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THE SIXTH PAN BOOK OF HORROR STORIES

Selected by Herbert van Thal

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THE SIXTH PAN BOOK OF HORROR STORIES

Edited by

HERBERT VAN THAL

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THE SIXTH PAN BOOK OF HORROR STORIES

THE OLDEST STORY EVER TOLD

By Romain Gary

LA PAZ is twelve thousand feet above sea level – any higher and it is impossible for men to breathe. There are llamas, Indians, arid plateaux, eternal snows, ghost towns, eagles, and below, in the tropical valleys, wander gold prospectors and giant butterflies.

Schonenbaum had dreamed of La Paz, the capital of Bolivia, almost every night during the two years he had spent in the Torenberg concentration camp in Germany, and when the American troops at last opened the gates to what seemed to be another world, he struggled to obtain his Bolivian visa with that tenacity which only true dreamers can translate into action. Schonenbaum was a tailor by profession, a tailor in Lodz, in Poland, heir to a great tradition which five generations of Jewish tailors had made illustrious. He settled in La Paz, and after a few years of diligent labour he was able to set up on his own and soon enjoyed comparative prosperity under the sign: SCHONENBAUM, PARIS TAILOR. Orders flowed in, and soon he had to look for an assistant. This wasn't easy: the Indians of the upper Andes provide the world with an astonishingly limited number of 'Paris tailors', and delicacy with the needle is not often one of their crafts. Schonenbaum had to spend too much time teaching them the rudiments of the art for such a collaboration to be profitable. After several attempts, he resigned himself to remaining alone, despite the mounting load of work. But an unexpected encounter solved his problems in a manner that, he was certain, revealed the hand of Providence, which had always shown itself well-disposed towards him, since of the three hundred thousand Jews from Lodz, he was one of the few survivors.

Schonenbaum lived on the heights above the town, and the llama trains passed under his window from dawn on. By virtue of an ordinance issued by a government anxious to give the capital a modern aspect, the streets of La Paz are forbidden to these animals, but since they constitute the sole means of transport on the mountain trails, the spectacle of the llamas leaving the city limits at dawn, under their burden of crates and sacks, is and will doubtless remain for some time familiar to all visitors to the country.

Every morning, then, as he was walking to his shop, Schonenbaum met these llama trains; he was fond of the llamas, without quite knowing why: perhaps simply because there are none in Germany. Two or three Indians usually led towards the distant villages of the Andes caravans of twenty or thirty animals able to carry burdens which often amounted to several times their own weight.

One day, when the sun had just risen, as he was walking down to La Paz, Schonenbaum passed one of these caravans, the sight of which always made him smile. He paused and held out his hand to stroke a passing animal. He never caressed a cat or dog, both of which abound in Germany, and he never listened to the birds, which sing in Germany too. There is no doubt that his experiences in the extermination camps had made him somewhat reserved towards the Germans. He was patting the animal's flank when his eyes were drawn to the face of the Indian walking beside it. The man was barefoot, a staff in his hand, and at first Schonenbaum paid him scarcely any attention: his casual glance almost left this face for ever. It was a yellowish, fleshless face, with an eroded and stony aspect which seemed to have been created by centuries of physiological misery. But something known, something familiar, and yet terrifying and nightmarish, suddenly stirred in Schonenbaum's mind and wakened in him an extreme agitation, while his memory still refused to help him. That toothless mouth, those large, gentle brown eyes opened on the world like a perpetual wound, that sad, long nose, that expression of permanent reproach – half question, half accusation – hovering on

the face of the man walking beside his llama literally leaped upon the tailor when he had already turned his back. He uttered a muffled exclamation and whirled around.

'Gluckman!' he shrieked. 'What are you doing here?'

Instinctively he had spoken in Yiddish, and the man thus addressed leaped to one side as if he had suddenly been scorched. Then he began running along the road, pursued by Schonenbaum, who loped behind him with an agility of which he had never thought himself capable, while the llamas, with their arrogant expression of disdain, continued on their way with deliberate steps. He caught up with the man at the turn in the road, grabbed his shoulder, and forced him to stop. Gluckman: beyond a doubt. It was not only the similarity of features that convinced him – no, above all, it was that expression of suffering, of mute interrogation, which it was impossible to mistake.

'Why? Why are you doing this to me?' the eyes were perpetually asking. Gluckman stood, cornered, his back against the red rock, his mouth open, revealing his naked gums.

'It's you,' Schonenbaum shouted, still in Yiddish. 'I tell you it's you!'

Gluckman shook his head.

'It's not me!' he howled back in Yiddish. 'My name's Pedro. I don't know you.'

'And where did you learn to talk Yiddish?' Schonenbaum screamed triumphantly. 'In the La Paz kindergarten?'

Gluckman's mouth opened still wider. He glanced wildly towards the llamas, as though seeking their help. Schonenbaum let him go.

'But what are you afraid of, you idiot?' he asked. 'I'm a friend. Whom are you trying to fool?'

'My name's Pedro!' Gluckman whined in a shrill, pleading voice, still in Yiddish.

'Completely *meshugge*,' Schonenbaum said pityingly. 'So your name's Pedro . . . And this . . .' He grabbed Gluckman's hand and looked at his fingers. Not one nail . . . 'And this? I suppose it was the Indians who ripped off your nails, roots and all?'

Gluckman pressed still closer against the rock. His mouth closed slowly and the tears began running down his cheeks.

'You're not going to turn me in?' he stammered.

'Turn you in?' Schonenbaum repeated. 'To whom? To whom should I turn you in?'

A hideous comprehension suddenly gripped his throat. Sweat burst out on his forehead. He was overcome with fear – that hideous fear which suddenly peoples the whole earth with hidden dangers. Then he managed to gain control of himself.

'But it's over!' he shouted. 'It's been over for fifteen years! Hitler is dead and buried!'

Up and down Gluckman's long, fleshless neck the Adam's apple moved spasmodically, while a kind of cunning grin flickered across his face.

'They always say that! I don't believe their promises.'

Schonenbaum took a deep breath: they were twelve thousand feet above sea level. But he knew the altitude had nothing to do with it.

'Gluckman,' he said solemnly, 'you've always been an idiot, but even so, make an effort! It's over! There is no more Hitler, no more SS, no more gas chambers, we even have a country of our own, Israel, that has an army, a judiciary, a government! It's over! There's no need to hide any more!'

'Ha, ha, ha!' Gluckman laughed, without a trace of gaiety. 'That won't work with me.'

'What won't work?' Schonenbaum shouted.

'Israel!' Gluckman declared. 'It doesn't exist.'

'What do you mean, it doesn't exist?' Schonenbaum thundered, stamping his foot. 'It does so exist! Haven't you read the papers?'

'Ha!' Gluckman said simply, with an infinitely sly expression.

'But there's even an Israeli consul here in La Paz! You can get a visa! You can go there!'

'It won't work with me!' Gluckman declared. 'Another German trick.'

Schonenbaum was beginning to get gooseflesh. What fright-

ened him most was Gluckman's superior expression. And what if he were right? he thought suddenly. The Germans were quite capable of such a trick. Present yourself at such and such a place with papers proving you're a Jew and you'll be taken to Israel free: you present yourself, you let them put you on the ship, and you find yourself back in an extermination camp. Gluckman was right: there could be no Israel. It was only another German trap. My God, he thought, what's happening to me? He wiped his forehead and tried to smile. Then he realized that Gluckman was talking, still with that sly and knowing expression.

'Israel's a trick to get us all together, the last ones, all those who managed to get away, and then to gas us . . . It's pretty good. The Germans are clever. They know how to do things like that. They want to get us all there, just like the last time, and then once we're together, *arakhmones!* . . . I know them.'

'We have our own Jewish state,' Schonenbaum said gently, as one speaks to a child. 'The President's name is Ben Gurion. There's an army. We sit in the United Nations. It's over, I tell you.'

'It won't work,' Gluckman declared. 'I know the trick.'

Schonenbaum put his arm around his friend's shoulders.

'Come,' he said. 'You come and stay with me. We'll go see a doctor.'

It took him two days to make some sense out of the victim's incoherent remarks: since his liberation, which he attributed to a temporary disagreement among the anti-Semites, Gluckman had been hiding in the upper plateaux of the Andes, convinced that things would return to 'normal' from one moment to the next, but that by passing himself off as an Indian llama driver of the Sierra he might escape the Gestapo. Each time Schonenbaum tried to explain to him that there was no more Gestapo, that Streicher, Rosenberg, Himmler were gone, that Germany was a nice democratic republic, he merely shrugged his shoulders with a sly, knowing look: he knew better, he wasn't going to let himself be trapped; and when Schonenbaum, lacking any further arguments, showed him photographs of Israeli schools

and army units with their happy, confident, and determined young men, Gluckman suddenly intoned a *kaddish* for the dead: he mourned these new innocent victims whom the enemy's guile had managed to assemble in Israel in order to make their extermination easier, as in the days of the Warsaw ghetto.

That Gluckman was simple-minded Schonenbaum had always known; more exactly, his reason had resisted less well than his body the nameless torments he had endured. At the camp, he had been the favourite victim of SS commander Schultze, a sadistic brute carefully chosen by the authorities and altogether worthy, as he soon proved, of the confidence that Eichman had shown in him. For some mysterious reason, he had made the wretched Gluckman his scapegoat, and none of the prisoners, connoisseurs though they were, supposed that Gluckman could emerge alive from his hands.

Like Schonenbaum, he was a tailor by profession. Although his fingers had lost some skill in wielding the needle, he rapidly recovered enough agility to return to work, and the 'Paris tailor' establishment could finally catch up with the orders that continued to flow in. Gluckman never spoke to anyone, worked in a dark corner on the floor behind the counter, hidden from the eyes of visitors, emerging only after dark to visit the llamas, whose coarse-haired flanks he stroked for a long time, and his eyes still glowed with ghastly comprehension, a kind of total knowledge occasionally accentuated by a cunning and superior smile. He *knew*, and that was all there was to it, and the exact nature of that knowledge was something Schonenbaum tried not to think about. Twice he tried to run away: the first time when Schonenbaum casually remarked that the day was the sixteenth anniversary of the fall of Hitler's Germany, and the second when a drunken Indian began shouting in the street that 'a great leader would come down from the mountains and take things in hand'.

It was not until six months after their encounter, during the week of Yom Kippur, that a perceptible change seemed to occur in Gluckman. He gave the impression of being surer of

himself, almost serene, as though delivered. He no longer hid behind the counter, and one morning, as he came into the shop, Schonenbaum heard something almost incredible: Gluckman was singing. More precisely, he was mumbling under his nose an old Jewish tune from the borders of Russia. He glanced up at his friend, raised the thread to his lips, licked it, threaded his needle, and continued to mumble his old, sad, tender tune. Schonenbaum had a moment of hope: perhaps the victim's terrible memories were finally fading. After lunch, Gluckman usually went to lie down on a mattress he kept in the back room of the shop. Yet he slept very little, remaining for hours at a time crouched in his corner, staring at the wall with an hallucinatory gaze that invested the most familiar objects with a quality of terror and turned each sound into a cry of agony . . . But one evening, returning unexpectedly to the shop to look for a forgotten key, Schonenbaum surprised his friend furtively stowing a cold meal in a basket. The tailor found his key and left, but instead of returning home he waited in the street, hidden in a doorway. Then he saw Gluckman creep out, the basket of food under his arm, and vanish into the night. Schonenbaum discovered that his friend disappeared this way every evening, always with the basket of food under his arm, and when he returned, a little later, the basket would be empty, and his face would have a cunning and complacent expression, as if he had just made an excellent bargain. The tailor was tempted to ask his assistant about the purpose of these nocturnal expeditions, but, knowing his retiring nature and being reluctant to frighten him, he decided not to ask him any questions. He waited patiently in the street after work and when he saw a furtive silhouette creeping out of the shop and gliding towards its mysterious destination, he followed.

Gluckman walked quickly, keeping close to the walls, sometimes turning around as if he were trying to shake off a possible pursuer. All these precautions brought the tailor's curiosity to its peak. He leaped from doorway to doorway, concealing himself each time his assistant turned around. Night had fallen, and several times Schonenbaum almost lost track of his friend.

Despite his corpulence and a rather weak heart, he none the less managed to catch up with him each time. Finally, Gluckman turned into a courtyard off the Avenue of the Revolution. The tailor waited a moment, then ran in on tiptoe behind him. He found himself in one of the courtyards of the great market of the Estuncion, from which the llama trains set out each morning towards the mountains. Indians were sleeping on heaps of straw in a stench of manure. The llamas stuck their long necks out of crates and shop fronts. A second exit, opposite, opened on to a narrow, dimly lit alley. Gluckman had vanished. The tailor waited a moment, then shrugged his shoulders and prepared to turn back. In attempting to cover his tracks, Gluckman had taken the longest way. Schonenbaum decided to return home directly, crossing the market-place.

He had no sooner started down the narrow passageway than his attention was attracted by the glow of a kerosene lamp that filtered through the skylight of a cellar. He glanced casually towards the light and saw Gluckman. He was standing in front of a table and taking food out of his backet, arranging the items in front of someone sitting on a stool with his back to the skylight. Gluckman set out a sausage, a bottle of beer, red pimentos and bread. The man, whose face Schonenbaum still could not see, spoke a few words and Gluckman quickly rummaged in the basket for a cigar, which he also set on the tablecloth. The tailor had to make an effort to wrench his eyes from his friend's face, for it was terrifying. He was smiling, but the enormous, fixed, burning eyes lent this strangely triumphant smile something maniacal. At that moment, the man turned his head and Schonenbaum recognized SS commander Schultze, the torturer of the Torenberg camp. For one desperate second, the tailor clung to the hope that he might perhaps be the victim of an hallucination, or that he had been mistaken; yet, if there was one face he was in no danger of forgetting, it was indeed the monster's face. He recalled that Schultze had vanished after the war; some people said he was dead, some that he was living in hiding in South America. Now he saw the man with his own eyes: the arrogant, heavy jaw, the cropped hair, the mocking

smile. But there was something more frightening still than the monster's presence: Gluckman's. By what hideous aberration could he be there, in front of the man whose favourite victim he had been, the man who had tortured him so relentlessly for over a year – what was the logic of the madness that drove him to come here every night, to feed his torturer each night instead of killing him or turning him over to the police? Schonenbaum felt his mind go blank: what he saw exceeded in its horror all the limits of the endurable. He tried to cry out, to call for help, to alert the population, but all he could do was open his mouth and wave his arms: his voice refused to obey him, and he stood there, staring with bulging eyes at the victim, who was opening the beer and filling the executioner's glass. He must have stood for a good minute in total unconsciousness: the monstrous absurdity of the scene taking place before his eyes finally robbed it of all reality. It was only when he heard a muffled exclamation beside him that he managed to regain control of himself: in the moonlight, he saw Gluckman standing by his side. The two men stared at each other a moment, one with outraged incomprehension, the other with a cunning and almost cruel smile on a face in which the eyes gleamed with all the fires of some triumphant madness. Then Schonenbaum heard his own voice: he could scarcely recognize it:

'He tortured you every day for over a year. He martyred you, he crucified you! And instead of calling the police you bring him food every night? Is it possible? Am I dreaming? How can you?'

On the victim's face, the expression of profound cunning grew more intense, and from the darkness of time rose the age-old voice that made the hair stand up on the tailor's head and froze his heart:

'He's promised to treat me better *the next time*!'

MAN SKIN

By M. S. Waddell

HE CAME towards the door of the house and there was someone else standing in the porch, fumbling for a key. The young man had his in his hand and the other stood aside and let him open the door, then stepped behind him into the hallway.

The young man switched on the light and started to climb the stairs past the numbered green doors. Before he had reached the second landing the light went out.

He stopped, hand resting upon the banister. Odd. The other man must have put it off.

Then he heard the slip-slop of it slowly dragging up after him and saw the dark shape of the other in the stairwell.

There was no other light switch, nothing he could do about it at all, in fact, beyond going back down the stairs he already climbed to switch it on again at the bottom. He found that he didn't want to go past the other again . . . it was not a rational fear, but it grew in him as the other's steps brought it shuffling up the stairs, its form still mingled with the darkness as though it were a part of it.

He began to climb, and it seemed to him that the dark thing behind him increased its pace to keep up with him. Now and then he thought he could hear its laboured breath, now and again the old house creaked under his feet.

There was absolutely nothing to be afraid of.

So he stopped on the fourth landing and waited for it to follow him up.

But it did not come.

He had heard no door open. Until the moment of his stopping he had been conscious of the movement behind him on the stairs. It had not gone away . . . it was there, somewhere,

behind him. When he had stopped so had it, it was plainly waiting for him to start again.

It was following him.

He started slowly back down the stairs.

Something moved . . . scuttled . . . down there in the darkness.

'Hello,' he said, then he called down the stairwell, 'Are you there?'

There was no reply.

He came to the second landing. He was beginning to wonder if he hadn't imagined the whole thing. There was no one there in the darkness . . . no one at all.

Going any farther was daft!

So he quickly lit a cigarette. He turned with the lighted match still in his hand and it was standing there beside him, its body drawn up into the doorway, its white plastic face towards him, weak yellow eyes watching him.

'Are you ill?' he said.

It grinned and it nodded, and the lax skin of its throat flapped against its long jaw.

Then it put out an arm and caught his sleeve and drew itself against him, so that he found he was supporting its weight.

It opened its mouth to speak and nothing came, although its lips moved around its yellowed teeth and its tongue darted furtively to and fro inside . . . it was capable of no intelligible sound.

He started up the stairs with it. There wasn't much else he could do. It was two o'clock in the morning, there was nobody else to help. If the other did live in the house it would surely stop at its own door . . . if it didn't it would still have to be put somewhere for the night at least.

So he climbed the stairs, less surely now, for the other's body weighed upon him. He found the guttural rasp of its breath through its open mouth distasteful, the webbing of its arms around him seemed to draw strength from him.

With one long nail it scratched and tested the pink skin of his neck.

The young man reached his own door and turned the key, and they went through into the little corridor. The other doors that opened off it were all closed . . . no light showed from any of the other bed-sits., so there was no chance of anybody else being able to help him. He walked the thing down the corridor to his own room, then rested its weight against the wall as he searched for the second key.

He opened the door and switched on the light and turned to find that the thing had followed him inside, that it shielded its weak eyes from the glare of the lamp, arm flapping across its face.

It sat on the bed and sank its face down on to its chest and looked at the floor as the young man took off his coat.

Damp and cold and stiff the poor thing was. Grey fingers laced by its throat, fumbled across its face. Strands of white hair floated across its brow from beneath the peaked cap it wore. Its black coat was frayed and tattered, blue tennis shoes without laces peeped from the folds of the coat where it flopped on the floor, grotesquely too large for the poor thing.

The young man picked up his shiny tin kettle and went down the corridor to the bathroom to fill it.

The thing unbuttoned its coat and laid its canvas cloth on the table.

When the young man returned the light was out. He reached for the switch, clicked it and nothing happened.

He took a cautious step into the room and the thing's cold hand came across his face. Its fingers lodged on his chin and forced back his head.

The blood in his mouth was his own, and the twist of the meat skewer in his throat brought him gurgling to the bed, where the thing landed on his chest.

At that point the young man died. The swift stroke of the scalpel was on dead flesh and his eyes, placed carefully in the ashtray, were unseeing.

It was evening again. It had been back to the bed-sit.

Shivering cold, the poor thing came across the allotment,

carefully skirting the points where the light from the street lamps flirted with the orderly furrows of the earth. Over its shoulder hung a sack which flapped against its scrawny body. It was lithe and quick now.

Soft earth surged against its feet, yellow grass by the allotment edge stood as high as the knee of its baggy trousers.

Into the allotment shed it went, closing the door behind it.

It lit the oil lamp and untied its sack.

It held the thing before it, stroked and probed and tested with its teeth.

It was enjoying itself.

Poor thing that it was, it had little enjoyment.

It drew off its red rubber gloves and laid them back in the canvas cloth.

There was the other thing in the sack to attend to.

So it started out across the allotment again, pit-patting furtively across the soft earth, soft damp warmth of the thing in the sack against its shoulder.

It put the sack down by the side of the manhole, painfully eased up the cover.

Soft damp things, down there in the darkness.

It held the sack over the hole and the thing plopped and trickled down.

Sour, sweet smell.

It let the manhole cover slide back into position, started back across the criss-crossing paths.

The man by the allotment fence watched the poor thing go. Doubt played with his mind but didn't bring him to a decision. Whatever was going on was the other fellow's business.

So he started down the road to home and decided to forget about it.

'Arthur,' he said to himself. 'Keep your nose out of it.'

Just time to go home and change, then back to the pub.

Arthur Lawton was looking forward to getting to the pub. He forgot all about the thing and its sack.

His skin was thick and coarse and kept his innards warm. He would have done well to remember.

The poor damp thing stood in the darkness by the door of the junk shop. It still wore its heavy coat, but now there wasn't a white hair to be seen beneath its cap. Its chin still rested on its chest, as though the breast bone had risen up to meet it. It was looking at its tennis shoes, but in reality was watching the young man behind the counter.

'Selling 'em, Dad?' the young man asked.

The poor thing shivered.

The young man handled the clothes with distaste.

He became conscious of the frightened yellow eyes that watched him, the hands that played across the fragile face. Tattered sleeves, bony wrists, dirty hands, dirty old man . . . Always bringing in clothes. Could be his own . . . always about the size. Probably not though . . . sailor's things once, and a dark corporation coat another time. Rag and bone . . . but then he never made a bargain. Took anything. Funny.

'Where d'you get 'em, Dad?' he asked, fingering the cloth. It had been a reasonably good suit once.

Its grey fingers flew to its mouth. It seemed to speak, but its words were lost entirely in the furtive cluster of its fingers.

'Speak up, Dad.'

It advanced from the shadow. It put its hand on the suit and tried to tug it from his grasp.

'Here . . . Dad?' the young man said.

It let out a whimpering sound and withdrew its hand which flashed up to its face again, played with the loose skin of its throat.

It stood mouthing before him, feverishly moving its lips behind its fluttering palm.

The young man picked the suit up. Its eyes followed him anxiously.

'You've got a lot of these, ain't you, Dad?' the young man said. 'You do keep bringing 'em in. Where you getting them, then? Not nicking 'em, are you?'

It shivered.

Its hand groped forward again, trying to take back the suit.

Well, it was money for old rope. No names, no pack

drill. What if he was pinching them? The old fool was off his nut.

'Okay, Dad,' the young man said, swiftly dragging the suit to his side of the counter.

The grimy note which he fished out from the box beneath the counter was quickly covered by its hand. It tucked the note away.

Methodically, the young man ran his fingers through the pockets.

The heavy watch flopped out on the counter. The young man tried to cover it with the cloth, but the frightened eyes had seen it.

'Giving it away, are you?' the young man asked.

It had turned for the door. It grasped the handle and turned it the wrong way. The young man came round the counter, holding the watch. It started to shake the door.

'Here, Dad,' the young man said. 'Do leave off.'

It looked over its shoulder at the advancing youth, and gabbled something soundless. Then it managed to open the door and thrust itself clear of the young man's restraining hand.

It bobbed off down the road in the darkness, long legs flapping.

When it finally stopped, it was back in the shadows by the canal bank where nobody could see it.

It slipped off its cap and put it into its pocket, then let its fingers slip rapidly over its bald head.

It shouldn't have come out without its hair.

Arthur Lawton's lonely song soared over the allotments. Cheery and beery as he was he was not cold, for the drink in him made the whole world warm and happy.

Long past the point of caring exactly where he was going he allowed himself to be guided by it. It appeared from nowhere and took his arm. Arthur was convinced that more hospitality lay ahead.

They picked their way through the plots to the allotment

shed. Arthur completed the last hundred yards with the assistance of its wiry arm laced firmly round his middle.

The door of the allotment shed opened to its touch, and Arthur staggered in with it.

It lit the oil lamp, while Arthur sat on an upturned packing case enjoying counting his feet. They had become confused. Two he had, of that he was certain. It was merely a matter of reassurance.

Touching each foot with difficulty he finally established that all was well, quantity and quality. He screwed himself back into an upright position, taking the tin mug that was offered to him.

The light from the oil lamp glistened on its damp face, showed the thin streak of black hair that now graced its brow. It surveyed Arthur with a businesslike smile on its thin lips.

Like a bloody vampire, he thought, in a lucid movement.

Its fingers played across its face, eased the flap of loose skin that fell across its forehead. Weak eyes watched Arthur as he drank.

Arthur started to talk to it. It had nothing to say to him, but Arthur did not notice. He was altogether preoccupied with his own problems. Words seemed to come from him with great ease, fluency of thought made him sob with the very impact of his own meaning on his mind.

They were all barbarians, and Christ was crucified.

It had turned away from him and was bending over a sheet in the corner, where it fiddled through the pile of implements it kept clean and sharp for the job.

It took out a long kitchen knife and placed it on the canvas cloth it had spread on the earth floor. The thick rubber gloves, which it put on, covered its thin arms to the elbow.

It slipped its hair from its head and put it carefully away.

Arthur became aware of the change in its attitude gradually. He felt a hand on his arm, persuading him to drink again. The tin mug which was thrust into his hand was filled with a liquid yet more satisfying than the one before.

He felt no compunction at all at letting it lower him from the

packing case to the centre of the canvas cloth. The thing was tender with him, and he was very fond of it. Oh yes, very fond indeed.

Putting one tired foot after another the policeman brought himself up the road by the allotments. Life was difficult. He had another three hours on duty and no way of knowing what was going on at home, and whether she was going to change her mind. If she didn't change her mind he would have to switch the dates, and that would create all sorts of difficulties.

He saw the light in the allotment shed and wondered idly what was going on there. He'd noticed it before, and wondered about it. Some poor soul married to a nagger.

He paused by the canal bank, wondering if it was worth a look. It was odd, and if anything was going on . . . he turned out of his way and moved between the allotments towards the lighted shed.

The light went off.

He quickened his step. Four minutes brought him to the door. Nothing had passed him. The door was locked when he tried it.

He knocked.

He went to the back and tried the windows. They were closed tightly.

Instinct told him that there was someone inside.

He stood before the door and spoke through it. No answer.

Somebody would have a key.

He went off to fetch it.

Forty minutes later he came back across the allotment. There was still no light in the shed and he was beginning to wonder if there was any point in it. Again he tried knocking on the door and flashing his torch through the window, again he had no success.

He opened the door and flashed his torch inside.

A lawn mower. A work bench. Four packing cases. A tarpaulin on the floor, rolled up in a bundle.

He stepped in, guided his torch round the wall.

There was a small instrument on the edge of the packing case.

A scalpel.

He bent beside the tarpaulin, prodded it with his finger.

It was soft.

Propping the torch up on the packing case he unrolled the tarpaulin, and the raw, bleeding thing fell out on the ground before him.

Tissue and muscle, and sinew and the shiny nobs of bones, practically intact; a soft mass that he knew for a man by the shape. Eyes in lidless sockets, fleshless limbs that stuck together, lipless mouth, and bared brain.

There was a floppy pink something folded neatly beside it.

Man skin.

It was four hours later when they finally established where it lived.

No one really seemed to know anything about it. It came and went from the allotment muffled up against the cold. It fled from people.

It had no friends. No two people could even agree on the colour of its hair.

They surrounded the house at three in the morning. They came equipped to deal with it, but uneasy.

Soft, skinless bodies they had found, that was quite bad enough.

When it opened the door to them it looked innocent. Its white hair flapped over its brow and it seemed to know quite well why they had come for it.

It had been sitting by its sewing machine, stitching. The needle still nestled in the plump flesh. It was making itself a set of combinations to keep it warm, poor thing. Like a deflated balloon the skin lay across the table, knotted arms and knotted legs to stop the bleeding.

It was a bit big for the poor thing, in need of trimming. Then it would be skin-tight.

Like the others.

CAMERA OBSCURA

By Basil Copper

AS MR SHARSTED pushed his way up the narrow, fussily conceived lanes that led to the older part of the town, he was increasingly aware that there was something about Mr Gingold he didn't like. It was not only the old-fashioned, outdated air of courtesy that irritated the moneylender but the gentle, absent-minded way in which he continually put off settlement. Almost as if money were of no importance.

The moneylender hesitated even to say this to himself; the thought was a blasphemy that rocked the very foundations of his world. He pursed his lips grimly and set himself to mount the ill-paved and flinty roadway that bisected the hilly terrain of this remote part of the town.

The moneylender's narrow, lopsided face was perspiring under his hard hat; lank hair started from beneath the brim, which lent him a curious aspect. This, combined with the green-tinted spectacles he wore, gave him a sinister, decayed look, like someone long dead. The thought may have occurred to the few, scattered passers-by he met in the course of his ascent, for almost to a person they gave one cautious glance and then hurried on as though eager to be rid of his presence.

He turned in at a small courtyard and stood in the shelter of a great old ruined church to catch his breath; his heart was thumping uncomfortably in the confines of his narrow chest and his breath rasped in his throat. Assuredly, he was out of condition, he told himself. Long hours of sedentary work huddled over his accounts were taking their toll; he really must get out more and take some exercise.

The moneylender's sallow face brightened momentarily as he thought of his increasing prosperity, but then he frowned

again as he remembered the purpose of his errand. Gingold must be made to toe the line, he told himself, as he set out over the last half-mile of his journey.

If he couldn't raise the necessary cash, there must be many valuables in that rambling old house of his which he could sell and realize on. As Mr Sharsted forged his way deeper into this forgotten corner of the town, the sun, which was already low in the sky, seemed to have already set, the light was so constricted by the maze of small courts and alleys into which he had plunged. He was panting again when he came at last, abruptly, to a large green door, set crookedly at the top of a flight of time-worn steps.

He stood arrested for a moment or two, one hand grasping the old balustrade, even his mean soul uplifted momentarily by the sight of the smoky haze of the town below, tilted beneath the yellow sky. Everything seemed to be set awry upon this hill, so that the very horizon rushed slanting across the far distance, giving the spectator a feeling of vertigo. A bell pealed faintly as he seized an iron scrollwork pull set into a metal rose alongside the front door. The moneylender's thoughts were turned to irritation again; everything about Mr Gingold was peculiar, he felt. Even the fittings of his household were things one never saw elsewhere.

Though this might be an advantage if he ever gained control of Mr Gingold's assets and had need to sell the property; there must be a lot of valuable stuff in this old house he had never seen, he mused. Which was another reason he felt it strange that the old man was unable to pay his dues; he must have a great deal of money, if not in cash, in property, one way or another.

He found it difficult to realize why Mr Gingold kept hedging over a matter of three hundred pounds; he could easily sell the old place and go to live in a more attractive part of town in a modern, well-appointed villa and still keep his antiquarian interests. Mr Sharsted sighed. Still, it was none of his business. All he was concerned with was the matter of the money; he had been kept waiting long enough, and he wouldn't be fobbed off

any longer. Gingold had got to settle by Monday, or he'd make things unpleasant for him.

Mr Sharsted's thin lips tightened in an ugly manner as he mused on, oblivious of the sunset staining the upper storeys of the old houses and dyeing the mean streets below the hill a rich carmine. He pulled the bell again impatiently, and this time the door was opened almost immediately.

Mr Gingold was a very tall, white-haired man with a gentle, almost apologetic manner. He stood slightly stooping in the doorway, blinking as though astonished at the sunlight, half afraid it would fade him if he allowed too much of it to absorb him.

His clothes, which were of good quality and cut, were untidy and sagged loosely on his big frame; they seemed washed out in the bright light of the sun and appeared to Mr Sharsted to be all of a part with the man himself; indeed, Mr Gingold was rinsed to a pale, insipid shade by the sunshine, so that his white hair and face and clothing ran into one another and, somehow, the different aspects of the picture became blurred and indeterminate.

To Mr Sharsted he bore the aspect of an old photograph which had never been properly fixed and had turned brown and faded with time. Mr Sharsted thought he might blow away with the breeze that had started up, but Mr Gingold merely smiled shyly and said, 'Oh, there you are, Sharsted. Come on in,' as though he had been expecting him all the time.

Surprisingly, Mr Gingold's eyes were of a marvellous shade of blue and they made his whole face come vividly alive, fighting and challenging the overall neutral tints of his clothing and features. He led the way into a cavernous hall. Mr Sharsted followed cautiously, his eyes adjusting with difficulty to the cool gloom of the interior. With courteous, old-world motions Mr Gingold beckoned him forward.

The two men ascended a finely carved staircase, whose balustrades, convoluted and serpentine, seemed to writhe sinuously upwards into the darkness.

'My business will only take a moment,' protested Sharsted,

anxious to present his ultimatum and depart. But Mr Gingold merely continued to ascend the staircase.

'Come along, come along,' he said gently, as though he hadn't heard Mr Sharsted's expostulation. 'You must take a glass of wine with me. I have so few visitors . . .'

Mr Sharsted looked about him curiously; he had never been in this part of the house. Usually, Mr Gingold received occasional callers in a big, cluttered room on the ground floor. This afternoon, for some reason known only to himself, he had chosen to show Mr Sharsted another part of his domain. Mr Sharsted thought that perhaps Mr Gingold intended to settle the matter of his repayments. This might be where he transacted business, perhaps kept his money. His thin fingers twitched with nervous excitement.

They continued to ascend what seemed to the moneylender to be enormous distances. The staircase still unwound in front of their measured progress. From the little light which filtered in through rounded windows, Sharsted caught occasional glimpses of objects that aroused his professional curiosity and acquisitive sense. Here a large oil painting swung into view round the bend of the stair; in the necessarily brief glance that Mr Sharsted caught, he could have sworn it was a Poussin.

A moment later, a large sideboard laden with porcelain slid by the corner of his eye. He stumbled on the stair as he glanced back over his shoulder and in so doing, almost missed a rare suit of Genoese armour which stood concealed in a niche set back from the staircase. The moneylender had reached a state of confused bewilderment when at length Mr Gingold flung aside a large mahogany door, high up in the house and motioned him forward.

Mr Gingold must be a wealthy man and could easily realize enormous amounts on any one of the *objets d'art* Sharsted had seen; why then, thought the latter, did he find it necessary to borrow so frequently, and why was it so difficult to obtain repayment? With interest, the sum owed Sharsted had now risen to a considerable figure; Mr Gingold must be a compulsive buyer of rare items. Allied to the general shabbiness of the

house as seen by the casual visitor, it must mean that his collector's instinct would refuse to allow him to part with anything once bought, which had made him run himself into debt. The moneylender's lips tightened again; well, he must be made to settle his debts, like anyone else.

If not, perhaps Sharsted could force him to part with something – porcelain, a picture – that could be made to realize a handsome profit on the deal. Business was business, and Gingold could not expect him to wait for ever. His musings were interrupted by a query from his host and Sharsted muttered an apology as he saw that Mr Gingold was waiting, one hand on the neck of a heavy silver and crystal decanter.

'Yes, yes, a sherry, thank you,' he murmured in confusion, moving awkwardly. The light was so bad in this place that he felt it difficult to focus his eyes, and objects had a habit of shifting and billowing as though seen under water. Mr Sharsted was forced to wear tinted spectacles, as his eyes had been weak from childhood. They made these apartments seem twice as dark as they might be. But though Mr Sharsted squinted over the top of his lenses as Mr Gingold poured the sherry, he still could not make out objects clearly. He really would have to consult his oculist soon, if this trouble continued.

His voice sounded hollow to his own ears as he ventured a commonplace when Mr Gingold handed him the glass. He sat down gingerly on a ladderback chair indicated to him by Mr Gingold, and sipped at the amber liquid in a hesitant fashion. It tasted uncommonly good, but this unexpected hospitality was putting him on a wrong footing with Gingold. He must assert himself and broach the subject of his business. But he felt a curious reluctance and merely sat on in embarrassed silence, one hand round the stem of his goblet, listening to the soothing tick of an old clock, which was the only thing which broke the silence.

He saw now that he was in a large apartment, expensively furnished, which must be high up in the house, under the eaves. Hardly a sound from outside penetrated the windows, which were hung with thick blue-velvet curtains; the parquet

floor was covered with exquisitely worked Chinese rugs and the room was apparently divided in half by heavy velvet curtaining to match those which masked the windows.

Mr Gingold said little, but sat at a large mahogany table, tapping his sherry glass with his long fingers; his bright blue eyes looked with mild interest at Mr Sharsted as they spoke of everyday matters. At last Mr Sharsted was moved to broach the object of his visit. He spoke of the long-outstanding sum which he had advanced to Mr Gingold, of the continued applications for settlement and of the necessity of securing early payment. Strangely, as Mr Sharsted progressed, his voice began to stammer and eventually he was at a loss for words; normally, as working-class people in the town had reason to know, he was brusque, businesslike, and ruthless. He never hesitated to distrain on debtor's goods, or to evict if necessary and that he was the object of universal hatred in the outside world, bothered him not in the slightest.

In fact, he felt it to be an asset; his reputation in business affairs preceded him, as it were, and acted as an incentive to prompt repayment. If people were fool enough to be poor or to run into debt and couldn't meet their dues, well then, let them; it was all grist to his mill and he could not be expected to run his business on a lot of sentimental nonsense. He felt more irritated with Mr Gingold than he need have been, for his money was obviously safe; but what continued to baffle him was the man's gentle docility, his obvious wealth, and his reluctance to settle his debts.

Something of this must have eventually permeated his conversation, for Mr Gingold shifted in his seat, made no comment whatever on Mr Sharsted's pressing demands and only said, in another of his softly spoken sentences, 'Do have another sherry, Mr Sharsted.'

The moneylender felt all the strength going out of him as he weakly assented. He leaned back on his comfortable chair with a swimming head and allowed the second glass to be pressed into his hand, the thread of his discourse completely lost. He mentally cursed himself for a dithering fool and tried to con-

centrate, but Mr Gingold's benevolent smile, the curious way the objects in the room shifted and wavered in the heat haze; the general gloom and the discreet curtaining, came more and more to weigh on and oppress his spirits.

So it was with something like relief that Sharsted saw his host rise from the table. He had not changed the topic, but continued to speak as though Mr Sharsted had never mentioned money to him at all; he merely ignored the whole situation and with an enthusiasm Sharsted found difficult to share, murmured soothingly on about Chinese wall paintings, a subject of which Mr Sharsted knew nothing.

He found his eyes closing and with an effort opened them again. Mr Gingold was saying, 'I think this will interest you, Mr Sharsted. Come along . . .'

His host had moved forward and the moneylender, following him down the room, saw that the large expanse of velvet curtaining was in motion. The two men walked through the parted curtains, which closed behind them, and Mr Sharsted then saw that they were in a semicircular chamber.

This room was, if anything, even dimmer than the one they had just left. But the moneylender's interest began to revive; his head felt clearer and he took in a large circular table, some brass wheels and levers which winked in the gloom, and a long shaft which went up to the ceiling.

'This has almost become an obsession with me,' murmured Mr Gingold, as though apologizing to his guest. 'You are aware of the principles of the camera obscura, Mr Sharsted?'

The moneylender pondered slowly, reaching back into memory. 'Some sort of Victorian toy, isn't it?' he said at length. Mr Gingold looked pained, but the expression of his voice did not change.

'Hardly that, Mr Sharsted,' he rejoined. 'A most fascinating pursuit. Few people of my acquaintance have been here and seen what you are going to see.'

He motioned to the shafting, which passed up through a louvre in the ceiling.

'These controls are coupled to the system of lenses and

prisms on the roof. As you will see, the hidden camera, as the Victorian scientists came to call it, gathers a panorama of the town below and transmits it here on to the viewing table. An absorbing study, one's fellow man, don't you think? I spend many hours up here.'

Mr Sharsted had never heard Mr Gingold in such a talkative mood and now that the wretchedness which had assailed him earlier had disappeared, he felt more suited to tackle him about his debts. First, he would humour him by feigning interest in his stupid toy. But Mr Sharsted had to admit, almost with a gasp of surprise, that Mr Gingold's obsession had a valid cause.

For suddenly, as Mr Gingold moved his hand upon the lever, the room was flooded with light of a blinding clarity and the moneylender saw why gloom was a necessity in this chamber. Presumably, a shutter over the camera obscura slid away upon the rooftop and almost at the same moment, a panel in the ceiling opened to admit a shaft of light directed upon the table before them.

In a second of God-like vision, Mr Sharsted saw a panorama of part of the old town spread out before him in superbly natural colour. Here were the quaint, cobbled streets dropping to the valley, with the blue hills beyond; factory chimneys smoked in the early evening air; people went about their business in half a hundred roads; distant traffic went noiselessly on its way; once, even, a great white bird soared across the field of vision, so apparently close that Mr Sharsted started back from the table.

Mr Gingold gave a dry chuckle and moved a brass wheel at his elbow. The viewpoint abruptly shifted and Mr Sharsted saw with another gasp, a sparkling vista of the estuary with a big coaling ship moving slowly out to sea. Gulls soared in the foreground and the sullen wash of the tide ringed the shore. Mr Sharsted, his errand quite forgotten, was fascinated. Half an hour must have passed, each view more enchanting than the last; from this height, the squalor of the town was quite transformed.

He was abruptly recalled to the present, however, by the latest of the views; Mr Gingold spun the control for the last time and a huddle of crumbling tenements wheeled into view. 'The former home of Mrs Thwaites, I believe,' said Mr Gingold mildly.

Mr Sharsted flushed and bit his lip in anger. The Thwaites business had aroused more notoriety than he had intended; the woman had borrowed a greater sum than she could afford, the interest mounted, she borrowed again; could he help it if she had a tubercular husband and three children? He had to make an example of her in order to keep his other clients in line; now there was a distraint on the furniture and the Thwaiteses were being turned on to the street. Could he help this? If only people would repay their debts all would be well; he wasn't a philanthropic institution, he told himself angrily.

And at this reference to what was rapidly becoming a scandal in the town, all his smouldering resentment against Mr Gingold broke out afresh; enough of all these views and childish playthings. Camera obscura, indeed; if Mr Gingold did not meet his obligations like a gentleman he could sell this pretty toy to meet his debt.

He controlled himself with an effort as he turned to meet Mr Gingold's gently ironic gaze.

'Ah, yes,' said Mr Sharsted. 'The Thwaites business is my affair, Mr Gingold. Will you please confine yourself to the matter in hand. I have had to come here again at great inconvenience; I must tell you that if the £300, representing the current instalment on our loan is not forthcoming by Monday, I shall be obliged to take legal action.'

Mr Sharsted's cheeks were burning and his voice trembled as he pronounced these words; if he expected a violent reaction from Mr Gingold, he was disappointed. The latter merely gazed at him in mute reproach.

'This is your last word?' he said regretfully. 'You will not reconsider?'

'Certainly not,' snapped Mr Sharsted. 'I must have the money by Monday.'

'You misunderstand me, Mr Sharsted,' said Mr Gingold, still in that irritatingly mild voice. 'I was referring to Mrs Thwaites. Must you carry on with this unnecessary and somewhat inhuman action? I would . . .'

'Please mind your own business!' retorted Mr Sharsted, exasperated beyond measure. 'Mind what I say . . .'

He looked wildly round for the door through which he had entered.

'That is your last word?' said Mr Gingold again. One look at the moneylender's set, white face was his mute answer.

'Very well, then,' said Mr Gingold, with a heavy sigh. 'So be it. I will see you on your way.'

He moved forward again, pulling a heavy velvet cloth over the table of the camera obscura. The louvre in the ceiling closed with a barely audible rumble. To Mr Sharsted's surprise, he found himself following his host up yet another flight of stairs; these were of stone, fringed with an iron balustrade which was cold to the touch.

His anger was now subsiding as quickly as it had come; he was already regretting losing his temper over the Thwaites business and he hadn't intended to sound so crude and cold-blooded. What must Mr Gingold think of him? Strange how the story could have got to his ears; surprising how much information about the outside world a recluse could obtain just by sitting still.

Though, on this hill, he supposed Mr Gingold could be said to be at the centre of things. He shuddered suddenly, for the air seemed to have grown cold. Through a slit in the stone wall he could see the evening sky was already darkening. He really must be on his way; how did the old fool expect him to find his way out when they were still mounting to the very top of the house?

Mr Sharsted regretted, too, that in antagonizing Mr Gingold, he might have made it even more difficult to obtain his money; it was almost as though, in mentioning Mrs Thwaites and trying to take her part, he had been trying a form of subtle blackmail.

He would not have expected it of Gingold; it was not like him to meddle in other people's affairs. If he was so fond of the poor and needy he could well afford to advance the family some money themselves to tide them over their difficulties.

His brain seething with these confused and angry thoughts, Mr Sharsted, panting and dishevelled, now found himself on a worn stone platform where Mr Gingold was putting the key into an ancient wooden lock.

'My workshop,' he explained, with a shy smile to Mr Sharsted, who felt his tension eased away by this drop in the emotional atmosphere. Looking through an old, nearly triangular window in front of him, Mr Sharsted could see that they were in a small, turreted superstructure which towered a good twenty feet over the main roof of the house. There was a sprawl of unfamiliar alleys at the foot of the steep overhang of the building, as far as he could make out through the grimy panes.

'There is a staircase down the outside,' explained Mr Gingold, opening the door. 'It will lead you down the other side of the hill and cut over half a mile off your journey.'

The moneylender felt a sudden rush of relief at this. He had come almost to fear this deceptively mild and quiet old man who, though he said little and threatened not at all, had begun to exude a faint air of menace to Mr Sharsted's now overheated imagination.

'But first,' said Mr Gingold, taking the other man's arm in a surprisingly powerful grip, 'I want to show you something else – and this really has been seen by very few people indeed.'

Mr Sharsted looked at the other quickly, but could read nothing in Mr Gingold's enigmatic blue eyes.

He was surprised to find a similar, though smaller, chamber to the one they had just left. There was another table, another shaft ascending to a domed cupola in the ceiling, and a further arrangement of wheels and tubes.

'This camera obscura,' said Mr Gingold, 'is a very rare model, to be sure. In fact, I believe there are only three in existence today, and one of those is in Northern Italy.'

Mr Sharsted cleared his throat and made a non-committal reply.

'I felt sure you would like to see this before you leave,' said Mr Gingold softly. 'You are quite sure you won't change your mind?' he added, almost inaudibly, as he bent to the levers. 'About Mrs Thwaites, I mean.'

Sharsted felt another sudden spirt of anger, but kept his feelings under control.

'I'm sorry . . .' he began.

'No matter,' said Mr Gingold, regretfully. 'I only wanted to make sure, before we had a look at this.'

He laid his hand with infinite tenderness on Mr Sharsted's shoulder as he drew him forward.

He pressed the lever and Mr Sharsted almost cried out with the suddenness of the vision. He was God; the world was spread out before him in a crazy pattern, or at least the segment of it representing the part of the town surrounding the house in which he stood.

He viewed it from a great height, as a man might from an aeroplane; though nothing was quite in perspective.

The picture was of enormous clarity; it was like looking into an old cheval glass which had a faint distorting quality. There was something oblique and elliptical about the sprawl of alleys and roads that spread about the foot of the hill.

The shadows were mauve and violet, and the extremes of the picture were still tinged with the blood red of the dying sun.

It was an appalling, cataclysmic vision, and Mr Sharsted was shattered; he felt suspended in space, and almost cried out at the dizziness of the height.

When Mr Gingold twirled the wheel and the picture slowly began to revolve, Mr Sharsted did cry out and had to clutch at the back of a chair to prevent himself from falling.

He was perturbed, too, as he caught a glimpse of a big, white building in the foreground of the picture.

'I thought that was the old Corn Exchange,' he said in bewilderment. 'Surely that burned down before the last war?'

'Eigh,' said Mr Gingold, as though he hadn't heard.

'It doesn't matter,' said Mr Sharsted, who now felt quite confused and ill. It must be the combination of the sherry and the enormous height at which he was viewing the vision in the camera obscura.

It was a demoniacal toy and he shrank away from the figure of Mr Gingold, which looked somewhat sinister in the blood-red and mauve light reflected from the image in the polished table surface.

'I thought you'd like to see this one,' said Mr Gingold, in that same maddening, insipid voice. 'It's really special, isn't it? Quite the best of the two . . . you can see all sorts of things that are normally hidden.'

As he spoke there appeared on the screen two old buildings which Mr Sharsted was sure had been destroyed during the war; in fact, he was certain that a public garden and car park had now been erected on the site. His mouth suddenly became dry; he was not sure whether he had drunk too much sherry or the heat of the day had been too much for him.

He had been about to make a sharp remark that the sale of the camera obscura would liquidate Mr Gingold's current debt, but he felt this would not be a wise comment to make at this juncture. He felt faint, his brow went hot and cold and Mr Gingold was at his side in an instant.

Mr Sharsted became aware that the picture had faded from the table and that the day was rapidly turning to dusk outside the dusty windows.

'I really must be going,' he said with feeble desperation, trying to free himself from Mr Gingold's quietly persistent grip.

'Certainly, Mr Sharsted,' said his host. 'This way.' He led him without ceremony over to a small oval doorway in a corner of the far wall.

'Just go down the stairs. It will bring you on to the street. Please slam the bottom door – it will lock itself.' As he spoke, he opened the door and Mr Sharsted saw a flight of clean, dry stone steps leading downwards. Light still flooded in from windows set in the circular walls.

Mr Gingold did not offer his hand and Mr Sharsted stood rather awkwardly, holding the door ajar.

'Until Monday, then,' he said.

Mr Gingold flatly ignored this.

'Goodnight, Mr Gingold,' said the moneylender with nervous haste, anxious to be gone.

'Goodbye, Mr Sharsted,' said Mr Gingold with kind finality.

Mr Sharsted almost thrust himself through the door and nervously fled down the staircase, mentally cursing himself for all sorts of a fool. His feet beat a rapid tattoo that echoed eerily up and down the old tower. Fortunately, there was still plenty of light; this would be a nasty place in the dark. He slowed his pace after a few moments and thought bitterly of the way he had allowed old Gingold to gain the ascendancy over him; and what an impertinence of the man to interfere in the matter of the Thwaites woman.

He would see what sort of man Mr Sharsted was when Monday came and the eviction went according to plan. Monday would also be a day of reckoning for Mr Gingold – it was a day they would both remember and Mr Sharsted felt himself quite looking forward to it.

He quickened his pace again, and presently found himself confronted by a thick oak door.

It gave beneath his hand as he lifted the big, well-oiled catch and the next moment he was in a high-walled alley leading to the street. The door slammed hollowly behind him and he breathed in the cool evening air with a sigh of relief. He jammed his hard hat back on to his head and strode out over the cobbles, as though to affirm the solidity of the outside world.

Once in the street, which seemed somewhat unfamiliar to him, he hesitated which way to go and then set off to the right. He remembered that Mr Gingold had told him that this way took him over the other side of the hill; he had never been in this part of the town and the walk would do him good.

The sun had quite gone and a thin sliver of moon was showing in the early evening sky. There seemed few people about

and when, ten minutes later, Mr Sharsted came out into a large square which had five or six roads leading off it, he determined to ask the correct way back down to his part of the town. With luck he could catch a tram, for he had now had enough of walking for one day.

There was a large, smoke-grimed chapel on a corner of this square and as Mr Sharsted passed it, he caught a glimpse of a board with gold-painted letters.

NINIAN'S REVIVALIST BROTHERHOOD, it said. The date, in flaked gold paint, was 1925.

Mr Sharsted walked on and selected the most important of the roads which faced him. It was getting quite dark and the lamps had not yet been lit on this part of the hill. As he went farther down, the buildings closed in about his head, and the lights of the town below disappeared. Mr Sharsted felt lost and a little forlorn. Due, no doubt, to the faintly incredible atmosphere of Mr Gingold's big house.

He determined to ask the next passer-by for the right direction, but for the moment he couldn't see anyone about; the absence of street lights also bothered him. The municipal authorities must have overlooked this section when they switched on at dusk, unless it came under the jurisdiction of another body.

Mr Sharsted was musing in this manner when he turned the corner of a narrow street and came out opposite a large, white building that looked familiar. For years Mr Sharsted had a picture of it on the yearly calendar sent by a local tradesman, which used to hang in his office. He gazed at its façade wth mounting bewilderment as he approached. The title, CORN EXCHANGE, winked back dully in the moonlight as he got near enough to make out the lettering.

Mr Sharsted's bewilderment changed to distinct unease as he thought frantically that he had already seen this building once before this evening, in the image captured by the lens of Mr Gingold's second camera obscura. And he knew with numbing certainty that the old Corn Exchange had burned down in the late thirties.

He swallowed heavily, and hurried on; there was something devilishly wrong, unless he were the victim of an optical illusion engendered by the violence of his thoughts, the unaccustomed walking he had done that day, and the two glasses of sherry.

He had the uncomfortable feeling that Mr Gingold might be watching him at that very moment, on the table of his camera obscura, and at the thought a cold sweat burst out on his forehead.

He sent himself forward at a smart trot and had soon left the Corn Exchange far behind. In the distance he heard the sharp clopping and the grating rattle of a horse and cart, but as he gained the entrance of an alley he was disappointed to see its shadow disappear round the corner into the next road. He still could not see any people about and again had difficulty in fixing his position in relation to the town.

He set off once more, with a show of determination he was far from feeling, and five minutes later arrived in the middle of a square which was already familiar to him.

There was a chapel on the corner and Mr Sharsted read for the second time that evening the legend: NINIAN'S REVIVALIST BROTHERHOOD.

He stamped his foot in anger. He had walked quite three miles and had been fool enough to describe a complete circle; here he was, not five minutes from Gingold's house, where he had set out, nearly an hour before.

He pulled out his watch at this and was surprised to find it was only a quarter past six, though he could have sworn this was the time he had left Gingold.

Though it could have been a quarter past five; he hardly knew what he was doing this afternoon. He shook it to make sure it was still going and then replaced it in his pocket.

His feet beat the pavement in his fury as he ran down the length of the square. This time he wouldn't make the same silly mistake. He unhesitatingly chose a large, well-kept metalled road that ran fair and square in the direction he knew must take him back to the centre of the town. He found himself

humming a little tune under his breath. As he turned the next corner, his confidence increased.

Lights burned brightly on every hand; the authorities must have realized their mistake and finally switched on. But again he was mistaken; there was a little cart parked at the side of the road, with a horse in the shafts. An old man mounted a ladder set against a lamp-post and Mr Sharsted saw the thin blue flame in the gloom and then the mellow blossoming of the gas lamp.

Now he felt irritated again; what an incredibly archaic part of the town old Gingold lived in. It would just suit him. Gas lamps! And what a system for lighting them; Sharsted thought this method had gone out with the Ark.

Nevertheless, he was most polite.

'Good evening,' he said, and the figure at the top of the lamp-post stirred uneasily. The face was in deep shadow.

'Good evening, sir,' the lamplighter said in a muffled voice. He started climbing down.

'Could you direct me to the town centre?' said Mr Sharsted with simulated confidence. He took a couple of paces forward and was then arrested with a shock.

There was a strange, sickly stench which reminded him of something he was unable to place. Really, the drains in this place were terrible; he certainly would have to write to the town hall about this backward part of the locality.

The lamplighter had descended to the ground now and he put something down in the back of his cart; the horse shifted uneasily and again Mr Sharsted caught the charnel stench, sickly sweet on the summer air.

'This is the town centre as far as I know, sir,' said the lamplighter. As he spoke he stepped forward and the pale lamplight fell on to his face, which had been in shadow before.

Mr Sharsted no longer waited to ask for any more directions but set off down the road at breakneck speed, not sure whether the green pallor of the man's face was due to a terrible suspicion or to the green-tinted glasses he wore.

What he was certain of was that something like a mass of

writhing worms projected below the man's cap, where his hair would normally have been. Mr Sharsted hadn't waited to find out if this Medusa-like supposition were correct; beneath his hideous fear burned a savage anger at Gingold, whom somehow he suspected to be at the back of all these troubles.

Mr Sharsted fervently hoped that he might soon wake to find himself at home in bed, ready to begin the day that had ended so ignominiously at Gingold's, but even as he formulated the thought, he knew this was reality. This cold moonlight, the hard pavement, his frantic flight, and the breath rasping and sobbing in his throat.

As the mist cleared from in front of his eyes, he slowed to a walk and then found himself in the middle of a square; he knew where he was and he had to force his nerves into a terrible, unnatural calm, just this side of despair. He walked with controlled casualness past the legend, NINIAN'S REVIVALIST BROTHERHOOD, and this time chose the most unlikely road of all, little more than a narrow alley that appeared to lead in the wrong direction.

Mr Sharsted was willing to try anything which would lead him off this terrifying, accursed hill. There were no lights here and his feet stumbled on the rough stones and flints of the unmade roadway, but at least he was going downhill and the track gradually spiralled until he was in the right direction.

For some little while Mr Sharsted had heard faint, elusive stirrings in the darkness about him and once he was startled to hear, some way ahead of him, a muffled cough. At least there were other people about, at last, he thought and he was comforted, too, to see, far ahead of him, the dim lights of the town.

As he grew nearer, Mr Sharsted recovered his spirits and was relieved to see that they did not recede from him, as he had half suspected they might. The shapes about him, too, were solid enough. Their feet rang hollow on the roadway; evidently they were on their way to a meeting.

As Mr Sharsted came under the light of the first lamp, his earlier panic fear had abated. He still couldn't recognize

exactly where he was, but the trim villas they were passing were more reminiscent of the town proper.

Mr Sharsted stepped up on to the pavement when they reached the well-lit area and in so doing, cannoned into a large, well-built man who had just emerged from a gateway to join the throng in the roadway.

Mr Sharsted staggered under the impact and once again his nostrils caught the sickly sweet perfume of decay. The man caught him by the front of the coat to prevent him from falling.

'Evening, Mordecai,' he said in a thick voice. 'I thought you'd be coming, sooner or later.'

Mr Sharsted could not resist a cry of bubbling terror. It was not just the greenish pallor of the man's face or the rotted, leathery lips drawn back from the decayed teeth. He fell back against the fence as Abel Joyce passed on – Abel Joyce, a fellow moneylender and usurer who had died in the nineteen-twenties and whose funeral Mr Sharsted had attended.

Blackness was about him as he rushed away, a sobbing whistle in his throat. He was beginning to understand Mr Gingold and that devlish camera obscura; the lost and the damned. He began to babble to himself under his breath.

Now and again he cast a sidelong glimpse at his companions as he ran; there was old Mrs Sanderson who used to lay out corpses and rob her charges; there Grayson, the estate agent and undertaker; Amos, the war profiteer; Drucker, a swindler, all green of pallor and bearing with them the charnel stench.

All people Mr Sharsted had business with at one time or another and all of whom had one thing in common. Without exception all had been dead for quite a number of years. Mr Sharsted stuffed his handkerchief over his mouth to blot out that unbearable odour and heard the mocking laughter as his racing feet carried him past.

'Evening, Mordecai,' they said. 'We thought you'd be joining us.' Mr Gingold equated him with these ghouls, he sobbed, as he ran on at headlong speed; if only he could make him understand. Sharsted didn't deserve such treatment. He was a businessman, not like these bloodsuckers on society; the lost

and the damned. Now he knew why the Corn Exchange still stood and why the town was unfamiliar. It existed only in the eye of the camera obscura. Now he knew that Mr Gingold had been trying to give him a last chance and why he had said goodbye, instead of goodnight.

There was just one hope; if he could find the door back to Mr Gingold's perhaps he could make him change his mind. Mr Sharsted's feet flew over the cobbles as he thought this, his hat fell down and he scraped his hands against the wall. He left the walking corpses far behind, but though he was now looking for the familiar square he seemed to be finding his way back to the Corn Exchange.

He stopped for a moment to regain his breath. He must work this out logically. How had it happened before? Why, of course, by walking away from the desired destination. Mr Sharsted turned back and set himself to walk steadily towards the lights. Though terrified, he did not despair, now that he knew what he was up against. He felt himself a match for Mr Gingold. If only he could find the door!

As he reached the warm circle cast by the glow of the street lamps, Mr Sharsted breathed a sigh of relief. For as he turned a corner there was the big square, with the soot-grimed chapel on the corner. He hurried on. He must remember exactly the turnings he had taken; he couldn't afford to make a mistake.

So much depended on it. If only he could have another chance – he would let the Thwaites family keep their house, he would even be willing to forget Gingold's debt. He couldn't face the possibility of walking these endless streets – for how long? And with the creatures he had seen . . .

Mr Sharsted groaned as he remembered the face of one old woman he had seen earlier that evening – or what was left of that face, after years of wind and weather. He suddenly recalled that she had died before the 1914 war. The sweat burst out on his forehead and he tried not to think of it.

Once off the square, he plunged into the alley he remembered. Ah! there it was. Now all he had to do was to go to the left and there was the door. His heart beat higher and he began

to hope, with a sick longing, for the security of his well-appointed house and his rows of friendly ledgers. Only one more corner. He ran on and turned up the road towards Mr Gingold's door. Another thirty yards to the peace of the ordinary world.

The moonlight winked on a wide, well-paved square. Shone, too, on a legend painted in gold leaf on a large board: NINIAN'S REVIVALIST BROTHERHOOD. The date was 1925.

Mr Sharsted gave a hideous yell of fear and despair and fell to the pavement.

Mr Gingold sighed heavily and yawned. He glanced at the clock. It was time for bed. He went over once again and stared into the camera obscura. It had been a not altogether unsuccessful day. He put a black velvet cloth over the image in the lens and went off slowly to bed.

Under the cloth, in pitiless detail, was reflected the narrow tangle of streets round Mr Gingold's house, seen as through the eye of God; there went Mr Sharsted and his colleagues, the lost and the damned, trapped for eternity, stumbling, weeping, swearing, as they slipped and scrabbled along the alleys and squares of their own private hell, under the pale light of the stars.

PARTY GAMES

By John Burke

THE MOMENT Alice Jarman opened the front door and saw Simon Potter on the step she knew that there would be trouble.

Behind her the party was growing noisy. Already a fight had broken out. Two boys were shouting at each other and there was an occasional thump as one or other of them was thrown heavily against the wall. But it was the usual sort of fight. A party at which small boys didn't fight wasn't much of a party.

Simon Potter said: 'Good afternoon, Mrs Jarman.'

He was eight years of age and he was not the kind of boy who would become involved in a fight. He was polite, neat, quiet, and clever; and he was unpopular. His unpopularity was such as to keep him out of a scuffle rather than bring one down upon him. He was a cold little boy. Even as he stood there with his deferential smile he gave Alice the shivers.

He wore a new raincoat, his shoes were highly polished – probably by himself, she thought – and his pallid brown hair was sleeked back. He carried a neatly wrapped present.

Alice stepped back. Simon came on into the hall.

At the same moment the door of the sitting-room was flung back and Ronnie came pounding out. He stopped when he saw Simon. He said what Alice had been sure he would say.

'I didn't invite *him*.'

'Now, Ronnie —'

'Many happy returns, Ronnie,' said Simon, holding out the package.

Ronnie could not help looking at it. He could not help the instinctive movement of his hand towards it. Then he shook his head and looked up at Alice.

'But, Mum . . .'

She smoothed it over – or, rather, blurred it over. The noise and exuberance from the sitting-room helped. Ronnie was unable to concentrate. He wanted to stay and argue, wanted to accept the present, and wanted to get back into the uproar. The three things bubbled up and blended in his mind. Alice took Simon's coat and steered him towards the gaiety. He didn't need to be told to wipe his feet; he added nothing to the muddy treads which some of them had left. Ronnie tried to say something, but somehow he was holding the package and then he began to unwrap it as he followed Simon into the room.

Alice stood by the door for a minute or two and looked in.

'Hey . . . look . . . super!'

Ronnie tossed shreds of paper aside and opened the box within. He took out a model crane and held it up.

'It's battery operated,' said Simon quietly.

It was a simple statement, but it wiped the pleasure off Ronnie's face. The others, who had crowded closer, edged back and turned to stare at Simon. His present was more expensive than any which they had brought. He had done the wrong thing. He was always doing the wrong thing. The fact that he did a thing made it wrong.

A large boy with carroty hair pushed Ronnie. Ronnie put the crane on a chair and pushed him back. A girl with a blue hair-ribbon said, 'Oh, don't start that again,' and stepped to one side. She found herself close to Simon. He smiled. He looked at her and then at another girl a few feet away as though to draw them both nearer to him. 'Always talking to girls,' Ronnie had once said of Simon to his mother. Alice watched. Yes, she could see that he was a boy who would talk to girls because he had nothing to say to boys. But the girls were not flattered. Instead of listening to him they giggled and made eyes at each other and then scurried away, looking back and still giggling.

Alice went towards the kitchen and drew the curtains. It would soon be quite dark outside. In summer they could have had the party in the garden; but Ronnie had elected to be born in the winter, so most of his celebrations had been accompanied by a trampling of wet feet into the house and a great fussing

over scarves and gloves and rain hoods and mackintoshes when the guests left.

Tom would be home in another twenty minutes or so. She would be glad to see him. Even though the din would not diminish, it would somehow be more tolerable when shared. Tom would organize games, jolly them all along, and make the little girls in particular shriek with laughter. Until he came she couldn't concentrate on the food or on anything else. She had to keep dashing back to the sitting-room to make sure that nobody was really getting hurt and nobody was being neglected. She had started them off on a game of musical chairs, but her piano playing was pretty terrible, and while she was at the keyboard there had been chaos behind her. Then she had suggested a treasure hunt, only to realize that she had done nothing about hiding the treasure before the party started.

She was not very good at organizing parties. The sheer pressure of the children's excitement overpowered her. No matter how much trouble she took in the days beforehand, when the birthday itself came she was never ready for it.

Not that it mattered, Tom assured her. Just open the door, let 'em in, and leave 'em to it. When there were signs of the furniture cracking up under the strain, bring on the sandwiches and jelly and cake and ice cream.

It was all very well for Tom. He did not get home until after she had taken the first shock of the impact. Twenty children together were not just twenty separate children added together, one plus one plus one and so on: they combined into something larger and more terrifying. There was no telling what they might do if the circumstances were right . . . or wrong, depending on the way you looked at it.

There was a howl of derision from the sitting-room. Alice nerved herself to go and make another inspection.

By the time she got there it was impossible to tell what the cause of the howl had been. Simon Potter was backed against a wall, while Ronnie and his best friend grinned and bobbed their heads with a lunatic merriment, exaggerating the movement, slapping their sides like bad actors in a school play.

Ronnie saw his mother watching him. His grin became genuine and affectionate. Then, before she could frown or ask him a silent question, he swung round and gathered up an armful of his presents.

'Come and look! Look what my Dad gave me!'

Somebody groaned theatrically; a boy with pimples blew a loud raspberry. But they all gathered obediently round. It was the accepted thing to do. This was Ronnie's party and Ronnie's birthday, and at some stage it was only fair that he should insist on their inspecting his trophies.

'My Dad gave me this.' Alice felt soft inside at the sound of adoration in his voice. 'And this. My Dad gave me this as well.' It would have been just the same if Tom had given him a cheap scribbling pad or a box of crayons: the devotion would have been there, unwavering. She loved him for loving so intensely.

Simon was watching gravely. He showed neither excitement nor boredom. He did not make approving noises; and he did not exchange glances of sly boredom with anyone. He was remote, dispassionate, unmoved.

Yet somewhere behind that bleak little face there must be envy or, at the very least, sadness. Simon's father had died years ago. His mother had brought him up with a single-minded fervour that allowed him no relaxation and little contact with other children, even though he spent so many hours and days and weeks at school with them. She worked hard in a solicitor's office and managed to run the home as well, determined that the boy should not feel the loss of his father too deeply. Each afternoon he stayed on at school for an hour in a class set aside for children with difficult journeys, difficult home backgrounds, or with working parents who could not leave their jobs in time to meet their children. By the time he did get home Mrs Potter was in the house waiting for him, ready to devote herself to him. She was proud of the life they made together, proud of their home, and proud of Simon's unfailing neatness and politeness and cleverness.

Alice saw him clear his throat. She saw it rather than heard it – the way he ducked his chin and gulped. He edged forward.

She thought for a moment that he was going to ask if he could have a closer look at one of Ronnie's presents. Then he said:

'What about a game?'

The heads turned. They stared at him. It was a little girl who broke the sudden silence. She seemed glad of the diversion.

'Yes. Let's do something. What shall we play?'

'If we could get some pieces of paper' – Simon glanced swiftly at Alice and she realized that all along he must have been aware of her scrutiny – 'we could put someone's name on it and —'

'Oh, *paper* games,' groaned someone.

'Choose a name,' Simon persisted, 'and write it down one side of the paper. Then divide the paper up into squares, and have, say, flowers and trees and the names of – well, footballers if you like – and they have to begin with the letters of the name.'

The boy who specialized in blowing raspberries blew another. 'What's he talking about?' said the girl with the blue hair-ribbon.

'It's easy.' Simon's voice rose pleadingly. 'You write the name down one side of the paper. Then you write the things you're going to have across the top – that is, I mean, the categories you've chosen. And —'

'Oh, *paper* games.'

Alice intervened. It was time for an adult to take control and tell them what to do. She walked into the room and tried desperately to recall the games they had played when she was a child. Her mind refused to render up its memories. All she could remember was a girl going through the seat of a chair and screaming, and a squat little boy who had gathered an audience around him while he practised spitting into the fire.

She said: 'Now, everybody.' They turned thankfully towards her. 'What about Postman's Knock?' she ventured.

There were shrugs and hisses and moans; but the girls squealed hopefully and nudged one another, and in no time at all they were playing Postman's Knock. Alice retreated again,

leaving them to it. From the kitchen door she glanced occasionally across the hall and then felt absurdly like a voyeur. Some of the boys behaved with a flamboyant confidence that indicated a prolonged study of films which they ought never to have been allowed to see. Some of the girls wriggled, others relaxed and enjoyed themselves. It was frightening to see in these children of eight and nine years of age the pattern of what they would be as adults – patterns already forming, some already established.

And there was Simon outside the door, waiting. He knocked. The girl who came looked at him warily, prepared to be haughty or coquettish. After they had kissed she wiped her lips with the back of her hand. Simon went back into the room. The girl looked up at the ceiling, and said, loudly enough for him and the others inside to hear: 'Ugh!'

They soon tired – the boys sooner than the girls.

'Murder. Let's play murder!'

As the door opened and Ronnie came racing out, Alice tried to assemble good reasons why they should not play murder. She was not quick enough. Already they were racing upstairs. Two boys came into the kitchen, making for the back door, and stopped when they saw her.

'Not outside,' said Alice quickly. This, at any rate, she could prevent. 'It's too muddy in the back garden. You've got to stay indoors.'

They turned and dashed away. She heard footsteps pounding overhead. There was a distant slamming of doors. Lights were switched off. Ronnie appeared suddenly in the splash of brightness thrown out from the kitchen. He and the pimply boy were grinning and whispering. Simon Potter passed them on his way towards the stairs. As he went they clutched each other conspiratorially.

Before Alice could make a move, Ronnie swung towards her. 'Don't mind if we close the door, Mum?' He did not wait for an answer, but closed it quietly and made her a prisoner. She knew there would be yells of protest if she opened it again.

There was a full minute of uneasy silence. In her head it was

incongruously noisier than the last hour had been. In the hush a tension was building up. Something was going to snap.

A muffled thump came from upstairs. It was repeated. It might have been somebody banging insistently on the floor or somebody hammering to be let out. If, she thought apprehensively, they had locked somebody into one of the rooms or one of the old cupboards at the far end of the landing . . . the creaky, cold end of this old, cold house. . . . Somebody. Simon.

Then there was a convincingly blood-curdling scream.

Alice jerked the door open.

'Put that light out!'

'No, it's all right' – Ronnie's voice came from the landing – 'it's over.'

Feet pounded downstairs again. Lights were snapped on everywhere. Everyone was shouting at everyone else. Who had been murdered? Who was it?

To Alice's relief the victim was Marion Pickering, a fluffy little blonde with eyes too knowing for her years. There was indeed quite a possibility, thought Alice uncharitably, that Marion would finish up on the front page of certain Sunday newspapers.

Boys and girls swarmed out of every cranny. The hall seemed to boil with activity, then they were all jostling into the sitting-room. There seemed to be twice as many people here as when the party began.

She could hear the shouting. Ronnie was trying to establish some kind of order.

'Who was on the stairs . . . shut up, will you . . . we've got to find who was upstairs and who was downstairs. Now sit down . . . oh, shut up a minute, will you . . .'

The inquiry was going to be a disorderly one. It needed a strong hand to control it. Instead, there was a shouting and shrieking, a carry-over from the tenseness in the dark.

It was really dark now. Alice had not realized how swiftly the evening had taken over. Twenty minutes earlier it would still have been too hazy to play murder; now there was blackness outside the windows.

Through the hubbub of voices she heard a faint but unmistakable sound. It was Tom's key in the front door.

She was halfway across the hall as he came in.

'Darling!'

He had to lean precariously forward to kiss her. He was laden with an armful of garden tools – a trowel sticking out of some torn brown paper, a pair of secateurs, and a short-handled axe.

'Going well?' He nodded towards the sitting-room door.

'I'm so glad you're back.'

'Ah. That means it's getting out of hand, mm?'

'Any minute now.'

It was so wonderful to see him. His lean, furrowed face was so reassuring. The smell of pipe smoke in his hair, the quiet confidence in his eyes, the sight of his competent, capable hands: everything about him strengthened her and at the same time soothed her.

Yet there was something wrong. Something nagged at her and demanded her attention.

As he turned to lay the garden tools across the umbrella stand she realized that the sound was still going on upstairs – the intermittent thumping she had heard earlier.

'I'll just dump these,' Tom was saying, 'and then plunge into the fray.'

She was jolted into awareness of what he had done with the tools.

'Don't leave them there! For goodness' sake! With all these little monsters in and out . . .'

'All right, all right. I'll take them out to the shed right away.'

'It's filthy out there. You'll get mud all over your shoes if . . .' She broke off and laughed, and Tom laughed. 'I do sound a nagger, don't I?' she said.

He tucked the implements under his arm and headed for the stairs. 'I'll leave them in our room,' he said firmly.

Ronnie emerged abruptly and ecstatically from the sitting-room. 'Dad!' He threw himself at his father and butted him, tried to get one arm round him, smiled up at him. 'Come on in

here – come and see – I've got lots more things. But nothing like you gave me.'

'In a minute or two, son. I've just got to go upstairs with some things. I'll be right down.'

Alice looked past them into the sitting-room. She moved closer to the door. Then she said:

'Ronnie, where's Simon?'

'Mm?'

'Simon. Where is he?'

Ronnie shrugged and pummelled his father again. 'Dunno. Probably gone up to the lavatory.'

'Ronnie, if you've done anything . . . locked him in anywhere . . .'

'Don't be long, Dad.'

Ronnie twisted away and slid cunningly past his mother. She could not bring herself to pursue him into that whirlpool of arms and legs and boisterous faces.

Tom said: 'Anything wrong?'

'I don't know. I just wonder if they've played some horrid joke on Simon Potter.'

'Didn't think he'd been invited.'

'He wasn't. But he came, poor kid. They've kept him on the edge of things. And now I think they've done something.' The din from the sitting-room was so overpowering that she could not swear to hearing the spasmodic thudding from above. 'If they've locked him in one of the cupboards, or one of the rooms at the far end of the landing . . .'

'I'll see,' said Tom reassuringly.

She was glad to turn away towards the kitchen and leave it all to him. Now everything was going to be all right.

Two boys scuttled out of the sitting-room.

'Mrs Jarman – where is it, please?'

'First door on the left at the top of the stairs.'

They went up two stairs at a time behind Tom. Alice felt comfortable and safe when she returned to the kitchen, instead of being a frightened outcast. She began to put the cups of jelly on a large tray. In another fifteen minutes they could start eat-

ing. After that, Tom would organize them while she cleared the food away and did the washing-up.

Ronnie came in. 'Mum, where's the stuff for the game? You know, the corpse stuff.'

The thudding upstairs had stopped. But there was a louder thump, as though someone had fallen or banged something heavy against the floor. Perhaps it was Tom wrenching open one of the cupboard doors: they were old, stiff, and misshapen.

'Ronnie,' she began, '*did* you —'

He did not wait for her to finish. He scooped up the small tray that he had so carefully prepared earlier today, covered with a sheet of thin brown paper, and was gone again.

She heard him yelling at the top of his voice.

'All right, everyone. Come on, sit down. Now, I'm going to put the lights out . . .'

'Hey, wait for us!'

Footsteps hastened down the stairs and two or three boys dashed into the sitting-room. They must have been queueing up for the lavatory. Once one wanted to go, they all wanted to go. Soon, thought Alice, the girls would begin: they would all be smitten at the same time by the idea rather than by the necessity.

'Now,' Ronnie was shouting, his voice so hoarse with continuous exertion that it cracked on every third or fourth word, 'there's just been a murder. We worked out who did it, but we never got round to dealing with the corpse, did we?'

'That was me,' piped up Marion.

'Yes, we know, but . . . hey, shut that door!'

There was the slam of the door and the voice was muffled. After a few minutes there was a loud squeal and a burst of laughter, then another squeal. Alice arranged triangular sandwiches on a plate. She could almost follow the progress of the game by the pitch of the shrieks. 'Here's the corpse's hand,' Ronnie would be saying – and then he would pass a rubber glove stuffed with rags along the line in the darkness. 'Here's some of its hair' – and along would go some of the coarse strands from the old sofa which was rotting away in the garden

shed. 'And here are its eyeballs.' Two peeled grapes would pass from flinching hand to flinching hand.

Everything was ready for the party tea. She went to the door. It was time Tom came down. She could hear no sound from him.

She went to the foot of the stairs and looked up.

'Tom – are you nearly ready?'

There was no reply. Perhaps he had had to join the end of the queue for the lavatory, having more self-control than the over-excited little boys.

Alice decided to put an end to games for the time being. She went to the sitting-room door and opened it.

'Ah, Mum, close the door.'

'Time for tea.' She switched on the light.

There was a squeal. Then another. And all at once it was hysteria, no longer a joke. One little girl sat staring at what was in her hand and began to scream and scream.

Alice took a step into the room, not believing.

One boy held a severed human hand from which blood dripped over his knees. The girl who could not stop screaming was holding a human eye in her right hand. The girl next to her also held a human eye, squashed and torn. On her left the pimply boy went pale and let a tuft of hair fall between his fingers to the floor.

Alice said: 'No.' Somehow she kept herself upright. 'No. Simon – where's Simon?'

'I'm here, Mrs Jarman.'

The voice was quite calm. She turned to find him standing at one side of the room. She tried to find words. Still cool and detached, he said:

'They locked me in. Ronnie and that one over there locked me in. But I'm all right now. I was let out, and everything's all right now.'

'Then who . . .?'

She stared at that hideous hand, chopped bloodily off at the wrist. And she recognized it and also the colour of the hair that lay on the floor.

Simon Potter stood quite still as Alice Jarman ran from the room and up the stairs.

She found her husband lying in front of the bedroom cupboard from which he had released the boy. The garden tools lay beside him, splashed with red – the axe that had first smashed in his head and then chopped off a hand, the secateurs that had snipped off a tuft of his hair, and the trowel that had clumsily gouged out his eyes.

Simon, pale but content, was now not the only boy in that room downstairs without a father.

THE UNFORGIVEN

By Septimus Dale

THE MAGGOT flopped lazily from her dry brown lips and lay on her rotting cheek.

Withered leaves covered her. Withered hands crossed upon her belly. Withered hair flopped across her brow. Withered eyeballs lay beneath her withered lids.

She had been very beautiful when she was alive . . . but that was three weeks ago.

She was no longer beautiful. She had become a part of the landscape. She lay in a cranny of the black rocks where tall tangled bushes hid her from the sun. Green slime on the rocks by her feet showed where the river would eventually reach her and pluck her from the cranny, but there was no river . . . it had been a hot tiresome summer. The dark pools on the river bed did not stir, the trees did not stir, she did not stir. She was dead but no longer cold, for things lived within her, and parasites clawed her meat as they meandered over her cramped body.

She was a lewd, bad, wicked girl, according to her father.

If she had really been a lewd, bad, wicked girl it had done her very little good, for her clothes were plain and she had not a penny to her name. Her father was usually right about such things and he had stated her character as a fact, which upset her very much at the time. She went down to the church and sat in the bell tower thinking about it until her poor thoughts made her life seem all adrift.

The Reverend Lewis Alexander Rose laid his black hat on the sideboard, with his black gloves tucked inside, and looked at her. Three minutes later he was still looking at her, his long

pale finger tapping against the side of his sharp little nose. His thin hair lay like a cobweb across the parchment skin of his skull, where the flesh was dappled brown and white.

The Reverend Lewis Alexander Rose told her again that she was a lewd, bad, wicked girl.

'Whore!' he said.

The tea gong rang and she filed into the dining-room with her two brothers to sit there, holding herself upright and still, while her father said Grace.

It was a fine tea with ham and eggs, lettuce fresh from the garden, and cool, iced orange juice to sip. The tablecloth was startling white and the silver knives shone against the pale-blue plates. It was Sunday and tea was a ceremony that spread right out over the hour, with the Reverend Lewis Alexander Rose smiling and joking with his wife and children, laughing and tapping his nose.

He was a kind, jolly man.

Her father said nothing to her, nothing at all. She sat on his right-hand side and he talked to the others as though she were no longer there. When he laughed she laughed, when he frowned she frowned, but when she spoke he heard nothing at all.

She rose and cleared the table and went with her mother to the kitchen, leaving her father alone with the two boys.

Her mother did not dare speak to her. She felt pity for her mother because her mother was so afraid. Amy Rose was a small dear woman with a small dear mind that echoed her husband's anger and delight. Poor Amy Rose dried her dishes carefully, for they were the best set. She had so many things on her mind, and all of them concerned her wicked daughter and her husband, both of whom she loved very much.

When it was time to return to the family the girl followed her mother dutifully up the brown staircase, her feet sinking in the plush stair carpet, her hands running against the polished banister rail, the grave grandfather clock outstaring her as she passed it by.

The girl sat by the window, looking out at the sea. She listened to her father reading and found herself almost asleep

and watched by the wide eyes of her little brothers, who sat side by side on the sofa and stared at her as though she were somebody else.

She smiled at them and they looked at their father, and did not dare to look at her again.

At three o'clock in the morning the Reverend Lewis Alexander Rose closed the door of his study and climbed the stairs to the bathroom. From the whitewood cupboard there he took his pearl-handled razor with the long blade that shimmered in the gas light. He tested the edge with his thumb, nicking his flesh, observing his pain with pleasure as the thin curtain of blood spread across his palm.

He took care to wash and bandage the cut before wiping clean the razor blade and folding it back into its case.

He went to his changing room and put on his long black walking cloak, combed his hair carefully, and retraced his steps downstairs to the study where his daughter awaited him, her bonnet upon her knee.

The moon shone in the clear night sky as they passed along the main street; sea lisped upon the beach as the girl struggled to keep pace with her father.

The church on the hill stood out sharply against the dark mountain that rose behind it, white stone against the trees of the plantation that covered the foot of the mountain slopes. Their feet rasped on the shingle as they approached the large oak door, where her father paused to fumble with the keys.

It was dark inside and her father lit the gas jets while she waited in the aisle, her hands clasped upon her prayer book. He discarded his cloak and laid it over the back of a pew, then motioned her to sit down.

The Reverend Lewis Alexander Rose mounted the steps to the pulpit and stood there in his black glory, his body hunched slightly forward, his pale eyes blinking as he gazed over the girl's head at the vacant pews and the worn silk cushions.

He spoke.

She was used to her father's sermons. She knew the practised

gestures of his delivery, the wheedling tone of his exhortation. She listened to the steady drone of his voice as he spoke to the empty seats, and found her fingers rapping the boards of her prayer book as his voice rose and rose and echoed against her from the damp walls. Then his attention turned to her, and his frail face twisted and shook as his arms writhed; she saw his eyes, his thumping fingers as he drummed the stand; she heard the chatter of her own teeth and ground them together, to keep out the fear.

He's quite mad, she thought to herself, and instantly forbade the thought.

He saw her below him, small and white and evil with her brown boots peeking out beneath her dress, her white blouse gleaming where it showed through her wrap, her eyes inveigling him.

Abruptly he stopped shouting.

The damned evil was in her, it would not be driven out.

He lowered his head and prayed to his own sweet God and as he prayed he sensed her movement as she left the pew, heard the patter of her panic-stricken feet down the aisle, the thud of her body against the door.

He raised his head slowly and gazed at her. She stood by the locked door, her arms dropped by her side, her face half turned away from him.

'Whore!' he said.

He came slowly down from the pulpit and picked his cloak from the pew back, carefully righting it on his shoulders without paying further attention to his daughter.

She waited by the door for him. The key nestled in her father's hand as he stalked down the aisle towards her, jangled as he reached to extinguish the dim lights.

He stood beside her. For a brief moment his hand rested on her shoulder, touched the side of her cheek, brushed lightly against her hair. Then his fingers closed upon her wrist; she felt his long nails dig into her flesh as he jerked her forward.

I must make a noise, she thought to herself.

He opened the door and pulled her through it, holding her still as he closed it quietly behind them.

They moved out of the porch, round to the side of the church where the white gravestones gleamed through the weeds like old forgotten teeth.

'You're hurting me,' she said.

He released her wrist.

'You musn't be afraid of your father,' he said.

She walked with him through the back of the gate in among the tall still trees that flanked the potato field, her feet clattering on the rough stone track. At the far side of the field lay the sloping acres of the plantation and the narrow creek of the river that ran down through it. Her father pushed her before him across the dry files of the field.

The Reverend Lewis Alexander Rose was her father. Her father was a good man, and she was not afraid of her father. Her father loved her, her mother loved her, and God loved her, and she crossed the potato field repeating that to herself again and again under her breath, just to convince herself that it was true.

If it had not been true she would have tried to run away.

His black boots sank in the brown earth, his breath came hard against his chest, and his fingers already toyed with the razor in his pocket.

Now it was too late to call out. She was too far away from the houses on the front.

At last she was afraid of her father.

She started to run, clumsily, her feet catching in the loose earth. She reached the edge of the field and ploughed through the weeds, her clothes caught up in her arms. She reached the edge of the plantation and found herself among the small pine trees, trees that scratched against her as she thrust between them. She was running uphill, and she realized with the sheer sharp knowledge of panic that she was running farther and farther from the town and help. She was running up the side of the mountain and her father was coming behind her.

She found herself on the side of the culvert where the river had run dry and was now no more than a trickle between the black rocks. She tried to descend, but slipped and fell and

found herself slithering down the rocks, her fingers rasping against the stone.

Her father loved her, her mother loved her, and God loved her.

You musn't be afraid of your father.

He stood at the top of the slope and looked down at her.

She lay against the rock where she had fallen, watching him. He came down the slope gingerly, picking his way sideways along the slippery rocks of the river bed.

Her father loved her, her mother loved her, and God loved her.

You musn't be afraid of your father.

He took out his handkerchief and dipped it into the water. He took her hand and cleaned it carefully, wiping clear the small flesh grazes. She pulled herself upright against the rock and allowed him to wash her face, his fingers gentle against her skin, the water cool and refreshing.

His thin face was pale and drawn. He had nothing to say to her, nothing left. He dried his handkerchief carefully and found his balance on the slippery surface, his feet sinking in leaf mould.

She was evil. She was so evil, the evil was in her. She was lewd, bad, and wicked. He saw her evil in her eyes and her pretty face and her long fine hair, and the way she folded his handkerchief and tucked it into her sleeve.

Lewd, bad, and wicked.

He took out the pearl-handled razor and eased the blade open. He held it open in his hand and she caught at his wrist.

'No,' she said.

Her father loved her, her mother loved her, and God loved her.

'Whore!' her father said.

She took the razor and brought it carefully against her adam's apple.

'Whore!' her father said.

Quickly, she slit open her throat.

PUPPETMASTER

By Adobe James

DECARLO WAS the last of the great puppetmasters.

At one time, when he was at the pinnacle of his powers and popularity, great hordes of people had come to the puppetorium from incredibly long distances to watch his ten thousand little creations perform in stirring soul-gripping pageants of war . . . and love.

There had been wealth, fame, and companionship in those days.

Now, Decarlo had only his puppets.

Occasionally – either through accident or design – someone would stray from the chartered roads and unexpectedly drop in on Decarlo's puppetorium. But these visits were few . . . and most of the visitors would feel uncomfortable as they sat in the shabby seats watching Decarlo's pathetic efforts to put on a special performance for them. It was really sad, they all agreed; through inactivity, Decarlo no longer had complete control of the puppets, fully half of the machinery was out of order, and – worst of all – the antiquated performance was . . . was . . . boring!

No, obviously, Decarlo's days of glory had withered. Today, only the chill winds of decay blew through the barren arbours of greatness.

None of this mattered to Decarlo, though, for the puppetmaster was engrossed in making plans for a comeback.

He had begun to create a new entire series of puppets. A different puppet – one which would make him famous again.

He thought the new ones were beautiful – the best thing he had ever done.

And yet, his old fans – the ones who had known Decarlo at his height of glory – would have been appalled.

In truth . . . the puppets were grotesque! The little people, the birds, the animals, the monsters, the scenery were all alien in appearance – quite unlike anything anyone had ever seen before.

They all reflected his ageing eyesight, his trembling hands, his approaching senility, and his loneliness.

Decarlo saw none of these faults; he thought of them as being near perfection. He had developed a strong rapport with some of the new puppets, one of them especially. Her name was Lilith. She was the most beautiful, as well as being the most animated and the most affectionate. Often when he was holding her, Lilith would impulsively lean forward – seemingly of her own accord – and kiss his cheek.

He had created her out of a piece of cloth from his own vest. He had given her eyes to see with, lips and mouth to smile and sing with, and a nose and ears and arms and hands . . . and a perfect little body.

Oh, she was beauty! When Decarlo stood in that black formless limbo behind the curtains – towering above the darkened stage – he sometimes thought he could feel her little heart beating in happy anticipation.

You see, he loved Lilith. And Lilith loved him.

Of course, the rest of the puppets loved Decarlo too, but not in the same way. He was a father to them. Sometimes, like naughty children, they sassed and would not obey. Afterwards, though, the puppets were always contrite and – shame-faced – would apologize and beg forgiveness.

They had learned their lesson well, he thought, as a result of the earlier punishment of Asmodeus. The puppet Asmodeus had been disrespectful – disobedient – had continually refused to obey the commands. So - one day – with all the other puppets lined up on parade, their bright eyes unblinking and unfathomable as they watched, Decarlo had doused the screaming and suddenly repentant Asmodeus in oil . . . and set him afire.

Lilith had understood the necessity of the cruel punishment; the other puppets did not.

Since that time, it seemed as if the others no longer cared for

the puppetmaster as a friend. They spoke to him as if he were an angry god . . . or a harsh father.

Without their friendship – their childlike playfulness – Decarlo found it increasingly difficult to concentrate on his work. Much of the earlier inspiration was gone. The colours of his stage settings seemed to fade – become drab – until they were merely a cacophony of dullness instead of a symphony of beauty. The dismal fogs of loneliness and despair closed in around him more often. He began to lament the famous days when he had the companionship of his own kind.

And there were moments of painful insight when he realized he was – in fact – only a lonely old man playing with dolls.

'Soon I shall die,' Decarlo told the puppet Lilith.

'Oh, my poor-poor darling,' Lilith replied softly. She laid her head against his collar bone. 'Don't be sad. I love you.'

Awkwardly, Decarlo petted her. 'Thank you, little one.' His voice rumbled like thunder ringing in the canyons of the sky, and his great grateful tears ran like rivers flowing from the glaciated snow packs of his eyes.

There was a moment of silence, finally broken by Lilith who said, 'I know, let's go out to the garden theatre, and there I will dance for you.'

'The garden?'

'Oh yes! Please?' Her blue eyes twinkled happily and the little skirt swirled around as she pirouetted to show her joy. 'Please!'

'All right,' Decarlo grumbled, reluctantly being drawn into the warm whirlpool of her enthusiasm.

'Thank you, thank you, thank you.' She kissed his cheek again. 'You're so good to me.'

'Hold on tight then.'

Lilith giggled and clutched his coat. They moved out on to the platform and down into the garden theatre. This had been the setting for one of Decarlo's most famous plays; it was a lush verdant pastoral scene, with miniature fruit trees and a tiny stream that flowed like liquid crystal across the land. Decarlo had manufactured small birds and animals for the setting.

The birds now chirped and sang softly, while little animals twitched their noses and scampered away in mock fright at their approach. A male puppet – one of the caretaker gardeners – was using a knife to trim back some plants.

'You may go,' Decarlo dismissed him.

The puppet inclined his head respectfully and backed away.

Decarlo placed Lilith alongside an oak tree. Then, being careful not to crush part of the scenery, he sat down in front of her. Laughing, she ran over and placed her head against his hand.

The smell of an afternoon rain came to them, and along with it, the smell of new and eager young growing things . . . and decaying dying old things.

'How peaceful it is,' Decarlo said, feeling himself becoming melancholy.

'Don't be sad,' Lilith crooned. 'Be happy with me; think happy thoughts for me.'

He smiled down, pleased with the concern in her voice. 'Very well. Happy thoughts. Like the time the King came on my stage – right here – with tears in his eyes and said I was the world's greatest artist. Happy thoughts! Like love fondly recalled. And many friends – more friends than one could ever hope to count. And summer nights . . . when one is young and there are no aches. And people of your own kind . . . to talk to . . .'

'Yes, yes,' she clapped, 'things like that. Aren't you happy right now?'

Decarlo thought for a moment. Finally he answered, without conviction, 'I suppose I am.' His voice lowered and became forlorn; 'But I would be happier if the rest of the puppets loved me as you do.'

Lilith angrily stamped her little foot. 'They're fools, Decarlo. Jealous, stupid, insensitive, unappreciative fools. They're only little machines. Beasts, really . . . but I am part of you. I was your first new creation. The rest of them don't matter.' Once again she attempted to put her arms around him. 'Please let me dance for you.'

He forced a smile. 'Go ahead, little one.'

Slowly, never taking her eyes from him, Lilith began dancing. She was tantalizing. She was beauty – poetry in motion. She was woman. She swayed to and fro like a young sapling in gentle winds; her arms moved up and down like white wings of a bird in slow flight; and her hair swept from side to side like a restless golden sea.

Decarlo, completely hypnotized – as always – watched her graceful dance. She reminded him of someone who had loved him once . . . who? – The name was almost in his mind when he was yanked back to reality by the repeated tugging on his coat. He looked down and saw the female puppet he had made to be a servant of the gardener. She called his name.

'Yes?' His voice was filled with exasperation at being interrupted.

'Decarlo, you promised me clothes. But I have none.' She gazed down at her thick, ungraceful, mud-stained nude body.

'Go away. I'll make your garments later – in time for the show, at least.'

'But you've dressed her.' She nodded angrily towards Lilith. 'Why do you not treat me as you do her? Why is she your favourite?'

'I told you to go away! Are you going to be disobedient?' There was an implied warning in the question.

The female turned her gaze from him, but the puppet-master had seen her long enough to know that she was weeping when she disappeared into the bushes.

Soon, Decarlo was lost again in the trance created by Lilith's dance. Perhaps it was this trance, perhaps it was that foggy moment when the soul is called elsewhere, or perhaps he saw the approaching danger and it simply did not register in his brain; whatever the reason, he was quite unprepared for what happened next. His mind returned when Lilith screamed. He saw her cowering with her back pressed tight against a fruit tree. Her eyes were wide in silent exorcism.

It was then, and only then, that Decarlo saw the gardener. His voice thundered the command; 'You! Puppet! Go away. Get back.'

The dark-haired male paid no attention. It was almost as if his ears had been deafened by desire. He crept forward – on all fours like an anxious dog – past the little waterfall, past the frightening mountain that was Decarlo's leg, past the bridge, and then reached the trees where he stood, looking down at Lilith. His hands clenched and unclenched in lust – guttural animal-like sounds were coming from his throat. He reached out and caressed her bare thigh. Lilith shuddered at his touch.

'Puppet,' Decarlo shouted. 'I will destroy you . . . if you go one step farther!'

The admonition had no effect on the gardener. Lilith attempted to scramble back away from him. She was helpless in her fright; her legs were awkward, unmanageable. She tripped and fell. The male immediately pounced on her.

'Stop it. Stop!' Decarlo screamed. What was happening? What was going wrong with the puppet? It was all a disjointed dream. It had to be a dream . . . a nightmare. The male had ripped off Lilith's undergarments; he savagely slapped her when she struggled. He was invincible – a superman . . . and Decarlo was impotent.

'Help me, Decarlo,' Lilith cried. Now she was flat on her back, eyes frozen in disbelief.

Decarlo watched – horrified – so stunned that he was incapable of movement. He saw the male. He saw the terrible wicked thing that the male was about to do – a forbidden thing. He saw and heard Lilith scream as the insertion was made . . . saw the male's body arched and moving in passion, and then, as nightmare piled on nightmare, saw the gardener's knife suddenly materialize in Lilith's hands. She stabbed at the male's back, but the knife slipped over the shoulder inflicting only a small superficial wound on the tanned skin. It was painful, though. The puppet roared – like some wild wounded beast – and twisted the knife from her. His arm rose once . . . twice . . . the blade sank deep into her throat. And the blood stained her blouse . . . and her little eyes closed.

Once, just before she died, Decarlo thought he heard Lilith's voice calling out to him like the far-off cry of a night bird.

The gardener stood and shook his head; his bull-like neck twisted contemptuously towards Decarlo, and then he started to leave.

'You should not have done that.' Decarlo's voice was troubled – sad – full of fatherly love.

The puppet looked up and flung a curse.

'Lilith was mine. You knew she was mine. What you did was forbidden. Now . . . I am forced to punish you,' the puppet-master intoned. He watched the still arrogant – but now, uncertain – expression on the gardener's face.

The puppetmaster reached out; the male threw up his hands and screamed rebelliously as Decarlo closed his fist and slowly began squeezing. Then the puppet was struggling. Sharp teeth bit into Decarlo's hand, and the puppetmaster was forced to release his hold.

Oh, the impertinence of the puppet! It was unbelievable! The more he fought, the angrier Decarlo became. The battle raged across the grassy plain. The gardener, unbending, began shouting curses and taunts; he fell once and momentarily was at the mercy of the puppetmaster, but as Decarlo's huge foot came crashing down from the heavens to stamp out life, the male rolled aside. Finally, he sought refuge behind a fruit tree.

Decarlo plucked the tree from the ground, and – abruptly – saw the battle was over. The male was winded; his strength was gone. The little figure stood panting, waiting . . . waiting . . . waiting.

'Are you sorry,' Decarlo asked, wanting – needing – some sign of repentance.

The puppet spat.

Decarlo's voice was as thunder, and the soft little clouds – part of the setting – scuttled away from the force of his breath. The musical, living sounds of the garden abruptly died and there was a vast silence upon the land. No bird sang. No animal moved. 'Very well, then. You pay for your transgressions, evil one. What I created, I now destroy as a lesson to all of those like you who would mutilate beauty, who would rape, who would take that which has been denied them.'

Decarlo lifted his foot once again; the male puppet stood, panting, looking up unremorseful and defiant and unafraid, as the huge figure blotted out his sun and sky.

'Decarlo . . .' The whining discordant voice of the female reached him. He peered down angrily, and saw her grotesque figure standing atop a small rise next to his leg. In her hand she carried the gardener's knife – Lilith's murder weapon.

'Give me the knife,' Decarlo commanded. 'I will destroy him with his own instrument of hate.'

'Please, Decarlo . . . Master! Don't kill him.' It was a plea from the ugly mud-spattered woman. The sight of her sickened Decarlo. Lilith had been right. These were beasts, animals . . . and he would never understand how he could have thought of them as beautiful or near perfection. 'Give me the knife . . . or do you wish punishment also?'

The female stood, looking up at him, blinking back tears and sniffling like a frightened but adamant small child. Finally, her spirit apparently broken, she began walking dejectedly towards Decarlo; her hands hung limply at her side.

'The knife,' Decarlo demanded again.

She closed her eyes; her little body shuddered once or twice as she reached some sudden decision, and then – abruptly – she was running towards the puppetmaster's leg. The knife blade flickered in the fading light of the late afternoon and Decarlo felt the blade as she slashed his tendons.

He shouted, and hopped on one leg. Almost faster than his eyes could adjust to it, she ran and slashed at his other leg. Oh, the pain of it all . . . the excruciating pain! He could stand upright no longer. Decarlo screamed and fell forward to his knees and then, slowly, like some huge reluctant tree being toppled continued to fall until he was helpless on his side. In his falling, he wiped out a small village, a snow-capped mountain, and created a deep crater on the plains.

The female clamoured up on to his chest . . . and the knife flashed and swung like a maddened scimitar of death as she hacked her way through the mammoth rib cage, into the cavernous chest, and then into his heart.

Decarlo's legs and feet pounded the ground, raising mammoth new mountain chains whose jagged peaks almost punctured the sun. His arms toppled whole forests of trees, and his body – convulsing in death throes – levelled fountains and gardens and buildings and machinery. His fingers scraping the earth, gouged huge river beds and crevices and canyons. The gushers of blood from his open heart pumped high into the air – and the afternoon was filled with red rain.

And finally, he lay still on his side looking through rapidly dimming old eyes at the two mutinous puppets. He made one feeble attempt to raise his hand and smash them, but his strength was gone . . . he dropped his arm . . . and closed his eyes.

The female puppet ran swiftly across the broken – maimed – earth and reached the side of the male. The ground shuddered fearfully, and trees swayed in the hurricane winds from each dying gasp of the puppetmaster. The sky was darkening. Broken machinery made wild insane noises and movements. The earth opened and closed like a hungry sea anemone. Plants sprouted, bloomed, withered, and died in split seconds. A maddened moon and sun chased each other from horizon to horizon, and seas peeled back and raised and crashed inward.

The two puppets stared at each other – frightened beyond speech, almost incapable of movement. And then, terrified at what they had done and what was happening, clasped each other's hand and began running towards the west – away from the verdant cage the puppetmaster had called 'Eden'.

NO FLIES ON FRANK

By John Lennon

THERE WERE no flies on Frank that morning – after all why not? He was a responsible citizen with a wife and child, wasn't he? It was a typical Frank morning and with an agility that defies description he leapt into the barthroom on to the scales. To his great harold he discovered he was twelve inches more tall heavy! He couldn't believe it and his blood raised to his head causing a mighty red colouring.

'I carn't not believe this incredible fact of truth about my very body which has not gained fat since mother begat me at childburn. Yea, though I wart through the valet of thy shadowy hut I will feed no norman. What grate qualmsy hath taken me thus into such a fatty hardbuckle.'

Again Frank looked down at the awful vision which clouded his eyes with fearful weight. 'Twelve inches more heavy, Lo!, but am I not more fatty than my brother Geoffery whose father Alec came from Kenneth – through Leslies, who begat Arthur, son of Eric, by the house of Ronald and April – keepers of James of Newcastle who ran Madeline at 2–1 by Silver Flower, (10–2) past Wot-ro-Wot at 4*s*. 3*d*. a pound?'

He journeyed downstairs crestfalled and defective – a great wait on his boulders – not even his wife's battered face could raise a smile on poor Frank's head – who as you know had no flies on him. His wife, a former beauty queer, regarded him with a strange but burly look.

'What ails thee, Frank?' she asked stretching her prune. 'You look dejected if not informal,' she addled.

'Tis nothing but wart I have gained but twelve inches more tall heavy than at the very clock of yesterday at this time – am I not the most miserable of men? Suffer ye not to spake to me or

I might thrust you a mortal injury; I must traddle this trial alone.'

'Lo! Frank – thou hast smote me harshly with such grave talk – am I to blame for this vast burton?'

Frank looked sadly at his wife – forgetting for a moment the cause of his misery. Walking slowly but slowly towards her, he took his head in his hands and with a few swift blows had clubbed her mercifully to the ground dead.

'She shouldn't see me like this,' he mubbled, 'not all fat and on her thirty-second birthday.'

Frank had to get his own breakfast that morning and also on the following mornings.

Two, (or was it three?) weeks later Frank awake again to find that there were *still* no flies on him.

'No flies on this Frank boy,' he thought; but to his amazement there seemed to be a lot of flies on his wife – who was still lying about the kitchen floor.

'I carn't not partake of bread and that with her lying about the place,' he thought allowed, writing as he spoke. 'I must deliver her to her home where she will be made welcome.'

He gathered her in a small sack (for she was only four foot three) and headed for her rightful home. Frank knocked on the door of his wife's mother's house. She opened the door.

'I've brought Marian home, Mrs Sutherskill' (he could never call her Mum). He opened the sack and placed Marian on the doorstep.

'I'm not having all those flies in my home,' shouted Mrs Sutherskill (who was very house-proud), shutting the door. 'She could have at least offered me a cup of tea,' thought Frank lifting the problem back on his boulders.

A HEART FOR A HEART

By Ron Holmes

AS I WRITE this confession I consider these words which are drawn in the blood of my lover who is dead. She is without a heart. I cut out her heart. She is without blood. Her blood is for my pen. And presently there will be no more of her and me, for together we will burn and crumble, our organs of ecstasy reduced to a grey, impotent ash. This will be.

What has happened is over and lives only in my mind, in these blood-red words, and in the screams of my wife whom I can hear through the open doors of my laboratory. I left them open for that reason.

By now I believe that I am insane, yet I am aware of sensations more vivid than in all my sane life of fear. Now I am unable to feel fear. The feeling is good.

My wife is screaming, and her screams rise from my operating table. She is strapped there, quite tightly. She is conscious. And before her is the body of Stella, my dead lover. Stella is naked. There is a small hole in her forehead. In the hole is an haemorrhage, and the haemorrhage is oyster to a lead pearl; the bullet which killed her, froze her breasts, and chilled her succulence. I can see her now, and though she is dead she excites me. There is another hole beneath her breast. There is blood on her flesh. The blood came from the incision I made when I cut her heart out.

To explain, and I must or defile this blood which once throbbed beneath me in beautiful delirium. Stella became my assistant only six months ago. While working at Strasburg she read of my experiments in the theory and practice of grafting human organs. She offered her collaboration and within days we were lovers. She was beautiful.

My pen is running dry and so I dip into her blood, and now across my page I see full rich words glistening in the light of my reading lamp.

I had not loved my wife for many years. Physically, she repulsed me. Intellectually, we were incompatible. Yet with Stella there was a union of mind and body, a harmony which endorsed the faith I had in my work in transplanting organs from one living thing to another. She lived in me and I in her, as though we had given all in return for all.

It need never have happened. I wish to record this opinion. This morning, however, my wife came into the laboratory carrying a gun. From then the process could not be halted. She glared at me wildly and told me to make love to Stella. I refused, but then she pointed the gun at Stella's head. She repeated her wish. Helplessly, I moved towards Stella. I had never loathed anyone so much as I then loathed my wife. I began to make love to Stella. I felt her warm mouth take mine. I felt the mystery of her body. Then there was a noise and Stella's body went limp and very heavy in my arms. Her head fell back and blood pumped up through her forehead.

My wife stood back holding the gun and laughing at me.

I have tried to remember what happened next, but I cannot. My earliest recollection is one of working intensely; Stella on my right and my wife on my left.

I had to work quickly. I had very little time. After I had removed Stella's heart and ensured that it was preserved at the correct temperature I began operating on my wife.

Listen! She is still screaming.

After my work was completed I waited by my wife's side. When she opened her eyes I told her that everything was all right and that she should forgive me, for I had been a fool. I said that I had fixed it so that no one would ever know. She smiled weakly, and I asked her how she was feeling. Still subdued by the drugs, she asked me what had happened.

Oh, the sweetness of my anticipation. Without losing my smile I walked across the laboratory. I had raised Stella's body

on an inclined table, so that her corpse sagged and her head rolled above her heavy naked breasts.

'It's all over,' I said. These were my exact words. Stella hung there, deaf to our victory.

My wife closed her eyes in horror. She trembled as though she were in the depths of a violent fever. I left Stella as she was and went over to the refrigerator. I came back with the jar. 'Can you see it?' I asked. At first she would not look. When she did look I put the jar behind my back. 'You always thought you were so independent,' I said. Quickly I raised the jar before her eyes.

'Oh, my God!' she shrieked. 'It's her heart.'

I was shocked at her ignorance. 'Her heart?' I questioned. I pointed to the contents. 'This is yours! It's yours.' In the jar the organ floated beautifully. Like the jar, it belonged to me. But she did not seem to understand. 'I exchanged her heart for yours. It's Stella's heart that beats in your body.' I thrust my hand into the cavity in Stella's cold breast. My hand came out, empty and covered with blood. I dangled it before my wife's eyes. She then lost consciousness.

As I write she is still screaming, and Stella's blood has coagulated on my pen. In a few moments I shall join the two women. I shall set fire to the laboratory because I know of anything that has any meaning. I know that I must do it soon, before my sanity returns to bring me grief, remorse, a million emotions that I must never know. Already I know that my madness is waning. And I must die while I can consummate my union with Stella and my wife as the flames enjoy our flesh.

A REAL NEED

By William Sansom

MY UNCLE lived in a black-and-white house in a wet green dell. Black timbers, black as trees in the rain, held plaster white as dry chalk: and on either side there rose steeply banked the fields of high green grass. There were no flowers. Only green, and against it the black and the white.

In one green paddock my uncle kept a black-and-white cow, which stood all day in the field declaring its camouflage sharp against the green. It was a coincidence that my uncle was also a cleric, and although very poor, and very old, kept his white collar shining clean and his black suit brushed. He was so old, or he had drifted so long in the shadow of his prayers, that his face and his bald head were quite white too.

So you see how it was, when I spent that long dull June with my uncle. Confined for hours to my chair in the garden, I could only stare at the white sky, this endless green, and at these several close incursions of black and white. Incursions! They were more like stances, declamations, eruptions caught in the act. How freshly young green shines under a low white sky! How still the house and the cow stood, how slowly across the green lawn my uncle moved on his old black legs!

I sat there trying to remember how a flower looked, or a blue sky. I played with coloured picture books, I looked for a long time at my own pink hand. But the others – the green and the black and the white were too powerful, they were everywhere with the sun glowing bright as a medical lamp behind its lens of white cloud. You will know something of what must have come over me that afternoon with my uncle.

I had begun by then to theorize. At one time I began think-

ing how black and white were not colours, not colours at all isolated in this way before me: and that this green with a light inside it was almost not a colour too, it was more a kind of vegetable force breeding and shining and creeping all about. And what is needed, I thought – I thought . . . and I began to study my uncle's face more intently.

He was standing a few yards away. I looked him carefully up and down – his black suit had shape to it, I saw where parts of him protruded and parts fell cavernously in. I saw his white collar, and his white wrinkled neck above it. I saw his old face, moveless in thought – its curdled paste of skin, its eyes blank beneath heavy lids of his dark old age, its moulding of bone and its white pouches sagging like sacs out of spirit jars, and the benign white dome new-born above.

All at once the notion came to me – this man is full of red! Inside he's red!

You know – I tried hard to forget this. I invented games – rigmaroles of paper and pencil, countings and postures – to divert that thought. I took more exercise than was permitted, I limped hard for periods excessively long – in order that the very pain in my foot might relieve this new pain in my mind. I tried to wheedle my way into the dark of the house, from which I was soon ejected – for the doctors had prescribed not only rest but air – by my uncle himself: himself, so that in that way, too, I was brought face to face in too literal a manner with my thought. Soon even at night, in bed, in the dark, far from the green and the black and the white, I lay awake thinking only of the red.

Such matters must find their outlet.

And one afternoon I could no longer bear it, strong passions seized me, I determined to root the red out of that black-and-white old man. I went for him with a bread-knife.

It is curious to see that this happened inside – in the dining-room to be exact. Not out in the green at all. So that at least must prove that the thought had grown stronger than its cause. And curious too, that I could realize easily, as with a second

mind, the ordinary still nature of the room in which this happened. The dark overmantle of the sideboard with its single apple in a bowl: the sense of time hanging over our cold luncheon: the calm light, dusting old fabrics; old framed photographs fading into the wall. And if anyone thinks that life in such circumstances changes – brightens, or disappears, or unbalances itself – they are wrong. It remains the same: only, more noticeably the same.

I was standing behind uncle, by the bread-board. His head was nodding at his cold mutton – as if he were talking to it: or talking to the pieces, for he always chopped his food first and then took the fork in his right hand. I remember so well his right hand with the fork raised; and his other hand stretched out on the tablecloth to the left, crumbling a piece of bread. Old people can eat with such indifference, with all tired time to spare to spin the precious dining hours longer.

He was reflected in a mirror opposite, though his head was bowed, and I could not see his face. Nor did I want to. I took the knife suddenly from the loaf of bread – it was in the middle of cutting a slice – and in the second I held it over him, pointed like a dagger, I saw that it was one with saw-edges. With pleasure, with excitement, with the utmost careful concentration, I placed the blade exactly along the centre of his clean white dome and began to saw.

At the first touch my uncle reached a little forward, as though he had fallen asleep, or as though he had suddenly noticed a black fly which was strolling the rim of his white plate. I suppose, really, that was the moment he died: his heart would have come to a stop.

I went on sawing – it was no easy matter, I knew that from the beginning, and already I had to steady the head with my left hand. But I kept on trying, and watched with some impatience. And disappointment. For at first there was indeed a pinkiness, but then it all became a mess, you could have called none of it red, certainly not in the light of that old room, certainly not the red I was after.

As soon as I had looked at it, and looked up again in my helpless disappointment, and in doing so saw my movement in the mirror opposite, the mirror set in the great dark sideboard – my heart again bounded with joy! I saw hope, I saw the bright end to all misfortune!

I ran stumbling round the chairs, I could hear them falling behind me like fragments of a past life, and standing before the mirror I went at my own throat.

It was lovely. The red came bounding out to meet my thankful eyes, it came so easily, so brightly, so bravely blazing its colour that in simple admiration I had to stop. I stopped, with my throat only half cut – there was no need for more. I sank to my knees, sobbing thankfulness, and through hands clasped in a sort of prayer, I looked again.

But now there was no mirror! I saw only the black wooden face of the sideboard, I was down on the carpet. It was appalling. But I knew I had not really been robbed, I was just on my knees below the mirror. However, so that it might never happen again I got to my feet – it was beginning to hurt now dreadfully – and with a last glad glance in the mirror I stumbled out through the doors on to the green. And away down to the garden gate, to the lane, my hands so richly red against the green and with the memory of my lovely red throat. And, you know, I was so glad it was *mine*.

I suppose it was this, this sudden bright red, that so unsettled the foresters coming down the hill towards me. I am sorry they were so obviously put out, I can only suppose that they who led their lives so deep in the green may have been dazzled quite hurtfully at the sight of all my red.

Now, now I am quieter, and in my new grey home, I can see that such matters can be overdone, too much is too much: and now I can even find great and subtle pleasure in the colour, the blueness shining from what may be first thought black, of the uniforms of my new friends with their priestly blue domes.

GREEN THOUGHTS

By John Collier

Annihilating all that's made
To a green thought in a green shade. MARVELL

THE ORCHID had been sent among the effects of his friend, who had come by a lonely and mysterious death on the expedition. Or he had bought it among a miscellaneous lot, 'unclassified', at the close of the auction. I forget which it was, but it was certainly one or the other of these. Moreover, even in its dry, brown, dormant root state, this orchid had a certain sinister quality. It looked, with its bunched and ragged proportions, like a rigid yet a gripping hand, hideously gnarled, or a grotesquely whiskered, threatening face. Would you not have known what sort of an orchid it was?

Mr Mannering did not know. He read nothing but catalogues and books on fertilizers. He unpacked the new acquisition with a solicitude absurd enough in any case towards any orchid, or primrose either, in the twentieth century, but idiotic, foolhardy, doom-eager, when extended to an orchid thus come by, in appearance thus. And in his traditional obtuseness he at once planted it in what he called the 'Observation Ward', a hothouse built against the south wall of his dumpy red dwelling. Here he set always the most interesting additions to his collection, and especially weak and sickly plants, for there was a glass door in his study wall through which he could see into this hothouse, so that the weak and sickly plants could encounter no crisis without his immediate knowledge and his tender care.

This plant, however, proved hardy enough. At the ends of thick and stringy stalks it opened out bunches of darkly shining leaves, and soon it spread in every direction, usurping so much

space that first one, then another, then all its neighbours had to be removed to a hothouse at the end of the garden. It was, Cousin Jane said, a regular hop-vine. At the ends of the stalks, just before the leaves began, were set groups of tendrils, which hung idly, serving no apparent purpose. Mr Mannering thought that very probably these were vestigial organs, a heritage from some period when the plant had been a climber. But when were the vestigial tendrils of an ex-climber half or quarter so thick and strong?

After a long time sets of tiny buds appeared here and there among the extravagant foliage. Soon they opened into small flowers, miserable little things; they looked like flies' heads. One naturally expects a large, garish, sinister bloom, like a sea anemone, or a Chinese lantern, or a hippopotamus yawning, on any important orchid; and should it be an unclassified one as well, I think one has every right to insist on a sickly and overpowering scent into the bargain.

Mr Mannering did not mind at all. Indeed, apart from his joy and happiness in being the discoverer and godfather of a new sort of orchid, he felt only a mild and scientific interest in the fact that the paltry blossoms were so very much like flies' heads. Could it be to attract other flies for food or as fertilizers? But then, why like their heads?

It was a few days later that Cousin Jane's cat disappeared. This was a great blow to Cousin Jane, but Mr Mannering was not, in his heart of hearts, greatly sorry. He was not fond of the cat, for he could not open the smallest chink in a glass roof for ventilation but the creature would squeeze through somehow to enjoy the warmth, and in this way it had broken many a tender shoot. But before Cousin Jane had lamented two days something happened which so engrossed Mr Mannering that he had no mind at all with which to sympathize with her affliction, or to make at breakfast kind and hypocritical inquiries after the lost cat. A strange new bud appeared on the orchid. It was clearly evident that there would be two quite different sorts of bloom on this one plant, as sometimes happens in such fantastic corners of the vegetable world, and that the new flower

would be very different in size and structure from the earlier ones. It grew bigger and bigger, till it was as big as one's fist.

And just then – it could never have been more inopportune – an affair of the most unpleasant, the most distressing nature summoned Mr Mannering to town. It was his wretched nephew in trouble again, and this time so deeply and so very disgracefully that it took all Mr Mannering's generosity, and all his influence too, to extricate the worthless young man. Indeed, as soon as he saw the state of affairs, he told the prodigal that this was the very last time he might expect assistance, that his vices and his ingratitude had long ago cancelled all affection between them, and that for this last helping hand he was indebted only to his mother's memory, and to no faith on the part of his uncle either in his repentance or his reformation. He wrote, moreover, to Cousin Jane, to relieve his feelings, telling her of the whole business, and adding that the only thing left to do was to cut the young man off entirely.

When he got back to Torquay, Cousin Jane was nowhere to be found. The situation was extremely annoying. Their only servant was a cook who was very old and very stupid and very deaf. She suffered besides from an obsession, owing to the fact that for many years Mr Mannering had had no conversation with her in which he had not included an impressive reminder that she must always, no matter what might happen, keep the big kitchen stove up to a certain pitch of activity. For this stove, besides supplying the house with hot water, heated the pipes in the 'Observation Ward', to which the daily gardener who had charge of the other hothouses had no access. By this time she had come to regard her duties as stoker as her chief *raison d'être*, and it was difficult to penetrate her deafness with any question which her stupidity and her obsession did not somehow transmute into an inquiry after the stove, and this, of course, was especially the case when Mr Mannering spoke to her. All he could disentangle was what she had volunteered on first seeing him, that his cousin had not been seen for three days, that she had left without saying a word. Mr Mannering was perplexed

and annoyed, but, being a man of method, he thought it best to postpone further inquiries until he had refreshed himself a little after his long and tiring journey. A full supply of energy was necessary to extract any information from the old cook; besides, there was probably a note somewhere. It was only natural that before he went to his room Mr Mannering should peep into the hothouse, just to make sure that the wonderful orchid had come to no harm during the inconsiderate absence of Cousin Jane. As soon as he opened the door his eyes fell upon the bud; it had now changed in shape very considerably, and had increased in size to the bigness of a human head. It is no exaggeration to state that Mr Mannering remained rooted to the spot, with his eyes fixed upon this wonderful bud, for fully five minutes.

But, you will ask, why did he not see her clothes on the floor? Well, as a matter of fact (it is a delicate point), there were no clothes on the floor. Cousin Jane, though of course she was entirely estimable in every respect, though she was well over forty too, was given to the practice of the very latest ideas on the dual culture of the soul and body – Swedish, German, neo-Greek, and all that. And the orchid house was the warmest place available. I must proceed with the order of events.

Mr Mannering at length withdrew his eyes from this stupendous bud, and decided that he must devote his attention to the grey exigencies of everyday life. But though his body dutifully ascended the stairs, heart, mind, and soul all remained in adoration of the plant. Although he was philosophical to the point of insensibility over the miserable smallness of the earlier flowers, yet he was now as much gratified by the magnitude of the great new bud as you or I might be. Hence, it was not unnatural that Mr Mannering, while in his bath, should be full of the most exalted visions of the blossoming of his heart's darling, his vegetable godchild. It would be by far the largest known, complex as a dream, or dazzlingly simple. It would open like a dancer, or like the sun rising. Why, it might be opening at this very moment! Mr Mannering could restrain himself no longer;

he rose from the steamy water, and, wrapping his bathrobe about him, hurried down to the hothouse, scarcely staying to dry himself, though he was subject to colds.

The bud had not yet opened; it still reared its unbroken head among the glossy, fleshy foliage, and he now saw what he had no eyes for previously, how very exuberant that foliage had grown. Suddenly he realized with astonishment that this huge bud was not the one which had appeared before he went away. That one had been lower down on the plant. Where was it now, then? Why, this new thrust and spread of the foliage concealed it from him. He walked across, and discovered it. It had opened into a bloom. And as he looked at this bloom his astonishment grew to stupefaction, one might say to petrification, for it is a fact that Mr Mannering remained rooted to the spot, with his eyes fixed on the flower, for fully fifteen minutes. The flower was an exact replica of the head of Cousin Jane's lost cat. The similitude was so exact, so lifelike, that Mr Mannering's first movement, after the fifteen minutes, was to seize his bathrobe and draw it about him, for he was a modest man, and the cat though bought for a Tom, had proved to be quite the reverse. I relate this to show how much character, spirit, *presence* – call it what you will – there was upon this floral cat's face. But although he made to seize his bathrobe, it was too late. He could not move. The new lusty foliage had closed in unperceived; the too lightly dismissed tendrils were everywhere upon him; he gave a few weak cries and sank to the ground and there, as the Mr Mannering of ordinary life, he passes out of this story.

Mr Mannering sank into a coma, into an insensibility so deep that a black eternity passed before the first faint elements of his consciousness reassembled themselves in his brain. For of his brain was the centre of a new bud being made. Indeed, it was two or three days before this at first almost shapeless and quite primitive lump of organic matter had become sufficiently mature to be called Mr Mannering at all. These days, which passed quickly enough in a certain mild, not unpleasant excitement, in the outer world, seemed to the dimly working mind

within the bud to resume the whole history of the development of our species, in a great many epochal parts.

A process analogous to the mutations of the embryo was being enacted here. At last the entity which was thus being rushed down an absurdly foreshortened vista of the ages slowed up and came almost to a stop in the present. It became recognizable. The Seven Ages of Mr Mannering were presented, as it were, in a series of close-ups, as in an educational film; his consciousness settled and cleared. The bud was mature, ready to open. At this point, I believe, Mr Mannering's state of mind was exactly that of a patient who, wakening from under an anaesthetic, struggling up from vague dreams, asks plaintively, 'Where am I?' Then the bud opened, and he knew.

There was the hothouse, but seen from an unfamiliar angle. There, through the glass door, was his study. There below him was the cat's head, and there – there beside him was Cousin Jane. He could not say a word, but then, neither could she. Perhaps it was as well. At the very least, he would have been forced to own that she had been in the right in an argument of long standing; she had always maintained that in the end no good would come of his preoccupation with 'those unnatural flowers'.

It must be admitted that Mr Mannering was not at first greatly upset by this extraordinary upheaval in his daily life. This, I think, was because he was interested, not only in private and personal matters but in the wider and more general, one might say the biological, aspects of his metamorphosis. For the rest, simply because he *was* now a vegetable, he responded with a vegetable reaction. The impossibility of locomotion, for example, did not trouble him in the least, nor even the absence of body and limbs, any more than the cessation of that stream of rashers and tea biscuits and glasses of milk, luncheon cutlets, and so forth that had flowed in at his mouth for over fifty years, but which had now been reversed to a gentle, continuous, scarcely noticeable feeding from below. All the powerful influence of the physical upon the mental, therefore, inclined him to tranquillity. But the physical is not all. Although no longer a

man, he was still Mr Mannering. And from this anomaly, as soon as his scientific interest had subsided, issued a host of woes, mainly subjective in origin.

He was fretted, for instance, by the thought that he would now have no opportunity to name his orchid, or to write a paper upon it, and, still worse, there grew up in his mind the abominable conviction that, as soon as his plight was discovered, it was he who would be named and classified, and that he himself would be the subject of a paper, possibly even of comment and criticism in the lay press. Like all orchid collectors, he was excessively shy and sensitive, and in his present situation these qualities were very naturally exaggerated, so that the bare idea of such attentions brought him to the verge of wilting. Worse yet was the fear of being transplanted, thrust into some unfamiliar, draughty, probably public place. Being dug up! Ugh! A violent shudder pulsated through all the heavy foliage that sprang from Mr Mannering's division of the plant. He became conscious of ghostly and remote sensations in the stem below, and in certain tufts of leaves that sprouted from it; they were somehow reminiscent of spine and heart and limbs. He felt quite a dryad.

In spite of all, however, the sunshine was very pleasant. The rich odour of hot, spicy earth filled the hothouse. From a special fixture on the hot-water pipes a little warm steam oozed into the air. Mr Mannering began to abandon himself to a feeling of *laissez-aller*. Just then, up in a corner of the glass roof, at the ventilator, he heard a persistent buzzing. Soon the note changed from one of irritation to a more complacent sound; a bee had managed, after some difficulty, to find his way through one of the tiny chinks in the metal work. The visitor came drifting down and down through the still, green air, as if into some subaqueous world, and he came to rest on one of those petals which were Mr Mannering's eyebrows. Thence he commenced to explore one feature after another, and at last he settled heavily on the lower lip, which drooped under his weight and allowed him to crawl right into Mr Mannering's mouth.

This was quite a considerable shock, of course, but on the whole the sensation was neither as alarming nor as unpleasant as might have been expected. 'Indeed,' thought the vegetable gentleman, 'it seems quite agreeable.'

But Mr Mannering soon ceased the drowsy analysis of his sensations when he saw the departed bee, after one or two lazy circlings, settle directly upon the maiden lip of Cousin Jane. Ominous as lightning, a simple botanical principle flashed across the mind of her wretched relative. Cousin Jane was aware of it also, although, being the product of an earlier age, she might have remained still blessedly ignorant had not her cousin – vain, garrulous proselytizing fool! – attempted for years past to interest her in the rudiments of botany. How the miserable man upbraided himself now! He saw two bunches of leaves just below the flower tremble and flutter, and rear themselves painfully upwards into the very likeness of two shocked and protesting hands. He saw the soft and orderly petals of his cousin's face ruffle and incarnadine with rage and embarrassment, then turn sickly as a gardenia with horror and dismay. But what was he to do? All the rectitude implanted by his careful training, all the chivalry proper to an orchid-collector, boiled and surged beneath a paralytically calm exterior. He positively travailed in the effort to activate the muscles of his face, to assume an expression of grief, manly contrition, helplessness in the face of fate, willingness to make honourable amends, all suffused with the light of a vague but solacing optimism, but it was in vain. When he had strained till his nerves seemed likely to tear under the tension, the only movement he could achieve was a trivial flutter of the left eyelid – worse than nothing.

This incident completely aroused Mr Mannering from his vegetable lethargy. He rebelled against the limitations of the form into which he had thus been cast while subjectively he remained all too human. Was he not still at heart a man, with a man's hopes, ideals, aspirations – and capacity for suffering?

When dusk came, and the opulent and sinister shapes of the great plant dimmed to a suggestiveness more powerfully

impressive than had been its bright noonday luxuriance, and the atmosphere of a tropical forest filled the orchid-house like an exile's dream or the nostalgia of the saxophone; when the cat's whiskers drooped, and even Cousin Jane's eyes slowly closed, the unhappy man remained wide awake, staring into the gathering darkness. Suddenly the light in the study was switched on. Two men entered the room. One of them was his lawyer, the other was his nephew.

'This is his study, as you know, of course,' said the wicked nephew. 'There's nothing here. I looked when I came over on Wednesday.'

'I've sat in this room many an evening,' said the lawyer with an expression of distaste. 'I'd sit on this side of the fireplace and he on that. "Mannering," I'd think to myself, "I wonder how you'll end up. Drugs? Sexual perversion? Or murder?" Well, maybe we'll soon know the answer. Until we do, I suppose you, as next of kin, had better take charge here.'

Saying this, the lawyer turned, about to go, and Mr Mannering saw a malicious smile overspread the young man's face. The uneasiness which had overcome him at first sight of his nephew was intensified to fear and trembling at the sight of this smile.

When he had shown the lawyer out, the nephew returned to the study and looked round him with lively and sinister satisfaction. Then he cut a caper on the hearth-rug. Mr Mannering thought he had never seen anything so diabolical as this solitary expression of the glee of a venomous nature at the prospect of unchecked sway here whence he had been outcast. How vulgar petty triumph appeared, beheld thus; how disgusting petty spite, how appalling revengefulness and hardness of heart! He remembered suddenly that his nephew had been notable, in his repulsive childhood, for his cruelty to flies, tearing their wings off, and for his barbarity towards cats. A sort of dew might have been noticed upon the good man's forehead. It seemed to him that his nephew had only to glance that way, and all would be discovered, although he might have remembered that it was impossible to see from the lighted room into the darkness of the hothouse.

On the mantelpiece stood a large unframed photograph of Mr Mannering. His nephew soon caught sight of this, and strode across to confront it with a triumphant and insolent sneer. 'What you old Pharisee?' said he, 'taken her off for a trip to Brighton, have you? My God! How I hope you'll never come back! How I hope you've fallen over the cliffs, or got swept off by the tide or something! Anyway – I'll make hay while the sun shines. Ugh! you old skinflint, you!' And he reached forward his hand, and bestowed a contemptuous fillip upon the nose in the photograph. Then the usurping rascal left the room, leaving all the lights on, presumably preferring the dining-room with its cellarette to the scholarly austerities of the study.

All night long the glare of electric light from the study fell upon Mr Mannering and his Cousin Jane, like the glare of a cheap and artificial sun. You who have seen at midnight in the park a few insomniac asters standing stiff and startled under an arc light, all their weak colour bleached out of them by the drenching chemical radiance, neither asleep nor awake, but held fast in a tense, a neurasthenic trance, you can form an idea of how the night passed with this unhappy pair.

And towards morning an incident occurred, trivial in itself, no doubt, but sufficient then and there to add the last drop to poor Cousin Jane's discomfiture and to her relative's embarrassment and remorse. Along the edge of the great earthbox in which the orchid was planted, ran a small black mouse. It had wicked red eyes, a naked, evil snout, and huge repellent ears, queer as a bat's. This creature ran straight over the lower leaves of Cousin Jane's part of the plant. It was simply appalling. The stringy main stem writhed like a hair on a coal-fire, the leaves contracted in an agonized spasm, like seared mimosa; the terrified lady nearly uprooted herself in her convulsive horror. I think she would actually have done so, had not the mouse hurried on past her.

But it had not gone more than a foot or so when it looked up and saw, bending over it, and seeming positively to bristle with life, that flower which had once been called Tib. There was a

breathless pause. The mouse was obviously paralysed with terror, the cat could only look and long. Suddenly the more human watchers saw a sly frond of foliage curve softly outward and close in behind the hypnotized creature. Cousin Jane, who had been thinking exultantly, 'Well, now it'll go away and never, never, never come back,' suddenly became aware of hideous possibilities. Summoning all her energy, she achieved a spasmodic flutter, enough to break the trance that held the mouse, so that, like a clock-work toy, it swung round and fled. But already the fell arm of the orchid had cut off its retreat. The mouse leaped straight at it. Like a flash five tendrils at the end caught the fugitive and held it fast, and soon its body dwindled and was gone. Now the heart of Cousin Jane was troubled with horrid fears, and slowly and painfully she turned her weary face first to one side, then to the other, in a fever of anxiety as to where the new bud would appear. A sort of sucker, green and sappy, which twisted lightly about her main stem, and reared a blunt head, much like a tip of asparagus, close to her own, suddenly began to swell in the most suspicious manner. She squinted at it, fascinated and appalled. Could it be her imagination? It was not.

Next evening the door opened again, and again the nephew entered the study. This time he was alone, and it was evident that he had come straight from table. He carried in his hand a decanter of whisky capped by an inverted glass. Under his arm was a siphon. His face was distinctly flushed, and such a smile as is often seen in saloon bars played about his lips. He put down his burdens and, turning to Mr Mannering's cigar cabinet, he produced a bunch of keys, which he proceeded to try upon the lock, muttering vindictively at each abortive attempt, until it opened, when he helped himself from the best of its contents. Annoying as it was to witness this insolent appropriation of his property, and mortifying to see the contempt with which the cigar was smoked, the good gentleman found deeper cause for uneasiness in the thought that, with the possession of the keys, his abominable nephew had access to every private corner that was his.

At present, however, the usurper seemed indisposed to carry on investigations; he splashed a great deal of whisky into the tumbler and relaxed into an attitude of extravagant comfort. But after a while the young man began to tire of his own company. He had not yet had time to gather any of his pothouse companions into his uncle's home, and repeated recourse to the whisky bottle only increased his longing for something to relieve the monotony. His eye fell upon the door of the orchid-house. Sooner or later it was bound to have happened. Does this thought greatly console the condemned man when the fatal knock sounds upon the door of his cell? No. Nor were the hearts of the trembling pair in the hothouse at all comforted by the reflection.

As the nephew fumbled with the handle of the glass door, Cousin Jane slowly raised two fronds of leaves that grew on each side, high upon her stem, and sank her troubled head behind them. Mr Mannering observed, in a sudden rapture of hope, that by this device she was fairly well concealed from any casual glance. Hastily he strove to follow her example. Unfortunately, he had not yet gained sufficient control of his – his *limbs?* – and all his tortured efforts could not raise them beyond an agonized horizontal. The door had opened, the nephew was feeling for the electric light switch just inside. It was a moment for one of the superlative achievements of panic. Mr Mannering was well equipped for the occasion. Suddenly, at the cost of indescribable effort, he succeeded in raising the right frond, not straight upwards, it is true, but in a series of painful jerks along a curve outward and backward, and ascending by slow degrees till it attained the position of an arm held over the possessor's head from behind. Then, as the light flashed on, a spray of leaves at the very end of this frond spread out into a fan, rather like a very fleshy horse-chestnut leaf in structure, and covered the anxious face below. What a relief! And now the nephew advanced into the orchid-house, and now the hidden pair simultaneously remembered the fatal presence of the cat. Simultaneously also, their very sap stood still in their veins. The nephew was walking along by the plant. The cat, a

sagacious beast, *knew* with the infallible intuition of its kind that this was an idler, a parasite, a sensualist, gross and brutal, disrespectful to age, insolent to weakness, barbarous to cats. Therefore it remained very still, trusting to its low and somewhat retired position on the plant, and to protective mimicry and such things, and to the half-drunken condition of the nephew, to avoid his notice. But all in vain.

'What?' said the nephew. 'What, a cat?' And he raised his hand to offer a blow at the harmless creature. Something in the dignified and unflinching demeanour of his victim must have penetrated into his besotted mind, for the blow never fell, and the bully, a coward at heart, as bullies invariably are, shifted his gaze from side to side to escape the steady, contemptuous stare of the courageous cat. Alas! His eye fell on something glimmering whitely behind the dark foliage. He brushed aside the intervening leaves that he might see what it was. It was Cousin Jane.

'Oh! Ah!' said the young man, in great confusion. '*You're* back! But what are you hiding there for?'

His sheepish stare became fixed, his mouth opened in bewilderment; then the true condition of things dawned upon his mind. Most of us would have at once instituted some attempt at communication, or at assistance of some kind, or at least have knelt down to thank our Creator that we had, by His grace, been spared such a fate, or perhaps have made haste from the orchid-house to ensure against accidents. But alcohol had so inflamed the young man's hardened nature that he felt neither fear, nor awe, nor gratitude. As he grasped the situation a devilish smile overspread his face.

'Ha! Ha! Ha!' said he. 'But where's the old man?'

He peered about the plant, looking eagerly for his uncle. In a moment he had located him and, raising the inadequate visor of leaves, discovered beneath it the face of our hero, troubled with a hundred bitter emotions.

'Hullo, Narcissus!' said the nephew.

A long silence ensued. The spiteful wretch was so pleased that he could not say a word. He rubbed his hands together, and

licked his lips, and stared and stared as a child might at a new toy.

'Well, you're properly up a tree,' he said. 'Yes, the tables are turned now all right, aren't they? Do you remember the last time we met?'

A flicker of emotion passed over the face of the suffering blossom, betraying consciousness.

'Yes, you can hear what I say,' added the tormentor. 'Feel, too, I expect. What about that?'

As he spoke, he stretched out his hand and, seizing a delicate frill of fine silvery filaments that grew as whiskers grow around the lower half of the flower, he administered a sharp tug. Without pausing to note, even in the interests of science, the subtler shades of his uncle's reaction, content with the general effect of that devastating wince, the wretch chuckled with satisfaction and, taking a long pull from the reeking butt of the stolen cigar, puffed the vile fumes straight into his victim's centre. The brute!

'How do you like that, John the Baptist?' he asked with a leer. 'Good for the blight, you know. Just what you want!'

Something rustled upon his coat sleeve. Looking down, he saw a long stalk, well adorned with the fatal tendrils, groping its way over the arid and unsatisfactory surface. In a moment it had reached his wrist, he felt it fasten, but knocked it off as one would a leech, before it had time to establish its hold.

'Ugh!' said he. 'So that's how it happens, is it? I think I'll keep outside till I get the hang of things a bit. I don't want to be made an Aunt Sally of. Though I shouldn't think they could get you with your clothes on.' Struck by a sudden thought, he looked from his uncle to Cousin Jane, and from Cousin Jane to his uncle again. He scanned the floor, and saw a single crumpled bathrobe lying in the shadow.

'Why!' he said, '*Well!* – Haw! Haw! Haw!' And with an odious backward leer, he made his way out of the orchid-house.

Mr Mannering felt that his suffering was capable of no increase. Yet he dreaded the morrow. His fevered imagination patterned the long night with waking nightmares, utterly

fantastic visions of humiliation and torture. Torture! It was absurd, of course, for him to fear cold-blooded atrocities on the part of his nephew, but how he dreaded some outrageous whim that might tickle the youth's sense of humour, and lead him to *any* wanton freak, especially if he were drunk at the time. He thought of slugs and snails, espaliers and topiary. If only the monster would rest content with insulting jests, with wasting his substance, ravaging his cherished possessions before his eyes, with occasional pulling at the whiskers, even! Then it might be possible to turn gradually from all that still remained in him of man, to subdue the passions, no longer to admire or desire, to go native as it were, relapsing into the Nirvana of a vegetable dream. But in the morning he found this was not so easy.

In came the nephew and, pausing only to utter the most perfunctory of jeers at his relatives in the glass house, he sat at the desk and unlocked the top drawer. He was evidently in search of money, his eagerness betrayed that; no doubt he had run through all he had filched from his uncle's pockets, and had not yet worked out a scheme for getting direct control of his bank account. However, the drawer held enough to cause the scoundrel to rub his hands with satisfaction and, summoning the housekeeper, to bellow into her ear a reckless order upon the wine and spirit merchant.

'Get along with you!' he shouted, when he had at last made her understand. 'I shall have to get someone a bit more on the spot to wait on me; I can tell you that. Yes,' he added to himself as the poor old woman hobbled away, deeply hurt by his bullying manner, 'yes, a nice little parlour-maid.'

He hunted in the telephone book for the number of the local registry office. That afternoon he interviewed a succession of maidservants in his uncle's study. Those that happened to be plain, or too obviously respectable, he treated curtly and coldly; they soon made way for others. It was only when a girl was attractive (according to the young man's depraved tastes, that is) and also bore herself in a fast or brazen manner, that the interview was at all prolonged. In these cases the nephew would

conclude in a fashion that left no doubt in the minds of any of his auditors as to his real intentions. Once, for example, leaning forward, he took the girl by the chin, saying with an odious smirk, 'There's no one else but me, so you'd be treated just like one of the family, d'you see, my dear?' To another he would say, slipping his arm round her waist, 'Do you think we shall get on well together?'

After this conduct had sent two or three in confusion from the room, there entered a young person of the most regrettable description; one whose character, betrayed as it was in her meretricious finery, her crude cosmetics, and her tinted hair, showed yet more clearly in florid gesture and too facile smile. The nephew lost no time in coming to an arrangement with this creature. Indeed, her true nature was so obvious that the depraved young man only went through the farce of an ordinary interview as a sauce to his anticipations, enjoying the contrast between conventional dialogue and unbridled glances. She was to come next day.' Mr Mannering feared more for his unhappy cousin than for himself. 'What scenes may she not have to witness,' he thought, 'that yellow cheek of hers to incarnadine?' If only he could have said a few words!

But that evening, when the nephew came to take his ease in the study, it was obvious that he was far more under the influence of liquor than he had been before. His face, flushed patchily by the action of the spirits, wore a sullen sneer; an ominous light burned in that bleared eye; he muttered savagely under his breath. Clearly this fiend in human shape was what is known as *fighting drunk*; clearly some trifle had set his vile temper in a blaze.

It is interesting to note, even at this stage, a sudden change in Mr Mannering's reactions. They now seemed entirely egotistical, and were to be elicited only by stimuli directly associated with physical matters. The nephew kicked a hole in a screen in his drunken fury, he flung a burning cigar-end down on the carpet, he scratched matches on the polished table. His uncle witnessed this with the calm of one whose sense of property and of dignity has become numbed and paralysed; he felt

neither fury nor mortification. Had he, by one of those sudden strides by which all such development takes place, approached much nearer to his goal, complete vegetation? His concern for the threatened modesty of Cousin Jane, which had moved him so strongly only a few hours earlier, must have been the last dying flicker of exhausted altruism; that most human characteristic had faded from him. The change, however, in its present stage, was not an unmixed blessing. Narrowing in from the wider and more expressly human regions of his being, his consciousness now left outside its focus not only pride and altruism, which had been responsible for much of his woe, but fortitude and detachment also, which, with quotations from the Greek, had been his support before the whole battery of his distresses. Moreover, within its constricted circle, his ego was not reduced but concentrated; his serene, flowerlike indifference towards the ill-usage of his furniture was balanced by the absorbed, flowerlike single-mindedness of his terror at the thought of similar ill-usage directed towards himself.

Inside the study the nephew still fumed and swore. On the mantelpiece stood an envelope, addressed in Mr Mannering's handwriting to Cousin Jane. In it was the letter he had written from town, describing his nephew's disgraceful conduct. The young man's eye fell upon this and, unscrupulous, impelled by idle curiosity, he took it up and drew out the letter. As he read, his face grew a hundred times blacker than before.

'What,' he muttered, '"a mere race-course cad . . . a worthless vulgarian . . . a scoundrel of the sneaking sort" . . . and what's this? ". . . cut him off absolutely . . ." What?' said he, with a horrifying oath. '*Would* you cut me off entirely? Two can play at that game, you old devil!'

And he snatched up a large pair of scissors that lay on the desk, and burst into the hothouse —

Among fish, the dory, they say, screams when it is seized upon by man; among insects, the caterpillar of the death's-head moth is capable of a still, small shriek of terror; in the vegetable world, only the mandrake could voice its agony – till now.

GIVE ME YOUR COLD HAND

By John D. Keefauver

IT IS THE waiting that is hardest – now that the numbness is wearing off. The waiting, as one shovelful after another of earth is thrown out of the hole, as each swing of a pick digs deeper into the wet, floodlighted ground. Will they never reach the body, if one is actually there? Can't they be satisfied with *one* body, the one that lies, covered now, near the hole? They dig so slowly, these poor sweating cops. I feel sorry for them.

I should feel sorry for myself. Or George. He stands beside me, handcuffed to my left wrist, so excited he seems about to wet his pants. His eyes shine, his large shoulders are hunched and tense, his neck muscles like thick, wet ropes. His hands, easily a third larger than mine, and I'm not a small man, keep jerking, unconsciously, anxiously, as if he is helping the cops dig. His beard glistens with rain. He hasn't shaved since he started hearing the voices. A beard, a body like a giant – yet he is a child, as surely as I am a man, a teacher in the Monterey school system – as surely as I am a fool named Tony!

A fool! Only a fool would have let himself become involved in such a miserable mess. Only a fool would have stayed with Anita – at least as long as I did. Only a fool would be standing among a bunch of digging cops in the middle of the night with summer fog coming in from the Pacific near by. A fool, with one dead person beside him, waiting to see if another is found.

A fool from the beginning, overwhelmed by a woman, although any man might be overwhelmed – easily – by Anita. What was not forgivable in me was that I stayed with her *after* I knew her evil.

It seems unbelievable now that I met her only a few months ago on Carmel Beach, some hundred miles south of San

Francisco on the Monterey Peninsula. Ironically, I was beside another hole then, too, and death was in it. A poor bastard – he must have been a nut – had dug a deep shaft in the sand as a makeshift dressing-room for himself, his wife, and their three children. Childlike, he had tunnelled out from the base of the hole later in the afternoon. The tunnel had collapsed while he was inside; he had suffocated.

I was one of the frantic diggers who had tried to save him, and Anita was among the spectators. I noticed her immediately – her body, her expression. She was taller than most women, large-boned, her sun-stained body richly curved, sexually powerful – a strong, proud woman. But it was her expression that stuck like glue, that made me again and again glance at her. All the bystanders carried pity in their faces – *they cared* – but Anita's was cold as the ocean, unchanging except once: a smile, I swear, flicked through her cheeks.

Of course, at the time I thought I had been mistaken. No one could smile at such a horrible death. It wasn't human. Little did I know . . .

The man's body was removed from the beach, and spectators gradually drifted away, speaking in whispers as if they were afraid death would overhear. Anita didn't leave.

'Men choose stupid ways to die,' she said in a husky Scandinavian-accented voice. 'So filthy, covered with sand. Sand in his hair, in his eyes, all over his hands. He had such beautiful hands, did you notice?'

Then, for the first time, I saw the darning needle. Glittering in the afternoon sun, it was stuck in the left shoulder strap of her bathing suit, just above one breast. As she spoke, she raised her hand and swiftly – unconsciously, it appeared – stroked her index finger over its long silvery surface, as if she were wetting her finger on her tongue, or, as I came to understand later, as if she were touching her being, her soul, her sex.

Anita took me home with her that afternoon. Within days we were lovers. Even now, months later, I'm not sure why it happened so quickly, or how it came to happen at all. Who knows *exactly* why a certain man at a certain time jumps into

the velvet well of a certain woman? Why she wants him there? What is the *exact* combination? Who *really* knows?

No matter now. Too late. It happened. Eyelids pinned, ears plugged, mind shellacked, I jumped into her. She was Swedish, a blonde mountain of sex with ocean-blue eyes. I ached to climb her and swim in those eyes. She had come from Sweden only four years ago; most men she had known there were blonds. I was dark, olive-skinned, black-haired – like her husband, Nelson. Perhaps that was why she wanted me, took me inside. Of course, it was more than this. It *must* be more than this, I kept – keep – telling myself. With Anita, you were never sure of anything.

I reminded her of her husband in another respect: I had large hands. Twenty years of handling footballs, basketballs, the last few years as a physical education instructor, had made them into powerful weapons. 'It is nice to have strong hands caress me,' she said from the beginning, stroking them over and over. 'Nelson beat me with his.'

He had left her, she told me. He had gone to San Francisco one morning less than a year ago and had never come back. They had been married not much more than a year when he disappeared. She had never heard from him again. She thought he was dead. And she was glad. He was a bastard, a rich, cruel bastard with a two hundred thousand-dollar home in Pebble Beach. He beat her with his million-dollar hands.

Or so she told me.

Of this I was sure – that Nelson had tremendous hands. She showed me a full-length photograph of him, and her. He was a small man, skinny, shorter than Anita, but his hands were hams with knuckles, clubs, abnormally disproportionate to the rest of his body. And nestled in one of the clubs, completely hidden, was one of Anita's hands.

I didn't see the needle the first time I looked at the picture, but, weeks later, after I was beginning to suspect – and fear – the meaning of the piece of glistening steel, I looked at the photograph again and, yes, stuck in the front of her dress was the long darning needle, the same one she had in her bathing

suit the day we met on Carmel Beach, the same one she *invariably* had stitched in her clothing.

'Why always the needle?' I finally asked. It had pricked me while I kissed her.

She shrugged and lightly smiled. 'It is mine,' she said – and that was all, as if that was enough explanation for any man.

I think that it was with that question that I, for the first time, saw in her eyes a hardening, a withdrawal, a shutting-out, like fog coming in to shore from the Pacific. And as I got to know her better – if that is *really* possible – I saw again and again her ability to detach herself from me – and from everybody but herself, I suppose. She'd be talking to me when suddenly – as if a key word of mine, or hers, had unlocked a door that only she could enter – she'd leave me, psychologically, her eyes fogged, her expression appearing as if she were asleep. Even in bed, after a frenzy of loving, I would find myself totally left out of her thoughts, her consciousness. Once it even happened while we were in the act of love. She simply died on me. Even her body seemed to lose its warmth.

Rejection. I felt it even from George – at first. Later, strangely, we became friends, of a sorts. The day Anita took me home from the beach I felt the man's resentment, his jealousy. I first thought that possibly he might have been her lover, too, but I soon gave the idea up. When we drove up to her Pebble Beach home, near Carmel, and George opened the massive front gate for the Cadillac convertible, his expression immediately became sullen when he saw me in the car with Anita. Childlike resentment was in his voice when he acknowledged Anita's introduction of me.

The shaggy-haired, burly, bearded man – he was so hidden by hair it was difficult to tell if he was twenty or forty years old – lived in a kind of guest house behind the main home. He was the gardener, the handyman, a stupid, childlike gorilla of a man who usually talked in grunted monosyllables.

Anita told me she had hired him a few months before her husband disappeared. 'They never did like each other,' she said. 'Nelson treated him as if he were a dirty shoeshine boy.

He wanted to get rid of him.' I remember the brightness that came into her eyes then. 'But George was mine. (Like her needle? I thought later.) I was the one who had found him. He was working in Monterey on a fishing boat. As soon as I saw him, I knew he was for me. He had such large, strong hands.' The brightness in her eyes reached such an extreme then that I felt uncomfortable. 'With those hands, I knew he could do anything around the house I wanted him to do. Anything.'

Hands. Nelson's, George's, mine. Anita seemed to gain nourishment from them, although I didn't realize the extent of what they meant to her until, I suppose, it was too late. Or so I rationalize, like all men must do. In any event, I realize now that one of the reasons, certainly, that Anita chose me as a lover – as well as other men – was because of my large, powerful hands.

Her home, too, was large and powerful. Built out of stone hauled up from the near-by beach, it reminded me of a castle. Its high, narrow, triangular-topped windows, its four turret-like corners on the roof, its great wooden door with large metal hinges, its moatlike ditch – all were the work of some eccentric during the twenties. Wind moaned through huge pines and cypresses circling the house, except on the ocean side. Inside, ceilings were high, floors and walls were bare stone, and a fireplace was in almost every room. At night, in the main room, firelight danced on a suit of armour.

Anita's bedroom faced the ocean, and there we threw ourselves against each other in a frenzy of love-making, violently, like the surf crashing against the shore outside. Afterwards, she would take my hands and press them to her breasts. 'Your hands are as strong as waves,' she'd say. 'Give me their strength.'

Yet, once, cupping my hands as usual, she murmured, 'Even waves die,' and, trembling suddenly, she reached for her needle on the bedstand.

At night she always kept the piece of steel on the stand. Increasingly, I became bothered by its presence. Often it sat

gleaming in a puddle of moonlight, naked too. She refused to put it elsewhere, just as she refused not to wear it in her clothing. She would not talk of it. She simply said, 'No,' to my requests – then pleas – that she put it away. I stopped mentioning it, of course. I realized her sensitivity, its importance – too late.

Anita, the needle, George, hands. If only I had understood these things as I understand them now. Handcuffed to George, watching the poor, sweating cops dig their hole deeper, I feel a great sadness, a loss; so much has been wasted: George, Anita, me – and, yes, Nelson, too. I don't know whether I'll be glad if they find a body at the bottom of the hole, or if they don't. And the covered one lying beside me? – I suppose it is better that it is there.

Fear. It is hard to say when I first felt it. It came slowly, kept back, rationalized out by my passion for Anita. I think it began to nibble on me the first time I heard George moaning outside. I was leaving Anita for the night, walking to my car in the backyard. He was behind the main house, not far from his own quarters; his voice wailed to the moon as I walked towards him and my car. As soon as he heard me, he became silent. He was sitting on the ground next to a newly planted flower garden (not too far from where I stand now, in fact). Beside him, her head on his lap, was Sags, Anita's old bloodhound. I asked him what was the matter. He wouldn't answer. He let his cabbage head drop until his chin was almost on his keglike chest, his un-cut hair matted over the collar of a ragged jacket.

'Is there anything I can do? Are you ill? Do you want me to call Anita?'

'No,' he finally said, spitting out the word with disgust. 'I don't like her no more. She's bad.' Broodingly, he petted Sags with a hand as big as Nelson's, bigger than mine; the dog responded with a feeble wag of her tail. 'She told me to do something tonight that's bad.'

I let his words pass. They were typical – childlike jealousies, passing angers. Once George told me Anita had chased him with her needle; I, of course, didn't believe him – then. Little did I know . . .

'You better go to bed, George. You'll catch cold out here.'

'I'm listening now.' His voice had become sullen.

Stupidly, I asked him to what. If only I had kept my mouth shut; it would have at least kept the fear from starting so soon.

'Mr Nelson talks to me every night,' he said defiantly, as if (I later reasoned) Anita had scolded him for believing – or telling – such a thing.

'Nelson's not here,' I reminded George.

Up and down the man's big head rocked. 'Yes, he is. I can hear him. It's plain. He's trying to tell me something. He wants me to do something for him. It's plain.'

The next day I didn't see Sags. And the dog was not to be seen all that week. I finally asked Anita what had become of her. She told me the dog had died. It wasn't until weeks later that George, in a fit of guilt, told me Anita had made him kill the dog and bury the animal in the backyard. That was the 'bad' thing he had been moaning about.

'But why?' I asked Anita, angered. And, yes, fear was there, too; it was beginning, or, more precisely, it had started and I didn't realize it at the time.

She shrugged. 'The dog was old. She was useless. Besides, Nelson liked her, she reminded me of him.' Her hand darted for the needle in her dress; her voice climbed into an emotional shrillness, a tension that I had never heard. 'I can't *stand* anything, anybody – even a dog – that reminds me of him!'

Fear. George waited for me in the yard one night. When I came out of Anita's house I was already shaken. In the middle of our love-making, while my world was driving into her, joined in a passion almost unbearable in its intensity, she called out a name, a moaning cry.

'Nelson!' she had cried, then gone cold, her body stilled. Minutes later, reaching for my hand, she murmured, 'Nelson was the only one who could ever frighten me. For a moment I thought you were him.'

'But why, for God's sake!'

'Your hands,' she said. 'I felt them suddenly, and for a moment I thought they were his.'

'But mine are so much smaller.'

'I know. But they are hard, they are strong. Quick, give me one. No, both!' And she took them and held them to her breasts – for almost an hour, murmuring, 'They are mine, mine.'

Then, later, George grabbed me as I walked out into the yard. He slapped a monstrous hand on my shoulder – it reached almost halfway across my back – and pulled me towards the backyard. 'Mr Nelson wants to talk to you,' he said in a whisper that climbed with excitement. Tugging me, babbling all the time, he led me to the spot next to the new garden where he had sat before with poor Sags' head on his lap. 'He told me to come get you, Mr Nelson did. He told me! I heard it *plain*!'

'George, I got to get home.'

'Mr Nelson is talking to me plain now. Every night. He says, "I want you to help me, George. I want you to get somebody for me." Listen to him.'

'Oh, for God's sake, George, Nelson's not here!' I was tired, very tired.

The man's great cabbage head went up and down in spasm jerks. 'Yes, he is! All the time. I hear him. He says, "George, I want you to help me. I want you to . . ."'

Of course, I didn't hear anything, any voices. But the very fact that I stood there a moment – *only a moment* – and listened indicated, as I look back, that I was involved with Anita and her life more than I realized.

When I wouldn't 'listen' longer with George, he became gruff, resentful, and within his anger said, 'She'll get you too, Miss Anita will. She's bad. I don't like her any more.'

I passed this off – or, tried to – as the babbling of a nut. I had previously mentioned to Anita that George had told me of his hearing Nelson's voices. Immediately, alarm had rippled across her face. 'I'll speak to him about it,' she had said crisply. 'You mustn't believe him when he says things like that. He's crippled mentally.'

Yet, his words, 'She'll get you, too, Miss Anita will,' stuck

in my mind like glue, sticking so well that I almost didn't give up my apartment in Monterey, as planned, and move in with Anita for the summer vacation. I did it, however, even though at the time I believe I knew I was making a horrible mistake. I simply could not resist her – her rich body, her power. Power. She had power over me – perhaps as she had had over Nelson, and as she had over George. Power that kept me coming back for more of her. And I knew full well that power attracts, then destroys. I was tired then, so very tired, and didn't realize it.

So when school was out I moved in with Anita. We were happy – at first. We went to the beach, we took drives down the coast to Big Sur, we took in the plays in Carmel and Monterey, we sat on the rocks at night outside the house. In bed, she'd take my hands and caress them, whisper to them, tell me how strong they were, like her father's. She had a recurring dream of sitting in her father's palm as a child, laughing as he tossed her up and caught her, over and over. 'He *always* catches me,' she said, telling me of the dream. 'Always. He never lets me fall.' The dream was based on fact, she said. Her father had tossed her up and he had never let her fall. Never.

Hands. They were so often on her mind. 'Don't ever hit me with your hands,' she told me more than once. 'Please, Tony. That's what Nelson did.' Her fingers flew to her needle as she'd told me, something she did whenever she felt tension, fright, anger. 'And my father hit me once, too, with the same hand he used to throw me up with. It was the same as if he'd let me fall. Please, Tony, don't ever hit me, please, with your hand.'

One night she angered me. I could stand no longer seeing the needle always in her clothes, always on the stand by the bed at night. Why? I wanted to know, demanding to know this time. Why! in God's name.

'It is mine,' she said, her usual answer.

'That is no answer!' I shouted at her.

'I need it,' she said. 'You have your cigarettes, I have my needle.'

'I don't like it, get rid of it!' I shouted, not realizing then how I feared the long, glittering thing.

'No,' she said. 'It is mine.'

I raised my hand to grab it from her dress. In an instant, as if she had made the move many times before, she pulled the needle from her dress and struck out at my hand with it. The point went into my palm.

Even now, handcuffed to George as the police dig ever deeper into the ground, I feel the itch where it healed.

Fear. From that night – only a little over a month ago now – I felt increasing fear, the dull ache of it, not sharp, not slashing, not sudden and intense enough to make me pack up and leave Anita. Little fears, growing.

The wind was right one night and from our bed we heard George outside in the yard, heard his repeated moaning wail: 'Yes, Mr Nelson, yes, Mr Nelson, I'll help you, I will, just tell me who it is.'

'The man is crazy,' I told Anita. 'I wish you'd get rid of him.'

'No,' she said. 'I brought him here, I found him. He belongs to me, he is mine.'

The man's cries were so loud one night that they awakened me out of a deadened sleep. His wails increased to a point where I knew I'd have to go out and shut him up. As I climbed over Anita to leave the bed, she woke up – or, perhaps, only partially woke up. I've never been sure, and I've thought back over the incident so many times my head swims. In any event, her eyes opened. Even in the moonlight I could see – or thought I saw – the fear in them. 'Nelson, don't!' she screamed, jerking up so quickly she almost struck me with her forehead.

'It's only me,' I said quietly. 'Tony.'

'Nelson, for God's sake don't!' she screamed again. Automatically, her hand went to her pyjama top, to the spot where the needle would be if she were dressed.

I shook her roughly. She must have been awake. Yet, for the third time, she screamed, 'Nelson, don't, please! Don't hit me again!'

I snapped on the bedstand light. Still over her, I recoiled at what I saw: her face was literally smeared with terror: lips

drawn back, colourless and tight against her teeth; eyes like spurting fountains of fear. Frantically, almost desperately, she searched her pyjama top, hunting for her needle. Then, realizing it was on the bedstand, she twisted under me, reaching for it. I grabbed her arm and, angered now, shouted at her that I was Tony, damn it, Tony! 'Nelson,' she mumbled, 'please,' staring right into my face.

I finally calmed her enough so that I could let her arm go and get out of bed. Unmoving, she said not another word. She simply stared at me as I threw on a coat, stared at me as I put on shoes, as I went out the bedroom door.

When I got outside George was gone. I heard only the sound of waves dying on the rocks, the wind in the cypresses and pines. But just as I was going back into the house, I thought I heard a distant voice, one pained and crying, 'George, help me, help me.'

My imagination, of course. The workings of fear. The influence of Anita, George, the needle, hands. My mind – any mind – could take only so much. It was at this point that I realized I definitely had to leave Anita.

But I waited too long.

When I got back into the bedroom, Anita had not changed her position in the bed. Only her eyes, now glazed and dead-like, moved. They followed me, sullenly, as I undressed and got back into bed. When I reached to turn out the bedstand light I noticed the needle was gone from the stand. 'What did you do with it?' I asked her quietly. She did not answer. I asked her again. No answer. Then I saw it – stuck in her pyjama top. I turned out the light – reluctantly. I slept little that night.

From that night she slept with the needle in her pyjama top, in addition to it always being in her daytime clothing. 'I feel better with it,' she said, 'like you do with your cigarettes.' At night, in bed, when she took my hand – rarely now – and put it on her breast, I sometimes felt the needle prick my fingers. She never mentioned calling me Nelson, and I (wisely?) never brought it up.

Our relationship deteriorated rapidly. We stopped going out at night, stopped going to the beach, stopped sitting on shore rocks and watching evening fog come in. Our love-making stopped. When she went out, she went alone. In the house, she stayed in her room most of the time. Once I found her, needle in hand, slowly, deliberately, punching holes in a package of my cigarettes.

Fear. One night I woke up and found her gone from the bed. I searched the house, calling for her. I found her outside. She was sitting on the ground next to the garden where George sat and wailed. She was rolling the needle between her fingers when I walked up to her.

'What are you doing out here?'

She did not answer.

I asked her to come inside, I asked her what was the matter, I asked her if I had done something wrong. She never answered.

Fear. I told her I was leaving as soon as I could find a place to stay. She shrugged. 'As you like,' she said. I began to look for an apartment – only a week ago now. I found one – today. I was to move into it tomorrow. If only I had found it a day earlier! Just twenty-four hours earlier, and I would not now be standing beside a hole waiting to see if it is a grave.

A few hours ago, lying in bed (we slept now in separate bedrooms), afraid even to go to sleep, I heard George's wailing even above the sound of rain. It became so loud, so disturbing, that I got up and started outside to quiet him. As I passed Anita's room, she said, 'Where are you going?' her voice cold as fog. I told her. 'Stay here,' she said. I did not stop. As I went out the door, flashlight in my hand, she said angrily, 'Don't believe anything he tells you. He's crazy!'

So are you, I thought.

Outside, as I neared George, he jerked up his head. 'Mr Nelson?' he whimpered.

'It's me, George. Tony.'

'Oh.' The word was heavy with disappointment.

I stopped in front of him and shined the light on his face. I had never seen his expression so calm, so peaceful. A potted

plant was in the freshly hoed garden, less than a foot from his knee.

'Where did that plant come from?' I asked.

'I put it there. It's for Mr Nelson. He's gonna come see me tonight. He told me. It was plain.'

'Go inside, George. You'll get soaked out here.'

'He's gonna tell me who he wants me to get. Him and me, we been talking a lot tonight. A whole lot. Just him and me, all alone out here.' He looked down at the garden and potted plant. 'Ain't we, Mr Nelson? Ain't we, huh? Just you and me, ain't we?'

'Okay, okay, George. Just keep it quiet, will ya?' I turned to go back inside the house. I'd had enough of the whole mess. Let him wail his goddam head off. I could stand it for one more night.

The crazy son-of-a-bitch grabbed me by the arm. 'Come on, stay out here with me and Mr Nelson, Tony. Mr Nelson likes you. He told me so.' His face shone with pride. 'He likes you almost as much as he likes me.'

'That's good of him.'

'He don't like Miss Anita none atall. No more, he said.'

I tried to pull my arm out from the grip of his ham hand. His hold tightened.

'Mr Nelson don't want you to go back inside with her! She's bad. Bad like a snake. Worser!' His fingers bit deeper into my arm.

'Goddam it, George, let me go!'

'No. Mr Nelson says no!'

As I swung around, trying to free myself, my foot clipped and broke the potted plant just inside the garden.

'Oh-h-h-h,' George moaned, letting me go. He dropped to his knees in garden mud and clumsily began to scrape bits of the broken pot together, sitting the plant upright again. 'Oh-h-h-h, all busted. Mr Nelson's flower, all busted. Now I'll have to . . .'

His voice broke off. Whimpering, he dropped the bits of pottery and collapsed on the ground, his forehead resting in

the garden mud. 'Yes, Mr Nelson,' he moaned. 'Yes, sir; yes, sir,' bumping his head on the ground with each word.

In a moment his 'Yes, sir; yes, sir' ceased. He looked up into my flashlight beam, smiling. 'That was Mr Nelson, did you hear him?' I mechanically moved my head. 'He said, "George, let Tony go in the house now." It was plain. "Don't hold him with your hands," he said, "'cause you got nice big hands and you oughten to use them 'til I tell you to." It was plain.' The man's head went up and down, up and down, childishly happy. 'I'm gonna help him get the person he's after, soon as he tells me who it is. It'll be plain.'

I had had absolutely enough, too much. A cold horror was penetrating my bones. The sickness of the man, of Anita, of the whole house, the needle . . . I simply wanted to leave and go somewhere where there was warmth, health. I remember I had turned and started away from George, not sure if I was going to go back in the house and get my clothes and leave, or simply leave without my belongings. Then George said something that made me stop – unfortunately.

'Mr Nelson is gonna come up out of his grave and . . .'

As he continued talking, I, at first, thought his words were simply more of his babblings. Yet, something, like a vague itch, made me pay close attention to what he was saying. Perhaps it was because the word *grave* seemed to fit, like a key in a lock.

George mumbled happily on, speaking to the freshly planted garden, unaware, I suppose, that I was even there. As I listened, the horror of what he was saying slowly jellied my soul.

'It don't make no difference if you're dead, does it, Mr Nelson? You can still come out of your grave down there, can't you? Can't you, huh? That bad ol' Miss Anita, she don't know what she's talking about, saying you're dead and you can't come out of your grave. Saying because I killed you, you could never talk and walk around no more. Saying because I killed you, you don't like me no more. She don't know you have forgive me. She don't know I'm helping you now. She don't know. I don't like her neither, like you don't. She made me do it, you

know it. She made me kill you and dig a hole and dump you in it and plant a garden on top. I didn't wanna, honest, Mr Nelson. She chased me around the house with that needle of hers. She scared me bad. And she told me *you* was gonna kill *me*. It was a lie. She's bad. She's worser than a snake. She's . . .'

I don't know how long Anita had been standing behind me. Long enough, I suppose, for her to hear George's words. I heard her when she whirled around and started walking rapidly – almost running – towards the house. I followed her. I don't know why. I don't know whether I went after her in anger, horror, or hysterics, or some of each, or whether I was a puppet and she was yanking me along behind her by my strings, or if I followed her as you would follow a spider that should be squashed. I don't remember the actual following. I remember, vaguely, coming into her – our! – bedroom and seeing her backed into a corner, her lips curled and hard, like an animal, her glittering needle in her hand, its point aimed at me.

'Get away from me, Nelson,' she said.

'I just want to get my things.'

'They're mine,' she said. She took a step towards me, keeping the needle in front of her. 'You can't frighten me any more.'

She took another step towards me; this I definitely remember because it brought her within striking range of me. I felt the needle go into my hand before I saw it. I remember its sting. And the white, drawn smirk on her face.

I hit her.

She fell to one knee and started back up.

I hit her again.

'Nelson!' she screamed. 'Nelson!' She began to crawl around me, towards the door. 'Nelson, don't! In God's name, Nelson, don't!'

I let her go out the door, the needle still in her hand. 'Get away from me, Nelson!' she yelled hysterically as she ran downstairs. 'Get away, Nelson, don't!'

I followed her down the steps and out into the yard. I watched her run towards George, screaming, 'Stay away from

me, Nelson!' She fell against the man, shouting, 'Nelson's chasing me, George! Help me! He's after me!'

'*You?*' George said. 'Mr Nelson . . . after *you?*'

'Yes. Me.'

I heard George say, almost blissfully, 'Mr Nelson, he was looking for *you* all the time. After *you*.'

And in a moment: 'Yes, Mr Nelson, sir. Yes, sir. It's plain.'

I remember watching George's ham hands pat Anita's cheeks – tenderly, it appeared. 'Mr Nelson says you're the one,' he told Anita, very simply. 'It's plain.'

'Help me, George.'

'I'm helping Mr Nelson.'

His fingers dropped to her neck.

'I'm doing what he says. It's plain.'

I watched George's powerful fingers tighten on Anita's neck. She gagged and squirmed and beat at him. I know she hit him at least once with the needle; I saw the blood on his hand when they handcuffed us together.

When I walked up to him he was smiling ecstatically, Anita crumpled at his feet, the needle lying on the ground beside her. 'I did what Mr Nelson told me,' he said proudly. 'I helped him.' Happy tears were in his eyes. 'It was plain.'

Somehow the police came. I suppose I called them. I remember only the high points. Somehow, I am handcuffed to George and they have finished digging, they have reached the body, Nelson's body. I expected they would. George is radiant about it. He is mumbling, babbling, talking to Nelson. The cops keep telling him to shut up. They are keeping him here to identify the body. His talk does not bother me. When you have been tortured, ordinary pain ceases to affect you.

They are bringing up the body. It will get wet, I think. I turn away. I feel faint. It will get wet, I keep thinking. I cannot stop the silly thought. They lay the body beside Anita's. They have ruined the garden; the body was under it.

I hear someone say, 'Look at his hand. His right hand. Look! It's got little holes all in it.'

I think of Anita at work with her needle, plunging it again

and again into poor Nelson's hand. Probably after he beat her with it. Probably after he was dead.

I hear only rain now. Everyone is quiet, for a moment. George has finally found Mr Nelson; his babbling has stopped. I hear only rain.

MY LITTLE MAN

By Abraham Ridley

MY LITTLE man loves me. He tells me so, every night.

Don't tell. Please don't. They don't like him. They don't want me to have him. They want me to be alone up here all day. Well, I've had enough of this house, indeed I have. I know these yolk-yellow walls as I know my own skin. I smell like the damp boards of this attic room.

One day I'm going to take my little man and run down those dark, dark stairs, through the hall and across that blush-red carpet, and out into the street, to somewhere where they won't be able to pester me, shout at me, and lock me away, not ever again.

I'm so pretty, my little man says. He is very sweet, but he is not really pretty.

Tonight I will get my paints from the drawer and make a wonderful picture of him. His poor face . . . and, oh, it is my fault because I dropped him smack on the floor and quite spoilt his nose. Well, that can't be helped now.

Today I am lonely.

It is Wednesday, February 3rd, and between the bars on my window I can see the blank wall of the bakery opposite and nothing else at all.

It is raining, and the rain runs down the red wall like fresh-flowing blood. It is very beautiful.

Anna is such a lovely name, he said. I think it is a lovely name too. I think today I will call myself Anna, all day.

I haven't been Anna for months and months and months, which is rather silly, because I enjoy it. It is nice to have a name like Anna. If ever I should have a little girl of my own I will probably call her Anna.

It is Thursday, February 4th.

Last night I started to paint again. I got my paintbox down from the big cupboard, and I painted a picture of my little man's face just as if nothing had ever happened to his little nose.

It is a lovely picture. I shall give it him on his birthday.

He will be three on his birthday. Isn't that nice.

If they let me I will have a party up here, just for us. There will be orange juice and ice-cream, and we will be so happy.

If they don't let me I shall sing all night.

No, I won't sing all night, although it makes them really cross. If I sing all night Mrs Elvinstone will give me an injection and say it is only to teach me how to behave.

I am twenty-three and today my name is Anna, although that isn't my right name, which is Connie, short for Constance Marie Durr. My father is Alfred Lisle and he is very famous.

Robin Durr is my husband and he lives just downstairs, and he hasn't been upstairs to see me for at least three days since Monday, February 1st. He is very busy nearly all the time and I don't think we really love each other now, not any more. I'm awfully fond of my Robin, but he shouts at me; oh, yes, he does. Sometimes when I am asleep he shouts at me, I know. All sorts of people come and shout at me when I am asleep, but I never really believed that Robin would, indeed I did not.

But now I know.

It was just awful.

He was there. They all stood round me with their horrible rubber faces on and I didn't know which one he was. They laughed and laughed, and so I sat up in my little bed and caught hold of one of those bad faces to see if it was my husband, Robin Durr.

Oh, it was horrible, like cold wet dough, and my finger just went straight into the middle of that face and stuck there in the soft damp flesh. Blood came seeping out of the closed eyes as my fingers moved behind the lids and dropped splash, splash all over my pretty nightie, and I cried and cried till they gave me my injection.

My little man is quiet. When I lie there at night I can hear him breathing so gently and I know that he is well and happy and safe, which is really the only thing that matters to me in this nasty house.

As long as he is with me we will both be safe.

Today it is Friday, February 5th.

Today Mrs Elvinstone brought ham and eggs for my breakfast and my husband Robin Durr came and sat with me for one whole hour, during which we played snakes and ladders and I won three times and he didn't even win once.

I said to him about shouting at me at night and please would he not do it.

He didn't say anything at all.

I wanted him to explain why he wanted to come up to my room at night with a horrible soft face on and shout at me and my little man when we were trying to get our sleep, but he wouldn't explain. He put away our snakes and ladders and he sat in his chair and smoked his horrid old pipe and said I wasn't to upset myself, and when I was better we would go away and then there would be such lovely times.

Then I said I wasn't going to get better, was I?

Mrs Elvinstone said he was to go downstairs and let me rest.

Oh, I don't like that Mrs Elvinstone. Every time my husband Robin Durr comes up to talk to me she makes him go away. If only I could talk to my husband Robin Durr without Mrs Elvinstone sitting with us I'm sure he would understand about not coming to shout at me in the middle of the night.

What can I do?

Mrs Elvinstone is my jailer; yes, she is. She is very fat and very clean, and she says how good and kind she is to me, but I know that she really wants to marry my husband Robin Durr. She is far too old to marry my husband Robin Durr, and she is not beautiful at all.

My little man hates Mrs Elvinstone. He told me so last night when I said how would he like to have Mrs Elvinstone for his mammy?

I am going to tell my husband Robin Durr what my little man said about Mrs Elvinstone, because, even if he doesn't love me any more at all, there is still my little man to think about. I don't care what they do to me, but I won't let them touch my little man.

Today the sun is shining outside. I can see the shadow of our chimney on the bakery wall, and that means the sun must be out and all bright and lovely.

I wish I could take my little man out into the park, where he could see the toy boats and the pretty ducks.

One day Mrs Elvinstone said she would take my little man away from me if I shouted at night again. Wasn't that an awful thing to say?

Sometimes when they shout at me I shout at them to make them go away. Sometimes when I am lonely I sing to my little man, but Mrs Elvinstone doesn't like that either. She wants me to be still and silent as a little mouse up here in my room, so that she can forget about me altogether.

Mrs Elvinstone wants everybody to forget all about me, so that she can make my husband Robin Durr marry her. She thinks that if I am quiet and still like a little mouse up in my room everybody will think I am dead and my little man is dead. Then she will tell my husband Robin Durr that I am dead and my little man is dead, and she will go away with my husband Robin Durr and lock the door of my room and leave me here with my little man and all those people shouting.

It is Saturday, February 6th, and today my little man is two years eight months and eleven days old. I have painted a special picture for him and hung it up on the wall where he can see it when he wakes up.

The next time they come shouting at me I will open my eyes and look at that lovely picture and not feel frightened at all.

My little man loves me. My little man is the only one in this whole world who really really loves me, and I really really love my little man.

Today I said to Mrs Elvinstone why did she want me to die?

I wanted her to tell me that she wanted to marry my husband Robin Durr, and then I was going to tell her that I wouldn't ever let myself die, not while my little man needed looking after.

Nasty, fat old Mrs Elvinstone wouldn't say why she wanted me to die. She's too clever, I told my little man. She wants to go on pretending that she is looking after us, and then one day soon she will send the men with the rubber faces to hurt us, and they'll shout and shout and shout so that no one can hear us at all.

Well, I didn't tell Mrs Elvinstone, but I know what I will do. I shall stick my fingers in my ears, and then I shan't hear them shouting at all.

I won't let them hurt my little man.

There is a great, fat, green man crawling along the floor on his tummy. He is crawling towards the bed and I can hear him. It is a soft, slippery, slithery sound because he has a soft, slithery body, and I know for certain sure that he is leaving his awful damp mark all over my nice carpet and that soon he'll come slithering up on to the bed.

Once he just sat there and I tried to kick him, and all those horrible pale leeches shook off his arms and legs and came slithering over me, and he cried and cried and crept after them, just trying to gather them up. Worst of all, their squelchy bodies got all mixed up in the bedclothes and I could feel them touching me and they wouldn't go away, not all night, and I was afraid to call out because Mrs Elvinstone would come.

Tonight I will stay under the bedclothes and just let him sit there.

I can hear him breathing, and if I stretched out my leg I could touch him because he is sitting there cross-legged on the bottom of my little bed.

I am afraid of that big green man.

One of those leeches is in the bed. Oh, yes, it is. I can feel it in the bed. Oh, yes, I can. One of those leeches is creeping up my back right inside my nice nightie, and there is another and

another, and he is crying, and they are crying, and, oh, they are soft and wet and warm and eating me, oh, yes, they are eating me, and he is so upset.

I am shouting and shouting and shouting, and Mrs Elvinstone will come.

Mrs Elvinstone has come. She is wearing her big red coat and the green man has run away.

I asked Mrs Elvinstone why she is always so angry.

She said I was a poor dear.

I asked her why she sent that man. I said I wanted to see my husband Robin Durr, and then I would tell him all about her, and what she is trying to do to my little man and me.

Mrs Elvinstone is going to give me an injection. She is coming with her big needle and she wants to put me to sleep.

When I am asleep she will take my little man away and lock my room and leave me there, and go away with my husband Robin Durr.

When she comes at me with that needle I will stick it into her instead; yes, I will. Then I will take my little man and run down those dark, dark stairs, through the hall and across that blush-red carpet, and out into the street, to somewhere where they won't be able to pester me, shout at me, and lock me away ever again.

I will; yes, I will. We will be awfully happy, awfully.

Mrs Elvinstone is sitting on the edge of the bed and asking me to put out my arm. So I put out my arm and now I've got her hand with the syringe in it and she knows what I'm doing; oh, yes, she does. Her horrid fat legs are up in the air and I've got that needle in her cheek, squirting and squirting that stuff into her.

I can stick it in her; oh, yes, I can, like a pin cushion.

For my little man.

In and out, in and out.

Sticky Mrs Elvinstone.

It is Sunday, February 7th.

We are going away, my husband Robin Durr and I.

I've put on my pretty frock and my husband Robin Durr has packed my case, and now they are coming up the stairs to help me.

I told my husband Robin Durr how happy I was, and how nice things would be with my little man and my husband where we are going.

They have brought a coat with them and my husband Robin Durr is holding it out for me.

It is all wrapped round me, this funny coat. Now I can hardly move at all. Oh, but it is warm and lovely.

My husband Robin Durr is a very good kind man.

The man has opened the door and they are taking me down the dark, dark stairs, through the hall and across the blush-red carpet, and out to the street and the ambulance.

Now I am lying nice and comfortable on the bunk.

We are waiting for my husband Robin Durr who is bringing my little man.

Here he is.

What has he done with my little man?

He is getting into the ambulance and he has left my little man behind.

'No,' he says. 'It's time we buried him properly.'

CRACK O' WHIPS

By H. A. Manhood

MUTTERING angrily at the crawling progress of a hawker in his path, his bleak, thin-lipped gipsy face rippling in a kind of agony under his smart bowler hat, Squaler Adams swung his circus-painted van out of the Whitechapel Road between high, dingy walls into the Swan and Abbot Yard.

Children skipped before him, abusing him aggressively for destroying a grotto of dirt and stones and flowers built on a manhole cover exactly in the middle of the yard, but he hardly noticed them, stopping tumultuously outside the shabby balconied tavern from which the yard drew its name.

Dogs barked inside the van as it stopped, but a rapping word from Squaler quietened them. Lighting a new cigarette from a draggled butt, he stiff-stepped to the door, and the publican fat, bald as nothing, and timid under his merriness, looked up from his betting slips with jocular surprise.

'Well, well, if it ain't Squaler himself! Welcome, m'boy!'

'Mister Adams to you,' Squaler said with vicious distinctness.

'All right, all right! But ain't I your friend?'

'Friend?' Squaler forked his fingers derisively. 'I ain't got any and I don't need any.'

To hell with you, then, the publican thought, but he did not say so: 'Well, I'm sorry you feel that way about it,' he sighed. 'Here have a drink.' He beckoned Squaler into the sour-pickled bar-room. 'What's the almighty trouble?' he asked cautiously, glad that somebody had knocked Squaler at last. 'What's gone wrong with your schedule? Thought you were booked for a northern circuit. Squaler Adams and His World-famous Troupe of Performing Poodles . . . saw it in the gossip myself.'

The publican poured again and spat clumsily, surprised at his own daring, hating Squaler, but afraid of him, too, consoling himself with the thought that he brought good, profitable custom to the house. Astonishing how much he could drink; and it all went to his eyes so that they seemed to float in pure gin, bright, cold, and hard like poisonous crystals.

Fully aware of all that the publican was thinking, Squaler drank gulpingly, spitefully amused, cunningly enslaving him with an offhanded explanation: 'I want that yard of yours for a week or two, private, see? Couple of falls broke back stage in a damned fourpenny joint; killed Six and Seven, two of my best. Busted my show. Someone done it on purpose.'

'Terrible bad luck, Mister Adams.' (God help 'em, whoever it was!)

'But worse for them,' Squaler sneered, and a gold tooth glimmering like a shot in waiting.

'The management wouldn't listen when I talked compensation. Maybe they wish they had now, the swine!' Smoothly he pulled a newspaper – a smudgy country sheet – from his pocket, spreading it on the puddled counter. 'Act o' God, in a manner of speaking,' he jeered, and drank again.

Gapingly the publican read of a disastrous fire which had occurred, cause unknown, two dead, in an up-country theatre, and he stuck his thumbs into his waistcoat pockets and scratched nervously to ease a creeping of flesh. He thought how he'd take perishing good care to keep on the right side of such a knife-minded cove.

Satisfied with the publican's expression, Squaler lit another cigarette, poking the smoking butt into a convenient knothole as if to show how simple it was to start fire: 'Is Jimmy the Dose about?'

'Not right handy.' The publican trod upon the cigarette-end with difficulty and eyed a fly-specked clock-face: 'He'll be in Mike's poolroom for sure.'

'Get one of those brats to take these to him, then.' Reaching across the mahogany, Squaler pulled two fluffy white paper chrysanthemums from a vase: 'Two more for Squaler Adams.

He'll know all about it.' He added a shilling as compensation for the messenger, but the publican, smirking appreciatively, foxily substituted a halfpenny on his way to the door (just to pay for the flowers), calling with windy authority, sending an urchin running.

When he returned Squaler was gazing at an advertisement for whisky in which a dancing girl leaned seductively, his left eye half closed against the fumes of his cigarette.

'You ought to get one like that for the good of the house,' he said.

'Yes, Mister Adams.'

'You'd be able to sell much worse gin than this and no one would notice it. I want that room facing the yard and something to eat as soon as I've parked the van and the dogs, understand?'

The publican nodded, one eye on the clock: 'D'you happen to know anything for the two-thirty?' he asked with pathetic hope.

'Red Label'll make it,' Squaler snapped, and turned into the yard and the publican scribbled gratefully. The lists completed and dispatched, his thoughts skated uneasily. Just like something out of a nightmare this Squaler was, for all his smart, tight-fitting clothes, bow-ties, and thin-soled, pointed yellow boots. A Chinese Judas, that's what he was! But he knew something about training dogs. They did what he wanted them to; they just had to else the whip of his flicked the life out of 'em! Ah, well. He sighed and spat, wholeheartedly, very glad that he was not a poodle in Squaler's string, lumbering into the kitchen to bully-drive his humming tub of a wife, send her skipping for some of that salt fish Squaler was so fond of.

Out in the yard the tawdry-painted van buzzed and backed, roaring through the gateway into the inner yard as if it, too, had been well-trained by Squaler, children scattering noisily, assembling in the gateway in curiosity, clutching handbills snatched from the van, unafraid of Squaler and hopeful of entertainment.

But Squaler slammed the gate upon them before loosing his poodles from the kennel boxes in the van. At a word the seven

dogs ceased in their wanderings, grouping together at the foot of the high brick wall, pathetically alert, gazing patiently, hungrily, determined to understand to avoid punishment. Squaler brought a stinking lump of beef and a bag of coarse biscuits and sprung the blade of his knife, calling the dogs to him one by one: 'Here, One!' examining mouth, ears, and paws, feeding it meat, and sending it back to its place against the wall with a biscuit to be eaten at ease: 'Here, Two!' The meat distributed without the need for punishment, he lifted the kennel boxes from the van, clearing a space of pub-litter and ranging them against the wall as they were numbered, ordering the dogs into them, using his fist cruelly when Eight, puzzled by the missing pair, entered Number Six. Filling a pan with water from a wall-tap he ordered them to drink, again by numbers, forcing obedience with a whip. Back again to the boxes and then, as they were called, they must take their places in line for a circus-trot upon their hind legs, bowing in time with the threatening whip.

But the yard was breathless, full of sour furnace heats. Summer hung over the city like a suffocating depth of blue wool. The rumbling of traffic, women's voices, cross-stitched in gossip, the foot-race of heavy-shod children about a barrel-organ, a tapping from the cobbler's shop in a corner of the yard; all came thickly, sluggishly, as if sound itself were oppressed. More children stood under a line of newly watered window-boxes, poised in strange cactus-shapes, mouths open to catch the drips, a frieze symbolizing the need of the world and its everlasting dependence upon an offhand power on high.

Soon Squaler wanted to drink again, and the dogs were ordered to their boxes. Whip in hand he entered the Swan and Abbot by a side door, nodding to the bookmakers and their shabby runners accounting at the bar. The publican grunted gleefully, excitedly, whispering good news: 'Red Label won all right.'

'The tip's worth a quart then – gin, man, gin, not hopwater.'

The publican regretted his enthusiasm: 'Jimmy the Dose has got the goods and will bring 'em along after dark.'

'Good!' Squaler tapped a fat shoulder with the grease-smooth handle of his whip: 'The best gin, mind.'

Alone in a musty, broken-ceilinged room dreary with many spotted mirrors, with ragged-curtained windows overlooking the inner yard, Squaler hung his coat and collar upon a dusty staghorn and sat down to eat and drink, still wearing his bowler hat and with his feet mounted on the sofa bed.

While he ate he read an old newspaper methodically from page to page – news, advertisements, every inch. Sweeping a space clear on the table, he took an old pack of cards from his pocket, jerked them free of a red silk garter, and shuffled them for a game of solitaire, playing without change of expression, even as he had read the newspaper, a cigarette drooping and smoking like the wick of a short-lived soul. Occasionally his hand reached for his glass, but his eyes did not lift from the cards for more than the moment necessary to drink.

The dogs in the yard under the window made no sound. Sometimes a pot rattled in the kitchen as if protesting against greater heat. Pedlars bawled in the outer yard, offering and selling the most unlikely articles. Towards six o'clock the tide of sound from the main road increased as factory workers scattered homewards, dwindling again, then beginning on a new, brisker note two hours later when the workers, refreshed and smartened, emerged in search of amusement. Mothers called their children to bed, and the children hooted dismally, pleading the folly of bed while light remained.

At dusk Jimmy the Dose, tall and dignified, sauntered into Swan and Abbot Yard, a trembling white poodle under each arm.

Stolen two days before from a West End district, the two animals sadly missed the freedom and luxury to which they had been accustomed. But Jimmy didn't care. He couldn't afford to be sympathetic. He'd bought them cheap, and meant to sell them dear like any other trader. Squaler would soon alter their looks so that even the duchess who'd lately owned 'em wouldn't recognize 'em. A bit of luck having two right ones in stock, else it would have meant hunting for a pair, which would have been awkward with most of the gentry out of town.

Being in the dog business was very instructive one way and another to a man of a humorously philosophical turn of mind. Pick up a finicky, scented, gold-collared pup of some squinting, fancy breed and you got a good idea of what the owner was like; that led to amiable speculation between the so-called high and low, to a mental switching of persons, and the birth of conclusions neither pompous nor ludicrous, but certainly of a kind of unforeseen by Marx or his later gospellers.

Jimmy, well but curiously educated, had become a receiver of stolen dogs out of sheer amusing necessity. The business, linking two worlds, kept his mind intelligently alive and, moreover, he loved the good-natured Tower Hamlets better than the gilded, false-crusted West. He looked forward to and attended dog shows in a spirit of gleeful inquiry, and was often mistaken for a peer, although it pleased him better on other grounds to be mistaken for a successful bookmaker.

Once inside the Swan and Abbot Jimmy bundled the two poodles under one arm, tipped his derby to the company, and asked for water, cold, pure, and lovely for the bowels. Accustomed to such a request, knowing that the water would be paid for at a champagne rate, the publican filled a glass and jerked a thumb towards a door in an angle of a passage. Refreshed and happy at the prospect of profit, Jimmy barked and howled merrily outside the door before entering, but his humour was wasted on the gloomy Squaler, who merely nodded and looked critically at the poodles.

'Not bad,' he grumbled, and Jimmy gaped and echoed him indignantly.

'Not bad! Lord love us! D'you know where they came from?' His long, plump face puckered haughtily; he sniffed delicately, stroked back an imaginary ringlet of hair and peered quizzingly through a key-ring. 'Have you no better quality parchment, young man? And I would like a monk to illuminate the pedigree for me . . .'

But Squaler wasn't amused: 'How much?'

'Twenty quid.'

From a thin twist of notes Squaler counted out ten.

Jimmy recounted them. 'You only want one dog?' he asked innocently, although the price of one was adequate for the two.

He had prudently, on principle, asked twice as much as he was prepared to accept.

'Have a drink,' Squaler grunted, and turned again to examination of the poodles.

'But I said twenty,' Jimmy wailed realistically, pathetically. 'Dammit, there's a reward of a tenner offered for 'em.'

But Squaler did not seem to hear. He had gripped the two poodles by their muzzles, forcing their gaze, breathing frightening spurts of smoke into their eyes. Looking at him Jimmy felt suddenly very empty and unsafe, as if he were standing on a sucking sponge. He was glad to break his rule, and drink and forget the question of price. Tough luck on the dogs, but they'd get used to it. Perhaps someone or something would take an equal crack at Squaler one fine day, balance things up, although it would need more pluck than Jimmy felt that he himself possessed.

An ugly, spider-minded devil. Always a bad sign when a man drank so much alone. With a curt 'So long,' Jimmy went away, hand tight on the notes in his pocket, as if he were afraid that Squaler would come snatching, with those gin-soaked eyes of his.

Alone again, Squaler grinned evilly to himself and lit the two gas jets, standing one of the two shrinking, frightened poodles upon the table among the food and cards, talking steadily to it in a queer, thready voice, cigarette bobbing menacingly, stopping sometimes to rap out its new name of Six, clipping and trimming its fashionable tufts to match the rest of his troupe, finally stencilling six irregular patches upon its shaven body with gipsy-ink, cuffing it brutally when it backed and wriggled, planting it helplessly high on a tall bamboo stand while he worked on the second dog.

The transformation complete, Seven marked with seven patches and clipped to a new smartness, Squaler dumped them through the window into the yard, climbing after them with his whip. The light cast through the open window might have been

a furnace mouth, so frenziedly did the dogs seek to avoid it. Squaler called to them, and they cringed and raced, but the whip caught up with them, snapping and biting cruelly so that they were glad to creep from sight into the kennel boxes assigned to them. Scenting newcomers, the rest of the troupe whined and fidgeted, but a word, which was like a small echo of the whip, was sufficient to quell them.

Dropping the doors of the boxes Squaler climbed back through the window, drinking and waiting. After a few minutes the two poodles yapped miserably, and at once he reached out, shaking the whip terrifyingly over their boxes. Silence, and then they dared to bark again in their loneliness, and once more the lash hissed and cracked. But still they did not understand; foolishly they scratched and whined in miserable chorus. But this time Squaler did not use the whip. Hopping through the window he silently grabbed the poodles one after the other, muzzling them tightly so that any sort of sound was impossible.

Returning through the window, he gulped the last of the gin, kicked off his boots and lay back on the narrow, creaking sofa watching the flies on the blotched ceiling unwinkingly, presently dozing, then sleeping, the gas jets hissing over him like watchful guardian snakeheads.

Waking late to the tap of the publican's wife on the door, Squaler stretched and spat and reached for a cigarette, calling curtly to her to enter. She did so, her loose slippers slurring as if phrasing her contempt, bringing newspapers, salt fried fish, and thick, gritty coffee, pursing her fat purple lips as she turned out the gas jets and raked together the stubs scattered over the floor and table, gathering up empty glass and bottle, and leaving the room without a word.

Squaler had hardly noticed her. Morosely, he picked up a newspaper, reading, smoking, and drinking the bitter coffee, munching sugar between gulps, tossing fish and bread into the yard for the later benefit of his dogs.

Already the sun was riding high, flooding an unrefreshed world with new scorching heat. Good beach-milking weather.

Squaler cursed at the bad luck that kept him training when he might have been earning easy money along the coast, spinning the holiday crowds.

No sense in carrying on with only seven dogs though, since they were used to working in a pack of nine. Quicker to train two new dogs than to teach the old ones new places.

Gruntingly he found his boots and pulled them on, not bothering to lace them, taking up his hat and whip, climbing through the window. Seven of the dogs moved and shook themselves in their boxes, and Squaler released them methodically. But Six and Seven were crouched sadly.

Briskly Squaler unstrapped the muzzles, talking bitingly, naming the dogs often, forcing attention with his fist, bundling them out to join the wandering troupe, recalling them after a minute, singling them out with the whip, cracking it about them so that the tip of the lash just seared them, the dust of the yard rising gustily as if in horror. They tried to join the remaining, watchful seven, but the whip formed an angry, living fence, a cage almost in which they were trapped.

They howled mournfully, and nosed each other, puzzled by the faint, scented smell of each other, by a memory of comfort which would not fit with this new slashing voice and whip. Then, when they were near to hysteria, Squaler unexpectedly gave them meat, effacing detail from their minds, leaving only broad fear of the whip and the beginning of understanding that they must obey.

Meat to all the troupe and then Squaler leaned and smoked, grimly amused that the seven old stagers were contemptuous of the newcomers, even though their sex was inviting.

So well had he trained them, implanted his own attitude of mind. Watching, he heard a sound from the near gate, and saw that it was ajar, saw a red head peeping between. A lightning jerk of the wrist and he had sent the whistling lash within an inch of the inquisitive, upturned nose, and the boy jerked back in alarm, squawking indignantly.

'Hi! What d'yer think you're playing at?'

Squaler grinned maliciously: 'Get to hell out of here!'

'Aw, guv'ner, have a heart. Lemme watch you training 'em. I'll sit pretty. God's honour.'

A foot hammered impatiently at the door. Squaler swore threateningly. The boy grumbled and went away, and Squaler set to work, strapping Six and Seven in strange harness, controlling their movements by leading strings, cracking his whip cruelly when they dragged and jibed.

Simple movements at first which, even when performed successfully, earned no reward except brief respite. Squaler didn't believe in payment for results when he could make 'em hop without. They improved. Squaler brought out a step-ladder, calling one of the older dogs, ordering it by a crack of the whip and a sign to climb the ladder, to pause, bark three times, naming itself, and somersault away. He led Six to the ladder, cracking the whip about its reluctant haunches. It mounted one step; again the whip; two steps and then suddenly it scrambled out of control, for a second whip had begun to crack in the outer yard, loudly and confusingly, so that the dogs were bewildered.

Furiously Squaler wrenched open the gate. The red-headed boy was cracking an improvised whip gleefully. Squaler pounced intending to snatch the whip and punish the boy, but the boy evaded him easily, flourishing the whip impertinently as he ran away. Defeated, Squaler returned, slamming the door, cracking his own whip to restore order, bruising dog after dog until they were obedient and in line.

But no sooner did he begin again than a second whip cracked in opposition, then another, for Redhead had quickly proved to others the peculiar joys of whip-cracking. The dogs were puzzled and unmanageable. Squaler opened the door, lacing his own whip among the running children. But they were too quick for him. Jeeringly they raced before him and dared to strike back.

Angrily Squaler returned once more to the inner yard. The publican brought him gin and sympathized profusely, regretting that there was nothing he could do to stop the nuisance: 'You know what kids are. You'd have done the same thing

yourself once (and a damned sight worse!). If you was to promise 'em a show later on . . . needn't keep your promise, of course.'

But Squaler saw no sense in compromise: 'If I catch 'em . . .'

Viciously he attempted to force the poodles to obey his own whip and voice only, but the cross-cracking from the outer yard increased steadily and the dogs blundered confusedly. More and more children found sticks and cords, cracking lashes in merry competition until Swan and Abbot Yard echoed thornily.

Accustomed as the tenants of the yard were to noises of various kinds, and healthily amused by the present exhibition, no one but Squaler objected. Helplessly he drank and raged. If only he could lay hands on Redhead . . .

Cunningly, he presently kennelled the dogs and opened the door of the inner yard slightly, waiting within easy reach. Sure enough the boy came and peered unsuspectingly inside. Instantly Squaler caught him, dragging him inside, spinning him across the yard, kicking the door shut and standing before it, picking up his whip, slashing at the reeling boy so that bloody weals appeared on the healthy pink of his cheeks. The boy shrieked under the whip, running blindly, yelling loudly for assistance.

At once the many whips ceased to crack. There was a bumping and muttering and appeals to 'Give us a bunk up here, Bert.' Heads appeared over the wall, hands placed carefully among the broken glass topping. Redhead bawled again and they climbed higher, dropping over the wall. More children shoved against the door, forcing it open, sending Squaler sprawling, two dozen angry children prancing excitedly. Licking his bleeding lips, Redhead pointed to Squaler and they crowded upon him, slashing and kicking.

'You dirty swine, you!'

Overwhelmed, Squaler pounded with the butt of his whip, but the whip was promptly dragged from his hands. He kicked and punched, but the children were too many. He staggered and fell under the united hammering and Redhead, assuming control, shrilled an order:

'Hold him down!'

Obediently, the children, boys of all ages with several lusty girls among them, dragged strongly at Squaler's limbs so that he was stretched flat, kneeling heavily so that all his strength was useless.

'Quick! Hold the gate, two of you!'

For the publican was coming, not too quickly, with one or two others alarmed by the uproar.

'Now!' Redhead spat briskly. 'Hold his fist, you!' He fingered the weals tenderly and spat again, this time upon Squaler. 'Fond of the whip, ain't you? Time you knew better. We ain't dogs and you ain't God, see? Hold hard!'

Very deliberately, he stamped twice upon Squaler's wrist with all his weight, his iron-shod boots breaking bone easily. Squaler moaned in startled agony, writhing helplessly. But the boy was merciless. A careful poising above the second wrist and his boot came crashing, smashing down.

Then, at a word, the children jumped up, diving triumphantly through the gate and yard into the merry freedom of the street.

THE INMATE

By Richard Davis

YES, SHE is pathetic, isn't she? About thirty-two, I imagine. No, I shouldn't go too near if I were you. She's quite friendly most of the time, but occasionally – That's why we have to keep her apart, of course. Can't be too careful. It's really amazing how one isolated incident of violence communicates itself to the rest of the patients. Seems to bring out all kinds of hidden tendencies. Mild old gentlemen who normally wouldn't hurt a fly, well, if they get to hear that there has been some sort of – some little spot of bother anywhere in the establishment involving a patient and a member of the Staff, or even a visitor such as yourself, you'd scarcely credit the change. Of course, it all stems from the fact that most of us, even those of us on the outside who are laughingly referred to as sane, have a streak of violence which certain stimuli can activate. Usually it is so well concealed, so well controlled that the stimuli have to be pretty powerful. But with our patients it is less under control, so that the stimuli needed are correspondingly less. I don't wish to bore you with medical jargonese, but I'm sure you realize that there is no such thing as absolute sanity. You remember that old saw about the sleeping tiger? Was it Omar Khayyam? Well, it's true, of course. Most of us have a beast inside us just waiting to spring out, under certain circumstances . . .

Talking of beasts reminds me. About that poor woman. On second thoughts, even if I did I doubt whether you would believe me.

Well, come back to my office, then, and I'll give you a drink to round off your tour. I keep some in case of emergencies.

Whisky? That woman? You really want to hear? I said a beast reminded me, didn't I? Her husband, you see, was a friend of

mine. That's what made it all the more distressing when she had to be brought here. Quite incurable, I'm afraid. When you hear why, you won't be surprised. Though I doubt if you'll believe me.

Her husband was an animal collector. Yes, I said was. He's dead now, poor chap. Didn't live long after the experience. Became an old man in one night. Well, he collected animals, and brought them to his own private zoo. More money than sense really. He had a large estate such as you still hear about occasionally in Scotland. Bought it cheap off some ancient crumbling family who found it impossible to keep up and had to sell it to pay off death duties. His family made all their money through marketing one of these detergent powders. Suffice it to say that there was a take-over bid made and accepted, and my friend found himself a very rich man. He was madly eligible, of course, and being not exactly ill favoured, he was eagerly chased after by match-making Mamas.

You detect a certain flippancy in my manner? Yes, you're right. It's because I'm uneasy, because I don't know how to tell you what happened, because there's no medical explanation for it, for what I saw with my own eyes, but mostly because I don't really want to tell you. Confession won't be good for my soul. I fear it will only cause me more sleepless nights than I've had already, though God knows if that's possible.

That creature you saw in there, smiling and mumbling to herself. She was once one of the most beautiful girls in Edinburgh Society. My friend met her at some dance or other and fell hook, line, and sinker. Whether she genuinely cared for him, or was merely attracted by his money we'll never know. She had the reputation for being somewhat fast, but in this day and age most girls are, or if not, like to be thought so. At any rate, she came of a very good family as I've said, and in my friend's eyes, that made up for a lot. Braving the jealousy of her unsuccessful rivals and their equally disappointed mothers, she married him.

Everything went well at first. After the bustle of town life she found the quietness and seclusion of the Western Highlands

intriguing. Still very much a young girl, she adored the romance of it all and was prepared to put up with the inconvenience of inadequate plumbing for the beauty of the mountains and lochs. Do you know that part of the world at all? The Road to the Isles that they used to sing about, from Fort William to Mallaig? Well, you should. I have a small cottage near Fort William that I sometimes escape to, so I was actually on the spot. He called me in the middle of the night, and the horror in his voice made him sound quite unrecognizable. But I'm anticipating.

Linda often used to say to me that the beauty and peace of it all actually inspired her. She was like that, you see. She said that it led her thoughts on to a higher plane, made her aware of a higher level of consciousness. In this frame of mind she turned to mysticism, and began studying the occult. I suspect that she had already begun to feel a little bored, and turned to fantasy, as many bored women will. I once taxed her with it, practically accused her of not having enough to occupy her time, but she replied that for a doctor I was surprisingly insensitive.

Her husband at that time had just embarked on this zoo idea. It all started, I believe, from a herd of white deer which had bred on the estate. White deer are extremely rare, practically extinct, in fact, and I believe there is only one other estate in Scotland which boasts a herd. He was very excited about them, and determined to cash in, though God knows he didn't need the money. He told me what he intended to do. He would start this zoo, charge people to go round it, and eventually open the house and the rest of the grounds too. Linda was dead against it at first, particularly when he started throwing money away financing expeditions to the Belgian Congo and the Indian jungles. You see, apart from the initial expense of hiring guides and equipment, there were all the costs of shipping the animals, obtaining the necessary foods and the hundred and one incidentals. It's amazing how it mounts up when you stop to think.

But none of this deterred him. He never actually went on any of the expeditions. Even if he'd wanted to, there was too much

to do at home administering the estate. At least that was the excuse he gave. You see, he wasn't that adventurous. He preferred the somewhat doubtful comforts of a draughty Highland baronial hall to no comfort at all on safari in some malaria-ridden swamp, and I can't say that I blamed him.

It was from the second trip to the Congo that they brought the animal in question. Oh, hadn't I mentioned him before? I find it difficult not to keep thinking of him, so I presumed I must have brought him to your attention. I see him now. He was enormous, even for a gorilla, with a great brown shaggy hide, and arms so powerful that they looked as if they could crush a man with the slightest pressure. He was hideous, and yet at the same time he was beautiful. There *is* something beautiful in a manifestation of primitive strength, and he was a perfect example of his species. It seemed to me when I saw him that he had an uncommonly high brow, and if there are degrees of intellectual ability among the anthropoids in the same way that Man varies between idiocy and genius, he would have been nearer the latter than the former category.

Linda had previously taken no interest in her husband's 'foolishness' – her description. I think she was frightened that one dark night all the animals would break out and wreak havoc on the estate. She had tried to dissuade him from carrying on with it: after all, she had pointed out, there were enough zoos in the country already. It was a needless expense, she had said. She had even tried to get me to speak to him to use my influence but I would not be drawn into any controversy between husband and wife. After all, it was his money to spend as he wished.

However, all that changed when the gorilla arrived. To this day I cannot explain it. I wish I could, but medical science has no name for it. The very day he arrived she began to take an all-absorbing interest in him. They had to keep him under sedatives during transportation, you see, because he could have fought his way out. No, there's no law against keeping one privately that I know of. He was to be the star turn of the zoo. People were to come from miles around to see him. They had a specially strengthened cage all ready to receive him, and

there was quite a welcoming committee, of whom Linda was one. You see, straight away that was out of character. She had taken absolutely no interest in the animals up to now, and all of a sudden— Yes, you can put it down to the whims of a bored woman, if you like. You can put it down to natural curiosity, you can put it down to anything you like. But what you can't put down to natural curiosity was Linda's behaviour. Even now I shouldn't be telling you, with that poor creature not fifty yards away from us, in the state in which you have just seen her. You must promise that it shall go no further—You see, there was nothing natural about Linda's curiosity concerning the gorilla. She would spend hours beside the cage just staring at him. She seemed to be completely fascinated by him. Her husband was quite worried, well, concerned would be a better word. At first he didn't take it seriously; just another of her odd little pastimes. But when it started getting out of hand he came over to see me at Fort William. I go there for weekends when I can get away, which isn't often now since I took over this place. But when I was there, one weekend he came over, purely on a social visit you understand, and told me all about it.

I could see straight away that there was something he didn't understand. Don't get me wrong, there was no horror about it, he was just puzzled. She kept on talking about the gorilla, you know, where he came from, his natural habitat, was he lonely, shouldn't they get a mate for him, all that kind of thing. She was suddenly terribly interested in his history, the evolution of the anthropoid and mammalian species; nothing, of course, that you couldn't find in a book on natural history or biology, but for one who had previously shown no interest, even a positive antipathy for the subject, this volte-face seemed somehow unhealthy. That, at any rate, was how Bob felt. He asked me to drop in for dinner and casually talk to her: nothing doctor–patient, just a friendly chat.

When I arrived they showed me over the zoo. It was larger than I expected. I've described the gorilla to you, so I won't bore you again. But I watched Linda watching him – she insisted on accompanying us – and there was something in her

expression that I didn't understand and didn't particularly like. I suddenly realized for the first time why Bob was worried. There was nothing you could put your finger on, it was just something you sensed. And the gorilla, too, sensed it. It was unbelievable, but he actually responded. How? You have asked me a difficult question, because I can't – or couldn't – give a definite answer. All I can say is that he was conscious of her presence in some way in which he was not conscious of ours. It is too subtle to convey easily. He was – less of a beast when she was there. When she left I stayed behind for a tiny minute, and I could almost see the physical change. He seemed to sink in the evolutionary scale as I watched. It was not a little frightening. What possible point of contact could these two beings share, which was denied to Bob and myself? And what deep core of his being could Linda touch and we couldn't?

Linda still studied her books, in the intervals when she could tear herself away from the zoo. During the course of the evening I noticed one lying face downward on one of the occasional tables. She had evidently thrown it down when we arrived. It was concerned with reincarnation. 'Do you believe in reincarnation?' I asked, more as a conversational gambit than anything else.

Linda smiled, though there was a tenseness in her eyes. 'Do you really want to know, or are you merely being polite?'

'You must tell me all about it some time,' I said, trying to keep the conversation as casual as I could. 'I'm frightfully unversed in things of that sort.' She seemed to think I was making fun of her, because she shut up like a clam after that. Nothing I said would make her discuss it.

But it wasn't only me with whom she was irritated. Her husband seemed to vex her in various trivial little ways. I saw her once or twice look at him with what actually appeared to be distaste, although he was blissfully unaware of the fact. When it was time for me to go I was relieved. There was a steadily growing atmosphere which made me uneasy, and even then I didn't put everything together – I didn't connect all the

parts I'd seen or discovered to make one convincing whole. If you follow me.

I didn't see them after that for some considerable time. My duties here took up virtually all my energy, and in the intervals all I felt able to do was eat and sleep. The marital troubles of Bob and Linda went completely out of my head. I occasionally heard from Bob, of course. We had kept up a desultory correspondence for many years since we had first met on holiday in Spain before the war. Only in one letter did he mention Linda's preoccupation. He had convinced himself it wasn't important and because of his casual tone, he almost convinced me. Almost, but not quite. In the letter in which he did mention it, though, he was somewhat agitated. It seems she had stayed out all night. He didn't realize it at the time. He himself had come in late and had gone straight to bed. He hadn't switched the light on, so as not to disturb her. Only in the morning did he realize her bed hadn't been slept in.

They searched the grounds first, because even then he didn't imagine – well, they found her in the gorilla's cage. Yes, actually *in* the cage, *with* the gorilla. Sound asleep. She hadn't been harmed in any way. She had somehow managed to get the key, or a duplicate of it, and her story was that she had gone outside to see him last thing and – had fallen asleep. When it was suggested that she might have been killed, she had laughed and said, 'Oh, *he* wouldn't hurt me,' or words to that effect. At any rate, so Bob said, she seemed none the worse for her adventure.

I wasn't really sure that I believed what Bob had said. I put it down to the fact that he was disproportionately worried about Linda, and had, albeit unconsciously, distorted the facts. Although I couldn't quite see how facts like that could have been distorted. Apart from forbidding her to repeat the experience, I understand, he took no further action.

You see, even then I wasn't really worried. Not worried enough to take any positive action. I was having certain changes made, certain structural alterations done to this place, and I can only plead this in excuse for my remissness. I was busy to the exclusion of all else, as they say. You won't judge me too

harshly I feel, when I tell you that Bob's next letter drove what little unease I felt clean away. Linda was pregnant. This was the best thing that could have happened. It was just what she needed to drive all this morbid nonsense out of her head. I determined to drive up to Fort William at the first opportunity I could get away, to congratulate them.

As luck would have it, I had just taken on Doctor Cannon. You met him earlier this afternoon. Young fellow, but very capable. I have every confidence in leaving the place in his charge, so I had no qualms in taking another long weekend off. I went over to the house on the Sunday. When I saw Linda, I realized at once how right my opinion was. She looked happier and prettier than she had since before she was married. I offered my heartfelt congratulations, and I must say that she accepted them without any of the apparent coolness which had seemed to grow up between us. It had probably been because she was nervous and upset on the previous occasion, and not meant for me personally at all. I was even quite willing to put it down to my highly developed imagination that her relations with Bob still seemed a trifle strained. It takes a certain effort of adjustment on the part of the Mother-to-be when she first hears the news, and the husband is the obvious person to suffer. I still thought it would pass. Linda was happy about it, that was the main thing.

In the evening, over our coffee in the drawing-room, I determined to make quite sure the breach between us had closed. The best way to do this, so I fondly imagined, would be to re-examine the original cause. 'You promised to tell me about reincarnation,' I said, deliberately ignoring Bob's startled look.

'I believe in it implicitly,' Linda said, quite calmly, broaching no argument. 'I'm quite certain I have lived before.'

'But how *can* you be so certain? You don't remember—' It seemed to me that they both jumped up simultaneously, though I now realize that Linda was the first one to get to her feet.

'But that's just it, Tim. I do remember! Oh, nothing connected, of course. I'm no Bridey Murphy, or anything like

that. But suddenly, for no reason at all things came into my head. Little pictures of places I couldn't possibly have seen.'

'You've seen them in books.'

Linda laughed. 'I won't try to convince you. I know I couldn't do that, so I won't try.' And she didn't. I was sorry, because I would have liked to discuss it further, but I could see that nothing I could have said would have shaken her faith in what to her was an incontrovertible fact. What she did tell me though, was about her dream. It seems that for some time past, long before she was pregnant, she had been having this recurrent dream. At first it had frightened her by its very intensity, then she had come to accept it and eventually, to welcome it. I asked her to describe it, but she was cagey. I think she felt that in some way it was encroaching upon her privacy.

Outside the night was cold. Smoking Bob's cigars and drinking his very excellent brandy, I was loath to move, although my car was heated and the drive back to Fort William would have taken fifteen minutes at the most. When Bob suggested I stay the night, I didn't put up any very strong resistance.

It seemed I had hardly put my head down on the pillow, when I was awoken by sounds of shouts and cries coming from outside the window. I could see waving lights coming from the bushes at the end of the lawn, and as I was about to throw on some clothes to discover what had happened, I heard the sharp report of a rifle. A moment later Bob burst in, eyes wild with excitement, and collapsed into the armchair. 'What on earth—' I began, but he held up his hand to stop me. He was so breathless that it was some time before he could speak. At last he managed to get out, 'The gorilla. He escaped from his cage!'

'My God—!' I was almost out of the door and down the stairs before he shouted:

'It's all right, Tom got him. He's dead.'

'Was anyone hurt?'

'He went for Tom, but Tom got out of the way and he lumbered off in the direction of the wood. One of Tom's assistants always carried a rifle, and I told him to shoot to kill.'

'It was a pity you had to do that.'

'There was no other way. He was a dangerous brute and I couldn't take any chances.'

I saw the body. Tom, the head keeper, still white and shaken from his narrow escape, had covered it with a tarpaulin. As I folded it back to take one last look at the magnificent specimen, I heard a woman's voice, shaking with anger, cry out, 'You damned fools!'

A moment later Linda burst upon us. I say that, because there was no other way to describe her entrance. She threw herself down on top of the tarpaulin, sobbing as if her heart would break.

'Oh God,' I heard her moaning, 'why did they have to do it. All that beauty, all that strength. Oh God!'

I put my arm on hers to try and restrain her.

'They had to, Linda,' I said, as calmly as I could. 'He was dangerous.'

She drew away from me sharply, as if my very contact repelled her. 'What do you know about it,' she shouted out, beside herself. 'You can't possibly understand. Nobody can. Nobody can appreciate beauty as I saw it.'

She turned round. Bob was standing behind her looking helpless and unhappy. 'It was wanton cruelty,' she said, throwing him a look of bitter hatred and contempt. 'I'll never forgive you.'

And she never did. I left early the next morning, and Linda did not put in an appearance. When I came back to Town, I had an anguished letter from Bob saying that Linda positively refused to speak to him. Her behaviour seemed out of all proportion. Bob was really very much in love with her, you know, and her silence hurt him more than he could put into words. He still couldn't properly understand why she was so furious at the gorilla's death. I still blame myself for not writing to her personally, asking her to make it up with Bob, if only for the child's sake, but then she might have written me an abusive letter telling me to mind my own business, and after that, well, I could hardly have visited the house again could I? But then, I blame myself for so much, for not seeing what I should have

seen. The trouble was that whether or not I suspected the truth subconsciously I would have rejected it.

I made excuses even to myself after that night for not revisiting Scotland. I was busy here. That was certainly true, but I capitalized on it, if you follow me. Although, deep down I knew that Linda needed help, I preferred not to become involved, and perhaps with my well-meaning but clumsy attempts to help only widen the rift between the two of them.

When the final event occurred it was only sheer coincidence that I was on the spot. At least that is how I argued it to myself, though I was having a spot of conscience trouble by that time. Idle curiosity played its part, too, I think, on looking back. The nine months were approximately up and I wanted to see if Linda's baby would have the desired effect.

In the middle of the night after I got to Fort William the telephone rang. I hardly recognized Bob's voice. I told you this before, didn't I? He sounded as if – as if he'd caught a glimpse of Hell. And he had, of course. You think I sound melodramatic? He could hardly speak, but he managed to gasp out a plea for me to come at once. When I arrived, he met me at the front door. He had been waiting for me. His face was ashen, his eyes were dazed with horror. Without a word he grabbed me by the arm and led me into a little room. What I saw nearly made me vomit.

Even now I can hardly bear – it had Linda's features you see. Linda lay in bed, eyes staring up at the ceiling, smiling happily. She was more or less as you saw her today. They'd engaged a nurse, a midwife-she was, and when she saw – well, they'd wanted to destroy it, but Linda moaned and moaned for it. When I'd seen, Bob pushed me into the corridor. He told me what Linda had been like for the past few weeks, pushing him away with disgust every time he'd tried to go near her, telling him he wasn't the father . . . He'd put it all down to the whims of pregnancy, as anyone would. She'd told him about her dream too, *all* about it; about the jungle, how she'd lived as mate to – her reincarnation belief was all mixed up with it. He was sobbing, holding his head in his hands, still stupid with unbelief.

But suddenly he stopped, became calm, ominously calm as I knew. He told me what he intended to do, first to – it, then to himself. I told him not to be a fool, even then I should have stayed with him, never left him for a minute. Even now I can't forget the last thing he said to me, and the way he said it.

With eyes clouded with horror, he told me what would stay with him for ever, both this side of the grave and beyond it – how Linda gazed upon it, and her expression of thankful relief when the thing had first been placed into her arms . . .

RETURN TO DEVIL'S TONGUES

By Walter Winward

I KEEP BLAMING myself. I should have known; somehow I should have known how it would all end. But inviting Ben Lawson to stay with me seemed the most natural thing in the world. I hadn't seen him for almost eighteen months, and I was lonely. From his letters I judged that he was lonely, too. Nevertheless, something should have told me. If only I could forget his face, or hers. But I can't. And I don't think I ever shall.

Prior to his visit, I had last seen him in 1945, when he was Major Lawson. During the war he had thrice been decorated for conspicuous bravery and had only failed to win the highest award possible simply because, as he brusquely and rather cynically later put it: 'There was no one around of a high enough rank to see what I damn' well did.' He was a brave man, nobody would deny that. His regiment was proud of him, his parents doted on him, his fiancée worshipped him. Yet he was disconsolate.

It was the army he missed, he wrote in a letter to me a year so after the war in Europe had ended. Or not the army so much as the war itself.

I remembered hearing that Chesterton, our commanding officer at the time, had tried to persuade him to make the service his career, even going as far as to promise him a regiment of his own in a few years. But Lawson declined. In his opinion peacetime soldiers were little more than a glorified police force. Even the guarantee of action in Palestine was unattractive to him, as, from what he had both heard and read, the British did nothing more than prevent the Arabs and Jews from slitting each others' throats.

'I feel as though there is something, as yet undetermined,

I have to do with my life,' he wrote in his concluding paragraph. 'At one time I thought that the defeat of Nazism was my mission, but now I know that the last five years were only a step towards a greater (and sometimes, I feel, terrible) goal. But what, Peter? What? I don't know.'

If Ben Lawson did not know where his future lay, he at least knew the direction he did not want it to take.

He had a violent row with his father when the latter tried to insist that he took his place in the family business: green-groceries. His fiancée, not unreasonably, wanted to marry him and settle down as soon as possible, but he procrastinated continuously, and eventually the girl decided it would be of benefit to them both if she sought her future husband elsewhere. Lawson apparently agreed with an alacrity that was almost indecent, and, or so he told me in a subsequent letter, for a while felt quite light-hearted. But that feeling soon passed and his moods returned.

It was towards the end of November 1946 that I found myself in London, and I decided to call on Lawson. He greeted me as though I were a returning prodigal, and, seeing how overjoyed he was to see me, I invited him to my home in Dorset for as long as he cared to stay. He accepted immediately and with great enthusiasm, and we made the hundred-odd miles journey the following day in his pre-war Austin.

He sang quietly as we drove through the Surrey countryside, then louder as we passed through peaceful Hampshire villages. By the time we reached Dorset he was bellowing at the top of his voice. Once in a while, as he paused for breath between several none-too-melodious versions of The Hallelujah Chorus, he reflected aloud on the reasons for his sudden change of spirits. He could find nothing to account for the metamorphosis, however, other than the fact I was an old friend and that there would undoubtedly be some very pleasant evenings to be passed reminiscing. I told him we might manage some shooting, and this seemed to delight him so much that he put his foot hard on the accelerator and burst forth into a further unholy rendering of Handel's masterpiece.

It was five o'clock and already dark by the time we reached Smallwater, which lay midway between Dorchester and Bridport.

'Small indeed,' commented Lawson, and turned into the main street.

I was about to give him directions when I suddenly realized he did not need them. The house lies on the outskirts of the village and to reach it involves making several complicated turnings. Lawson made them without any comment from me. I felt a curious sensation in the pit of my stomach: he had never in his life visited my home.

'Here we are,' he said, manouevring the Austin into the driveway.

I stared at him.

'How on earth did you know the way?' I asked.

He looked puzzled.

'Didn't you tell me?' I shook my head. 'Then I just don't know. You must have mentioned something about the place years ago and it stuck in my mind.'

During the war I'd naturally spoken to him about the house and the village, but only vaguely and generally, the way soldiers do when the things they love are thousands of miles away.

As soon as we were inside I gave him a drink, and we sat talking about our wartime friendship and experiences. The incident of our arrival was quickly forgotten. After dinner, we retired to the library.

'What do you find to do down here?' asked Lawson when we were settled behind port and cigars.

'Oh, not much,' I answered. 'A little fishing, a little shooting, a little walking. It's pretty dull.'

'Then why stay?'

'Nowhere else to go. Besides, I've lived here all my life. As a matter of fact, though, I have tried to sell up once or twice, but no luck. It seems the days of the country gentleman are over. Too much money to be made in the big towns, rebuilding some of the mess our Austrian friend made. Maybe in ten or

fifteen years' time someone will make me an offer, but I'll be too old to move then.'

'You should get married,' smiled Lawson; 'find a woman to help you while away some of these long winter evenings.'

'Who'd have me? Anyway, I'll think about getting married when you take the plunge.'

After we had been talking and drinking for a further couple of hours, Lawson begged to be excused.

'Sorry, Peter, old man,' he began, 'but the drive must have taken more out of me than I realized. The Morleys may be used to all this country air, but the Lawsons need their rest.'

I apologized immediately.

'My fault entirely . . . I've got a bad habit of keeping my guests up until all hours. Trouble with me is I don't sleep too well, and I tend to forget that other people need their eight hours.'

This was perfectly true and more than like the result of the relatively inactive life I lead.

After I had shown Lawson to his room and wished him goodnight, I retired myself. I tried to settle down but, as usual, found it difficult to sleep. I turned first one way then another in an attempt to find a comfortable position, but eventually resigned myself to a restless night.

The village clock struck two, and I lit a cigarette. By the time it was finished I was feeling pleasantly drowsy. My head had no sooner touched the pillow, however, when I was suddenly alert and attentive: someone was creeping stealthily along the landing. Then I relaxed: Lawson going to the bathroom, no doubt. The footsteps stopped and I had the inexplicable feeling that I was being watched. I stared into the darkness, the hairs on the nape of my neck bristling. It was a sensation I had experienced many times during the war and one which had saved my life on several occasions. It told me something was wrong.

Eventually there was a further movement on the landing and I heard the stairs creak; a few seconds silence then the front door opened and closed. I got out of bed and went to the win-

dow, which overlooked the driveway. Walking purposefully in the direction of the road was Ben Lawson. I struck a match and looked at my watch: two-thirty. I followed Lawson's tall figure until it was lost among the trees, and then went back to bed.

At breakfast the following morning my guest made no mention of his nocturnal wanderings, and I decided to forget all about the matter. It was probably nothing more than he had been unable to sleep in a strange room, and it might embarrass him if I broached the subject.

I had been perfectly frank when telling Lawson that there was little more to do in the neighbourhood other than fish or shoot or walk, but he seemed so delighted to have escaped the monotony of a London winter that he radiated ebullience. Even the shortest hike through the low-lying hills by day, or the most inconsequential joke I made during our after-dinner sessions, seemed to give him a great deal of pleasure.

'I feel so much at home here,' he said to me after the first week, and I felt absurdly pleased.

One night during the second week I again found difficulty in sleeping due to rather a heavy dinner. After lying awake in extreme discomfort for almost an hour, I decided that the only solution was an indigestion tablet and a glass of water. Cursing mildly because of the cold I pulled on my dressing-gown and made for the bathroom. I had no sooner opened my bedroom door when I heard a noise coming from along the passage. I closed the door quietly and stood motionless.

Lawson – it could be no one else – crossed the landing, paused briefly outside my room, and then proceeded downstairs. Filled with curiosity, I went to the window.

The moon was full and the sky clear, and I could see Lawson much more easily than on the previous occasion. For a few moments I lost him among the shadows, but then picked him up again as the trees thinned. He was walking along the road away from the village. I watched him until he disappeared, then went back to bed, so puzzled and concerned at his strange behaviour that I completely forgot about my indigestion.

The next day I had an appointment to see my solicitor in

Dorchester and I apologized for having to leave my friend to his own devices for a few hours. Lawson said he did not mind in the least, as it would give him an opportunity to have a look at the engine of his Austin, which tended to get temperamental when left unused.

I returned much later than I expected and was greeted with the words:

'You didn't tell me this place had a history.'

'What place?'

'The village. I had a chat with your gardener while you were out and he tells me you had a murder here some years ago.'

I recalled hearing my father speak of the incident, which had happened over half a century before.

It appeared that a woman of the neighbourhood, a married woman, had been having an affair with another man. The two lovers used to meet at a spot called the Devil's Tongues, half a mile or so out of the village on the Bridport road.

The Devil's Tongues, or merely the Tongues, as we called them locally, were three huge slabs of stone some ten or fifteen feet in height. No one knew how they came to be there, and their unusual name apparently emanated from some long-dead Smallwater native, who likened them to Lucifer poking fun at the sky. The legend said they had once been used for sacrificial purposes, but this had never been proved.

From what I remembered of the story, the woman's husband had followed her one night, and, in a fit of jealous rage, had killed his wife with an axe. The two men had then fought and the lover succeeded in wresting the axe from the husband and killed him in self-defence.

'But why the interest?' I asked Lawson.

'Just curiosity. What happened to the man?'

'Went quite mad, so far as I remember. Apparently the sight of the dead woman, together with what he himself had done, turned his brain. He's been dead for years, of course. I'll show you the place tomorrow if you like.'

'I've seen it thanks, Peter; went up this afternoon. Weird place; just right for a lovers' tryst. Or a murder.'

'I'd stay clear of it if I were you,' I said.

'Why?'

'No reason in particular. It's all right during the day, but it's somewhere to keep away from at night.'

'Have you been there at night?'

'Once. I wouldn't do it again for a pension. Something scared me. I don't know what.'

Lawson laughed.

'Living in the country doesn't suit you. You're getting as superstitious as a peasant.'

'Perhaps.'

During dinner neither of us spoke very much. Lawson was preoccupied with his own thoughts, and I was recalling the time I had seen the Tongues after dark. Nothing positive had happened to frighten me, but I felt, during the ten minutes I was there, as if I would never get away. It was a feeling outside the realms of logic – silly superstition perhaps, as Lawson had said – but I experienced an emotion unknown to me prior to and since the war: acute fear. The Devil's Tongues were aptly named.

The following day I went down with influenza. The local doctor, Fisher, decided that the attack was only a mild one and diagnosed a week in bed. Lawson commiserated with me.

'Sorry to see you like this. I know what 'flu's like.'

Lawson went out for his customary walk in the afternoon and I went to sleep. When I awoke, it was dark. I glanced at my watch: twenty past ten. I had been asleep for over eight hours and felt slightly better.

I rang the bell by my bedside and in a matter of moments Lawson appeared, carrying a bowl of soup.

'I had the housekeeper make this,' he said, putting the bowl in front of me. 'I looked in about seven, but you were well in the arms of Morpheus and it didn't seem right to wake you.'

I drank as much of the soup as I could, while he talked idly about what he had been doing during the day.

'Enough?' he said finally, noticing I had put the spoon down. I nodded. 'Anything else? Hot toddy or something?'

'No thanks.'

'Then I'm off to bed. Goodnight. I hope you'll feel better in the morning.'

I switched off the bedside lamp and lay awake for a little while. Eventually I heard Lawson come out of the bathroom and then the door of his room closed.

As I have said, I normally sleep badly. That night, however, was the worst in my experience.

I tossed and turned, perspired profusely, threw off the bedclothes, then, when I shivered, pulled them over me again. Finally, I fell into an uneasy slumber. No sooner had I done so when I began to dream. Fantastic shapes, dark and menacing, flooded into my unconscious mind. It seemed as though they were in the room itself, soaring high to the ceiling above my head and then swooping down at me. Gradually each one lost its amorphousness and took on concrete and terrifying proportions. One became a huge bat carrying something in its mouth. It flew around and around my head, but never close enough for me to see what it held. A second figure joined the bat. It was a woman and she smiled seductively and beckoned. She came closer smiling all the time. When she was within two feet she laughed. I tried to move away as from out of her mouth sprang a huge rat, its teeth dripping with blood. From her nostrils wriggled a tiny snake, and then another and another. They dropped down on to my face and I moaned. Yet a third figure hovered above me and I saw, to my horror, that it was a monstrous slug. Its fat slimy body oozed a gelatinous substance which dripped on to my hair and neck. Gradually, the body grew larger and larger, and the foul excrement like liquid fell faster. When it seemed it could grow no bigger it burst with a high-pitched cry, covering myself and the room with what remained of its body.

I closed my eyes to dismiss the apparitions, but a voice commanded: 'Open them. Open them' – and I obeyed. The giant bat swooped again and I saw what was in his mouth: Ben Lawson. There was blood all over his face and he was shrieking terribly. I took hold of his arms and tried to release him, but

both limbs came away in my hands. 'Please, Peter! Please, Peter!' he screamed. I began to pray, to call on the powers of God with all my might. Then I felt myself growing colder and colder.

I woke up limp and exhausted. The bedclothes were on the floor and I was shivering uncontrollably. Thank God! Thank God! it was only a dream. Then I heard it again: Lawson's voice, far away. 'Help me, Peter, help me!' it begged. I began to decline, so far as I could remember, the Latin noun 'bellus', just to assure myself I was not still asleep. I had reached 'bello' when I heard the voice again: 'Help me,' it whispered.

I jumped out of bed and ran to Lawson's room. It was empty, the bed had not been slept in.

'Ben! Ben!' I shouted.

'The Tongues, Peter, the Tongues,' came the faint cry.

The Devil's Tongues! I did not pause to reason or understand. I sensed only one thing: my friend was in the gravest danger.

I raced back to my own room, threw on the first clothes that came to hand, and ran from the house.

I covered the first two hundred yards as fast as I could, but then became breathless and slowed to a walk. My brow was hot and feverish despite the bitter northeast wind which blew down from the hills. Dark clouds chased each other across the face of the moon, like gigantic mice milling around a piece of cheese. The tall trees lining the road bent towards me, beckoning and whispering. Help, they seemed to say.

I reached the Tongues in a little under a quarter of an hour. The three huge slabs looked sinister and threatening against the black sky. There was no sign of Lawson.

I was just about to turn away, cursing myself for my foolishness, when I heard his voice coming from a short distance in front of me. It was followed by a woman's laugh. I opened my mouth to call, but quickly decided against it. How could I explain my presence? My friend would think me quite mad if I told him that, ill as I was, I had walked half a mile on a

bitterly cold night because of a nightmare. It was not my place to question who the woman was or what the two of them were doing here.

I started for home. Before I had taken a dozen paces, however, Lawson and the woman appeared from behind a clump of small trees. Realizing that neither of them could fail to see me if I remained where I was, I melted into the shadows of one of the stones.

I didn't want to watch them kiss or listen to them talk, but the position in which they stopped made it quite impossible for me to do otherwise. They stood not twenty yards away, their arms around each other.

What a fool I was! What a damned fool! God alone knew how long their meeting would last and it was out of the question for me to move until they did.

I looked at them again, hoping to Heaven they would show some sign of leaving. The woman was facing in my direction, although she had eyes for no one but Lawson. I was a confirmed bachelor, almost a misogynist, but there was no disputing that she was beautiful. At the same time there was something strangely forbidding about her. Her beauty was – I hunted for the correct phrase and found it in a cliché: skin deep. Yes, that was it. Perhaps it was only the effect of the moonlight, but her features were translucent, almost as though her face was made of wax. There seemed to be nothing underneath the skin – again I hunted for a phrase: no soul.

'It's wonderful to be back,' said Lawson. 'But why does it always have to be here?'

'You know why,' answered the woman. 'I like this place at night. It's . . . secure. I hate daytime. The sun seems to bore right through me. But you wouldn't understand that.'

'No,' admitted my friend.

The two embraced. I felt like a peeping Tom. I was just about to reveal my presence and hang the consequences, when the woman said:

'I must go now. Please come tomorrow.'

The wind sang louder, drowning Lawson's reply, then louder

still. It seemed to be saying something, warning someone. The air became very cold.

The woman walked back up the hill and out of my sight. Lawson watched her go and I watched him.

Suddenly there was a piercing scream, long and terrible, almost drowning the sound of the wind. A look of intense horror crossed Lawson's face and he began to run in the direction the woman had just taken. I moved out from my hiding-place and saw, silhouetted against the sky-line, two figures. One was the woman's and in front of her, brandishing a huge axe, stood a giant of a man. He raised the axe above his head and shrieked: 'You slut! You filthy slut!'

Lawson, charging up the hill, yelled: 'Look out!'

He was still some way from the pair when the man struck. The blade of the axe flashed in the moonlight and sank deep into the woman's skull, cutting off a second, half-formed scream. Again the axe flashed, and yet again. By this time Lawson was almost on top of the man and the latter turned and saw him.

'Adulterer!' he cried, and sprang.

I saw immediately that my friend would suffer the same dreadful fate as the woman unless I helped him, and I tried to run forward. But something held me to the spot. I was able to move my arms and legs where I stood, listen and see, but I could not take even a single step. An invisible force rooted me to the ground. All I could do was watch and pray.

The axe cleaved its way through the air towards Lawson's head. He moved fractionally and the blade whistled harmlessly past his right shoulder and embedded itself deep in the soft turf. I could see my friend's assailant very clearly, the foaming mouth spread in a maniacal grin, and almost smell the hot, fetid breath. I tried to close my eyes, to shut out the sight of what must almost certainly be Ben Lawson's death; but the same power which imprisoned me compelled me to watch.

Lawson moved back quickly, his eyes desperately searching the ground for a weapon. He bent down and picked up a large stone and hurled it with all his might. It missed its intended

target, but caught the helve of his adversary's axe, striking it to the earth. Lawson, sweating with fear and exertion, leapt forward. He was tossed to the ground like a discarded coat. He sprang to his feet instantly and ran blindly up the hill. The madman, cursing obscenely, snatched up the fallen axe and blundered after him.

Tears of anger and fear poured from my eyes. My heart pounded as I saw the man gaining on Lawson, who suddenly changed direction and came running towards me. His pursuer, more clumsy because of his size, turned slower and as he did so fell over the murdered woman's body. In a fit of demoniacal rage he picked up the corpse and flung it down the hill. It turned over and over and finally came to rest within reaching distance of where I was standing. I saw what remained of her face and was immmediately sick.

Lawson was now no more than a couple of feet away from me and I could hear his terrified sobs, and his tortured lungs screaming for air. I tried to call to him, but my voice would not obey my wishes. Incredibly, he did not see me. Neither did his attacker, who was now almost on top of us both.

The axe swung again, but in his anxiety to finish the task the killer stumbled and dropped his weapon. As quick as a thought Lawson seized it and sank it deep into the other's head. A great fountain of blood spurted upwards, drops of it falling on my raincoat. Almost insane himself by now Lawson struck a second and third and fourth time, until all that remained of the man's face was a meaningless mass of bone and gristle. Then Lawson sat down and began to sob, quietly at first then louder and louder.

The next thing I remember was waking from a four-day coma in my own bed. Doctor Fisher was peering anxiously at me.

'You're a young fool,' he said, as soon as it became apparent that the crisis was over. 'You're damned lucky you didn't catch pneumonia, wandering around the hills in the middle of the night.'

'Where did you find me?' I asked.

'I didn't. Franklin did.' Franklin was a local farmer. 'Delirious, he said you were. And no wonder. Mumbling something about the Tongues and that chap Lawson.'

At the mention of my friend's name, the memory of that dreadful night came flooding back.

'Where is Lawson?' I asked weakly.

'In hospital, where he should be. I don't know how or why but he's as mad as a hatter.'

'Mad!'

'Yes, mad! Wandered into the police station the same night we found you, saying that he'd seen a woman murdered and that he himself had killed a man with an axe; up at the Tongues.'

'But that's what happened. I saw it myself.'

'Yes, yes,' murmured Fisher soothingly.

'But it did happen,' I protested. 'Lawson's telling the truth.' A sudden thought occurred. 'Have you been up there?'

'Of course. It was the first thing I did.'

'And?'

'And nothing. Only . . .'

'Yes?'

'I found two skeleton's: a man's and a woman's. Been there at least half a century if I'm any judge. Oh, and one other thing: an axe. Rusty as hell. Been there about the same time as the skeletons, I reckon. Still, I expect someone's been playing a practical joke. I'll know more when I get the laboratory report. I suppose we'll find some hospital in the vicinity is missing a couple of specimens. Now you get plenty of rest; I'll be in to see you tomorrow.'

I said nothing to Fisher, but I doubted if he'd find any hospital claiming those particular specimens. I very much doubted it.

Ten days later I was on my feet again. I heard from Fisher that Ben Lawson had been transferred to an asylum for the insane. I tried to get permission to see him, but was told he was dangerous and that it would be many months before he

could receive visitors, if at all. The doctor I saw said I wouldn't recognize him anyway; he'd apparently aged even as they watched him, forty or fifty years in a matter of days.

I made inquiries around the neighbourhood, even going as far afield as Dorchester and Bridport, for a beautiful woman whose skin was incredibly pale. No one could help me, but I suppose I knew that before I began my search.

I still don't sleep very well. I have the most hideous nightmares in which I see Ben Lawson being chopped like firewood with a huge axe.

I have, locked away in the cupboard, the raincoat I wore that night. It's been cleaned half a dozen times, but the bloodstains on the left sleeve are indelible. I suppose I should throw it away, but I never seem to get round to doing that. It's the only thing I have left to keep me sane, to remind me that I did not dream Lawson's return to the Devil's Tongues.

PUTZ DIES

By Septimus Dale

THE ROOM is furnished in a bright, compact style. The colouring is easy on the eye; the chairs are well padded and modern, constructed on tubular frames. The walls are sound-proof. The room is designed to offend no one. It is the death-cell.

The man sitting in the tin bath is called Jacob Putz. He is condemned to die. It is never a very easy business to bathe him because he is paralysed from the neck down. He has to be lowered into the tin bath and the water carried to him in the large kitchen kettles.

Stern, the junior of the two attendants, lifts him from the bath and lays him back in his bed. He is only a talking head on a pillow now. He cannot move his arms and legs, he cannot feel them. So he uses up his energy in grimaces. He grins, he laughs; he twists his face to emphasize whatever he is saying. His cheeks are sucked in and puffed out, his bushy eyebrows raised in comic gesture of despair, his thick lips creased with a frown.

He lies on the bed in his ill-fitting prison uniform. He is quite a tall man. His face is round and fat with chubby, rose-red cheeks and little piercing eyes. A lock of brown hair slips across his forehead, a cow's-lick. He lies staring at the ceiling and he talks, he talks incessantly. He is eager to hear the sound of his own voice; to emphasize the fact that there is still a day to go; that he is still of this world; that his execution may never happen.

Stern and Walthar, the senior attendant, watch him. They are ordinary men but they have an extraordinary job. They are paid to sit and listen to him; to keep him contented as a fatted calf; to play with him. Guessing games, twenty questions,

chess – he liked to play chess at the start, but now he won't, because the game takes so long and there is so little time left.

'. . . experiments in pain,' he says, his eyes tracing the shadows on the wall. 'My life has been devoted to experiments in pain. I believe in pain as the mirror of the extreme perfection of man's ability, the sublimation of the ego in the physical body, the resurrection of the animal, the supreme animal.'

His eyes flicker as he looks at Stern and Walthar, to see if they are listening to what he is saying.

Stern sits at a card table, patience cards spread before him. He is young, but he is not new to the job. He has been with ten men now, eight of them were not reprieved. He is no longer impressed with his job or his customers. They pass like peas on a process line at a canning factory. He is not hardened to his job, he tells himself. He has merely developed a mechanical ability for ignoring the being of his customers, most of his customers. This one is a difficult case.

He lays one card upon another and he grunts now and then, as though he were taking in what Putz is saying. On Wednesday, the tour of duty ends on Wednesday – for Putz everything ends on Wednesday – he has agreed to take his little daughter to the zoo. He does not approve of zoos on principle because he believes in the sanctity of wild life. He finds the sight of a caged animal unpleasant, and he regards his own presence, outside looking in, as undignified and degrading. But his daughter wants to go very much. Her friends have all been already. He senses that going to the zoo has become a social caste mark in his daughter's life, and he is intelligent enough to realize its importance for her. So he will take her to the zoo tomorrow – Wednesday, after Putz dies.

'My experiments,' Putz continues, unaware that he is talking to himself, uncaring anyway, because in his position he is alone in a prison that houses some two thousand men, alone because he is unique, 'my experiments have been conducted under the supervision and with the direct approval of my government, with the aim of laying clear man's reaction to the physical ulti-

mate, the repression of ego by pain and fear, the chemical reaction of brutality upon the defenceless.'

The shadow has moved a little across the cell. The shadow is cast by the sun as it shines through the bars of the little window high up on the lime-green wall. Putz can count the time by the shadow. He could ask Walthar or Stern for the time, but he prefers to work it out for himself, because time in hours and minutes has lost its meaning. His concern now has come to be reckoned in terms of time eternal, which he sees as a living thing, ungoverned by mental restrictions which may be imposed upon it, hours, seconds, minutes. Time is the shadow on the wall. In the early morning it is narrow. As the day passes it reaches its zenith and then declines, then vanishes. Today he will watch it for the last time, because there will be no sunlight tomorrow.

Putz feels Walthar's gaze upon him. Walthar is a large man, a man who has once been handsome. His looks have withered away, fallen into bags of sagging flesh, and eyes that water perpetually with the cold. They are soft brown eyes, gentle eyes. He is a gentle man, a man whose hands are made to caress. He is a just man. He blinks slowly, his eyes full of concern as he watches Putz.

'You'd better rest up for a bit,' he says. 'You'll only wear yourself out.'

Putz grins. 'My dear fellow; I'm conducting an experiment.'

'You do rattle on,' Stern says from the corner. 'I don't think we've ever had one that rattled on the way you do.'

'I'm conducting an experiment, I tell you. Just as everything I've ever done has been in the nature of an experiment.'

He takes a certain pleasure in watching Stern's face as he says this. Walthar has let slip that one of Stern's sisters was one of his – 'experiments'.

'Oh, shut up.' Stern gets to his feet. He is clearly nettled.

'By delicate use of surgery without anaesthetic I have observed the reaction of a man to his innards. I have fed another patient one of his eyeballs in a strawberry jelly . . .' Putz paused, then observed to Walthar, 'My new experiment should

be just as successful. I have no need to slit this man's mouth to his cheek bones – I have only to talk, he conjures up the rest.'

The head on the pillow nods contentedly. Stern looms over him, his fists clenched.

'You bastard . . . you . . .' He closed his eyes, for the mocking mouth opens yet again, the thick lips twist into a grin.

'Now, Officer Stern, restrain yourself. I had a job to do, so have you. I've done mine. Now you must do yours properly.'

'I can't take much more of this,' Stern turned away. 'I'll be glad to see this one go, Walthar. You hear that, "Professor", I'll be glad to see you frizzle tomorrow.'

'All right, break it up,' Walthar gets to his feet, putting a hand on Stern's shoulder. 'That's enough of this.'

'By God, it is.'

'Go and get us all something to eat, Stern,' says Walthar, directing him to the door. 'It's about time we had something.'

Stern goes out.

'You shouldn't have done that,' Walthar says, coming to stand over the bed. 'There's no need to make things any more unpleasant than they are already.'

'This is my experiment, Officer Walthar. I just want to see how much the lad can take, that's all. It's another experiment in pain if you like.'

'His sister . . .' Walthar begins.

'I know.' The head on the pillow grins again. 'I know.'

'I can always have somebody else put on in his place.'

'That would be a great pity. It might damage his chances, mightn't it? He should have mentioned his sister at first. They mightn't take too kindly to the omission. Bad for the lad's career you know.'

Walthar turns away.

The fact that Putz was a war criminal makes very little difference to Walthar. That Putz's perverted sadism had been practised with official consent was regrettable, but he had come to live with the idea that such things could happen in wartime. After all, his customers were all specialists in the same line.

It was unfortunate that Stern was personally involved, Stern's involvement was the only angle of the thing that affected him. But justice would be done. Stern would have his justice. As long as Stern had his justice the balance of Walthar's world would not be upset.

Putz had been in charge of a prison hospital under the Stertin régime, an experimental hospital. With the simplicity of war he had carried out his experiments in the nature of pain and the reduction of personality without outside interference. It made for a long and complicated trial, complicated by virtue of the fact that most of the prosecution witnesses were so enfeebled or deformed, their bodies and minds so warped and diseased at Putz's hands, that they had difficulty in putting together a coherent account of their experiences. Some could be interrogated only by yes–no signals made by the stumps of their limbs, others could write with pens clenched in gumless, tongueless mouths. But they had succeeded in conveying an outline of life in Putz's 'hospital'. The greater part of the evidence had been forthcoming from Putz himself, a Putz who had lain on his stretcher in court watching his protégés being wheeled past him to the witness stand, grinning at their incoherent mumbling, their heavily veiled features. Putz had told the full story of his experiments with a note of pride in his voice. His suave tone had an almost hypnotic effect, his chubby rosy cheeks twitched into a grin now and then as he remembered the complicated and delicate operations he had performed.

Now Putz is in the death cell. He is Walthar's guest. He is a man of medical genius, a brilliant surgeon. He is a man who has destroyed Stern's sister. Walthar is content that he is a man who is about to meet a just reckoning, a man whose time has almost come.

Putz lies awake on the bed. The night is slipping away. There will be no other night, unless there is a reprieve in the morning. There is the chance, the hope.

The barber has shaved his head. Walthar avoided his gaze as the razor slipped over his scalp.

It is Walthar's job to keep the hope of reprieve alive in him. He knows that it is Walthar's job not to let him despair, because it is easier to deal with a prisoner who thinks that it will not happen to him, that it is all an elaborate farce. It is Walthar's job to keep him happy and docile until the last moment, when the governor will tell him that there has been no reprieve, that the law will take its course.

He knows that there is no hope. He is interested in the fear that grips his body, a professional interest. He is interested in controlling that fear. People are bad at controlling fear, he knows that. They are out of practice in a civilized world. He had a chart on his office wall that showed the degree of suppression of different peoples. It was one of the things they had shown at the Trial, one of the things they had been barely able to understand. He knew how he, as a Slav, ought to react.

There would be a chair, like a barber's chair; a control unit; a little metal crown that fitted his head neatly; a fitting on his right ankle. There would be an audience; the governor, doctors, officials. Walthar would be there with his watery eyes, and Stern, enjoying himself.

It would be another experiment in pain. It would satisfy his curiosity. There had always been a doubt, now he would know. This time he would be the subject of the experiment. He hopes that he will remain conscious long enough to register the extent of his own pain, his own fear. He hopes that he will register the fear of death on their faces as they watch the shock flicker through his body. Fear in their eyes, horror in their bodies. They are not mentally equipped to deal with the fear of death as he is.

He watches the ceiling and repeats to himself that he is about to die. He is about to die by electrocution. Two thousand volts will pass through his body and they will be left with the knowledge of his death which they have caused. They will press the lever, they have passed the sentence, they are afraid because he must die.

He wakens, and he knows that he has been asleep for a long time. He does not know how long. Now he is awake and

conscious that it is morning. There are others in the room and Walthar is bending over him, touching his face to wake him.

He gazes at them. He twists his face to mock their gravity. The governor, the doctor, afraid. They are standing in a group around his bed, and the governor is opening his mouth to speak, and Putz knows what he is about to say and he does not want to hear it. It is morning and he does not want to die. He does not want to feel himself lifted by Walthar and Stern and carried down the passageway to the little steel door and strapped securely into the chair with a crown fitted on his head.

He twists his head on the pillow, turning away from them. He does not want to know that he is about to die, that there will be no reprieve. He will not listen to them. He is only a head on a pillow, soon his scalp will be scorched.

'It is therefore my duty to inform you that a stay of execution has been granted owing to the nature of your physical disability and the natural reluctance of the state to execute a man who is no longer in full possession of his faculties. It has therefore been prescribed by the Minister of Justice that you be admitted to the State Prison Hospital at Corblanz and your sentence commuted to one of imprisonment for life.'

Their eyes are upon him. The doctor is relieved. The governor's face is dull and placid. Walthar wears a startled expression. Stern has turned away.

'There it is,' the governor says gruffly, shuffling his papers. 'Another compromise, Putz, a political measure. In my opinion a miscarriage of justice. My only hope is that the other prisoners, wherever you go, make your life as unpleasant as it can possibly be within an institution.'

'Sir . . .' Walthar says in a shocked voice.

'I know, Walthar, I know the rules. No personal comment on the decisions of the . . . I know. You don't have to teach me my job.'

The governor turns from the bedside and walks to the door.

'I know, Walthar. I also know that this man does not deserve to go on living. This is the one man in my time here that I would have enjoyed dealing with.'

Putz begins to laugh, and his laughter follows the governor down the corridor, past the steel doorway, echoing and re-echoing, a mocking contented laugh. He lies on the bed and his chubby face shakes with mirth.

'Well now, Walthar,' he chuckles at length, 'all things come to an end, don't they?' He suddenly grew serious. 'Because of my physical condition. They're soft, Walthar, you're all soft. You're afraid to face up to killing. I never postponed an operation for a thing like this.' He gestured at his inert body. 'That's why you'll never make a race of scientists. You haven't got the guts to go through with things.'

Stern slumps into his chair, his face bloodless. Walthar speaks to him.

'Where do we go from here?' There is a tone of bewilderment in his voice.

'Poor Officer Stern,' the voice crows again from the bed. 'Poor Officer Stern isn't getting his treat after all. What a shame, what a shame.' Putz's head rocks back and forth on the pillow in triumph. 'Poor Officer Stern . . .'

'Shut up,' Walthar roars at him, his soft eyes grown hard, his decision taking form in his head.

'Well, if the Senior Officer isn't losing his temper too. Another successful experiment! I never thought I should succeed with you, Walthar. I'd quite given up hope.'

Walthar towers over him.

'Easy, Walthar,' says Stern from the side. 'There's nothing we can do about the bastard now.'

Walthar turns away.

'It's time he had his bath,' he says coldly.

Stern looks startled.

'I didn't think we'd need it this morning. I haven't made any arrangements . . .'

Walthar smiles. 'That's all right. You get the bath out and put Putz into it. I'll go and see about the water.'

Walthar leaves the cell and goes down the passage towards the kitchen.

Stern is alone with Putz.

'You don't dare touch me,' Putz says. 'You keep off me.'

Stern snorts. 'I'm not your sort, old chum, don't worry. I don't enjoy that sort of thing – your sort of thing.'

'Soft,' says Putz, sneering, 'too soft to get anywhere.'

Stern ignores him. He lifts Putz's limp body from the bed and places him in the tin bath, gently. He is determined to regard the man as an object, to forget what he has done. He forces the thought of his sister from his mind. It is a job, that's all. He will do his job correctly. He has no right to personal vengeance.

So he lowers Putz's body into the bath and stands by watching as Walthar re-enters the room and crosses to the bath, as he pours the first kettle of boiling water down into Putz's upturned, grinning face.

THE ROAD TO MICTLANTECUTLI

By Adobe James

THE RIBBON of asphalt – once black, now grey from the years of unrelenting sun – stretched out like a never-ending arrow shaft; in the distance, mirages – like dreams – sprang into life, shimmered, and silently dissolved at the approach of the speeding automobile.

Rivulets of sweat poured down from the face of Hernandez, the driver. Earlier in the day – when they had been in the good land – he had been congenial, expansive, even sympathetic. Now he drove quickly, apprehensively, almost angrily, not wanting to be caught in the bad land after sunset.

'*Semejante los buitres no tienen gordo en este distrito execrable*,' he muttered, squinting his eyes against the glare of the late afternoon sun.

Seated next to him, the man called Morgan smiled at the remark, 'Even the vultures are skinny in this lousy land.' Hernandez had a sense of humour; for that reason – and that reason, alone – Morgan was sorry that it was going to be necessary to kill him. But Hernandez was a policeman . . . a Mexican Federal cop who was taking him back to the United States border, where Morgan would be handed over to the criminal courts to hang, twitching, at the end of a long Texas rope.

No, Morgan thought, and knew the thought to be true, they won't hang me this time; next time, maybe, but not now. Hernandez was stupid, and it would be only a matter of time before he made a mistake. Completely relaxed, Morgan dozed, his manacled hands lying docilely in his lap . . . waiting . . . waiting . . . waiting.

It was almost five o'clock before Morgan, with all the keen instincts of the hunted, sensed his moment of freedom might

be approaching. Hernandez was becoming uncomfortable – the result of two bottles of beer after lunch. The policeman would be stopping soon. Morgan would make his move then.

On their right, a range of gently sloping foothills gradually had been rising from the flat surface of the desert.

Morgan asked, pretending boredom, 'Anything over there?'

Hernandez sighed, '*Quien sabe?*' Who knows? The plateau on the other side of the mountain range is supposed to be worse than this side. *Es impossible!* No one can exist there except a few wild Indians who speak a language that was old before the Aztecs came. It's uncharted, untamed, uncivilized . . . ruled by Mictlantecutli.

Now, slowly, as shadows lengthened, the land was changing all around them. For the first time since leaving Agua Lodoso, they could see some signs of vegetation – mesquite bushes, cactus, shrub brush. Ahead, standing like a lonely outpost sentinel, was a giant Saguaro cactus almost fifty feet high. Hernandez slowed the car and stopped in the shade of the cactus. 'Stretch your legs if you want, *amigo*, this is the last stop before Hermosillo.'

Hernandez got out, walked around the car, and opened the door for his prisoner. Morgan slipped out and stood, stretching like a cat. While the Mexican was relieving himself against the cactus, Morgan walked over to what had first appeared to be a crude cross stuck in the sand. He peered at it; the cross was only a sign – weather-beaten and pock-marked by the talons of vultures who had used it as a roosting place.

Hernandez strolled over and joined him. He, too, stared at the sign, his lips pursed in puzzlement under his black moustache. 'Linaculan – one hundred twenty kilometres! I did not know there was a road . . .' Then he brightened. 'Ah, *si*. I remember now. This must be the old *Real Militar*, the military highway leading from the interior to the east coast.'

That was all Morgan needed to know. If Linaculan was on the east coast, then Linaculan meant freedom. He yawned again, his impassive face a portrait of indifference.

'Ready, *amigo?*'

Morgan nodded. 'As ready as any man is to be hung.'

The Mexican laughed, coughed, and spat in the dust. 'Come on then.' He led the way towards the car and stood by its open door waiting for his prisoner. Morgan shambled towards him, his shoulders slumped forward as if protecting him from the oppressive heat of late afternoon. When he did move, it was as a snake strikes an unsuspecting victim. His manacled hands came down, viciously, on top of Hernandez's head. The policeman moaned and toppled to the ground. Morgan was on him immediately; his hands seeking, and finding, the gun he knew was in the Mexican's waistband. Then he stood upright – about four paces away from the figure on the ground.

Hernandez shook his head groggily, blinked his eyes, and started to rise. He had struggled to his knees when Morgan's cold voice froze him into immobility.

Morgan said, 'Goodbye, Hernandez. No hard feelings.'

The Mexican looked up; he saw death. '*Dios . . . dios.* No!' That was as far as he got; the 44-slug caught him above the ridge of the left eye and he was thrown ten feet backwards by the force of the bullet. He shuddered once, his legs beat a small tattoo in the dust, and then he was still.

Morgan walked over, shaking his head mournfully. 'I sure had you pegged wrong. You didn't look like a coward who would beg for his life.' He sighed at the dead man's lack of dignity – feeling almost as if he had been betrayed by a weak-willed friend.

He squatted and began searching the body. There was a wallet containing a badge, five hundred pesos, and a colour photograph of an overweight Mexican woman surrounded by three laughing small girls and two self-consciously grinning young boys. Morgan grunted non-committally and continued his search.

He found the handcuff keys taped to the calloused white soles of the dead man's foot.

Twilight was beginning to turn the Mexican hills to a red bronze when Morgan loaded Hernandez in the trunk of the car. He strolled back over to the road sign. After the mileage

there were the words, '*Cuidado – Peligroso*', 'Take Heed – Dangerous'. What a joke, he thought. Could anything be more dangerous than being hung? Or playing the part of a fox hounded by international police? He had been trapped and sentenced to die four different times in his life; and yet, he was still a free man. And . . . there could be nothing, absolutely nothing, ahead of him on this insignificant little dirt road that could match Morgan's wits, Morgan's reactions, Morgan's gun!

He got behind the wheel of the car and turned on to the road. It was rougher than it had appeared at first, but none the less, he made good time for the first thirty miles, and was able to drive fast enough that the dust remained spread out behind him like the brown tail of a comet hanging luminously in the fading light.

The sun dropped below the horizon line, but then, as Morgan began climbing the range of hills, it came back into sight once more – looking like the malevolent inflamed eye of a god angry at being awakened again.

Morgan crested the hill and began a downward ascent into a valley. Here darkness was embracing the land. He stopped once, where a *barranca* sloped down from the road, and threw over Hernandez's body. He watched it, rolling and tumbling, until it finally disappeared from sight in the black shadows beneath a strand of mesquite bushes some hundred feet below at the bottom.

Morgan drove on. He turned on the car lights as night closed in swiftly around him.

Abruptly, as he reached the valley floor, he began cursing, for the road was really no longer a road – just a scarred and broken path leading across the wilderness.

The next five kilometres took at least fifteen thousand miles out of the automobile. Morgan was forced to shift down to first gear as potholes – deep as wading pools – wrecked the front-end alignment and suspension system. Jagged hidden boulders in the middle of the road scraped at the undercarriage with a thousand steel fingers.

And dust! Dust was everywhere . . . it hung like a dark ominous cloud all about him; it coated the inside of the car as though it were beige velvet. It crept into Morgan's nostrils and throat until it became painful to breathe or swallow.

Minutes later, over the smell of dust, came the odour of hot water – steam – and he knew the cooling system had ruptured somewhere. It was then Morgan realized the car would never make it to Linaculan. By the last barely perceptible horizon glow, he searched the landscape for some evidence of life . . . and saw only the grotesque silhouettes of cactus and stunted desert brush.

The speedometer indicated they had travelled forty-four miles when his bouncing, weaving headlights picked up the solitary figure of a priest walking slowly alongside the road. Morgan's eyes narrowed as he weighed the value of offering a ride to the padre. That would be stupid, he thought – the man could be a *bandido* who would produce, and skilfully use, a knife, while Morgan was concentrating on the road.

The padre loomed up larger in the headlights. He did not turn towards the car; it seemed as though he were totally unaware of the car's approach.

Morgan passed without slowing; the figure was lost immediately in the dust and blackness of the Mexican night.

Suddenly, just as though several automatic relays had clicked open somewhere in his brain, all of Morgan's instincts were screaming at him. Something was wrong – terribly wrong. A trap of some sort had been entered. The feeling was familiar; there had been other traps before. He grinned wryly, pulled the gun from his pocket, and laid it on the seat beside him in preparation.

The next three miles seemed endless as he waited, almost eagerly, for the trap to swing shut. When nothing happened, he grew irritable and began cursing his imagination. The smell of hot oil and steam had grown humidly overpowering, and the engine was beginning to labour. Morgan glanced down at the temperature gauge and saw the needle had long since climbed into the red danger zone.

And, it was at this moment, while his attention was distracted, that the left front wheel slammed into a jagged rock which ripped through the tyre's sidewall. The vehicle began bucking and weaving from side to side like a wild, enraged, injured animal. Morgan hit his brakes, knowing it was too late. The car skidded sideways on the gravel, swerved to the right, teetered for a second on an embankment, and then – almost as if it were a movie being projected in slow motion – rolled end over end down the incline.

The last thing Morgan saw was a monstrous boulder looking up in the night like some huge basalt fist of God.

For a long time after he regained consciousness, Morgan lay still with his eyes closed. Someone had wiped his forehead and spoken to him. A man! Possibly . . . the priest? He listened to the man's coarse breathing; there was no other sound. They were alone.

Morgan opened his eyes. It was dark, but not as dark as before. A little moonlight was seeping through the high thin clouds. The priest – black of clothes and dark of face – was beside him.

'*Senor*, you are all right?'

Morgan flexed his leg muscles, moved his ankles, moved his shoulders, and turned his head from side to side. There were no aches, no pains; he felt surprisingly good. Well, no sense in letting the other man know; let the priest believe Morgan had injured his back and was incapable of rapid movement . . . then, when he had to move fast, the other would be unprepared.

'I hurt my back.'

'Can you stand?'

'Yes . . . I think so. Help me.'

The priest reached out; Morgan took the proffered hand, and, groaning audibly, stood erect.

'You are fortunate that I came along.'

'Yes. I'm grateful.' Morgan felt in his pocket. The wallet was still there; the gun was gone, or had it been in his pocket? Then he remembered, it had been on the seat beside him. Well,

no chance of finding it in the darkness . . . and there would be other weapons.

'Where were you going?' the priest asked.

'Linaculan.'

'Oh, yes . . . a fine city.' The priest was standing quite close to Morgan, staring at the American. The moon slipped in and out of the clouds. There was a moment of light, only a moment, but enough. Suddenly, for the first time in many years, Morgan was afraid . . . frightened by the padre's eyes; they were too black, too piercing, too fierce for a priest.

Morgan stepped back three paces – far enough away from the priest that the other man's eyes were lost in the darkness.

'You need not fear me,' the priest said quietly. 'I cannot harm you. I can only help you.'

It sounded sincere. Some of Morgan's nervousness began to abate. Mentally he sniffed the wind; the odour of the trap was there, but not as strong as before. After a few moments, some of his old cockiness returned. Where do we go from here, he thought. He was at least halfway towards Linaculan, so it would seem prudent to continue on, unless . . . there would be other transportation before then.

Morgan asked, 'Is Linaculan the nearest town?'

'Yes.'

'Is that where you were going?'

'No.'

Hopefully then, 'Do you have a church near by?'

'No. But I frequently trod this road?'

'For Christ's sake, why walk this miserable road?'

'For the very reason you mentioned, for Christ's sake.'

Now Morgan was completely at ease. The padre was harmless. A nut, but harmless. 'Well,' he said almost jauntily, 'I've got a long walk ahead of me. See you.'

Morgan thought he saw the priest's expression soften with the remark. 'I will walk part way with you.'

'Suit yourself, padre. My name's . . . Dan Morgan. I'm an American.'

'Yes . . . I know.'

The answer surprised Morgan for a moment; then he felt his guard rising again. Obviously the priest had gone through his belongings while he was unconscious . . . and perhaps that was where the gun had gone, too.

They began walking in silence. The moon – that alien globe of cold white light – won its battle with the clouds, and now shone brightly behind them. Long slender shadows raced along the road in front of the two men. The folds of the padre's cassock made whispering noises with each stride he took; his sandals went slap-slap-slap in the thick dust of the road.

In an effort to make conversation, Morgan asked, 'How far is Linaculan from here?'

'A great distance.'

'But,' Morgan exploded, 'I thought it was only about another fifty kilometres.'

'The candle lights of Linaculan are fifty-four kilometres from the point of your crash.'

Well, that was nice to know anyway. With luck, Morgan could make the thirty miles by tomorrow afternoon . . . and then, it would be a simple matter to get another car. He began taking longer strides; the priest kept pace beside him.

In time, the moon was cut off by a range of hills, and their shadows disappeared. The darkness that came in around them now was a tangible thing, warm, disquieting, fearful as the interior of a locked coffin. Morgan glanced at his watch. It had stopped at 8.18, apparently something snapped when the crash occurred. He didn't know how long he had been unconscious, but they had been walking for at least two hours . . . so, perhaps, it was around midnight.

They plodded on, two dark figures – shadows almost – walking a desolate road. They climbed a short hill and were bathed in moonlight again. Morgan liked that. The darkness had been too dark; it seemed to him that there were things – unseen, unreal – out there beyond the moonlight.

They started down the other side of the hill, and the darkness crept back . . .

'Don't you have any lights at all in this God-forsaken place?' Morgan asked irritably.

The padre did not answer. Morgan repeated the question, and his voice was full of frustrated threat.

Still there was no reply. Morgan shrugged and mentally said, 'To hell with you, my sullen Catholic friend. I'll take care of you later.'

The road led down the far side of the hill. Night – the true horribly oppressive night of the claustrophobiac – closed in menacingly.

They were in a gully for a long time before reaching another hill – this time, no moonlight greeted them; the only illumination was a hollow glow from behind the horizon clouds. It was enough though to show a fork in the road.

Morgan hesitated and asked, 'Which one goes to Linaculan?'

The priest stopped. The fierce black pupils of his eyes had grown large; so large, in fact, there seemed to be no longer any white to his eyes at all. He stretched out his arms to adjust his cassock, and at that moment he looked like some evil black praying mantis about to devour a victim. Even in the semi-darkness, he cast a shadow . . . a black, elongated shadow of the cross.

And now, the cornered killer instinct took hold of Morgan. 'Answer my question,' he snarled. 'Which way to Linaculan?'

'Have you so little faith?'

Morgan's voice was shaking in fury. 'Listen, you surly bastard! You've refused to answer my questions . . . or even make conversation. What does faith have to do with it? Just tell me how much farther I have to go to get to Linaculan; that's all I want from you. No psalm singing, no preaching. Nothing! Understand?'

'You still have a great distance to go . . .' His voice trailed off, and Morgan sensed a change in the padre's attitude. A moment later, Morgan heard it too . . . the far-off drumbeat of a horse's hooves.

The moon – as if curious – parted the clouds for the last time. There was only a shadow moving across the landscape at first, but as the horse came nearer, Morgan could see the animal, its mane and tail rippling like black flags straining at their halyards. It was a magnificent beast, quite the largest he had ever seen – coal-black as the midnight and spirited as a thunderhead.

What really took Morgan's breath away, however, was the girl. She rode the animal as though she were an integral part of it. The moonlight played with her, for she was dressed completely in white, from boots and jodhpurs to the form-fitting, long-sleeved blouse and Spanish *grandee* hat. Her hair, though, was black – black as a raven's wing, and it hung like a soft ebony cloud from her shoulders.

Savagely, she reined the stallion to a halt in front of the two men. The horse reared; Morgan jumped back nervously, but the priest stood his ground.

'Well, padre,' she said, smiling and – at the same time – slapping her jodhpurs with a riding whip. 'I see you have taken another unfortunate under your wing.' She put an odd emphasis on the word 'unfortunate'; Morgan didn't know whether to be angry or puzzled. He waited, silently watching the dramatic by-play going on between the two people. Perhaps, the entire thing was elaborately staged – all part of the trap. It was of no matter – there was no immediate danger to him. So, for the moment, he was content to merely stand and enjoy the woman's proud body.

In time, the girl became aware of Morgan's stare; her own eyes, answering, were as bold and insolent as the man's. She threw back her head and laughed throatily. 'You are in bad hands, my American friend. This *hombre* here' – she nodded contemptuously towards the priest – 'is called "old bad luck" among my people. Each time he is on the road, there is an accident. You have had trouble tonight . . . no?'

Morgan nodded once, then glanced sideways at the priest.

The padre, however, was watching the girl. She laughed under his scrutiny. 'Don't look so angry, old man. You can't

frighten me. Why don't you run along now; I'll see that our American friend reaches his destination.'

The priest held out his hand to Morgan. 'You must not go with her. She is evil. Evil personified.' He made three crosses in the air.

There was no doubt in Morgan's mind about his decision. The padre had said she was 'evil'; coming from a priest, that was a real recommendation. Besides, only an idiot would continue to walk the dark road when there was a chance to ride, a chance for pleasant conversation, a chance – really, a promise if he had correctly interpreted her look – of even more! He hesitated, still a wild, hunted animal wary of the trap.

The girl gently patted the sweating neck of her horse. 'Where were you going?'

'Linaculan,' Morgan answered.

'That isn't too far away. Come on, I'll give you a ride to Mictlantecutli's ranch . . . you can call for help from there.' Her lips were half parted; she seemed almost breathless as she awaited his answer.

Morgan turned to the priest. 'Well, thanks for the company, padre. See you around some time.'

The priest took two quick steps towards Morgan, and put out his arms, beseeching, 'Stay at my side. She is evil, I say.'

The girl laughed aloud. 'It's two against one, churchman. You've lost another victim.'

'Victim?' Morgan's eyes narrowed. He'd been right about the old devil all along. But something was ringing false. Then it came to him . . . if the padre was a thief and a murderer, why hadn't he done the job when Morgan was unconscious?

The priest gazed back over his shoulder towards the setting moon; it would be dark within seconds now. He reached inside his cassock and withdrew an ivory cross about eight or ten inches high. 'The night is coming. Hold on to the cross. Believe me. Do not go to Mictlantecutli. I am your last chance.'

'Go on, get away from him, you old fool,' the girl shouted. 'The authorities should take care of you idiots who molest and

frighten travellers on this road . . . and prevent them from reaching their destination.'

The priest paid no heed to the girl; he implored Morgan once again, and this time his voice was strong as he watched the last red lip of the moon disappear below the hill, 'There still is time . . .'

The girl viciously pulled back on the reins and dug her spurs into the horse's flanks; it screamed in rage and reared, its front hooves blotting out the stars. When back on all fours, the stallion was between Morgan and the priest. Her face was a soft glow as she smiled and withdrew a boot from the stirrups. 'Come, my friend. Place your foot here. Vault up behind me.' She reached out a helping hand, and as she bent over, her blouse gaped open slightly. Morgan grinned, and took her hand. He pulled himself astride the horse. 'Put your arms around me and hold on,' she ordered. Morgan did so, happily. Her body was supple, delightful to hold, and the faint scent of some exotic perfume wafted back to him from her hair.

He gazed down at the priest; the old man's face was once more unfathomable. 'So long, padre. Don't take any wooden *pesos*.'

The girl did not wait for an answer. She raked the flank of the horse with her spurs and the beast tore out into the night. 'Hold tight,' she shouted, 'hold tight.'

They rode at breakneck speed for almost ten minutes before she reined the stallion to a walk. With their pace slowed, Morgan became aware of the girl's body again, and desire built up rapidly inside him. It had been a long time; there was no one around to stop him . . . and the girl had shown a spirited wantonness that lead him to believe she would welcome his advances. They rode with only the hoarse breathing and clip-clop of the horse, and the creak of their saddle breaking the silence. Surreptitiously, his hand began to ride higher and higher on her rib cage. She made no protest, so he became bolder. Finally, he could feel the soft flesh of her breasts beneath the silk blouse.

It was easier than Morgan had ever believed possible. She

simply reined in the horse and turned partially around. We can stop here . . . if you want.'

Morgan's voice was guttural, his body pounding in desire, as he said, 'Yeh. I want.'

She slid from the horse, and Morgan was beside her immediately. Her arms went around his neck; their lips met in a brutal bruising parody of love. Her fingernails dug into his shoulders as his hands sought immediate demanding familiarity with her body. She moaned, deep in her throat as Morgan fumbled with her clothes. And then, with only the disinterested horse grazing near by and the brittle eyes of the stars glittering as they watched, their bodies joined in a violent collusion of hot, implacable lust.

Morgan could feel the lassitude of his body when he awakened. That was his first impression. His second impression was that he was still embracing the girl. The third – an overpowering horrible odour of putrefaction.

He opened his eyes.

And screamed.

It was a scream wrenched involuntarily from his soul, for there, in a faint light of an approaching dawn, he could see that he was holding in his arms the rotting cadaver of a woman – a body from which the flesh was peeling in great huge strips like rotten liver, from which the death grimace revealed crooked brown teeth and eyeless sockets.

Morgan whimpered and jumped to his feet. His heart was hammering as though it were about to fly from his body like some overtaxed runaway machine that explodes into pieces. His breath came in deep animal-like pants of fright. And his eyes darted frantically around like those of a madman tormented by phantoms.

'I . . . I . . . I . . .' he panted. It was all he could say. He began running down the road. He fell twice, painfully ripping open his legs and hands on the rocky surface of the land. 'I . . . I . . . I . . .' and then, the words he wanted most to say came spilling out, 'Help me . . . someone! Help . . . me!'

He heard the horse's hooves behind him. It was the girl; she

was alive . . . and whole! She smiled, reassuringly. 'Where did you go?' she asked. And then, she grinned impishly, 'Where are your clothes.'

'I . . . I . . . I . . .' Morgan could not speak.

'Come,' she said.

Morgan shook his head. He could not marshal his thoughts, but this much was certain; he knew he was not going with the girl.

'Come!' And this time it was an imperative command. The girl was no longer amused at his nudity, his frightened inarticulateness.

Morgan willed himself to turn and run away, but his body did not respond to his mental orders. Instead, like a mindless zombie, he mounted the horse.

'That's better,' the girl said, soothingly. 'Of course, you should have put on your clothes . . . but it doesn't matter.' She glanced towards the east, 'Night is almost gone. We must hurry. There is something I want you to see before we get to Mictlantecutli's ranch.'

She slapped the stallion with her whip, and the animal began chasing the blackness of the night.

Now, behind them, the sky definitely was beginning to lighten as dawn came to the Mexican desert. In the near light of the new day, Morgan could see a landmark that looked familiar. And then, off the road, at the bottom of the ravine, he saw his car. Gingerly, the horse picked its way down the slope until they were beside the wrecked vehicle.

Ugly, red-necked vultures screamed and flapped their wings as the horse approached. Several were fighting over what appeared to be elongated white ropes hanging out of the car windows. A few of the birds took to the air . . . the rest, arrogant and unafraid, moved over a few reluctant steps away. 'But . . . but . . . what are they doing here?' Morgan asked. 'There was no one in the car but me.'

He could feel the girl's body shaking in silent laughter. She pointed. By squinting his eyes, Morgan could make out the figure impaled on the steering-wheel post. The cold undulating

horror he had felt earlier closed in around him again. The body was familiar . . . too familiar! Morgan whimpered as the girl urged the stallion closer. The vultures had gone for the eyes first – as they usually do . . . the entrails of the dead man hung out the open window, and these had been the reason for fighting among the birds.

Morgan saw the clothes. The dead man was dressed the same as he had been. He wore the same shape wristwatch. What terrifying nightmare was this? Awaken . . . wake up . . . wake up, he mentally shouted. But the nightmare, more real than life itself, remained. The dead man was Morgan, there could be no doubt about it.

Morgan's mind was forced in a corner by the realization, his sanity backed away from the fact. He began to lose all control. He screamed, the scream of a demented lunatic.

At his cry, the girl shouted and whipped at the stallion. The horse scrambled up the side of the ravine.

There, in the roadway, stood the priest.

'Help me, Father. Help me. God help me . . .' Morgan mumbled, the saliva trickling slowly from both sides of his lax mouth.

'You made your choice. I am sorry.'

'But I did not know what Mictlantecutli was.'

'Mictlantecutli is known by many names: Diabolo, Satan, Devil, Lucifer, Mephistopheles. The particular name of evil is never important, for the precepts are the same in every country. You have embraced evil; you have made your last earthly choice. I am powerless now to aid you. Goodbye . . .'

He felt, then heard the girl's laughter – shrill, maniacal, satisfied. Her whip bit into the horse's neck and her spurs drew blood. They tore down the road, galloping, galloping, galloping towards the night. The stench was back again, and shreds of the girl's flesh began sloughing off in the wind.

She turned . . . slowly, this time . . . and Morgan saw the horrible grinning expression of a skeleton.

He twisted around, unable to face the apparition, and cried out once more for the priest. Far back in the distance – as if he

were viewing something in another world – Morgan could see the padre's solitary figure at the top of a hill, plodding towards the east, the rising sun, and a new day.

When Morgan turned back again, weeping and knowing now the desperate futility of hope, they had already reached the edge of night . . . and the oppressive darkness reached out to engulf them.

THE DOLL OF DEATH

By Vivian Meik

'IT'S ONLY a question of time, of course,' Vereker said quietly to the medical officer, as Mrs Brandon collected her letters and left the Mikalongwe post hut in her little *garetta* bush-cart.

Doctor Strang lifted one eyebrow. 'Vereker,' he said deliberately, 'during the fifteen years I've known you, never once have you been guilty of indiscretion, rancour, or scandalmongering, which is probably the reason why you are the youngest provincial commissioner in the service. What do you mean exactly? Brandon, as most of us know him, is a very decent chap, and she matches him to the soles of her dainty feet. They are among my best friends.'

'That's why,' Vereker said shortly. For a single second he looked steadily at Strang, then, without another word, turned abruptly on his heel and joined the *safari* which was awaiting him. Before the medical officer had recovered from his surprise, the commissioner was striding ahead of his carriers down the new *boma* road to the border.

Strang watched the *safari* disappear into the distance before he moved into his own *machila* to continue his journey. He was glad now that there had been very little mail for him, for he admitted quite frankly that Vereker's few words had upset him considerably.

Knowing Vereker as he did, he came to the conclusion at once that it would be a waste of time asking him to amplify his words. Vereker never amplified anything. Strang smiled whimsically as he thought of the man. Silent, even dour, honourable, clean-living, strong in mind and body, the provincial commissioner was all that and more. His greatest virtue – failing, his juniors called it– an was oysterlike propensity for keeping his

thoughts to himself. Few men knew Africa so well, none had given her greater service. Idolized by the natives he understood so well, loved and respected by his fellow-Europeans, he carried his power ably and well. Mikalongwe, all eighty thousand square miles of it, was the 'safest' province in Central Africa. To Vereker, almost entirely, was the credit due.

It was no wonder, therefore, that his cryptic remark had upset Strang, but as there was nothing to be gained by considering the commissioner, the doctor focused his thoughts on the Brandons.

Brandon was, as he had told Vereker, a decent fellow – a sahib. He had come out a few years previously, as had a number of ex-officers to whom the idea of a life of suburban monotony was repugnant, and had taken up a block of land in this new country. He was a hard worker and had been fairly successful. The wattle-and-daub shanty had soon given way to a homestead, and when he had married Shirley Trent a few months ago, the entire community of his scattered compatriots rejoiced.

It had seemed pre-eminently an ideal marriage for Central Africa, for the bride was no inexperienced newcomer. She was familiar with all the drawbacks of a planter's life, having come out over two years before on a visit to her brother, whose plantation marched with Brandon's. Her sister-in-law, greedy of the company of another woman on a lonely farm, had persuaded her to make her home with them.

Love had not come at first sight, for Shirley and Brandon had met constantly before they found themselves attracted to each other, though Brandon himself smilingly emphasized that he had loved his wife from the moment he met her. She was a most attractive girl, and it was currently believed that, in a land where white women were so few, she would have been married with the minimum of delay. There was no doubt that she could have done so had she chose.

Strang, however, suddenly remembered that he had, long ago, heard a persistent rumour to the effect that it once looked very much like a match between her and Dick Everett, a

planter down Nswadzi way. But nothing had ever materialized, and the story had been consigned to the limbo of the lying jade. Still, in view of Vereker's remark, he tried to recall it.

Not that there was much to recall – a few dances and a few motor rides when Everett and the girl had found themselves up at Zomba. That was all. As far as he knew the man had never visited the Trents or known Brandon, while the latter never went up to Zomba – the Central African capital in the highlands.

So there he was, he shrugged his shoulders impatiently, back at the point from which he started. If it had not been for Vereker, who had laid the train of thought, he would not have even considered the matter. But Vereker . . . it was believed that there was not a single insignificant thing that occurred in his district that Vereker did not know.

After a while the doctor smiled. He thought he saw the idea! Vereker liked Mrs Brandon very much, he knew. Obviously a man hates the thought of any ill befalling a friend, but – a big but – a friend is very seldom justified in coming between man and wife . . . Vereker also knew that Strang was Brandon's best friend. Very soon, possibly, the doctor would be called in, both as friend and consultant . . . He could then do what he thought best. At any rate, Vereker must have guessed that his words would have prepared Strang for something. Decent chap, Vereker . . .

But in the meantime what was Vereker thinking, and what in hell did he actually mean? For days Strang worried, to such effect that he decided to turn back and go on to the Brandon's. His plan was, however, upset by the arrival of a sweating runner, who gasped out the news that cholera had broken out on the Mikalongwe border, and it was three months before Strang's *safari* halted by the Brandon homestead again.

Within ten minutes of his arrival he decided that the commissioner had, for once, made a mistake, whatever he had meant by his cryptic remark; but after a couple of days he felt vaguely unsettled again.

There was no change in the Brandons since last he had seen them – at least no tangible change. Brandon himself seemed a trifle quieter than usual – that was all. A change for the better, Strang would have thought, had it not been for that remark of Vereker's. Still, it was not as if Brandon had developed the habit of brooding, and there was certainly no doubt about the way he worshipped the very ground on which his wife trod. She was her own gay self, with perhaps the added dignity unconsciously developed by a woman who is loved.

Strang damned Vereker under his breath. His visit over, he continued his *safari*, inspecting his various charges along the trails to the border, and eventually returned to his headquarters in Zomba after four strenuous months in the 'bush'.

In accordance with custom he repaired forthwith to the club, to become almost immediately possessed of the news that Mrs Brandon had eloped with Dick Everett a fortnight previously.

The details were – blessedly – scant. No one seemed to know anything more than the bare facts. She had, it appeared, come up to Zomba to some friends for the King's birthday 'week'. She had attended the ball at Government House, and had danced twice – twice only – with Everett. The next morning they had left together for Nswadzi.

'Brandon?' Strang asked quietly. The sneering answer was given that Brandon hadn't done a thing.

In an hour the medical officer was on the road again. His *safari* came up with Vereker three days later.

The commissioner listened patiently while Strang related the sorry tale. 'What's to be done now?' he ended lamely, then added, 'Have you seen Brandon?'

Vereker nodded. 'Yes,' he said quietly.

'Oh, don't be so damned monosyllabic,' the doctor burst out impatiently. 'How did you know?' He didn't wait for an answer, but went on, 'Can't you see how it's affecting me?'

'It's affecting me, too.'

'Then why the hell didn't you do something before this?' Strang countered.

Vereker smiled grimly. 'I'm not omnipotent,' he said.

'Then how did you know it was coming?'

The commissioner remained silent for a moment then shrugged his shoulders. 'One gets a hunch sometimes. You going on to Brandon?'

'Not at once. I only came to see you, with a vague idea that we might both go on together.'

The other shook his head. 'I don't think we can do anything about it. You'd better go on, though.'

Brandon met Strang with his old welcoming smile. He heard his friend out quietly, and then casually remarked that the matter was not worth discussion. After that, neither by word nor deed did he make any reference to the affair, nor did he show the slightest emotion. All that he had apparently done was to have had removed every article that had belonged to his wife and to have locked her room. Everything had been put out of sight, except, incongruously enough, a doll of which she had been particularly fond. It had been left where it lay in a corner by the gramophone.

Strang noticed it particularly, because it seemed so pathetic and forlorn among surroundings which were now so very masculine. It was one of those elongated pierrot rag dolls with a china head and hands – one of the fantastic things given away to the feminine section of their clientèle by the management of fashionable hotels on gala nights. Presumably Mrs Brandon had brought it out with her as a souvenir of some dance at home. As he noticed it he fancied it seemed to look at him in an appealing way, but as that was obviously a silly fancy he dismissed it with an impatient shrug of his shoulders.

A few days on the estate convinced him that there was nothing that he could do. Brandon himself was inscrutable and gave no sign of his thoughts. Indeed, he might not have been thinking of the matter at all. Not by the slightest detail did he change his daily routine. The only difference Strang noticed was that, at nights, he excused himself after dinner and locked himself up in his room. The doctor was puzzled at Brandon's attitude, and could not recall having met a similar case. But

whatever the man's thoughts were, he was certainly master of himself.

Strang stayed on till the limit of the time he could spare from his duties, and then left reluctantly, feeling absolutely baffled.

When he had left the estate several miles behind him, he suddenly made up his mind that he would go through with this matter whatever it cost him. He was certain that there was something more in it than met the eye. 'A vague premonition,' he thought, 'but this is Africa, and it's good enough for me. I'll see Shirley . . .'

He ordered his *safari* to make for the Nswadzi border, and two days later crossed into the district presided over by his old friend, Geoffrey Aylett.

Aylett was surprised and delighted to see Strang. 'But what in Heaven's name has brought you here?' he asked.

Strang did not beat about the bush. The other heard him out. Then he said thoughtfully, 'Yes, I know Everett. He used to be rather a sweep at one time, but seems to have changed the last year or two. Possibly the country's shaken him up. I'm surprised to hear he's done a thing like this, but, quite frankly, I don't see what we can do about it. I'm not a custodian of anyone's morals, you know, and if a man chooses to live openly with another man's wife, it's nobody else's business. Brandon is entitled to a divorce, and if he went to Zomba, he could have it all over in a week. This isn't Europe, thank Heaven.'

'But he won't even discuss the matter. I tell you, Aylett, there's something about the whole business that frightens me – something ontological. I know how Brandon used to look at his wife . . .'

'Well, he'd better not try any revenge stunts here. Everett may not be an ace of trumps, but we don't stand for anything like that.'

'The whole thing puzzles me beyond words,' Strang emphasized again. 'Vereker apparently saw it coming – and *he* won't say a word. Brandon got it in the neck – and *he* won't say a word, either. I'd have staked my life on Mrs Brandon . . .'

Aylett's *askari* sergeant came up and saluted. He held out a

letter. 'Runner from new *Dona* Everett *Bwana*,' he said impersonally.

Aylett glanced through the note. He turned to the medical officer. 'Here's your chance to place your stake,' he said, with a little smile. 'Everett has been attacked by some mysterious malady with which she cannot deal. It must be serious, or she would hardly have overridden the usual conventions to this extent. She asks for a doctor. Venters is a week's march away. Care to go?' He held out the letter.

Strang nodded eagerly as he snatched at the note. The contents merely said what Aylett had passed on – possibly it was appendicitis.

Strang set off at once. Everett's estate was two days' march away, and he wondered whether the planter was alive or dead by this time. Africa is a hard mistress . . .

When the medical officer arrived at the plantation he was amazed to see Everett calmly supervising the work on his fields. On catching sight of the *safari* the planter left his work and came up to the track.

The doctor tried to regard Everett impersonally, but feeling that this attitude was generated by the circumstances, he introduced himself and stated his mission courteously, and explained how he came to be there instead of the Nswadzi doctor.

Everett confirmed the letter. Five nights ago, he said, he had been taken mysteriously ill. He had been seized with agonizing pains in the region of the heart and abdomen, for which he had been at a loss to account. The usual limited medical knowledge possessed by a planter and the estate first-aid outfit had not eased the agony. Alarmed, Mrs Brandon had written to the commissioner, but shortly after the runner had left, the pain disappeared as suddenly as it had come.

The symptoms puzzled Strang. It looked as if he might have to stay some time, and as the situation would indubitably be strained by his presence, he thought it better to say something to Everett in connection with his friendship with the Brandons.

'Look here, Everett,' he began, without preamble, 'before we go any farther, I'm going to ask you to remember that I'm

here as a doctor. I am aware of certain recent circumstances, but do not propose, should you ask me to prescribe for you, to let that influence my attitude to you one way or another. In a small community, as you know, feelings run high. As you know, too, Shirley Brandon and her husband were particular friends of mine, but, as I said just now' – he shrugged his shoulders – 'I am here purely as a medico. I felt it my duty to come along. I had no idea but what you might have been dead. Of course, as you now appear to be quite fit —'

Everett put out his hand. His voice trembled as he spoke, and in his eyes there crept a look of fear. 'Please don't go, doctor,' he pleaded. 'That night – but we can't talk here. Won't you come up to the house? My "boys" will look after your *safari*.'

The two men walked slowly up to the homestead. After Everett had spoken, a silence had fallen between them. Each was busy with his own thoughts, and Strang's face wore a very worried frown.

'Would you care to walk on ahead?' the doctor asked Everett, when they were nearing the house, 'and say that I have arrived. Mrs Brandon will not be expecting me.'

'No, no doctor,' the planter said nervously. 'I think she'll be glad to see you, really. She —' He broke off irresolutely, then relapsed into his nervous silence.

In a few minutes they reached the house. 'Shirley,' Everett called, 'Shirley . . .'

They heard her footsteps patter round the corner of the veranda. As she recognized Strang she stood stock-still. Her face grew pale. 'You . . .' she gasped.

'It's all right, darling,' Everett interrupted, 'Doctor Strang will explain.' He turned to the medical officer. 'Perhaps – er – I've got one or two little things to attend to. Would you excuse me for a few minutes?'

Strang nodded absently. His eyes were fixed on Shirley Brandon. Had he not seen it himself he would never have believed anyone could have changed so quickly in a few days. But it was the look on her face that held him – a look of cold, stark terror. He recovered himself, and stepped forward as he

put out his hands. 'Why, Shirley, my dear child,' he said, 'you mustn't look like that, you know.'

At his words she seemed to come to life again. She began to laugh hysterically. 'I don't care, doctor,' she said, in a queer choked voice, 'I love him. I tell you I love him and he loves me. I've always loved him and I don't care what anyone says or thinks . . .' Her voice trailed off into a scream. Strang was just in time to catch her as she fainted.

Everett had rushed out, and together the two men carried her into the bedroom. 'My big bag,' Strang ordered curtly. The planter raced off and returned with it almost immediately. 'Thanks'; the acknowledgement was short. 'Now shut that door and go and play with the puppies until I call you . . .' Then he bent over the unconscious girl and gently lifted her wrist.

In a few minutes she opened her eyes. She looked round her, puzzled, then recognized Strang. 'Doctor —' she said weakly.

'Hush, my dear,' Strang said quietly, 'don't worry about anything. Everything is all right now, and Dick's only gone to see about my things. Try and sleep a little. Now just take this.'

'I'm frightened – doctor – frightened to go to sleep. Besides, I must speak to you.'

'Why, of course, Shirley; but first try and rest a little. I'm going to be here for ever so long,' he smiled.

'No, I must talk to you, doctor – now,' she replied. 'If I don't, I'll go mad. Can't you see how I'm suffering? And last night – Doctor Strang' – she suddenly sat bolt upright and stared at him with a terrified look in her eyes – '*you* don't think I'm mad, do you? Say you don't – and don't let Alec kill me . . . He's been trying to do so for three nights in my dreams, with that horrible Malolo drum which he makes my little pierrot doll beat. And then the doll stops and comes towards me. Only it hasn't got a pierrot face any more – it becomes black and has the Malolo filed teeth. Its boneless legs trail as it drags itself forward to me. I can't escape, doctor. It crawls and crawls and crawls, with implacable hate on its foul, black face. And when I am exhausted, running, its little evil face comes

closer and its boneless legs and hands work like tentacles round my body, stripping me naked. The face, doctor, oh, my God! the face, small and evil – and then it grows, just like one of those screen fantasies as the camera closes up to some monster. Then, having stripped me to the soul, the face descends . . . while the tentacles of legs and arms coil like living snakes . . . I tell you, doctor, he's killing me . . .' She began to whimper . . . 'Save me, doctor, save me . . .'

'Hush, my dear, everything will be all right now.' Strang tried to soothe the overwrought girl.

'But I must speak, doctor, or I'll go mad, I tell you – *mad*. You *must* listen. That was but the least of it. I'll tell you everything, doctor. Why I . . . why I . . .'

An hour later, Strang, his lips set in a thin, hard line, went on to the veranda to Everett. His impersonal attitude to the planter seemed to have undergone a change.

'She's all right now,' he said, 'and sleeping like a child. And now, young fellow, let's see if we can't locate the cause of your trouble of the other night. Come into my room.'

'Not a thing wrong,' he said at the conclusion of his examination. 'You're as sound as a bell.'

'The pain was very real though,' the other said wryly. 'It makes me shiver to think of it. It can't be appendicitis again, can it? As you have seen, I was operated on for that when I was last at home.'

'H'm – yes, I noticed that. Now listen, Everett. Frankly, I'm worried about both of you. I'll hang on a few days. If there is no recurrence again, well and good. Take Shirley home, though, for a spell. She's overwrought. Can you manage it?'

'Oh, yes, Doc, that's all right. Dunster can keep an eye on the place for a few months. Can't you give me some idea —?'

Strang looked away. 'I'll be able to judge better in a few days,' he said evasively. 'You've been here long enough to know that Central Africa is a queer place – lots of things happen with which western science is not yet familiar.' He turned to Everett again. 'I am now going to ask you a few questions

about Shirley. You may not like them – as a doctor I don't care a damn either way – but I want your assurance that you will not try to hedge when you answer.'

'Doctor Strang,' Everett spoke angrily, 'just get this before you go on. I've loved Shirley ever since the first time I saw her – and she has loved me. We had a misunderstanding like any couple of young fools – but – we've paid a hell of a price both before and when she married Brandon. But the debt is quitted – we paid, I tell you, in blood almost . . . I know that the men up in Zomba don't think much of us, and I know that – once – I did things of which I am now ashamed; but all that was before I met Shirley. Brandon got her on the rebound, but I tell you the man's a swine at heart. He lives a Jekyll and Hyde existence – but this Hyde is worse than the original. Nobody knows – only Shirley. I know you number him among your best friends – but you've got to listen to *me* now. Within a week he broke Shirley – body and soul. She tried to hide it at first, for the honour of her caste in a black country, but it was beyond endurance. She wrote to me, and we eventually arranged to meet in Zomba and come down here together, damning everybody and everything. At any rate, she's safe here. Brandon knew – he knows now – that Shirley hated him after – after her wedding night . . . Why hasn't he made any move since Shirley came to me? I'll tell you. He knows that I'd kill him. I'd have killed him before – the rotten, foul swine – if it had not been for her —'

'Steady on, Everett,' said the doctor. 'Er – you've answered the questions I was going to ask. Now, suppose you get your boys to get my gear up here. I'd like a little rest. Thanks. And don't worry about Shirley – she'll be sleeping right through till tomorrow morning.'

Later on, after a quiet dinner, the two men sat at their ease on the veranda. Conversation gradually died down in the silence of the night. Strang felt stifled, though a cool breeze had sprung up and was fanning his tired eyes. A great weight seemed to be pressing him down. This revelation about Brandon . . . It seemed incredible, yet medical jurisprudence

was thickly dotted with cases like this. And Shirley . . . Then there was Vereker. How did he come in? An observer obviously for he did not appear to hold a brief for anyone . . . But how and what did he know? He turned to Everett, and asked suddenly, 'Ever met Vereker – my Provincial Commissioner in Mikalongwe?'

'Vereker? Oh, rather – several times,' was the surprising reply. 'An awfully good fellow I thought him. See a lot, say nothing type. More than that – he was very kind to me and asked me up to dine with him whenever we both happened to be in Zomba. I appreciated this because, as I told you, the Zomba people have not been – as kind.'

'Oh! Had you over to his outfit, did he? – Er – after Shirley was married?'

The planter nodded. 'Yes, it was shortly after that. Quite human he was that time, too. Actually spoke for more than a minute on end – conventional stuff! I think he was the only man who ever guessed that Shirley and I loved each other.'

'How was that?'

'Well, I wasn't within miles of the wedding – naturally. When I was leaving his *safari*, he mentioned, *à propos* of something else, how Shirley had carried a pierrot doll I had given her instead of the usual bridal bouquet. I had given it to her some time previously. I expect he had noticed me hand it over. Oh, yes, now I remember, he had seen me —'

'Half a minute! That doll interests me! I've often noticed Shirley amuse herself with it. You say Vereker remarked about it?'

'Yes – twice, as a matter of fact. When I was saying goodnight a little later on he brought it up again. "Yes," he said, "come to think of it, it was *rather* novel, carrying a doll on her wedding day. She's great on it still . . ." That was all, but it told me a heap. Clever fellow, Vereker – and damned kind. Why did you ask if I knew him?'

'Oh, I just wondered.'

The two men relapsed into silence. The minutes wore on. For once the night was peaceful. Even the sound of Africa's

eternal drums seemed placid – almost lethargic. Monotonously the rhythm rolled across the miles like the drone of a drowsy chorus. Suddenly, without any warning, they changed their beat. The very air seemed stirred as the now irregular throb broke their peaceful rhythm. And, as suddenly, Everett threw himself out of his chair, his face contorted with pain and his body writhing convulsively. He looked like some grotesque human animal in an invisible grip – twisting, groping, trying to escape the torture of some gigantic stranglehold. An unwilling scream of agony was drawn through his lips as Strang leaped up and tried to steady him.

The doctor's first thought was that Shirley – thank Heaven – was still deep under the influence of the powerful narcotic he had given her. She would not hear her lover. Then he grappled with the tortured man. Everett's head 'boy' came running out when he heard his master's scream. With his help Strang eventually lifted the planter and carried him to his room. He was conscious, but could only whisper weakly, 'Doc – it's bloody Hell, do something – but gag me first. I mustn't wake Shirley.' Strang nodded, as he took out his handkerchief. Then he rushed off for his bag.

But it was of no avail. The strong dose of morphia he administered hardly lessened the agony. For three hours Everett turned and twisted in pain. At last it died down, leaving him exhausted and biting on the handkerchief he had stuffed into his mouth.

'My God! Doc – what was it?' he whispered at last. 'It was worse than the last attack. Each breath was a torture and I felt as if my spine was cracking. I felt as if I was gripped by a pair of vicelike hands and was getting the life squeezed out of me. And did you hear those damned drums of hell roll their devilish rhythm everywhere. Every beat throbbed through my brain in unison with each pang of torture. What is it, Doc? – for God's sake, don't let it come again.'

In answer Strang took off Everett's clothes. 'Tell me,' he said quietly, 'exactly where you felt the pain. Here? Here? Here?' Then the planter looked at him in surprise.

'There is not a vestige of pain left,' he said. 'I'm only exhausted and my heart's thumping.'

Strang said nothing as he turned Everett's body over. He stared at two red marks showing up lividly in the middle of his back. They were distinct and complete – the impression of two powerful hands . . . And hammering on his brain was the echo of the irregular throb of the drums of which Everett had complained. Even as he remembered them their beat changed, and before his astonished eyes the red imprints slowly disappeared.

Strang suddenly realized that he was in the grip of fear – cold, unreasoning, stark, naked terror. His own voice sounded far away as he spoke to Everett:

'Can't make it out yet,' he heard himself saying calmly to his patient; and then, in a cheerful voice, 'But we mustn't have this sort of thing happen so far away from anywhere – what? I am going to take both of you up to my place in Zomba tomorrow.'

'But—'

'No "buts", Everett. I'm being honest with you and I tell you I regard it as of vital importance. Any details about the conventions can be settled later – they are of no consequence, as far as I am concerned.'

The two men looked at each other. Then Everett spoke, 'I'll tell Ch'sila to arrange the *safaris* for daybreak. Will you – see to Shirley?'

The doctor nodded. Then after a moment, 'You'd better get off to bed. I want my room! I'll give you a little injection before you go. It will stop that heart thumping. Oh, and if I were you I shouldn't mention this business to Shirley . . .'

But Strang did not go to bed that night. For two hours he wrote by the flickering light of the hurricane lantern at the corner of the veranda outside Everett's and Shirley's rooms, his chief mail runner squatting patiently beside him. Dawn was almost breaking when he handed the bulky envelope to the native. '*Bwana* Vereker,' he ordered curtly, 'and run as if the devil was after you.'

The man grinned as he saluted. 'Only ninety miles, *Bwana*

Vereker, the drums say,' he answered. 'Tomorrow night, *Bwana*, I give him letter.' A moment later he had gone.

Then Strang, wide-eyed and thoughtful, waited impatiently for the coming of the day. Not till the complete *safari* was well on the road, with Everett's double *machila* jogging along beside his, did he relax and snatch a little sleep.

There was a frightened look in the medical officer's eyes as he spoke. 'I tell you, Vereker,' he said, 'it's only a question of days before Everett dies. He's had four seizures since I brought him here. Neither heart nor body can stand the strain. Shirley Brandon's horror-laden dreams have already driven her to the verge of insanity. I give them both a month at the outside. Both are physical wrecks. Is there no way by which we can get Brandon, or at least find out what he is doing?'

'I can tell you what he is doing,' Vereker replied. 'More than that. I can tell you how he is murdering both Everett and the girl. But we can do nothing either in law or out of it. In the first case there isn't a tittle of evidence any jury would accept. In the other, the doll has put him beyond our reach.'

'Go back a bit, Vereker,' the doctor said. 'I want to know how you found it all out. Perhaps then, between your knowledge of the "bush" and mine of medicine, we might be able to do something. If necessary I'll gladly kill him myself.'

Vereker shook his head. 'No good! I could have had it done easily after your letter from Nswadzi confirmed my suspicions, but that wouldn't have saved your patients. The opposite, in fact. The doll – you see, it's like this . . .

'I had spotted the fact that Everett and Shirley Brandon had been in love with each other, and when I "discovered" Brandon I mentioned one or two little things to Everett. I had found out, through Brandon casually boasting that he had learnt the secret of the drums, that he was leading a double life. White by day, black by night . . . He was *too* well up in native ritual and things like that.

'News came to me one day that a white man was heading the obscene initiation ceremonies of the Ch'anguru – not far from

Brandon's place. As you know, no white man, unless he's gone native – through and through – can get near these ceremonies, and one morning I saw a *machila* carrying him back from one of these orgies. He was slavering at the mouth from the physical reaction. He had been married only a week . . . It was not hard to guess that his wife would run away, though naturally I was not in a position to voice my suspicion. No woman could stomach *that* . . . even though she could not guess the actual extent of the evil. She had, however, to feel the reaction.

'I thought I'd give you a hint, but you misread it. Still, the point is not that. *Brandon is breaking no law.* After his wife went away, more news percolated through to me via my native intelligence branch – real evil news about him. He had taken up blood brotherhood with the Ch'anguru – you know how they exchange their blood – and he had also devised a new sadistic dance – a doll dance . . .

'That was her doll, and Everett's . . . See? The Ch'anguru, at their initiation and certain other ceremonies, have a kind of cult-of-Isis, black mass type of ritual, and the doll, to an almost unlimited evil extent, became literally a limb of Satan. You know the tag – "There are more things . . ." and then he began to *use* it . . . This effigy type of revenge has been in vogue since the days of the first Pharaohs. It is something western civilization *will* shut their eyes against. The Orientals do it with a goldfish which has been injected with a drop of the proposed victim's blood. Sometimes they starve the fish, or get it gasping for want of water. There are many things you can do to a fish . . . including biting it in two . . . Anything that happens to the fish – the victim feels . . . Pleasant, isn't it? Over here, however, blood is not necessary. Original ownership is sufficient – Ch'anguru and *Zinyao voodoo* is sufficiently strong . . . Of course, a drop or two of blood makes it ever so much more effective . . .

'Well, the news came in about the doll. Can you picture the bestial, lewd, sadistic dance led by Brandon and the pierrot doll? And each time the dance took place to the throb of the

drums, Brandon crushed the doll to himself, with a vision of Shirley and Everett for urge . . .

'See? Suppose, as you suggest, we kill him? What happens then? Who devitalizes the doll? Only the death of the person on whom the *ju-ju* lies can do this. And what he does to the doll – the devil does to Everett . . .'

'My God, Vereker,' said the doctor, 'can nothing be done? The monster must be insane – worse, when Shirley resisted his lust and sadism . . .' Suddenly Strang sprang to his feet. 'I've got it, Vereker, I've got it,' he almost shouted. 'That's the clue – the word insane – but first – if I certify him insane, can you arrest him?'

'Why, of course,' was the reply. 'But they, the doll . . .'

'I'll explain as we go along. I can arrange for the doctor here – I've already consulted him – to look after Everett and Shirley Brandon. He will keep them under chloroform when the next attack comes. How soon can you leave?'

'Within the hour. My *safari* is always ready.'

'Good.'

Strang was almost his old cheerful self when they set out for Brandon's estate, but at the thought of what was lying before him he grew serious again. During most of the three-day march he went over his plans with Vereker time and time again. The commissioner, as if regretting his recent verbosity, merely kept on nodding his head in answer, but there remained a look in his eye that was not pleasant to see.

They caught Brandon unawares . . . Central Africa, as Aylett had remarked to Strang, was not, thank Heaven, Europe . . .

Securely bound, Brandon raged for hours like some caged beast. Later he grew calmer, but his captors took no notice of him. Patiently they waited for the night.

Slowly at first, then gradually louder, the drums began to throb. 'Hurry, hurry, hurry,' they seemed to call, 'the jungle gods wait.' As the hours wore on, and the drums maintained their insistence, a change came over Brandon. His face twitched and grew bestial. His voice became a snarl as his lips curled

back over his teeth and gums. He began to slaver. And still the two others waited patiently, while the drums kept throbbing out their inexorable message. Then Strang left the room.

'Let me go, Vereker,' Brandon growled, 'just this once. I swear to you, I will – where's Strang gone to? Strang, Strang, come here . . .'

For an hour the prisoner pleaded, whined and cursed in turn. At last Strang came back. In his hand was the pierrot doll. He held it tenderly, almost preciously. As he sat down he nodded imperceptibly towards Vereker, who slipped away to the vacated room. The commissioner smiled as he carefully gathered up the litter Strang had left behind – the remnants of the black coat Brandon had worn at his wedding, pieces left over after Strang had entirely recovered the pierrot doll. A syringe and a solution with which the medical officer had infected the cloth . . . He smiled again – cynically – as he recalled how assiduously Strang had attended Brandon when he had bitten his lip till it bled, after he had first begun to rage. He put the remnants very carefully into the kitchen fire and watched them burn till the end. Then he rejoined Strang.

Brandon was now screaming. 'My doll, Strang, give me my doll. I'll admit anything, cannibalism, anything – if you give me my doll.' His voice changed. It became cunning. 'Listen, Strang,' he said, 'because I am blood brother to the Ch'anguru, the drums have told me what is happening to Everett and Shirley. I offer to save them, if you give me back the doll. My doll is a sacrificial doll now. It's vital . . . it's *living*, Strang. I'm willing to remain bound, but let me only hold it and send its message. Can't you hear the drums calling for the *ju-ju* of the doll dance? Give it to me and loosen my arms. Keep my body bound if you will, but give it to me. The drums are insistent . . . Strang, *can't* you understand?'

Strang looked up at Vereker. The commissioner nodded. Then the doctor turned to Brandon. 'Here's your doll. Remember you offered me the lives of Everett and Shirley. Remember . . .'

Brandon held the doll quietly for a moment. Slowly he

stroked it as if it were a living thing – its legs, its hands, its slim elongated body and arms. As he stroked it it seemed to smile. Brandon's face lost its snarl. He began to eye it as a cat eyes a mouse. Slowly his hands worked along the pierrot – up and up till they reached the doll's throat . . .

With a wild cry he turned to Strang. A maniacal laugh burst from him. His voice grew frenzied. 'Watch, Strang, watch,' he screamed. 'See what I will do to Everett and – her . . . Every pang the doll suffers – a hundredfold will they bear it. Look . . .' He took the doll by the throat, while his insane strength gradually exerted its full pressure.

For a moment nothing happened. Vereker and Strang stood like graven images. Then slowly the long boneless hands of the pierrot lifted themselves. The little face became convulsed with rage and bestiality. The hands crawled along Brandon's arms, stretching themselves as they moved towards his throat. Like the tentacles of an octopus they groped their way upwards. Then they found what they were searching for, and held fast . . . The legs spread downward in unison.

A look of horror spread over Brandon's face as he realized what had happened, but it was too late to relax his own fixed muscles. The pressure increased . . . Gradually Brandon's grip grew weaker as his heart failed to take the strain. The doll's head, no longer held so fast, began to move. Its tiny evil mouth slavered as it pulled itself along till it reached the hands. There was a slight sound as its teeth clenched on something. For a long minute it hung there.

Then it dropped to the ground – the limp thing of rags it once was.

LOVE ME, LOVE ME, LOVE ME

By M. S. Waddell

I WAS not alone.

I stopped and turned round. I knew there was somebody there, somebody following, somebody who did not want to be seen, somebody shy.

Well, all right, so there was nobody there. Maybe it was just my imagination . . . again.

I lit a cigarette, pausing beneath a street lamp. Maybe it was nerves, maybe I had been doing too much, maybe now was the time to do something about it. I'm not made of iron. Time to take a rest. I walked on up the avenue, mechanically counting my paces between the trees that flanked it.

Harcourt could do it . . . no doubt about that. He was able, he knew the ropes. Nothing would go far wrong with Harcourt in charge. There was no need to actually go away. I could stay at home . . . where I would be on hand if anything happened.

The feeling again, the feeling that somebody was watching me. I fought against it, unavailingly. I turned round.

Nothing.

A quiet road, trees, and bushes, an odd friendly light winking over the top of a hedge, only not so many now as there usually were because now it was getting late, or early, depending on the way you look at it. One-thirty a.m., a cool morning, not unpleasant. The way I like it . . . the best way for relaxing; not lying in bed, getting up and walking. Not far, just along the road and back, makes the thoughts stand still, makes things insignificant. People, too many people all day . . . nobody at night . . . usually.

So I quickened my pace. Maybe it would be better to get home, get to bed. This feeling . . . this was bad. Feet on the

ground . . . people with feet on the ground don't start imagining things, not this way . . . this rustling on the road behind me.

Turn round . . . again? All right . . . don't turn round. So what about the rustling on the road . . . a dog?

Glad to get home just the same. I unlatched the gate, turned up the path. Thirty yards, feet scraping on the gravel. Keys . . . groping for the keys, fumbling for the lock.

Someone was standing at the gate, something. A shape . . . colourless . . . then it was gone, faded. Imagination . . . or not imagination? I went back down to the gate. Nothing. Always nothing.

Or was there? Nothing tangible . . . but there was something. A feeling in the air . . . a fondness . . . the only way to describe it. Something personal about the night.

Then there wasn't. There was only night, impersonal. Time to go inside to have a drink, to go to bed. To fix it with Harcourt tomorrow for a rest . . . a real rest.

Back into the house . . . a drink . . . to calm things down.

Looking through the window . . . there is nothing at the gate.

There is nothing at the gate.

There is something at the gate . . . someone. A someone . . . waiting at the gate. Last night . . . I don't know about last night. Maybe there wasn't last night. Tonight there is someone, or something – I don't know – at the gate. Curiously there is no feeling of anxiety about it in my mind . . . curiosity yes . . . that much good the day's rest has done.

This thing at the gate . . . It still isn't there when I look directly. Just now and then . . . a glance through the curtains and there it is, glowing faintly in the light from the road.

Harcourt is coming tonight. That ought to be the test. I can see it clearly now . . . inside the gate. Never close . . . but inside the gate standing at the foot of the garden in the darkness.

It's not so shy now . . . it lets me look at it. I'm not afraid. Maybe it is imagination . . . maybe not. If not, then I should be afraid. But I'm not . . . just rather happy. I'm not afraid . . . maybe *it* is, or shy, or something.

Harcourt didn't see it. It was near to him, close to him in the darkness, but he didn't know. I didn't ask him. I couldn't ask him because he would have thought . . . well, it's obvious what he would have thought – wouldn't anybody?

You can't talk to a man like Harcourt about a thing like . . . the thing. Can you call a thing a person? Harcourt has his head firmly screwed on. You can talk to him about budgets and schedules and items for procedure . . . my sort of man, a man who doesn't need an imagination.

We talked. We sat by the window and talked. I kept the curtains back . . . I wanted to see if he would see it. I didn't want him to see it . . . not really. If he saw it, then it wasn't an it . . . it was something that could be classified and boxed away in his orderly mind . . . if he didn't see it, it was part of my imagination, or strain from overwork or nerves.

Well . . . he didn't see it.

It saw him.

He must have seen it, if it was there to see. It came right out into the light as it has never done before, right up the garden towards the window.

I know more about it now. It looks like a woman . . . a girl, not a woman. Too slight for a woman, too soft in its movements. It never actually seems to move. One minute it is in one spot, the next a little farther on. But coming towards the house, definitely. White . . . or perhaps not really white. Colourless, like water formed into a shape, like rain frozen into a pattern on glass.

'You know your way?' I asked Harcourt at the door.

'Down to the station . . . Yes.'

I held the door open for him.

'Goodnight.'

'Goodnight.'

He walked down the path.

I stood in the door. He must have thought I was watching him particularly, he made a gesture of farewell at the gate.

The thing was standing against the hedge. It had the most wistful, sad little face I have ever seen. It stood as high as my shoulder, still, more than is implied by still . . . motionless, its fingers clasped against its cape. It had turned its face aside so that I could not look directly upon it. It wore high old-fashioned shoes, a long, plain-cut dress, a cape draped over its shoulders.

I waited at the door. It did not move.

'Come in,' I said out loud. 'You can come in.'

I stepped forward, and it was gone.

'You musn't be afraid of me,' I said, standing in the garden in the darkness. 'You mustn't be afraid.' My voice sounded shrill, uncertain. I was trying to be sincere. It was afraid, and cold and lost, wherever it was, whoever it had been.

I waited a minute, two, three . . . till there was no point in it. I turned back to the house, pausing at the door. 'You don't have to be afraid of me,' I said again, softly.

I went back into the sitting-room. I sat by the window, looking out, in my favourite chair, where it would expect to see me. I waited. I went to sleep.

Morning . . . and the sun shining through the glass. I awoke slowly, comfortable, taking my time like a tabby cat. Plenty of time . . . all the time in the world.

Only it was running short of time . . . it had not found what it needed, it was still searching, with all the time in the world, but short of time.

In the moisture on the window pane it had traced with its finger, LOVE ME, LOVE ME, LOVE ME.

Tonight Harcourt walked through it. It was waiting by the door when I let him in, and he moved through it. Just for a moment its face mingled with Harcourt's smart black suit, then I was looking at it over his shoulder . . . and it was looking at me.

'You look pale,' Harcourt said, as I closed the door. 'You were right to take a rest.'

'I don't know,' I said. 'I'm beginning to wonder if it was such a good idea.'

'Oh?'

I looked at his face. He wasn't really interested. Fair enough . . . he wasn't paid to be interested.

'Gets a bit lonely out here,' I said. 'You know the way it is.'

'Go off somewhere then,' he said, settling in his chair by the table, spreading the papers from his briefcase before him. 'Nothing to hold you here is there?'

'No,' I said. 'I suppose not.'

We went on to other things then . . . Harcourt's sort of things. But I went on thinking about it . . . and it wasn't right. There was something to hold me here . . . there was that thing in the garden for a start.

Just how long was it going to stay in the garden?

Not long. She was waiting in the hall when I showed Harcourt to the door. The same frozen stance, the same fragile hand clutching the edge of her cape.

I let Harcourt out, closed the door, turned round. She was still there, standing at the foot of the stairs, her eyes upon me.

'Well, you're in at last,' I said. 'What do you want?'

For a wraith she wasn't very forthcoming. Just the eyes, soft and sad, trying to say something. A fragile little thing.

'I don't know how to get through to you,' I said. 'I'm sorry. I don't know what you want.'

She smiled. It was the first time I had actually seen her make any movement. It was a nice smile, wistful maybe, but nice. Then she started to fade. One minute she was standing against the banister, the next she wasn't.

'You mustn't be afraid,' I said, hopefully.

There wasn't much point in waiting about in the hall for a timid spectre, so I abandoned the idea. Maybe she couldn't stay in one place very long? She was gone, anyway.

I waited round a bit that night, just to see if she would put

in an appearance. Nothing happened. Once or twice there seemed to be a shade, a movement in the firelight, but she didn't let me see her.

So it went on for a day or two. She would turn up at odd spots round the house, just standing there smiling. Once she reached out towards me, dainty fingers uncoiling. I moved towards her . . . too quickly . . . she faded away. That was the way it always was . . . she wanted me . . . she wanted to contact me, to try me, but she was afraid.

Harcourt still came each night. She didn't pay any attention to him. Once or twice she appeared in the room while we were talking, once standing by the window, frowning, again seated in the large leather armchair, her hands folded coyly on her lap. She was watching me, all the time, so that it was hard to keep my mind on what Harcourt was saying.

'This can't go on,' I said one night, after Harcourt had left. She was still there in the armchair, still smiling. 'We're not getting anywhere.'

I came towards her, slowly this time, so as not to scare her. I had learnt my lesson. I stopped, two or three feet from the chair. I extended my hand.

'It's all right,' I said. 'All right.'

She pushed away from my hand, so that, just for a moment, her body faded into the back of the armchair . . . but she was learning too, she did not fade away.

'It's all right. You're all right,' I went on saying.

Then her hand stretched out and touched my right shoulder. A shock of cold ran down my arm. A withering, stinging sensation. I snatched my hand back, involuntarily. She faded away. I was left clutching my right arm, my cold arm, with my left hand.

That was the beginning . . . the real beginning I suppose.

For the first time I was afraid. I was afraid because I wanted to touch her, I wanted to stroke that face, to hold that tiny chill hand. I knew she knew it . . . I knew that was what she wanted . . . that the other, the talking, the searching for communication had all been to her the by-play of love. This was what she had

come for, this was the meaning of the words she had traced on the window, Love me, Love me, Love me.

It was easy. There was no one to come between us. Harcourt came, but he came only at night and he did not stay for long. She came to me . . . she came at odd times, there was no rhyme or reason. She came, and she would sit there smiling, and I would come to her and reach out and take her in my arms and press her cold little nothingness of a body to mine, and the chill would run through me.

'You don't look well,' Harcourt said, gathering his papers together. For once there was a note of genuine concern in his voice.

'I feel well enough in the circumstances.'

'Your accident, of course.' His voice trailed off. He was looking at my arm, the white edges of bandage that showed beneath my sleeve.

'A scald,' I said, 'rather more severe than I thought.'

'You've had the doctor, of course.'

'Of course.'

He believed me. He has been trained to believe me and not to question.

Then he left. I went back into the room and she was standing by the window, watching him go. But she turned to me again, and I came to her, and the short sharp chill ran down the side of my face as her formless fingers stretched out to me.

She touches me now, strokes me. I know that where she strokes me the flesh will wither and peel, the tissue will rot, the blood will dry. She strokes me now. I cannot draw myself from her because I love her, but soon . . . soon it will be over.

Harcourt came again tonight. He let himself in . . . I have given him a key. He came up to the bedroom and we talked. I kept the room dark so that he could not see . . . what there was to see. I told him it was my eyes . . . but he will know soon enough.

She was watching. She sat at the foot of the bed and watched him. Once or twice I saw his eyes flicker towards the place where she sat as though he saw something, a half shape in the darkness. But then he has a rational mind.

He said goodbye and he got up to leave. She stirred. He went out. She stood at the foot of the bed. She smiled at me, and she turned her head away and glided from the room and I knew that she was going, too.

I watch them from the window. He strides down the road, she glides behind him. He turns suddenly, as though he senses something there. He stops. He lights a cigarette. He shakes his head, he walks on.

A scrap of withered flesh falls from my face on to the carpet as I turn, to grope my way back to the bed.

She was mine . . . she was mine . . .

THE SHED

By Richard Stapley

IT WILL be very difficult to write this, and I don't imagine you will ever be able to read it, for they won't allow its publication.

I hate them almost more now than before – because I find it difficult to trust their kindness and constant attention to my needs.

They will bring me practically anything I ask for, whether it be water or rice, these being the only two things I really desire. They appear concerned because I refuse their offerings of succulent steaks, cream-smothered tortes, or delicacies prepared with such obvious care by their excellent chefs. Always, they promise to return, when I feel better to enjoy them.

They will not allow me paper – and I simply do not believe them when they tell me it is in desperately short supply. I steal toilet paper to write on (there's no apparent shortage of that), but if I were unable to do this I feel the urge to communicate so strongly I would carve words with my nails into the concrete floor.

I smile to myself at this. I think they must have read my thoughts some weeks back, for about ten days ago they introduced me to Hans, who had come specially to cover the concrete with wall-to-wall linoleum.

Anyway, I must try to tell you my story. I cannot be sure, you must understand, that it actually happened to me, or that it happened to *be* me, or quite who I am. So much belonging to me has been taken away by them.

For instance, I attempted to decipher the name on my medical progress chart one day, when the nurse had inadvertently left it behind, but I didn't have time to read it before the officer silently opened the door and kicked it out of my hands.

This, it should be explained, was the only sign of cruelty I have ever seen here, and the only time I have been abused – that is, since the shed.

This particular officer had been so kind to me it was rather a shock, and when I cried and he noticed my tears, his rather stern but most handsome face relaxed into an expression of incredible compassion.

I told him I had merely seen a graph, the words 'experiment nine' and several numerals – but that I had forgotten the actual sequence of numbers. Normally there is little opportunity for conversation, but this day I told him I desperately desired to feel a human body close to mine – perhaps, at this moment, my violent need was more important than anything else in the world.

When I expressed my observation that the female nurses in this establishment seemed peculiarly unattractive, he laughed. He left almost immediately, holding my chart in his hand, and said he would be back to see me the next day, and that if I behaved myself I would be permitted to polish his boots.

I thought for a long time after he had gone about the many professional hands that had felt my body over this long period of time – hands that touched, explored, travelled over every part of me without love, though with such infinite care.

As I say, they have all been kind, but I cannot tell you when my story starts, for it is impossible for me to learn from them when I came here, or from whence I came.

When I awoke for the first time my belongings were neatly set beside me on a small table. One object which was more important than anything I possessed was missing. It was my watch. I asked for it each day, but it was as if they pretended not to hear me.

My room faces mountains of incredible beauty. The huge windows, though not barred, cannot be opened. I am comfortable because the room is air-conditioned (a little too warm most of the time) and I accept their explanation that fresh air would be extremely bad for me. I am promised a walk on the foothills after my next operation in a few days time. It would

be so much easier to bear my isolation if they would tell me everything about me. I even feel a cold fear that, after this next operation, I might not see again the hills I long to walk upon.

Almost every day, unless there is an electrical storm, the sky is a wondrous blue and infinite, and while I lie there hour upon hour a restlessness overwhelms my being, and I envy the birds who alight on the tree, the branches of which touch my window whenever there is a slight breeze.

I know there has been a war and that I speak very good English, together with several other languages. For almost as long as I can remember I have been in a very beautiful country, and for the past weeks the rich, long, green alpine meadows have been covered with dazzling yellow carpets of flowers. When the sun is high they shimmer like a sea dyed with rich oil paint.

Long ago when I was free to travel I would pass through ancient and noble cities. I know that I was always a long way from the sea-shore. On some of these journeys the mountains would give way to seemingly endless flat barren plains, and on every occasion I would be struck with an inexplicable melancholy.

It was on a beautiful warm sunny day – much the same as it is this morning – that I was riding in the train with my three good friends. They wore smart uniforms, and had authority. To me they were the essence of kindness and consideration.

I know very well I was trusted, because I was allowed to roam up the corridors of the train, and once I visited these five very pleasant and attractive girls who apparently came from another country and told me they were aerialists appearing with a travelling circus.

Four spoke English, one did not, and this girl who never uttered a word need have spoken no language I understood, for I read everything she was thinking through her incredibly beautiful clear blue-grey eyes.

She followed me down the corridor and when I entered the toilet I didn't lock the door. Almost immediately it opened, and

we were in each other's arms. In my impatience I tore her oriental silk blouse, but even afterwards it was never mentioned. I remember at the finish we smiled about it, but at the time we were making love it seemed of no consequence that I had to steady ourselves all the time from falling, with my right hand clutching the toilet-pull.

After the second time she pulled gently away and faced the mirror. I watched her carefully combing her hair. She then removed the scarlet streaks from her face, and remade up her sensual mouth.

I stood close behind her, aching, knowing it was not enough, but she carefully withdrew my hands from her breasts, pinned her torn blouse with a clasp she found in her handbag, and left me.

I combed my hair, and my reflection smiled back at me from the mirror, as I recalled the time spent of wonderful passion and satisfaction. When I opened the toilet door I was surprised to see one of my friends in uniform, waiting outside in the corridor. He grinned, and took my arm in a companionable fashion, leading me back to our compartment.

As I walked back with him I noticed the scenery had changed from the mountains to the plains, but today, rather than melancholy, I felt an inward glow of contentment. I measured the degree of my partly spent passion not by time but by estimated miles of track. I must have made love for nearly one hundred miles.

I was still smiling when I pulled open the sliding door of the compartment, and my two other friends joked that I had indeed been gone a fantastic long time.

I was standing in front of them in a proud and suggestive stance to prove I should have stayed twice the time when the train unexpectedly screeched to an emergency halt and I was thrown into the arms of the trusted one who sat directly opposite.

It was silent except for distant shouts and the hissing of escaping steam.

When we had disentangled ourselves I looked up. This man

was holding me very close. He pushed me back into my seat, and whispered to one of his companions that we must be approaching the shed.

I put my head out of the carriage window. We were at a junction where several tracks met. We had not had an accident, for almost immediately the train started to move slowly backwards.

I know that I was suddenly frightened, and I have, from this moment I am describing, never ceased to feel a cold dread when I remember it. It was the fear of the totally unknown, such as the knowledge of an impending disaster before being quite sure what form that disaster is to take. I had experienced it once before when I lay in the sun and though I had heard not a sound was aware of an alien being close to me. I was temporarily frozen with fear, and as I turned my head to the right a poisonous snake struck out, narrowly missing my groin.

The train was moving faster now – back over the tracks we had been travelling, past gantries signalling the approach of other trains, clattering over points to a different track. My fear was that the driver had gone insane and that we should all be killed by some as yet unseen but signalled express.

Many heads were peering from the windows, and far down the train I thought I could distinguish the blonde hair of my lover streaming in the breeze. I was unable to satisfy my panic and desire to join her, for my trusted friend was holding me in a vicelike grip. Though the air cooled my face, the sweat continued to drip from my forehead.

After ten minutes or so the train slowed, pulling into a siding, and there were many troops in grey uniforms and jackboots who jumped on to the bottom carriage steps while the train was still moving.

As the train shuddered to a halt I caught my first sight of the handsome officer I have previously written about. I, with several others, was asked to follow him. The soldier in front of me was handed a heavy parcel shaped like a shell. I was bewildered and frightened. I had done nothing wrong I could think of, yet the officer's manner, though courteous in the extreme,

filled me with an appalling terror and dread. In desperation I searched a hundred alien faces for my lover or the four other girls, but I was unable to recognize them in the crowd.

To the question as to whether anything was wrong, which I directed to the soldier in front of me, he merely grinned. He told me not to worry and that I would soon find out what it was all about.

If I were to remain sane it was imperative I be told without delay, but I was being shoved forward, and in front lay a flight of seemingly unending stone steps.

My breath came in gasps as I struggled up the steep stairs in the steaming humidity, and all around instructions were barked, and there was a dreadful activity which I felt solely concerned my being, yet I knew I was to be kept from learning its secrets or its meaning.

When we had almost reached the shed at the top of the hill I was soaked with sweat. The sun beat down with intensity from the cloudless sky and I could smell the sickly sweet richness of clover. I looked over my shoulder, down the flight of steps at the soldiers behind me and some of the passengers who had also left the train. I heard the train whistle and saw it slowly move away to continue its journey. It was such a deeply sad sight that my heart cried and the soldier immediately ahead, who carried the shell-like package, turned to look at me.

Perhaps he noticed the tears in my eyes, for again he told me there was nothing to be concerned about, but I knew that he was lying. I stumbled and fell into him, causing him to drop the heavy package. It started to roll down the hill, and the soldiers following jumped clear, and shouted to others who were at the bottom of the hill. The wrapping was torn free, and the object glinted in the sun as it came to rest between the railroad tracks. The soldiers closest to it were putting on their gas masks.

The officer turned on the soldier, yelling a stream of abusive words at the man. He roughly pushed the soldier forward until he stumbled again, and while he was still lying on the ground, struck his face with the cane he carried, the blood trickling from an ugly cut directly beneath the man's eye.

I imagined I, too, would be severely reprimanded or punished, but not one word was addressed to me, and the officer stretched out his hand, pulling me to the top of the steps. He was calm when he explained it was not my fault, and that I must not be concerned. My real concern, if he but knew, was with a sudden keen perception I felt that the container was connected in some way with myself.

The shed was a nondescript sort of building, yet it was for some strange reason quite out of the ordinary, standing alien and forbidding at the top of these steep stone steps with no apparent use. Why it actually appalled me so would not be possible to say, but there have been other buildings (such as prisons and certain hospitals) that have, in the past, filled me with fear, though I did not know at the time I saw them first what they might have been. All one knows is that they are peculiarly and starkly functional.

My fear increased as I entered the heavy steel door to the shed. There were many people inside. There was great activity, yet I could not connect this activity with any purpose I was able to imagine. A considerable number of men and women sat at tables as though they might be manufacturing some kind of article, yet I could not actually see their hands, for they were hidden by the surrounding boxlike structures. The air was tinged with a smell of metal, oil, and industrial odours that were part-repellent.

There were many high-ranking officers hurrying to and fro, and they were dressed in a variety of uniforms. The workers themselves wore ugly grey smocks, but there were also a number of men and women in white. I found myself recognizing two other odours – antiseptics and ether.

The lighting in the shed was strange and almost evil. It appeared as though the ceiling must be very high, for it disappeared into an inky blackness. There were large patches of gloom, and other areas were lit by almost blinding spotlights. I could recognize the high-pitched whine of machinery that must have been performing at incredibly fast revolutions.

Two officers approached me and asked me kindly to follow

them. I was informed there was absolutely no need to be alarmed and that I must not imagine for one moment that I was guilty of doing anything wrong. Some of the other passengers on the train, they explained, had been responsible for various crimes and would be dealt with accordingly this very morning, but most certainly not myself.

I knew they were not telling the truth – the complete truth. For a brief moment, however, I must admit I was filled with relief, yet, even in the midst of this temporary lessening of tension, I knew I would finally learn today the real truth – and that it might well kill me.

I was told to climb some steep spotlessly clean wooden stairs to a brightly lit area – and all persons on this level were dressed in white. Two or three were already wearing surgeon-type face masks, and as I followed the one who had beckoned, the remainder followed suit. My fear returned like a great wave engulfing me. I appeared to be surrounded by sterile beings, their personalities obliterated in white. Conversations were almost totally muffled. My only communication was with their emotionless eyes. I silently cursed all who had told me I had nothing to fear – for this which I experienced now was what I knew all along I had been afraid of.

I was motioned to sit on a long, hard bench. My mouth was totally dry. I hadn't eaten for eighteen hours and I felt a deep nausea in my stomach. This was the same dread I had felt the moment the train had started its backward journey, and it was only the beginning of my terror to come.

At the right of the bench sat four people of indeterminate sex, with their hands stretched into a box similar to those I had noticed on the lower level. I could discern they all wore heavy industrial rubber gloves. I imagined the interior of the box must have been hot, for I could smell quite clearly the pungent odour of hot rubber. I guessed the box to be some kind of sterilizer, for one of the persons withdrew a gloved hand, placing a syringe with a long needle on to the near-by table.

Both my arms were tightly held by two soldiers who wore white coveralls over their uniforms. The floor was awash with

antiseptic fluid, and it appeared to be sprayed from low-lying jets which I was unable to see. One of the figures close to me took the syringe, inserting it into a vein in my arm. It seemed a lengthy operation, and I could sense the liquid flowing up my arm. My mind became momentarily calmer.

Shortly afterwards, five masked persons approached me, each one carrying a tray upon which appeared to be perfectly ordinary plates of hot food. The stench of this food nauseated me, yet there was nothing about its appearance which might give one the slightest hint that it was anything other than what it purported to be.

The first person came forward and the food was begun to be forced into my mouth. I cannot exactly explain the taste – it was, I recall, pastelike in substance, but it was the stench which sickened me. There was no word in my vocabulary to aptly describe it – yet there was a word which, almost unreasonably, suddenly came to my mind – and that was gangrene.

I struggled without any effect, and they continued to force mouthful after mouthful of the warm paste down my throat – even though I vomited and the white uniforms were stained with several colours.

Perhaps the worst horror of this particular time was the moment I recognized the beautiful eyes of the girl to whom I had made love on the train. Slobbering this revolting muck all over her I screamed that it was me, that I was indeed guilty, that I would admit all, and tell them, my enemies, everything they must know. Then I realized to my total horror that my torture had only just begun.

The worst degree of my fear, as I have said before, was the pre-knowledge of what was about to happen, and that each successive cruelly inflicted pain and experimentation would be followed by others, until my tormentors had achieved their final goal. I knew now that this goal was my absolute collapse, and with it my ultimate mental and physical castration.

Perhaps it was the knowledge of this approaching last humiliation which caused the complete pain and finish. Even as I was borne with almost loving care down those steep stone

steps, I stretched out to touch my torturers in the hope that one might have been the girl. As I passed into unconsciousness, I smelled once more the sickly clover, and I cursed the shed.

True to the handsome officer's promise, I was allowed to walk in the alpine meadows, and breath the beautiful fresh air for the first time in possibly several months. During the last two weeks, after a series of operations, I had lost the sight of both my eyes. I grew to love the huge dog that led me everywhere.

A few nights later, the officer came into my room and told me the authorities were finally going to release me. I would not be going home, as such, but would be in an environment more to my liking, and that possibly my own kind would help me to a fuller recuperation.

I accepted my fate, for to be free from these walls would, in itself, be therapeutic. I could not hate my tormentors, for they were, in many ways, so like myself. So like, yet – bitter irony – so utterly different.

My watch was strapped on to my wrist this last night, and I had to smile, because I would never again be able to see my treasure. I had expected they would allow me to keep the dog I had grown so fond of, but I was informed he had other duties to perform, and this shattered me. They were simply not interested in my desperate request to exchange the precious watch they had previously found so fascinating for the dog.

I needed an injection to induce sleep, as usual, this last night, and, as I drowsed off, I remember I was thinking that humans must be the cruellest of the universal beings.

At three a.m. (they volunteered to tell me the time) I was awoken and led to the dressing-room. This took a considerable time as the clothing was bulky and I had suffered several disfigurements besides the loss of my sight.

Again, I was somewhat apprehensive, and though my fears were in no way comparable to those I had suffered at the time of the train incident, I was afraid that I might be facing the

unknown alone – and strange though it might seem, I began to dread being away from the ugly nurses and the handsome officer. If only I had the dog to keep me company it would have been easier to face – this goodbye.

I was led by a hand and told there were two steps into the van. I could hear voices and was conscious of much activity. The officer told me I would commence my journey before very long, and some rough-sounding voices laughingly shouted out for me to enjoy my trip.

I was helped into the compartment and given one last affectionate pat on the shoulder by the officer. Voices now were garbled and distant. Otherwise the silence was eerie. This stillness must have lasted two hours or more, interspersed with the distant chatterings. I thought the transport would never leave.

Then, suddenly, I knew I was indeed moving. It was a violent buffeting and jawing which I experienced – like being on a train – only more so – like a train that was about to crash, perhaps.

•

The officer looked at his watch, reckoning he had two hours at least, before he need be at his station. He would just have time to see the girl. He walked slowly towards the main buildings, but before continuing on to the wards, stopped in the cafeteria and picked up a cup of black coffee.

One of the doctors was sitting at the only vacant table. 'Good evening, Captain,' he said. 'Is everything going satisfactorily?'

'Perfect,' said the officer. 'The weather report couldn't be better. I expect you've learned of the excellent news we received by signal about the Chinese? I imagine an armistice will be declared almost immediately.'

The doctor said, 'I heard on the radio that our Ambassador is already flying to Peking, together with the British and French.'

'I wonder,' said the officer with a grin, 'if the United States has anyone left of importance to send? I hear from a friend of mine, who has just returned from Washington, that the entire Eastern seaboard is a mess.'

'I had a cousin in Baltimore,' said the doctor.

'I'm sorry, sir,' the officer said. 'I really am most sorry to hear it.'

The doctor stood up, stretching himself wearily. 'If you will excuse me – I must get some sleep. I've been operating all day and I'm exhausted. Oh, incidentally – that 2RX3 – or "truth-paste", as the funny boys have christened it – has been further developed. It is quite fantastic. One day, before long, it might be possible for us to understand even the language of animals.'

The officer said, 'I find that a pretty alarming thought. I don't think I'd particularly like to know what my dog says whenever I kick him.'

'I can't imagine you ever kicking your dog,' said the doctor. 'Well, goodnight, Captain. I hope everything goes according to plan. I'll see you tomorrow.'

The officer finished his coffee, and walked beneath the clearly visible stars towards the private wards of the sanitorium's women's section. The air was balmy, and fragrant with the smell of new-mown grass.

He smiled as he stuck his head around the door of the sister's room. He could never tell whether she had high respect for him, or held him in contempt. Whenever she talked to him, her head was lowered, as if she had her eyes fixed on his boots.

'We expected you earlier,' she said. 'I might have to wake her, Captain. It's strictly against the rules, you know.'

'I don't imagine my visit will harm her,' said the officer. 'With the message I bring I'd think she would be happy to lose some sleep.'

The sister said, 'She has been very, very ill – ever since she learned of the pregnancy. We hope we can nurse her through, but the chief psychiatrist is concerned she might suffer a total nervous collapse.'

They were outside room 712 which had a FORBIDDEN ENTRY – WITHOUT CHECKED PERMISSION sign outside in bold red lettering. The sister silently opened the door, allowing the officer to enter the darkened room. The girl's eyes were

open, looking grotesque, almost as though she were dead, in the dimmed violet light. The officer was thinking how pretty she had looked before 'the affair' – as they termed it in the mess. One of his fellow officers, who had once lived with the girl, had showed him a photograph.

'Hello, Captain,' said the girl in a hushed whisper, as though it were a great effort for her to talk. 'When does it happen? I presume that is what you have come to tell me.'

'In about three hours.' The officer motioned the sister to leave him alone with the girl. He walked forward as soon as the door was closed, and sat carefully on the girl's bed. He was unable to take her hand, as, since her attempted suicide, they had insisted she sleep in a modified strait-jacket.

'You look better – good,' he lied. 'With these new drugs we start you on tomorrow, you will soon be feeling like your old self.'

'Never,' said the girl. 'I never will. I know in my heart I'm dying.'

'Don't be silly,' said the officer.

'I wish I could die. I wish it now.'

'I tell you everything will be fine,' said the officer compassionately. 'You must believe me.' He so would have liked, at this moment, to have been able to hold her hand. He desperately wanted to communicate to her his sympathy. 'You volunteered, you know. No one forced you to do it. Why did you volunteer? You knew exactly what you were doing.'

'They didn't tell me everything,' said the girl. Tears were beginning to well in her eyes. 'I was young, desperately patriotic. I burned to get even for our humiliation after the last world war. I would never have done it if I had known. Not if they had told me everything.'

'I have good news for you,' said the officer. 'When you are better – and I can vouchsafe on the highest authority your recovery will be complete – you will treasure the news I bring you. You should feel deeply proud. In a month – they expect in a month you will be able to walk – the President is conferring upon you our nation's highest honour.'

'Are you telling me the truth?'

'I have no reason to lie. It is a fact. Besides – we expect an armistice to be signed, with terms quite favourable to ourselves. It is expected we shall control the greater part of Central Europe. The Chinese feel, in the interest of humanity, particularly based upon our present irrevocable proof of the facts, that it is better for the world to lay down its arms. It is doubtful, at the moment, we have grounds to fear anything from the unknown, but we must prepare ourselves for any eventuality.'

The girl said, turning her head away from the officer, 'Tell me about the being.'

'The being,' said the officer, 'in two hours and twenty-three minutes precisely, will be shot into orbit. The government has not, as yet, released the full story on experiment nine, but . . .'

The girl interrupted, crying, 'Please, Captain – *please* don't call him that.'

'I'm sorry. Believe me, I understand your feelings. We can only tell you we have established, without a shadow of a doubt, that this being did come from another planet.'

The girl, though all along having known the fact, gasped. It seemed the knowledge would never cease to be a shock to her.

'We know the planet,' continued the officer, 'but I cannot divulge exactly which one, until I am permitted to do so by the authorities. We have found that these beings are almost identical to humans – in everything from their sexual habits to their vocal reproduction system. They have extraordinary psychoperceptive powers, and seem to absorb languages without apparent study. It was, as you know, difficult to obtain the truth from the being until we fed him with 2RX3. We cannot determine the being's exact age – but we know they live far longer than we do. In fact, their life expectancy is considerably longer – possibly more than double that of ours. Their whole sense of time, too, is totally different, and when the information is finally and fully assessed by our computers, it might well blast to hell all our own previous theories on time.'

The girl said, 'Has there been any communication from his own planet?'

'If there had been,' said the officer, 'it could not possibly be received in our lifetime.'

'It's horrible,' said the girl. 'It terrifies me.'

'Please don't be afraid,' said the officer. 'We have found the being's space-ship. He was the only one to land, obviously having been sent on some scouting expedition. We learned that the violent hydrogen explosions since the nineteen-fifties have been of great concern to the inhabitants of this planet. This particular being, experiment nine . . .' The officer broke off in the middle of what he was going to say, and touched the girl's feverish brow. 'Forgive me. He is being shot into space in little over two hours, and we have reason to believe that some time – we cannot say when – a rescue attempt will be made by his fellow beings. We shall have him under constant surveillance – but, and this might seem very difficult to comprehend – owing to this incredible time difference, the actual rescue might not take place for up to a hundred years from now.'

'My child,' said the girl in agony, 'my baby!'

There was a gentle tap on the door, and the sister came into the room, looking really quite angry. 'I must ask you to leave immediately, Captain. The girl simply has to get some sleep.'

'Just one minute, Sister,' said the officer, turning back to face the girl. 'There should be no reason at all, why your child should not be a perfectly normal human being.' He could not tell her that the authorities merely *hoped* for this fact. It was too early, at this time, to say.

'Thank you, Captain,' said the girl. 'You've been most kind.' The girl struggled to hold back the tears, but it was useless. She was sobbing uncontrollably. 'I want to see the father of my child – the father of my child.'

The officer leaned over, once more laying his hand upon the girl's forehead. 'It is the State's child – humanity's child. It belongs to the world.'

The sister administered a powerful sedative intravenously. It was some time before it took effect, the girl restlessly turning to and fro, as far as the restrictive jacket would allow. 'I hate my country,' she cried. 'I hate my fellow men. I want to be

alone – alone with him. I cannot bear to think of him being alone – up there – until after I die.'

Sister said, 'Go to sleep now, dear. Nothing is as bad as it seems. You mustn't fret yourself. It simply isn't worth worrying about things that might never happen.'

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