then Highland, then Hollywood Boulevard, and finally – after an eternity of heartbeats – the book store.

The Pickwick.

Lewis Stillman, his rifle over one shoulder, the small automatic gleaming in his hand, edged silently into the store.

A paper battleground met his eyes.

In the filtered moonlight, a white blanket of broken-backed volumes spilled across the entire lower floor. Stillman shuddered; he could envision them, shrieking, scrambling at the shelves, throwing books wildly across the room at one another. Screaming, ripping, destroying.

What of the other floors? *What of the medical section?*

He crossed to the stairs, spilled pages crackling like a fall of dry autumn leaves under his step, and sprinted up the first short flight to the mezzanine. Similar chaos!

He hurried up to the second floor, stumbling, terribly afraid of what he might find. Reaching the top, heart thudding, he squinted into the dimness.

The books were undisturbed. Apparently they had tired of their game before reaching these.

He slipped the rifle from his shoulder and placed it near the stairs. Dust lay thick all around him, powdering up and swirling, as he moved down the narrow aisles; a damp, leathery mustiness lived in the air, an odour of mould and neglect.

Lewis Stillman paused before a dim hand-lettered sign: MEDICAL SECTION. It was just as he remembered it. Holstering the small automatic, he struck a match, shading the flame with a cupped hand as he moved it along the rows of faded titles. Carter . . . Davidson . . . Enright . . . *Erickson*. He drew in his breath sharply. All three volumes, their gold stamping dust-dulled but legible, stood in tall and perfect order on the shelf.

In the darkness, Lewis Stillman carefully removed each volume, blowing it free of dust. At last all three books were clean and solid in his hands.

Well, you've done it. You've reached the books and now they belong to you.

He smiled, thinking of the moment when he would be able to sit down at the table with his treasure, and linger again over the wondrous pages.

He found an empty carton at the rear of the store and

placed the books inside. Returning to the stairs, he shouldered the rifle and began his descent to the lower floor.

So far, he told himself, my luck is still holding.

But as Lewis Stillman's foot touched the final stair, his luck ran out.

The entire lower floor was alive with them !

Rustling like a mass of great insects, gliding towards him, eyes gleaming in the half-light, they converged upon the stairs. They'd been waiting for him.

Now, suddenly, the books no longer mattered. Now only his life mattered and nothing else. He moved back against the hard wood of the stair-rail, the carton of books sliding from his hands. They had stopped at the foot of the stairs; they were silent, looking up at him, the hate in their eyes.

If you can reach the street, Stillman told himself, then you've still got half a chance. That means you've got to get through them to the door. All right then, *move*.

Lewis Stillman squeezed the trigger of the automatic. Two of them fell under his bullets as Stillman rushed into their midst.

He felt sharp nails claw at his shirt, heard the cloth ripping away in their grasp. He kept firing the small automatic into them, and three more dropped under the hail of bullets, shrieking in pain and surprise. The others spilled back, screaming, from the door.

The pistol was empty. He tossed it away, swinging the heavy Savage free from his shoulder as he reached the street. The night air, crisp and cool in his lungs, gave him instant hope.

I can still make it, thought Stillman, as he leaped the kerb and plunged across the pavement. If those shots weren't heard, then I've still got the edge. My legs are strong; I can outdistance them.

Luck, however, had failed him completely on this night. Near the intersection of Hollywood Boulevard and Highland, a fresh pack of them swarmed towards him over the street.

He dropped to one knee and fired into their ranks, the Savage jerking in his hands. They scattered to either side.

He began to run steadily down the middle of Hollywood

Boulevard, using the butt of the heavy rifle like a battering ram as they came at him. As he neared Highland, three of them darted directly into his path. Stillman fired. One doubled over, lurching crazily into a jagged plate-glass store front. Another clawed at him as he swept around the corner to Highland, but he managed to shake free.

The street ahead of him was clear. Now his superior leg-power would count heavily in his favour. Two miles. Could he make it before others cut him off?

Running, re-loading, firing. Sweat soaking his shirt, rivering down his face, stinging his eyes. A mile covered. Half way to the drains. They had fallen back behind his swift stride.

But more of them were coming, drawn by the rifle shots, pouring in from side streets, from stores and houses.

His heart jarred in his body, his breath was ragged. How many of them around him? A hundred? Two hundred? More coming. God!

He bit down on his lower lip until the salt taste of blood was on his tongue. You can't make it, a voice inside him shouted, they'll have you in another block and you know it!

He fitted the rifle to his shoulder, adjusted his aim and fired. The long rolling crack of the big weapon filled the night. Again and again he fired, the butt jerking into the flesh of his shoulder, the bitter smell of burnt powder in his nostrils.

It was no use. Too many of them. He could not clear a path.

Lewis Stillman knew that he was going to die.

The rifle was empty at last, the final bullet had been fired. He had no place to run because they were all around him, in a slowly closing circle.

He looked at the ring of small cruel faces and he thought: The aliens did their job perfectly; they stopped Earth before she could reach the age of the rocket, before she could threaten planets beyond her own moon. What an immensely clever plan it had been! To destroy every human being on Earth above the age of six – and then to leave as quickly as they had come, allowing our civilization to continue on a

primitive level, knowing that Earth's back had been broken, that her survivors would revert to savagery as they grew into adulthood.

Lewis Stillman dropped the empty rifle at his feet and threw out his hands. 'Listen,' he pleaded, 'I'm really one of you. You'll *all* be like me soon. Please, *listen* to me.'

But the circle tightened relentlessly around Lewis Stillman. He was screaming when the children closed in.

THE LIVING SHADOW

by Rene Morris

THE NIGHT had spread her velvet cloak across the heavens. A thousand stars, like uncountable watching eyes, shone down upon the sleeping earth. A small cloud drifted over the face of the moon, creating a brief darkness, and then once more the moon's light cast eerie shadows over the sleeping fields, throwing into relief the nocturnal outlines of paths and hedges. It was a perfect night – a night for the living, yet for one man this would be the last he would breathe. Fate, which, like a croupier, gathers in his winnings unsatisfied with earlier victories, had ordained this. How unexpected is the last ace in the pack. Manson's card was this night to be turned.

He bid a fond good night to the dark-eyed girl, and, with happy heart, he started to walk home. The night was fair and his lodging only a short distance away. Soon he left the busy road, and turned his step to follow his usual route home across the fields. As he strode along the tree-shrouded lane he was happily unaware that he had provoked the hate of a man; indeed, he would have been bewildered, for, living a simple life of goodness, he had never, wittingly, interfered with another's.

The mind of a man in love ceases to act in a logical fashion. One man's jealousy had grown out of all reasonable proportion, and had filled his soul with hate. A hate so intense that

it obliterated reason and was replaced by one desire – Manson's death. Now the time had come for this desire to be fulfilled.

Rutland was a young man, tall and leanfaced. He was animal-like in his emotions, which were aroused savagely and instantly if fate went against him. He and the devil were kinsmen this night. He crouched, well hidden in the bushes at the side of the stile, over which Manson would come – for the last time. He waited, taut as an animal watches for his prey, hungry for the kill. Only the slight shaking of his large hands, and an uncontrolled twitching of the muscles of his face, betrayed any emotion. His senses were unnaturally tuned to every sound and vibration. The eyes that watched were alive and bright. This was it! Soon Manson would trouble him no more; the waiting would be over and the job – accomplished. Overhead the stars pinpointed the vastness, the eyes of the heavens watching him.

Somewhere along the darkened lane somebody was whistling. Rutland's body tensed. For a moment – silence. Then, still far down the lane . . . footsteps. The clicking of a walking stick accompanied the hollow footfalls. It was him. Rutland's heart beat faster and the knuckles of his right hand whitened. In it – shining like a long wet tooth – was a knife.

In a surprisingly short space of time the figure of a man came into view. As he climbed the stile his shadow, long and black, fell almost at Rutland's feet. The shadow paused. Fumbling in his outer pocket for a moment he pulled out his pipe and filled it carefully. A small flame lit the face up for an instant, affording enough assurance to Rutland that this was the man he was after. Leaning back against the stile the man pulled on his pipe and gazed up at the stars. The smoke curled up, a faint aroma of tobacco filling the night air. Rutland smirked cynically in the darkness – 'Smoke on, my friend, for this will be your last chance,' he thought. Even a legally condemned man is granted a last smoke! He felt calmer now. Manson's small form leaning there, so content and unsuspecting, was almost amusing. This would be easy.

Unhooking his stick Manson was about to walk on when

a movement in front of him caused him to stop. A man suddenly and without notice mysteriously appeared before him and stood facing him. He was surprised to see anyone at this time of night, but it was the way the man was standing there that was so unnerving. Like a great ape, legs slightly apart, long arms dangling at his sides, he stood. His face was not visible, but Manson could discern a row of white teeth in the darkness.

His blood ran cold inside him, but he tried not to show fear to this man. His voice came clearly and with great calmness as, taking a few steps towards the figure, he asked: 'Who are you? What do you mean by trying to frighten the life out of me?'

Though he could not see the face Manson felt surrounded by hate; he thought he recognized the voice, but was not sure.

'You may well ask that, my friend. I am going to claim your soul this night and give it to the devil.' There was a ghostly chuckle.

'May I ask what I have done to provoke you to such an act?' The teeth disappeared from the dark mask.

'You take the only girl I ever loved, and then stand there and ask that?' The voice grated harshly.

Manson decided the fellow must be mad, and resolved to try to humour him. It was unlikely that anyone would pass this way at this hour, but he might get a chance to run for it. It was plain now that the threat on his life was a real one. He must therefore convince this fellow that he was making a mistake, but even the conviction of his own innocence did not reassure him.

'I don't know you. As for taking your girl — I am not even courting, so you must have the wrong person.'

'Don't lie to me. Lying won't save you. You saw her tonight.'

'Who?'

'Lorrain Peters.'

So that was it! Manson had only asked the girl her name this very night. It came as a shock to him that she could be the cause of all this trouble. He tried to laugh.

'Why, I hardly know her. I only learned her name tonight. I'm not even sure if she likes me.'

'She does. I've heard talk about you and her, but you are not having her – I shall see to that.'

Manson was struggling to think. The situation was becoming complicated. 'You have it all wrong – she doesn't want me.' The tall man took a step nearer. 'Don't be a fool – you will know what I say is true when you see her again. I ...' his voice trailed away, as he saw the tall man's big hands caressing a big knife.

Suddenly the two of them came together as if drawn by an invisible wire. The knife hovered above Manson's head. Instinctively he swung his walking stick with all his strength and the knife dropped to the ground. It sank into the grass at Manson's feet. The impact, as the stick whipped the long arm, had sent it twisting out of his hand. Taking advantage of the bigger man's momentary inability to act, Manson gripped the arm and sent his assailant hurtling over his shoulder. Before he could regain his feet Manson tried to make a run for it. He had only run a few yards when a large hand grasped his shoulder and swung him to the ground.

Rutland's two strong hands were on his throat. With a superhuman effort Manson threw him off. Over and over they rolled, panting and straining. The blow from the stick had only succeeded in maddening Rutland, giving him the strength of three men. Manson knew that he was slowly losing. Now he was struggling to free himself rather than fight. Sweat rolled down his face. It blurred his vision and he became frantic. The other's strength was terrific, and, try as he might, he would not be able to hold those searching fingers away from his throat much longer. They twisted and stretched, gripping ever tighter. If they got a proper grip he was finished. He knew that he would not stand a chance. Tremors of cramp twitched in his arms. In a desperate effort to free himself he managed to bring his knee up and caught the other a sharp jab in the groin. The big man lost his grip and Manson rolled free. He was almost on his feet when he felt a sharp tug at his leg and down he went yet again. He had a fleeting glimpse of his stick, which curled round

his leg like a long, brown snake. He must have hit his head when he fell because everything went black for a brief second. When he looked up he saw Rutland standing astride him. There was a swishing in the air above his face. He heard himself scream thinly. His face seemed to split and it burned horribly. Again it crashed down and Manson's senses reeled in waves of acute pain. He struggled feebly, but could not move himself. His sight seemed to come and go in waves of agony. He saw the big man's face above him for a moment, then his senses dulled. It had disappeared the next time he could see, and lying there he fancied that he could see the stars, but he was not sure. He was not sure of anything any more. Everything looked distorted and unreal. Far away, a voice spoke. It began as a whisper, and as his senses slowly returned it grew in volume.

'At last. Your time on this earth has come to an end, Manson.'

Manson's sight had fully returned. What he saw made him shudder with all his being and wish that he could return to the opiate of oblivion. He made an effort to move, but failed. He tried to speak, but the words stuck in his throat. This was to be his end. He was not afraid to die, but with all of him he desired revenge. The word repeated itself over and over again in his tormented mind. In that very moment he knew that his desire would be fulfilled. A numbness overcame him and he could feel himself floating. All pain had now gone and he had a feeling of great wellbeing.

Rutland stood over him – in his hands he held a huge stone. He lifted it a few inches and let go. The heavy stone thudded dully, covering Manson's head. The thing was done – Manson was dead. Rutland stood there, his shoulders bent and the big hands hanging, inert now, at his sides. He stared down at the body in the grass and shivered. As he gazed dispassionately at the body, so lifeless and still, something snapped inside him. He felt tired and weak, all anger spent.

The night had suddenly turned cold, or was it the coldness of fear that had crept into his heart? For he felt fear as he had never known before. He feared for his own life now. He roused himself with a jerk; he must find a hiding place for

the body, which would go unnoticed until the mangled thing at his feet had rotted away, leaving no trace.

Quickly he glanced around. The land was flat for at least two hundred yards all round except for the shrub that grew on a piece of rough ground by the stile. It would afford him a little cover until he could find a better place for it. It was unlikely that anyone would pass this way now. It was almost midnight. He reached down, and with an effort moved the heavy boulder that covered half the head. The sight that confronted him turned his stomach over.

The skull hung open at the forehead. A grey slimy substance oozed out, released by the removal of the weight. A thin line of blood trickled down the ashen face, and the eyes stared sightlessly up at him. Although he could not bring himself to look down again, he knew that what he had seen was reality and not delusion . . . the face was smiling. A horribly inhuman smile in death, and Rutland stumbled away from it and leant weakly against the stile. He peered into the darkness of the lane, where all was still. He turned back to the body in the grass and could not avoid seeing the face still grinning up at him. He suddenly felt panic, and with an effort suppressed a desire to run.

Turning his back on it to blot out the gory sight he took hold of each leg to drag the lifeless thing into the shrubbery. It was heavy and unmanageable. He could feel the arms dragging and catching in the stubby undergrowth as if they were fighting to fasten on to something solid. He dropped the legs with a thud and looked about him for a likely spot. At the bottom of the bank he saw a ditch. A close inspection proved it to be the ideal hiding place, for the grass grew high and it was overhung by the hedge that bordered the furthestmost side. This discovery gave him some relief. Feeling better able to master his task, he returned to the body and once more took up the legs. Having dragged it down the bank he pulled the trailing arms into position and rolled it into the ditch. Somehow the shoulders had lodged and the luminous smiling face floated in the shadows like the face of a devil. The eyes shone, as with lifelike gaze they fastened upon him. He had to cover them. Swiftly he gathered twigs and

heavy foliage, placing them without ceremony over the mangled corpse. It was done. He passed a shaking hand over his forehead and realized that he was sweating.

He turned away up the slope with quick steps, his feet sinking a little in the wet grass, slowing his movements. At the top of the bank he turned round to take a last look at the ditch. There was nothing to be seen of his gruesome work. Breathing a sigh of relief he made his way out of the shrubbery, avoiding all obstacles carefully. He must leave no traces.

In the tree-covered lane he had an uncanny feeling that he was being followed. The branches overhead blotted out the starry sky and in this darkened tunnel he was afraid. A twig snapped close at hand; he shot a nervous glance over his shoulder, half expecting to see the figure of Manson behind him. But he saw nothing, yet could not convince himself that he was alone. The click . . . click . . . click of a walking stick fell in with his footsteps – the darkness shrieked with the sound. The faster he went, the faster they fell. O God! – he had forgotten the walking stick. Where was it? He stopped. Better go back and look for it – someone might find it. The impenetrable sheet of blackness faced him. He shuddered at the thought of going back along the lane, so full of strange movements and whisperings. A deep sense of foreboding had planted a doubt in his mind; he could not go back. Anything was preferable. He would go back and look in the daylight when he felt calmer. He moved more quickly now, and he breathed a sigh of relief when he emerged at the end of the lane. Now that he was in the open he came once more into the silvery light. The air was cooler now, smelling sweet and fresh. He became calmer and thought about the girl for whom he had risked his neck tonight. Was it going to be worth it? He would treat her with such love and devotion that she would not be able to help loving him. He knew that he had once inspired great love in her, and would do so again. There was no one to stop him now.

Lorrain lay sleeping. The lines that were fast appearing showed clearly on his face as he watched his wife. She stirred.

'Mel?' Her hand moved across the bed to find it empty.

'I'm here, darling,' he said.

'Oh, I thought you were wandering again. Mel, did you sleep well last night?'

'Of course I did,' he said a little irritably. 'All right, so I didn't sleep, I went down and got myself a drink. There's nothing wrong in that, is there?' She slid out of bed and went across to where he stood by the window. He did not look at her when she laid a gentle hand on his arm.

'I'm sorry, Mel. It's just that I worry about you. You are not well lately. Why don't you see a doctor? He would give you something to make you sleep.'

'I'm all right,' he said, as his expression softened, and he patted the small hand. 'I'm fine, fine.'

Lorrain knew that there was something on his mind that he kept from her. They had been married three months now, and still he would not tell her what was troubling him. Towards night he started to act strangely, and seemed to grow afraid. At night she would hear him moving about, for he seldom slept; when he did he tossed and turned, waking in a sweat. Always he insisted on drawing the curtains before it was really necessary. She knew that there was something, but despite all these clues she could not even guess what it was.

The thought had struck her that he could be going out of his mind. He had changed so much from their early gaiety that sometimes Lorrain was afraid of him. If only he would see a doctor. . . .

Rutland's dream was always the same. He would see eyes, he would make frantic clutches at the bedclothes as he tried to shield himself from them.

He felt impelled to get out in the mornings, and this became a habit for an hour or two before breakfast. He loved the daylight, and he would come back in a much happier frame of mind, as if he had forgotten the fear that haunted his nights. 'I'm going out, Lorry, I won't be long.' He heard her acknowledgement from up the stairs, and remembered his empty promises to her to see a doctor.

The warm sunshine did much to dispel the memories of a night he had spent in a cold sweat. The watching eyes had gone and he could look up at the sky without fear. It was hard to imagine indeed at this magic moment that the horrors of the night even existed – those nights that held such indescribable terrors. He felt almost sane again, but he knew that something was going to happen. He could feel it approaching. What was it, this thing of which he was so afraid? Manson was dead – and yet, in the darkness, he could feel his presence. In the daylight he felt safe and unafraid, but each night the feeling grew more intense. Suddenly he felt he must know . . . he could not go on like this and steadily go out of his mind. The only thing to do was to go and see for himself and exorcise those nightly ghosts. The papers had reported Manson as missing, but as far as he knew the body was still undiscovered. What if Manson was not dead? No! Impossible. A mental picture of him lying dead on the grass reassured Rutland that he must be dead. After all, if he were alive, what had become of him? Where was he? God, where was he?

He told himself that he was not afraid to go, though the very thought was enough to turn his stomach. He turned his step towards the open fields, involuntarily quickening his pace. He almost felt as if he were being drawn by some power outside of himself, an indwelling force that urged him on.

‘Good morning, Rutland.’

He swung round, startled. It was an acquaintance from his club. ‘Mind if I tag along? Early constitutional and all that. Going far?’

Blast the man! Of all the people he knew it would have to be this one. No hope of shaking him off now, without arousing suspicion anyway. This man liked the sound of his own voice, and would probably go on talking for hours. It would be certainly unwise to appear rude. He tried to sound at ease when he spoke and was surprised at how well he managed it.

‘Not far, just along by the farm and back.’

‘Good.’ His companion beamed. ‘We never see you at the Club now that you are married. The fellows have been ask-

ing about you. How about coming up one night? With the little woman, of course.'

'We don't go out much at night,' Rutland replied with as much civility as he could muster.

'We gathered that,' his companion replied with a chuckle. 'Just married and all that. . . .'

The nudge and knowing leer that accompanied this remark sickened Rutland almost as much as the thoughts which were still coursing through his brain. On and on he went, the drone of his voice becoming monotonous. They walked for ten minutes. Ten long minutes. The man suddenly stopped.

'Hi there,' he called.

A feminine voice answered. Through a break in the hedge he could see a young woman walking towards them across the fields. A smile spread over the face of Rutland's companion.

'I say, old man, mind if I leave you? I was hoping to see this girl.'

This was a lucky break and he almost managed a smile as he answered. 'Not at all, it was nice to have seen you.'

He left the two of them together, and shortly afterwards turned into that all-too-remembered lane.

The trees overhead blotted out the sunlight and he felt suddenly chilled. This was the lane that had haunted his dreams. It was wide for a lane and he could see a long way down it. The hedges on both sides were high and impregnable, and the tree trunks were not visible. Above his head twined a dome of thick foliage. He felt shut in and his heart beat a little faster as he heard the sound of his own footsteps. As he neared the stile his heart thudded. What would it look like after four months? The thought of seeing an emaciated body brought him out in a cold sweat, and the knowledge that it had only been there for that short space of time did nothing to allay his fears. He felt compelled to go on; something drew him along in spite of what he might find. He crossed the stile and stood for a while scrutinizing the open countryside. He saw no one. With shaking fingers he lit a cigarette and pulled on it for a while to steady his nerves.

Then, making up his mind, he stepped into the scrubby growth and walked a few paces. It looked unfamiliar in the broad light of day and he stopped to think. The ground was dotted with small shrubs, but rose a little farther on where the bushes grew larger and thicker. It all came flooding back to him – the bank must be the rise in front of him . . . it must be. He didn't drag Manson very far, that much he did remember. Slowly he mounted the rise and looked down upon the thin line of the ditch. He was suddenly terrified, uncannily he felt Manson's presence everywhere. The very air breathed of him. Down in that ditch lay a dead man – a man he had killed. Why be afraid of it? It could not harm now.

Even as he thought these things the sweat started out on his forehead and the palms of his big hands grew damp. He half expected to see Manson rise up out of his hiding place and stand grinning at him. He forced himself to go on. The thought that he might sleep the sounder for knowing that Manson still lay where he had been left set him off down the bank. He reached the bottom and stood at the edge of the ditch. The pile of sticks denoted the place. Manson lay dead under there. He felt sick – his very being screamed at him to turn and run, to flee from this place and never look back. Yet he knew that he must look, for his nerves could not stand another night of doubt.

Slowly, with a pounding heart, his hand went out to pull the sticks gently away to one side of the ditch. He stood for a moment with eyes closed; then, with an effort he forced himself to look into the ditch. . . . What he saw almost caused his heart to stop. Smiling up at him, with black, seething eyes, lay Manson. The forehead yawned open, and inside, black and shining, bubbling in their hundreds, swarmed countless ants. The glassy eyes had gone – in their sockets ants rose and fell in black, struggling masses. The mouth eternally smiled, yet behind the ivory of the teeth was a further moving mass. The face was white – the starkest white Rutland had ever seen. God! those ants, the head was dense with them.

He stumbled away and sank down on the soft grass. It was to horrible to think about, and yet it would be imprinted on

his mind for the rest of his life. He sat staring into space, revolted and nauseated. What on earth had induced him to return to this place to uncover a sight worse than all the imaginings of hell's horrors.

He felt a movement in the grass near his hand. Peering down he recoiled as swiftly as lightning. A long line of ants was swarming across the grass and over his shoes and he saw with horror that they were coming from the pile of sticks in the ditch. Their swollen black bodies gleamed in the sunlight as they came over the edge. Rutland was transfixed, rooted to the spot. Faster and faster they came. He looked all round but found only the black line, now wider, leading back to the ditch. With the slow dawning of terror he realized that the ants were emerging from Manson's head. Manson's presence permeated the air about him, growing stronger as he stared stupefied at the line of ants blackening the grass as they bubbled towards him. He leapt back, frantically shaking them from his shoes as he turned and ran, stumbling and falling up the bank. He paused briefly to glance over his shoulder. The ants had not followed him, they seemed to be collecting, and were covering the grass in a huge writhing mass. Fascinated, he watched. They seemed to be taking shape, they moved over the grass a little and the main body of ants divided down the middle. Again they divided, fashioning a form of some kind. It was uncanny; he would wake and find he had been dreaming. What he saw next shocked him into reality . . . THE FIGURE OF MANSON LAY ON THE GRASS BELOW.

Lorrain found him crying like a child, unable to tell her what was wrong. Once she had persuaded him to go to bed, she went for the doctor, first locking him in his room. What she had feared for some time had happened; she now was desperate to find out the cause of this outbreak, which had been boiling for so long. The officer from the mental hospital arrived that evening.

'I'm so glad you've come, Mr Lennard. Something terrible has happened to Mel. Did you follow him this morning?' In order to safeguard Rutland she had had him watched for the

past week.

Mr Lennard gently closed the door. 'Have you locked him in his room?' She nodded. 'You must come to the police station with me, my dear, as I'm afraid there is something you must know.' She knew then that there was no hope for Mel.

The journey was endless, but eventually the car stopped with a jolt, and she allowed herself to be led through to an inner room in the police station. Having drunk a cup of tea with shaking hands, she was asked a few questions. The words drummed against her skull . . . why was she there, what had the police got to do with a case of mental illness? She was told, as gently as possible, that Rutland had been found by Mr Lennard that morning in a state of nervous hysteria. When approached Rutland ran like a madman across the fields. Mr Lennard decided the ditch held the answer to the man's strange behaviour, and went and inspected it. He found the body of Manson. Wasting no time he rang the police and told them. Apparently Mel had made his way home by a roundabout route, reaching home without being seen by anyone.

Some time after he was taken to the mental hospital, where it was to be decided whether he was fit enough to stand trial. His fingerprints were the same as those found on the walking stick, which had been taken in as lost property. Manson's name was inside the crook. Not much notice had been taken at the time, but now the name had come to light, and was connected with the missing man. So Rutland found himself in a locked room, and as the darkness slowly descended, he was faced with an even greater horror – night.

He ate nothing. Through the high window he could see the stars. Those perpetually watching eyes. He shielded his eyes from them and his ravings grew wilder. 'Let me out,' he called. 'Let me out or I shall die.' The orderly outside grinned to himself. 'Poor, mad fellow,' he thought.

An hour went by and faint moonlight filtered through the small window. He was quiet now, utterly spent, his head had dropped to his shoulder and he slept fitfully. He was dreaming that he was back by the ditch, watching those

ants . . . God, those ants ! He came to. He could feel Manson's presence coming ever nearer. Running to the door he cried out in a voice of tormented agony : 'Let me out . . . Oh God, let me out !' An orderly came along the corridor and tapped on the door. 'It's all right, old chap, you're quite safe here. Get into bed and go to sleep.' With that he was gone. Rutland shouted after him, but to no avail. 'You don't understand . . . he will get me. . . .' he moaned. The night crept on with sounds and whisperings. He slid round the walls of his room half crazy with fear. He dared not look up, for then he would see the window, and through it – the stars . . .

A shaft of moonlight slid in, fingering the darkness. He avoided it, as though it might do him some harm, but the light it gave was comforting in the blackness he dreaded so much, and he stood back to watch it. His mind wandered back again to the ants . . . and he whimpered like a child.

Down the corridor two night orderly officers were talking together. Suddenly one looked up.

'Did you see something then, Bill?'

His companion looked about him in the dim light. He shook his head. 'No. Why?'

'I thought I saw a shadow pass by.'

His friend laughed. 'I'd like to see anyone get inside this place at night. You imagined it.' They stood listening for a while, but heard nothing. They continued their conversation in a low tone. Along the wall the black shadow of a man moved on up the corridor. It stopped outside Rutland's door. It seemed to fall to the floor, then it moved on. The head slid under the door until it had completely disappeared beneath it.

Rutland had the intense feeling that he was not alone – an ever-abiding presence shadowed him. His face twitched and his eyes darted round the walls and tried to pierce the blackness. The moonlight fell again on the wall. In its pale light Rutland saw . . . the black figure . . . it moved towards him. 'No, no, no !' he screamed with all the pent up force of his lungs. 'Get away from me.' He sobbed uncontrollably.

The shadow drew nearer. Taking a blanket from his bed

he tried to beat the thing, to separate it and stamp it out, but he found that nothing he did was any use. He seemed to be fighting thin air. He hauled himself up on the bed, and screamed again. He could feel hundreds of pin-pricks creeping inexorably up his body. They reached his face and he opened his mouth to scream yet again, but it was blocked and filled by the seething, writhing swarm. It was not long before he fell to the floor, coated with ants from head to foot . . . and after some time the ghostly moaning ceased.

The morning sun shone warmly, and the hospital staff were engaged in their daily tasks. The orderly opened Rutland's door; the food he carried dropped to the floor with a clatter. 'Come quickly, QUICKLY,' he babbled almost incoherently. Footsteps sounded along the corridor, the doorway filled with white-aproned staff, in gruesome contrast with the black mass on the floor. The excited jabber brought the Matron in charge.

'It's a skeleton, Matron, covered with dead ants !'
Somewhere, Manson smiled on.

BONFIRE

by C. A. Cooper

THEY THINK me mad, but they are wrong. I have had my revenge, and am unpunished : I have destroyed him before a hundred witnesses, and have been given a lifetime in which to enjoy the memory of his pain. For in the very moment of my victory I proclaimed what I had done – and by being thus most sane and cunning I made them think me mad, and so placed myself beyond the reach of the gallows. Is that not very clever? It is, and I have told them so, but the more I tell them the truth the more convinced they are of their lies. What SANITY there is there – to escape retribution by broadcasting a truth that by any interpretation of their laws demands the supreme penalty!

Not that there was anything obviously hateful about Martin, on a superficial acquaintanceship. A pleasant young man, he seemed, polite and intelligent and rather likeably shy. But from the first time I saw him I felt an instinctive antagonism. He was applying for a position at my school, and as the headmaster I had to interview him. I glanced at his letter as he sat down in front of me, noting again the impressive academic qualifications it described, and when I looked up he was grinning at me awkwardly: and it was then that my hate was born, with a split-second of seemingly unjustified anger. I told myself that I was being foolish, that I should not let a moment's petulant irritation disturb me, but as the interview went on I found the hostility welling up inside me irresistibly. I tried to analyse it, watching him steadily over the desk all the time, and suddenly I thought of myself as I had been at his age. Me – John Wilson – the idealistic firebrand of Oxford University! Me, with my grandiose dreams of a revolution in education, and by it a revolution in the quality of the whole nation! Me, forever in trouble with authority for attacking what I regarded as an outworn and stagnant orthodoxy! Me, failing miserably to win a good degree!

And then, after that, the long years of failure. The junior appointment at what was hardly better than a kindergarten. The transparent self-deceit to the effect that even here my ideas could be put to use. The agony of being an odd man out to the other teachers and a mixture of impractical dreamer and underpaid scholastic failure to everyone else. The brief romance that I broke up – savagely, deliberately – because I could not afford a marriage. The volumes of social and educational theory returned unwanted from the publishers. The gradual drying-up and surrender of my spirit, the withdrawal into myself, the successive meaningless promotions that had brought me to my present position – my present entombment, more like! – as the ageing headmaster of a village junior school in Kent, a figure harsh and aloof and enigmatic, and an object of fear and dislike among the children I would have helped so much.

Martin would never experience that failure. Everything

about him hinted at an infinite capacity for advancement. He would go on from strength to strength, from success to success, for ever. And yet it was I, and not he, who had that quality the world sometimes calls genius! Suddenly the unfairness of it all burst on me painfully, and I glimpsed a future in which he who now cringed and fawned as my subordinate would rise up and ride roughshod over me, attaining amidst the roaring acclaim of all humanity the pinnacles of fame from which I had so spitefully, so deliberately, been repelled. Indeed, even at that first interview he gave himself away, practically confessed his intentions.

‘Of course,’ he said, ‘I won’t be staying here indefinitely. I’m just gaining experience, really.’

‘Yes,’ I said; ‘you’ll soon be moving on to better things.’ And we both laughed – he, I think, with some embarrassment. But from that moment on I knew him for what he was, a charlatan and a conspirator. I granted him the post he wanted only that I might watch him more closely, impelled, I suppose, by a vague fascination in which the black seeds of hate were hardly discernible, let alone the deadly fruits they were to bear.

But during the days that followed a sense of oppression settled heavily on my mind. The memories that had been aroused when I interviewed Martin preyed on me without mercy. Old ambitions, old hopes, rose up like ghosts in my fevered imagination, and each one surveyed the barren, futile death-trap that was my present existence with a whispered accusation that echoed round my head till all the universe seemed to be shouting its condemnation in my ears. I thought of what might have been, and of what was, and then I looked at Martin and thought of what would be; and in my mind the old dreams said, ‘You killed us by your failure, yet he who would not know us lives on to take your crown.’ A hate more savage than I had ever imagined possible began to grow within me, and visions of murder came shrieking into my dreams.

There was no resisting them, those phantasies of vengeance. They possessed a wild allure, a sweet and seemingly sensuous excitement that I could not refuse. And when

there came the inevitable thought of translating imagination into reality it was not an idea fantastic or alarming so much as a new source of pleasure, of rich anticipation. I played with it awhile in my mind before accepting it, not so much doubting it as savouring its every promise of delight, and all the time I watched Martin closely, hating him more each day; till finally I formed a resolve that instantly became a burning and overwhelming obsession – to kill him, horribly, that all the world might see the just deserts of those who trample and misuse and plot against their betters.

Weeks passed. I watched with secret hatred, with the ecstasy that comes of impending triumph, as he wormed his way into the affections of the staff and the children. It was maddening to see him win the respect, the love even, of those little children. My rage knew no bound when I saw him squatting amongst them in the classroom, smiling and making them laugh – him, who hated all things save his deceitful, treacherous self! For me, who loved them, the children never laughed; they only hung their heads and muttered an inaudible greeting and slunk away; and I saw in this added cheap facility of his the epitome of his loathsome attempt to seem superior to myself, to humiliate me with his easy success in everything to which he turned his hand. Once, indeed, coming upon him as he whirled the skipping-rope for a little girl of whom I was especially fond, and who seemed particularly averse to me, I lost my head altogether and ordered him to desist on the feeble pretext that the game was dangerous. He looked at me oddly then, and I thought I was discovered, and wondered whether I would have to kill him on the spot; but the incident passed, and afterwards I was more careful.

But I knew that the time was fast approaching when he must die, and with that knowledge a mounting excitement possessed me. I gloated on his ignorance of my intentions, on the fact that for all his scheming it was he and not I who would be destroyed, he and not I who would taste the bitterness of defeat. I imagined the scene of his death a thousand times, though just what form that death was to

take I had not then decided. It would be an end of extreme anguish – that much was certain; but more than that, it would be PUBLIC. This last detail, introduced at first merely as an additional refinement, became more and more the dominant factor in my phantasies of revenge. And how right, how proper, how just! That same world that had seen fit to conspire with him against me, to prefer his crafty emptiness to my vision and ability, would witness his death, my triumph. I looked to the future with a relish in which every shred of my former misery seemed to be absorbed.

Yet still I held my hand. It was as though I were awaiting some signal, some secret sign to indicate that the time had come; and like the expert gourmet who will not spoil the enjoyment of his meal by a premature snack, however great his hunger, I knew that any revenge I exacted before the appointed time would be unsatisfying and incomplete. Only, once that signal came, everything would fall into place.

It came. It came by Elizabeth. She had been a teacher at the school for several years before he came, but not until I saw them together did I realize that I loved her. And at the same time I perceived the full hateful shape of their conspiracy against me. I remembered how Elizabeth had always avoided me, so that I had never been able to be sure of my love for her even in my own mind; and I saw how now – now while I was wifeless, childless, alone, rejected – he proposed to flaunt his success before me. The pleasure I had once felt at anticipating my future triumph vanished. I became mad with rage. And I knew that the time was ripe. The signal had been given, and everything would fall into place.

That night he came to see me in my study.

‘I hear we have a tradition here for putting on a really good Guy Fawkes display,’ he said. ‘Well, there’s only a week to go. With your help I’d like to give them something really special this year.’

A week! That was all the time I had. A week in which to plan my revenge, to seek out some way of rendering him helpless that I might sacrifice him to my hate, sacrifice him

in full view of the world – and the woman – he thought to win. A wild anxiety that I might not succeed took hold of me. For three whole days I was helpless. I could not think : and at night I tossed and turned in a fever of indecision, my mind first devising and then rejecting a thousand impractical schemes, only to return to them again and again in the sleepless small hours, just as the cogs of a machine from time to time arrive back at their original positions in respect of one another. Failure, it seemed, was staring me in the face; and I came within inches of abandoning my plan altogether.

But have I not told you that Justice and Fate fought at my side? I have; and as I tottered on the very brink of defeat they came to my aid. I was walking along one of the school corridors, my mind confused and weary with fruitless effort, when all at once there came an intolerable pressure behind my eyes. The scene around me slipped away abruptly and became as remote as in a dream. I felt myself falling, or rather spiralling eccentrically downwards, through what seemed a giddy immensity of space. There came a buzzing and singing in my ears, growing louder and seeming to blot out will, energy, movement – everything, in fact, but a lurking speck of half-suffocated and grimly-held consciousness. And then the buzzing extended to a rich electric tingling over every part of my body, and I was aware of an iron rigidity seemingly creeping from my bones to stiffen my every limb, my every muscle. I had, in fact, fallen into one of the fits to which I was occasionally prone.

My epilepsy, if so infrequent and harmless a malady may so be called, at no time robbed me altogether of consciousness. After the initial seizure I found myself in full possession of my senses of sight, sound, and touch, but completely unable to move. And while I was in this state HE – my enemy, the object of every fibre of hate and loathing that was within me – came to my aid. Though I lay rigid on the ground he seemed aware, after a brief glance into my eyes, that I was conscious, for he spoke to me in a way that was clearly intended to be comforting – and was a great deal more so than he realized.

‘Don’t worry,’ he said; ‘we’ll soon have you inside thaw-

ing out. As a matter of fact, this sometimes happens to me as well. You feel so darn vulnerable, don't you, till you can move about again.'

How fortunate it was that I could not betray myself by any inadvertant start of joy! As rigid and as expressionless as a corpse I lay before him, and in my mind I was wondering how to obtain the drugs which, suitably mixed, could provoke Rigid Epilepsy in a habitual sufferer.

Now indeed was his doom certain! The very next day, having made a rapid recovery from my seizure, I set about preparing for my revenge. But at once I encountered a difficulty. Three of the drugs I required were easy enough to come by, but the fourth – quinine – presented me with a problem. I knew very little about the drug, and I was therefore unable to devise any method of obtaining it that might not arouse suspicion. And I had only two short days left! Yet again I seemed defeated; and yet again I was saved. Of course! Colonel Forsythe would have quinine! He had contracted malaria in Africa, and even now was subject to occasional bouts of it – bouts that could only be relieved with quinine. I would visit him the next day, and somehow contrive to take what I wanted.

That night was torture. Such was my excitement that I could not sleep at all. Indeed, anxiety and fatigue combined temporarily to befog my reason, and a detail which was in reality quite trivial – the necessity for explaining my absence from school the next day – loomed so large as to almost undermine my resolution. I saw it as an insurmountable obstacle to my plans. I became convinced that in the very moment of remarking that I proposed to visit a friend I would be discovered. It seemed impossible to devise a form of words that would not instantly betray me. I thought longingly of abandoning my intentions altogether, and it seemed that if only I could do so the unbearable tension within me would be broken, and I could sleep. But then I thought of him who planned to humiliate me, and rage and hatred gripped me like a giant hand; so that even while the sweat poured coldly off me and my stomach crawled with

sick fright I resolved to carry through my revenge.

Morning came, and with it my mind cleared somewhat, though the strain was beginning to tell on me visibly; which last-named phenomenon, far from arousing suspicion, was very easily turned to my advantage. Looking very much a sick man I announced after morning school that I would spend the remainder of the day resting at home, and confident that I would receive no callers I set off for Colonel Forsythe's country house.

The journey was not a long one, a mere twenty minutes' walk from the school, and soon I found myself in the Colonel's huge study. Once, many years ago, I had regarded him as a friend, but now I discovered that I loathed him. He was looking at me curiously as I sat awkwardly in his big fireside armchair, his fine blue eyes shrewd and piercing in a handsome, deeply-lined face, and suddenly I realized that he could see into the depths of my soul as though its inmost secrets were written in letters of fire about my head, could read every thought and motive that lay behind my feeble 'just passing - thought I'd drop in' excuse for calling on him. He was a tall man, and strong in spite of his silver hairs, but in that moment I knew that if my cause were to succeed I must first kill him - straightaway, that very afternoon, before it was too late.

'Have a drink,' he said quietly, and handed me the glass. He was still holding my eyes with his, tearing open my mind that he might see what was within, devouring me. Fiend! Traitor! Once he had been my friend, but now he was in league with him who plotted so deviously to destroy me. Why else would he gaze at me like that, dragging out my soul's every secret, every plan?

I leapt angrily to my feet, smashing the glass to splinters on the hearth as I did so. Forsythe, who had turned to mix himself a drink at the cocktail cabinet, faced round at me quickly. He managed to seem neither alarmed nor even surprised; indeed, he even smiled slightly.

His gaze flickered down to the hearth, then back to me.

'You're in some kind of trouble,' he said. 'Sit down. Perhaps I can help.'

How impeccably tactful he was ! How controlled and kind and considerate ! How like an understanding father speaking to his wayward offspring ! How infinitely SUPERIOR to the wretched, untidy creature shaking and half-sobbing before him ! I hated him then with a hate that knew no bound, no restraint, no pity. I snatched the poker from its hook by the fire and flew at him like a tiger.

But I was too slow. Surprised though he was, Forsythe managed to get the big oak desk between us before I could strike. His face had gone deathly white. I began to circle the desk, but he moved round away from me, catching up a heavy wooden ruler as he did so.

'For God's sake,' he cried, his voice shaking, 'you're sick. Think what you're doing.'

I ignored him. Slowly, carefully, I edged round the desk, and he retreated so as to keep it between us, his mouth working soundlessly in the tense silence. Fool, to think that he could save himself thus ! I knew that in just a few brief moments he would be exactly where I wanted him, that his breath panted in a body that was already dead.

He moved sideways one more step, and his back was to a chair. It was the moment I was waiting for. With a yell of triumph I caught hold of the desk and threw it over at him. He dived backwards away from it but tripped on the chair, and the desk crashed down on to his legs, pinning him to the floor.

Ice. Red ice. It froze out every vestige of heat and passion from my mind, leaving only a roaring emptiness and a sense of spinning and whirling that was as remote and ecstatic as something in a dream. And when it was gone I was very tired, and the Colonel's head was an ugly thing of blood and smashed flesh and little patches of exposed bone, and the poker in my hand was heavy with gore.

Mad, they call me, yet see how easily, how completely, I defeated one of three times my strength ! And see how, even with the smell of blood heavy in my nostrils, and my body reeling with a strange exhaustion, I achieved what I had come for. I found the quinine in the Colonel's bath-room, and slipped it into my pocket. I considered the advisa-

bility of moving the body to some place where it would not easily be found, but decided against it; for there was nothing to link me directly with his death, and I knew that by the time the police found one of their inevitable clues it would be too late. Too late, that is, for HIM : he whose death was to be much more bitter, so much more PUBLIC, than that of the Colonel.

I slept soundly that night, and when I awoke new life flowed like wine through my veins. An exhilaration the like of which I had not known possessed me. Gone were the leaden weights of weariness and doubt that had pressed on me so harshly, and in their place was a wonderful sense of freedom and power. My mind was functioning with a pellucid speed and accuracy that was peculiarly thrilling, and when I turned it to considering the plan for my revenge I found neither fault nor possibility of failure. I saw the world that sought to destroy me as a collection of pawns, obedient to my slightest whim; and I knew that soon – very soon now, in just a few swift hours – that world would know the terror of my vengeance. For this was the day I had awaited so long, the day on which HE would face the Destiny he so richly deserved.

‘Maniac Killing in Kent’ screamed the headlines, and when I arrived at the school the staff-room was buzzing excitedly with the news. ‘So near,’ they said; and, ‘It must have been a madman, to batter the head like that’; and, ‘For twenty minutes at least, the doctor says’. Buzz, buzz, all the time, as though the brass instruments in some great symphony had unexpectedly struck an ominous discord, leaving the strings trembling in sudden terror while underneath them the great drums and basses roared in a sullen and relentless crescendo. I stood just inside the door, listening, and a fierce delight burnt within me. How disturbed they all were at this first trivial manifestation of my anger, and how ignorant of its being the merest prelude to the savage retribution they were so soon to witness! I gazed exultantly on he who was marked out to die, and the one phrase that through all the noise of talk stood out clearly over and over

again had for me, and me alone, a special meaning : 'So near, so near !'

Careless, I was, in my triumph : careless, but sure.

'Near indeed,' I shouted ; 'and nearer with every stroke of the clock.' And I went out, slamming the door behind me, knowing that in the staff-room there would be only a moment's astonished silence before someone remembered that the Colonel was a friend of mine and explained my strange words as being due to personal grief. Grief, indeed ! The thought was irresistibly funny, and I laughed heartily as I entered my study.

Hardly had I got inside before there was a knock on the door. It was Watts, the deputy-headmaster. He came in rather hesitantly, and when he spoke it was with an air of profound sympathy.

'I take it you've heard about Colonel Forsythe,' he said. His solemnity was hilarious.

'Indeed, indeed,' I said : 'silly old coot.' At that Watts's expression became even funnier.

'You're not well, sir,' he said at last. 'Why don't you take a rest?' Amazing that I could be so bold, could reveal so much of my true state of mind, without them suspecting the truth !

'I'll rest soon enough,' I snapped, 'but first there's work to be done. Send Martin to me.' Watts hesitated a moment, then went out.

Mere moments it was, five minutes at the most, before my victim stood before me, but such was my impatience that it seemed like hours. He too looked as if he wanted to say something about my taking a rest, but I cut him short.

'The show must go on,' I said. 'It needs us.' He looked blank, and I chuckled. 'The bonfire tonight, that is,' I explained. And with that I plunged into a discussion of our arrangements for the evening's display. At my own suggestion the bonfire was to be a huge and magnificent affair, six feet high and built round the old iron flagpole that stood at the edge of the school playing fields, so that the guy could be hoisted on top of it by means of the single small pulley-wheel at the top of the pole. Most of my staff – those who

took any interest in the matter at all, that is – regarded this as an odd and unnecessary idea, but it was essential to my plan and I had overruled their rather half-hearted objections. After all, what did it matter to them that in my sudden enthusiasm for Guy Fawkes I should organize the whole thing myself? What indeed, save the death of one of them and a lifetime of shattered sleep for those who helped me kill him?

A splendid thought, this, that in killing one of them I was punishing them all! They were united into one body by their conspiracy against me, and I was cutting off that body's right hand. All morning I dwelt on the idea gloatingly, hardly conscious of the fact that I was alone with my enemy in the little storage hut, working with him on the guy.

'This will do fine,' he said at last.

'Yes, you will,' I answered; but as he glanced round at me I turned my gaze from him to the guy, and he suspected nothing.

Nothing, that is, of the truth. But as the day went on I became aware that not only Martin but the rest of my staff as well were beginning to look at me askance, and I realized that though none of them even dreamed of the truth they had all sensed something strange in my manner, something more even than illness or sorrow. Indeed, I had done nothing to conceal the excitement that possessed me. It gave me pleasure to see them curious and amazed as I flung out some ironic comment, some wild remark that would be recalled long afterwards with a first horrified realization of its meaning. How stupid they were not to perceive the truth – or rather, how completely blinded to it by my cunning! Again and again I saw that expression of astonished puzzlement jerk on to their faces, and soon I could hear them whispering behind my back. 'He's seriously run down,' said one; 'If he doesn't let up soon he'll have some kind of breakdown', another. They stole furtive glances at me as I moved amongst them, then looked away guiltily as our eyes met. They were alert, anxious, puzzled, watching; somewhere, in the cloudy depths of their minds, a voice was asking strange and disturbing questions. They suspected, but they knew

not what they suspected.

And the police suspected too. 'Just a routine call, sir,' said the sergeant, but he was glancing around sharply and his questions were searching. Later I knew why – there was school chalk on the poker that had killed Forsythe, and mine was the nearest school. I lied skilfully, and they went away seemingly satisfied : but I knew they would be back.

Yet not for one moment did I doubt my success. The sense of power, the sure certainty that neither God nor man could hinder me now, grew stronger as the day progressed. Seeming danger exhilarated me because I knew it was not really danger at all. Rather was it an additional and welcome opportunity to practise my skill and resource, contemptuously deflecting everything that stood in my path, till in the end my enemy was helpless in the midst of those who would help him, destroyed amongst those who already sought his executioner. So it was that every increase in the disturbance around me served only to increase my pleasure, and so it was that I myself threw out the words that might seem to endanger my cause : for well did I know that mine was the hand of Fate itself. The steady rhythm of the clock beat in my ears like the approaching steps of some inexorable ghost bent on death – HIS death, his agony, my final and terrible revenge !

And then at last it was evening, and Martin was in my study, and the death-tick of the clock was banging almost painfully in my ears. The crisis was at hand, and I knew that now was the time when my wits and willpower would be tried to their utmost. The prospect delighted me, and I gazed across at Martin as might a master chess-player survey the ruined defence of his adversary – thoughtful, reserved, picking and choosing his moves carefully that the kill might be achieved with perfect artistry.

A bright flash lit the black square that was the window, then another. Guy Fawkes night, evidently, had already begun for some people. With a renewed sense of urgency I crossed to the cupboard and took out the big bottle of wine, and the glasses, and the little plastic vial that was with them.

'The children must be waiting for us,' I said. 'But first,

something warming. It is not inappropriate, I think.' And I chuckled inwardly at how VERY appropriate it was, at how VERY warm that wine was to make him !

I hid my hands with my body as I poured the drinks, then turned to offer him his. And he saw nothing to make him suspect ! But had he watched more closely he might have seen that his wine was a little paler than mine, that as I handed it to him I slipped something small – an empty vial perhaps – into my coat pocket. Little things, but they spelt pain, and justice, and death !

'Thanks,' he muttered. He didn't know why he had been invited to my study, and was consequently altogether too confused and ill at ease to point out that schoolmasters do not usually drink when they are supposed to be on duty.

He sipped at his drink, then curled his lips in involuntary disgust. God, the drug must taste !

It was a tense moment. Unless I could get that drink down him my cause was lost. But my mind rose exultantly to the challenge.

'Drink, man !' I cried, and by way of example I emptied my own glass in a single gulp, watching him narrowly as I did so.

A shy and awkward young man was Martin – or at least, so he seemed. Doubtless the thing was an elaborate pose designed to disguise his scheming. But if so the pose killed him, for with a brief and rather sickly grin he raised his glass and drained it completely.

I turned away quickly to hide any uncontrollable look of triumph on my face. My heart pounded, my palms sweated, my head roared, with the excitement of victory. I had done it ! Death was inside him, and presently it would be all around him too, and in that moment my whole consciousness was swamped with the wild mixture of rage and delight that is revenge.

But the hardest part of my task was still before me. I knew from the time doctors had experimented with the drug on me that it took between five and ten minutes to take effect, but any one of those minutes could ruin my plan. I had to watch for the first signs that the drug was beginning to

work, then delay a while before doing anything else – but not too long, or the seizure would come too early. For it was essential that it should not take place in my study, and equally so that we should not be alone together for more than a very short time in the storage hut. Perfect timing was therefore absolutely necessary, and in view of the drug's somewhat unpredictable action it might seem that chance must inevitably play as large a part as judgement. Perhaps so; but then another word for chance is Fate, and well did I know that Fate was with me, that I myself WAS Fate, that my judgement of even the subtlest nicety could not possibly be other than perfect.

At this thought I became drunk with power. My hands shook : I abandoned all restraint. And why not, indeed? Who could stop me, now?

'A fine night to burn on, don't y'think, Martin?'

How amazed he looked at that ! And was that fear in his eyes as well? Was he just a little afraid already? I gazed at him, taking in every movement of his face, every twitch, every uneasy sideways glance as he avoided my stare, and I was sure; he was frightened. Or rather, he was puzzled and nervous. The first glimmerings of something strange and terrible were beginning to penetrate his mind – too slight to send him running outside for help, but too unmistakable to be entirely ignored.

I smiled with satisfaction at being able to read his mind so easily. And secretly I hugged myself with delight; for if fear was only just beginning to tinge the edges of his consciousness, think how soon that fear would become a raging torrent of agony, a torrent to sweep away that consciousness for ever into the black oblivion of death !

Then, quite suddenly, I saw him sway unsteadily on his feet. His eyes glazed over. He passed a hand over his brow in a slow, bewildered way, then stood gazing stupidly at the sweat glistening on his fingers. It was the preliminary effect of the drug.

Never had I expected it to work so quickly. For a moment I wondered how long I ought to wait before getting him outside, but then I realized that with the drug acting so

swiftly I dare not risk delay. I rushed to his side and caught hold of his arm, pushing him towards the door. But to my surprise he resisted violently; indeed, he broke free and staggered backwards away from me.

I do not know what tortuous mixture of reason and intuition led him to the truth, but somehow he arrived at it. I saw it in his eyes as he slumped against the wall. One moment they were blank, senseless, half-closed in surrender to the drug; the next, as they saw me advancing through a world that must have been suddenly liquid and dream-like, they were charged with the horrified life of realization.

'You!' he gasped. 'You killed Forsythe. And now —' But that was all he could manage. I caught hold of him by the arm and dragged him towards the door.

'And now — YOU!' I said.

One word, and one word only, was left to him in this world, and that was more of a whimper than a word.

'Madman!' he whispered. And then we were through the door and in the corridor, and Fate was still with me; it was empty. Martin weighed heavily on my arm, but some automatic reflex kept his feet dragging after him in a parody of a walk, and he was too far gone to resist me.

A few more paces and we were outside the building altogether. The storage hut was about fifty yards away, quite near the unlit bonfire on the edge of the playing-fields. The children were already waiting in a big semicircle around it, but it was pitch dark, and they had their backs to us, and the rockets overhead kept their attention away from us.

Then just as we got to the door of the storage hut I saw Watts coming up from behind it. With desperate energy I threw Martin inside and shut the door.

Watts wanted to know if I needed any help with the guy. It clearly struck him as most peculiar that I should want to attend to such a matter myself.

'I have Martin with me already,' I told him, and sent him off for some petrol for the bonfire. Then I entered the hut. Martin was still on his feet, and the cold night air must have had a reviving effect on him, for as I came in he lunged at me violently. With a scream of rage I threw him off, so

that he reeled backwards and crashed into the far wall. He slumped there dazedly for a moment, then pulled himself slowly upright and took one staggering step nearer, his arms groping before him and his teeth tightly clenched with the terrific strain of his fight against unconsciousness. I closed the door and bunched my fists in readiness, and at my heart was a lust to strike, to smash, to kill, such as you who have never seen your enemy helpless before you cannot possibly understand. My whole being vibrated in a savage delight at what I was about to do, and there was no room for pity, only for hate.

He was still six feet away when his whole body twisted backwards, as though gigantic and invisible hands were trying to break it in two. His arms came slowly down to his sides, obviously against his will, and with the wrists turned back upon themselves convulsively. And his face became distorted, inhuman. The mouth was wrenched violently sideways and upwards, so that it became a gaping hole where there should have been a cheek, and so frightful was the muscular tension that blood dribbled freely from the edges of his eyes.

For perhaps half a minute he fought with the strength of terror against the drug-induced seizure, reeling and staggering blindly as he pitted his strength against the terrific spasms that gripped him; and all the while I was screaming I know not what of triumph and hate. I may have struck him, but my memory is cloudy : for he was MY enemy, and the horror tormenting him was MY chosen vengeance, and the power jerking and wrenching and twisting him was MY power. Best of all, this was merely a prelude to what was still to come – the ultimate agony, the supreme expression of my anger !

Martin stiffened suddenly, not in any one limb this time but over his entire body. There was no fighting that final rigidity, and at once his frantic flailing ceased. He stood erect for a moment, like some huge and clumsy toy, then swayed and fell stiffly to the floor.

But well did I know, from my own experience, that this was a toy that still thought, and feared, and felt. I stood

over it for a moment, watching the spasmodic twitching of an eyelid that was its one sign of life, and I felt faint with joy.

There was work to be done, to make the sacrifice ready. I set to feverishly, well aware that I had already been in the hut too long, that at any moment Watts or some other master might come in to find out what was delaying me. A sense of urgency mingled with my exhilaration, producing in me a curiously light-headed sensation in which everything around me seemed unstable and unpredictable, yet at the same time obedient to the slightest exertion of my will. It was as though I were driving a very fast car at a speed only just within my power to control; it was hard to keep a grip on things, but whenever they seemed to be getting out of hand a deft and rapid mental reflex maintained the balance.

Suddenly there was a commotion outside; Watts's voice, and other deeper voices, gruff and official. The police.

'He's in here,' Watts was saying. Hastily I went outside and confronted the officer who seemed to be in charge. He was someone else from the sergeant I had seen earlier on – a senior detective from London, probably.

I waved Watts into silence before he could speak.

'We're looking for Mr Wilson,' said the officer; 'the head-master of this school.' I realized with a little thrill of delight that Martin must be able to hear every word we said, helpless a few feet away inside the hut.

'Indeed,' I replied: 'he went that way, towards his home.' And I pointed to the road alongside the school grounds.

Watts gaped amazedly in the darkness. I kicked his shin savagely. A few seconds of confusion – of SILENCE – was all I needed.

'Thank you, sir,' said the officer, and began to move off. Watts tried to speak, but I interrupted him quickly.

'You'd better hurry,' I shouted: 'I think Mr Wilson has gone mad. He was threatening to kill someone.'

That set them positively running for their cars. Watts turned to me, his face still a mask of astonishment, and began to expostulate wildly. But there was an iron bar in my hand that I had brought with me from the hut, and with careful

accuracy I smashed it into the side of his head. He fell without a sound – dead on the instant, as I learnt later. And the policemen were not yet out of sight.

But they had seen nothing. I smiled triumphantly, standing there alone in the darkness, and gazed upwards at the jewelled sky. So close, the stars seemed, as though they were crowding down around my head; or as though I myself were some gigantic nebulous spirit pervading the entire universe, commanding the stars as they spun through their silent void, and destroying my enemies with a single whispered word of death.

I turned and went back into the hut. Not merely the hour but the very moment of my revenge was at hand. I stood a moment beside the unmoving body of my enemy.

‘Your audience is waiting,’ I said softly. ‘We must go.’

And with that the final scene was set. The people who saw us coming – the staff who had plotted with him, and children who would speak of that night with bated breath when they were old men – hushed a moment as they saw us coming : but their awe was not for me, wild-eyed and fierce as I must have looked. It was the macabre figure on the handcart I pushed before me that silenced them. The size and shape of a man, it was, but motionless and stiff. A huge mockery of a university gown flapped blackly around it, and on its head was an outsize mortar-board, and where there should have been a face there was a grinning mask.

The hush was short-lived. The children began to cheer, at first raggedly and then in delighted unison. Evidently the idea of burning a schoolmaster appealed to them.

I arrived at the bonfire. A looped rope hung from the top of the iron pole around which it was built, and I threw it round the figure on the handcart, passing it under the arm-pits. There were other masters waiting to help me, but the moment the rope was secured I began to pull with all my strength on the other end. It was essential that I should take as much of the weight as possible myself, for guys do not usually weigh ten stone. . . .

Even so they noticed. No sooner had two more masters joined me at the rope than one of them passed an amazed

remark on the figure's weight.

'Coal,' I snapped : 'he's full of coal. Black to the heart, indeed.' An unlikely explanation, but just sufficiently plausible to gain a little time.

And so we pulled, they steadily but me frantically, and the figure dragged swiftly up the six-foot pile of wood that was our bonfire, until at last it was wedged securely on top; and as I let go the rope I wondered what Martin was thinking, so close now to death.

A memorable scene, that was ! Only the stars and the moon and the beams of a few electric torches disturbed the icy and transparent darkness, and the sinister black mound of the bonfire, with its gruesome summit, loomed huge amongst the waiting crowd. And Elizabeth was there too ! I saw her wandering about near the bonfire, ostensibly attending to the children, but really looking for Martin.

Well, let her see him then. Let her see him as he really was, grotesque and ugly and trapped in the web of his own treachery. Let her see him DIE !

I took up a torch of oil-soaked rag wrapped round a stick, and lit it with a match. The flames were dazzling in the surrounding blackness, and I could feel their heat on my face.

There was an expectant murmur from the children. At last the ritual was to begin ! Already the two masters who had helped me with the guy were lighting the big expensive rockets, and one of them rushed into the sky, exploding in a great claw of green lights overhead. On the ground a huge catherine-wheel swelled into a six-foot disc of dazzling white fire, and from farther to the left clouds of red smoke began to drift chokingly across the scene.

I approached the bonfire and gazed upwards at the silent figure at its top, the blazing torch in my hand. The air was full of the noise of fireworks and the excited cries of the children, and I was completely ignored. This was my last moment of secrecy, of private vengeance; as soon now as I willed it pain more than the unhurt mind can conceive was to be unleashed on him who chose to plot against me, and the world that had cringed before him would stand back

aghast, praying to become blind that it would not see, and mad that it would not remember. And I – I whom they thought so feeble, so contemptible, so easily used and deceived – would be the author of their distress! Like some invading demon a frenzy of rage took hold of my mind and body : I sweated, I reeled, I half-fainted; and with a cry of ecstasy, as of some lonely adolescent who reaches orgasm with the girl of his dreams clutched naked in his arms, I hurled the torch into the bonfire.

The flames were live things as they scuttled up and around the petrol-soaked pile, exploring with a horrid, eager energy everything in their path, dragging themselves with a hungry crackle along branches and twigs, leaping across gaps with a thud of exploding petrol-vapour, spreading with an increasing noise and fury over the pile's surface, burrowing in red anger deep inside it, then climbing upwards, a concerted tide of scorching, scalding death, with a deafening and ever-rising roar of satisfaction, till the bulk of the bonfire was altogether lost to view and it seemed that the Earth itself had opened to send a column of fire pouring into the sky. And half-hidden behind enveloping curtains of flame was a Figure, a black spectral thing unmoving amidst the upward-gushing fire, a dark spindly thing that fizzled and melted, and split slowly into a thousand red-hot lumps that would harden, and dry, and fall away into the inferno beneath.

A cry – an inhuman, wavering, wailing sound, rising high-pitched and long-drawn and then fading with a sob into the thunder of the flames – came from the figure : but only I heard it, for the children were cheering wildly at the hellish majesty of the fire. I laughed at that, a cracked demented laugh as though I were a madman, and danced crazily in the brilliant circle of firelight. I could see them all gaping at me in the darkness outside, and feeling my senses slipping away from me in the delirium of triumph I pointed upwards and screamed out what I had done. At that all became confused, and the smell of burnt flesh went to my head like wine; but through it all I could hear the shouts, and Elizabeth's scream, and I could see them trying to pull down the mountain of fire that I had made, like so many tiny frantic

figures in a luridly crimson dream. They got him out of the flames in the end, and the police were there too, helping them and leading me away; but the Thing they laid out on the grass was charred and dead, and hardly recognizable as the impeccable, facile, shallow, detestable young man who twenty minutes before had been sipping wine in my study. I laughed to see them standing so white-faced, so silent, so shaken, round the cindery remains of Martin, and then I must have fainted, for I remember nothing more of that terrific night, nor of many that followed.

They have me in one of their asylums for the mad now, and every day the white-coated doctors come probing into my mind. I make no secret of the fact that I am sane, for although it was indeed part of my plan to escape the hangman I know perfectly well that nothing I can do or say will alter their opinion of my madness. It therefore delights me to confound them by presenting them with evidence of my intelligence and power of reason, knowing all the time that they will continue to blind themselves to the truth. But even so I am becoming bored. Gradually I have come to realize that even the destruction of Martin was not complete victory. There are others as hateful as he trying to gain easy success over such as myself. Some of them are here in this asylum – there is one young doctor I particularly mistrust – but they abound outside as well. I think I shall have to destroy them. And do not be too quick to say, ‘You are confined, trapped behind locked doors : what you threaten is impossible.’ Think first of what I have already done, and then ask yourself again whether I might not soon be free, seeking out my enemies. Enemies who might be well liked by this false and stupid world. Enemies who might be anybody.

YOU, perhaps.

HAND IN HAND

by M. S. Waddell

THE SEVERED head lay in the dog's basket, fluff sticking to the lips, sightless eyes gazing up at the ceiling.

It seemed odd to the young man that he had never seen her without her glasses before. The mark on her nose showed where the glasses had been . . . where were they now?

He put down his cup of tea and started to look for them. He might have touched her glasses in the struggle, just might have. He couldn't afford the possibility that someone would find her glasses and his fingerprints. It was the sort of detail that had to be attended to at the time.

He had cut her throat in the sitting-room just after dinner. The stained chair cover he had covered with a rug. Her partly dismembered torso now lay on the table, severed hands and feet conveniently laid at one side. Her startlingly white flesh with the clear red lines of the incisions stood out against the plastic table top, scuffed here and there by the scrapings of the saw as it bit through her bones.

Her glasses were lying in the hearth. One lense was broken and the frame was twisted. He must have stamped on them as he struggled to hold her in the great warm armchair, working the sharp penknife in her throat.

He picked the glasses up and polished them on his sleeve. On the fire? They had a metal frame. They might not burn. They would have to go with her.

He poured himself another cup of tea ignoring the pleading eyes in the dog basket as best he could. She would keep watching him. He picked up a cushion, threw it at the head. It lodged in the basket and the head toppled sideways, releasing a fresh flow of blood through the nostrils.

Fat vulgar Rosie had a lot of blood in her fat vulgar body.

He fitted the rubber kitchen gloves back on to his hands and picked up the saw, starting back to work.

Walking up the hillside the couple were grateful for the light flooding from Rosie Garret's house which assured them of a greeting.

The man was stout and fortyish, dressed in a business suit and black highly polished shoes. He was sweating slightly and at a disadvantage to his companion, a woman of the same age whose clothes, bright blue jeans and a sweater, were more suitable for the occasion.

'It's a nice house,' the woman said, cocking her head at it. 'A bit remote but plenty of space.'

'Need a car,' the man said. 'Living up here without a car . . . she'll soon have no friends.'

'That's not true. Rosie always has friends in her house, plenty of them, you know that.'

'Young men,' said the man contemptuously. 'You know why they come. God knows what she sees in them. The pickings of the gutters, that's what Rosie collects. She'll have herself in trouble one day, you mark my words. A woman of her age gallivanting around with every little sailor boy who happens to come by. . . .'

The woman protested half heartedly. The man wiped his brow with his large white pocket handkerchief.

'She's lonely,' the woman said. 'You wouldn't understand.'

'She's not lonely!' the man said with a short laugh. 'That's just the trouble.'

They opened the gate and proceeded up the drive towards the bungalow, white and pretty against the blue of the summer sky shading now towards dusk.

'Every light in the place,' the man said disapprovingly, standing in the porch and wiping his face yet again.

'Do stop muttering, Arnold.'

Arnold blinked at her crossly, took his time about replacing his handkerchief, and rang the bell.

The chiming of the bell, up and down the scale, stopped the young man in his tracks.

He went to the light and switched it off. Whoever it was, they might just go away. No good . . . the other lights, lights on all over the place. He waited for the bell to chime again.

Perhaps it was a man to read the meter, a postman.

He pulled himself together. He had to answer the door. If he didn't the caller might get suspicious. There was no way away from the house except back down the hill to the town. If they decided on making trouble he would be caught neatly in his own trap.

He lifted the torso in his arms and looked round the room. The frilly edge of the sofa beckoned. He lifted it up, slid the headless limbless thing in beneath. He picked the head up by the hair, looked once more deep into Rosie's pathetic eyes . . . why wouldn't she stop looking at him? . . .

The bell chimed again. He looked round. Blood stains . . . on the table, in the dog's bed. He shoved the dog's bed into the corner, left the cushion lying in it. He took a rug from the settee, draped it over the table, removing the severed hands and feet and part of Rosie's leg, stuffing them beneath the sofa. No room, little bits of Rosie poked out from underneath. He took out the head, pushed it into a drawer of the sideboard.

The bell rang again, furiously, insistently.

He still had a hand, part of the leg. The leg went in with the head. In desperation he slipped the hand into his jacket pocket. Safer there than anywhere else.

He opened the door and looked at the hostile couple standing there, their unknown faces filled with suspicion.

'Is Mrs Garret in?' the man asked.

'No.'

'We're friends of hers,' the woman said. 'You must be Alan?'

'That's right,' the young man said. 'I'm Alan.' Who was Alan?

'Where is Mrs Garret?' the man asked.

'Gone to . . . gone down to town.'

'Will she be long?'

'I don't know . . . I don't think so.'

'We'll wait,' the woman said, and the young man realized the trap he had laid for himself.

They trooped into the house and down the hall and into

the sitting-room and made themselves comfortable and all the time the woman talked and the man watched him with vaguely concealed hostility and he kept wondering if any small portion of Rosie would be lying on the floor for them to trip over.

The single trickle of blood that came from beneath the sofa was almost an anticlimax. Deliberately he stood on it as they settled themselves, and kept talking whilst he rubbed his foot back and forth.

'The room's in a bit of a mess,' he said. 'Wasn't expecting no visitors.' He had to concentrate on what he was saying or he wasn't going to get away with it. He had to stop thinking about what lay under the sofa beneath the lady's fat bottom.

'Have a cigarette,' the man said, reaching a packet towards him. He took the cigarette, keeping his hand steady. The man scuffled in his pocket for matches. The young man reached for his, touched the cold wet flesh of Rosie's hand in his pocket, recoiled.

'You don't look well,' the woman said, with concern in her voice. 'I hope Rosie's been looking after you.'

'She's been very good,' the young man said, thinking of the fight with Rosie, the hacking at the sinews of her neck, the suck snap of the skin as the head finally came apart from the shoulders. She couldn't harm him now, couldn't harm anyone now, not now, dead.

The blood was spreading out round the sole of his shoe.

The couple had lapsed into silence. They were watching him. The man looked at his watch, said something in an undertone to his wife.

'Do you think Rosie'll be long?' the man asked.

'I don't know,' the young man said. 'I don't really think its worth your while waiting, you know Rosie.'

The woman smiled. 'It's not a question of waiting. We've come to stay for a while . . . didn't Rosie say?'

Stay. . . .

'She must have forgotten.'

'Funny thing to forget,' the man said.

Go away fat man and little wife, the young man said

inside himself in a shrill panic-stricken voice. Go well away. Go now, go. He had to concentrate. If he didn't concentrate he was going to get caught.

The door bell rang again.

'That'll be the bags,' the man said, and got up. 'I'll go.'

The woman followed him into the hall and the young man was able to raise his foot from the puddle of blood and think about what he was doing next.

He could hear them talking in the hallway, stuff coming in. Trunks! The puddle of blood sat accusingly before him.

He took off his jacket, put it over the back of the sofa. Pushed and pulled at the edge of the sofa till it covered the trickling pool of blood, shoved Rosie's exposed flesh back underneath.

'Whatever are you doing?' the woman asked.

'Just . . . just putting things to rights.'

'You've cut yourself,' the woman said. 'There's blood all over your things.'

Blood on his hands, blood on the knee of his trousers.

'I caught my hand,' he said.

She looked puzzled. 'Let me see.'

'I can look after myself, thanks.'

'Now don't be silly,' she said, cooing at him, like Rosie. Face like Rosie, eyes like Rosie, pathetic.

He knocked her hand aside. 'I can do it myself,' he said, short, sharp, and terrified.

He went quickly out of the room and along the passage to the kitchen. His shirt was sticking to his back, the blood had soaked through the cuffs. He was frightened. He had to stay, work it out. Get the body out of the house, get rid of it. He had to concentrate. If he didn't concentrate he was going to get caught.

They sat in the front room eating. The little man and his wife were puzzled that Rosie had not been there to greet them. The young man was upstairs in his room.

'I don't like him,' the man said. 'Shifty, common.'

'Very young,' the woman said.

The man got up from the table, went across to the settee, bounced on it.

'His jacket, dear,' the woman said reprovingly.

'Cheap,' the man said.

The woman got up from the table, took the jacket on her arm, put it across the back of the chair.

'Put it down!' The young man rushed in, grabbing the jacket. The woman stepped back surprised.

'It was getting rumpled,' she said.

'Don't touch my things,' the young man said. 'I hate people fiddling with my things.'

She put the coat down. 'I'm sorry.'

He grabbed the coat, groped for the pocket. The hand still nestled there, safe.

They went to bed at half past eleven, upstairs. He settled downstairs, waited till they were asleep, got up, checked, locked the door of the sitting-room, and dragged out the torso.

By three o'clock he had the body hewed apart, thirteen sections. He sat at the table wrapping them. He had washed the knife and saw, put them carefully away.

He heard somebody moving upstairs.

Thirteen bulky parcels on the table. Little bits of Rosie, all neatly parcelled up; dear old fat lousy Rosie.

He had to concentrate, he had to concentrate or he wasn't going to get away with it.

Steps coming down the stairs.

He unbolted the door, quickly piled the parcels behind the sofa.

He went into the hall.

'Did I disturb you, dear?' the little fat lady asked. Like Rosie, like Rosie, like old dead Rosie.

'I was still awake.'

'Worried about Rosie?' she asked.

'Worried about Rosie.'

She put her hand on the door.

'Don't . . . don't go in there,' he said.

She looked surprised.

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'I'm a bit overwrought.'

She opened the door.

It was alright. Quite alright. There was nothing to worry about, absolutely nothing. He knew there was nothing to worry about.

'I'll make you a cup of tea, dear,' she said.

He wanted her out of the room. He nodded, she went out, down to the kitchen. Was there anything in the kitchen, specks of blood? No nothing. All okay.

He got hold of the parcels, stuffed them in beneath the sofa again.

The fat man appeared in the doorway, sleep in his eyes.

'Where is she?' he asked.

Rosie, Rosie, Rosie. The young man froze, could not speak. Tell him Rosie's dead, tell him, tell him. All over then, tell him.

'Have you seen my wife?' The fat man said anxiously.

His wife, of course, his wife.

The fat man paddled down towards the kitchen. The kettle whimpered. The young man sat back comfortably in a chair, everything was looked after, everything was alright.

He had only to concentrate now, concentrate on not slipping up. If he could concentrate he wasn't going to get caught.

He put his hand in his pocket and took out his matches and lit a cigarette and put the matches back and remembered what should have been in his pocket.

Rosie's hand, Rosie's dead hand.

He had to concentrate or he was going to get caught.

He had lost the hand.

He got down on his knees on the floor, groped underneath the sofa. No hand.

'Is there anything we can do?' The fat man said from the doorway.

He got up. 'I dropped something, that's all. It's alright.'

So it was. It was alright. The hand wasn't there. It must have fallen behind a chair, under the table, somewhere. It was lost, it was going to be alright, alright.

'Can we give you a hand?' the fat man asked again.

A hand, a hand, a hand.

'No,' his throat dry and hoarse, just a croak, fading away.

The kettle whistled in the background and the little man paddled out to help. The young man leant against the side-board and put his hand in his mouth and quivered with fear.

Rosie's hand, somewhere. Perhaps they were looking at it now, touching it. Rosie's bloody dismembered hand.

There was nothing he could do about it.

He had to concentrate or he wasn't going to get away with it. Had to concentrate, had to concentrate.

They brought the tea in and set it on the coffee table and settled there in their dressing gowns and said how mad they all were to be up having tea in the middle of the night.

Tea, two fat ordinary faces looking at him.

Sitting on the sofa, watching him.

Tea and buns and milk and sugar.

Fat man with his arm round little wife, resting on the back of the sofa.

Fat man's hand on the sofa beside little wife's, beside Rosie's.

Rosie's hand on the sofa, gradually staining it red. Rosie's hand draped gracefully over the edge of a cushion.

They hadn't seen it. They hadn't seen Rosie's hand yet, not yet.

He had to concentrate. If he didn't concentrate he was going to get caught.

He had to behave as if it wasn't there, behave absolutely naturally. There was no way of getting to it, he couldn't reach over and remove it. He had to drink his tea and watch their fingers interlocking beside Rosie's.

He had to concentrate, had to concentrate.

Concentrate on what? Tea, milk, sugar, the immediate things. What had he? Tea, milk. He had to do the natural thing, be natural.

The little woman put the sugar bowl back on the table.

He leant forward. What did he want of her, what did he want?

Sugar, sugar, sugar, that was what he wanted.

'Pass the hand, please,' he said.

And started to cry and laugh all at once as Rosie's hand slipped forward off the cushion and plopped on to the little woman's lap.

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Which do you find the most horrible?

'... a nauseous stench was in his nostrils. The great spider gave a sibilant rattle and then it was on his mouth, covering his face and eyes with its bloated, sticky carcass.'

'We three sat and watched that hideous, gibbering prodigy grow up out of Stone's flesh, till two horrid, spindling little black arms disengaged themselves.'

'The severed head lay in the dog's basket, fluff sticking to the lips, sightless eyes gazing up at the ceiling.'

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