



Pan Books

THE SEVENTH PAN BOOK OF

HORROR STORIES

Selected by
Herbert van Thal

THE SEVENTH PAN BOOK OF HORROR STORIES

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HERBERT VAN THAL



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THE MAN WHO HATED FLIES

By Charles J. Benfleet

I FIRST knew Hugo Latymer when he was a newly-appointed assistant housemaster and I, a mere ten years his junior, was in my final year at school. He took the Upper Sixth for Chemistry, but the main appeal of his classes was the way he could be side-tracked into talking about virtually anything else under the sun. Most of all I enjoyed the lengthy discussions on quasi-scientific subjects – telepathy, telekinesis, spiritualism and the like.

After I left we still used to see quite a lot of each other as I had taken a position with a firm in Horsham and so within easy reach of Cranleigh. Before long he ceased looking on me as Benfleet, C. J., but rather as Charles and we established a fairly regular routine whereby I dined with him once a year and returned his hospitality at similar intervals.

Hugo was in no sense a crank nor, indeed, am I (or so I firmly believe) but it seems to me wrong to accept modern science as the be-all and end-all of our understanding of the Universe. Many of the ideas that were scorned in their day have now become accepted and it is not so very long ago that men were put to death for believing that the Earth revolved around the Sun. No, we both believed that Man has only just begun to understand the great, universal Truth as a small child might take its first, tottering steps.

As the years went by Hugo became Housemaster and got married. I, too, married and with our greater responsibilities our meetings became less frequent. Dinners were supplanted by letters and occasional phone calls. Hugo's success as Housemaster earned him the offer of a Headmastership in India which, after some prompting by his wife, he accepted.

After the first year, when his new surroundings and experi-

ences had prompted him to correspond quite frequently, our letters became fewer and farther between and, up to a short while ago, I had not heard from him for nearly a year.

Then, one Friday, an envelope with the familiar handwriting dropped through the letter-box. The letter bore, though, an English stamp and I tore it open eagerly.

'Dear Charles,' I read, 'You will be surprised to see that I am back once more in dear old England. I have managed to take the lease of a small cottage only a mile or two from the School. Though small it will be adequate for me now that my dear wife has passed away.

'I feel only guilt that I agreed to go to India for it was there that Constance contracted the disease that was to prove fatal. The anguish of her illness and my great sorrow since have conspired to prevent me from writing to you earlier.

'There seemed no reason for me to stay on after Constance's death; indeed the bungalow held only sad memories for me, so I decided to return and live out my days close to the school where I found such happiness in the past.

'My sojourn abroad was, I now know, a mistake and has brought me not only great unhappiness but ill health too. Dirt and disease were only too prevalent out there. Financially I am fortunate to be reasonably independent so do not have to seek a position of any sort but, nevertheless, I would dearly love to restore my connections with the School be it only in some part-time or occasional capacity: which is all, I fear, that my present health would allow.

'But enough of my tribulations. Charles, I long to see you once again. Can you find the time to come to supper? Any day at all would be fine for me – just drop a line to let me know. The telephone is not yet installed so I cannot suggest ringing.

'As ever,

Hugo.'

Anita and the children were enjoying a late holiday at her sister's home in Kingswear and would not be back until the Sunday evening so I thought I would take advantage of my temporary grass-widowerhood by calling to see Hugo on the

morrow, Saturday. To avoid any possibility of a letter not being delivered in time, I sent a telegram advising him to expect me at about seven in the evening.

Saturday turned out to be dank and foggy. The local train that clanks wearily from Horsham to Cranleigh and on to Guildford was late but, even so, it was only 7.15 when I was knocking on the door of the gaunt and rather unlovely building that was Hugo's new home.

Seldom have I seen so great a change in any man. He seemed to have shrunk a full six inches and to have aged three times faster than the calendar would have conceded. His skin, too, had taken on an ashen, sickly hue.

I hid the shock I felt as best I could, allowed him to hang up my coat and followed him to a roaring fire which did much to dispel the chill from my bones and the oppressive gloom of the rather drably furnished room. The thin film of dust on the less accessible surfaces showed that much in the way of house-keeping was either beyond him or no longer of consequence.

The room served as both dining-room and drawing-room for a table was already laid out for supper. After a few minutes of rather stilted conversation, during which I extended my condolences for his wife's death, he excused himself and disappeared briefly, returning with two bowls of steaming hot soup.

On that chill night the soup was doubly welcome and served to melt the barrier that had formed between us after so long a separation. Over the cold meats that followed, and the apple pie, the clock turned back and we were once again the close friends that we had been in the years gone by.

A decanter of port had been standing on a side table. Hugo unstopped it and passed it to me saying 'I have not lost my taste for this, you see, nor for a good cigar to accompany it!'

'Now tell me, Charles, you must, from time to time, have pondered the mystery of death. We all of us do as the years weigh more heavily upon us. What do you think happens to us after death? To the essential "us", to the Ra of the ancient Egyptians, to the soul, if you prefer to call it that?'

'Well, that's quite a question to throw at me out of the blue.

I suppose that, basically, it seems both wrong and illogical that we should each exist for a mere drop in the ocean of time and then, suddenly, cease to exist, completely, utterly and for ever.

'I don't, personally, believe in reincarnation here on earth, but I feel that we must go on to another existence, somewhere. Not, of course, to a Heaven, all harps and clouds and long flowing robes, nor, indeed, to a Hell of smoke and eternal fires. If I have a conviction at all it is that the whole of life here, or on any other planet, is part of an experiment in some vast Laboratory and that we each possess a small spark, an infinitesimal subdivision, of the intellect of some Great Experimenter.

'After death we will coalesce and fuse together once more into that one Being. I believe, too, that that Being is what we speak of as God but that, beyond Him, there are other Gods *ad infinitum*. In other words the Experimenter I speak of is, in turn, part of some even greater, even more incomprehensible Experiment. There is no Supreme Being since we are speaking of Infinity and the Infinite has no beginning and no end, no top and no bottom.'

'You have put it well, Charles, and you seem to have given the matter much thought, as I was sure you had. I am not sure that I agree with your conception of the Infinite: any mathematician could define for you a series that is infinite yet has both definite beginning and end. But that is by the way and, in general terms, I go along with your ideas. You say that, eventually, we shall all be joined in some super-Intellect. This means that, four-dimensionally, we are one now but, living in a three-dimensional world, can only perceive ourselves as discrete entities. The prongs of a three-dimensional fork thrust into a two-dimensional surface show up only as separate points. Therefore, in a sense, I *am* you and every other living thing, or will be.

'Personally I believe in reincarnation or, if you prefer the technical term, metempsychosis. Such belief is as old as the hills and can be found in the religions of every race. Now how on earth did they all come to the same conclusion, long before they could communicate with each other?'

'You sound very positive, Hugo, but what proof have you?'

'Proof? Evidence abounds, but let me tell you of a case which occurred in India and of which I have some first-hand knowledge. Names and places do not matter but the whole affair is recorded and attested.

'A young girl of eight or nine, who had always been quiet and somewhat morose, began increasingly to pester her mother to let her go "home" and to speak of her "real" family. The mother, uncomprehending, ascribed this to some complicated game of make-believe. Nevertheless the girl insisted that she was really a married woman with two children and lived many miles away. Her parents could only shake their heads and sigh.

'One day a man called at the house who had business with the father and was admitted by this girl who, at sight of him, claimed that he was her "real" cousin – though he, of course, laughed at such fancy. Finally, to quiet the girl once and for all, her parents agreed to make the journey to this distant village (which none of them had ever visited before) where the girl claimed her "home" to be. Accompanied by the doctor and two learned men who had become interested in the case, they set out.

'On reaching the village the girl became excited and lively, directing them all without hesitation to a certain house outside which three children were playing. She rushed to the two older children, kissing and hugging them and calling them by their names – which proved to be correct.

'Hearing of these strange visitors, the children's father soon arrived. The girl, to his astonishment, embraced him with tears in her eyes. This man told the amazed onlookers that his wife had died some eight or nine years previously when giving birth to their third child – a child that she, of course, never saw.'

'And what of the alleged cousin?'

'Oh yes, he really was the cousin of the dead wife.

'Of course the experts tried to avoid drawing the obvious conclusion, claiming that everything could be attributed to mind-reading or something like that, quite forgetting that

mind-reading was something they would deny was possible at any other time.

'Anyway that is but one instance . . .' He broke off abruptly and reached out for a fly-swatter that lay near his chair.

'If there's one thing I can't stand,' he said, lunging wildly after a lone fly that, surprisingly, had not settled in some warm, dark spot for the winter, 'it's flies. Carriers of disease and filth, they are an abomination on the face of the earth. There, got him!

'As I was saying, that was but one instance of the many, many true stories that have been checked and verified. Reincarnation is a fact. After death we live again – not necessarily as another human being or even in the same place – but death is not the end.'

We argued the subject a good deal after that and it was gone eleven before either of us realised that the hour was so late. Transport back to Horsham was now impossible so I accepted Hugo's kind offer of a bed for the night.

The next morning was bright and sunny, full of browns and golds and crisp fallen leaves underfoot. I decided to catch the first bus back to Horsham – there are no trains on a Sunday – in order to prepare the house for Anita's homecoming. I must confess that I had not done even the minimum of housekeeping.

As we parted Hugo said, 'Somehow, Charles, if the power is granted to me, I will prove my beliefs of which I spoke last night.' The words, and the look in his eyes as he spoke them, have haunted me ever since.

Two weeks later Hugo was dead. His solicitors told me the sad news the day before the funeral and also informed me that it was Hugo's wish that I should take as many of his books as might be of interest to me, the remainder of his estate going to a distant cousin who was his only surviving relative.

I naturally attended the funeral – as did quite a number of the school staff. Afterwards I was introduced to the cousin and we went to the cottage – he to view the property that was now his and I to select the books which would then be crated up and sent on to me.

Hugo's library was not large but comprised many rare and valuable books on what, I suppose, most people call the occult. Each was lovingly inscribed with his initials 'HL' and the date.

I reached up for one of the volumes and, as I did so, a huge spider was dislodged on to my shoulder. With revulsion I flicked it off on to the floor and trod on it.

Then I looked up and noticed the web it had been spinning. In the middle, like a delicate piece of embroidery, were the initials HL.

I looked again at the still twitching remains of the spider. As realisation came flooding in I was violently and horribly sick.

THE THING

By R. Chetwynd-Hayes

THE BAR was not very full the evening being but middle-aged, that is to say it was too early for the after-theatre crowd, and too late for the 'a quick one for the road' school. This, in my humble opinion, is the time for civilised drinking, not that I've ever minded drinking at an uncivilised time, but its nice to be able to spread your elbows and bath your tonsils with Scotch in reasonable comfort. There are those people who go into a bar for social intercourse, at least so they say, but I being above all else an honest man must confess I go into a bar for only one reason; I like to drink. Now let us get one thing straight, I'm not an educated drinker; fancy names on dusty bottles don't mean a thing to me; as the man said when he was asked if he preferred beef to mutton: 'It's all meat'. Old fashioned whiskey was good enough for my father, and he died a drunkard's death at eighty-two, which was twenty years longer than his teetotal brother lived, who was knocked down by a bus in the Fulham Road after speaking at a temperance dinner on how strong drink shortens life. There must be a moral there somewhere, but frankly I've never quite seen what it is, unless it be stay quietly sozzled at home, then you won't be knocked down by a 175 bus.

But all this is by the way; digression is one of my many weaknesses, for I often find that the soup is much more tasty than the main dish, and perhaps when you have heard the rest of my story you will agree with me. However, as I said, the room was not very full so I went straight up to the bar and ordered six double whiskeys, and the smart young barman looked at me, for he could see I was by myself. So I took a deep breath and explained the facts of life to him.

'I could order one whiskey, take it over to that table, drink

it and come back for five refills. But that would be wearing on my legs, which after the fourth glass need as much rest as they can get, and a lot of work for you.'

He grinned and said he agreed, but I don't think he was happy, for one thing I'm not what you might call a snappy dresser and they were used to dinner jackets and off the shoulder dresses, or at least a decent lounge suit. But corduroy trousers and roller neck jersey is my stock in trade, for a writer isn't looked up to these days if he dresses like everyone else, and damn it all, my money is as smart as the next man's. I carried my drinks on a tray the barman gave me to a table a little way from the bar, and after emptying the first glass, I sat back and took in the scenery.

The tables were little islands and most of them deserted, but here and there a few castaways sipped their nourishment and looked as miserable as most people do in bars, so I turned my attention to the tall stools that lined the bar, and thought they looked like the things in circus rings for seals to perch on. On the one nearest to my table was a girl, and I wondered how I'd missed her, but thought perhaps she'd come in when I wasn't looking, but she was there now and was presenting one of the most tasteful bare backs that I've ever seen. Now all men have their various tastes when it comes to admiring feminine beauty, some rave about legs, others breasts, although believe me, a lot of deception is practised in that direction these days, but for myself, show me a flawless white back and I'd raise my hat, always supposing I wore one, which I don't. This girl knew what she'd got, and made the most of it, for her dress was a mere tape that supported the legal amount of material at the front and nothing at all above the waist line at the back. She must have felt my gaze, which isn't surprising, for she turned her head, and I saw a pair of cornflower blue eyes set in a pale, beautiful, if characterless face, surmounted by a pile of artistically dressed hair. Then she winked, and without so much as by your leave, came and sat at my table. I sighed deeply and downed my second whiskey to wash away my disillusion, for surely the strangest part of man's make-up is that he will pawn his soul for what he thinks he cannot have, but

will turn his head in disgust when he learns it is well within his means to buy it. She sank down in the chair opposite mine, and said in a low, husky, carefully cultivated, seductive voice:

'Aren't you going to buy me a drink?'

I said: 'Why not? But you will have to fetch it yourself, I never stir before the sixth drink and by then it's a risky business.'

She took my pound note, making a small grimace, and the small sherry must have been exorbitantly expensive, or she was very forgetful for I never saw my change. When she came back and reseated herself, and the third whiskey was doing its bounded duty so that the sharp edges of the bar were becoming nicely rounded, and a faint mist was obscuring the far end of the room, for if truth must be told, and I can see no reason why it shouldn't, this was not the first bar I had visited that evening; she said:

'You're cute, you know that don't you, you're cute.'

I nodded slowly, for I was in the mood to agree to anything. 'Yes, I know. Whenever I look into a mirror I get a shock.'

She giggled and took a ladylike sip from her glass, and I wondered if the people who owned this place knew what she was up to, or if the smart young barman who had a suspicion of a knowing smirk on his face was receiving his cut.

'What's a nice looking fellow like you doing on your own?'

'Getting drunk,' I said briefly, 'it's a hobby. Some people collect stamps, others milk bottle tops, but I get drunk. I do it very well.'

She giggled again, and there was something horrifying about that beautiful mask; she looked like an animated shop window dummy, or a body from which the soul had been sucked out.

'You're funny. I like witty men. Say something else.'

I grinned and felt my face crinkle, like a deflated balloon pressed by a child's destructive fingers. 'A fool is funny because he dare not think, for thought is the pathway to truth, and beyond truth lies madness.'

She shrugged her shapely shoulders and they gleamed in the bright light like white clouds on a winter's day, and for some

reason I felt sad, which was strange for usually I am a cheerful drinker.

'That's not funny, it's rather frightening. I say, you're not squiffy, are you?'

How I would have answered this insulting insinuation I do not know, for let it be recorded, never in fifteen years of heavy drinking have I been drunk, or as my uncle (the one knocked down by a bus in the Fulham Road) would have aptly expressed himself: 'been seen the worse for strong drink', for at that moment there was a sudden influx of people who came into the room, chattering and babbling and in less than no time the place was crowded, and I was troubled by the thought that I might not have time or opportunity to buy my second consignment. But there came in with this human flood, like a piece of driftwood cast ashore by the tide, a young man who for some reason that I could not at that time understand, stood out from the crowd and claimed my complete attention. He was young, younger than he should have been, for although there were lines about his eyes and mouth, and a certain tautness of his facial muscles that suggested maturity of years, yet he wore an air of youthfulness that did not flatter him, for one was reminded of a fruit that had hung on a tree for a whole summer but was still unripe; a soft green skin full of corruption, that will fall to the ground at the first breath of autumn. He clung to the bar like one who has walked through life looking for props, and his weak handsome face turned slowly, the pale blue eyes were lifeless blue chips of broken glass, and his full lips were moist and sagged pathetically as though he were about to cry. His neat dark suit was rumpled, and his long fingers toyed with the buttons, then, like a startled bird, the right one flew up to the striped tie and jerked it from side to side, then abruptly he turned his back and suddenly I was aware that he was not alone.

He who drains the wine jug to its bitter dregs sees strange visions, at least so it is said, but speaking for myself, although I've seen the world through many an empty bottle, I've yet to meet a pink elephant, but of course I'm still comparatively young, and all things come to him that waits. But I knew, and

don't ask me how or why, that what stood behind the young man did not come out of a bottle, but it wasn't the kind of thing you usually met in a bar either. I'll tell you something else, I was pretty certain that I was the only person who saw it, because no one else paid it the least attention and they would have if. . . . Let me describe the Thing, because that is what it was – a Thing. Imagine something that has the shape of a man; a tall man at least six foot two, dressed in a long black robe that encased the entire figure from neck to feet, only the feet weren't too substantial, I could not be sure they were actually there; then imagine a dead white face; a face made of white wax, then give the face a pair of black gleaming eyes; eyes filled with a terrible hunger, that a thousand years of sated lusts will not satisfy, then crown the face with a mop of coarse hair and watch a pair of thin lips as they mouth silent obscenities, or whisper unfulfilled longings into the victim's ear, and you have a fiend that is begging someone to share its hell.

'What's the matter, honey,' the girl spoke and her pale beauty seemed to bear a faint resemblance to that dreadful face, 'you look as though you've seen a ghost.'

'The man at the bar,' my voice betrayed nothing and I marvelled that this was so, 'do you see anything unusual about him; the young one – there?' I pointed, and she turned with little interest for I suppose I was already beginning to bore her and a more promising client would soon draw her away. Then her face flushed for a moment, then turned paler than before, her eyes glazed with sudden fear, and one hand tightened its grip about the wine glass so that I found myself watching the whitened knuckles.

'It's Rodney!' she gasped the name in a strangled voice and for an instant her beauty was wiped away, so that I saw her as she would be when time had done its work; had taken the sheen from the pale skin and wrecked the firm muscles with cruel fingers. Then she jerked her head round and I looked at a frightened child, the cultivated mask ripped aside, and she was as naked as a sinful man on judgment day. I said: 'Do you know him?' A silly question, but I wasn't really interested in

her problems, because the young man was taking a drink, at least I guessed he was for although his back was towards me, the Thing had moved to a position a few feet from our table, and for a while I could not understand why its mouth was open and its throat muscles working, then I suddenly realised that it was enjoying whatever the man was drinking. I know that must sound crazy, but may I never raise a glass again if it isn't true; the white face gleamed with the look of a dipso who is having his first drink for a long time, then the man at the bar turned, a full glass was in his hand so I guessed he'd ordered a refill, and he came towards our table so that for a while they stood side by side, the Thing and him, only I knew he did not know he was not alone. Then he suddenly saw my girl friend, the Thing's eyes lit up as well, and together they approached the table, an action that didn't make me feel happy, or, if I was to judge by her expression, the little lady either, for she looked as terrified as a rabbit at a stoat's convention.

'Don't leave me alone with him,' she pleaded, 'he's poison.'

I said nothing as he came up to the table and I could tell he'd seen a lot of tough American films, because he just grabbed a chair and sat down; the Thing stood behind him, its eyes fixed on the girl, while its lips kept moving, and I found myself trying to guess what it was saying.

The man ignored me, a fact that he would have regretted if I hadn't been so concerned with what he brought with him, and when he spoke to the girl it was with a slight Cockney accent that is so popular with pop singers.

'So I found you - up to your old tricks again, looking for suckers, and I see you've found one.'

He looked at me, but much more important the Thing did so as well, and I saw a gleam of speculative interest in its dreadful eyes, so that terror made me empty the sixth glass and make a beeline for the bar. The young man laughed, a high pitched whining sound, but I did not care, so long as the Thing stayed where it was he could laugh his head off. But I could not leave the bar, I had to stay and watch this macabre drama, and though I would not face the truth the tall black figure held a repellant fascination for me; I felt an urge to

touch it, to hear it speak, even as a child might want to finger fire.

When I looked back the Thing had changed its position and stood behind my vacated chair where it was watching the girl and the man, and it seemed that it was taking part in the conversation, for the mouth was opening and closing so that I had the impression it was shouting instructions. More people came in and others left, all of them seeking the stimuli of alcohol for the going is tough along the narrow pathway to the grave, or maybe the seventh whiskey was turning sour on me. Perhaps my liver was at last giving up the fight, or more likely my brain was beginning to present its own film show, but I could distinctly see a row of tables standing in a neat row against the far wall, and seated round them was a number of figures dressed all in black, and wearing white masks. They sat perfectly still; their heads were turned inwards and I could only see the sexless profiles, and I felt an unexplainable dread that they might move, for I knew these were the eternal watchers; the dark ones who know neither anger nor pity.

The girl looked back over one white shoulder, and her blue eyes raked my face with burning intensity; a mute appeal for help, as though I were a lifeboat in a boiling sea, and she a lone swimmer at the end of her strength. There was a scraping of a chair and the young man sprang to his feet; the Thing moved back, its eyes blazing with an unholy joy. The girl rose quickly and ran towards me, and the drinkers drew back in alarm, so that I stood alone with the girl running her last few steps; only the watchers did not move. She clutched my arms and I saw the dark caverns of hell reflected in her eyes, and I wanted to tell her it would all pass, that suffering cannot last for ever – not even in hell, but there was not time. The gun in the young man's hand spoke instead, and the beautiful eyes blinked, then blazed forth their horror, the white shoulders quivered, the neck twisted, and she slumped to the floor.

When I looked up the young man was staring in astonishment at the huddled figure that lay at my feet, but the Thing was close behind him, its right arm was raised to the level of

his, and its hand rested on the hand that held the gun. Then it drew back and I saw a look of peace on its face; the peace of a sated drug addict, the peace that would come to a vampire who has drunk his fill. The young man shook his head several times, then slowly, like a tired child stifling a yawn, he put the nozzle of the revolver into his mouth and pulled the trigger.

The room was a bedlam of screaming women and swearing men; they rushed back and fro like ants when a pick axe has been driven into their hill. I sank into a chair and listened to the waterfall that crashed about my ears and pondered on the suddenly revealed truth that man's lusts must go on multiplying so that eventually, surely there must be total darkness – or a wiping out – a new beginning.

At last I rose and made my way towards the door – towards those black figures who were now more real than before, and there suddenly came into my vision a little man with a pale wrinkled face and the knowledge of forbidden lore in his eyes. He beckoned with a long trembling finger, and I bent down so that his lips could approach my ear. His voice was old, so very old, and he spoke in a low husky whisper:

'Don't look behind, but you're being followed.'

With a single movement the watchers turned their heads, and the white masks were staring at me, the eyes black pools of darkness, and I knew I would never walk or drink alone again.

Together we left the room.

THE RETURN

By G. M. Glaskin

IF SHE moved her head no more than an inch to the left, she could see through the long lean scythes of grass right down to the river to where the punt was usually tied up. But for some reason or other the punt wasn't there. And when she came to think about it a little longer, she realised that the jetty also wasn't there. It worried her, until it occurred to her that perhaps the place where she was lying was either too far up- or down-river for her to see where the punt and the jetty should have been. But no; when she turned round to look over her shoulder, the roof of the house was exactly where she expected it, peering at her over the orchard of almond and apple trees which, despite their age, were again green and swelling with fruit this summer.

She turned back to the river again, the sun seeping luxuriously through the back of her dress. Where could the punt and jetty have got to? Had Father decided after all to build a new jetty, and while the old one was demolished the punt was up in the boat-house? That must be the explanation. And yet, if this were so, she should have heard about it. Surely her sisters, even Flora, could not have kept so important a project secret from her? When she would go back up to the house, later on in this glorious day when the sun's warmth would be gone, she'd have it out with them, mark her words that she would. They couldn't put *everything* over Maisie Jane Matthews, no matter how smart they all thought they were, all five of them, especially Flora, even Elsie; hateful, they were at times, like when they said in sing-song voices:

'Maisie's the baby, you can tell by her dimple,
And also because she's a teeny bit simple!'

Simple? Simple? What did they mean by it? But whatever they meant, they couldn't deny that not one of them was as happy as she herself was. Father always said so, Father was always right; so it must be so. Which meant that she in turn could be sorry for her sisters, poor miserable wretches who, no matter how good their eyesight might be, could never any of them see all the *joyous* things in life.

Like the river: the waters gliding and glimmering over the reflected trees plunged down deep in the river's depths, far more fascinating and mysterious than those so much more substantial trees always upright on the banks. The long grass: the best bed of all, and with stems to chew and make whistles from, and sometimes shaking seeds into her hair and down the neck of her dress to – to *tickle*. Insects to study: ants always so methodically busy, poor things, just like her sisters; ladybird beetles, like herself, opening their little red carapaces with the black polka-dots to spread their wings and half flutter, half totter, from one stalk of grass to another, blissfully without method or purpose at all. Birds skimming over the water and arrowing among the trees, alighting on branches, plucking at their plumage with quite shameless vanity, and pausing, stiffening now and again, to take watch around them – something they'd heard? or smelt? or just sensed without really knowing, like she herself did? Calling to each other, always so happy. Except crows, carping and cavilling their endless complaints, and black, like her sisters had been for months, in mourning when their mother had died. The old grey-white horse with the shaggy lock of mane hanging forlorn over his eyes and his look of mild reproach, just like their father's. Crickets itchy in the grass. O the grass, the grass! How she always loved just to lie there in its luxury. Especially today, for today was a very special day, a very special day indeed. . . .

Today was her birthday. Seventeen years ago today she had been born in the house just over her shoulder of the mother whom she had never seen because, so sadly, so tragically, she had died shortly after she herself, Maisie Jane Matthews, had been born; and consequently she had never known a mother's

love and maternal ministrations, no matter how much her five elder sisters might proclaim that they all of them were 'little mothers' to their poor baby Maisie. For Maisie, try as she might, could not look upon any one of them as a replacement for the mother she had lost, and consequently had been acutely aware all her life of a profound and sometimes insupportable feeling of 'being deprived'. Her sisters could all remember their mother; she could not. And no sense of reality could seep through to her from the one daguerrotype photograph of her which their father kept on the large walnut desk in his study.

But today was her birthday. She did not want to think any sad thoughts today. Today she was happy, and happy she would stay, even if to remind her she must occasionally wriggle her body full-length through the languorous grass till she could peer through the water's gently sliding surface (to where did it go? and why should it want to leave the peaceful loveliness of this place?) to where spears of sunlight revealed the rocks and sands beneath; until the water became too dark to see through any more, but would still occasionally gleam with sudden if minute brilliance from the bellies of minnows as they would abruptly turn in their otherwise leisurely yet mysterious errands. Would she see a tortoise? Today, of all days in the year, being her birthday, she could expect to see almost anything.

Turning on her back she gazed up at the incredibly immense blue reaches of sky with its flocks of near-luminous clouds scudding from horizon to horizon like herded sheep. She hoped they wouldn't turn malicious and menace her birthday with rain. Perhaps if she turned on her stomach again, would they all go away? She would try it anyway; and this time when she turned, her body complained with an ache and a creak from, she told herself, lying a little too long in the grass. And she said to herself: That's how *old* people must get to feel, with their grey hair and wrinkled skin sometimes flecked all over with death-freckles. And as though thinking of old people had invoked a manifestation before her very eyes, *there*, deep down in the water, and yet not quite so deep as the rocks and sand and little clouds of underwater dust, the face of an

old woman appeared suddenly in the depths to peer sinisterly up at her, the mouth leering uglily, and the eyes – the eyes – relentlessly seeking her own. She started back in fright, and wished she had stayed on her back looking up at the sky. Yet when she searched around her, there was no one to be seen, certainly no old woman with hideous face. There were only the birds and the horse across the river and no, not even the punt and the jetty. Ah, but the house was still there, craning to assure comfort.

What would that house provide for her tonight? she wondered. A birthday dinner, of course. Flora and Elsie, perhaps even Mabel, would cook it; Grace would set table. None of Annie's 'good plain cooking' tonight; her sisters would give the cook a night off. They had promised. But Bridget would still serve; her father would insist on that. And perhaps, tonight, having turned seventeen, she might be allowed a glass of wine? But no, that might be too much to expect. Fruit punch as usual, she supposed, and pulled a little moue. Girls, she opined, should be allowed to drink wine, even sherry, when they first put up their hair. Hers had been up for a year now, but the only wine she had tasted, she giggled to herself, had been drunk surreptitiously down in the dark of the cellar. Somehow, perhaps because it was forbidden, it had seemed all the more delicious.

And for dinner? Chicken, she supposed; the last of the turkeys had been eaten for Christmas. Flora's vegetable soup first, and then almost the same vegetables fresh from the garden to go with the main course. Unless, unless – unless Father remembered how she adored Brussels sprouts and brought some home from the city. Dared she hope? Dared she hope, also, that he might give her the gold watch he had given each of his daughters when they had turned eighteen – 'My daughters are all becoming little women,' he was always saying – or would he still refuse to make an exception of her and she must wait yet another year for her very own watch? O the agony of it all! She could almost guess what would come from her sisters: a scarf, handworked handkerchiefs, a pair of gloves that might or might not be of silk, a pair of stockings that certainly

wouldn't be, a book on housekeeping from Flora when she just *longed* for a novel by Marie Corelli. O well . . .

But *afterwards*, that was the main thing. Games in the parlour? Would they ask anyone in? The Jackson girls and – O the wickedness of her! – maybe the Whittaker boys? Which would mean . . . and she writhed in the grass at the sheer wilfulness of her craving, sucking in her bottom lip and giving it a nip with her teeth, as though it had already been guilty of inviting a kiss . . . which would mean that they would have to invite – dared she mention his name? – the Whittaker boys's cousin *Septimus*. There, she had said it! Dancing, Mabel at the piano, Milly on the violin, Flora always frowning! But she wouldn't care, she wouldn't care! She'd dance all she wanted to on her birthday, especially, especially – dared she say it again? – especially if *Septimus* should be the one who would ask her.

Ah, how she could dream here, deep in the grass and with the river whispering conspiracies.

That ache again, the cramp and creak in her back. Flora was always saying that she'd give herself rheumatism, lying like that in the grass. But she didn't care, she didn't care! All that she did care about now was that, incredible as it seemed, she must have fallen asleep; for now, when she lurched up suddenly into a sitting position, she found the sky waned into golds and greys and the clouds scudding faster and thicker and the wind chill on her cheeks. Lord, what time was it! Then the blasphemy made first her hand fly to her mouth, then her offending mouth require the stifling of a titter. As if anyone could hear! But she must hurry, she must run, or else she would be late for her own birthday, and there was her new white muslin frock for her to change into. . . .

Up through the apple and almond trees, lurching with stiffness from lying in the grass, her limbs feeling idiotically like those of an old crone until she made them work all the faster. No rheumatism for her, especially not tonight. Through the arbor of grape-vines with the carnations and gaillardias planted by Jenkins. Up the path of the vegetable garden with scarcely a glance. If she tried to squeeze out reality as she ran, a game

she still loved to play with herself, she could almost see what a wilderness of weeds and horror it could all become if ever they should leave it. But that, of course, they would never do; Father wouldn't even contemplate such a thing; and why *should* they leave, with all this peace and beauty around them? As though her own silly day-dream – or day-mare? – would not be dispelled, she decided to dismiss it by calling Flora to let her know she was coming.

'Flora, Flora!' she shouted, still running and running, panting for her breath, laughing helplessly to herself and thinking: If she didn't reach the house soon, she'd be bound to collapse. 'Flora, Flora . . . !'

And then she stopped dead.

O yes, the house was still there, but what on earth could have happened to it? The door was not only open, but *gone*. What *could* have happened to it? And what was all that *dirt*, all that dust and dry dead leaves doing all over the verandah . . . and . . . and . . . how could the verandah itself have rotted and fallen in as it had? And the windows! The windows! Smashed, every one of them! Panes gaping and jagged or gone altogether. No paint on the frames; only chars as if from a fire. Even some of the frames were gone from obscenely nude brick. Above her, rafters sagged and rotted and, even more unbelievable, supported only a few remnants of roof. Great gaping holes in it exposed malevolent sky. And inside, *inside* – where there should have been curtains and carpets, pictures and furniture, her sisters flitting bird-busy from one room to another – there was . . .

Nothing! A charred-blackened wreck of a house, a mere shell, as though it had been blasted to smithereens. She shrank back, stunned, incredulous, horrified, barely stifling her sobs and possibly a scream.

. . . until it occurred to her: Of course, she had come up to the wrong house. She had gone to some other part of the river, for wasn't it true that she could no longer remember how she had come there at all? *That* was why the punt and the jetty had been missing. That was why the river itself had been somehow different today. That's what she had done: she'd

come back to the wrong house. Now, instead of sobs, she couldn't help laughing at herself. Flora was always saying she was a fool. Was that what they meant when they said she was 'simple'? Well, she didn't care, she didn't care, just let them see if she did. And just to defy them, she'd sing that song she had heard their Aunt Bella once sing, until their father had stopped her, saying such things were unfit for his young daughter's ears:

'Take me in your arms, love,
Fan me with your fan;
Kiss me and caress me –
That's a nice young man!'

But then, although she tried hard to laugh and be happy, defying also the dusk which frightened her so, she found herself sobbing again, sobbing and running she didn't know where, hadn't the faintest idea any more, because the bend of the river, the trees, the shape of the banks, all told her that from where she was running was where the house *should* have been; but something had happened, she didn't know what, except that it must have been some dreadful catastrophe, some horror that wouldn't bear thinking about. And now the house was all, all of it gone, her sisters and Father and Bridget and Jenkins and everything. All, all gone. There was only herself left, fleeing from her terror in this horror of wilderness.

From the river to the road, and then the next horror assailed her. Some sort of machine, some monstrous and inconceivable thing, all glass and metal glinting evil in the last light from the sun, had baulked her path and was threatening to devour her. She screamed; screamed all the louder when she saw the two figures – a man and a woman, she thought, in some kind of uniform, black – somehow emerging from the monstrous machine like the two demons that they were. She wanted to run from them, but couldn't. As in a nightmare, her legs failed her and she felt herself sagging, sinking to the ground, falling and flailing, and all she could do was moan her despair. When they reached her, the monsters, she hadn't the strength even to struggle against them, but could only fall limp with

her weeping. The devil's advocates had sought and seized her for her wickedness, and it was too late, too late; it could never be undone.

'Flora!' she moaned. 'O Flora, Flora! Don't let them take me, and cast me into *Hell*. . . .'

The devil's chariot throbbed and roared with mechanical monstrosity, and his advocates gripped and strapped her inside some kind of device so that she couldn't free or even move her arms behind her. And they leered at her so, leering and jeering:

'Now, now, Maisie Matthews. Come along quietly and we'll soon have you home again. You'll be all right, dear. We'll soon have you home. . . . ' And the she-demon jabbed a poison-dart into her arm, and filled it with venom.

Home? Hell, they meant. They were taking her *away* from her home; they had even, now that they had drugged her, taken away her home itself. Nothing, nothing of it was left. She could only cringe and quiver in horror, too terrified to think of what might still be ahead of her.

Hell was a street of buildings like cliffs, all concrete and glass of incredible height and hideous taste, the street an inferno of hell-bent contraptions that hooted and hissed. Lights like molten suns glared in the night around her, making it garish as day never was. Voices boomed at unbelievable volume from what she thought must also be some kind of machines. When roof-tops could be seen, they bristled with contraptions like enormous paper-clips.

'We'll soon have you home,' the demons beside her kept saying, over and over, as though they could fool her, 'we'll soon have you home.' And they half dragged her out of the contraption that at last stopped throbbing and roaring and led her across that terrifying canyon and into one of the cliffs with stone floors and incredible slashes of colour where pictures should have been. They took no notice of her whimpering or of what she was trying to tell them, but dragged and pushed her to the fresh horror of a machine in the wall that carried them upwards, upwards, when they'd always told her that hell was *below*. It stopped, and they led her out, too terrified to say

anything any more, and she found herself at what she supposed was a door, where the man pushed some kind of button that gave a shrill little shriek.

When the door opened, she was confronted by some apparition of an old woman – could it be the woman she had seen at the river, come to claim her at last? But no; there was, she had to admit, something familiar about this one, as though she had seen it before, or had known she would encounter it some time in the future. Yes, that was it; for the apparition was a crude, a cruel parody of her sister, or what Flora might be like when she would be seventy, perhaps even eighty years old. Its face had a scar livid as a firebrand on one of her cheeks. And as though the demons who had captured her knew what they had conjured, one of them said:

‘We’ve found her, Miss Matthews. Yes, in the usual place.’ And then, as though this wasn’t torment enough, they had to go on and say: ‘Come along now, Maisie. Be a good girl. Here you are home again, safe with sister Flora.’

‘O Flora, Flora,’ she heard herself whimpering. ‘If only it *could* be. . . .’

Could it be Flora? Older than Aunt Bella, older than old grandmother Matthews? This old haggard apparition, such a parody of what Flora had been? This old, old woman saying: ‘You’ve given her her tranquilliser? Good. You may be right: perhaps we just *can’t* cope any more. . . .’

And then, suddenly reminded of something she must announce, she found she could at least compose herself, stiffening her body with her last shreds of dignity and, no matter what they might think of her for it, managing to say:

‘You may all have the felicity of wishing me happy returns. It’s my birthday, you know. My seventeenth birthday.’

But this seemed only to infuriate the apparition before her, for the Flora-phantom was almost spitting when it said: ‘O you fool, Maisie! You’re *seventy*, not *seventeen*! And I’ve told you and told you, you’re not to go out alone. Never! They’ll put you away if you do, and *then* you’ll know all about it. What did you try to do, burn the house down again? And all of us with it?’

And the apparition raised a hand to the scar on her face.

'It's *my birthday*, Flora,' she persisted; it was all that she could say. 'It's my seventeenth birthday. Don't deny me my party, Flora. Please don't deny me my party. I warn you, I'll do something you'll be sorry for if you do. . . .'

But then, some vague recollection – or was it something she had forgotten? – gave her something to laugh at.

THE BATS

By David Grant

THE WINDROPS had a big garden behind their house and at the end of it was a wooden hut. Originally it had been used for storing garden implements and any junk that looked as if it might be useful some day, but now it was given over solely to the use of their eight-year-old son, Mervyn. The Windrop's intention was twofold: Mervyn could have a place of his own in which he could do what he liked and make as much mess as he liked, learn to be independent and do things for himself; and also the hut would be a place where his parents could leave him if they wanted to go out without upsetting him. If they wished to go to a theatre or a dance, or for a drink with friends, they could do so, because with luck he would be so absorbed in whatever he was doing that he would not care in the least if they were away as long as they liked.

Mervyn's main preoccupation seemed to be collecting and looking after animals. He was genuinely interested, and with the information he could glean from books and his father's help which, however, he could enlist only after a great deal of persuasion, he was successful in raising broods of all sorts of small creatures from caterpillars to rabbits. Long hours would be spent by the boy peering intently down at the movements of the various animals as he studied their habits, their often brief, intense lives, and their almost casual deaths.

The trouble with the hut and Mervyn's exile there was that it was an easy way out for the parents. He was becoming independent too quickly, and his affection rapidly being transferred from his parents to the animals he nurtured at the bottom of the garden. If the Windrops had any inkling of this they were too wrapped up in the good time they were having and the luxury of having a child who was no trouble to them

because he could be left to his own resources, to worry overmuch. Mervyn was not conscious of anything wrong, but it might have been broken to him gently and no real harm done had it not been for an accident that revealed to him, for the first time, the extent of his abandonment.

The usual procedure, when Mervyn first took over the hut, was that his parents would appear at the door and diffidently tell him that they were going out. After a while this lapsed and they would arrive at the hut, dressed ready to go and merely say: 'Well, we're off out, Mervyn' and leave it at that. Mervyn was usually so absorbed in his collection or in something that he was making that he did little more than grunt. Seeing this almost total lack of concern the Windrops went a stage further and stopped coming down to the hut at all. Sometimes they told him when he was up at the house for a meal, but often they said nothing and just went, leaving him to fend for himself.

One evening they went out early without saying anything, while Mervyn was down at the hut busily converting an orange box into a cage for a grass snake he had found. Soon the light began to go and he switched on the electric light in the hut with the same preoccupied air which seemed to characterise everything he did now that he was left to his own resources. The bulb was dim and he was bending low over the box in his own light, chipping wood away with a chisel, which he handled somewhat uncertainly. Suddenly the chisel slipped, there was a brief moment of disbelief and there was blood welling from his left hand and a great pain shooting up his arm. The chisel clattered to the floor and Mervyn crashed out of the hut into the gloom, screaming with shock and terror. He blundered through the garden towards the house, stumbling as he went, his eyes wet with tears and his arm hanging limp by his side and dripping blood. He rushed up to the house and burst in. The house was in darkness.

'Mummy! Daddy! I'm hurt!' he screamed, but there was no reply. He paused and sucked in breath, his sobs almost silenced by disbelief that his parents should not be there to help him. He called for them again, but there was nothing. He

rushed through the house, trying every room, calling for them as he went. Finally he burst into his bedroom and sank down on the bed, his body shuddering with sobs. His right hand, the good one, plucked at the coverlet and then the pluck became a grip as something in the boy asserted itself. The tears stopped flowing, although he still sucked in great gulps of air, and his grip on the coverlet strengthened until the knuckles showed white as he strove to control himself. His teeth clenched as he fought back the pain and the shock, and he found the courage to look at his shattered hand. Somehow he had missed the artery, but there was still a lot of blood flowing from the wound and the pain throbbed through the whole arm. Mervyn stared down at it, and then the months of independence came to the surface and he walked steadily from the room, holding his hand well away from him, and went into the bathroom. There he turned on the cold tap in the basin and stuck his hand under it. As the water struck the wound he nearly swooned from the pain, but his basic hardness sustained him and he left the hand there while the blood swirled round the basin, mingling with the water, and then dropped out of his life. Next he took a bottle of iodine from the cupboard above the basin and removed the cork with his teeth. Unsteadily he poured iodine on to the wound and yelled with agony. Once again he clenched his teeth and overcame the pain as he knew he must. His face was grey, but his eyes were hard and staring as he found a bandage and started clumsily to bind his hand as he had seen his mother do it. But now his mother was not there to help. This was something he would remember. They had not been there to help. Somehow he managed to wind the bandage round his hand and fix a simple kind of knot. Blood was still seeping through, mingling with the iodine, but he was past caring. Now that he had got this far he was weak from loss of blood and the shock, not only of the accident itself, but of finding that he had to care for himself when it was the duty of others to be there to aid him. He staggered back to his room and slumped over the bed where he lost consciousness.

The Windrops had a very pleasant evening and returned home late. As soon as they entered the house they saw the first

signs of what had happened. A small table in the hall had been knocked over and the papers that had been on it were flecked with blood. As they went into other rooms they saw that there were splashes of blood everywhere. They regarded the scene with horror and stood speechless before Mrs Windrop recalled her duty, screamed 'Mervyn!' and raced up the stairs where a trail seemed to lead. They passed the bathroom and saw the pools of blood on the floor. Then they burst into Mervyn's room where he lay tossing feverishly on the bed, his face white and beaded with sweat, his injured hand hanging limply over the pillow which was now deeply stained.

They telephoned for the doctor, who in turn sent for an ambulance and listened in stony silence while they told him what they knew, which was, of course, very little. The contempt on his face was enough in itself to punish the Windrops, but they had no idea then of the punishment their son had in store for them.

He did not lose his hand, although it was a very near thing, but he virtually lost the use of it and it hung, clawlike by his side, incapable of doing much more than pulling and pushing things if they were not too heavy. His parents' remorse was genuine and they did all they could to make up for that one dreadful night, but they discovered that all affection had died in their son, except for his animals and for the life he led in the hut. He was always polite to them and, at times, almost affable, as if he were a friend of the family rather than their eight-year-old son. He accepted their new interest in him with a vague condescension that humiliated them. He now smiled little, apart from at his pets, and when he looked at the creatures in their neat little cages in the hut there was a soft, tender look in his expression which contrasted with the hate which showed when he glanced at his parents, a hate which vanished if they were actually looking at him, to be replaced by something that distressed them equally: indifference.

His father took to coming down to the hut to see what he was doing, to take an interest in his hobbies in an effort to win back the boy's affection, but each time he found the same indifference to anything he might say or do and a total absorp-

tion in the study of his pets. As far as Mervyn was concerned his father might not have existed as he stood next to him in the confined space of the hut, and he never spoke unless it was some brief answer to the questions his father asked to show his interest.

Windrop's effort was too late and failed miserably. While distressed by the alienation of his son's affection, he was also piqued that more interest should be shown in the animals and that he should be virtually ignored.

'It's those animals,' he said to his wife. 'We shall have to get rid of them. We can't hope to gain Mervyn's confidence, or even his attention, while they're still there. They'll have to go.'

'We couldn't do that,' replied Mrs Windrop. 'They're his whole life now. If we took them away he'd have nothing left.'

'What an attitude,' snorted her husband in disgust. 'Of course he'd have something left: us.'

'I don't know,' said his wife doubtfully. 'But I don't think the answer is to get rid of the animals.'

It was all right for her, Windrop decided. She hadn't been snubbed like he had.

'Why don't you go down and have a look at them?' he asked. 'You try and talk to him down there. It's impossible.'

Mrs Windrop went down to the hut. Mervyn was in there, stroking his grass snake. His mother pulled back at the door when she saw it, but by the look of contempt in his eyes she realised that it was harmless.

'Hello,' she said diffidently. Mervyn replaced the grass snake in its box and turned to a tortoise. His mother was left looking at his back. Her lips tightened with anger but she tried to make the best of it. She looked round at the boxes and cages, at the hamsters, the rabbits, the hedgehog, the caterpillars that looked like miniature flue-brushes, the raven and the one-eared cat that sat nonchalantly in the corner, washing itself.

'My, what a lot of pets you have now,' she said, forcing enthusiasm into her voice. Mervyn's mouth curled slightly at the edges. He had not reasoned it out at all, but deep down he knew that she was the real villain as far as his accident was concerned. He could forgive his father not being there, but his

mother never. She did not see the loathing in his eyes as she turned and pointed into the far corner of the hut.

'What have you got there?' she asked.

Mervyn had hung sacks so that the whole corner was shut off from the joists to the floor, thus making a small dark enclosure with the top and bottom open.

Mervyn ignored his mother's question. She tried again.

'What have you got over there?'

'Bats,' replied Mervyn quietly.

'Bats?'

'Bats.'

'Oh, I see,' she said, backing towards the door. 'I didn't think you could keep bats.'

'I can,' said Mervyn following her with his eyes. She was trying to show that she was not frightened, but she was. There was something that repelled her about bats. She thought of the small, mouselike bodies, the staring blind eyes, the shrill squeals and the darting flight. Some of them drank blood. The other pets she could stand, although some of them made her shudder slightly when she first saw them curled up in their cages or inching from plant to plant, but the thought of bats was too much.

'I'm going to get dinner ready,' she said abruptly, and left. Mervyn smiled as she went. He crossed to the corner and pulled one of the sacks aside. There they were. Hanging from the joists was a row of bats. They looked bigger than the usual sort found in Britain, but perhaps that was the fault of the light, which threw long shadows. The boy looked up at them with affection and then casually ran a hand across his throat. He could not feel them, but he knew that there were two tiny wounds there, wounds he was pleased to have. After all, his friends must feed.

Back in the house, Mrs Windrop was in the kitchen talking to her husband.

'He's got bats down there now.'

'Bats? I didn't think you could keep them.'

'Neither did I, but he says he can.'

Mervyn was right. He could. The bats were flourishing, but

he was suffering for it. After his accident he had regained his previous colour and health with encouraging rapidity, but now he had become pale and listless again as he had been immediately after it. It was as if his blood were being drained slowly from him.

In time the Windrops noticed it, and in their fumbling way tried to say something to him, get him to eat more, to take more rest, but the look in his eye, the silent scorn was too much for them and they stood mutely by as he began to waste away. As far as they were concerned it was a phase following the accident and would probably right itself in time. Then Mrs Windrop saw the marks on Mervyn's throat.

She was in the kitchen one day, shucking some peas, when Mervyn came in from the hut to wash. He looked even paler than usual and his eyes were feverish. He stopped by the sink and took a piece of soap to wash his hands. It was then that his mother noticed the two little pinpricks on his throat. They looked as if they had just been made. She came close to him and pushed his head back, peering at the marks.

'How did you do that?' she asked. Mervyn twisted his head away from her irritably and flushed beneath his pallor.

'Nothing,' he mumbled and looked at her steadily. She could not hold his gaze and she knew it. He left the room and she stood there thinking about the marks. He must have been bitten by some insect in the garden. He must have been bitten. . . . The bats! She suddenly thought of the bats hanging silently up there in the corner of the hut and she gasped as the fantastic idea blossomed in her mind. She went quickly to her husband and told him.

'You must ask Mervyn,' she concluded. 'You must be firm and get him to tell you about it.'

'He won't say anything whatever I ask him. Anyway, the whole idea is ludicrous.'

But, ludicrous or not, Windrop was determined to find out about the marks from his son, not so much to ascertain how he got them, but to prove to himself and the boy that he still had some authority over him. That evening he went to Mervyn's bedroom and found him lying on the bed, resting. He was

shocked at his appearance. His body seemed to be wasting slowly away and the pallor of his face was almost luminous in the dimly-lit room.

‘Mervyn. Let me have a look at your throat, please.’

Mervyn did not move.

‘Mervyn, the marks on your throat.’ Windrop approached the bed and looked down at his son who stared up at him without moving and without saying a word. He tried to turn away as his father sat on the edge of the bed, but Windrop got hold of him and pushed his head back so that he could see the pricks in the light of the bedside lamp.

‘Where did you get those?’ Silence.

‘All right,’ said Windrop, making a decision. ‘You aren’t going to tell me anything, so I’ll tell you a thing or two: not only are those bats going, but all the other animals as well, and furthermore I shall take great pleasure in demolishing that hut with my own two hands.’

‘No!’ The cry came from deep within the boy and his eyes seemed to start from his head. He raised himself up on his elbows and Windrop recoiled from the hatred that radiated from his son. He rose quickly from the bed and then asserted himself.

‘Yes,’ he said firmly, and left the room. Mervyn slumped back on to the bed and his eyes seemed to sink back into his head as he fought to recover from this shattering blow. What would he do when the hut went? Where would the bats be able to go? It was difficult enough as it was trying to make sure they were fed, difficult to supply enough blood. . . .

That night the Windrops went to bed happier than they had been for some time. A decision had been made, and once it was carried out they could get on with the job of reclaiming their son without malign outside influences making it impossible. They talked for a while and then both went comfortably to sleep.

In his room Mervyn waited patiently. When he judged it right he went quietly to the door of his parents’ room and tapped. There was no reply so he softly opened it and looked in. Both asleep. He closed the door and hurried downstairs, out

into the garden and down to the hut. As he neared it he could hear the shrill cries of the bats as they waited for him. He opened the door of the hut and they flapped out into the night, circling him, squeaking urgently as they hovered close, almost caressingly.

Mervyn started to walk back towards the house and the bats followed, swooping and wheeling away at times, but always returning. When he got to the house he paused.

'Quiet now, bats,' he said gently and the cries ceased abruptly. Then the strange procession entered the house: the small, pale-faced boy in pyjamas and the now silent swarm of fox-faced bats, flicking their way silently around the room as they went out into the hall and up the stairs. Mervyn edged his way along the passage until he came to his parents' room. He stopped to see if all his friends were with him, and they were. He grinned widely and then opened the door of the bedroom, stepped in and looked back at the silent, flapping mass of wings, fur and teeth.

'Come along, bats,' he said.

THE FUR BROOCH

By Dulcie Gray

SHE HAD no idea why she had agreed to go out with him. She didn't like him, and she never would, but he seemed to have a hypnotic effect on her. Thank Heavens though, it would be for the last time.

They had met three months ago, and this was the sixth time he had persuaded her to spend an evening with him, and each time she had been uncomfortable and bored. She was sorry for him of course, but she actually found him repulsive, she didn't quite know why. She shivered slightly.

He was a small man, and rather stout, with a pink and white complexion, a round unlined face and baby-blue rather staring eyes. He had a soft insinuating voice, he fluttered his pudgy white hands nervously all the time when he spoke, and he walked mincingly. Not her type at all. His name was Henry Mallory and he was twenty-seven.

She was eighteen, and very pretty. She wasn't conceited about it, but she knew it for a fact. Everyone, including the looking glass in her bedroom told her so. Her name was Sheila Francis.

Unfortunately Sheila's mother rather liked Henry, and did everything she could to encourage him, but now that Sheila was engaged to John Coolridge, surely even her mother must realise that Henry couldn't take Sheila out any more. Not after tonight.

John was wonderful. Sheila sighed happily as she thought of him. He was all that she had ever wanted in a man. He was tall, dark and handsome. He had black hair, brown eyes, a lean attractive face, a marvellous smile which showed off his splendid white teeth, a strong clear speaking voice and broad shoulders. What more could a girl ask?

She sighed again and pulled the pale woollen frock over her head, zipped up the fastening, smoothed the material over her hips, and reached for her pearls. She put on the pearl earrings to match, gave her lips a second coating of lipstick, and looked for the last time into her mirror. She looked good. No doubt about it. If only she were going out with John!

She heard the front door bell ring. Henry had arrived. She glanced at her clock on the dressing table. Seven o'clock exactly. He was always punctual. Dead on time. She heard the front door being opened, the sound of voices, and then her mother's footsteps coming up the stairs. In another moment her mother entered the room.

'Look darling,' she exclaimed excitedly. 'Isn't Henry kind? He's brought you these gorgeous flowers and this little present.' She held out an enormous bunch of dark red roses, and a small square parcel. 'He says he wants you to wear what's in the parcel this very evening. He's so thoughtful and charming. I can't think why you don't like him.'

Sheila took the roses, and sniffed at them dutifully. 'Lovely,' she said.

'I'll open the parcel darling,' said her mother, 'while you put on your coat. I wonder what he's brought. Mustn't keep Henry waiting though. He's got a taxi outside.'

'I'm engaged to John,' said Sheila resentfully. 'I shouldn't accept any presents except flowers from Henry.'

'Rubbish!' exclaimed Mrs Francis. 'How old fashioned you are! Of course you should.'

Sheila put on her new cherry red coat, while her mother opened the parcel with little cries of anticipatory joy. 'Oh darling,' she breathed. 'Look! Isn't it enchanting?'

In a small square box lay a small brown brooch. It was in the shape of a curious little animal, with a pointed nose, and two unwinking eyes. Its round little body was covered with long silky fur. It had four tiny webbed feet, and the pin on which it was resting was gold. A minute gold collar round its neck was fastened by a gold chain to the brooch-pin, which was long and pointed like a miniature sword.

'Put it on,' cooed Mrs Francis girlishly. 'What a lucky girl you are! And what an original brooch!'

Sheila took it out of the box, and to her surprise the body of the little animal was squashy. For some reason this unnerved her. She looked at it with a slight feeling of disgust, staring at the beady expressionless eyes, then she pinned it on to her coat. Was it her imagination or did those unwinking eyes gleam for a moment in satisfaction? Of course it was imagination.

'It's absolutely darling!' fussed her mother gaily. 'I've never seen anything so sweet, and you look sweet too my dear.' She kissed her daughter fondly. 'Now come downstairs my poppet or Henry will be getting impatient.'

Henry was standing in front of the fire warming his round fat backside. He waved his hands at her cheerfully when she walked in, and complimented her on her appearance. Just for a moment as his eyes rested on the brooch Sheila thought she saw the same gleam of satisfaction that she had imagined in the animal's eyes, but it was gone so quickly that she couldn't be sure.

Her mother was fussing round them. Would Henry have a drink? – No he wouldn't thank you – or they would be late for dinner. Where were they going? To the Arlington? How lovely – *Such* good food, and such a charming atmosphere. Terribly expensive though naughty Henry. But of course they must be going! The taxi would be costing a fortune. And how madly extravagant to take a taxi all the way out to the Arlington. Not a taxi but a hired car? Worse and worse, naughty boy. But we're only young once. Sheila listened to the conversation in exasperation. Really how silly her mother could be sometimes. Why couldn't she grow up? And Henry with his bland face and over-polite manners, was a pain in the neck.

They drove out to the Arlington more or less in silence; Sheila feeling depressed and Henry apparently lost in his own thoughts and when they reached the roadhouse, Henry told the chauffeur to get himself some dinner, as they wouldn't want him for an hour and a half. Then he piloted Sheila through into the ornate dining room.

With John, Sheila would have enjoyed herself. Though the Arlington was bogus Elizabethan in style and the place almost deserted, the food really was excellent, and Henry insisted on plenty of drink. Sherry first, white wine with the fish, red wine with the meat, and he was now ordering a sweet white wine for the sweet. Chateau Yquem.

'But I couldn't!' Sheila protested. 'Firstly because my head is swimming. Secondly because I don't want a sweet.'

'I do,' said Henry. 'I want crepe suzette.' His pale blue eyes were shining moistly, and his cheeks were flushed.

'Goodness you are going it!' exclaimed Sheila.

In spite of all the drink she had had, and the fact that she had spoken the truth when she said her head was swimming, part of her brain was active and wary. Something was not right with the evening. Why was Henry so pleased with himself? This was to be the farewell dinner because Sheila was marrying John. Henry had professed himself broken-hearted at the news, so what was he excited about?

While he ate his crepe suzette she watched him speculatively. He was not an attractive sight. He ate it greedily and managed to flick little bits of it round his rosebud mouth, which therefore had to be wiped carefully from time to time.

Finally the time came for coffee, and Henry insisted on brandy for them both, and a cigar for himself, and now he began to talk garrulously to her: mostly about himself. He told her of his lonely childhood, with only a widowed and possessive mother to bring him up and of the way he had overcome his loneliness by inventing imaginary games, and dreaming Walter Mitty dreams. He told her that he had been very unpopular at school, and of how in the end he had found that he could only obtain the praise and attention he craved by being the biggest swot in school. He told her that he had developed such a taste for being top in everything, that even now he couldn't bear to lose. He was highly competitive he said, but now he had found a way of always winning no matter what the odds against him were.

Sheila looked at him in surprise. She didn't like to mention that as far as she was concerned he had lost, but Henry brought

up the conversation himself. 'Take you and me for instance,' he said softly. 'You think you'll be marrying John and not me, don't you?'

'I know it,' replied Sheila.

'You wouldn't like to change your mind about me? You're exactly the kind of girl I'd like to marry, and I'd make you a good husband.'

'You're very kind,' said Sheila, 'and I'm very flattered, but you see I'm in love with John.'

'In love! In love!' sneered Henry. 'That's what they all say, but being in love doesn't last. Being a good husband does.'

'I'll take my chance,' laughed Sheila.

Henry looked at her reproachfully with his moist staring blue eyes. 'You shouldn't laugh,' he said reprovingly. 'For one thing, it isn't quite the thing under the circumstances, and for another, your mother should have taught you that he who laughs best laughs last, and I meant what I said you know, I never lose. You'll never marry John.' He changed the conversation abruptly. 'How do you like the little brooch?' he asked.

Sheila fingered it, and looked down at it politely.

'It's sweet,' she said.

'It's a vo-do,' said Henry.

'What d'you mean?'

'They're very rare. It's a kind of mouse. The true ancestor of the bat.'

'I don't like bats,' said Sheila.

'Well it isn't a bat, it's a mouse. Besides there are all sorts of bats, from the English domestic bats to the cave bats in India and vampires.'

'Don't!' said Sheila shuddering slightly. 'I told you I hate all bats.'

'Look!' said Henry, 'I'll show you something.' He slipped the gold collar off the little animal's neck. 'I'm going to take the vo-do off the brooch pin, and it will stick by its feet to your coat. It has prehensile feet. They can stick to anything, and how ever much you shake the coat, it won't fall off.' He slipped the creature's collar and put it on the coat.

'You speak about it as though it's alive,' said Sheila.

'Do I?' asked Henry. 'That's foolish of me.' He raised the brandy glass. 'Is this goodbye Sheila?' he asked

'I'm afraid so,' answered Sheila.

'I'll give you one more chance to change your mind,' said Henry, 'because I like you better than most of the others.'

'What others?' asked Sheila.

'The other girls,' replied Henry vaguely. He waited a moment, then clicked glasses. 'Goodbye Sheila.'

'To you,' said Sheila.

Henry laughed. 'Thank you my dear,' he said. 'I shall be fine.'

He relapsed into a pleased silence, they both finished the drinks, and Henry stubbed out his cigar. He beckoned the waiter and paid for the bill.

'I thought we wouldn't go straight home,' he said. 'I'll take over the car from the chauffeur and we'll go to Fox's the gaming house and have a little gamble. What do you say?'

'No thanks,' said Sheila. 'I don't like gambling. Besides I'm rather tired.'

'Pity,' murmured Henry, 'but the choice is yours.'

He steered her out to the car, and said to the chauffeur, 'Brown, I've decided to drive the car home myself. Can you find your own way back?'

Before the chauffeur had time to reply, Henry seized Sheila in his arms and said, 'John will never marry you I tell you. Not if I live to be a hundred!' He kissed her violently, and she began struggling to get free. The chauffeur was embarrassed and turned away, and the doorman raised his eyes to heaven.

When he finally let go, Sheila was furious. 'Don't you dare do that again Henry,' she said, 'or I'll slap your face.'

Henry laughed for the second time that evening and seized her again. 'I shall do what I please,' he said. He kissed her long and passionately. Again Sheila struggled violently.

'I'm certainly not coming back with you,' said Sheila when she was once again free of him. 'I'd sooner die.'

'Just as you like,' said Henry smiling, but now there was venom in his voice.

'Get me a taxi,' went on Sheila turning to the doorman. 'At once.'

'We'll never get a taxi at this time of night, Madam,' said the doorman. 'It's impossible.'

'A hired car then.'

'It will take some time Madam.'

'Then I'll walk,' said Sheila angrily.

'Don't be a silly girl,' said Henry. 'It's three miles. You can't walk all that way by yourself at this time of night.'

'I don't care. I'd rather do anything than get in the car with you.'

'Very well,' said Henry, 'if you're determined to be a fool, I can't help you.' He stepped into the car, and told the astonished driver to drive on.

For a moment Sheila hesitated, then she set off down the road for the three mile walk home. It was only nine o'clock after all, and a fine night, with a full moon, so with any luck she wouldn't be too late back, and she wasn't wearing high heels, so she'd be able to walk quite fast.

To her surprise there weren't many cars about; in fact she had never realised until this moment what an isolated road it was, but this after all made walking easier. She set off at a spanking pace. After about a mile she felt a small prick in her neck. Startled she put her hand to her throat, and found that the animal from the brooch had shifted to the top of her collar. For some reason this frightened her, though she realised there must obviously be a simple explanation for what seemed a disturbing phenomenon. She'd shifted its feet by walking so fast perhaps. She tried to pull it off to put it further down the coat, but she couldn't move it. It was stuck fast to the cloth. She then saw by the light of the moon that there was blood on her fingers. Odd. With a slight feeling of panic she attacked the brooch again and this time she felt a sharp prick on her thumb. Or was it a prick? It almost felt like a bite. And now too she began to feel slightly dizzy. There was a strange sort of mist in front of her eyes and a thrumming in her ears. She shook her head to clear it, and decided to sit for a moment on the grass verge, but immediately she was bitten a second time

on the neck, and when in a kind of frenzy she tried to remove the animal brooch altogether she found to her horror that it was twice the size.

Now a real panic seized her. She began running down the road, with tears streaming down her face. 'The next car,' she thought frantically. 'The very next car that comes, I'll stop and hitch a lift.' But no car came.

The brooch swelled larger and larger and became heavier and heavier, until at last she could run no longer, and now instead of sticking to the coat, the animal was fastened all the time to her throat. She could feel its teeth exploring her skin. It bit her again and then most horrifyingly of all it began to suck her blood. She began screaming and screaming. But no-one heard her. She struggled with it and pulled at it but it only sucked deeper, swelling monstrously all the time while its leathery front feel clawed at her face. She lurched all over the road screaming and crying but no-one saw her to come to her rescue. With a last agonised cry she fell to the ground and the enormous animal now on top of her tore at her flesh.

When she was found, she was dead in the ditch. There were bite marks all over her neck and face and deep pits which were like pot holes of blood. Her jugular vein had been cleanly severed and one eye was lying on the grass beside her. Attached to her coat was a small gold sword on a chain. The fur animal had gone.

Henry was never connected with her death since he had a perfect alibi, and Sheila's foolish mother though she wondered where the sweet little animal off the brooch had got to, never connected it with her daughter's death either.

One or two motorists on the road reported having seen an animal like a giant hedgehog with silky fur, running quite rapidly on the path by the road. But the vo-do was never captured and mysterious deaths now occur regularly in the district every full moon.

DREAM HOUSE

By Dulcie Gray

THEY SAT side by side on the sofa in my office, and I thought I had never seen a more incongruous pair. She was enormously fat, and about fifty. He was small and thin, and obviously several years younger. She had a huge round face, brown eyes, and lank dark hair. His hair was sandy, and his eyes were a watery grey. She was monstrously plain. He was good-looking, in a neat, rather efficient way. She talked. He remained silent most of the time.

For a large woman, she was very vivacious. She waved her beautiful hands when she spoke, and when she laughed, which was often, she showed two rows of still excellent teeth. 'And so you see,' she said finally, 'we thought we'd come to you.'

'Yes indeed,' I murmured politely. 'I see.'

'It's not just a question of money, I have plenty, but my husband likes to work.'

Her husband nodded expressionlessly.

'Not that he ever holds anything down for long. He seems to get bored, don't you Henry?'

Henry protested, 'My dear, that isn't strictly true. . . .'

'Well not bored exactly, but we like to travel and we do travel, don't we Henry?'

'You're used to it, my dear,' said Henry.

'Yes,' said the woman complacently. 'I'm used to it. I travelled as a girl you see, and my first husband was very well off, so I suppose I got the bug. I met Henry on one of my travels, didn't I Henry?'

'Yes dear.'

'Australia you know. I expect you could tell by the accent. He's trying to get rid of it.'

I glanced at the man, but beyond a slight flickering of his sandy eyelashes, his face was still impassive.

The woman continued, 'So what can you do for us?'

'Well,' I said cautiously, 'your request is a little unusual, but you're perfectly right, the house is empty at the moment, though whether Lord Drummond wishes to let, I have no idea. However, if you will leave the problem with me, I'll see what I can do.'

'Good.' She rose splendidly. 'Will you please let me know, as soon as you have any information?'

'Of course,' I said, 'and I'll do my very best for you.'

'I'm sure you will.' She smiled at me graciously, drew her sable cape round her shoulders, and put on her gloves. 'Come Henry,' she said, and the two of them went out of the room.

I telephoned Lord Drummond almost immediately, and he seemed not averse to the idea. 'I'd have to know more about them of course, and I'd like references and so on, but it might be quite a good thing. The house fell empty when my agent's wife died, and I have no one in mind, as a replacement at the moment. It's a very isolated house, although it's on the estate, so they are unlikely to bother me, but would it bother them do you suppose? Are they townspeople? We'd better have a trial period I think, say eighteen months. One thing I would like to know though, is how they came to discover the house at all?'

I wrote to Mrs Denchworth, telling her what Lord Drummond had said, and including his enquiry and she replied by return of post, saying that she and her husband were delighted; especially her husband, who had set his heart on the house because he had been in England during the war and had been billeted in the village, where he had seen it and fallen in love with it.

In due course their references came through and they met Lord Drummond, who then telephoned me to say that I could proceed with the arrangements as soon as I liked. 'Rum pair,' he said. 'She's pretty ghastly, but he seems quite a decent little chap. Anyway they appear solvent. He has been offered an excellent job here in Blayddon (which is why they want the place) as a constructional engineer, so I'll give it a try. I shall be away most of the winter in any case, so I shan't see much of them, and they're willing to pay quite a tidy price.'

I heard no more from him or the Denchworths until Christmas. Mr Denchworth must have written the card, because the handwriting was different from that on all previous communications. He wrote 'Thank you for arranging this house for us. My wife calls it her Dream House. So do I. We are both well. Best wishes Marjorie and Henry Denchworth.'

I threw it away with the rest of the cards on January 6th, and thought no more about them until I had occasion to visit Lord Drummond the same month about another of the houses at Blayddon, and being free at tea time or thereabouts, decided to call on them.

Mrs Denchworth seemed pleased to see me. Her husband less so. She graciously gave me tea out of a silver tea pot, being very much the lady of the Manor, and she ordered him about more like a lackey than a husband, and scolded him for putting the milk in his own tea first. 'So common,' she said. I gathered that she was getting on his nerves a good deal, although he didn't say anything, but he went white when she disparaged Australia and corrected his accent, and looked daggers when she ordered him out of the room to get some more hot water for the tea. She however seemed oblivious of any undercurrents of strain, and was very excited about some alterations that Denchworth was doing to the house. 'He's doing them all absolutely single-handed,' she said proudly. 'Building is obviously a side-line of his and he's doing it all quite beautifully.'

When the eighteen months were up, I once again heard from Mr Denchworth.

'My wife and I are not renewing the lease,' he wrote. 'We have been very happy here, and Lord Drummond has been an excellent landlord, but my wife wishes to travel. England gets too cold for her in the winter; she is used to the sun, so we are off to Honolulu in a few weeks' time.'

I happened to run into Lord Drummond shortly after this in St James' Street. After the usual greetings, I remarked that I had heard from the Denchworths, and enquired whether he wished to re-let the house.

'Don't see why not,' he said. 'It was quite a success. They were no trouble at all. Devoted to each other apparently, and

kept themselves to themselves. Can't understand it really. Each one to his taste and all that, but she wasn't my idea of a perfect mate. Talk, talk, talk, mean with the purse strings, and years older than he. What's more she made him drop the job for this Honolulu business, and he was well liked in the village. Spent quite a lot of money on the house too, which seems a waste under the circumstances. Splendid for me though, of course, so no complaints. First class constructional engineer they tell me. First class. Ah well, it takes all sorts. All sorts.' He waved his umbrella at me, and we parted.

I only saw Denchworth once again. I had been sent to Jamaica on business, and while I was there, I went to Round Hill for a drink and a swim. Round Hill is one of the most luxurious hotels in the world, and Denchworth looked prosperous and happy. He seemed surprised to see me, but very affable, and enquired after Lord Drummond. I told him that his lordship was well, and not unnaturally asked after his wife. At once his face clouded. 'She's dead,' he said sadly, 'and I miss her terribly.'

'I'm sorry,' I murmured. 'I had no idea.'

'Yes. Very sudden. Very sudden. Never meet anyone like her again.'

Before I could question him further, a very pretty girl came up to talk to him, and since I was now getting late for my business appointment, I hurried away, and soon forgot all about him.

And that was the last I ever saw of him.

I heard from him however, the other day. The letter was posthumous, and it read as follows.

'My dear Andrews, This is rather a delicate matter, and I hesitate to write directly to Lord Drummond, but I think he ought to be told. You will remember that you were good enough to arrange that my wife and I were able to rent his house, Milton House in Blayddon, some few years ago, and his Lordship was very kind to us. Among other things he was good enough to let me do some decorations and alterations. The house needed modernising; actually it needed more bathrooms, and we put these in at our own expense. Lord Drummond

expressed himself delighted, which pleased me. What might distress him however, should he or anyone else do any further structural alterations, is that my wife is walled up between the bathroom and the dressing-room of the principal bedroom suite. (My wife always said that 'bedroom suite' was a revolting expression, but I can't describe what I mean more accurately.)

'I married my wife for her money, because, as she quite rightly used to say, I was too lazy to like work. She never stopped nagging at me for this, though what she thought I or anyone else would have married her for at her age, and with her looks, I can't imagine. After five almost intolerable years, I determined to get rid of her. I thought out ways and means, as any murderer must do, and was beginning to despair of arranging it, when an English friend, whom I had met when I was in the Air Force in Britain during the war, wrote to me, and offered me a job in his newly opened factory in Blayddon. Here was my chance.

'You see Milton House was the perfect house for my scheme. I knew it well from the days when I was stationed at Blayddon, and it was also extremely convenient for the job at the factory. Now if it transpired that the house was empty, I was on my way to my heart's desire. I wrote to my friend enquiring about this, and he told me that I was in luck. So I accepted his offer and you know the rest.

'I had a little difficulty persuading my wife to come to you before she herself had seen the house – but she was delighted to be back in the old country – since she herself as you know, was English, and she was also in her own way rather moved that I seemed to want to settle down to earn my own living. I told her that I had fallen in love with Milton, that it was all that I had ever dreamed of as a home, and the perfect setting for her. And indeed that is precisely in the end what it turned out to be.

'Even without Lord Drummond's co-operation in allowing me to make my alterations, Milton was full of possibilities, but he of course made everything plain sailing. I had well remembered from my war-time visits the secret passage, dating

from the Civil War, in the side of the great open fireplace in the drawing-room, and I remembered how the chimney itself, on its way to the outer air, encroached in a great bay of brick, into the principal bedroom. I only needed to tell my wife that the bay of brick gave the room character, for her to disagree violently, and demand that it be hidden. It was in fact ugly, and Lord Drummond who has considerable taste readily agreed to the wall being built out level with it on either side, especially as one of the two hollow spaces so formed, was to be part of the new bathroom —

‘My wife’s body is in the other.

‘I won’t bore you with details, but when the time came, I inveigled her into this space, hit her on the head with what is commonly known as a blunt instrument, walled her up, and there she still is.

‘Her disappearance was unremarked, because a few weeks previously she had bought an extremely expensive house in Honolulu, which of course I have since sold at a reasonable profit, and also because I had the foresight to suggest that my wife should go to London a week ahead of me, to buy clothes, and so far as anyone in Blayddon knew, I drove her to London with all her luggage, to have her little feminine shopping spree. (Her luggage is I presume, still at Paddington station, at the left luggage office, unlabelled of course.)

‘By the time this reaches you, I shall alas have rejoined her, “in the bourne from which no traveller”, etc., which simply means in the flowery language that my wife liked so much, that I shall be dead. I have been ill for a year now, and the doctors have pronounced me incurable.

‘I have enjoyed my all too short time on my late wife’s money, very much, and among other things I have been able to repay countless kindnesses, since the bank believes my wife to be alive still; her handwriting being fortunately a very easy one to copy.

‘Lord Blayddon’s kindness also requires repayment. Hence this letter.

Yours sincerely,
Henry Denchworth.

'PS. I got the idea of walling her up more or less by chance, and since I have come this far in my confession to you, I might as well go further, and tell you that she is my fourth victim.

The remains of my mother and sister are under the cement floor of number 104 Perregrine Place, South Yarra, Melbourne (Australia). I was making alterations to our own home at the time and this seemed an ideal place for the disposal of the bodies. Like my wife they were dominating women against whom in the end I had to rebel. My third victim was a girl I got into the family way. (Another expression my wife regarded as vulgar.) This murder was discovered, since in order to dispose of her body I had dismembered her and hidden various portions of her anatomy round an isolated farm some seventy miles north of Sydney. Her headless torso in a brown paper flour bag was unfortunately not well enough buried, and again unfortunately, the owner of the farm was executed for the crime since it was not known that I had been in the district that night.

'So you will understand that when it came to the point of deciding to kill my wife, I wished to go back to method A, which had been so successful.

'There was one worrying change in the circumstances of the last murder, however, and I must say that for a couple of days I was in considerable distress. I told you that I had hit my wife on the head with a blunt instrument, before walling her up. Well I didn't hit her hard enough, and once incarcerated she came to (imagine!) and for two and a half days she screamed, banged on the wall and tried to get free. Worrying for me to say the least and it nearly upset the arrangements. However in the end all was well.

'PPS. My wife considered postscripts both vulgar and effeminate. She had a theory that if one had anything interesting to say one automatically contained it in the letter itself. I trust I haven't bored you. H.D.'

THE STREETS OF ASHKELON

By Harry Harrison

SOMEWHERE ABOVE, hidden by the eternal clouds of Wesker's World, a thunder rumbled and grew. Trader John Garth stopped when he heard it, his boots sinking slowly into the muck, and cupped his good ear to catch the sound. It swelled and waned in the thick atmosphere, growing louder.

'That noise is the same as the noise of your sky-ship,' Itin said, with stolid Wesker logicity, slowly pulverizing the idea in his mind and turning over the bits one by one for closer examination. 'But your ship is still sitting where you landed it. It must be, even though we cannot see it, because you are the only one who can operate it. And even if anyone else could operate it we would have heard it rising into the sky. Since we did not, and if this sound is a sky-ship sound, then it must mean . . .'

'Yes, another ship,' Garth said, too absorbed in his own thoughts to wait for the laborious Weskerian chains of logic to clank their way through to the end. Of course it was another spacer, it had been only a matter of time before one appeared, and undoubtedly this one was homing on the S.S. radar reflector as he had done. His own ship would show up clearly on the newcomer's screen and they would probably set down as close to it as they could.

'You better go ahead, Itin,' he said. 'Use the water so you can get to the village quickly. Tell everyone to get back into the swamps, well clear of the hard ground. That ship is landing on instruments and anyone underneath at touchdown is going to be cooked.'

This immediate threat was clear enough to the little Wesker amphibian. Before Garth finished speaking Itin's ribbed ears had folded like a bat's wing and he slipped silently into the

nearby canal. Garth squelched on through the mud, making as good time as he could over the clinging surface. He had just reached the fringes of the village clearing when the rumbling grew to a head-splitting roar and the spacer broke through the low-hanging layer of clouds above. Garth shielded his eyes from the down-reaching tongue of flame and examined the growing form of the grey-black ship with mixed feelings.

After almost a standard year on Wesker's World he had to fight down a longing for human companionship of any kind. While this buried fragment of herd-spirit chattered for the rest of the monkey tribe, his trader's mind was busily drawing a line under a column of figures and adding up the total. This could very well be another trader's ship, and if it were his monopoly of the Wesker trade was at an end. Then again, this might not be a trader at all, which was the reason he stayed in the shelter of the giant fern and loosened his gun in its holster.

The ship baked dry a hundred square metres of mud, the roaring blast died, and the landing feet crunched down through the crackling crust. Metal creaked and settled into place while the cloud of smoke and steam slowly drifted lower in the humid air.

'Garth – you native-cheating extortionist – where are you?' the ship's speaker boomed. The lines of the spacer had looked only slightly familiar, but there was no mistaking the rasping tones of that voice. Garth wore a smile when he stepped out into the open and whistled shrilly through two fingers. A directional microphone ground out of its casing on the ship's fin and turned in his direction.

'What are you doing here, Singh?' he shouted towards the mike. 'Too crooked to find a planet of your own and have to come here to steal an honest trader's profits?'

'Honest!' the amplified voice roared. 'This from the man who has been in more jails than cathouses – and that a goodly number in itself, I do declare. Sorry, friend of my youth, but I cannot join you in exploiting this aboriginal pesthole. I am on course to a more fairly atmosphered world where a fortune is waiting to be made. I only stopped here since an opportunity presented to turn an honest credit by running a taxi service. I

bring you friendship, the perfect companionship, a man in a different line of business who might help you in yours. I'd come out and say hello myself, except I would have to decon for biologicals. I'm cycling the passenger through the lock so I hope you won't mind helping with his luggage.'

At least there would be no other trader on the planet now, that worry was gone. But Garth still wondered what sort of passenger would be taking one-way passage to an uninhabited world. And what was behind that concealed hint of merriment in Singh's voice? He walked around to the far side of the spacer where the ramp had dropped, and looked up at the man in the cargo lock who was wrestling ineffectually with a large crate. The man turned towards him and Garth saw the clerical dog-collar and knew just what it was Singh had been chuckling about.

'What are you doing here?' Garth asked; in spite of his attempt at self control he snapped the words. If the man noticed this he ignored it, because he was still smiling and putting out his hand as he came down the ramp.

'Father Mark,' he said. 'Of the Missionary Society of Brothers. I'm very pleased to . . .'

'I said what are you doing here.' Garth's voice was under control now, quiet and cold. He knew what had to be done, and it must be done quickly or not at all.

'That should be obvious,' Father Mark said, his good nature still unruffled. 'Our missionary society has raised funds to send spiritual emissaries to alien worlds for the first time. I was lucky enough . . .'

'Take your luggage and get back into the ship. You're not wanted here and have no permission to land. You'll be a liability and there is no one on Wesker to take care of you. Get back into the ship.'

'I don't know who you are sir, or why you are lying to me,' the priest said. He was still calm but the smile was gone. 'But I have studied galactic law and the history of this planet very well. There are no diseases or beasts here that I should have any particular fear of. It is also an open planet, and until the

Space Survey changes that status I have as much right to be here as you do.'

The man was of course right, but Garth couldn't let him know that. He had been bluffing, hoping the priest didn't know his rights. But he did. There was only one distasteful course left for him, and he had better do it while there was still time.

'Get back in that ship,' he shouted, not hiding his anger now. With a smooth motion his gun was out of the holster and the pitted black muzzle only inches from the priest's stomach. The man's face turned white, but he did not move.

'What the hell are you doing, Garth!' Singh's shocked voice grated from the speaker. 'The guy paid his fare and you have no rights at all to throw him off the planet.'

'I have this right,' Garth said raising his gun and sighting between the priest's eyes. 'I give him thirty seconds to get back aboard the ship or I pull the trigger.'

'Well I think you are either off your head or playing a joke,' Singh's exasperated voice rasped down at them. 'If a joke, it is in bad taste, and either way you're not getting away with it. Two can play at that game, only I can play it better.'

There was the rumble of heavy bearings and the remote-controlled four-gun turret on the ship's side rotated and pointed at Garth. 'Now - down gun and give Father Mark a hand with the luggage,' the speaker commanded, a trace of humour back in the voice now. 'As much as I would like to help, Old Friend, I cannot. I feel it is time you had a chance to talk to the father; after all, I have had the opportunity of speaking with him all the way from Earth.'

Garth jammed the gun back into the holster with an acute feeling of loss. Father Mark stepped forward, the winning smile back now and a bible taken from a pocket of his robe, in his raised hand. 'My son,' he said.

'I'm not your son,' was all Garth could choke out as defeat welled up in him. His fist drew back as the anger rose, and the best he could do was open the fist so he struck only with the flat of his hand. Still the blow sent the priest crashing to the ground and fluttered the pages of the book splattering into the thick mud.

Itin and the other Weskers had watched everything with seemingly emotionless interest, and Garth made no attempt to answer their unspoken questions. He started towards his house, but turned back when he saw they were still unmoving.

'A new man has come,' he told them. 'He will need help with the things he has brought. If he doesn't have any place for them, you can put them in the big warehouse until he has a place of his own.'

He watched them waddle across the clearing towards the ship, then went inside and gained a certain satisfaction from slamming the door hard enough to crack one of the panes. There was an equal amount of painful pleasure in breaking out one of the remaining bottles of Irish whiskey that he had been saving for a special occasion. Well this was special enough, though not really what he had had in mind. The whiskey was good and burned away some of the bad taste in his mouth, but not all of it. If his tactics had worked, success would have justified everything. But he had failed and in addition to the pain of failure there was the acute feeling that he had made a horse's ass out of himself. Singh had blasted off without any goodbyes. There was no telling what sense he had made of the whole matter, though he would surely carry some strange stories back to the traders' lodge. Well, that could be worried about the next time Garth signed in. Right now he had to go about setting things right with the missionary. Squinting out through the rain he saw the man struggling to erect a collapsible tent while the entire population of the village stood in ordered ranks and watched. Naturally none of them offered to help.

By the time the tent was up and the crates and boxes stowed inside it the rain had stopped. The level of fluid in the bottle was a good bit lower and Garth felt more like facing up to the unavoidable meeting. In truth, he was looking forward to talking to the man. The whole nasty business aside, after an entire solitary year any human companionship looked good. *Will you join me now for dinner. John Garth*, he wrote on the back of an old invoice. But maybe the guy was too frightened to come? Which was no way to start any kind of relationship. Rummag-

ing under the bunk, he found a box that was big enough and put his pistol inside. Itin was of course waiting outside the door when he opened it, since this was his tour as Knowledge Collector. He handed him the note and box.

'Would you take these to the new man,' he said.

'Is the new man's name New Man?' Itin asked.

'No, it's not!' Garth snapped. 'His name is Mark. But I'm only asking you to deliver this, not get involved in conversation.'

As always when he lost his temper, the literal minded Weskers won the round. 'You are not asking for conversation,' Itin said slowly, 'but Mark may ask for conversation. And others will ask me his name, if I do not know his na . . .' The voice cut off as Garth slammed the door. This didn't work in the long run either because next time he saw Itin – a day, a week, or even a month later – the monologue would be picked up on the very word it had ended and the thought rambled out to its last frayed end. Garth cursed under his breath and poured water over a pair of the tastier concentrates that he had left.

'Come in,' he said when there was a quiet knock on the door. The priest entered and held out the box with the gun.

'Thank you for the loan, Mr Garth, I appreciate the spirit that made you send it. I have no idea of what caused the unhappy affair when I landed, but I think it would be best forgotten if we are going to be on this planet together for any length of time.'

'Drink?' Garth asked, taking the box and pointing to the bottle on the table. He poured two glasses full and handed one to the priest. 'That's about what I had in mind, but I still owe you an explanation of what happened out there.' He scowled into his glass for a second, then raised it to the other man. 'It's a big universe and I guess we have to make out as best we can. Here's to Sanity.'

'God be with you,' Father Mark said, and raised his glass as well.

'Not with me or with this planet,' Garth said firmly. 'And that's the crux of the matter.' He half-drained the glass and sighed.

'Do you say that to shock me?' the priest asked with a smile. 'I assure you it doesn't.'

'Not intended to shock. I meant it quite literally. I suppose I'm what you would call an atheist, so revealed religion is no concern of mine. While these natives, simple and unlettered stone-age types that they are, have managed to come this far with no superstitions or traces of deism whatsoever. I had hoped that they might continue that way.'

'What are you saying?' the priest frowned. 'Do you mean they have no gods, no belief in the hereafter? They must die . . . ?'

'Die they do, and to dust returneth like the rest of the animals. They have thunder, trees and water without having thunder-gods, tree sprites, or water nymphs. They have no ugly little gods, taboos, or spells to hag-ride and limit their lives. They are the only primitive people I have ever encountered that are completely free of superstition and appear to be much happier and sane because of it. I just wanted to keep them that way.'

'You wanted to keep them from God – from salvation?' the priest's eyes widened and he recoiled slightly.

'No,' Garth said. 'I wanted to keep them from superstition until they knew more and could think about it realistically without being absorbed and perhaps destroyed by it.'

'You're being insulting to the Church, sir, to equate it with superstition . . .'

'Please,' Garth said, raising his hand. 'No theological arguments. I don't think your society footed the bill for this trip just to attempt a conversion on me. Just accept the fact that my beliefs have been arrived at through careful thought over a period of years, and no amount of undergraduate metaphysics will change them. I'll promise not to try and convert you – if you will do the same for me.'

'Agreed, Mr Garth. As you have reminded me, my mission here is to save these souls, and that is what I must do. But why should my work disturb you so much that you try and keep me from landing? Even threaten me with your gun, and . . .'

the priest broke off and looked into his glass.

'And even slug you?' Garth asked, suddenly frowning. 'There was no excuse for that, and I would like to say that I'm sorry. Plain bad manners and an even worse temper. Live alone long enough and you find yourself doing that kind of thing.' He brooded down at his big hands where they lay on the table, reading memories into the scars and callouses patterned there. 'Let's just call it frustration, for lack of a better word. In your business you must have had a lot of chance to peep into the darker places in men's minds and you should know a bit about motives and happiness. I have had too busy a life to ever consider settling down and raising a family, and right up to recently I never missed it. Maybe leakage radiation is softening up my brain, but I had begun to think of these furry and fishy Weskers as being a little like my own children, that I was somehow responsible to them.'

'We are all His children,' Father Mark said quietly.

'Well, here are some of His children that can't even imagine His existence,' Garth said, suddenly angry at himself for allowing gentler emotions to show through. Yet he forgot himself at once, leaning forward with the intensity of his feelings. 'Can't you realise the importance of this? Live with these Weskers awhile and you will discover a simple and happy life that matches the state of grace you people are always talking about. They get *pleasure* from their lives – and cause no one pain. By circumstances they have evolved on an almost barren world, so have never had a chance to grow out of a physical stone age culture. But mentally they are our match – or perhaps better. They have all learned my language so I can easily explain the many things they want to know. Knowledge and the gaining of knowledge gives them real satisfaction. They tend to be exasperating at times because every new fact must be related to the structure of all other things, but the more they learn the faster this process becomes. Some day they are going to be man's equal in every way, perhaps surpass us. If – would you do me a favour?'

'Whatever I can.'

'Leave them alone. Or teach them if you must – history and science, philosophy, law, anything that will help them face the

realities of the greater universe they never even knew existed before. But don't confuse them with your hatreds and pain, guilt, sin, and punishment. Who knows the harm . . .'

'You are being insulting, sir!' the priest said, jumping to his feet. The top of his grey head barely came to the massive spaceman's chin, yet he showed no fear in defending what he believed. Garth, standing now himself, was no longer the penitent. They faced each other in anger, as men have always stood, unbending in the defence of that which they think right.

'Yours is the insult,' Garth shouted. 'The incredible egotism to feel that your derivative little mythology, differing only slightly from the thousands of others that still burden men, can do anything but confuse their still fresh minds! Don't you realise that they believe in truth – and have never heard of such a thing as a lie. They have not been trained yet to understand that other kinds of minds can think differently from theirs. Will you spare them this . . . ?'

'I will do my duty which is His will, Mr Garth. These are God's creatures here, and they have souls. I cannot shirk my duty, which is to bring them His word, so that they may be saved and enter into the kingdom of heaven.'

When the priest opened the door the wind caught it and blew it wide. He vanished into the stormswept darkness and the door swung back and forth and a splatter of raindrops blew in. Garth's boots left muddy footprints when he closed the door, shutting out the sight of Itin sitting patiently and uncomplaining in the storm, hoping only that Garth might stop for a moment and leave with him some of the wonderful knowledge of which he had so much.

By unspoken consent that first night was never mentioned again. After a few days of loneliness, made worse because each knew of the other's proximity, they found themselves talking on carefully neutral grounds. Garth slowly packed and stowed away his stock and never admitted that his work was finished and he could leave at any time. He had a fair amount of interesting drugs and botanicals that would fetch a good price. And the Wesker Artefacts were sure to create a sensation in the

sophisticated galactic market. Crafts on the planet here had been limited before his arrival, mostly pieces of carving painfully chipped into the hard wood with fragments of stone. He had supplied tools and a stock of raw metal from his own supplies, nothing more than that. In a few months the Weskers had not only learned to work with the new materials, but had translated their own designs and forms into the most alien – but most beautiful – artefacts that he had ever seen. All he had to do was release these on the market to create a primary demand, then return for a new supply. The Weskers wanted only books and tools and knowledge in return, and through their own efforts he knew they would pull themselves into the galactic union.

This is what Garth had hoped. But a wind of change was blowing through the settlement that had grown up around his ship. No longer was he the centre of attention and focal point of the village life. He had to grin when he thought of his fall from power; yet there was very little humour in the smile. Serious and attentive Weskers still took turns of duty as Knowledge Collectors, but their recording of dry facts was in sharp contrast to the intellectual hurricane that surrounded the priest.

Where Garth had made them work for each book and machine, the priest gave freely. Garth had tried to be progressive in his supply of knowledge, treating them as bright but unlettered children. He had wanted them to walk before they could run, to master one step before going on to the next.

Father Mark simply brought them the benefits of Christianity. The only physical work he required was the construction of a church, a place of worship and learning. More Weskers had appeared out of the limitless planetary swamps and within days the roof was up, supported on a framework of poles. Each morning the congregation worked a little while on the walls, then hurried inside to learn the all-promising, all-encompassing, all-important facts about the universe.

Garth never told the Weskers what he thought about their new interest, and this was mainly because they had never asked him. Pride or honour stood in the way of his grabbing

a willing listener and pouring out his grievances. Perhaps it would have been different if Itin was on Collecting duty; he was the brightest of the lot; but Itin had been rotated the day after the priest had arrived and Garth had not talked to him since.

It was a surprise then when after seventeen of the trebly-long Wesker days, he found a delegation at his doorstep when he emerged after breakfast. Itin was their spokesman, and his mouth was open slightly. Many of the other Weskers had their mouths open as well, one even appearing to be yawning, clearly revealing the double row of sharp teeth and the purple-black throat. The mouths impressed Garth as to the seriousness of the meeting; this was the one Wesker expression he had learned to recognise. An open mouth indicated some strong emotion; happiness, sadness, anger, he could never be really sure which. The Weskers were normally placid and he had never seen enough open mouths to tell what was causing them. But he was surrounded by them now.

'Will you help us, John Garth,' Itin said. 'We have a question.'

'I'll answer any question you ask,' Garth said, with more than a hint of misgiving. 'What is it?'

'Is there a God?'

'What do you mean by "God"? ' Garth asked in turn. What should he tell them?

'God is our Father in Heaven, who made us all and protects us. Whom we pray to for aid, and if we are Saved will find a place ...'

'That's enough,' Garth said. 'There is no God.'

All of them had their mouths open now, even Itin, as they looked at Garth and thought about his answer. The rows of pink teeth would have been frightening if he hadn't known these creatures so well. For one instant he wondered if perhaps they had been already indoctrinated and looked upon him as a heretic, but he brushed the thought away.

'Thank you,' Itin said, and they turned and left.

Though the morning was still cool, Garth noticed that he was sweating and wondered why.

The reaction was not long in coming. Itin returned that same afternoon. 'Will you come to the church?' he asked. 'Many of the things that we study are difficult to learn, but none as difficult as this. We need your help because we must hear you and Father Mark talk together. This is because he says one thing is true and you say another is true and both cannot be true at the same time. We must find out what is true.'

'I'll come, of course,' Garth said, trying to hide the sudden feeling of elation. He had done nothing, but the Weskers had come to him anyway. There could still be grounds for hope that they might yet be free.

It was hot inside the church, and Garth was surprised at the number of Weskers who were there, more than he had seen gathered at any one time before. There were many open mouths. Father Mark sat at a table covered with books. He looked unhappy but didn't say anything when Garth came in. Garth spoke first.

'I hope you realise this is their idea – that they came to me of their own free will and asked me to come here?'

'I know that,' the priest said resignedly. 'At times they can be very difficult. But they are learning and want to believe, and that is what is important.'

'Father Mark, Trader Garth, we need your help,' Itin said. 'You both know many things that we do not know. You must help us come to religion which is not an easy thing to do.' Garth started to say something, then changed his mind. Itin went on. 'We have read the bibles and all the books that Father Mark gave us, and one thing is clear. We have discussed this and we are all agreed. These books are very different from the ones that Trader Garth gave us. In Trader Garth's books there is the universe which we have not seen, and it goes on without God, for he is mentioned nowhere; we have searched very carefully. In Father Mark's books He is everywhere and nothing can go without Him. One of these must be right and the other wrong. We do not know how this can be, but after we find out which is right then perhaps we will know. If God does not exist . . .'

'Of course He exists, my children,' Father Mark said in a

voice of heartfelt intensity. 'He is our Father in Heaven who has created us all. . . .'

'Who created God?' Itin asked and the murmur ceased and everyone of the Weskers watched Father Mark intensely. He recoiled a bit under the impact of their eyes, then smiled.

'Nothing created God, since He is the Creator. He always was. . . .'

'If He always was in existence – why cannot the universe have always been in existence? Without having had a creator?' Itin broke in with a rush of words. The importance of the question was obvious. The priest answered slowly, with infinite patience.

'Would that the answers were that simple, my children. But even the scientists do not agree about the creation of the universe. While they doubt – we who have seen the light *know*. We can see the miracle of creation all about us. And how can there be creation without a Creator? That is He, our Father, our God in Heaven. I know you have doubts; that is because you have souls and free will. Still, the answer is so simple. Have faith, that is all you need. Just believe.'

'How can we believe without proof?'

'If you cannot see that this world itself is proof of His existence, then I say to you that belief needs no proof – if you have faith!'

A babble of voices arose in the room and more of the Wesker mouths were open now as they tried to force their thoughts through the tangled skein of words and separate the thread of truth.

'Can you tell us, Garth?' Itin asked, and the sound of his voice quieted the hubbub.

'I can tell you to use the scientific method which can examine all things – including itself – and give you answers that can prove the truth or falsity of any statement.'

'That is what we must do,' Itin said, 'we had reached the same conclusion.' He held a thick book before him and a ripple of nods ran across the watchers. 'We have been studying the bible as Father Mark told us to do, and we have found the answer. God will make a miracle for us, thereby proving that

He is watching us. And by this sign we will know Him and go to Him.'

'That is the sin of false pride,' Father Mark said. 'God needs no miracles to prove His existence.'

'But *we* need a miracle!' Itin shouted, and though he wasn't human there was need in his voice. 'We have read here of many smaller miracles, loaves, fishes, wine, snakes – many of them, for much smaller reasons. Now all He need do is make a miracle and He will bring us all to Him – the wonder of an entire new world worshipping at His throne, as you have told us, Father Mark. And you have told us how important this is. We have discussed this and find that there is only one miracle that is best for this kind of thing.'

His boredom at the theological wrangling drained from Garth in an instant. He had not been really thinking or he would have realised where all this was leading. He could see the illustration in the bible where Itin held it open, and knew in advance what picture it was. He rose slowly from his chair, as if stretching, and turned to the priest behind him.

'Get ready!' he whispered. 'Get out the back and get to the ship; I'll keep them busy here. I don't think they'll harm me.'

'What do you mean. . . ?' Father Mark asked, blinking in surprise.

'Get out, you fool!' Garth hissed. 'What miracle do you think they mean? What miracle is supposed to have converted the world to Christianity?'

'No!' Father Mark said. 'It cannot be. It just cannot be . . . !'

'GET MOVING!' Garth shouted, dragging the priest from the chair and hurling him towards the rear wall. Father Mark stumbled to a halt, turned back. Garth leaped for him, but it was already too late. The amphibians were small, but there were so many of them. Garth lashed out and his fist struck Itin, hurling him back into the crowd. The others came on as he fought his way towards the priest. He beat at them but it was like struggling against waves. The furry, musky bodies washed over and engulfed him. He fought until they tied him, and he still struggled until they beat on his head until he stopped.

Then they pulled him outside where he could only lie in the rain and curse and watch.

Of course the Weskers were marvellous craftsmen, and everything had been constructed down to the last detail, following the illustration in the bible. There was the cross, planted firmly on the top of a small hill, the gleaming metal spikes, the hammer. Father Mark was stripped and draped in a carefully pleated loincloth. They led him out of the church.

At the sight of the cross he almost fainted. After that he held his head high and determined to die as he had lived, with faith.

Yet this was hard. It was unbearable even for Garth, who only watched. It is one thing to talk of crucifixion and look at the gentle carved bodies in the dim light of prayer. It is another to see a man naked, ropes cutting into his skin where he hangs from a bar of wood. And to see the needle-tipped spike raised and placed against the soft flesh of his palm, to see the hammer come back with the calm deliberation of an artisan's measured stroke. To hear the thick sound of metal penetrating flesh.

Then to hear the screams.

Few are born to be martyrs; Father Mark was not one of them. With the first blows, the blood ran from his lips where his clenched teeth met. Then his mouth was wide and his head strained back and the guttural horror of his screams sliced through the susurrations of the falling rain. It resounded as a silent echo from the masses of watching Weskers, for whatever emotion opened their mouths was now tearing at their bodies with all its force, and row after row of gaping jaws reflected the crucified priest's agony.

Mercifully he fainted as the last nail was driven home. Blood ran from the raw wounds, mixing with the rain to drip faintly pink from his feet as the life ran out of him. At this time, somewhere at this time, sobbing and tearing at his own bonds, numbed from the blows on the head, Garth lost consciousness.

He awoke in his own warehouse and it was dark. Someone was cutting away the woven ropes they had bound him with. The rain still dripped and splashed outside.

'Itin,' he said. It could be no one else.

'Yes,' the alien voice whispered back. 'The others are all talking in the church. Lin died after you struck his head, and Inon is very sick. There are some that say you should be crucified too, and I think that is what will happen. Or perhaps killed by stoning on the head. They have found in the bible where it says . . .'

'I know.' With infinite weariness. 'An eye for an eye. You'll find lots of things like that once you start looking. It's a wonderful book.' His head ached terribly.

'You must go, you can get to your ship without anyone seeing you. There has been enough killing.' Itin as well, spoke with a new-found weariness.

Garth experimented, pulling himself to his feet. He pressed his head to the rough wood of the wall until the nausea stopped. 'He's dead.' He said it as a statement, not a question.

'Yes, some time ago. Or I could not have come away to see you.'

'And buried of course, or they wouldn't be thinking about starting on me next.'

'And buried!' There was almost a ring of emotion in the alien's voice, an echo of the dead priest's. 'He is buried and he will rise on High. It is written and that is the way it will happen. Father Mark will be so happy that it has happened like this.' The voice ended in a sound like a human sob.

Garth painfully worked his way towards the door, leaning against the wall so he wouldn't fall.

'We did the right thing, didn't we?' Itin asked. There was no answer. 'He will rise up, Garth, won't he rise?'

Garth was at the door and enough light came from the brightly lit church to show his torn and bloody hands clutching at the frame. Itin's face swam into sight close to his, and Garth felt the delicate, many fingered hands with the sharp nails catch at his clothes.

'He will rise, won't he, Garth?'

'No,' Garth said, 'he is going to stay buried right where you put him. Nothing is going to happen because he is dead and he is going to stay dead.'

The rain runnelled through Itin's fur and his mouth was opened so wide that he seemed to be screaming into the night. Only with effort could he talk, squeezing out the alien thoughts in an alien language.

'Then we will not be saved? We will not become pure?'

'You were pure,' Garth said, in a voice somewhere between a sob and a laugh. 'That's the horrible ugly dirty part of it. You were pure. Now you are . . .'

'Murderers,' Itin said, and the water ran down from his lowered head and streamed away into the darkness.

THE SNAIL WATCHER

By Patricia Highsmith

WHEN MR Peter Knoppert began to make a hobby of snail watching, he had no idea that his handful of specimens would become hundreds in no time. Only two months after the original snails were carried up to the Knoppert study, some thirty glass tanks and bowls, all teeming with snails, lined the walls, rested on the desk and window-sills, and were beginning even to cover the floor. Mrs Knoppert disapproved strongly, and would no longer enter the room. It smelled, she said, and besides she had once stepped on a snail by accident, a horrible sensation she would never forget. But the more his wife and friends deplored his unusual and vaguely repellent pastime, the more pleasure Mr Knoppert seemed to find in it.

‘I never cared for nature before in my life,’ Mr Knoppert often remarked – he was a partner in a brokerage firm, a man who had devoted all his life to the science of finance – ‘but snails have opened my eyes to the beauty of the animal world.’

If his friends commented that snails were not really animals, and their slimy habitats hardly the best example of the beauty of nature, Mr Knoppert would tell them with a superior smile that they simply didn’t know all that he knew about snails.

And it was true. Mr Knoppert had witnessed an exhibition that was not described, certainly not adequately described, in any encyclopaedia or zoology book that he had been able to find. Mr Knoppert had wandered into the kitchen one evening for a bite of something before dinner, and had happened to notice that a couple of snails in the china bowl on the draining board were behaving very oddly. Standing more or less on their tails, they were weaving before each other for all the world like a pair of snakes hypnotised by a flute player. A moment later, their faces came together in a kiss of volup-

tuous intensity. Mr Knoppert bent closer and studied them from all angles. Something else was happening: a protuberance like an ear was appearing on the right side of the head of both snails. His instinct told him that he was watching a sexual activity of some sort.

The cook came in and said something to him, but Mr Knoppert silenced her with an impatient wave of his hand. He couldn't take his eyes from the enchanted little creatures in the bowl.

When the earlike excrescences were precisely together rim to rim, a whitish rod like another small tentacle shot out from one ear and arched over toward the ear of the other snail. Mr Knoppert's first surmise was dashed when a tentacle sallied from the other snails, too. Most peculiar, he thought. The two tentacles withdrew, then came forth again, and as if they had found some invisible mark, remained fixed in either snail. Mr Knoppert peered intently closer. So did the cook.

'Did you ever see anything like this?' Mr Knoppert asked.

'No. They must be fighting,' the cook said indifferently and went away.

That was a sample of the ignorance on the subject of snails that he was later to discover everywhere.

Mr Knoppert continued to observe the pair of snails off and on for more than an hour, until first the ears, then the rods withdrew, and the snails themselves relaxed their attitudes and paid no further attention to each other. But by that time, a different pair of snails had begun a flirtation, and were slowly rearing themselves to get into a position for kissing. Mr Knoppert told the cook that the snails were not to be served that evening. He took the bowl of them up to his study. And snails were never again served in the Knoppert household.

That night, he searched his encyclopaedias and a few general science books he happened to possess, but there was absolutely nothing on snails' breeding habits, though the oyster's dull reproductive cycle was described in detail. Perhaps it hadn't been a mating he had seen after all, Mr Knoppert decided after a day or two. His wife Edna told him either to eat the snails or get rid of them — it was at this time that she

stepped upon a snail that had crawled out on to the floor – and Mr Knoppert might have, if he hadn't come across a sentence in Darwin's *Origin of Species* on a page given to gastropoda. The sentence was in French, a language Mr Knoppert did not know, but the word *sensualité* made him tense like a bloodhound that has suddenly found the scent. He was in the public library at the time, and laboriously he translated the sentence with the aid of a French-English dictionary. It was a statement of less than a hundred words, saying that snails manifested a sensuality in their mating that was not to be found elsewhere in the animal kingdom. That was all. It was from the notebooks of Henri Fabre. Obviously Darwin had decided not to translate it for the average reader, but to leave it in its original language for the scholarly few who really cared. Mr Knoppert considered himself one of the scholarly few now, and his round, pink face beamed with self-esteem.

He had learned that his snails were the fresh water type that laid their eggs in sand or earth, so he put moist earth and a little saucer of water into a big washpan and transferred his snails into it. Then he waited for something to happen. Not even another mating happened. He picked up the snails one by one and looked at them, without seeing anything suggestive of pregnancy. But one snail he couldn't pick up. The shell might have been glued to the earth. Mr Knoppert suspected the snail had buried its head in the ground to die. Two more days went by, and on the morning of the third, Mr Knoppert found a spot of crumbly earth where the snail had been. Curious, he investigated the crumbles with a match stem, and to his delight discovered a pit full of shiny new eggs. Snail eggs! He hadn't been wrong. Mr Knoppert called his wife and the cook to look at them. The eggs looked very much like big caviar, only they were white instead of black or red.

'Well, naturally they have to breed some way,' was his wife's comment.

Mr Knoppert couldn't understand her lack of interest. He had to go look at the eggs every hour that he was at home. He looked at them every morning to see if any change had taken place, and the eggs were his last thought every night before

he went to bed. Moreover, another snail was now digging a pit. And another pair of snails was mating! The first batch of eggs turned a greyish colour, and minuscule spirals of shells became discernible on one side of each egg. Mr Knoppert's anticipation rose to higher pitch. At last a morning arrived – the eighteenth after laying, according to Mr Knoppert's careful count – when he looked down into the egg pit and saw the first tiny moving head, the first stubby little antennae uncertainly exploring its nest. Mr Knoppert was as happy as the father of a new child. Every one of the seventy or more eggs in the pit came miraculously to life. He had seen the entire reproductive cycle evolve to a successful conclusion. And the fact that no one, at least no one that he knew of, was acquainted with a fraction of what he knew, lent his knowledge a thrill of discovery, the piquancy of the esoteric. Mr Knoppert made notes on successive matings and egg hatchings. He narrated snail biology to fascinated, more often shocked friends and guests, until his wife squirmed with embarrassment.

'But where is it going to stop, Peter? If they keep on reproducing at this rate, they'll take over the house!' his wife told him after fifteen or twenty pits had hatched.

'There's no stopping nature,' he replied good-humouredly. 'They've only taken over the study. There's plenty of room there.'

So more and more glass tanks and bowls were moved in. Mr Knoppert went to the market and chose several of the more lively looking snails, and also a pair he found mating, unobserved by the rest of the world. More and more egg pits appeared in the dirt floors of the tanks, and out of each pit crept finally from seventy to ninety baby snails, transparent as dewdrops, gliding up rather than down the strips of fresh lettuce that Mr Knoppert was quick to give all the pits as edible ladders for the climb. Matings went on so often that he no longer bothered to watch them. A mating could last twenty-four hours. But the thrill of seeing the white caviar become shells and start to move – that never diminished however often he witnessed it.

His colleagues in the brokerage office noticed a new zest for life in Peter Knoppert. He became more daring in his moves, more brilliant in his calculations, became in fact a little vicious in his schemes, but he brought money in for his company. By unanimous vote, his basic salary was raised from forty to sixty thousand per year. When anyone congratulated him on his achievements, Mr Knoppert gave all the credit to his snails and the beneficial relaxation he derived from watching them.

He spent all his evenings with his snails in the room that was no longer a study but a kind of aquarium. He loved to strew the tanks with fresh lettuce and pieces of boiled potatoes and beets, then turn on the sprinkler system that he had installed in the tanks to simulate natural rainfall. Then all the snails would liven up and begin eating, mating, or merely gliding through the shallow water with obvious pleasure. Mr Knoppert often let a snail crawl onto his forefinger – he fancied his snails enjoyed this human contact – and he would feed it a piece of lettuce by hand, would observe the snail from all sides, finding as much aesthetic satisfaction as another man might from contemplating a Japanese print.

By now, Mr Knoppert did not allow anyone to set foot in his study. Too many snails had the habit of crawling around on the floor, of going to sleep glued to chair bottoms and to the backs of books on the shelves. Snails spent much of their time sleeping, especially the older snails. But there were enough less indolent snails who preferred love-making. Mr Knoppert estimated that about a dozen pairs of snails must be kissing all the time. And certainly there was a multitude of baby and adolescent snails. They were impossible to count. But Mr Knoppert did count the snails sleeping and creeping on the ceiling alone, and arrived at something between eleven and twelve hundred. The tanks, the bowls, the underside of his desk and the bookshelves must surely have held fifty times that number. Mr Knoppert meant to scrape the snails off the ceiling one day soon. Some of them had been up there for weeks, and he was afraid they were not taking on enough nourishment. But of late he had been a little too busy, and

too much in need of the tranquillity that he got simply from sitting in the study in his favourite chair.

During the month of June he was so busy, he often worked late into the evening at his office. Reports were piling in at the end of the fiscal year. He made calculations, spotted a half dozen possibilities of gain, and reserved the most daring, the least obvious moves for his private operations. By this time next year, he thought, he should be three or four times as well off as now. He saw his bank account multiplying as easily and rapidly as his snails. He told his wife this, and she was overjoyed. She even forgave him the ruination of the study, and the stale, fishy smell that was spreading throughout the whole upstairs.

'Still, I do wish you'd take a look just to see if anything's happening, Peter,' she said to him rather anxiously one morning. 'A tank might have overturned or something, and I wouldn't want the rug to be spoilt. You haven't been in the study for nearly a week, have you?'

Mr Knoppert hadn't been in for nearly two weeks. He didn't tell his wife that the rug was pretty much gone already. 'I'll go up tonight,' he said.

But it was three more days before he found time. He went in one evening just before bedtime and was surprised to find the floor quite covered with snails, with three or four layers of snails. He had difficulty closing the door without mashing any. The dense clusters of snails in the corners made the room look positively round, as if he stood inside some huge, conglomerate stone. Mr Knoppert cracked his knuckles and gazed around him in astonishment. They had not only covered every surface, but thousands of snails hung down into the room from the chandelier in a grotesque clump.

Mr Knoppert felt for the back of a chair to steady himself. He felt only a lot of shells under his hand. He had to smile a little: there were snails in the chair seat, piled up on one another like a lumpy cushion. He really must do something about the ceiling, and immediately. He took an umbrella from the corner, brushed some of the snails off it, and cleared a place on his desk to stand. The umbrella point tore the wall-

paper, and then the weight of the snails pulled down a long strip that hung almost to the floor. Mr Knoppert felt suddenly frustrated and angry. The sprinklers would make them move. He pulled the lever.

The sprinklers came on in all the tanks, and the seething activity of the entire room increased at once. Mr Knoppert slid his feet along the floor, through tumbling snail shells that made a sound like pebbles on a beach, and directed a couple of the sprinklers at the ceiling. This was a mistake, he saw at once. The softened paper began to tear, and he dodged one slowly falling mass only to be hit by a swinging festoon of snails, really hit quite a stunning blow on the side of the head. He went down on one knee, dazed. He should open a window, he thought, the air was stifling. And there were snails crawling over his shoes and up his trouser legs. He shook his feet irritably. He was just going to the door, intending to call for one of the servants to help him, when the chandelier fell on him. Mr Knoppert sat down heavily on the floor. He saw now that he couldn't possibly get a window open, because the snails were fastened thick and deep over the windowsills. For a moment, he felt he couldn't get up, felt as if he were suffocating. It was not only the musty smell of the room, but everywhere he looked long wallpaper strips covered with snails blocked his vision as if he were in a prison.

'Edna!' he called, and was amazed at the muffled, ineffectual sound of his voice. The room might have been soundproof.

He crawled to the door, heedless of the sea of snails he crushed under hands and knees. He could not get the door open. There were so many snails on it, crossing and recrossing the crack of the door on all four sides, they actually resisted his strength.

'Edna!' A snail crawled into his mouth. He spat it out in disgust. Mr Knoppert tried to brush the snails off his arms. But for every hundred he dislodged, four hundred seemed to slide upon him and fasten to him again, as if they deliberately sought him out as the only comparative snail-free surface in the room. There were snails crawling over his eyes. Then just as he staggered to his feet, something else hit him - Mr

Knoppert couldn't even see what. He was fainting! At any rate, he was on the floor. His arms felt like leaden weights as he tried to reach his nostrils, his eyes, to free them from the sealing, murderous snail bodies.

'Help!' He swallowed a snail. Choking, he widened his mouth for air and felt a snail crawl over his lips onto his tongue. He was in hell! He could feel them gliding over his legs like a glutenous river, pinning his legs to the floor. 'Ugh!' Mr Knoppert's breath came in feeble gasps. His vision grew black, a horrible, undulating black. He could not breath at all, because he could not reach his nostrils, could not move his hands. Then through the slit of one eye, he saw directly in front of him, only inches away, what had been, he knew, the rubber plant that stood in its pot near the door. A pair of snails were quietly making love in it. And right beside them, tiny snails as pure as dewdrops were emerging from a pit like an infinite army into their widening world.

THE MONKEY'S PAW

By W. W. Jacobs

WITHOUT the night was cold and wet, but in the small parlour of Laburnam Villa the blinds were drawn and the fire burned brightly. Father and son were at chess, the former, who possessed ideas about the game involving radical changes, putting his king into such sharp and unnecessary perils that it even provoked comment from the white-haired old lady knitting placidly by the fire.

'Hark at the wind,' said Mr White, who, having seen a fatal mistake after it was too late, was amiably desirous of preventing his son from seeing it.

'I'm listening,' said the latter, grimly surveying the board as he stretched out his hand. 'Check.'

'I should hardly think that he'd come tonight,' said his father, with his hand poised over the board.

'Mate,' replied the son.

'That's the worst of living so far out,' bawled Mr White, with sudden and unlooked for violence; 'of all the beastly, slushy, out-of-the-way places to live in, this is the worst. Pathway's a bog, and the road's a torrent. I don't know what people are thinking about. I suppose because only two houses in the road are let, they think it doesn't matter.'

'Never mind, dear,' said his wife soothingly; 'perhaps you'll win the next one.'

Mr White looked up sharply, just in time to intercept a knowing glance between mother and son. The words died away on his lips, and he hid a guilty grin in his thin grey beard.

'There he is,' said Herbert White, as the gate banged to loudly and heavy footsteps came toward the door.

The old man rose with hospitable haste, and opening the door, was heard condoling with the new arrival. The new

arrival also condoled with himself, so that Mrs White said, 'Tut, tut!' and coughed gently as her husband entered the room, followed by a tall, burly man, beady of eye and rubicund of visage.

'Sergeant-Major Morris,' he said, introducing him.

The sergeant-major shook hands, and taking the proffered seat by the fire, watched contentedly while his host got out whiskey and tumblers and stood a small copper kettle on the fire.

At the third glass his eyes got brighter, and he began to talk, the little family circle regarding with eager interest this visitor from distant parts, as he squared his broad shoulders in the chair and spoke of wild scenes and doughty deeds; of wars and plagues and strange peoples.

'Twenty-one years of it,' said Mr White, nodding at his wife and son. 'When he went away he was a slip of a youth in the warehouse. Now look at him.'

'He didn't look to have taken much harm,' said Mrs White politely.

'I'd like to go to India myself,' said the old man, 'just to look round a bit, you know.'

'Better where you are,' said the sergeant-major, shaking his head. He put down the empty glass, and sighing softly, shook it again.

'I should like to see those old temples and fakirs and jugglers,' said the old man. 'What was that you started telling me the other day about a monkey's paw or something, Morris?'

'Nothing,' said the soldier hastily. 'Leastways nothing worth hearing.'

'Monkey's paw?' said Mrs White curiously.

'Well, it's just a bit of what you might call magic, perhaps,' said the sergeant-major, off-handedly.

His three listeners leaned forward eagerly. The visitor absent-mindedly put his empty glass to his lips and then set it down again. His host filled it for him.

'To look at,' said the sergeant-major, fumbling in his pocket, 'it's just an ordinary little paw, dried to a mummy.'

He took something out of his pocket and proffered it. Mrs

White drew back with a grimace, but her son, taking it, examined it curiously.

'And what is there special about it?' enquired Mr White as he took it from his son, and having examined it, placed it upon the table.

'It had a spell put on it by an old fakir,' said the sergeant-major, 'a very holy man. He wanted to show that fate ruled people's lives, and that those who interfered with it did so to their sorrow. He put a spell on it so that three separate men could each have three wishes from it.'

His manner was so impressive that his hearers were conscious that their light laughter jarred somewhat.

'Well, why don't you have three, sir?' said Herbert White cleverly.

The soldier regarded him in the way that middle age is wont to regard presumptuous youth. 'I have,' he said quietly, and his blotchy face whitened.

'And did you really have the three wishes granted?' asked Mrs White.

'I did,' said the sergeant-major, and his glass tapped against his strong teeth.

'And has anybody else wished?' persisted the old lady.

'The first man had his three wishes. Yes,' was the reply; 'I don't know what the first two were, but the third was for death. That's how I got the paw.'

His tones were so grave that a hush fell upon the group.

'If you've had your three wishes, it's no good to you now, then, Morris,' said the old man at last. 'What do you keep it for?'

The soldier shook his head. 'Fancy, I suppose,' he said slowly. 'I did have some idea of selling it, but I don't think I will. It has caused enough mischief already. Besides, people won't buy. They think it's a fairy tale; some of them and those who do think anything of it want to try it first and pay me afterward.'

'If you could have another three wishes,' said the old man, eyeing him keenly, 'would you have them?'

'I don't know,' said the other. 'I don't know.'

He took the paw, and dangling it between his forefinger and thumb, suddenly threw it upon the fire. White, with a slight cry, stooped down and snatched it off.

'Better let it burn,' said the soldier solemnly.

'If you don't want it, Morris,' said the other, 'give it to me.'

'I won't,' said his friend doggedly. 'I threw it on the fire. If you keep it, don't blame me for what happens. Pitch it on the fire again like a sensible man.'

The other shook his head and examined his new possession closely. 'How do you do it?' he enquired.

'Hold it up in your right hand and wish aloud,' said the sergeant-major, 'but I warn you of the consequences.'

'Sounds like the Arabian Nights,' said Mrs White, as she rose and began to set the supper. 'Don't you think you might wish for four pairs of hands for me?'

Her husband drew the talisman from his pocket, and then all three burst into laughter as the sergeant-major, with a look of alarm on his face, caught him by the arm.

'If you must wish,' he said gruffly, 'wish for something sensible.'

Mr White dropped it back in his pocket, and placing chairs, motioned his friend to the table. In the business of supper the talisman was partly forgotten, and afterward the three sat listening in an enthralled fashion to a second instalment of the soldier's adventures in India.

'If the tale about the monkey's paw is not more truthful than those he has been telling us,' said Herbert as the door closed behind their guest, just in time for him to catch the last train, 'we shan't make much out of it.'

'Did you give him anything for it, father?' enquired Mrs White, regarding her husband closely.

'A trifle,' said he, colouring slightly. 'He didn't want it, but I made him take it. And he pressed me again to throw it away.'

'Likely,' said Herbert, with pretended horror. 'Why, we're going to be rich and famous and happy. Wish to be an emperor, father, to begin with; then you can't be henpecked.'

He darted round the table, pursued by the maligned Mrs White armed with an antimacassar.

Mr White took the paw from his pocket and eyed it dubiously. 'I don't know what to wish for, and that's a fact,' he said slowly. 'It seems to me I've got all I want.'

'If you only cleared the house, you'd be quite happy, wouldn't you?' said Herbert, with his hand on his shoulder. 'Well, wish for two hundred pounds, then; that'll just do it.'

His father, smiling shamefacedly at his own credulity, held up the talisman, as his son, with a solemn face, somewhat marred by a wink at his mother, sat down at the piano and struck a few impressive chords.

'I wish for two hundred pounds,' said the old man distinctly.

A fine crash from the piano greeted the words, interrupted by a shuddering cry from the old man. His wife and son ran toward him.

'It moved,' he cried, with a glance of disgust at the object as it lay on the floor. 'As I wished, it twisted in my hand like a snake.'

'Well, I don't see the money,' said his son as he picked it up and placed it on the table, 'and I bet I never shall.'

'It must have been your fancy, father,' said his wife, regarding him anxiously.

He shook his head. 'Never mind, though; there's no harm done, but it gave me a shock all the same.'

They sat down by the fire again while the two men finished their pipes. Outside, the wind was higher than ever, and the old man started nervously at the sound of a door banging upstairs. A silence unusual and depressing settled upon all three, which lasted until the old couple rose to retire for the night.

'I expect you'll find the cash tied up in a big bag in the middle of your bed,' said Herbert, as he bade them goodnight, 'and something horrible squatting up on the wardrobe watching you as you pocket your ill-gotten gains.'

He sat alone in the darkness, gazing at the dying fire, and seeing faces in it. The last face was so horrible and so simian that he gazed at it in amazement. It got so vivid that, with a little uneasy laugh, he felt on the table for a glass containing a little water to throw over it. His hand grasped the monkey's

paw, and with a little shiver he wiped his hand on his coat and went up to bed.

II

In the brightness of the wintry sun next morning as it streamed over the breakfast table he laughed at his fears. There was an air of prosaic wholesomeness about the room which it had lacked on the previous night, and the dirty, shrivelled little paw was pitched on the sideboard with a carelessness which betokened no great belief in its virtues.

'I suppose all old soldiers are the same,' said Mrs White. 'The idea of our listening to such nonsense! How could wishes be granted in these days? And if they could, how could two hundred pounds hurt you, father?'

'Might drop on his head from the sky,' said the frivolous Herbert.

'Morris said the things happened so naturally,' said his father, 'that you might if you so wished attribute it to coincidence.'

'Well, don't break into the money before I come back,' said Herbert as he rose from the table. 'I'm afraid it'll turn you into a mean, avaricious man, and we shall have to disown you.'

His mother laughed, and following him to the door, watched him down the road; and returning to the breakfast table, was very happy at the expense of her husband's credulity. All of which did not prevent her from scurrying to the door at the postman's knock, nor prevent her from referring somewhat shortly to retired sergeant-majors of bibulous habits when she found that the post brought a tailor's bill.

'Herbert will have some more of his funny remarks, I expect, when he comes home,' she said, as they sat at dinner.

'I dare say,' said Mr White, pouring himself out some beer; 'but for all that, the thing moved in my hand; that I'll swear to.'

'You thought it did,' said the old lady soothingly.

'I say it did,' replied the other. 'There was no thought about it; I had just — What's the matter?'

His wife made no reply. She was watching the mysterious

movements of a man outside, who, peering in an undecided fashion at the house, appeared to be trying to make up his mind to enter. In mental connection with the two hundred pounds, she noticed that the stranger was well dressed, and wore a silk hat of glossy newness. Three times he paused at the gate, and then walked on again. The fourth time he stood with his hand upon it, and then with sudden resolution flung it open and walked up the path. Mrs White at the same moment placed her hands behind her, and hurriedly unfastening the strings of her apron, put that useful article of apparel beneath the cushion of her chair.

She brought the stranger, who seemed ill at ease, into the room. He gazed at her furtively, and listened in a preoccupied fashion as the old lady apologized for the appearance of the room, and her husband's coat, a garment which he usually reserved for the garden. She then waited as patiently as her sex would permit, for him to broach his business, but he was at first strangely silent.

'I — was asked to call,' he said at last, and stooped and picked a piece of cotton from his trousers. 'I come from "Maw and Meggins."'

The old lady started. 'Is anything the matter?' she asked breathlessly. 'Has anything happened to Herbert? What is it? What is it?'

Her husband interposed. 'There, there, mother,' he said hastily. 'Sit down, and don't jump to conclusions. You've not brought bad news, I'm sure, sir,' and he eyed the other wistfully.

'I'm sorry —' began the visitor.

'Is he hurt?' demanded the mother wildly.

The visitor bowed in assent. 'Badly hurt,' he said quietly, 'but he is not in any pain.'

'Oh, thank God!' said the old woman, clasping her hands. 'Thank God for that! Thank —'

She broke off suddenly as the sinister meaning of the assurance dawned upon her and she saw the awful confirmation of her fears in the other's averted face. She caught her breath,

and turning to her slower-witted husband, laid her trembling old hand upon his. There was a long silence.

'He was caught in the machinery,' said the visitor at length in a low voice.

'Caught in the machinery,' repeated Mr White in a dazed fashion, 'yes.'

He sat staring blankly out at the window, and taking his wife's hand between his own, pressed it as he had been wont to do in their old courting days nearly forty years before.

'He was the only one left to us,' he said, turning gently to the visitor. 'It is hard.'

The other coughed, and rising, walked slowly to the window. 'The firm wished me to convey their sincere sympathy with you in your great loss,' he said, without looking round. 'I beg that you will understand that I am only their servant and merely obeying orders.'

There was no reply; the old woman's face was white, her eyes staring, and her breath inaudible; on the husband's face was a look such as his friend the sergeant might have carried into his first action.

'I was to say that Maw and Meggins disclaim all responsibility,' continued the other. 'They admit no liability at all, but in consideration of your son's services, they wish to present you with a certain sum as compensation.'

Mr White dropped his wife's hand, and rising to his feet, gazed with a look of horror at his visitor. His dry lips shaped the words, 'How much?'

'Two hundred pounds,' was the answer.

Unconscious of his wife's shriek, the old man smiled faintly, put out his hands like a sightless man, and dropped, a senseless heap, to the floor.

III

In the huge new cemetery, some two miles distant, the old people buried their dead, and came back to a house steeped in shadow and silence. It was all over so quickly that at first they could hardly realise it, and remained in a state of expect-

tation as though of something else to happen – something else which was to lighten this load, too heavy for old hearts to bear.

But the days passed, and expectation gave place to resignation – the hopeless resignation of the old, sometimes miscalled apathy. Sometimes they hardly exchanged a word, for now they had nothing to talk about, and their days were long to weariness.

It was about a week after that the old man, waking suddenly in the night, stretched out his hand and found himself alone. The room was in darkness, and the sound of subdued weeping came from the window. He raised himself in bed and listened.

‘Come back,’ he said tenderly. ‘You will be cold.’

‘It is colder for my son,’ said the old woman, and wept afresh.

The sounds of her sobs died away on his ears. The bed was warm, and his eyes heavy with sleep. He dozed fitfully, and then slept until a sudden wild cry from his wife awoke him with a start.

‘*The paw!*’ she cried wildly. ‘The monkey’s paw!’

He started up in alarm. ‘Where? Where is it? What’s the matter?’

She came stumbling across the room toward him. ‘I want it,’ she said quietly. ‘You’ve not destroyed it?’

‘It’s in the parlour, on the bracket,’ he replied, marvelling. ‘Why?’

She cried and laughed together, and bending over, kissed his cheek.

‘I only just thought of it,’ she said hysterically. ‘Why didn’t I think of it before? Why didn’t *you* think of it?’

‘Think of what?’ he questioned.

‘The other two wishes,’ she replied rapidly. ‘We’ve only had one.’

‘Was not that enough?’ he demanded fiercely.

‘No,’ she cried triumphantly; ‘we’ll have one more. Go down and get it quickly, and wish our boy alive again.’

The man sat up in bed and flung the bedclothes from his quaking limbs. ‘Good God, you are mad!’ he cried, aghast.

'Get it,' she panted; 'get it quickly, and wish— Oh, my boy, my boy!'

Her husband struck a match and lit the candle. 'Get back to bed,' he said unsteadily. 'You don't know what you are saying.'

'We had the first wish granted,' said the old woman feverishly; 'why not the second?'

'A coincidence,' stammered the old man.

'Go and get it and wish,' cried his wife, quivering with excitement.

The old man turned and regarded her, and his voice shook. 'He has been dead ten days, and besides he — I would not tell you else, but — I could only recognise him by his clothing. If he was too terrible for you to see then, how now?'

'Bring him back,' cried the old woman, and dragged him toward the door. 'Do you think I fear the child I have nursed?'

He went down in the darkness, and felt his way to the parlour, and then to the mantelpiece. The talisman was in its place, and a horrible fear that the unspoken wish might bring this mutilated son before him ere he could escape from the room seized upon him, and he caught his breath as he found that he had lost the direction of the door. His brow cold with sweat, he felt his way round the table, and groped along the wall until he found himself in the small passage with the unwholesome thing in his hand.

Even his wife's face seemed changed as he entered the room. It was white and expectant, and to his fears seemed to have an unnatural look on it. He was afraid of her.

'*Wish!*' she cried in a strong voice.

'It is foolish and wicked,' he faltered.

'*Wish!*' repeated his wife.

He raised his hand. 'I wish my son alive again.'

The talisman fell to the floor, and he regarded it fearfully. Then he sank trembling into a chair as the old woman, with burning eyes, walked to the window and raised the blind.

He sat until he was chilled with the cold, glancing occasionally at the figure of the old woman peering through the window. The candle-end, which had burned low below the rim of the china candle-stick, was throwing pulsating shadows on the

ceiling and walls, until, with a flicker larger than the rest, it expired. The old man, with an unspeakable sense of relief at the failure of the talisman, crept back to his bed and a minute or two afterward the old woman came silently and apathetically beside him.

Neither spoke, but lay silently listening to the ticking of the clock. A stair creaked, and a squeaky mouse scurried noisily through the wall. The darkness was oppressive, and after lying for some time screwing up his courage, he took the box of matches, and striking one, went downstairs for a candle.

At the foot of the stairs the match went out, and he paused to strike another; and at the same time a knock, so quiet and stealthy as to be scarcely audible, sounded on the front door.

The matches fell from his hand and spilled in the passage. He stood motionless, his breath suspended until the knock was repeated. Then he turned and fled swiftly back to his room, and closed the door behind him. A third knock sounded through the house.

'What's that?' cried the old woman, starting up.

'A rat,' said the old man in shaking tones – *'a rat. It passed me on the stairs.'*

His wife sat up in bed listening. A loud knock resounded through the house.

'It's Herbert!' she screamed. *'It's Herbert!'*

She ran to the door, but her husband was before her, and catching her by the arm, held her tightly.

'What are you going to do?' he whispered hoarsely.

'It's my boy; it's Herbert!' she cried, struggling mechanically. *'I forgot it was two miles away. What are you holding me for? Let go. I must open the door.'*

'For God's sake don't let it in,' cried the old man, trembling.

'You're afraid of your own son,' she cried, struggling. *'Let me go. I'm coming Herbert, I'm coming.'*

There was another knock, and another. The old woman with a sudden wrench broke free and ran from the room. Her husband followed to the landing, and called after her appealingly as she hurried downstairs. He heard the chain rattle back and

the bottom bolt drawn slowly and stiffly from the socket. Then the old woman's voice, strained and panting.

'The bolt,' she cried loudly. 'Come down. I can't reach it.'

But her husband was on his hands and knees groping wildly on the floor in search of the paw. If he could only find it before the thing outside got in. A perfect fusillade of knocks reverberated through the house, and he heard the scraping of a chair as his wife put it down in the passage against the door. He heard the creaking of the bolt as it came slowly back, and at the same moment he found the monkey's paw, and frantically breathed his third and last wish.

The knocking ceased suddenly, although the echoes of it were still in the house. He heard the chair drawn back, and the door opened. A cold wind rushed up the staircase, and a long loud wail of disappointment and misery from his wife gave him courage to run down to her side, and then to the gate beyond. The street lamp flickering opposite shone on a quiet and deserted road.

THE LAST EXPERIMENT

By John D. Keefauver

IT WAS the absence of noise that bothered him. From the very beginning of his stay inside the soundproof and lightless cubicle, a crushing, total silence had forced him – within the first hour – to make his own sounds.

He did not mind the dark; in a sense, he enjoyed it. For years he had closed his eyes and daydreamed in a private dark.

He had been in the room now for days, it seemed, with only a bed, some cans of food and jars of water and a toilet in the nine-by-seven-by-seven-foot cubicle.

A psychologist had led him inside, smiled, shaken his hand and then left him alone, shutting him into the dark silence, into the waiting. And into his thoughts.

At first he had gone over the incidents of the last few days and weeks that had led to his being in this room. As usual, his thoughts were pegged to sounds – the sound of the voice calling him to the company orderly room a few weeks ago, the sound of the sergeant's words as he was told to pack his gear. 'You'll be told what it's all about, Nelson, when you get over there,' he had said.

Neff Nelson, unassigned Army private just out of basic training, hadn't waited long. Within a few days he and 24 other young men had been taken by truck to a far corner of the post. There, housed in barracks, they'd been interviewed by two psychologists.

Nelson remembered in particular the voice of one, a soft monotone, almost a purr, that was calm and reassuring. The psychologists had said that because Nelson and the other young men were all healthy and of above average intelligence, they were being offered a role in an important experiment in human research.

The project was to discover the effects of solitude and monotony on human efficiency. What happens to a man when he is completely shut off from society for a number of hours or days; when he has absolutely nothing to do? 'What happens when you eliminate all stimulating sights and sounds?' the soft-voiced psychologist had asked. 'That's what we're trying to find out; how well a man can perform various skills in such a situation.'

The Army wanted to develop tests that would indicate the type of person best suited to man a remote radar, missile or weather station, or any other job – perhaps in outer space – where a man might be alone and doing a monotonous job.

The psychologists had also explained what the volunteers would be getting into. Research assistants in a control room would record all sounds from the cubicles and 'they may ask questions of you subjects' through a microphone. The 'may' had been emphasized, Nelson remembered. The questions would test the volunteers' ability to think, to solve problems, to retain independent judgment. The answers and reactions of each volunteer would be compared with those he gave before entering the cubicle. He would also be given another test after completing his stay in the room.

'From this comparison,' the soft-voiced psychologist had said, 'any differences caused by the experiment in the cubicle may be isolated.' His voice purred on, explaining that the door of the cubicle would not be locked; that a volunteer could walk out at any time he wanted to, although if he did he would be disqualified. Both psychologists declined to say how long the volunteers would stay in the soundproof, lightless rooms. They explained that if they disclosed the time they would invalidate the test because the men would anticipate the time when they would get out of the cubicle.

'Would you like to be a part of the project?' each man was asked.

Private Neff Nelson remembered the exact tone of his own voice as it had said emphatically, 'Yes.' He remembered it clearly because the matter of going into a soundless cubicle was a decision he would never forget. He knew he was volunteering

for something that might very well drive him insane, and he was afraid.

Not literally all the way off the deep end, he told himself; not to a point where he would go blubbing off to the psych ward. But all his life he had lived not *with* but *on* sound. The absence of it, if only partial and for a short time, drove him to seek and find a sound, a noise, be it ever so slight. The breathing of another person would be enough, even the sound of a dog walking on a carpet. He had consulted specialists since he was a child but they had never been able to help him. During his waking hours he simply had to be constantly aware of sound.

He had been trying to break himself of the need for years. And when this chance to go into a soundless world was offered, he had jumped at it. Here was an opportunity that would force him to go without – like a dope addict in confinement. If he could survive, his habit would be broken.

Yet when he was actually on the way to his cubicle, his mind had uncontrollably strained to hear, record and store up everything audible in those last moments.

Now he remembered the footsteps of those who went first up the steps of the building that housed the cubicles. He remembered the scurrying sounds of caged rats – also being experimented upon – which they had passed just inside the corridor along which the cells were situated. There were eight cells. Each man received a handshake and last instructions from one of the psychologists as he entered his room. Nelson's cubicle was the last one at the end of the hall. He went in, followed by the psychologist with the purring voice.

The small room, well ventilated and kept at a constant temperature of 72 degrees, was entirely white, corklined and as spotlessly clean as a hospital. A toilet sat in one corner, a food-and-water-stocked refrigerator in another. There was a bed with a pillow and a blanket. That was all.

The psychologist was a tall, stoop-shouldered man, with unblinking owl eyes. He shook Nelson's hand and wished him luck. 'Remember, the door is not locked,' he said. 'You can leave whenever you want, but if you do you're automatically

disqualified.' He left with the words: 'The light will go out in a few minutes and the one in the corridor, too.'

Five-foot-ten-inch Neff Nelson was left alone in a nine-by-seven-by-seven-foot cubicle with water and canned food – each can a balanced meal – to keep his 174 pounds nourished. Suddenly aware of his loneliness, he listened intently for the sound of the psychologist's footsteps in the corridor. But he heard nothing; the room was soundproof.

For the first few minutes he had listened to the hum of the refrigerator, until it had stopped when the light was turned off. 'The hum would constitute an audial cue,' the psychologist had said. 'You would not be completely cut off from society if it were on.'

So he had begun a life of fumbling in the dark for food and water, washing with chemically treated wash cloths, and lying on the bed. There was nothing else to do. He had no schedule, no wristwatch. Dressed in pyjamalike clothes, he could sleep whenever he wanted to – in a quiet that noise could not penetrate, in a darkness that completely blanketed him.

And he could wait. He ate, slept, washed; ate, slept, washed. And waited.

And he thought. In a soundless world his thoughts swirled around sounds. His life had always been one of noises; now there were none.

Once, twice, three times he stuck his head under his pillow and pressed it to his ears in hope that when he released it there would be some contrast, some sound – even if ever so slight. But when his ears came away from the pillow there was no difference. The only thing he could hear was his heart. It pumped on and on, like the pound of a sledge. But this was noise of his own making, an inside sound, like the one he made by tapping his fingers on the wall or the floor. What he needed was a sound from outside, something, anything, to tell him an outside world existed.

And though the darkness itself did not bother him, it intensified his isolation from the outside world and made the lack of sound worse. In addition to hearing nothing, he saw nothing. He could not see the wall or refrigerator when they

were inches from his nose. The only way he knew anything existed was to touch it.

Once, after only a few hours in the room, he went to the door and quietly opened it, then shut it, opened and shut it, over and over, listening greedily to the slight noise it made. But, again, it was a sound of his own making and he needed an outside sound. And the corridor was as dark as his room.

At first he had gone over the sounds accompanying the incidents that had brought him into his soundless world. But he had soon used them up. Then he started back over his life, a man on a desperate hunt, searching for sounds he had heard, recalling and listening to them, sucking all noise from them greedily, almost frantically, as his cubicle-stay extended from hours to a day, to days. He clawed into his experiences, going back, back, looking, listening.

He went through the roar of the airplane engines he'd heard on his way to camp, the thump of his foot on a football in high school, the ringing cheer of spectators, the loud ticking of his first wristwatch (a sound that others barely could hear), the squeal of his first car's tyres, the scream of his voice when he fell from a tree, the br-r-r-r the cutting tool made in the cast on the leg he'd broken, the screech of chalk on a blackboard (a sound that had almost driven him out of school), his sister breathing on the other side of a bedroom wall. . . .

Yet now his mind kept grabbing onto and holding a sound that had first frightened him – the faint scurrying and nibbling of rats.

The sound had originated on a 30-minute radio show he'd heard when he was a child, a harrowing story of starving rats chewing their way closer and closer to a terrified man.

The man was a lighthouse keeper, and more than a hundred starving rats had drifted to his island in an abandoned row-boat. The keeper had seen them pour off the boat as it touched land, had seen them swarm toward him in the lighthouse. He had slammed and locked the ground floor door but in their frenzy they quickly ate through the wood.

Nelson vividly recalled the panting of the rats and the frightened monologue of the man as the starvation-crazed

rodents slowly, relentlessly, chewed their way up to the top of the lighthouse.

Higher and higher, the man had climbed, slamming a trap door shut behind him at each floor. But the rats, their feet scurrying, their teeth grinding, maintained a constant background to the man's terrified words. He'd waited at each door until he saw the wood begin to splinter, then with a choking cry of terror he'd sprinted up to the next floor and slammed shut the door.

The rats kept coming, their efforts growing more frenzied at each level, as if they could almost taste the meal so near them. A chewing wave, they washed through every floor until they reached the top, the glass-enclosed room from which the keeper had first seen the rodents. The floor of that room had been made of metal, Nelson remembered; it had stopped the rats – for a while.

Then had come a terrible silence; for the first time since the rats had hit the first door there was no sound of them. The keeper had thought the metal floor had stopped them, that he was saved, and Nelson remembered the strong disappointment he had felt then – and was feeling now – not because he wanted the black rodents to tear the man apart, but because he was left with no sound after having had it with him in long, rich moments of mounting tension.

Then Nelson heard again the keeper's gasp and the scraping of rat feet on the glass enclosing the light room. They had scurried to the ground and then climbed the outside of the building, and two had got into the top room before the keeper could slam the window shut. Nelson remembered the man's scream as the rats sprang at him, teeth bared. But he had desperately kicked and struck at them until he killed them. Then Nelson heard only the sound of claws on glass.

The rats finally left. For some reason they went back to the boat, perhaps because they saw it was moving. Then the shifting tide caught it and carried it away. Nelson could not remember the exact reason for their leaving the glass top. It really didn't matter. What did matter was his reliving, rehear-

ing the programme's sounds; when the sounds went, so did his memory of the programme.

He had brought it back many times in his life, times when there weren't enough outside sounds, even though the memory sent shivers over him like rat feet. And here, in the lost silence of the cubicle, the radio story was more real to him than it ever had been. Over and over the programme repeated itself in his mind. It came back even when he realised he had heard it enough – too much – repeating, repeating, until he couldn't stop the sounds of rats gnawing and scrambling on the lighthouse.

No matter what he thought of, it kept pushing to the surface and began again from beginning to end.

Nelson lay on his bed and tried to sleep. Unable to, he fumbled with food and water and tried to eat and drink. He washed again and again until his body was raw from scrubbing. Still, regardless of what he did, the rats were always with him. He couldn't keep them out. Their noises were part of his life in his noiseless world. They were needed and he welcomed them. Gradually he realised that he was afraid they would leave him. When their sounds faded away for a few minutes, he bit his fingers until he drew blood.

He smiled as he lay on his bed, eyes closed, listening. Noises filled his thinking – it was as if there *were* rats in the cubicle. He was content, he was not afraid. After all, he assured himself, the sounds were in his mind, and he could turn them off whenever he wanted to.

The day grew longer and with each passing hour he became increasingly troubled when rat sounds continued to be the only ones he heard, when they shoved all others back into silence. I wonder, he thought, can I really stop them if I try? If I wanted to? If I have to! Am I capable of even lessening their noise and dominance? If so, what would be the effect on me? I must know the answer.

He concentrated on pushing the rat sounds back. Slowly they diminished; the noise of their feet, their chewing grew faint. Gaps came when there was no noise.

No sound . . . no sound . . . nothing. A horrifying block of

soundlessness. No noise to lean on, to give him meaning, to give him reassurance that an outside world existed.

No sound! his mind screamed and he concentrated wildly on bringing back the rats. 'Come back!' he muttered, talking aloud to himself for the first time since he'd entered the room. 'Rats! come back.' He reached out with intense concentration, hungrily, almost frantically, and the creatures scrambled in for a moment. Then they went away; then came back again, but only partially. Slipping, slipping, they were slipping from him; their sounds were leaving him as if they were no longer conceived, controlled by his mind, but separate entities with the ability to go and come as they pleased. They scuttled away from his grasp and disappeared.

Nothing. There was no sound now except the lonely beating of his heart, the gulping of the drink he needed so badly and the sob he couldn't hold back.

The rats and the radio show were gone. *They had gone on their own.* The words flashed like a neon sign in Nelson's mind, repeating themselves. Then the reason for the repetition came.

If the rats had gone on their own, then they could return on their own. His mind could no longer make the sounds the rats themselves could. If there were rats in the cubicle, they would make sounds and he would hear them, even though he wouldn't be able to see them.

Yes, he could hear them if they were here. And immediately he heard them, heard their busy feet in the corner of the room at the foot of his bed. Their squeaky noises were a re-assuring, comforting sound. He smiled, relaxed – rat sounds were in his mind and all was right with his world. He listened for a moment, relaxed and satisfied, then sat up on the bed and looked toward the noise. Even in the pitch dark he could see a group of rats in the corner on the white floor.

A dagger of fear slit him. Pieces of his mind flew. He wanted to kick out, to scream. Then he realised he couldn't be seeing rats if it was too dark even to see the wall.

He was remembering the wall, that was what was happening. He was remembering how the wall looked when the lights

had been on earlier. And, somehow, he was remembering rats. Of course, 'seeing' the rats was something in his mind, like hearing them. It was just a trick of his imagination.

He relaxed again on the bed. But now, instead of closing his eyes and listening, he continued to stare at the ceiling. Creeping into his thinking was an itch, an anxiety, a desire to do something. He fought it, then let the desire out. He said aloud, 'I want to go to the corner . . . feel to see if the rats are actually there.'

But he didn't, he stayed in the safety of his bed, wondering: Am I avoiding the corner because I'm afraid rats will be there, or because I'm afraid they won't?

Private Neff Nelson remained on his bed for hours and listened to the scurrying and nibbling of rats. Their noises filled his cubicle. They surrounded him and he was very happy. He eased his foot off the bed once to see if one would nibble at his toe, and he was disappointed when nothing happened. 'You little vermin,' he said, 'you don't know what you're missing.'

He didn't bother to eat or wash, and he found he wasn't thirsty. He didn't think about the outside now, or how long he had been inside the room. And he rarely thought any more about when they would come to let him out. He was happy in his dark world of never-ending sounds, soothing rat sounds, like a mother's cooing words.

Private Neff Nelson talked regularly now with the rats in his cubicle. It was a friendly relationship, one of the best he'd ever had. And his mind was doing it all. He had it made, he figured. He had so much that the others didn't have. Who else could spend a week in a dark, silent room, yet have so much company?

His mind was doing it all, he kept repeating to himself. And he had it under perfect control. I'm a pretty creative guy, he told himself. I might even decide to live in a room like this all my life. I'll think it over and let them know.

'What do you think about that, you rats?' he said.

'We don't like the idea,' one answered in a squeaky voice.

The private laughed. It was the first time one had answered

him, the first time he'd actually heard one talk. It was a wonderful thing, this mind of his: it could make nonexistent rats talk.

'We don't like living with a nut,' another one said.

'Oh, you don't,' Nelson answered, smiling. 'Well, I don't like you either.'

'We're not joking,' another rat said. 'You're losing your mind.'

'He's lost it, you mean,' another squeaked disgustedly. 'Talking with rats . . . He's done for.'

'Now, come off it,' Nelson said. 'You know I'm making all this up.'

'Yeah,' two of them said together. 'Sure, sure.'

Nelson didn't like their tone. They were getting out of hand. 'I'm in control here,' he said, tightly.

Their sarcastic, squeaky laughs seemed to fill the room.

'Goddam it!' he exploded, sitting up. 'When I want to talk to rats, I do! And when I want you to answer me, I make you! That's all there is to it!'

'He's losing his mind. He's lost his mind,' they chanted.

'Shut up, you filthy sneaks!'

'He's insane, he's insane,' they kept chanting.

'I'm not!' It was almost a scream.

'Insane, insane.'

'I'm not! I'm not!'

'Insane, insane,' their wailing tone mounted. Hundreds of tiny feet scampered on the floor in a whispering tempo. 'Insane, insane, the private's insane.'

'No, I'm not! No!' The last 'no' was a scream. It went tearing through the room, bouncing from wall to wall. 'No!'

'Insane, insane.'

'No! No! No!'

And light from the corridor suddenly flooded through the cubicle door.

The two research assistants in the control room had not known the experimental rats caged just inside the corridor had escaped through some defective wire mesh. Nor would they have learned of it until feeding time if it hadn't been for Nel-

son's screams. The men had recorded on tape his talking to himself from the beginning. They hadn't thought it unusual; they were used to strange talk over the microphone after the subjects had been in the cubicle a while. But when Nelson seemed to be losing control, when he started screaming in terror, they had run from the control room toward his cubicle and noticed, as they passed the cage, that the experimental rats were loose. The researchers knew the rodents had to be in the hall some place.

They had opened the soundproof door at the entrance to the corridor, turned on the hall lights and the one in Nelson's room, and hurried to his cubicle. They saw his door was open a crack.

When they went into the cubicle, a flash of white fur scurried by their feet and into the hall. Nelson was sitting up in bed screaming at the other rats in the corner. The creatures, twitching their noses at the light, were trembling with fear.

One attendant realised immediately what had happened. The rats, after escaping from their cage, had scampered down the dark corridor to the end. There, finding Nelson's door open a crack, they had run inside.

But the attendant didn't know that when Nelson had repeatedly opened and shut the door he had unknowingly left it open enough for the rats to get in. The corridor was as dark as the room and no light had come in to let Nelson know it was open.

The attendant also didn't know why the volunteer kept screaming now.

Private Neff Nelson kept screaming 'No! no! no!' because the rats he had seen and talked to before were black, and the ones he saw now were white.

MARETA

By John D. Keefauver

OF COURSE, I didn't know Mareta had killed him until a few days ago. But her admission of murder was negligible – nothing – compared to what I found in her bedroom closet the day after.

I shouldn't have gone into the closet, I know; it was dangerous. As soon as I saw the two bottles and the photographs, I should have left the room – left the house, fled. With the knowledge they gave me, it was suicidal to remain near her. That was her plan, I realise now: to let me discover her secret, then destroy me. But I had had no time to think; I had time only to act, and she had forced me to that.

Now, too late, I realise that she had left the bedroom door unlocked purposely. Curious, I had gone in. Oh God, if only I had kept out of the place! If your child sucks blood, isn't it better not to discover it? If your wife gives birth to a monster, wouldn't it be better never to know? Now . . . I am drained.

Drained, like her bottles. Her drinking; I never realised to what an extent it had gone. Drunk, she had told me how she murdered Victor, her second husband, her voice puffed with pride and hate and . . . and, yes, power. Power! Mareta bragged of what she had done, and she felt power even in the telling of it. Later, I understood something else: by her talk of murder she was purposely planting fear in me. She succeeded.

It had been his eyes, she had told me, smiling drunkenly, ironically. Victor's eyes. I knew about them; after all, I had been there that night she had killed him, although at that time I, along with everybody else, thought it had been an accident. I had heard the story of Victor's eyes for months after his death. Eyes. I can 'see' them now. Bound for the island of

Hydra in the Aegean Sea, I was on a boat out of Athens when I met Victor and Mareta. By chance we were standing side by side next to the railing, both gazing at the first island stop of the daily milk-run boat. Toothpaste-white houses, glittering in summer sun, marched irregularly down to the sea from island mountains. Impressive; but when I turned toward Victor to comment casually on the sight, I saw for the first time his eyes and they wiped out the picture of the storybook houses – forever.

They battered me, these eyes; they hurt. They were pain; they were fear. They were lost; they had been beaten. They were a hungry child.

Sweat, yes. They looked as if they were sweating – too wet, too oily. They glistened with fear, shone with fright.

Mareta, his wife then, had been standing beside him, of course – brilliant in a wind-whipped dress, hair dancing. Even then I felt her power – poised, sharp, penetrating, hard, like a knife. I felt her in my pores. She was small, almost dainty, standing next to her dark-skinned and bulky husband. Yet, even from the beginning I had the feeling, though vaguely, that he and his eyes made up a puppet, and that his wife, Mareta, deftly handled the strings – and that now she was tired, her fingers bored.

By the time we reached Hydra at noon, we had become acquainted enough to have lunch together. Talk came easily. I learned that they too planned on spending a few days on the island of some 3,000 souls, mostly fishermen, the rest tourists and artists, and that Victor, born in Greece, had moved to the United States as a child and was now visiting his parents in Athens. It turned out that the three of us were from the Los Angeles area, where he was in the wholesale fruit business and I taught high school. He told me he had been married to Mareta less than a year. And it was her second marriage, too, I learned; her first husband had drowned, she said. She was years younger than Victor.

In the beginning no one suspected, least of all I, that she was a killer. She did it that first night in quiet, sleeping Hydra, did it efficiently, effortlessly, and with pride. How she

smiled in drunken humour months later – just a few days ago now – when she told me how simple it all had been. How easy. How stupid of him.

She had talked Victor into accompanying her on a midnight swim – she did such things with great charm. He did not swim himself, and now I realise that that was one of the reasons she married him – perhaps the most important reason. Did he suspect her? As I look back over my own relationship with Mareta, how *I* grew to suspect her, I think it possible that Victor did too. But after living with her almost a year, perhaps he wanted to die. Never mind – he died, and was I to be next?

They left their hotel – where I had a room too – and walked arm and arm (she underlined this point with a chuckle) out of the village proper, up a path along a nearby mountain side. She knew exactly where she was going. Years before she had visited Hydra with her parents; she had gone swimming with them in water beneath a lip of stone that jutted out from mountain rock some twenty feet above the sea. In the lip, out from the mountain enough to be over water, was a large hole. She had remembered the hole, how it would not be seen on a moonless night, how death could easily come there – either by falling on the sharp rocks in the shallow water or by drowning, or by both.

It was clever of her, she admitted. Clever that she arranged their trip to the island on a moonless night without Victor realising what she was doing. Clever that that same afternoon she had visited the spot alone, measuring her strides from a point on the path to the hole, measuring the distance carefully, so that that night she knew exactly where to stop and give Victor a push over the edge of the hole. He had given one short anguished yell as he dropped; she had heard his body splash into the water . . . ‘a delightful sound.’

She’d waited. Victor did not come to the surface. Then, an excellent swimmer, she had dived in after him, ostensibly to help him, actually to see if he were dead, she told me. He lay on rocks beneath shallow water; he made no living move. She pushed his body into deeper water, she said, then rushed back to the hotel, screaming in wifely agony.

This I knew; for I had been awakened that night by the commotion caused by her announcement that her husband had fallen into the sea. I joined the fishermen and tourists and the village men of the law at the hole in the lip. I watched as they searched for his body. Currents had carried it out to sea. It wasn't found for days, days that I stayed with Mareta, comforting her in my innocence, listening to her talk of Victor, how her love for him had been so strong at first, how it had turned slowly into fear, fear of his eyes. Fear, as she had had of her first husband's eyes, the one before Victor, the one who had also drowned. Neither husband could swim, but it was only a few days ago that I suspected that she had deliberately picked husbands who could not swim. I cannot swim myself, and I became her third husband. And it was only days ago too that she told me that even if Victor had not drowned from the fall, even if he had accused her of attempted murder – it was of no matter; she was the power and the glory and no man and no law could touch her.

Mareta and I had gone out together each day to watch the search for Victor's body. We were on the shore the fourth day, the day his body washed out of the sea. One bystander had vomited, another had stumbled away. I myself cringed in horror at the sight of Victor's eyes – and at the sight of Mareta's when they laid the body out and she was asked, after much hesitation, to identify the body. I saw her expression. My God! how I wish I had not. I still 'see' it – more vividly now, even in my present condition. At the time I didn't believe what I saw; I thought my own eyes deceived me. So gruesome, so terrible, that flick, barely perceptible, of happiness on Mareta's face when she saw that both of Victor's eyes had been ripped from his head.

A fish, some monster of the sea, had ripped out Victor's eyes, was the consensus of Hydra fishermen and the law of the island. Some fish with a diabolical mind, they agreed. (Of course, there were cuts and slashes over most of his body, and his clothes were torn in many places.) Yes, the fishermen said, there were fish that could chew out a man's eyes. Perhaps there was a sweetness of a man's eyes that a fish liked. Perhaps they,

the fishermen, should protect their own eyes every time they went into the sea. It was something to think much about.

The village shuddered at the tragedy; it was on the front page of the Athens newspapers. And when Victor was buried in the city, a stillness like the Parthenon in moonlight lay like a knot in my heart. I think my memory of Mareta's smile at Victor's eyeless face was poisoning me even then, but I didn't know it. I translated the emotion into love, pity.

Fear. It was to come later, sharp as a knife, after Mareta and I were married. She went back to Southern California after Victor's funeral, and I did too, though later and by a different route. I travelled through Europe for the summer, and by the time I got back to the Los Angeles area she had been there long enough, it appeared, to have forgotten Victor and their marriage. She had rid her home along the coast south of the city of all evidence of him. She had wiped him out, and within a week we were lovers, within a month we were married.

Looking back, seeking a reason why she married me, I can only come to the conclusion that it was mainly because I liked the water – sailing in her Mercury, lying on the beach beside her pool – but did not know how to swim. I had little money, but that was no problem: all her men – her father, her first husband, and Victor – had given her or left her money. My salary as a teacher was hardly needed. Of course, at first I thought she loved me. It did not take me long to find out how bitterly wrong I was.

And why did I marry her? I wonder myself, looking back on the marriage of only months ago. I am perplexed. I think it was because some of her – enough – rubbed off on me on the island of Hydra; her seed grew in me, like a cancer as it turned out. She came through my pores, growing all the time. She had a dazzling quality about her, a goddess power that said, 'If I admit you, you are very fortunate indeed.' She admitted me, and I plunged in. And her body. It was golden and sinewy, rich with curves and hunger; it fed on me. Our love-making was frenzied, almost combat. But as I look back, I see now that there was no love in her or her body; only hunger; it –

she – took and never gave. And when her appetite was appeased, she shoved me away. Within months she was tired of me. And soon fear came.

Fear. First it was disguised, like an itch in the soul; puzzling, like a stare from a stranger you feel you know – like the stare of Mareta that I came to know. Eerie, frightening, powerful, this stare of hers; it thrust itself at me, into me, exploring, prying. It was a power, a weapon – and I began to better understand why I had married her. Power. She was power. Power attracts. And power destroys.

One afternoon beside the pool I became conscious of her stare to such an extent that I knew it was the focus point of my growing fear. I remember how sun glistened on her golden body and on an opened penknife she held in her hand; she had been peeling an apple. She was lying naked – we never wore suits at the enclosed pool – her head toward me. I was sitting in a beach chair beside her when sun caught the knife blade and a blinding ray hit my eyes. I brought my hand up quickly to shield my face, and she lowered the knife. She knew what she had done. She had done it purposely, I realised later. Then I felt the full impact of her stare; it hit me harder than the sun ray had. It came shooting from behind the knife blade, slashing my eyes. Then I saw too the flash of her smile, so quick that at that time I wasn't sure she had smiled. Later I realised that her smile was the same as the one she had let flick through her expression the day they brought Victor's eyeless body from the sea.

That night I could not sleep. Lying beside Mareta, I thought I felt her stare upon my face. But it was dark in the room; the mind plays tricks. I shrugged off the feeling and finally slept. Later I awoke and felt her fingers slowly, carefully, lightly, exploring my eyes. 'Yes?' I said. Immediately, silently, she withdrew her fingers. All I could hear was her breathing – fast, excited, as if we were making love.

From that day on she seemed to have her knife with her almost all the time. At the pool she used it to peel fruit, in the kitchen to cut vegetables. At night I saw it by our bed, on the bedstand beside her head, the blade always showing. She kept

it razor sharp. It was very small, expensive, with a black ivory covering. It had only one blade, which she kept polished. She did not want me to handle the knife. I held it only once. She had left it, forgotten, on the bedstand once when she went into the bathroom; I picked it up. On either side of the blade, worn with age, were carvings of very delicate, probing, powerful eyes.

'Why do you use such a fine knife to peel vegetables?' I asked later.

'A knife should be used,' she said. And again I saw the flick of her ironic, secret smile. 'That's what my first husband said when he gave it to me.'

Fear. We were out in her Mercury one afternoon, a day in which heat waves shimmered like fire off the ocean. The wind had died, and although I could not swim I lowered myself over the side of the boat into the cooling water. Holding tightly on to the gunwale, I dipped my head into the ocean. When I looked up, Mareta was staring down at me, her secret smile escaping her face (too late; I saw!) her open knife near my fingers on the gunwale. When my face tilted toward hers, she lowered the knife quickly – too quickly? 'I thought I saw a shark,' she said.

She began to drink heavily, retreating each day from me into a world of alcohol and silence. I'd come home from work and find her in the bedroom, the door locked, no preparations made for dinner. More and more she kept her bedroom door locked all night, forcing me to sleep in a spare bedroom; and the nights we did sleep together she would not let me touch her and I awoke feeling her stare or her fingers on my eyes. She refused to explain her behaviour; she would not answer my questions.

'What is wrong? What have I done? Why are you acting like this?'

She would only smile.

And when I persisted in my attempt to question her, she – never saying a word – moved out of our bedroom. I came home one evening and I could not find her. I searched the house. She had disappeared. Her car was in the garage. Thinking she was

at the beach, I walked to the area where we frequently used to go. She was not there. When I got back to the house, she was in the kitchen preparing dinner, using her knife. She was drunk.

'Where have you been?'

She only smiled.

Often when I came home from work I could not find her in the house. Later, though, she would come down from upstairs, an upstairs I had just searched – including all bedrooms – without finding her. She refused to explain her whereabouts, to even talk, and I soon stopped asking her. I stopped looking for her in the house when I came home after work. I was very tired of it all – and afraid.

But one evening – just a few days ago now – she did not come down from her upstairs hiding place until after I had fixed my own dinner and read the paper. I was watching television, my back to the living room door, when I felt her hand on my neck, a warm caressing touch, like softened butter. I turned. She was naked.

She came around in front of me, blotting out the TV picture, swaying slightly; she had been drinking. Faint light behind me glazed her face; her ironic smile glittered in shadowy mirth. She stepped toward me, her arms came out. Her body touched me, I turned my face.

'What do you want?'

'Let's go out to the pool,' she said.

'No.'

'Take off your clothes, we'll go in together.'

'I'm going to bed.'

I stood up. She spread herself against me, like warm icing on a cake. Her arms twined around me. Her lips spread for my kiss.

'Now,' she said. 'At the pool.' I felt her thrust.

I pushed away.

She kept her smile, but it hardened angrily. Spinning, she glided – she walks with the stealth of a cat – out the door toward the swimming pool. I went to the window and watched her stoop at the edge of the water and pick something up. Then

she came back into the house and went up to the spare room. As she passed me I couldn't see what she carried in her hand; the object was too small. It wasn't until just a few hours ago now that I understood it must have been her knife.

Then though, the curiosity of what she had picked up at the pool took me into her room later. She was sitting in front of a window, a half-filled glass of whiskey beside her, staring out into the dark. I can 'see' her expression now; how can I ever forget it? Her ironic smile was at its ultimate in cruelty – an expression of a mad goddess.

But for the first time her smile and stare were of secondary importance to me. A tapestry hung down one wall, I had seen it many times, but as I came into the room that night I saw that one edge of it, about halfway down, was indented. It was caught on a key that stuck out of a Yale lock. Too, I could see a few inches of an almost imperceptible line of a doorway in the wall. In her drunkenness and anger, she had either forgotten to take the key out of the lock or had purposely left it there for me to see. There was a secret room behind that wall, a hidden closet.

She seemed not to notice that I had seen the doorway. She focused her smile and stare on me. Her anger was now either gone or under control. Very carefully, very slowly, very calmly, her words coming in the quiet between the falling of ocean waves nearby, her voice filled with pride and power, she said:

'I killed Victor.'

And then, her cool proud voice cutting me as if she were carving her words out of my skin, she told me, for the first time, the story of leading Victor to the hole on the island of Hydra. And again – this part of the story I had heard so often – told me of his nightmare eyes – eyes like her first husband's, eyes she feared.

'I killed him too,' she said, meaning her first husband, the one before Victor, her voice singing with power now. 'He drowned,' she chuckled. 'All my husbands drown. None know how to swim.' She took a long drink.

'Go look in the mirror,' she said. 'Go look at your own eyes, you'll see what I mean. You're just like Victor and the other

one. You're after me, you want to kill me too. I can see it in your eyes.' Her voice had lifted into a knot, as if it wanted to scream. 'It's in *your* eyes too!'

I went back to my room on jelly legs. I locked the door. I tried to sleep. I felt Mareta's stare, I saw her smile; in my mind I heard her insane words, over and over. I felt her fingers on my eyes – through the bedroom wall.

I got up and snapped on the light. I went to a mirror.

As I looked into the glass and saw my eyes, I at first felt shock and fear. But the longer I looked, the calmer I became and the more I understood. *Mareta* had made fear grow in the eyes of Victor and her first husband. As the men gradually saw her for what she was, fear grew. Mareta, seeing the fear and realising they *knew* her, translated their knowledge into a threat to her security – her power. And, thus, she destroyed Victor and her first husband.

I understood this because, gazing into the mirror, in my own eyes I saw the surge of living fear.

The next morning I saw a lawyer about getting a divorce. I planned to move out of the house as soon as I could find a place to live.

But I had waited too long.

As soon as I got inside the house that evening, Mareta came down from upstairs, silently, her smile so strong it seemed to be a being itself. Her stare pried into my eyes before she went out the door, the knife in her hand. I watched her walk across the lawn toward the beach, then I went up to her bedroom.

I suppose I should have known she would come back to the house immediately. If I had thought, I would have realised that she had left the house simply to give me an opportunity to get into her secret closet – especially when, going into the bedroom, I found the tapestry pulled back and the hidden door left open a crack.

Inside the closet I found the bottles. Two of them. Discarded olive bottles, washed and sealed. They were neatly lined up on a shelf, a stool in front of them. Mareta must have sat for hours staring at them and the photographs behind. The

three pictures, propped up against the wall, were of her first husband and Victor – and me. A sharp device – a knife? – had been thrust through the eyes of each man.

My mind, of course, at first refused to believe what I saw in the bottles, even though I had come to know Mareta for what she was. The sight I saw in them will stay with me forever, though I've tried with all my being to shut it out these last few days. The sight haunts me. My only consolation is that I know I will never see, actually, such a nightmare again. It is an impossibility.

While I stood in the closet, trying to accept *psychologically* the horror of what I saw in the bottles, Mareta came silently into the bedroom behind me. I did not hear her until she was almost on me. I turned in time to see her plunge the knife at me, silently, her smile bursting with pride, her stare like a goddess. We struggled. She had the advantage of surprise, and I was hurt. She struck again and again before I managed to get the knife from her and, wildly, blindly, stab it into her, blood streaming down my face.

She was dead by the time they got her – and me – to the hospital. They buried her yesterday. I wasn't there. I was in the hospital, where I am now. I'm glad she's dead. I'm glad I killed her. I wish she had been destroyed years ago, before she had had time to kill.

My only consolation, as I've said, is that now, blinded by the knife thrusts of Mareta (she had aimed the blade at my eyes only), I'll never again see those bottles, those olive jars containing the pickled eyes of Victor and husband number one, eyes she had cut out with her knife as the men lay at the bottom of the sea.

PLL NEVER LEAVE YOU - EVER

By Rene Morris

IS DEATH the end of our existence, or is there another life that we can know nothing of? Perhaps the story that I am about to tell will convince you that there are stronger ties to the living than one might at first suppose; and that love, most of all, springs eternal.

The sky had turned its back on daylight, and storm clouds were gathering like heavy grey blankets across the hills. An eerie blue half-light dimmed the mountains, and the sudden streak of lightning slid to earth in a blinding flash of fury, only to die amid another tumultuous roll of thunder.

In the shelter of the barn, Moragh stood silently, her long black hair flying in the wind. She watched with quiet exultation the tangled, mis-shapen trees, as they fought defiantly against the wind; a wind running wild and free, that sang through her body and washed away the aching hopelessness that was imprisoned within her.

'Moragh. Little Moragh. Come inside, you're getting wet.'

She did not hear her lover's voice, only the plaintive wail of a gull as it winged away over the croft, and was lost in the darkness. A shiver went through her as, pulling the woollen shawl closely around the slimness of her shoulders, she stepped inside the door and closed it upon the night.

Ianto took her gently by the hand and led her quietly in the darkness. His breath felt warm upon her cheek, and in the sanctuary of the barn his kisses and soft words gave her a kind of peace; as if his body poured a sweet strength into her veins, drowning her in his own desire. She lay in Ianto's arms listening to the rain beating down upon the roof; but the sound was melting away, and there was only Ianto, sweet Ianto, and a quiet peace all around her.

It had stopped raining. No longer did the stormbeat play upon the roof, only the drip, drip, drip of water, falling steadily from the rainpipe, kissing the sodden earth. Moragh lay in the sweet smelling hay watching Ianto as he delicately filled his pipe, its aromatic fragrance permeating the air with a deeper richness. Through the window, broken and barred, a thin shaft of pale moonlight cast a narrow path across the floor, and somewhere a rat scurried noisily out of sight.

‘Moragh?’

‘I’m here Ianto,’ she whispered.

‘Won’t he wonder where you are?’

‘I don’t care. I hate him. His love is like a prison, it suffocates me. Since his illness he has grown worse. He watches me all the time. Oh, Ianto, why does he cling to life so? Why doesn’t he die?’

He held her close to him, stroking her long silken hair and rocking gently, trying to comfort her. She felt small, and warm, like a child that needed reassuring.

‘Hush little Moragh. The Collector will call in his own good time. Not even Owen can last forever. And when life’s done with him, what then?’

‘I’ll give everything to you Ianto. The land is rich, and come Spring we’ll have more than fifty sheep. I shall need your help then. Will you come?’

‘I’ll come.’

‘Ianto, I love you so.’ She kissed him tenderly. ‘When shall I see you again?’

‘When I see the lamp burning in the window, I will come. Now you must go little Moragh.’

They walked to the barn door, and before opening it he wrapped the shawl around her shoulders and kissed her once more.

‘Till then.’

‘Till then my darling Ianto.’

Their hands touched for a moment, and then he was swinging away into the darkness, and soon his tall figure could no longer be seen. She wanted to cry out, to call his name, but the words would not come. Her throat felt tight and dry, paralysed

by the words that she could not utter; words that could span the gulf between them like a chain, but the link was broken, and with it, she realised Ianto had gone.

Her skirts trailed heavily on the wet and muddy earth as she made her way back to the croft. She stood for a moment in the doorway, her hand upon the latch looking back down into the valley. But the moon had gone, leaving behind only a dark void of emptiness, and shivering, she went inside and latched the door.

The wind had dropped, and a deathly hush hung about the croft. She felt suspended in time; entombed, without the sense of living, for without Ianto life was nothing. She merely existed until his arms were about her again, pouring back the sweetness of life, that was Ianto.

The light from the lamp spilled out, it's warm glow filling the room with dancing shadows. Owen heard the soft rustle of her skirts and turned his eyes to watch as she set the lamp down upon the table. She did not look at him, but busied herself at the fire, afraid to turn her face until the pain she felt could no longer be seen by those searching eyes. Eyes that forever gazed upon her with the sickness of love, devouring her every movement, her very being, until her soul lay bare with no fragment unseen.

'Moragh.'

She turned, but could not yet bring her eyes to meet his.

'Where have you been? I've missed you.'

'The storm had torn the door from the henroost. I had to make safe for fear of losing the little ones.'

'Dear Moragh. Your hair is tangled, bring the brush and sit by me.'

The evening ordeal had started. In health, he had anticipated her every wish. Never had she had to ask for something to be done, without finding that Owen had read her mind, and the job done. This nightly hair brushing was the only thing left for him to do, and in doing it, he felt that in some small way he could still show his love for her, and the need he had to be of some service even still.

Moragh sat stiffly on the edge of the cot, the sickly, sweet smell of his breath enveloping her like suffocating rain. He cupped her chin in his hand and turned her face toward him. She felt the tight knot in her stomach as her eyes looked upon the face of the man that once she had loved. The once strong face that was now a wasted shadow, a memory of yesterday. He gazed at her, his eyes deep concavities in a waste of snow. There was a blue transparency about the temples, each vein a dark line, reaching upward and outward, as if to break the shrinking prison that tightened across it. She felt nauseated, and the cold repulsion crept over her skin and broke out in tiny beads of sweat on her forehead. The brush ran limply through her hair, pausing now and then so that his hand could fondle the long black strength of it. He pressed the soft falling waves gently into place with a hand that was thin and white, his long fingers were cold upon her face, like the kiss of death. She wanted to tear herself away, to scream out the repulsion she felt for him, but his hand had dropped, and the brush scuttered noisily across the floor.

'That will have to do for tonight Moragh. I'm tired, but it looks well enough.'

She stooped to retrieve the brush, and as she passed, he caught her hand in his.

'I love you so Moragh. It grieves me that I cannot do more for you, but I shall get well, you'll see. You must have faith in me Moragh, for how could I leave you? I could not leave you, ever.'

'Hush. I know. Now you must sleep.'

'Kiss me Moragh.'

She closed her eyes so that he would not see the revulsion she felt, and prayed that he would not hear the hammering of her heartbeats. Her lips met the cold shrunken forehead but briefly. Before she could escape his arms went round her, dragging her down to him, and his lips were crushing hers with all the hunger of the love he had for her. Her brain seemed to snap; and when he let her go she swayed dizzily wiping the kiss from her mouth, and stifling a cry she quickly left the room. Closing the door behind her, Moragh stumbled outside

into the cold night air, the sickness welling up in her throat like a great tide that could not be quelled. All the loathing, all the disgust that was in her poured forth in an unending torrent. Her body shook with the violence of it. Hot tremulous waves rose up her spine, and the acrid taste filled her nose and mouth until she felt submerged in sickness.

When at last the violence ceased, Moragh went wearily to the stream, and cupping the water in shaking hands, let its coldness run down her burning cheeks. Despair was heavy in her heart, and she knew a great loneliness. The tears welled up, and she knelt by the stream weeping bitterly. But from despair there came anger. No more. There must be an end to this misery. She was young and strong, and there was so much that life could offer: so much love to give, and the sweetness of giving all to Ianto. Owen lay dying. But when? He clung to life like a leech, draining it of all the pleasures that were rightfully hers. And so it seemed logical . . . that Owen must die.

Moragh stood watching the old woman's gnarled hands as they deftly whittled away at the soft white wood. Behind her, through the open door, Moragh could see the row of small, headless dolls. Every finger had a perfect nail, and every toe so delicately carved and balanced on its tapering foot.

'Well?'

The old woman spat impatiently, wiping her thin mouth on the back of her hand.

'I was admiring your work. You are well known in these parts.'

The old woman was not impressed and continued to whittle, her weathered face a mask of wrinkled indifference.

'You want a doll?'

'Yes.'

'What do you offer for my service?'

'Whatever you wish. You have but to name it.'

The old woman nodded, the lines on her face tightening into a toothless grin. She rose stiffly from her seat and went inside. When she emerged she held a round ball of wood and a headless doll in her hand.

'Male, or female?'

'Male.'

'Describe him to me. Leave out nothing, for the likeness must be perfect.'

Moragh described Owen in slow detail, and watched the small round ball shrink as the tiny pieces fell to the floor. The old woman worked skilfully at the tiny head, stopping occasionally for Moragh's approval. Under the old woman's hand, the sallow face of Owen slowly emerged. It seemed almost alive, and the bark-paint gave to the eyes a sense of seeing. They stared at her with an intensity that was uncanny. She half expected to see the lids blink in the strong sunlight, so real were they fashioned. When the old woman had finished, the head was forced upon its spindly neck, and the effigy was complete. Moragh stared at it in disbelief – she was looking at Owen.

'Well?'

'It is a perfect likeness. And your price, old woman?'

'Two spring lambs. If I do not receive them, things will not go well with you. You understand?'

'I understand. You shall have two fine spring lambs, this I promise.'

The old woman seemed satisfied and placed the doll in Moragh's hands. It was done. She turned away down the path that led into the valley, and as she stepped lightly over the springy turf she felt almost happy. The sun was warm upon her back as she started up the col, the light breeze playing with her hair. It had been so easy, so very easy. She looked at the small effigy and smiled, the key to freedom lay in the palm of her hand.

Upon reaching the croft, Moragh placed the doll upon the rough wooden table and started to prepare a meal. She felt uneasy and had the strange feeling that she was being watched. It was not logical, and she tried to shrug it off, and yet the feeling persisted. She felt impelled to turn round, to make sure that she was alone. The effigy lay upon the table where she had left it; but its head had turned, and the tiny, lifelike eyes watched her every movement, a demonic smile on its up-

turned face. Its gaze held hers, and there was something familiar in the way it looked at her, something compelling about those eyes that made her feel afraid. An intangible fear that filled her with coldness as she stared at the shrunken face. Walking stiffly to the table, her hand reached out and grasped the doll, and turning its gaze from her she opened the flour sack and threw it inside.

'Moragh.' The word rent the air with a fearful urgency.

Opening the adjoining door Moragh stood half in, half out, her mind unable to think, yet knowing that she must answer his call. He was sitting up in the cot, his face was wild and desperate and his thin, white hands clutched the woollen blanket, white bony knuckles swollen and strained.

'Moragh. Where are you. My eyes, I cannot see.'

Somewhere, deep inside her, she suddenly felt pity for him. His poor, wasted frame had lain there upon the cot for months. It was only love for her that had kept his will to live so strong, and seeing him so helpless, Moragh went to him.

'Dear God, I am blind. I can see nothing but darkness. I am afraid Moragh. I am so afraid. Hold me, hold me . . .'

'You are dreaming Owen. Be still, be still. I will fetch you some water.'

Moragh eased his hands from her and hurried from the room. The slow realisation of what had happened dawned on her. Opening the flour sack, she felt inside and took out the doll. Brushing away the flour from it, she placed it in the window with its face turned away from her. The old woman had done well, and Moragh marvelled at the doll's sensitivity. This small effigy possessed the power of life and death, and it was then that Moragh decided not to wait any longer for Owen's death. It would be a kindness to end his misery as well as her own. As soon as he slept this night she would take the doll and burn it. Owen would feel nothing. The fire would be hot, and the doll would burn quickly: a small piece of human wood, in a large, hot fire.

After Owen had drunk the clear, cold water, his head sank back on the pillows and he felt calmer. His sight returning, he lay blinking in the strong, yellow sunlight that poured in at

the window. The nightmarish dream that had seemed so real had passed, but the shock of it had tired him, leaving him weak and spent. His eyes rested on his beloved Moragh, and through a mist of thankful tears, he watched the graceful movement of her body as she smoothed down the crumpled blanket, the sunlight playing on her hair. The sight of her so close to him was comforting, and soon his lids felt heavy and sleep overcame him like a gentle tide, washing away all pain and fear in oblivion.

Moragh stood by the window, a strange excitement mounting inside her as she watched the setting sun growing paler beyond the mountains. The criss-cross pattern of grey stone walls fell away into the valley, and the nocturnal outlines of trees and rocks stood out in sharp contrast on the skyline. Above, the vastness of the heavens dimmed to blue velvet and the stars peeped down, twinkling eyes in the darkness of night.

The croft was hushed and still. Moragh knelt by the stone fireplace carefully piling the logs on the smouldering ashes. Soon, the flames licked hungrily at the dry wood, curling round and upward, consuming all in its eager growth. The room danced with flickering shadows, as though Satan's infernal spirits had gathered in force to watch the sacrifice. The fire was ready, its yellow, tapering tongues hungry for wood.

Taking the doll from the window, Moragh looked upon its face for the last time, then, with pounding heart, threw it into the fire.

The stillness was broken by a sudden cry that rent the air, an agony of searing pain that lingered in her ears like the clamour of bells. Moragh covered her face with her hands, praying for the sound to die away, but it lingered still. Taking her hands from her face, she looked into the flames, hoping desperately that the doll had burned away, its figure consumed; but still it lay upon the red logs, twisting and turning in the heat of the fire, its small face staring at her with devilish hate. Owen's terrible screams grew louder, she could hear his tortured body threshing about in an agony of unspeakable pain. Dear God, it was too much to bear. Her voice broke from trembling lips, 'Die. For God's sake why don't you die?'

But the screaming continued, the sounds filling her with terror as they seeped into her brain like an avalanche of overwhelming avulsion.

Taking the bellows from the wall, she knelt before the fire, pumping frantically until the flames leapt high in the chimney, the heat unbearable. Crackling and spitting, the logs suddenly gave way and the effigy tipped out among the burning cinders that lay in the hearth. It lay black and charred in its cot of fiery ashes, the smell of burning human flesh violating her nostrils. The eyes had gone, their small black sockets stared up from the ashes like sullen pits of pertused ebony. Seeing the horrible, distorted figure, she sprang back, covering her eyes to blot out the terrible thing before her, but the picture was imprinted in the darkness of her mind forever.

White and shaken, convulsed with fear, her trembling hands covered her ears in an effort to deaden the sound of those terrible screams, but they sang thinly inside her head, spinning her senses until she felt bereft and numb. 'The doll. Get rid of the doll.' The words echoed round and round inside her head. It lay in the ashes, a thin spiral of smoke rising up from its twisted body. She must get rid of it or go out of her mind. Urged on by desperation, and hardly aware of her actions, she scooped the charred thing up in her apron and ran wildly into the night. Running blindly on without thought of direction, her feet slipping and sliding over the wet grasses, she at last found herself unable to run any farther, and by some strange chance, found that her panic had brought her to the old slate quarry. The black pit swam before her eyes, and standing breathlessly and dangerously near to its edge, she flung out her apron and the doll sped outward and over, disappearing into the inky depths below.

A thin scream rose on the night air as if carried by the wind, then all was still. She stood for a while staring after it down into the blackness of the quarry, her ears straining; but there was no sound except for the wind in the trees, and her heart beating wildly within her breast. The screams that had torn at her heart were still, and in the strange quietness of the night, she knew at last that . . . Owen was dead.

The light from the doorway fingered the darkness, and as Moragh neared the croft and entered into its narrow path of light, she could feel the red heat of the fire still upon her cold face. The acrid taste of burnt flesh permeated the air, invading her senses with its sickening strength. She knew what had to be done, for the body had to be wrapped for burial. Surely the worst part was over now? and the wrapping would not take long for his wasted frame was less than a child's. Nevertheless, the thought of handling his corpse sent hot shivers up her spine. The face of Ianto swam into her mind, and with it, determination that springs from love. With trembling hands, she lit the lamp and opened the middle door. The light fell upon the cot in the corner of the room . . . it was empty. The blankets were heaped about, ripped and torn as if some wild animal had vent his anger upon them. She followed the tangled shreds that hung limply over the end of the cot to the floor . . . and saw the hideous, blackened shape that had once been a man. Its shrunken, hairless head stared with eye-less sockets at the ceiling, and handless, the stubby arms lay in pools of congealed blood. Unable to take her eyes from it, they travelled unwilling over the body and fell upon the burnt and twisted legs. The skin had burned away, leaving the bones exposed; long, tapering claws in a bed of ashes. Like a doll, it lay upon the floor, stunted and bent.

Her shrill cry of horror broke the silence, and then she was falling down and down, in a dark spiralling tunnel to a bottomless pit. She felt herself walking, trying to climb out of the impregnable cage of darkness, but its depth was pulling her, down and down to oblivion.

The noises inside her head were strange, familiar. The whisper that grew within her mind was saying her name. It became louder, clearer, and sounded again, urgently. Opening her eyes, she could discern a face. Her eyes focused on its shape, and the outline became clear. It was like a dream. It must be a dream. She was looking at the face of Ianto. Her hand reached out falteringly, she wanted to touch it, but was half afraid that her vision would prove unreal, and would melt

away from her hand. Ianto spoke her name, and the lips were moving, and she knew that it was not a dream after all.

'Ianto, hold me. I'm so frightened.'

His strong arms bore her up. She could feel his heart beating so close to her own, and she clung to him, crying softly. He laid her gently in a chair, his arms pillowing her head.

'I saw the croft ablaze with light. I thought something may be wrong, so I came as quickly as I could.'

'Oh Ianto. It was so dreadful . . .' Her voice trailed away. There were no words to describe the horror of it. But now, everything would be alright - Ianto would know what to do. She clung to him like some small frightened child, her cheeks wet with tears.

'Tell me, if you can. Is it Owen? Has he died?'

Owen! Her body trembled as she suddenly recalled the hideous, mis-shapen thing that lay on the floor in the name of Owen. Ianto must not see it. What would he think? But he had to see it for she needed his help. She could not manage it alone, it was too much to face. Too much . . . too much . . .

'Ianto, help me . . . please help me. I didn't know it would be like this.'

Ianto felt that something was wrong. Owen's death had been expected and would not have upset her to this extent. She had wished him dead, and had said so, more than once. There was a strangeness about her that he did not understand. What was it? He would not ask any more questions of her, but go and find out for himself. He rose to his feet, but her arms reached out for him, her hands clutching wildly at his clothes. Pulling away from her he opened the door, and lifting the lamp high, let its yellow light invade the darkness.

'Good God!'

His voice was a whisper, almost inaudible, but its tone spoke of what he had seen on the floor. She stood frozen. When he spoke again his voice sounded almost harsh.

'What have you done to him? In Heaven's name, what have you done?'

'I had to do it, Ianto. I couldn't stand it . . . I couldn't. I didn't know you see . . . I thought it would be so easy . . .'

He came back into the room, and stood staring at her in disbelief. She looked so young, so very young, but the beauty he had once seen in her face was no longer there for him. He could only stare at her, and she, not knowing what to say to expiate herself, could not ease his mind. He turned from her, and she could feel the anger in him; an intangible barrier between them, a bridge that words could span, but there were no words and she could not explain. How could she make him understand?

'I did it for you Ianto. Don't turn from me. Please Ianto, I love you, I would do anything for you . . . anything.'

'But you killed him.'

'Not with my hands Ianto. Don't you see . . . not with my own hands.'

'How then?'

She went to him, pleading, with tears in her eyes. 'It was the doll you see. I threw it into the fire, but it would not burn. The old woman used unseasoned wood . . . I did not know that it would not burn.'

Ianto had heard enough. He felt shocked and disgusted. That she could do such a thing to a dying man was beyond his belief. This girl that had felt so soft in his arms, so warm with love. How could he look into her eyes now? Where was the innocence in them, that had once flowed from them and into his heart? He turned on her, his face ugly with anger.

'Witchcraft. How could you do it? He was dying, it was only a matter of time.'

She could not bring herself to speak, her legs would not support her, and sinking to the floor she knelt before him. The sound of her crying sickened him, and the hands that had once touched him in love and tenderness were grovelling at his feet. He felt no compassion for her, only a kind of anger mingled with fear. He wanted no part in this sorcery, it made him afraid to think of its terrible powers, and he wanted to get away from the croft and all it held as quickly as he could.

'The doll did not burn away then?'

'No,' she whispered.

'Where is it now?'

'I threw it into the quarry. It's all right Ianto, it's gone.'

'But you don't understand, it's not safe until it has burned away. The doll still lives . . . down there in the darkness. I must go and find it.'

Moragh rose up quickly as he moved to the door, but he flung it open and was gone before she could reach him. 'Ianto. Don't leave me . . . Ianto, wait for me . . .'

The night was black, and no moon above to cast a shadow in the darkness as she ran, unseeing and afraid, into the night. There was no path to guide her feet as she sped, stumbling and sliding, over the stones and wet grass. 'Ianto . . . IANTO' . . . Her voice called again and again, echoing back to her eerily from the mountains; but there was no reply, and she ran on blindly in fear and despair until her lungs were tortured and raw. The wind bit coldly into her body as if a thousand deathly fingers were clawing at her skin. And then, faintly on the wind someone was calling her name. She stopped to listen . . . again it came, singing in the darkness above the wind. A strange light shone in the distance, its glow pulsating with luminous light. 'Moragh. Moragh . . . I'm here.'

'Ianto. Wait for me.'

The voice came again and the light moved nearer.

'I'll wait for you my darling Moragh. How could I leave you - ever.'

She ran joyously towards the light, and then she was falling down and down, the slates sliding beneath her feet, hurrying her on . . . into the burnt and stunted arms of Owen.

A SMELL OF FEAR

By William Sansom

YOUNG Diana Craig bent over her big white bath. All she could see was curved white enamel, and her own pink hands, as she snicked at finger-nail after finger-nail with scissors.

The door behind was locked. March sunshine blew in white as snowlight, it showed up everything very clearly. After her hot bath, Di Craig felt rosy warm under her wrap. She had run the water away, and now the bath was empty save for an odd spatter of water drops, as if it had rained and stopped.

From outside came a rattle of drilling from men building the new flats beyond the end of the garden. A concrete mixer throbbed regularly underneath. The noise made your head ache: though it was company too, it was a sound of life and movement.

Suddenly she started back. The scissors flew open and cut lightly along her thumb. 'Help!' she yelled. She yelled it making no sound at all, only the word shouting huge in her mind. Then her hand went up to the little left breast that covered her thumping heart and she said: 'Honestly, Craig, nerves, you're just like an old lady of ninety!' Again she spoke silently, not even moving her lips. She pressed at the lightly cut thumb and looked again into the bath. And still she gave a little shudder.

She had thought the bath was full of shrimps and fleas.

Even now, it looked very like it. Many of the nail parings had caught themselves up in separate globes of water. However white such nails looked on her fingers, they gleamed yellowish against the white enamel. They just looked curled, and wet, like shrimps or sandfleas. And the surface tension of the water gave them a greyish blur of legs and feelers.

Now a big dark drop of blood splashed down among the

shrimp parings, it washed out pale pink and brought her abruptly to her proper senses.

'Fool,' she said, and went back along the passage to her room for the colourless, odourless iodine, 'I hope it stings you.'

Nerves. Nerves, she thought – too much time alone, not lonely but alone, bed-sitting in a bedsitter, not going out enough, not seeing friends enough. Why? Shy. Cloaking your shyness in a pretence laziness, cloaking yourself too in the huge comfortable anonymity of London. For in this Victorian suburb where among peeling grey houses you had your bed-sitting-room, there might be companionable gardens and trees – yet everyone still went strictly about their own business. Impartial plum blossom blew like confetti on everybody's shoulders: but only those who had been introduced exchanged a smile.

Nerves. There was that man, for instance, breathing hot down your neck in the fish queue. You had noticed him before, he seemed to hang about the shopping centre in the mornings, you had caught him looking at you once or twice, and once in a rather frightening way, darkly photographed behind in the glass of a shop window – your image and his looming like figures seen through dark glasses, two photographs greyly cut by the reflected sunshine among the coloured calendars and paints of an art-craft shop. Being behind you, he had seemed about to lean forward and, overshadowing, pounce.

In the fish queue, you had edged so far forward against the woman in front that this lady had looked round with shocked grey eyes. Yet the man behind had also edged closer. You had to move further in against the woman. A few feet away in the shop, the straw-hatted fishmonger went red-faced and muscular about his business of slapping the fish up and weighing and wrapping it in newspaper; the cash-till rang busily; a hose tap splashed in the gritty basin: everything was everyday and breezily safe. Yet a curious curtain of home-cured haddocks had been erected above the fish-slab. These hung like long yellow autumn leaves caught in a wire mesh, and the sunlight shining through them indeed sent a kind of leaf-dappling on to

the white tiles further inside the shop. Perhaps this curtain, though of haddocks, had thrown a net over your nerves?

So you had left the queue, fishless, for the spacious cold meat counters of a delicatessen a good few minutes away.

Yet – she considered as now she wound a scrap of sticking plaster round her thumb – what had really happened? Nothing. Why should the man not go shopping every morning? He carried a worn black oilcloth bag, he wore what amounts to one of the uniforms of artists – bright narrow trousers, a coloured shirt, slightly straggling hair: perhaps he was a painter, living by himself and working at home? All the more reason for him to be looking into that art shop. In any case, plenty of men nowadays did their own shopping. And had he really breathed down her neck? She could not be sure at all. Nor, for that matter, was she at all sure that a man had ever purposely put himself against her that other day in the underground: the train naturally jolted, and where else could the man have gone to in that pack of bodies?

Nerves. She stood now in her room paring the last nails and despising herself – or that other person who must be considered as herself. ‘Nerves’ must be stopped. In her present clinical mood she was quite sure she could stop them. She had read quite often, too, of a kind of plain girl who, for want of admirers, began to imagine herself followed by men. Was this perhaps something to do with it? But she was not plain. Regular features, green-brown eyes she felt to be ‘interesting’, and quite pretty hair nearly blonde. With a natural curl. At dances, she was quite in demand. Did she lack something vital? Or was it more that she had just – quieter habits? For instance, she really preferred to spend an evening at a concert rather than at a dance or a film: she preferred the quietness, if one could say such a thing, of music.

Sometimes in a double mirror she had caught sight of her profile and had noticed a tone of placidity in the face, as though this profiled stranger were all a little too heavy or pallid or something, shapely but overdone, like a Roman bust. Lips – not enough colour? Pale eyelashes? Cheeks too full and flat? It could not be exactly said – and she avoided saying it.

A mixture of vanity and humility told her that she was a good-looking, unattractive girl.

Part-time work in an office and various home-typing assignments took Miss Craig about a bit: she grew to know very well the twelve-minute walk from where she lived to the bus and the underground station. The walk involved her in four or five streets and turnings, leading slightly uphill towards home, and becoming quieter, more spacious and nerve-racking as she went. The houses became bigger, with ample gardens and bushes and trees, with suspicious laurel-hedged drives. Some were so large that nowadays small top turret windows were no longer cared for, and stared uncurtained like eager eye-sockets. Golden privet hedged its dull yellow against cream stucco and grey London brick; lime trees hung low; and particularly the dark-leaved may-tree grew here. The first road home was lit with a furnace glow of orange sodium lamps; then these ended abruptly at the first turning, and the next streets with their branch-mottled Victorian lanterns became all the darker, and in the darkness, dangerous.

The day after Miss Craig cut her thumb, she had to go to the post office to dispatch a manuscript. While she waited at the counter, she happened to glance round at the telephone kiosks behind – and there, in the shadow, she saw a glassed-in face studying her. She looked harder, trying to make out whose face it was – then shut her eyes. It was indeed that same man, the man from the fish queue. And his teeth had smiled. She turned quickly away. Her heart struggled with her breath. Had he smiled directly at her? Or had he only been smiling to himself at words spoken to him through the little black earpiece?

She paid for her parcel and turned to leave. But the telephone box opened and she saw quite close his hand as it swung the booth door open. It was coloured mauve and red; it seemed to be all birthmark.

Out in the street, the man followed her. He turned in her direction – away from the shops. She saw him limping after her. He had a lame leg? Desperately she pretended not to be

looking round at him but back up at a clock sticking out above a jeweller's shop.

She walked as fast as she could, and turned the first corner. She hurried on a hundred yards – to her bowed head endless yards of pavement squares and kerb and iron telephone and electric casings – before she dared look round again. But he had turned the corner and was coming after her.

It was broad daylight, two o'clock in the afternoon, an early spring afternoon, the trees sprinkled with buds, bright yellow dots on the branches everywhere; and she pretended to herself, even then, that she only kept her eyes lowered against all the dazzle and the slanting bright sunlight that flashed on the empty windows along the street. Wet tearful lowered lashes made rainbow colours close to her eyes. But . . . *empty* windows? Her heart stuttered again in absurd daylight terror, for empty was exact, no one stood at a window, and there was no one at all abroad in the street, it was like a city suddenly emptied of its people, the deader for the bright sunlight, dead but for the two, herself and the man limping after her. Simply the lunch hour, she breathed, simply the dead hour of eating, when everybody sat behind doors at the backs of their houses.

Round a corner came sailing a butcher's boy cycling with folded arms, whistling at the top of his breathless breath. A policeman, a far-away blue-domed sacristan, strode from behind a lonely parked car.

'Officer! Quick!' she shouted – from pale lips that never moved nor made a sound. But what should she say? Her foot-steps slowed, she walked sure on her heels again, she smiled to herself.

And she turned round once, quickly, to look back at the man. He was standing stock still, legs apart, in the very middle of the pavement, watching her. He looked like a man who has given up the race. But then she saw him make a sudden movement. He fumbled out a small white thing from his pocket, seemed to hold it out to her – then in the same movement circled the thing round and slipped it into a bright red pillar-box suddenly sprouted, it seemed, in that place. A letter! Posting a letter! She felt ashamed, and the more sorry for herself.

But then . . . why walk all that way from a post office to post a letter?

A boxer dog strode stiff-legged from behind a gate-post and sniffed at her. She flinched, began to circle round it, then pulled herself together and walked straight by, containing her slight fear as hard as she could. They smell fear, they can smell it, she muttered, I must hide it. But how could you hide something inside you that they smelled?

Several days passed. He seemed always to be about, she saw him in the distance or across the shopping street at least once each day.

He gave her the impression of 'hanging about'. Why? He seemed to be watching people, touching them with secret thoughts, establishing a one-sided contact with them in which – though nobody seemed to notice him – they were nevertheless used. But then – men shoppers are always slow, they wander about with a hopeless look, they have no children and kitchens to hurry back to. With a grocery list in their pocket you find them dreaming away into an ironmonger's window, dreaming up wire-netting, bone meal, nuts and bolts. So why attribute so much stealth to this one particular man? Because he stared at people? Don't, then, all people stare from time to time? Yes. But so much?

She stood trying to wedge a parcel in the crook of her arm, getting it caught up with the brolly handle and her bag, when she saw him suddenly across the street and in panic she dropped the lot.

A woman stood shrinking opposite him, and he in his corduroys was dancing to and fro. The woman was trapped by a pram behind her, and she looked desperate, not knowing which way to go as the man, his whole body face on to her, blocked her movement forward. Miss Craig's lips let out a little scream – but stopped it just in time as she saw both the man and the woman smile at each other and pass on their various ways. They had simply wanted to pass each other, dodging face to face . . . but how awful, thought Miss Craig, if it had been me what would I have done? Her heart jumped again, as she bent

blushing down to pick up bag, brolly and parcel – these at least excused her scream to anyone watching her, but she felt a dozen eyes scornfully boring at her, giants passing above as she squatted low on the pavement.

Once more she shook her head and muttered: 'Must snap out of this. Far too jumpy.' And she took immediate action, turned to a telephone box and rang up a couple of friends with the idea of arranging an afternoon's tea. They were both out. It left her lonelier than ever. Yet also relieved. The cure for loneliness is not necessarily other people. Often, having arranged to meet 'other people'—she then envisaged the meeting, the hours spent then with the too well-known, quite well-liked faces, and this only erected a further kind of cage about her. She enjoyed it when they came. But the anticipation was dulling.

When now she walked home through her four streets, she made a point of stopping to talk with a woman she knew by sight. This woman was always hurrying about the little front garden – clipping hedges, changing milk bottles, cleaning windows: her flat must have had no access to the back garden, she came out this way for air. They had first met over a stream of water flooding the pavement from this woman's house. Now, unusually, she was dressed in a smart tweed suit, off and out somewhere, yet pulling at a weed on the way.

'Hello,' said Miss Craig brightly, 'all dressed up and nowhere to go?' She bit her tongue. As usual, at these self-conscious times, what she said seemed to have a double bearing on the situation, as jokes about cemeteries crop up in the company of the recently bereaved. Why, now, shouldn't this woman have somewhere to go?

The woman looked down at her suit. 'Oh – this? I've had it *years*. But it's nice to know it looks like new. Of course that little tailor's a dream, I'd give you her name, only—' and she looked up and down Miss Craig rather slyly.

'Only?'

'Well...' The woman gave a merry little laugh. 'Only, you're the arty type, aren't you – and I was wondering, would it suit?'

Miss Craig's eyes opened wide with surprise. It was true, then! Often in the solicitor's office, where for half the week she

helped with the overflow documents, the others had hinted at her 'artistic' connections – freelance typing for dramatists, novelists, poets! Indeed, among a local draper's stock-taking lists and an architect's endless specifications, she had once dealt with a few chapters of a shorter guide to 'practical philosophy' and once a few poems by a poet who had never paid her – and drawing from these memories, she now half believed herself to have an *entrée* into some kind of vague Bohemia. Indeed she wore her fair hair in plaits coiled in a bun, and about her dress there were many small touches of velvet and even tufts of fur, though these derived less from her 'poetic' connections than a kind of camouflage-adaptation to the other women who attended musical concerts.

However, what this woman had now said gave her something to think about for the rest of the way home. Perhaps she *was* artistic? She thought of the green velveteen curtains she had fixed up in her room, the majolica plate on the wall, the floppy suède volume of Tennyson. Otherwise, why had she kept these particular things from the break-up of the old Bristol home?

A few minutes later she had to pass the boxer dog. She skirted round it. Then deliberately retraced her steps and walked boldly back near to, as a discipline. It growled, she ran, and arrived home with her head aching.

She could die of fear. People are afraid of the dark, people are afraid of walking alone – it's not only me, she said, it's not, I know it's not . . . but still . . . and that man began to haunt her more and more. On the Sunday evening in the foyer of their local cinema she was buying nuts, and saw him standing about, waiting, watching. She had read in papers that this kind of man had 'staring eyes': but his were not staring – they were dull, glazed, inward-dreaming eyes. She hurried on into the cinema, her face turned away in a last hope that he might not be looking. Throughout the film, as people changed places round her, she imagined it was he, only he, coming closer. Nearer and nearer in the dark, seat by seat. The film showed a simple love story, in the country, with plenty of sunshine: removed from it by her immediate fear, what she saw of it seemed smaller, fur-

ther away than usual – it looked old-fashioned, or like an amateur film. When at last someone came apologising along the row to take the seat next to her, she rose and struggled out in the opposite direction, never looking back. The lights in the main street outside reassured her: but she called a taxi, fearful of the darker streets home, and sat fingering the coins in her purse, watching the meter, saying: ‘Only this once, only this once,’ and trying to stop her heart fluttering like a little animal inside her vest.

And the next day again – she was sheltering from a dark rain shower in the station arcade, beside newspaper sellers and a dozen others, Londoners all appalled at the rain, grumbling as if they saw it for the first time in their lives – when edging round a curved shop front *inside the arcade* she saw first his awful leather shopping bag and then his limping figure following round. She held on, hoping – but he came steadily towards her, head forward. She ran out into the rain, drenched herself crossing the road, rounded a corner and scuttled into a thin hole in the wall, a doorless café: men stood against the walls all round. Were they laughing at her voice, even her wetness? She took heart. They were British workmen, they would defend her if he came in.

Why, why am I like this? her dry eyes cried to the little pools of tea on the oilcloth. I’m not afraid of standing up for myself. I’m not a neurotic. I’m all right usually. In the bus queue I told that woman with the stupid goffered hat exactly where she stood – at the end of the line. ‘You jumped,’ I said. And didn’t I give the girl in the sweet-shop a look when she mimicked that coloured fellow?

The next morning began with a shower – then the sun blazed out, cleansing everything, shining like sun at the sea-side, water sparkling everywhere. She almost forgot about that man, it was such a lovely day.

As she typed away, the afternoon grew warmer and warmer, the wind changed to a slow-moving draught of warm air fanned up from the south-west – she even had to get up

and open the window. At last her work was done, and ready for the post. She hesitated before putting on her coat – surely it would be chilly when night fell? Yet it was still so warm. But she put it on, for safety.

By the time the letter was posted it was dark. The air smelled of warm leaves, people were walking more slowly, strolling in their winter clothes as if it were summer. Street lights picked out the buds speckled against the dark. Miss Craig, too, began to stroll. Even in the darker streets towards home, where the lamp-standards were wider apart, it seemed lighter because of the calm warm air. But the thick laurel hedges were black – and suddenly from behind one of these a man stepped out, her heart jumped, he stood quite still watching her walk towards him, and then she heard a giggle, there was a girl in the shadow of the laurel, and she smiled to herself: 'He was afraid of *me*.' And she warmed with a big love for all lovers linked in pairs, who never walked alone threatening the pavements with an inquiring eye.

Four more streets, one very long, and then home. She turned a corner, and coming across the road – there in the loneliest, darkest part of the walk was that man . . .

She went on walking forward, terrified to stop, but beginning to veer away in a long wide curve, as if she had turned the corner only to curve away across the road.

But the man changed direction too. He had been going one way, and now abruptly turned toward her. There was no question now. Her head hummed with terror. Home, home, please home, it hummed. There was a roundabout way back. She lost the pretence of her careful curve and made it a complete half-circle and hurried off, trying not to run. Yet as fast as she walked, he was behind her. Everyone else walked slower in the false summer night – only he faster. She could hear the uneven sound of his limp, he must be poling himself hard along, his shadow would be large in the pools of light beneath the lamps as he passed – and how now to get home, by this strange roundabout way, through streets half known?

One corner. Another. She bent forward on her knees, walking faster – and then suddenly broke into a run. She ran a few

steps, then slowed, running made it feel worse . . . and then ahead along the dark street she saw what she had quite forgotten, the big pub at the back behind her own street, the big blaze of light, and now in the warm air people standing about outside . . . she half walked, half stumbled towards it, then slowed down as she saw several heads had already turned towards her.

Now she had to walk alone into the radius of curious eyes: and defences rose, she shortened her steps for a prettier carriage, she turned her head aside, pretending to look at the opposite side of the road. But the opposite houses lay ridiculously in darkness: so she raised her eyes to the roofs, thinking they would think she was looking at the stars. There were no stars: well, looking *for* a star, her nerves raved.

But alone? She could still hear him – far behind.

Rustic benches, a broad stretch of gravel back from the pavement, and the wide bottom plaster walls of the pub reflecting light and frosted glass from inside: the figures of a few people in two groups dark against this light: no cars – it was a local pub indeed. In one of the groups there stood two women. The light picked out their coloured coats and one head of bleached hair: women, comforting women. The other group was made of young men leaning and watching, not drinking, passing the time.

She slowed down as she came into this safe circle of light. Safe? But she was ordinarily nervous of going into a pub at night – old prejudices told her these were not nice places for a girl – yet now, it was the only thing to do? But suppose he came in too? And talked to her? Or just sat waiting for her to leave? Sat waiting until the pub closed? There was nothing she could say about him to the manager? Nothing.

Then go in, drink, telephone for a taxi? She gave a high gulp of a giggle, it came out, she swallowed it in disgust and still stood fluttering there outside in the light like a big clothly moth. The group with the women took a casual glance at her. But the five or six young men stared openly, grossly, though they made no sound whatsoever.

It was instead one of the women who suddenly turned,

laughed, and gave a little high wolf whistle towards her, and the others with her laughed – and Diana Craig felt the whole world against her and ran off into the dark.

Two of the youths separated themselves quietly and followed her. They were so quiet it might have been part of the shadow of the laurel that moved.

Out of the light, she began to run easily, loping in long strides, coat clutched above her knees – but the two youths ran faster, quick and silent on thick rubber soles, so that when they caught up with her she had not even heard them.

No sound came when she opened her mouth at a dark shape on her right, and another on her left. For a few paces they doubled easily along close on either side of her, jeering at her, quick, smooth, hard words, one after another:

‘Whatya runnin’ for, princess?’

‘Hard to get!’

‘Darling, you’re killing me.’

‘We’re friends, be friendly, we’re friends.’

‘Oh my poor feet.’

It stopped her. She stood panting between them. ‘I – I don’t know you,’ she said. And then: ‘Help, help me.’

Dark shapes against the darkness, no faces, only smiling teeth catching light from nowhere.

‘– of course we’ll help you. That’s what we’re here for, aren’t we, brother? Just step inside, princess —’

There were no houses. It was where the flats were being built, waste land, concrete mixers, drills going all day to make your head rock, swarming with builders, and now no one, no one at all, no light, only mud —

‘– and you can have two helpings of help —’

‘Go – go!’ she piped high, but her mouth was full of cloth and a hand hard over it and they were pushing her in, stumbling over mud and down behind something, huts, rubble, a fence of doors.

A light did go on. A light from across the street. Shone on doors, doors, doors, all over behind them old doors propped up to make a fence, and now close down their hard young faces

breathing effort, still talking hard at her as one braced her arms and the other fumbled as she went down on her knees.

'It's the spring in us, miss.'

'I gotta daffodil.'

'Where is it, where is it —'

'Ah!'

The hand over her mouth had gone, the cloth cleared, she screamed loud, a fist crashed like a brick at her mouth, the scream gulped, sobbed — and then another voice, loud and clear:

'You bloody bastards!'

The two heads left her, fell back, and she saw with horror the man had come; he was flailing about him with the old black shopping bag; he had it with him even at night, and now like a huge bat it flew round in the air cutting at the youths' faces. They put up their hands, kicked out at him once, then ran, ran, leaving him panting alone with her, and he reached out his arms to her still kneeling in the mud, and his coloured hands were on her, she saw the purple, red, yellow stains as they grasped forward.

'No!' she screamed and screamed. 'No!'

'Quiet, quietly —'

'Sssh' — he said, lifting her, and she hit him in the face.

'You followed me; I'll scream, you followed —'

'Sssh — I only wanted to —'

'No-o-o!' she screamed.

'— paint —'

Then blackness, as she fainted away in his arms, and the first people came hurrying up from the houses in the dark.

Later, he was jailed for three years.

THE LITTLE ROOM

By William Sansom

THE NUN Margherita was escorted with ceremony to the threshold of her new little room without windows; but there the Mother Superior and her sisters excused themselves and left Margherita alone with the five appointed artisans, who then immediately proceeded with their duties.

While three of these women artisans busied themselves with lengths of plastic boarding – these looked almost like boards of asbestos into which hairs and husk had been mixed – the other two artisans erected a firm brass guard over the manometer already cemented into one of the inner walls. Thus the three women occupied with the boarding acted as an impromptu guard over the threshold, while those within were able at any moment to glance up from their work and observe at close range any dilatory move on Margherita's part.

But Margherita had removed herself quietly to the side of the bed and seemed simply content to sit there and view at her leisure the equipment of her new room, which, of course, she had never seen before.

However, it differed little from all the other rooms in the convent. The walls were distempered a pale green, the polished linoleum reflected the same colour. There was little furniture; only her bed, a simple affair of polished walnut with a green silk coverlet, a small prie-dieu upholstered in similar materials, and a table; a miniature electric fire stood in one corner; but otherwise the room was bare, appearing thus with its shining surfaces immaculately clean, orderly, but unvisited. There hung about it an air of melancholy, the same that breeds in the deadly clean gleam of all those small suburban parlours, touched but unvisited, that day after day wait, dying of the afternoon light, for the good rustle of dust, or for a book to be

thrown across their immaculate monotony. But of course no such afternoon light ever penetrated into Margherita's room, for there were no windows through which it might enter. Only in this way did the room differ from all other rooms; but that is enough, for the character of a room is conditioned as much by the angles of light diffused upon it as by any other decoration. Margherita's new room had no windows, then – but it was illuminated by concealed bars of bluish white electric light that cast upon the room what approximated an afternoon light, colourless, and originating from no definite source, perhaps thus even the more monotonous, for its very essence was artificial. This light illuminated with unwavering severity a bowl of large white daisies that the Mother Superior had placed by the prie-dieu as a gesture of her personal impartiality.

Up to this time Margherita had comported herself with commendably calm reserve. Such very placid behaviour might have been mistaken for complacency – but Margherita was in no way indifferent, she knew her position, and now she regarded the busy movements of the artisans with interest. Perhaps it was the very presence of these other women that enabled her to maintain a tranquil attitude towards such fatal proceedings.

Margherita was in process of being walled up. In a very few minutes the final boards would be nailed into place, and she would then be abandoned for ever to herself and her little airless cell. Then there would be many hours in which she could repent her sin. She had been sentenced for 'the usual' – of which in fact she had been guilty on more than one occasion – and now it only remained for her to undergo the 'prescribed treatment'. For the moment, though, these artisans supplied her with feelings of company, it was difficult indeed to imagine life without people when these artisans were working around. Otherwise Margherita accepted as inevitable the process of her sentence – it was traditional and usual, she would never have dreamed of criticising so venerable and deeply rooted a custom. If unpleasant things are expected, they are easier to accept – the more so if they are not to be accepted in the very next instant.

The three women on the threshold had almost completed the fourth wall. They handled the light partitioning material with fluent ease, wielding their hammers and needles without effort, with the careless surety of workers skilled with their tools. They hammered the partitions together, sealing each socket with a nail, while along the floor they stitched deep into the carpet and on the ceiling deep into the tapestried frieze to ensure absolutely the exclusion from the room of all air. And at last, when only a narrow slit remained, they paused leaning against the new partition and chatting, for it was impossible to affix the final board until the other artisans inside had finished work on the manometer.

This instrument, of which only the dial showed, was already inset firmly into the wall. But since its function was to register the decline of oxygen in the atmosphere and since thus its slow needle would demonstrate to Margherita the speed of the approach of her suffocation, tempting her at some critical moment to injure the instrument in the belief, perhaps, that it was the agent of death rather than its mentor – for such reasons it was the custom to affix over the dial an outer trellice of brass wire as a shield against interfering hands. At all costs the manometer must be preserved – it was a refinement that was traditionally indispensable. How otherwise could the confined person be assured of a proper appreciation of the truth of her death? How could she grasp the full significances of her declining hours? For instance, without the exact message of the manometer, she might swoon prematurely, thus dying unnaturally early; or an optimism inherent in her character might decry the possibility of death, postponing in the strength of that belief even physical atrophies and thus protracting death artificially. In either case the dying would have been robbed of its natural proportion, and this was opposed to the convent philosophy. At all costs matters must take their allotted course. There must be no artificial stimulation, no short cuts, no illusions whatsoever – real experience according to the laws of nature afforded the prime base upon which all matters, including the suffocation-confinement, must be ordered.

Of course, it had been argued that illusions were illusions ac-

cording to natural laws – after all as themselves the illusions they occurred within the machinery of natural minds, they did not occur anywhere else – but nevertheless the highest intendants clung to the conception of an arbitrary norm which they styled as the real experience of a majority. Yet – came the constant complaint – how could any majority be proved more real than its minority? People on the sliding scale between the flesh and the spirit were difficult units with which to deal – there might be more of one sort but was it the right sort? What was the evaluation of a ‘real’ person. There might, for instance, be a majority of units far too fleshy – but this majority though convincingly numerous might also be convincingly sub-real? In a ceaselessly changing world among ceaselessly changing inhabitants, who was real, at what stage, now? Glib answerers maintained easily that there was no change, that the old world was the same and that human nature never, never changed. And that was the kind of answer given by the intendants, who, at this stage of their doctrine, smiled with pitying distaste at their interlocuters, raised their white eyebrows and sucked at their hollowed cheeks, invoking then such ready panaceas as ‘common sense’ or even – could this veil a conspiratorial return to the flesh? – ‘horse’ sense.

However, such problems did not concern Margherita as she watched the artisans finally stand away from their task and then survey the fitment with satisfaction. They turned to Margherita with smiles, as though wishing to be congratulated on their skill, and for her part Margherita thanked them, nodding her approval and smiling into their faces. For some minutes the three of them chatted about the manometer; then the artisans began to wander about the room, fingering the bed and the walls awkwardly, now quite plainly worried as to how they might take their leave. Margherita, too, found their company increasingly irksome – there was an emptiness now in their relations with her, almost as though they had left her already. No longer had the three of them a mutual interest. The only subject of meaning to all of them, the manometer, had been exhausted. The atmosphere became really embarrassing, so that Margherita felt almost glad when the three artisans in the

corridor began to yawn very loudly, and finally to summon the two inside, complaining that there were many other duties to perform, that valuable working hours were being lost.

The two inside leapt at this chance, they jostled each other in their haste to bid Margherita farewell. In a few seconds they had disappeared through the remaining slit in the wall. Margherita was relieved to see them go. Only when the final board was being nailed into place did she raise one hand towards them in a slight gesture of restraint. Then she wanted the two artisans back. But then it was too late. She was alone.

For some minutes she stood in the centre of the room, slowly tasting the new silence, the breathless silence, and the first sensations of being quite alone. The four walls, the floor, the ceiling – in fact six walls and their eight immaculate corners. Her eyes slowly roved these surfaces, one by one, and then suddenly she realised their similarity – there was no opening whatsoever, no familiar shut door, no window frame, only the plain unrelieved walls. It seemed impossible, no place could be like this. Perhaps there was a door behind her. Her senses told her there must be a door. She spun round – to face a wall. The door was eluding her, it contrived to exist behind her all the time! But spin as she might the door was too clever – it disappeared every time, just in time! Once she thought she had caught it in the corner of her eye, a misted rectangle just fading, like a shadow left on the eyes by a strong light. Several times she pretended to turn one way, then suddenly spun round in exactly the opposite direction. She tried even to disguise her thoughts, as if the omniscient door could read her mind. But every tactic proved useless – the door was too clever by half!

Then she looked up at the concealed channels from which the light came – it seemed to her that the fanning of this light might be heard. She strained her ears. Yes – a buzzing, a slight continuous whirring! For a moment her striving senses brought this companionable sound, but as her hearing relaxed so the noise faded, there had been no noise after all, nothing there but silence, a silent light, motionless, painted.

She shrugged her shoulders. The room was impassive. Nothing moved, it projected no character whatsoever. It was bare,

yet compact. It gave no sign of warmth, but was not cold. It echoed no sounds, nor did it consume sound. Whatever happened in that room happened by itself without the aid of the room, against a neutral background that neither projected nor absorbed. Margherita walked over to the bed and sat down. Her footsteps clattered on the linoleum an exact sound, unechoed, unmuffled. She rested her head on her hands and stared at the floor. What was there to do?

Yet the room without character seemed nevertheless to be alive, to contain invisible and inaudible motions, as if its function were to hide things going on just outside its walls. It radiated the impassive energy of a surgeon's waiting-room with its connecting door shut and watchful; it was like the interior of a large refrigerator, where there was no actual movement but the sensation, almost perceptible, of ice forming somewhere behind the walls, perhaps within the walls themselves. Of course, there lay also about this room a strong foretaste of doom – that was only natural, and Margherita felt it herself, though as yet she had not been moved by any deep apprehensions, remaining so far resigned beneath the weight of inevitable traditions. For all their massive ponderance, traditions such as these impose themselves gracefully, their approach is foreseen, they come slowly, with no sudden shock, with the footless tread of encroaching lava.

She rose from the bed and went over to the manometer. Through its brass screen the dial could be seen distinctly, its needle steadily pointing to a number, never quavering, encircled steadily by imperturbable spikes of enumeration that, of course, never moved. This girdle of numbers, some red, some black, lay engraved and meaningless. The units rose in hundreds, their many 'O's' and the enormous aggregate signified nothing to an imagination accustomed to count in simple threes and fours. These figures were vacuous, inestimable. If they expressed anything to Margherita, they expressed only an infinite plenty – thousands of 'O's' to go before anything could happen, thousands of pounds of oxygen to eat, hundreds of cubic hours to pass. Margherita turned away from this impossible instrument, walked over to the electric fire, switched it on, careless

that the ravenous little filament would squander her oxygen, careless with her wealth of hours.

Many years had passed since Margherita's novitiate, she was quite accustomed to solitary confinement. The idea of loneliness held no terrors for her. She went to the prie-dieu and on her knees addressed a prayer to the organization in which she believed. Presently she rose and went again to the bed. There she sat in contemplation. The glowing filament burnt at her air, a quiet and hungry bar of vermilion silently murdering her. But Margherita hardly thought of this acceleration; really she had not yet appreciated that she was about to die. She had often considered death, but never her own. She could never imagine her own death, in fact she had never tried – the idea was inconceivable. Even now there was no startling evidence to direct her thoughts. She was whole, healthy, fed, warm, breathing. Her hands were still hands, they told her beads, each finger was as sensitive as ever; her body filled the inside of her, she felt the usual pains in her left shoulder and a cramping discomfort down on the left of her back; her mouth felt pleasantly fresh, her eyes a little tired; this was her body as she had known and felt it inside her every day. The idea of its disintegration simply could not occur to her. Despite the disciplines of humility, an animal self-confidence assured her of life; her entity lived; and since its function was to live it could not consider itself dead, nor would it be capable of beginning to think in so negative a direction. Certainly these present surroundings implied death to her thinking brain. But here also she was deluded, for the tradition and its ceremonial had outpaced its truth, so that now only the idea was true.

Nevertheless after some hours Margherita became restless. She had meditated but had not been able to lose herself in meditation. This was ordinarily a difficult exercise, but today the power eluded her altogether. Something distracted her. Perhaps something in the room? But why, she thought, should this pleasant little room prove so distracting – it was like all the other little rooms in the building? Yet unlike the others this room disturbed her. Then she realised – it was of course the absence of windows. She thought: 'Alone in my ordinary

cell, however absorbed I become in my meditations, I am always accompanied in some measure by the presence of the window. A little square of sky, a little square of the infinite.' (But there was more to it than that. There were the small shadows, for instance, that surround all windows – the shadow just above the top frame, where in all the room the shade seems deepest, and again beneath the sill where it is really deeper, for the floor reflects no light. Windows and doors are deeply impressed in the child's first consciousness; they are the exits to mysterious regions, the entrances through which the first shapes of terror may approach, the first images of love. They are more than doors and windows, they are rectangles of infinite drama, mystery, and hope. They remain forever a mental comfort; one should never move far away from these facts perceived in the first moments.)

Margherita stared with greater curiosity at the green distemper surrounding her. She saw this closed expanse for the first time windowless. The first feelings of uneasiness disturbed her, so that still seated in an attitude of meditation her eyes glanced quickly from one side to the other, urgently revealing their whites, her eyes moved but her head remained still. Deprived of meditation, the full vacuum of these enclosed hours revealed itself to her. This artifice for solace had crumbled, she did not know how else to occupy herself, she had no further means. Loneliness descended and, thrown open against herself, she looked down at her monotonous empty hands and at her feet without direction. She could see, as if they were plainly laid out in layers, the hours that remained for her in the little room – an endless staircase of hours, not descending, as in reality they must, but instead ascending. She could see the stretch of these hours but never the limit. Because they had really to be experienced now, minute by minute, they appeared endless; outside the room, thinking of another in her position, she would plainly have seen the limit, she could have contracted the period into a reasonable perspective for criticism. But now she was the subject, the hours had no clear ending, indeed life itself seemed monotonously long.

Then, strangely, this very idea that life was endless provided

it with an ending. By 'endless' she had really meant 'of immeasurable length'. But by virtue of not being able to measure the tedium, and thus endowing it with a proportion, though of a length unendurable, she had really now envisaged an absolute length – and a length must have an end. So for the first time she saw the possibility of an end to life. Perhaps, appalled by the great staircase of hours, she began to hope for an end, and her wish enabled her to feel it quite clearly – so clearly that, if those misted hours had really formed a staircase, she might have seen the fringe of the topmost carpet, the brass rods, the level space of the landing. But the hours were not of carpet; they were a misted succession of grey apprehensions formed sometimes into the letters of the word 'hours', sometimes with no form but only weight, and so the final hour could never be seen but only perhaps felt; she was still defeated by the appearance of the final hour, death was still inconceivable.

Yet . . . she had felt the idea of death, if not of her own death. She could think of death on the one hand and of herself on the other, and know that these two ideas were related, although perhaps she could see no form to the link. And so, sitting on the green bed, her hands still clasped, in the lonely room where nothing moved, not even the heat, not even the light, where everything was quite still, where she alone could be heard to move and the rustle of her gown sounded deadly exact and solitary – there Margherita began to pity herself. She could say to herself: 'I am to die.' And now, in a remote way, to feel this, to regret it as the first unshed tears began to swell below her throat. She felt suddenly small, neglected, abandoned by those she had known and the environment that had nourished her. She had been left alone! Not one of her sisters cared, perhaps they had even ceased to think of her. She crossed the linoleum to the prie-dieu and tried again to pray. But 'I am to die', she thought.

All through her prayers she felt the weight of death. 'This person, this "me" that I am, this familiarity of hands and memories and close wishes and dry disgusts, this well-shaped shadow lying about my inner thoughts – all this is going to die. It will cease to be. There will be nothing more of it.' Then she

thought through the words and the half removal of herself in prayer: 'It cannot be?' And then: 'But what of God?' 'Where will God be if this "me" ceased to pray beneath him? I feel Him in my prayer, it is in my thoughts that He takes a shape. If, then, there is no me to feel Him . . . ?'

Many hours later she crossed herself and rose. Her mind had grown drowsy, the air before her eyes had become confused and thick. Perhaps a glass of water? She went to the bed and looked for the jug. There was bread laid out – but where . . . ? They had forgotten to leave her a jug. That was too bad! To think that they had forgotten such a vital detail of ceremony! Such casual behaviour belittled the ceremony. Could the ceremony have been as important as she had imagined? Perhaps they had not thought it worth while to devote their energies to the ceremony, perhaps they were impatient for other things. It might be that even now one of them – perhaps the Mother Superior herself – had remembered the jug and had personally questioned one of the artisans; yet even if the artisan had answered truthfully, which was to be doubted under the circumstances, then it was probable that the Mother Superior had nevertheless dismissed the question of the jug from her mind at the first opportunity. It was plain that her old companions had no further interest in her, their thoughts had skipped easily away to other matters. She, Margherita, was finished with. They had even hurried the ceremony of finishing her, so that an important detail had been neglected, and this showed that Margherita had been forgotten even before they had gone. How thoughtless these people were, how treacherous their affections!

Margherita felt this neglect deeply. Now that the ceremony had been exposed as unimportant, it seemed equally unimportant that she should die. It seemed now to be a mistake, and without point. All her efforts were to be of no purpose, she would die unseen, unheard, unfelt for, even unremembered. Hopelessly she took up the bowlful of daisies and drank the bitter yellow water from among the stalks, several of which fell untidily across her face as she drank.

She replaced the bowl and her eyes remembered the mano-

meter. She hurried quickly clicking over the linoleum and peered through the brass shield.

She gasped – with surprise, with shock, with fear, and then for the first time for breath itself. The manometer needle had advanced to within only ten units of the blue-starred danger mark! Soundlessly, with no show, no hesitant jerk, slowly it had revolved on its inexorable sweep, sweeping down the units with its remorseless steel stick. ‘If it would quiver!’ Margherita thought. ‘But it’s steady, steady as the hand on one of those electric clocks. You can’t see it move,’ she whispered, the words chasing themselves fearfully, ‘yet it moves; you can feel the time shortening; but from minute to minute you can’t see how short it is; for as soon as you fix on a minute it has gone; the hand has already approached some seconds farther on.’ She put her fingers to her face, scrambling at her features, as if she needed in some way the reassurance of their shape. ‘And what happens? Does the speed increase? Still imperceptibly, but nevertheless increase? Does the pressure rise at the compound speed?’

Her hand on her face came away wet, as streaming wet as if she had stroked a rain-spotted windowpane. She gasped for breath. Then, trying to concentrate, she took carefully exercised long breaths and paused in between these with her lungs empty. She seemed to be breathing not air but weight. It was so heavy to breathe, it took a pull – she perspired with lack of breath. Then, suddenly agile, like a cat wide-awakedly springing from half-sleep, she whisked her arms at the cord of the electric fire – the plug snapped out and rolled on the linoleum with an empty clatter. To have left on that bar biting through the precious minutes of her oxygen! She stared down at the plug, panting, her hands with their white scrubbed knuckles clenching and unclenching.

Why had she attacked the cord so savagely? Because the air in the little room had grown hot, uncomfortably hot? Because the needle’s advance had thrust her suddenly far up her staircase of hours, so that this sudden proximity with the end had flooded her with an equally abrupt desire to live? She had not felt this desire before. In the endless hours death had seemed

remote, inevitable, but remote. Now it was dangerously close. She looked in all directions, moving her head slowly in the heat, but with thoughts that raced, to find at all costs a way of spinning longer the hours she had wished to compress. But these hours were now remorselessly compressed about her ear, they weighed above her eyes in the blanketing air, air that was thinning yet thus grew thicker, and her eyes finally returned to the needle, which even in that short time had encroached upon two further units.

Desiring life, her regrets took form. She no longer pitied herself as one neglected. She strove now strongly to recapture what might have been. Her regret now consumed the past: 'What I could have done – in that long time!' The sensation of growing physically smaller which had distinguished her mood of self-pity now reversed itself in these positive regrets; she felt herself grow larger with the striving of thought, her mind attacked, she summoned at each possible resource, she seemed to grow large with the strength to attack. The time that had been wasted, the opportunities missed, the effort unpractised! Now in the shortening moments she thought back upon her past as a compartment of time whose every minute should have been utilized with faultless efficiency. She imagined only an inexhaustible energy that had been voluntarily let to waste; she forgot the necessities of rest, of disorder, of lethargy, of melancholy, of digression – all the negative inclinations through which incomplementary struggle the positive energies exist. No, in Margherita's sweating, panting, leadening brain there thrummed only the one-faced regret that the minutes should have been more used. She could have done this, she could have done that; she could have planted this avenue of limes, she could have blessed that maritime charity; she could have proceeded with her journal, she could have seen to the re-equipping of the dairy; she could, standing on a hill once at dawn, have appreciated more fully the message of the iridescent skies, she should then have exerted her senses so that forever after she could have re-created that dawn; she should have multiplied her lover by many lovers; or she should have disdained him, incarcerating herself within a shell of virtue

shaped by tireless impeccable effort. Whatever it was, she had left it undone. However much she might have done, she could have done more. However much she had seen, she had not felt deeply enough. However much she had felt, she had not stored those feelings deeply enough.

As again she rose the bed groaned – the sockets of its wooden frame seemed to complain beneath an invisible pressure. She dragged over the short linoleum journey to the manometer. Her feet lifted heavily, every such effort was made beneath a great weight. Her head nodded. She had made the journey from bed to manometer many times. Each time, even as her steps grew slower, as the needle swept closer, even within an ever-increasing desire to lie down and sleep – her desire for life mounted. As she looked through the engineer's brass at the dial she saw the needle encroaching, as steadily as the sun's shadow, upon the second unit beneath the blue stars.

Gasping, with slack shoulders, she dragged the prie-dieu from its place and set it by the manometer. She knelt beneath this dial and stared, not for a moment longer daring to leave it. Who knew whether the needle might not suddenly spring forward? If she stared, she could superintend its motion and know intimately the speed of her decline.

As the oxygen thinned and the pressure weighed more heavily, as the time shortened and the blue stars approached, as the units increased their pace and her grasp for life fought at their speed to slow it – sorrow for the past changed to a more virile regret for the future. The vague images of matters in which she was not ordinarily interested suddenly enthused her – the building of the new wing at the southerly aspect of the old convent fortress; how appalling that she would never, never see this! The installation of an electric laundry – this would occur, many other changes would occur, but she, dead Margherita, would never, never see them. . . . Gripping the sides of the prie-dieu and staring through the brass shield she thought then of the problems of doctrine, of behaviour, of prayer that would now never be solved. She thought with growing envy of the great goodness of life, the browning bloom of autumn fruit, the ice-slush on the February roads, the draughts of winter, the

huge dusty leaves shading their green midsummer trees – and above all the skies that went with the seasons, the skies to which she had looked for consolation . . . a thousand good things she would never feel nor see again. She would never see them. There was no hope left. Yet – it was still inconceivable that there should be no hope! Hope was bred in her living veins. But a new weight of reason was cruelly forcing at her senses, crushing out hope. With her pale scrubbed nails she began picking at the little brass wires of the shield. One fingernail weaved like a worm through the square and thrust itself straight at the needle, smelling at it, but yet inches away. Her mouth began to mumble, sagging, letting water.

How many hours had she endured in that room? A hundred? Days perhaps? There had been no measurement. The last hour of all dropped its lead on her nodding neck, she slipped from the prie-dieu on to the floor. Her finger pointed still at the manometer, but weakly. Her veil fell aside, revealing the nunnish pate bald as an ant's egg. An intolerable weight of sleep pulled her down, pulled at her eyelids, her puffed breathless lips, the muscles in her blueing cheeks. She forgot about the future.

Her eyes craved only for some taste of the present, the sight of birdflight, the colour of a flower, the pressure of her man's arms, the lick of fruit. How strong these could have tasted! Her lips opened and her tongue came swelling out, ever fattening, gently to lick the air.

The vision of the taste of fruit faded, as in their order the wish for the future had faded, the regret for the past, her first incapacity to believe in death; and now lastly as a swimmer out of her depth she began to struggle, her fore-brain gone, only now like an animal, thoughtless but to move, the instincts alone in charge. The naked head lurched from side to side, her arms weaved slow frog movements, weakening at each thrust. Before long they stopped moving altogether.

STREET OF THE BLIND DONKEY

By Rosemary Timperley

I CANNOT believe that I am really here, that I really had the courage to do it – to pack a bag and board a train, and then a boat, and another train, and then a taxi, and to say, quite calmly, in broken French: 'Please can you recommend an hotel where I can stay? Not too expensive.' 'Certainly, Madame. I take you to a nice hotel.' And so here I am, in 'nice hotel'.

It is still only ten at night, less than twelve hours since I left that house. That is how I shall always think of it now – not as 'home' or 'my house' but 'that house' – that house where I was more unhappy than I had thought it possible to be – where unhappiness was so intense that it seemed like a sickness, made me feel physically ill, so that I felt well only when away from that house. Now I am away from it for ever. He will not find me here. The thought of never having to see him again is like a deep breath of clear air, a long draught of fresh water, a sensation of wind in my hair.

Yet this is an odd room in which to find freedom. It's rather old-fashioned, almost musty. It's meant for two people, so the bed is double and the wardrobe enormous. On the plain walls are a few bad pictures representing country scenes. An advertising calendar hangs over the table, also picturing country scenes, and beneath them are scraps of verse, French on one side and Flemish on the other. For this is Belgium.

Why did I come to Belgium in my headlong flight? Because a child waits for me here, a child who was myself long, long ago, when I came here on my first Continental holiday with my parents. It was before the war, before the Nazis, before the abscess of evil formed over the countries of Europe, that we came here, to Bruges. And I was happy. Afterwards, in my

mind, I retained the picture of canals like green mirrors, swans like fairy-tale swans, all of them surely princes or princesses in magic disguise, and black-robed nuns with snow-white faces in sunshine. I have a memory too of a marble Madonna in one of the churches, strikingly beautiful with her long, straight nose and the reserved, almost sulky expression of a woman who has protested a truth and not been believed.

What am I going to do now that I am free? I begin to realise that when you have built your life for years on hope of escape, and have achieved it, a desert opens out, a desert without signposts. Right up to the moment of my arrival, I thought how clever I was being to escape from him, how cunning the way I'd worked out the obtaining of my passport without his knowing, the packing of my things, the waiting until he was sleeping at the far end of the garden, the ringing for the taxi – and then the journey. The arrival had been the end of the story, the purpose fulfilled – 'and so she escaped and was free for ever after.' But what to do now in the ever after?

A knock on the door. Suppose he is there! Suppose he followed me!

He looms in the doorway, a heavy shadow of pursuit and capture – the broad shoulders – the heavy jowl – the hard, shining eyes – but why a white coat?

It is not he at all. The swift illusion passes. It is the hotel proprietor, white-coated, carrying a tray of coffee, bread, butter and cheese. I arrived too late for dinner, so he brings this light meal to my room. How pleasant to have a meal brought to me. If I were still at that house I would just have finished washing up the dinner things by now.

'Goodnight, Madame. Sleep well.'

The proprietor goes. Alone again. Always alone now. But then it's years since I had any friends. He saw to that. He had a most efficient way of dealing with any friends from my pre-marriage life: the men he regarded with such suspicion and jealousy that in time they avoided us both, and the women he made passes at, so that they either stayed away out of loyalty to me, or had affairs with him, so naturally didn't want to see

me. Why did I marry him? Love, of course. Amazing that love takes such a long time to kill. But it's dead now, for ever and ever. I will build my life on loneliness now. I will learn to be self-sufficient. I will be the happy child again. I have come back.

And now I will eat my bread and cheese – my first bread of freedom.

The bells wake me next morning. The Belfry is just across the Market Square. I open my big window and step out on to the little balcony. I can see the Belfry on my right. It looks too slenderly tall for safety in the morning light. It plays a tune and then strikes eight – yet it's only half past seven. A memory returns: that the Belfry clock strikes the hour quietly half an hour before the hour, then, on the hour, it strikes again, loudly. So I have lived a lifetime but the habits of the old clock have not changed.

Already the Market Square is busy. Stalls are being put up in the centre and goods laid out. Everywhere is movement and colour. This sort of scene gives one a sense of proportion, makes one realise how insignificant are one's own tiny actions. Yesterday I was the brave adventurer. Now I am no more than a tiny alien shadow moving across the Belgian day. Lovely to be so irresponsible. This is true freedom. I wonder how soon it turns into loneliness.

In the hotel dining-room I breakfast alone. It is out of season so I am the only guest. 'In May, not many people,' the proprietor explains, 'except at weekends, then many people, much hard work.'

'But it's the weekend now.' For it is Saturday.

'Later this morning, big tourist party of children,' he says. 'Depart on Monday, then you alone again, Madame.' And he leave me alone now to get on with my roll, butter, strawberry jam, and some of the best coffee I have ever tasted.

This dining-room is impressive. It makes me feel small. There is an atmosphere of mingled grandeur and decay – heavy red curtains, elaborately arranged greenery on the

ornate mantelpiece and round the gilt-framed mirror, chandeliers hanging heavily from inadequate-looking supports. Either this place has known better days, or it gears itself grandly for the summer season.

He wouldn't think to look for me here, would he? Did I ever mention Bruges to him? Perhaps I did, long ago, in the early days of love before the nights murdered love. Did I ever tell him that if ever I were in despair and needed a refuge, this is where I would come? No, I never told him that. This has been my secret place always.

Strange to be living in the secret place, the last resort.

After the last resort, what?

The Green Quay. I remember it. You walk along the Street of the Blind Donkey, cross the bridge, turn to your left – and you're there. This was the very first walk I took when I came here as a child. I left my parents unpacking at the hotel and came out by myself. I decided to follow the canal, so that I wouldn't get lost. And I started from here, at the Green Quay. The water is green because of the reflection of overhanging trees. It is dappled with silver and the pattern changes constantly —

'Della!'

Someone is calling my name. But it's impossible. No one knows I'm here. Is it he? – did he follow me? – then where is he? – the green water – the empty sky – Oh, God —

'Della! Della!'

The cry seems to be coming from the water. There are several boats full of schoolchildren on the canal. A man stands up in one of the boats and waves. I am too short-sighted to see who it is. But it can't be he – of course it can't be – he hates children – he wouldn't let me have children —

I run back along the Street of the Blind Donkey, back to the hotel. For the rest of the day, I stay out of sight.

That evening, as I sit alone at my table in the dining-room about fifty schoolchildren troop in and take their places. Four adults are with them, two men and two women. One of the men

crosses to me. 'Della! It is you. I saw you this morning, on the Green Quay.'

It's Rupert Harman, a schoolmaster who lives not far from that house. We grew quite friendly when first I went to live there, then I had to avoid him.

'Hello, Rupert. So it was you. I heard you call my name.'

'I didn't call. I waved,' he says.

'But I heard you.'

He smiles. 'You must have been dreaming. Where's Garder?'

'He's not here. I'm alone.'

'Alone? You astonish me. Garder must be slipping.'

'I've left him. When you go back, please, please don't tell him that you saw me here. Don't tell anyone.'

'Look, Della, I've got to see to the kids for the next hour or so, but I hope to get them bedded down by ten. Let's meet then for a drink and a coffee. We could go to one of the cafés in the Square.'

He returns to the school party. The children cast sly glances in my direction. My hands are shaking. Of all the appalling luck! You come to your secret place and the man from next door but three turns up.

Shall I be able to trust him? Will he keep quiet?

Rupert and I sit and drink wine at a small table just inside one of the Market Square cafés. It is too cold to sit outside.

'What's been happening to you?' he asks.

'I left Garder yesterday. I couldn't stand it any longer.'

'You were right to leave,' Rupert says decisively. He is on my side. But then he won't have forgotten the way Garder spoke to him several years ago, when he came up to Rupert and me as we walked along the street, having met when we both got off the same bus at the corner. Garder said: 'I'll thank you to leave my wife alone in future. I know your sort. And Della's the sort of bitch who makes eyes at every man she meets.' Rupert had been too astonished to speak. Garder had hustled me back to that house.

Now Rupert asks: 'Why did you choose Bruges?'

'Because I was a happy child here.'

'And how shall you live?'

'By writing.'

'You were a writer before your marriage, weren't you?'

'Yes.'

'Why did you give it up?'

'Garder was jealous of it. If ever he found me writing, he'd fly into a rage, as if he'd found me in the arms of another man. But I can start again now that I'm free. Oh —'

A man comes toward the café. He pauses in the doorway. Only his silhouette can be seen, short, stocky, with powerful shoulders. His face is in shadow.

'Della, what's the matter?'

All I can do is stare at the man. He enters now and sits at a table. And it isn't Garder at all.

'What's the matter?' Rupert repeats.

'Nothing. I thought that man was Garder. It isn't.'

'You mustn't let him haunt you.'

'No, I mustn't.'

But as we walk back across the Square to the hotel, a broad-shouldered man passes us and, for a second, I think it is Garder. I say so to Rupert, who exclaims: 'That man? But he isn't even like Garder! You must come back to earth, Della.'

I am afraid.

The following day, Sunday, is the tourists' day in Bruges. They arrive in huge coaches which crowd the cobbled streets. They cram into the cafés and eat ice-creams. They buy dolls dressed in Bruges lace. They go for rides in the horse-drawn broughams.

They are mostly Belgian, from the surrounding towns and villages, but there are also French, English, Italian, American and Japanese visitors. The Market Square, its market section now turned into a huge car park, becomes a nightmare of traffic. Yet many people sit happily at the tables outside the cafés, breathe in the dust and petrol fumes and watch the traffic go by. Presumably the residents, unless they are cashing in on the tourists, go into hiding. And the Belfry

bells continue to play their little tunes every quarter just as if the world far below had not gone crazy.

I decide to join those superior bells by climbing the Belfry tower. It is over four hundred steps up and most of the tourists are obviously far too fat to attempt the climb, so I am solitary as I branch off from the crowds in the Square, buy a ticket for the tower and begin to climb.

At first the steps of the spiral staircase are wide and there is a bannister to hold on to. Then, as one climbs higher, they become narrower and the only hand-support is a thick, greasy rope wound round the central pillar. The atmosphere is dank. The air is rather dark. When one looks ahead one sees only the next few spiral stairs, and behind only the few stairs just trodden. The effect is claustrophobic. My heart begins to beat suffocatingly fast. I wish I hadn't come. I feel trapped. Yet I've climbed so far now that it would be worse to go back than go on. I am dreading the journey down. Going up is easier.

Suppose I met someone coming down. One of us would have to go back up or down. At intervals there are small landings where one person could squeeze past another, but this would not be possible on the stairs. Suppose I met Garder on these stairs! The thought fills me with such terror that momentarily I can't go on. I lean against the stone wall and try to breathe normally. Now why on earth should Garder be on the Belfry stairs at Bruges?

Because he is everywhere, that's why.

At last I reach the top. Bruges stretches out below, an elaborate carpet of red roofs, green trees, silver canals. The people are so tiny that one feels arrogant as airmen or gods who are forever looking down. In my quest for a sense of proportion I could not have come to a better place than this. The wind is clear and cool. The sun shines. Life is worth living and just to be alive is enough. Who cares about success and failure, hope and disillusionment, love and hate? These are human inventions to while away the emotional living-time. All that really matters is to breathe deeply the cool, clear air, to feel the sun on bare arms, to feast the eyes on a beautiful scene.

Only the living may have these pleasures, and so there is no such thing as a fate worse than death. That is why those who truly hate, kill. For to take away a person's life is the only way you can really reach and hurt him. The only way. Any other sort of revenge is trivial by comparison. The only way Garder could really get his own back on me would be by killing me, and that he cannot do. So I have nothing to fear from him.

But if he knew where I was he would be aiming to kill me now. If Garder were up here with me now, he would put his arm round my shoulders, then give me a hard push over the parapet. Down and down I'd fall, crashing at last among the parked cars below. If I stand here long enough, and look down long enough, I can almost believe that Garder is standing just behind me — that his arm is across my shoulders — that he is pushing me — harder — harder —

A huge booming noise, like the crack of doom, makes the Belfry shudder and sends me staggering back from the parapet. The big bell is chiming the hour.

I think it saved my life.

Down the stairs again, down and down, round and round, dizzy with going down and round, feet-muscles hurting with the unaccustomed nature of the movement, down and down and down — and at last the big grey entrance hall, cool and empty but for the souvenir shop and ticket window. I step out into the open air again, among the people. But the open air has changed since I began to come down. The sky has filled with clouds. The air has grown strangely still. This stillness seems to quell traffic noises and people's voices.

I make my way down the Street of the Blind Donkey again, but instead of turning left to the Green Quay, turn right, along the Dijver, cut through the cobbled streets, past the Béguinage, and so to the Lac d'Amour, which I remember from my childhood as a place of perfect beauty and peace.

Stillness hangs like an invisible cloud over the Lac d'Amour. The quietness is tangible-seeming. The air is difficult to breathe. Limbs feel heavy. Nerves are tense. I sit on a

bench under the trees and wait for something to happen. I feel half-strangled.

Everything grows darker. The many mingled greens about me grow a shade denser, richer, and the water of the lake turns grey-brown. Darker still and darker. No one else is about. This is the end of the world and I am the only person left on it, the last and only witness. Wind shifts the leaves on the trees, just a little. Stillness again. And then, suddenly, sheet lightning fills the sky. Everything is white lit. As a child I was told that lightning is the glance of God, and He never stops to do more than glance because his gaze would burn us right up. Now the light goes out. Thunder cracks. Rain falls, heavily, rushing, and so closely that to my short-sighted eyes, which cannot see the separate drops, it looks like mist.

It is through this rain-mist that he comes. He comes closer and closer. I am too frightened to run away. I simply cover my face with my hands so that I shall not see what happens. And after I have sat there for a long time in deliberate dark, I take my hands from my eyes, and find that the storm is over, the sun is shining again, and there is no sign of Garder anywhere.

So this time he let me off. But now I know for certain that he is here.

That evening, at the same café in the square, Rupert says: 'Where were you during the storm this afternoon?'

'By the Lac d'Amour. I saw Garder.'

'You mean he's followed you? What did he say?'

'Nothing. He went away again.'

'That doesn't sound like Garder.'

'It *was* Garder.'

'You must have dreamed it, Della.'

'No.'

'When you say he went away again – what exactly happened?'

'I didn't see. I hid my eyes.'

'Della, I don't think you're well.'

'You think I'm round the bend? I'm not. When I was living with Garder, I was afraid of going mad, but as soon as I

escaped from him that desperate feeling evaporated. I felt calm and clear-minded. He was driving me out of my mind, but I got away in time.'

A girl comes into the café and sits at a table behind Rupert. She is about thirteen, slender and big-eyed, wearing a white blouse and dark skirt. She stays very still and does not order anything to eat or drink. I feel as if I have seen her before and presume she is one of Rupert's party.

'Do you let your charges come out alone at night, Rupert?'

'Not after ten. They're supposed to go to bed then, although in fact they stay chattering in each other's rooms till all hours.'

'What about the girl there?'

He looks round, but the table is empty now.

'Maybe she recognised the back of my head and fled,' he says. 'What was she like?'

'Thin, dark, big black eyes.'

'You must pick her out for me at breakfast tomorrow.'

'I shall do no such thing.'

But next morning at breakfast I do look among the school-children for the girl I saw in the café, but cannot find her.

Rupert comes to my table. 'Well, which is the culprit?'

'She's not there.'

He laughs. 'Whose side are you on?'

'The children's, always.'

'Come back with us all instead of staying here, Della.'

'I can't.'

'My wife and I would help you. We'd protect you from Garder if necessary.'

'No one can protect me from Garder.'

'But the hotel will be empty when we've gone.'

'It was like that before your party came.'

'All those echoing corridors and empty rooms,' he says, then returns to his party. A few minutes later he is involved in the turmoil of departure and a coach bears them all the way to Ostend, from where they will go home by water.

Home. Where is home?

In the afternoon, I see the girl again. So she wasn't one of

Rupert's party after all. She is sitting on the parapet of the Green Quay. She is obviously so happy within herself, so caught up by the magic of the place, that I can't bear to break the spell by saying anything trivial to make her acquaintance. So I pass by, over the difficult cobblestones, and sit on the parapet much farther along.

Later I go to the Béguinage, where the houses of the Benedictine nuns surround an area of grass and trees. Once a man called Béguine started a religious order here. Nuns have prayed here for seven centuries and something of their serenity has seeped into the atmosphere.

A high wall encloses this little town within a town. The only entrance is through an arched doorway at the foot of a bridge across one of the canals.

Once through the gate, one seems to feel the quietness falling through the air. No sound comes from the houses. One would think they were unoccupied. And such silence is curiously anti-life – no child cries, no dog barks, no voice is raised in impatience, and there is no laughter. Distantly I see one black-robed, white-coiffed figure walking along a path. She goes into the church. And she might have been any nun in any century. This place breathes timelessness. It is a place where paths of time surely cross.

Suddenly I see the girl again. She is sitting on the grass, leaning against the trunk of a tree, her legs stretched out in front of her. As I pass her, I smile and say: 'Hello.'

'Hello.'

'I've seen you several times before.'

'Have you?'

'At first I thought you were with the school party at my hotel.'

'No, I'm here with my parents. They let me come out alone if I want to.'

'Do you like this place?'

'Yes. I'll come back one day.'

'How do you know?'

'I'm sure of it.' She adds: 'I wouldn't mind being a nun.'

'"Wouldn't mind" isn't enough. You must have a vocation.'

'That means you have to feel called, doesn't it? Well, I do feel sort of called to this place. I *shall* come back. Maybe not to be a nun. Maybe just for a refuge.'

And I feel as if I have had this conversation before.

A voice calls: 'Madame - Madame —' A woman is standing outside one of the houses and beckons me. Thinking she is in distress, I hurry across, to find only that the house is open to visitors and she wants to show me round. Deciding to take the young girl with me, and pay the small fee for both of us, I turn to where she was sitting. But she isn't there any more. I must have frightened her away. And I recall now that I myself was scared away from this place years ago when a middle-aged woman began to make conversation with me, and I felt there was something odd about her, so fled the moment her back was turned. I remember she was wearing a black dress and had dark hair with a white streak in it. She was very thin and her eyes were strange. I had sensed that she was slightly mad, yet had felt an affinity with her . . .

'This way, Madame.' The woman urges me into the *béguine's* house. I wander through the kitchen with its big range, then out into a cloister, a beautiful little enclosure with a well in the middle of the richly green lawn, and a covered corridor leading to the bedroom. I try to walk into the bedroom where once a nun slept, but Garder stands in the doorway and prevents me. At least, I think it is Garder, before I have had time to pull myself together and know that it can't be. Then I realise it is only a strange shadow cast by a pillar supporting the roof of the covered way. All the same, I don't go into the bedroom. I just stand in the doorway and look. Then I turn so icily cold in that doorway that I hurry back to the kitchen, the front door, the trees and grass outside.

I am cold with sweat and shaking with nameless terror.

There is a small bar near the Chapel of the Holy Blood. Bright window-boxes beckon. The inside seems dark because of the brightness in the street. To fill in time before dinner, I go in for a glass of wine. There are few customers and what with the dimness and my bad sight, they are no more than

shapes to me. I sit in the window seat and look over the window-box flowers at the people passing by.

Then something makes me turn my head. Accustomed to the poor light now, I see the customers' shapes more clearly. One of them, sitting only three tables away from me looks like Garder — the broad shoulders, the square jaw, the dome of a brow. He is staring at me. I leave my wine unfinished and hurry out.

Yet it is foolish to run away from him. Now that he knows I am here, he can in fact walk up to me and claim me any time. Why doesn't he? Why this cat-and-mouse game? Is he trying to break me down so that I will one day walk up to him and say: 'You win. Take me back to that house.'

But I will never do that. He can go on following me until I die of exhaustion, but I will not go back.

Is he following me now? I'm not sure. There are so many people in the Market Square at this time of evening, and the slanting rays of the sun make the pavements a bewilderment of long shadows.

Back at the hotel, I collect my key from the rack which is full of the keys of unoccupied rooms and go upstairs. I remember what Rupert said about echoing corridors and empty rooms. My room is right at the end of an echoing corridor.

If Garder came, no one would hear me cry out.

So far I have managed to quell overpowering fear. But now it comes down upon me, like a kidnapper's cloak flung over my head, blinding my eyes, stealing my voice, catching my breath. I sit on the edge of my bed, paralysed with this fear. I know that my flight is a mockery, that I have been living in a dream, trying to make the dream so vivid that it would be more real than reality.

Outside, the Belfry bells play gay little tunes before the big bell booms seven times. Dinner time.

Suppose, when I go down to dinner, to that big dining-room with the red velvet curtains and hothouse greenery and dazzling chandeliers, Garder sits waiting at my table. . . .

Yes. He is there. He rises as I come.

'Ah, Madame —' And it's not Garder at all. It's the pro-

prietor, resting his feet. He and his family have worked day and night since Saturday afternoon. Now they have the week-days to get over it before the next onslaught of tourists next weekend. Where shall I be next weekend?

I hurry through dinner to set the proprietor free for the evening, then return to my room. It is very quiet. I sit on the bed and stare in front of me. Time passes. The room darkens. I cross to the window and look down at the Square, deserted now and cold. Then I see the girl walking, slowly, by herself. A shadow moves alongside one of the buildings, approaches her, walks beside her. Then everything happens so quickly that I have no time to cry out. The shadow turns into a man — a man with familiar broad shoulders, thick neck, heavy jowl. He seizes the girl, flings her to the ground, pinions her arms, holds her down. He rapes her, with fantastic speed and precision. Then he puts his hands round her little neck and strangles her. And then I scream — and scream — and scream —

The proprietor comes while I am still screaming from my agonised throat —

‘Madame, what has happened?’

‘A murder — down there — look —’

He looks out of the window. The Square is quiet and empty.

‘Madame was dreaming, I think,’ he says, and goes away.

And all I can do is lie on the bed and shake and weep. For now I know who the girl was, or is. I know that there is no hope of returning to the world of childhood, even in the beautiful city of Bruges. For the child is dead. Garder killed her. I cannot bring her back to life again. She was the only part of me that did not belong to Garder, body and soul, and as long as he was alive in the flesh, he could not reach her. I left him sleeping at the end of the garden of that house, sleeping deeply after the cup of coffee which I gave him, the cup with death in it. Hoping to escape from him, I succeeded merely in giving all of myself to him, for the murderer belongs in all eternity to the victim, and the victim to the murderer.

Tomorrow I will go back to that house where Garder, who possesses me, is waiting.

CANNIBALS

By Martin Waddell

IT WAS not remarkable that he had killed his wife, but he should not have cooked her.

Siddy Okey, from photographs taken at the time, appears as a slight fragile figure. His flesh hugged his skeleton without pouch or crease. His skin was pale though there was a florid glow in his cheeks. His appearance suggested malnutrition, but the evidence is against this. From first to last Siddy appears to have eaten well, though not always within his income. A first glance at his photograph shows no eyes, but they are there, nestling in skull crevices on either side of a short pointy nose. Whether he wore his rimless glasses to aid them or conceal them is open to question. They show nothing of the determination of the man. Perhaps his head is a little large as it wobbles on the wings of his collar, for his neck is surely for ornament rather than support.

Before he cooked his wife Siddy was considered a fine man . . . there seems to be little or no disagreement about that. Neighbours knew him by the strict manner of his dress and the care with which he did the shopping. Meat and vegetables, soups and spices were the marrow of Siddy's existence. It is debatable when Siddy first looked on his wife as a food-stuff, perhaps the thought hovered in the dark dome of his head right from the start. . . . she was a splendid specimen. Siddy could hardly have failed to ponder on the glossy quality of Mirabel's skin; the solid flesh of her shoulder and the plump line of her calf. The fat little veins in her body pumped fresh blood through her; Siddy's own fine feeding plumped her up for the kill.

Strange to relate, it was a love match.

The turning point in Siddy's life came when Mirabel chanced

upon him one evening at a Town Hall Dinner Dance. It was an unfortunate social occasion, the brain child of the town's first Socialist Mayor. Mirabel, though Tory to the stay strap, came on the arm of her father, Councillor Larchard. To welcome in the new order she donned a gown of midnight purple and a string of her grandmother's pearls and determined to rub shoulders with allcomers in the knowledge that allcomers would benefit.

At this stage of her life Mirabel was as yet untouched by that weakness of the flesh which was later, much later, to prove her undoing. True, she had been heard to comment discreetly on the girth of Mr Lionel Barrymore's chest, but that was to a servant, and may be discounted. We are assured that such thoughts were far from her as she quitted her cocoon and winged her light hearted way toward destiny and Sidy Okey.

It may have been the claret or perhaps for once in his life the spirit of Pan which hailed Sidy through the muted strings of the six piece band. Whatever the cause Sidy certainly excelled himself. The night was alive with music and before the strains of the last waltz died away the Councillor's daughter had become acquainted with an aspect of life about which she had previously heard nothing. How and where Sidy did it has long been the subject of improper speculation. Suffice it to state that Sidy undoubtedly did, and apparently with a degree of success which he was subsequently unable to maintain. A breathless and ecstatic Miss Larchard departed in her father's carriage at the end of the evening minus that with which she had come and a sated Sidy cycled back to his bed on the wrong side of the tracks with his very soul aflame.

Dawn brought a reckoning. Sidy was smitten with a severe chill, which may or may not be indicative of the course of the past evening's events. Whatever the cause he stayed in his bed and a chilly remorse sealed his lips on the subject of his conquest. One did not seduce a Councillor's daughter at a Town Hall Dinner Dance, and Sidy knew it. An uninvited guest, as Sidy had been, was not expected to make away with the daughter of Mr Larchard under that fond parent's very eyes.

The Socialist in Siddy upbraided him for feeling the distinction, but the peasant in his bones knew better. The chill that nestled in his chest did not smother the romantic in him; it was merely muffled and laid to rest, somewhere to the east of his watchchain.

The newly blossomed and positively blooming Mirabel was not to be denied.

Mirabel Larchard had settled her course with the single-mindedness which had made her forefathers great. Having taken up the chase she became both determined and ruthless. As time wore on Siddy dithered and dodged as Mirabel darted missives at him day and night. At bay, he stayed indoors with his feet in a basin, and she preyed upon his doorstep in shantung and lace and chipped the blue gnome knocker. At a later and more eventful stage of the chase she wept copious tears upon his shoulder, causing him considerable embarrassment and mussing up his new chintz bedspread at one and the same time. It cannot be said that Siddy Okey actively discouraged her, as he might have done with regard to his station. But it equally cannot be said that he gave her reason to believe that her hopes for him would ever be fulfilled. Mirabel had her memories, and her memories drove her on. At the door of this false optimism must be laid the first blame for the sorry fate that overtook her. Siddy Okey was not fated to cook her, it was thrust upon him by one night of extraordinary prowess.

It was Councillor Larchard himself who finally plucked Siddy from behind the counter of his little café on the Slorlip Road and brought him submissively to the altar. Mirabel, somewhat plumper than heretofore, less dewy-eyed and now fully informed on the subject of life's delight and its ultimate consequence, stood shyly looking down on her miniscule groom. Siddy had bought a new collar for the occasion and found a pair of dress trousers which did not slop too far over his ankles . . . but surely even then Mirabel must have sensed that all was not as it should be? Surely it was not too late for her to abandon her base-born gastronome?

Mirabel married little Siddy Okey, and died regretting it, much later.

Even the honeymoon was not a success. It was spoilt for Mirabel when a strange affliction struck poor Sidy down. He said it was a virus. Whatever it was it did not fall within the scope of the local practitioner. But its virulence did serve to excuse many things, although it was not a state of affairs that could be expected to last. As it was plump sad Mirabel roamed the lakeside paths and twined daisy chains whilst Sidy relaxed in bed with a good book and a flagon of elderberry wine.

By the time a pale and haggard Sidy was led home on the arm of his bride Mirabel was beginning to dimly appreciate that something of his trouble lay in the mind. She could not know that for Sidy laurels were clearly designed for resting upon, and she had not yet abandoned all hope of finding a cure. Whatever had been could be once more, but for the time at least Mirabel had more important things to consider.

Five months and four days after they left the church at Seldon, Mirabel gave birth, some said prematurely, to little Sidney Rosewater Alfred Okey, the living image of the Councillor. In the general rejoicing Sidy found himself some distance from the centre of affairs, swamped and overwhelmed by the visits of innumerable Larchards and dependents who came to pay their respects. Carriages came and carriages went and Sidy sat in his new office in the catering department and whiled away time with the aid of an excellent cook book from the Regent Stores across the way. Sidy was a mere cipher in the hierarchy of the Town Hall system which had swallowed him whole on the Councillor's recommendation. He, who had loved his work, now came no nearer to a boiling pot or a sizzling pan than his bulk invoices would allow him. He was unhappy.

The birth of young Sidney Rosewater was an event that only involved poor Sidy in the most periphery sense. True, when at last the town hall clock struck out for freedom, Sidy did come slowly home burdened down by fresh blooms from the florist, but these were quickly relegated to the hall and ante-rooms. The inner sanctum, where Mirabel held her mysteries, was disinfected and refurbished by the Councillor and his wife and the result was an exotic cornucopia with which Sidy could not compete.

Councillor Larchard had been against Sidy from the first. Mirabel had always been particularly dear to him and the likeness of her son, Sidney Rosewater, struck him as a triumph for the blood of the Larchard's over the inferior brew of the Okey's. Thus he felt no guilt in debarring Sidy from the inner sanctum. At a loose end Sidy finally took himself down to the kitchens.

The prodigal, surrounded by the pots and pans of his trade, found the old magic was still harboured in his bones. He took to the cook and the kitchen maid as he had never taken to the Councillor and his lady. Kindred spirits, they busied themselves about the kitchen and prepared a fine repast for the upstairs people. Sidy supervised the entire operation himself in an apron and white jacket left over from his old life. There can be no denying that he did an excellent job. Sauce was never so rare, meat so tender, sauté potatoes so impeccably sauté.

The Larchards greeted his achievement with bewilderment. One did not cook one's dinner. In a Larchard world one hired menials for that. Five Larchards were present at Sidy's finest hour. Five Larchards, the Councillor and his lady, Septimus and Charlie and poor Aunt Nan, found themselves enjoying Sidy Okey's banquet despite themselves. From the sanctum Mirabel was heard to ring for more, and that when she was concerned about regaining her figure.

In short, the meal was a resounding success. The Larchard family were agreed upon that. Sidy could cook. It was an accomplishment which won him a reputation, but little credit. In the eyes of the Councillor and his dependents Sidy was one cook too many.

It is to Mirabel's eternal credit that she seized upon the slight favour her small husband had gained and sought to exploit it in his favour. She knew the unfortunate light in which the family regarded him and she hoped that he might find a way to their hearts through their bellies. Perhaps it was not too late even then for Sidy to have taken his place at the head of the household with young Sidney Rosewater on his lap and Mirabel beside him, but he missed his opportunity. The elder

Larchards and dependents deigned to dine, but not to acknowledge Siddy as their equal. It is unfortunate that Siddy regarded this as a proper decision, but he did. The social order was too deeply ingrained in his revolutionary soul. He marched toward the new order, one step forward, two steps back.

Siddy slotted into place where he belonged, with the under-servants. There was no real need to attend the Town Hall and his absence was scarcely noted. True his income ceased, but it had never been more than nominal. Councillor Larchard was only too grateful to hide the red sheep his Mirrie had married deep in the servants' quarters.

Still all could have been well, had it not been for Mirabel Okey, nee Larchard and her well nigh insatiable sexual appetite. Refreshed and positively ignited by the supreme act of womanhood Mirabel stormed back from a brief repose at Bognor and summoned her spouse once more to the battlefield of the bed.

It was hardly surprising that Siddy's dreaded virus smote him once more. Some said that it was congenital, others that Siddy should have it seen to; on one memorable occasion Mirabel despatched him to a Health Centre in Birkenhead where a diet of raw carrot was prescribed . . . but to no avail. The Larchards went without their magnificent dinners for a week or so and Siddy still laboured in vain. The final blow fell when a cousin, Dr Larchard of Middleton Avenue, sent a brief note to Mirabel on her husband's condition.

'Mirrie' it ran 'I conclude that your husband is in no way physically defective. The complaint of which you speak can therefore only be regarded as the result of some mental reservation on his part. It would appear that Sidney is not disabled, merely disinclined.'

Dr Larchard was not rewarded with a fee. Mirabel never spoke to him again.

Shattered, Mirabel did not know where to turn. Whatever passion she had held for Siddy was now a wilting plant. Memory could not sustain her for ever, nor was it in her nature to lavish her affection on little Sidney Rosewater, who saw his

Mamma between three and five and was otherwise without existence. Sidy was but a gruesome joke, and Mirabel needed urgent consolation.

Perhaps unfortunately, consolation was not so very far away. Two miles down town in fact, in the little office where Walter Perry handled the affairs of Mirabel's capital sum and admired his big strong self in the mirrors of his gleaming shirt studs.

Whatever Sidy was not, Walter Perry was. Walter was the Conservative candidate. Walter was broad and strong. Walter spoke with a ring of confidence and authority, chortled at his own jokes. Poor Sidy seldom joked, and when he did immediately regretted it. But his jokes were not Walter's attraction. In short Mirabel found that what Sidy had once done well Walter could repeatedly do better without blandishment or rehearsal.

From the date of this discovery Mirabel's attitude to her husband changed abruptly. Where he had become merely a tiresome accessory he was now an active nuisance in her life. Walter was unmarried, unattached and able. Sibby, when she saw him, which was not often, was accompanying the nursemaid to the park with little Sidney Rosewater, or shopping with the undermaid, or beating eggs with the cook.

Sidy was out.

The picture is not entirely complete. We must turn now to the nursemaid, a saucy child with small red buttocks and a wayward eye. She did not set out to snare Sidy but something in the lilt of her step and the two-way tilt of her bosom raked a fire in him. One night, when Sidney Rosewater was fast asleep in his cot and Mirabel was at play in Walter Perry's bachelor apartments, Sidy and the nursemaid slipped away to a public house on the edge of the common. They dined a little and wine a lot and in the bushes on the way home Sidy rediscovered an ability he had almost forgotten, greatly to their mutual satisfaction. Sidy, in fact, became quite good at it.

This splendid state of affairs existed for some time, might have gone on for ever in fact had it not been for the intervention of Councillor Larchard.

In the seventh week of Siddy's new calendar (which dated from the bushes) he was warmly wrapped in bed with the red-headed nursemaid when the Councillor appeared as in a puff of smoke. Mirabel was by his side and Walter Perry said soothing things to her as Siddy was upbraided.

The nursemaid was told to pack her bags and leave. Siddy wished to go with her and for a moment Mirabel's eyes gleamed with hope, but the Councillor forbade it. Siddy had no money. Even then he might have made a fight for it but the nursemaid made it clear that he would have found no encouragement. She left Siddy behind her in return for a discreetly worded notice for her next employer and a date with the councillor in his private office.

There would be, the Councillor decreed, no divorce.

Mirabel had come to the end of her tether. She sent Walter Perry to the chemists and that gentleman returned with a white powder. Distilled in Siddy's cocoa it could have been the end of Siddy, but it was not. He was very sick and Mirabel was barely sympathetic. The dose was repeated, and with the same result. Again she tried, but Siddy's agile mind outfoxed her. He fed his cocoa to the cat, and the cat confirmed his suspicions dramatically.

He sat on his bed and considered, absently removing his glasses and wiping them on the sleeve of his pyjamas. His job was gone, his wife was gone . . . his last fling had been snatched away from him. His only remaining joy was his kitchen, and now Mirabel and Walter Perry were striking even there with their potions. The family Lanchard had eaten him whole like one of his dinners, chewed him and munched him and swallowed him down. The family Larchard had eaten everything he had.

It was Tuesday evening, and on Tuesday evenings the Larchard's came to dine.

This Tuesday was no different from any other. They rolled through the door, the Councillor and his lady, Septimus and Charlie and poor Aunt Nan. Siddy showed them in himself,

saw them seated, watched the Councillor fit his great white napkin under his collar.

Mirabel was at rest, he said. She'd become overheated in the day.

A rich red wine was served, an original blend of Sidy's own inspiration. It was sweet and thick to the taste buds and poor Aunt Nan declined it, but Charlie and Septimus enjoyed it and the Councillor asked for more.

Sidy was quite inordinately excited. The maid had been excused and the whole serving of the meal had fallen upon him, but he did not seem to mind.

The fine soup which he served was rich with meat, a stock pot of the finest calibre. All manner of vegetables floated in it, many rare delicacies. It was housed in a gigantic tureen that Sidy brought on a trolley, but Sidy did not mean it to overshadow his main course. He served a dainty helping, ensuring that each had a sliver of the tender meat . . . removed a fingernail from the edge of the ladle and set it daintily on the side of his dish.

Sidy disappeared below to bring the next course and the family sat and waited, sipping their wine so red and thick that it almost congealed against the glass.

He was too long. So long in fact that the Councillor retrieved his soup plate from the trolley and sent poor Aunt Nan to ladle him another helping.

The thick brown soup slurped down his gullet. His silver spoon flashed in and out. The delicate meat delighted him.

In the very bottom of his soup plate there nestled a long meat sliver. He supped around it, finally coaxed it onto his spoon, raised it to his lips.

On the joint of the boiled and bloated finger was his daughter's wedding ring.

He plucked it off the spoon, dropped it on his lap, stood up quickly as it rolled down his knee.

Sidy opened the door.

He saw what had happened, was so sorry that he had missed it.

All was not lost.

He raised the cover of the immense serving dish and thrust his long three-pronged fork into the live but lightly toasted flesh of Walter Perry . . . who would have screamed, but for the apple in his mouth.

THE OLD ADAM

By Martin Waddell

ADAM LIVED in a bottle on shelf 43Q. He was 23 years old, trilingual and four foot three inches high. They fed him through a straw and spoke to him through a grille in the side of the bottle.

Adam was an original.

There was nothing before Adam and it seemed as though there would be nothing after him, for Adam was sterile. True, he had no Eve, so the point was immaterial. His mother was a rubber tree and his father some unknown donor, Caucasian free and twenty-one, but otherwise a mere card in an index file. Perhaps it was better that way.

Specimen 223367/Qlt/MZ was his formal name, but those who knew him best called him Adam, because it seemed appropriate. 223367/Qlt/MZ did not mind. The plastic brain they had lodged in his rubber skull was possessed of cheerful demeanour. He had an intelligence quotient which, whilst excellent for the son of a rubber tree, was not quite the thing for a Hero of the Soviet Union. For Adam was a Hero of the Soviet Union and a Bachelor of the Humanities (Leningrad) to boot. He had well grained neuron skin and the whites of his eyes were manufactured from the intestines of a rroldyheart worm. His bones were a neubron complex specially devised not to warp the leather stitching of his veins where the pig urine flowed freely. A man of many parts, Adam was master of none. He had great difficulty in moving his limbs. In later, more efficient numbers housed on the bright clean shelves of the laboratory, miracles had been performed. Poor Adam was merely a prototype. His shelf was in the public section of the Vitarum building but far from the popular central aisles. Now and then someone would take Adam's card from the Vita

register and have him removed from his bottle by a white coated assistant. Placed on the smooth oileroid folds of the limber table Adam would smile his best smile and sometimes attempt conversation. This was not easy. Although in a burst of initial enthusiasm they had taught him three languages . . . for political purposes . . . they had restrained his facility to the level which was immediately required of him. Adam was a good clean Russian numbskull. The Sonic in his bottle was tuned constantly to the Ravery. Noise was a vital part of his life, and the louder the merrier.

That was the root of Adam's trouble.

As a boy of two weeks (four foot three high, trilingual, fed through a straw and spoken to through a grille in the side of the bottle) he had become accustomed to the steady hum of the Ravery through his Sonic tubes. It was his constant lullaby. It formed the background at the height of his popularity when there were men in white coats and members of the Central Committee and television cameras around him, all the paraphernalia that might be expected to surround the first appearances of the first synthetic man. Of course he was precocious, for they had designed him with that in mind. But something somewhere in the rubber membranes was not as it should have been. 223367/Qlt/MZ absorbed information readily, but was unable to retain much of it. In it went, through his florelmghyt eardrums, and out another way. Little lodged in the chamber of his brain which had been specially designed for that purpose. The result was that Adam was subjected to a cram course of perpetual Indoctrolum tapes which were fed through his Sonic, totally obliterating the soothing though frenetic beat of the Ravery to which he was patiently tuned. Naturally 223367/Qlt/MZ did not take kindly to this. On a number of occasions he detached the Sonic plugs from the slots in the folds of his florelmghyt eardrums and dropped them on the floor. In one final undignified scene during an international Ultraview hook-up he removed the vetto shield from the microphone before him and broadcast to a startled world a few sharp and pungent phrases in Esperanto which sealed his fate, and ultimately, his bottle.

He should not have done it. The Ultraview unit estimated that a third of the World's potential audience had ultrad in on 223367/Qlt/MZ's outburst and of those forty-seven per cent could be assumed to have an Esperanto A rating and the other fifty-three per cent would at least understand the gestures which had accompanied it. If Adam had known of his little brothers and sisters all grouped together in the synthetic womb he'd left behind him he might have shown some restraint, perhaps in time have come to find the kindly instruction of the Indoctrolum audocrats as pleasing and soothing to the central nervous system as the hourly outpourings of the Ravery units. But Adam did not know of the others. He had been led to believe he was an only child through reading too much of his own publicity put out through the Soviet Department of Humanitarian Affairs. His was the only Supravisual green bottle and he the only Adam in it. So he whipped up the vetto shield at the right moment and said what he said. His message never reached Alaska or other points on the Eastern hook-up where they had time to expunge it, but where it was least desirous that it should be heard it was, loud and strong, and so another bastion of the East went West.

He was never seen on Ultraview again.

The grille of his green bottle was closed and the Socialiser sealed and he was whisked away through a strict security black-out to the basement of the Vitarum, and shelf 43Q, in a little cream room.

His tiny brother 223367/Qlt/MZ-2 took his place. MZ-2 had red hair from the tail of a Ukranian squirrel and the Hungarians had contributed a boiler suit in national colours. They called him the Universal Man, and he quickly learned to play chess. Although MZ-2 was more intelligent, he had not Adam's attraction for the scientists.

The little cream room at the end of Cirium Walklin just to the north of the main entrance was frequently visited in those first few months, and now and then Adam's grille slid back for a little conversation. But it was not the good old days. What talk there was was all about his insides, and Adam was soon on the way to becoming a hypochondriac. They fed him little pills

of all descriptions at one time almost disintegrating the foam rubber setting of his stomach. Adam came to look on them as an unnecessary interference in his day, and to ignore them accordingly. Mercifully the Indoctrolum Audocrats had ceased to break into the middle of his Ravery Sonics. He sat in his bottle and tapped his finger against the glass in what he fondly imagined to be time to the music. He took less and less notice of the world around him and, gradually, the world around him took less and less notice of Adam.

From the day of the Ultraview fiasco and his sudden eclipse from the public eye to his twenty-third year Adam sat in his bottle on shelf 43Q in the little cream room. If he ever yearned for the world outside it cannot have been keenly, for he had seen little of it. An early attempt at cultural weaning had taken the form of a progressive course in the translated works of Thomas Hardy, just then enjoying a Soviet re-patriation as unexpected as it was undeserved. Poor Adam knew more of the wicked wiles of Wessex (then situated somewhere south east of the Urals) than he did of the trouble and strife of his own up-to-date day. It is true that from time to time he toyed with the dial of his sonic and came across strange voices and sentiments which confused him, but by his twenty-third year he had ceased to bother about them.

It was the day of his twenty-third birthday. He was sitting in his bottle singing, as was his wont. It was a cheerful song, though unruly. He had developed a bass range and a yoodle of considerable potential. He sang both solo and in harmony and on the day of his birthday he was engaged in perfecting a particularly traumatic effect when his grille slipped back, perhaps for the first time in four or five months. He was so taken with his song that he was not at first aware of the pale blue eyes that gleamed through contact lenses at him.

Una had not come to the Vitarum to see Adam.

She was a friendly girl, but of a retiring disposition. She was a student in the Humanities and some chance fancy had taken her from her macrofotex in viewdor above to stroll through the dim lit corridors of the basement where the old exhibits were housed. What led her to the green door with the

legend 223367/Qt/MZ is something we shall never know. She came through it softly, for she had some faint idea that it was a place where she had no right to be with her low videx rating.

Adam's green bottle sat on shelf 43Q, all on its own. Inside Adam was harmonising lustily. He wore the green boiler suit in which he had been conceived and his podgy hands clapped happily against his prone legs. Every nerve on his body was visibly straining to keep up with the frantic beat from the Sonic.

Quite naturally, Una thought that something was wrong. She rushed him from the shelf to the oileroid table and quickly released the catch on his grille, although she lacked the requisite authority to do so. The noise from Adam's Sonic was almost too much for her, accustomed as she was to the silence of the viewdor above. Completely oblivious of what was happening Adam continued with his song.

Una unplugged his Sonic.

It was many years since Adam's bottle had known silence. His voice trailed away. He attempted to adjust the dial, played with the valve, tentatively removed the Sonic plug from his ear-drum and held it before his face, solemnly inspecting it with his grave worm-intestine eyes.

'Are you alright?' a voice said from the grille overhead. It was not an unpleasant voice, but Adam was not used to conversation and resented the break in his concentration, so he did not reply.

The voice repeated its enquiry, more urgently.

Adam looked up. Through the sides of the bottle he could see Una's pale face and her trim figure encased in a sky blue working overall. Her hair was short and neat, extremely functional. She looked as if she was harmless. Her enquiry was well meant and Adam bore no grudge.

All he did was to repeat, in Esperanto, that which had previously removed difficulties from his path. He said it pithily. It may not have been strictly called for, but it was apt.

Una had not lived a particularly secluded life. Her father had been a scientist and she knew that not all Sythons thought before they spoke. At this time she was not aware of Adam's

case history and so the repetition of his words for posterity did not spark off the recognition they might have warranted. (They had, let it not be forgotten, coloured East West relations for more than half a decade.) Una thought him merely neglected, and possibly illbred. But she was kind, and most concerned about the fit which had preceded her unplugging his Sonic, and she was not to be deterred.

'Are you alright?' she demanded again, as though nothing had been said. She managed it with a simple dignity which would have played on the heart strings of another man but on Adam it was wasted, for the one or two which were relevant had already snapped. These things happen to prototypes. The delicate nuance of her speech passed him by. Nothing had fitted him for the idea of tone as an implication of meaning. What did filter through to him, as he got used to the idea, was that somebody had come to talk to him who did not require a detailed account of his insides.

He told her all, rapidly, and in some considerable detail. Although his own life had been somewhat restricted he knew enough from the world of song as transmitted by the Ravery Units to realise that other people were colourful, gay and romantic. The digested plots of many thousands of half remembered sentiments slipped from him as his own experiences . . . which indeed they were. In the sum of his years enough passion had brewed in the environs of his green bottle to serve many a mortal in a full-sized world.

Una, who had come to ponder her troubles amidst the relics of yesteryear, found herself seated on the oileroid table top listening enthralled to the words of specimen 223367/Qlt/MZ as they spilled from him. She did not even own a Sonic, for they were out of date. Thus the brittle metres and the shrill cadence of Adam's conversation was a revelation to her. What he said was not only sincere, it also rythmed.

Una went home, tossed and turned on her pensive couch, and returned the next day with a recodex.

Adam had resigned himself to another twenty-three years of silence. He was sitting hunched over, drinking fluid from the

auto filler through a plastic straw when Una came strolling through the door.

She switched off his Sonic, switched on her recodex, opened the grille, said 'Are you alright?', and Adam started to talk.

He did not observe the humming recodex on the oileroid table beside his patient listener, nor notice the shudders of glee that chased across her intellectual brow as his sparkling sentences flowed through the grille.

Two and three quarter hours later Una departed and Adam, nursing a sore throat and quite exhausted, plugged himself back into the Sonic and went to sleep.

It was the first of many happy interludes. Una and her recodex became a familiar sight in the building, slipping through the viewdor to fade from sight in the draughty walk-lins of the basement. No one knew quite where she went or what she was doing. As she was a nonentity, no one bothered to find out.

Fourteen months later Una's great work was viewdorated. It proved an immediate success. She captured the common spleen, they said. She spoke with the poetry of the people. Sentiment came back with a rush. Una's frank and open-hearted declarations expressed the bloom of youth and purity, the sadness of rejected passion, the mellowness of a lonely faun at sunset and other like and allied things with a brittle brilliant clarity. 'Are You Alright?' became the motif of a generation within a month of viewdoration.

Una was in demand. It followed that her visits to Adam and his green bottle were less frequent. Down in the depths of the little cream room there was no one to admire her, and besides she was becoming bored with his one-sided conversational style.

So Una stayed away.

Adam, who was totally surprised when she first appeared, took it philosophically. He soon grew accustomed to his renewed loneliness. He replugged his Sonic in his ear and sat back to sing away the years.

It is not fair to say that Una forgot her old chum completely.

Once, in a mild heat-wave whilst passing through Pasadena on a Soviet American Goodwill Goalongtur, she did pause to

wonder how he fared in his green bottle and despatched a request to the Vitarum (of which she was now a full vice president) that specimen 223367/Qlt/MZ should be rehoused in a sumptuous case in the main hall, where she hoped his life might be a brighter, fuller one. It is not nice to assume that she thought in terms of possible future material from his new vistas. For she did not. At that time she had many spools of recodex to prune as a result of her months of patience in the cream room.

Although mystified, the Directorate of the Vitarum responded to the request of their brightest jewel with alacrity. Although she had not explained her motive (indeed she *could* not) they had specimen 223367/Qlt/MZ installed in a brand new case on the top landing, between the bust of Nero and the rotund Moon thing. Adam had soft lighting and people to look at, although there was no grille to speak through. But Adam was unhappy. They had installed an Ultraviewer in his glass case and he watched it fitfully and without interest. His old-fashioned Sonic equipment they left on shelf 43Q downstairs, along with his green bottle, which was pitifully outmoded.

Adam sat in the corner of his spacious case and sulked. People had a distressing habit of pressing their faces against his glass and mouthing at him. The Directorate had omitted to lable him properly and it is possible that the public took him for someone else. Perhaps it was that the ten per cent of the population which now had rubber trees in the family didn't like to talk about it, and wanted Adam suppressed. The new people had fine frames and remarkable durability and it cannot be said that Adam was the sort they would have chosen for a forefather. Adam was not handsome, and so they disowned him. Perhaps not disowned . . . they simply did not cause his identity to become known (although they must have sensed it from his rubbery look) and therefore debarred him from his rightful place in the sympathies of humankind. Beside Adam the bust of Nero looked reasonably like everybody else and the Moon thing was expected to be a thing and had no

common root with his audience, and so was excused. Adam alone was a travesty, for Adam reflected themselves.

Although things were pretty bad, there was a compensation.

Over the weeks Adam did try to strike up acquaintances as best he could. The absence of the grille and the mouthing faces put him off humans, and the bust of Nero was not talkative, but the pink and purple moon thing had a way of gesturing with its mandibles which was at once touching and affectionate.

Side by side in their glass cases they sat, periodically winking and gesticulating in the silence of their sound-proofed existences. They came to have a common bond, a sympathy that was divorced from the others outside and from which the bust of Nero was excluded by a common decision. Adam had never heard of Nero and the Moon thing had no reason to regard him with other than suspicion, considering what he'd had to put up with.

Ten years passed on the landing. Ten years of leisurely glass tapping between the two cases, of Sonic-less life. Ten years that saw annual viewdoration of Una's work, annual acclaim of her style which remained identical and therefore pleasing right from 'Are You Alright?' to her tenth work, 'Bottle-green'. Ten years which also produced a gradual clutter of exhibits on the floors of the Vitarum.

There came a day when Adam, unlabelled, his past forgotten, was caught up in a silent revolution. White-coated men came and removed him from his glass case in a Plutrone bag and wheeled him away to the old-fashioned walklins of the basement. A last despairing glance over his shoulder left him with a vision of the faithful Moon thing tapping the glass with all three hundred and forty-eight mandibles, rubbing its pink and purple body against the side of its case, opening and shutting its large eye in a gesture of farewell.

Even when they brought him to shelf 43Q in the little cream room and reinterred him in his bottle Adam's faith was not restored. The parting with the pink and purple Moon thing was too much, even for a Sython. The once beloved Sonic plug hung idly by his side, for he now had no use for it. Now and then he did feed fitfully from his tube, even listlessly cleaned

down the inside of the glass bottle, but it was no fun. They had put great calf volumes on either side of shelf 43Q, and they refused to communicate.

He was thirty-four and alone in the world.

Adam cast about in his mind for something to do and the Sonic emotions which had become his reasoning told him to pine. So pine he did, but there was nobody there to notice. The chubby 223367/Qlt/MZ of yesteryear gradually faded. The memory of sweetly groping mandibles filled his thoughts, the poetry of their vapid weaving, the sweet insinuations. In the Moon thing and the Moon thing alone Adam had found faithfulness. The members of the Central Committee had betrayed him, the scientists and the Ultraviewers; Nero had not even taken any notice. Una, who had seemed to hold the key to his personality, had faded away from his world. The Moon thing alone had been true.

Or so it seemed.

Sad and sorry he sat in his bottle on his thirty-fifth birthday. Wistfully he practised gestures against the glass. He did not hear the grille scrape back, nor see the pale blue eyes that gazed at him earnestly through contact lenses.

The cream recodex spools had at last run out.

Una, disguised as her old self, had slipped through the walklins of the Vitarum basement, battered recodex at the ready.

'Are you alright?' she asked, hopefully.

Adam looked up. Through the side of the bottle he could see Una's pale face and her trim figure encased in a sky blue working overall. Her hair was short and neat, extremely functional. She looked as if she was harmless, and Adam could not remember bearing any grudge.

But from somewhere deep inside him swelled a reply in Esperanto, which he thought he had long forgotten.

'Are you alright?' she said again, with an eye on her royalties and her finger on the tab of the recodex, but also a simple dignity.

He told her all, rapidly. But he told her all by his new method, gesticulation. Although his expressions were rich and

varied in his fashion, they were not for viewdoration. Adam wanted his Moon thing by him. Perhaps it *was* base humanity coming out in him at last or perhaps it was merely Una's imagination, but it seemed to her that Adam was striking a bargain. When she hopefully switched his Sonic on and off he included it in his gestures, but without putting it to its proper use. What he was after she did not know; but without it she was not going to get him replugged to the Sonic, and no Sonic meant no inspiration, and nothing for the recodex spool.

Distraught, Una roamed the Vitarum. She went from the land plane to the Vista Platform and mooched through the Vulcan globe, but no solution suggested itself. At last she came to the landing where she looked at Nero for inspiration, and found none. But close by, though separated from Nero by the Chromocreature, was the sad puff ball of the Moon thing, pink and purple and out of sorts, all three hundred and forty-eight mandibles wagging dispiritedly.

Una wasn't of Russian peasant stock for nothing. There was something in the wag of the despairing mandibles that told all she needed to know.

She disappeared into the Dorval arcade, discarded her over-all, fluffed her hair, powdered her nose and departed for the offices of the Directorate. It was a strange request, but they were not likely to disagree with Una, who was now all-powerful.

The Moon thing was stuck in a Plutrone bag and carried down through the echoing walklins to the cream room and shelf 43Q.

The Moon thing had, as Moon things do, curled its mandibles into its tummy and swallowed its eye. When they plopped it into Adam's bottle it did not stir.

It was not a big bottle, but it was big enough. Una was a woman of discretion. She placed a curtain over shelf 43Q and they went away and closed up the cream room.

Adam, frantic with delight, tapped the glass.

Mandible by mandible the Moon thing responded. Bits of pink and purple emerged slowly as it uncurled and swelled, tinged a faint green for it was chameleonic by nature. To

Adam's delight it grew and grew till at last the large cold eye in the middle of its throat opened, and it winked at him.

It rolled toward him. It shot out forty-nine mandibles and wrapped them round his throat, spat another twenty-two around each limb, attached the slitting edges to his tender neuron skin and made a meal of his pig urine blood. It opened its middle and dropped him into its digestive cavity where it stung him with septic suckers, bent and snapped his rubber bones, munched him tenderly with smooth pink flesh edges.

It had waited a long time for a square meal, and it was hungry.

In the morning Una came on tip toe to the shelf. She pulled back the curtain and cleared the grille of Adam's bottle.

Some tattered rubber adhered to the mandibles. A pool of digestive fluid in the bottom of the bottle contained a discarded piece of Adam's eye, but Una did her best to contain herself.

After all, the Moon thing *was* listening to the Sonic.

'Are you,' she said, hopefully, 'alright?'

THE ISLAND OF REGRETS

By Elizabeth Walter

THE COQ D'OR, a modest hostelry with an excellent cuisine some twenty-five kilometres east of Quimper, is not crowded in the last week of September; it is too near the end of the year. At the beginning of October the shutters go up for the winter and the proprietor and his wife (who does the cooking) hibernate. The previous week is thus a preparation for this withdrawal; an invisible dust sheet lies everywhere. Not but what they are still exceedingly hospitable – business is business, after all – but only those visitors who think it smart to be out of season brave their welcome, or perhaps a casual traveller passing through.

Peter Quint and his fiancée, Dora Matthews, belonged in both categories. They had deliberately chosen the end of September for their holidays, and they were motoring in Normandy and Brittany. From Dieppe they had come slowly southwards; Lorient had been their farthest south-east call and they were on their way back via Quimper to St Malo when they stopped at the Coq d'Or.

It had been Peter's idea to holiday in late September and to choose the Atlantic coast of France. Dora, who was still too recently engaged to feel it wise to assert independence, had contentedly acquiesced. It was the first holiday since their engagement had been announced to their surprised small world. They were spending it in getting better acquainted. Such was their relationship.

Their worlds, though surprised, were enthusiastically in favour of their marriage. 'Dora,' said Peter's friends, 'is just the girl for him. Sound, sensible, intelligent, yet not bad-looking – the perfect counter-weight to Peter's intellect and nerves.' 'In Peter,' said Dora's world – that is to say, Dora's

mother – ‘Dora has found a man who needs her love. She can devote herself to him without reservation. It’s already obvious how much he owes to her.’

Dora’s devotion, which had begun before the engagement (and there were some who said that Dora had proposed), was not so much a dreamy-eyed hero-worship as a determination to influence and mould. She recognised – how could she fail to – the superiority of her fiancé’s brain, but a position in the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries did not seem to her to accord with Peter’s worth. Had his opinion been asked, Peter would no doubt have agreed with her, but Dora, beginning as she meant to go on, did not canvass his views on this or any other matter. It would never have occurred to either of them that she might be wrong.

Since coming down from Oxford with a First in Classics, Peter had pursued a decidedly deviating course. A brief acquaintance with the schoolboy recipients of his learning had convinced him (and the staff) that teaching was not for him. An even briefer foray into the management trainee jungle had resulted in an equally rapid retreat. In desperation he sat the Civil Service Examination, and had ended behind a desk in the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries. This employment, though not arduous was uncongenial, neither Ag. nor Fish. being much concerned with Higher Things. During the previous winter Peter had suffered a mild nervous breakdown. This was politely credited to overwork.

It was while recovering from it that he had first met Dora Matthews, staying with her widowed mother in the same sea-side private hotel. The boarders – no one but the management could have thought of them as residents – were all more or less under Dora’s spell. She was young and they, poor dears, were ageing; she was nimbler on her feet than they. This naturally made it difficult to avoid her ministrations; only the spryest and the fiercest got away. The pale young man who appeared among them on Maundy Thursday evening was at once a scapegoat and an answer to prayer. One and all, the boarders conspired to throw the young people together. Never was matchmaking more co-operatively carried out. Not sur-

prisingly, Peter saw a good deal of Dora. Three weeks after he returned to London, their engagement was announced.

Dora was all for hurrying on the wedding, but Peter proved unexpectedly firm. Some instinct of self-preservation warned him that he would be surrendering body and soul. About the body he was not so troubled, being sexually repressed and confused. But the soul – the soul was an entirely different matter; he wanted for a while longer to be able to call it his own.

It was with the intention of deflecting Dora that he had proposed this holiday abroad, alleging that they did not yet know each other as a prospective married couple should. At the back of his mind he half hoped that Dora would raise objections which would enable him to break the engagement off; but as a less naïve man might have expected, she was only too ready to agree. Peter owned a 1961 Ford Zephyr and both he and Dora could drive. A motoring holiday seemed to offer the ideal of leisurely progress and enforced proximity.

Thus they drove one evening from Lorient to Quimper and put up at the Coq d'Or. The weather, which had been bad throughout the holiday, had excelled itself and the rain was streaming down. The equinoctial gales had set in punctually that autumn. Too often the landscape was obscured by trailing clouds and ropes of rain. As for the seascape, it boiled and thundered and spurted, and the spray and sea-mist hung above it like steam.

In the bar, while the proprietor's wife was cooking their dinner, Peter enquired about the sights of Kérouralhac. He was not surprised to learn that they were virtually standard: a savage and magnificent coastline, and a chapel dedicated to some local Breton saint. The proprietor seemed to feel that no apology was needed; it was not for these that people came to Kérouralhac. But he was a good-hearted host and set out to entertain the lady, whose French was so much better than the man's. Peter, struggling to follow a language with which he was not perfectly familiar, was astonished to hear Dora ask:

'What is that island off the coast that you can see from the hill above the village?'

'That, madame, is the Ile des Regrets.'

'The Ile des Regrets. Did you hear that, Peter? The place is called the Island of Regrets.'

'What are you talking about? What island? I never saw one.'

'You were driving, dear. You had your eyes on the road.'

'And the weather, monsieur, would have prevented you from seeing it. It is astonishing that it was visible to madame.'

'I saw it only for a moment,' Dora informed him. 'There was a lull in the squall, the mist lifted, and it was there. It looked so near I wanted to put out my hand and touch it. Like a child's toy left floating by the beach.'

'The distance is deceptive,' the proprietor said darkly, 'and the tide-rip has been the death of many a boat. At certain times it is as though all the waters of the Channel were being funnelled through one narrow rocky slit.'

'The kind of place one would regret trying to get to,' Peter murmured. 'No wonder it's called the Island of Regrets.'

'No, monsieur, that is not the reason for its title. The island is a magic place. You understand?'

'You mean there are superstitions about it,' Dora corrected.

The proprietor frowned. 'As you prefer, madame. We Bretons say it is a magic island. It grants the first wish you make when you first set foot there, but grants it in such a way that you will wish it had not been granted. This is why it is called the Island of Regrets.'

'How quaint,' Dora said. 'I do love peasant superstitions. Does anyone live on it?'

'A boat calls once a week,' the proprietor said with some ambiguity. 'Weather permitting, that is.'

'The weather doesn't permit much at present, does it?' Peter said glumly, looking at the lashing rain.

'Courage, monsieur. With us, there is no telling. Yesterday, today and tomorrow are different days. The weather of one day bears no relation to that of another. Tomorrow may be a beautiful day.'

'If it is,' Dora said, 'I vote we go to the island.'

'Impossible, madame. It would be dangerous to go alone, and none of our local boatmen will take you. They say the island is an unlucky place.'

'Why? You've only got to make sure your first wish is something innocuous.'

'No, the superstition, as you call it, is more complex than that. They say that the island-dwellers – the unseen dwellers – do not wish to have their privacy disturbed. Any violation of their territory is punished. Any theft, however small, will mean your death. Three years ago a boy landed there and ate some blackberries. He died, madame. Here in Kérouralhac he died that very night. You can go and see his gravestone in the churchyard.'

Dora smiled. 'I'll believe you without that. But don't you think there's a rational explanation? He probably ate poisonous berries by mistake.'

'That is what the doctor said, madame. But not a soul in Kérouralhac believes it. Poisonous berries do not look like blackberries. A local lad would not make such a mistake. It is more likely that the island-dwellers were angry at his stealing and punished him according to their law.'

'Who are these island-dwellers?' Peter asked curiously.

The proprietor spread his hands and shook his head. 'In Brittany, monsieur, we have many legends. We are an old race and I think our forebears are never truly dead. For myself, I prefer not to enquire too closely into the nature of the island-dwellers and I prefer to keep my distance from the Ile des Regrets. If you are wise, monsieur and madame, you will also. And now my wife is calling. Dinner is served.'

The proprietor proved a good prophet. The next day was a perfect autumn day. Peter, descending in the morning, found Dora studying a large map in the hall.

'We shall be able to go to the island,' she informed him. 'There's an excellent landing-place just here.' Her finger indicated a point on the north-east tip of the island, where Peter judged the channel to be not more than half a mile wide.

'Is it safe?' he asked uneasily, recalling the proprietor's words about 'a narrow, rocky slit'.

'Perfectly,' Dora assured him. 'The tide is on the turn now. By the time we've had breakfast the danger will be over. It's only when the water builds up to a certain level that the funnelling effect is produced. As you see, I've been making some enquiries. There's nothing to worry about.'

'I don't want to go,' Peter said firmly.

'Nonsense, darling,' said Dora, who did. 'If you don't believe me, go and talk to the boatmen. It isn't the tide-rip that puts them off.'

It was not the tide-rip that put Peter off, either. Dora suspected this.

'Of course,' she went on, 'if you're superstitious . . .' Her tone implied that superstition was beneath contempt.

'I just don't see any point in going there,' Peter muttered.

'It looks enchanting,' Dora contradicted. 'If we miss this chance it will certainly be the Island of Regrets.'

Peter said no more and they set off after breakfast. He half hoped it might be impossible to hire a boat, but this hope was balanced by the fear that Dora would already have arranged this. He was beginning to know his fiancée pretty well.

Overnight the world had been washed free of impurity; all colours had a clean and shining look. The sky was limpid blue and cloudless, a paler reflection of the colour of the sea. Autumnal tints set off a lingering summer greenness. Around the cliffs the breakers crumbled into foam. The island did indeed look to be within touching distance – a plaything that had been idly cast away.

The houses of the village, narrow and flat-fronted, led down to the jetty and the shore, where the mass of tumbled boulders and rock formations bore witness to the fury of past storms. Trails of ribbon-weed glistened in the sunlight, twined with great branches of bladder-wrack. On the hard several boats were drawn up for inspection and a net was being repaired.

The short cut to the harbour lies through the churchyard, where on the sheltered north and east sides of the grey stone building the dead of Kérouralhac sleep. Plain headstones and

occasional crosses give briefly the names and dates of the dead. The grass is scythed every summer; some of the older headstones lean. As Peter and Dora hurried down the pathway, a figure straightened up among the stones. He was standing in the remotest corner of the churchyard, where the herbage was drenched with rain. He had hitched his soutane up above his ankles in an effort to keep it dry, and he held half concealed behind him a branch of mountain ash with orange berries like beads.

Uncertain whether to speak, Peter hesitated, but Dora was already calling out 'Bonjour.' The curé came apologetically towards them, picking his way as delicately as a cat. He was wearing socks of stout, inelegant home knitting. Peter noticed that his shoes were down at heel.

'What a wonderful morning,' Dora greeted him. She prided herself on being at ease with the Church. 'We are going to the Ile des Regrets. Give us your blessing. Your people are all too scared to come.'

'You have my blessing, certainly,' the curé responded, 'but if you are going there, you are clearly not afraid. I wish you a pleasant day and continued good weather.' He made as if to turn away.

'Oh,' Dora cried, catching sight of the rowanberries, 'what a beautiful branch. Is this to decorate the church?'

The curé shuddered and held it further from him. 'It would not be suitable,' he replied.

'Really?' Dora was politely unbelieving. 'It would look so lovely in a vase. Would you like me to arrange it for you? I'm considered rather good at doing flowers.'

'You are very kind, madame, but I must not trouble you.'

Some memory stirred faintly in Peter's mind. 'Mountain ash - isn't that a talisman against evil magic?'

The curé admitted: 'There are those who believe it to be so.'

Dora, momentarily excluded from the conversation, had not been wasting her time. 'There are no mountain ash trees in the churchyard,' she cried archly. 'Mon père, where did you get it from?'

The curé twirled the branch unhappily: 'Among the Bretons, the old beliefs die hard. They are faithful children of the Church, madame – never doubt it – but they cling still to certain relics of their past. It can happen that a person dies in such circumstances that these superstitious beliefs come into play. In such cases a talisman may be placed on his tombstone so that his evil spirit shall not walk.'

'In the twentieth century!' Dora exclaimed in mock consternation.

'We are less advanced than you suppose, madame.'

'I never heard of anything so absolutely archaic. Do they really believe that evil spirits walk?'

'Whose grave was it?' Peter asked with growing foreboding.

'A young man, monsieur. You would not know his name. He died three years ago from eating poisonous berries.'

'Which he found on the Ile des Regrets?'

The curé looked obstinate and unhappy. 'As you say, monsieur, he found them on the Ile. There were those who said he should not be given Christian burial, but with God's help I managed to prevail.'

Only just, Peter thought, glancing at the decrepit corner from which the curé had come. 'May he rest in peace,' he said.

'Amen.' The curé crossed himself. 'Au revoir, monsieur . . . madame . . .'

'This place is extraordinary,' Dora said before he was out of earshot. 'Even the priest is afraid. And the proprietor last night more than half believed what he was saying. I'm so glad we didn't miss this.'

Peter's fears about the boat were justified when they reached the harbour; Dora had one already laid on.

'I had to pay the earth,' she confessed, 'but I know it's going to be worth it. It'll make a wonderful story to tell when we get home.'

Peter stowed away the picnic-basket and the camera, which Dora had insisted they should bring. His fiancée irritated him this morning, though there was nothing new in this. Sometimes he even wondered if he would have continued with the engagement if everyone else had not been so sure she was the girl for

him. They declared her sensible when she seemed to him merely insensitive. More and more he was reminded that 'fools rush in . . .' But it was not in Peter's nature to struggle hard and long against anything. Dora sensed this, and it had given her the upper hand. They were going to the Island of Regrets because Dora wished it; Peter automatically wished the same.

Their boat had an outboard motor which left a faint blue haze as they put-put-putted away. From the jetty the net-menders watched them, and the gulls screamed in the perennial excitement they display whenever a boat, however small, puts out to sea. Dora was at the tiller (she had claimed to know the channel) and Peter noticed with surprise the way she was hugging the shore. She seemed intent on putting the maximum distance between them and the harbour before setting course for the island in the bay. At last, just before they were out of sight behind a headland, she swung the little boat around, and, opening up the throttle to its limits, made straight for the Ile des Regrets.

At once, angry shouts arose from the shore behind them. Looking back, Peter saw that every man was on his feet. They were gesticulating – beckoning and pointing. One man – the owner? – even shook his fist in the air.

'Are you sure this is the course they gave you?' Peter asked Dora. 'They don't seem to like it very much.'

'They don't like our going to the island,' Dora said calmly. 'But we've got too good a start for them to be able to intercept.'

'Why didn't they make a fuss when you hired the boat?' Peter queried. 'They must have known what you were going to do.'

'They may not have asked or they misunderstood when I told them. Besides, I did not let them know we were coming here. I told them I wanted a boat to go around the headland to the next bay.'

'You lied to them,' Peter said.

'Only because I had to, Peter darling. They wouldn't have hired me the boat if I'd told the truth. In a sense you can say that their own superstition brought it on them.'

'The superstition, as you call it, is very real to them.'

'More fools they. It's about time they learned to live without it.'

'They could no more do that than get by without the air they breathe.'

'Unhealthy air,' Dora said, breathing it in in lungfuls, while the wind and spray brought colour to her cheeks.

Ahead of them lay the sheltered, smiling inlet which Dora's finger had marked on the map. A wooden jetty, its planking decayed and rotten, was the only intimation that the Ile des Regrets had life. Dora switched off the outboard motor and the engine coughed. It was time to wade through the shallows.

Reluctantly Peter stood up.

'Don't make such a mountain out of it, darling,' Dora said sweetly. 'You'll have to carry me across the threshold next.'

Oh God, Peter thought, swinging a leg over the side of the boat, which rocked alarmingly, I wish I didn't have to marry this girl.

And immediately his foot touched bottom. He had made his first wish, the wish which would be granted by the Ile des Regrets.

By the time he had waded ashore, carrying Dora, Peter's momentary forboding had gone. In no circumstances could he imagine that he would regret the engagement's being broken. He might even break it himself. Only – she was the ideal wife for him – everyone said so. Surely so many people could not be wrong? There would be such explanations and recriminations. Any doubt he felt would be dismissed as pre-nuptial nerves. On the other hand, if the engagement could be broken by Dora or some force outside his control, he could accept it as the working of fate or fortune, and (after a decent interval) rejoice. The Island of Regrets might be renamed the Isle of Gratitude. He set Dora down on it with a jar.

'What a darling place!' she exclaimed over-loudly. 'I do wish I could believe in magic, like you.'

'I hope that isn't your first wish,' Peter said sourly.

Dora favoured him with her most indulgent smile. 'Darling Peter, you really believe in it, don't you? Now, stand still. I'm

going to take your photograph. You look so sweet, standing there on the edge of the water.' She was adjusting the camera as she spoke.

Dora was an excellent photographer. She had an instinctive eye for composition and pose. Peter, normally slight and insignificant, looked a colossus against the empty space of sky and sea. Not that this gave him any satisfaction, as he stood there twisting his face into a smile. He would have given anything to turn and leave the island, but Dora was already summoning him to come on.

In a sense he did not blame her for advancing, for the island looked inviting and serene. From the sandy bay with its high-water mark of shells and pebbles, a track led inland, following the course of a stream. On each side of the bay the cliffs rose sheer and craggy, the ledges occupied by rock pigeons, gulls and terns. At the top of the slope where beach and scrub-grass intermingled, someone had built a clumsy cache for the stores which were brought once a week by the boat from the mainland; it was a further sign that not all the dwellers on the island were 'unseen'.

The path and the stream kept pace along a grass-grown valley. The slope of the land was getting steeper all the way. Looking back, Peter was surprised to see how great was the distance they had covered. The island had the power, it seemed, of suspending time. Then he glanced at his watch and at the sun approaching its zenith; the sense of timelessness was apparent rather than real. They had been walking a good half-hour and he had not noticed, so engrossed was he by the unfolding scene.

Despite the lateness of the season, there were wild flowers in profusion everywhere. From low-growing thickets of gorse and bramble the yellow-hammers were demanding bread-and-no-cheese. The blackberries, Peter noticed, were ripe and luscious; they looked more like clusters of jewels than fruit. It was easy to understand that a local boy might fill his stomach and his pockets. Happily, Dora did not like blackberries . . . He doubted even if she had noticed their existence; she was so intent on taking photographs.

At the top of the slope the grass gave place to woodland – deciduous trees in shades of autumn gold. On a Breton island trees are hardly to be expected. Peter said as much to Dora, who did not reply. The explanation was perfectly simple, as Peter was very soon able to see, for the centre of the island was a depression like a deep saucer, protected on all sides from the almost ceaseless wind.

The track – path was too grandiose a word to describe it – began once more to descend. In the bottom of the saucer a house hugged a cloak of conifers so tightly around it that only a chimney showed. Perhaps the house would be ruined and desolate, given over to martins and bats. Overhead the pine-trees merged, making the path darker; underfoot the pine-needles carpeted the ground.

‘Aren’t you glad we came?’ Dora called out to him.

This time it was Peter’s turn not to reply.

In not-quite-mock anger, Dora pelted him with fir-cones, one of which hit him in the eye. Peter cried out in mingled pain and protest. Dora was instantly at his side.

‘Did the nasty little fir-cone hit him, and did his horrid Dora throw it, then! Never mind, Dora will kiss it better.’ This she proceeded to do. Peter remained unresponsive. She flung away from him in a pet.

‘I can’t think what’s the matter with you this morning. Are you sulking because you didn’t want to come? Really, Peter, you behave no better than a baby. For heaven’s sake be a sport and come along.’

She marched off briskly, leaving Peter to follow, which he did, albeit with resentment in his heart. Neither of them noticed that one of the little fir-cones had lodged in the outside pocket of her bag.

The path through the pines led ever more steeply downwards. They had left the sunlight behind. The pine-needles underfoot muffled their footsteps. There was something sinister about this absence of sun and sound. Small flies darted about under the pine-trees. A clump of scarlet, white-spotted toadstools made Dora exclaim: ‘Look, Peter, there’s your magic – fairy houses.’

'Deadly poisonous,' Peter remarked.

The more he penetrated this wood, the more he wanted to get out of it, but Dora boldly led him further in. No wisp of smoke came from the chimneys showing above the tree-tops. The path itself had a little-frequented air.

'Do you suppose anyone lives in the house?' Dora asked him.

'No,' Peter said, not wanting to believe.

Almost before they knew it, the house was upon them. A sudden twist in the path and there it stood. Grey stone, four-square, its windows protected by closed shutters, it had a desolate and unresponsive look. Yet the front door swung open on its hinges; the ubiquitous pine-needles had drifted into the hall. They had also blocked the guttering and the drain-pipes. After the autumn rains damp patches showed on the wall.

All around the trees formed an elliptical clearing, the longer part of which lay directly behind the house. A rusty door-bell, its chain bracketed to the wall to discourage visitors, reverberated when Dora pulled it with unexpected sonority through the house.

'Suppose someone answers?' Peter said with apprehension.

'Nonsense, darling, the place is absolutely dead.'

It certainly seemed so; no hesitant footsteps or creaking shutter, no voice sharply demanding 'Who's there?' Nevertheless, remembering the cache for foodstuffs and the boat's once-weekly call, Peter's uneasiness mounted. No one had described the island as uninhabited, though they had seen no sign of life between the house and the shore.

Dora, untroubled by these considerations, pushed idly at the swinging front-door. It opened inwards with a sudden shrill whine from the hinges, spilling a drift of pine-needles to the floor.

'Why, the place is furnished!' Dora said, startled for the first time out of her phlegmatic calm. 'What a shame to let it go to rack and ruin.' She was tcha-tcha-ing and inspecting as she spoke.

Peter wondered what the owners would say to two in-

quisitive foreigners if they found them poking round in their hall; but he was bound to agree with Dora that it was a shame to see objects of beauty and value sinking through neglect into a state of disrepair.

Dora pushed open the door to the drawing-room. It revealed the same melancholy scene. The silk upholstery was split and rotten, the carpet dim under dust. At the windows hung what had once been curtains. Cobwebs trailed and floated on the walls, massing around mirrors and pictures and festooning the chandelier. It might have been the Sleeping Beauty's palace, except that there is nothing fairy-tale about filth.

'The whole place wants burning,' Dora stated, sneezing as the dust got into her throat.

'You don't want to go upstairs?' Peter asked her.

She missed the irony of his tone. 'I want to get out,' she said abruptly. And walked through toward the back door.

This gave on to the long and narrowing garden, whose greatest width was just below the house. It was entirely filled with a rank weed too coarse even to be couch-grass, which had submerged the outline of flower-beds and overrun even the terrace's stones. Unlike the flowers on the island, the weed had faded; its leaves were colourless, deepening to brown. It lay unstirred by the wind within its prison-enclave of pine-trees, for all the world like some malignant, stagnant pond.

And in the middle of it a man was standing, with his head sunk low upon his chest. He stood with his back to the house, and his hands thrust deep in his pockets. His long white beard and hair and old-fashioned garments made him look like Rip van Winkle sleeping on his feet.

'Why doesn't he speak to us?' Dora whispered.

'Perhaps he hasn't heard us,' Peter replied. He knew in his heart that this was not the answer, but he obligingly called out 'Good day.'

'Bonjour,' Dora added for good measure.

The figure neither moved nor spoke.

'He must be deaf,' Dora concluded.

'Or dead,' Peter added, half to himself.

Dora's literal-mindedness came to her rescue.

'He can't be dead, dear. He's standing up.'

'So he is,' Peter said. 'I hadn't noticed.'

She gave him a glance of dislike. 'Aren't you going to do anything about him?' she demanded. 'Find out who he is or ask him if there's anything he wants.'

'*Comment allez-vous?*' Peter dutifully shouted, aware of its incongruous sound.

The man might have been a statue for all the signs he showed of responding.

'Go up to him,' Dora said.

'What for? We have nothing we can give him. Remember we're trespassers here.'

'Then I'll go,' said Dora determinedly. She began to move forward as she spoke.

'Wait,' Peter commanded. 'You're too sudden. You'll give him too much of a shock.'

He began to edge cautiously around the garden. Dora did the same on the far side. Still the old man stood with his head bowed, like a statue. They tried French and English, even German; he did not look up. They were near enough now to see that his clothes were tattered, his hair and beard were matted and unkempt. His face, though grimed with dirt, had a strange, unhealthy pallor – maggot-white, Peter thought to himself. Even Dora's exuberance had subsided. For once she was not taking the lead. Peter stepped forward and laid a reluctant hand on the greasy shoulder.

'Can we do anything to help?' he asked awkwardly. 'Is there anything you need?'

At his touch the figure came to life convulsively, broke free of his grasp and raised its elf-locked head. The eyes, scarlet-rimmed, the lower lids drooping like a bloodhound's, lit up as they contemplated him. The voice was cracked and produced with difficulty, wheezing, as though, like the furniture, it had been neglected to the point of disrepair. His laughter when it came was a shrill cascade of cackles – harsh but not resonant in that oppressive air.

'Come at last, he has, the new tenant,' he cried between his

peals of hideous mirth. 'I could feel it in my bones that you were coming. I've been waiting for you since yesterday.'

Peter backed away from the madman. 'You're mistaken. I don't live here.'

The madman's laugh rose, screeching and unearthly. 'Don't try to deny it, my dear sir. This commodious residence is never left untenanted. It wouldn't be good for it, you know. I've been wondering who would replace me when I gave up my tenancy, because this winter, I'm afraid I shall really have to go.'

He put out a claw with black-rimmed finger-nails.

With a cry of fear Peter plunged back toward the path. Dora was already running as if the devils of Hell were behind her, but the madman made no attempt to pursue. He simply went on standing there, and laughing. The sound was audible all the way to the shore.

'The new tenant! The new tenant's coming. They're going to let me give up the keys at last. And the new tenant doesn't think he's going to like it. But he'll get used to it. It's a life-tenancy, ha-ha-ha!'

Peter and Dora were received in Kérouralhac with the same silence that they had preserved almost unbroken in the boat. They were both considerably shaken by their encounter with the madman, but neither was willing to admit as much, Peter because he feared to arouse Dora's derision, Dora because she was bewildered by herself. She was still far from accepting the Bretons' view of the island, but the effect it had on one was certainly very odd. During their flight to the shore she had known sheer unreasoning terror – a phenomenon which had not disturbed her rational mind before. Now, in the sunlight, and with a fresh sea-breeze blowing, she was exceedingly ashamed of this lapse. What was she to say if people asked about the trip to the island? Should she admit her fear, or make light of it, laugh it off? And what would Peter reply if questioned? But there was no need for Peter to speak. His white, set face was an announcement that all had not gone smoothly, even without the nerve twitching in his cheek.

As it happened, Dora need not have worried. No one was anxious to ask. The men on the quayside withdrew when they saw them coming and contented themselves with a long, unfriendly stare. They made no pretence of continuing with their occupations of mending nets or applying a lick of paint. They simply stood there in their uniform seamen's jerseys, dark trousers and sea-boots, and looked on with a hostile yet pitying air. Even the owner of the boat did not come forward. When Dora approached him, he promptly turned his back. Not even Dora was proof against such a demonstration.

'How stupid they are,' she observed as she turned away.

Her remark was audible, but they remained impassive.

'You've annoyed them,' Peter said. He longed to dissociate himself entirely from Dora's actions, but this was the most he could do.

'I like that! What have I done that you haven't?'

Peter forbore to explain.

'They're like savages,' Dora continued, unabated. 'It's as if we had broken a taboo.'

'Let's hope they won't turn hostile as savages.'

'Darling, this is Europe, for heaven's sake.'

'And the twentieth century,' Peter added.

Dora saw no connection between the two.

The street from the harbour was silent and deserted. The whole village knew they had been to the Island of Regrets. Children at play were called sharply into the houses; loiterers were seized and cuffed by the maternal hand. Conversations across the street were abruptly ended; the evening rang with the slamming of front doors. Only in the churchyard did the visitors encounter unimpaired indifference, the dead of Kérualhac having no cause for fear.

'Unfriendly lot,' Dora said, referring to the living. 'I shan't be sorry to get back to our hotel.'

'If it still is our hotel,' Peter muttered.

Dora looked at him. 'What do you mean?'

'With feeling running this high, we'll be lucky if they keep us.'

'Of course they'll keep us. We've booked in till tomorrow.'

If not, I shall certainly complain. To the French National Tourist Office, and to Michelin and Baedeker and the Guides Bleus and anyone else you care to name.'

'I'm sure you will,' Peter said hastily, 'but it won't solve the problem of tonight.'

'There may not be a problem. Stop fretting,' Dora commanded, her voice sharper because she was ill at ease.

However, she was right, as usual. She would be, Peter thought. At the Coq d'Or the proprietor had seen them coming. He came forward to greet them as they arrived.

'Bonsoir, madame . . . monsieur . . . You have made your expedition? The whole village can talk of nothing else. It is not every day there is a visit to the island. I hope at least that you have no regrets?'

'None at all,' Dora told him very firmly.

Peter allowed it to seem that she was speaking for them both.

'You see?' she said when they were alone together. 'The proprietor made no difficulties. Hotel people are civilised and cosmopolitan. They have to be - it's part of their stock in trade. It just underlines the difference between them and these ignorant peasants. The proprietor isn't afraid to speak to us.'

Nevertheless, it seemed to Peter that the proprietor was troubled. He had lost the easy manner of last night. He was politer than ever, even deferential, but there was a certain reserve in what he said. He kept his distance as though there was a physical barrier between them. At the bar, he did not join them for a drink. Instead, he stayed firmly behind the counter; it was as if he had walled himself in. He kept himself busy rearranging bottles and polishing glasses. There was no one else in the room.

It was Dora, of course, who opened the conversation.

'Who lives on the Island of Regrets?'

'No one, madame.'

'But someone does. We met him. We both saw him. Unless you're going to say he was a ghost?'

'No, madame, there are no ghosts on the island.'

'So he's a living person?'

The proprietor looked away.

'Isn't he?' Dora pursued. 'After all, the boat calls with provisions. He must be as alive as you.'

This time the proprietor faced her. 'You have met this person, you say?'

Dora nodded.

'Then you will know that he is a madman. There is always a madman on the Ile des Regrets.'

'How do you mean – there is always a madman?'

'It may sound strange, monsieur, but it is so.'

'But who sends them there? Where do they come from?'

'That monsieur, we do not know.'

'It's fantastic,' Dora burst out. 'Such callousness, such indifference.'

The proprietor was polishing a glass. 'Every community has its share of such poor creatures,' he said softly, 'and always they must be put away. They are dangerous to themselves and to others. The incurables, as one might say – although beasts in cages would be a better description, since they must always be behind bars; and what bars could be more effective than to be cast away on the Ile des Regrets without a boat?'

'You mean they are left there to die?' Dora asked in horror.

'No, madame, our madmen live for many years. They are amply supplied with provisions. By tradition, the whole village contributes. And when one goes, another is always forthcoming – no one knows from where. One day the whisper spreads through the village: "There's a new madman on the Ile des Regrets."'

'And you send out a welcoming committee?'

'Monsieur will have his little joke.' The proprietor was repolishing the glasses. 'You must pardon that I am so *affairé*. We hear tonight that a big coach party is coming and every bed will be in use. It does not happen often,' he continued, as if aware of the thinness of the excuse, 'but when it does, we are naturally very busy, since every room must be turned out.'

Complete stillness reigned in the hotel; the bustle of room-turning-out was evidently over. The excuse was so patently transparent that Peter was tempted to smile. The proprietor,

while aware of his duties as a *hôtelier*, was making sure they did not stay beyond tonight. Not only was some dreadful fate expected to overtake them, but they were regarded as bringers of bad luck. The whole of Kéroualhac ached to be without them, and they would never be welcomed back. This was therefore their last chance to probe the mystery surrounding the Ile des Regrets.

'What about that house on the island?' Peter demanded. 'That could do with a bit of turning out.'

It was the proprietor's turn to show a gleam of humour. 'Madmen are not good housewives, as a rule.'

'You're telling me,' Dora broke in. 'The place is filthy. How long has it been left to rot like that?'

'Since the owner built it,' the proprietor answered. 'He was another one who would not heed.' He looked at them over the glass he was polishing for the third time. 'Everyone told him that the Ile des Regrets was dangerous, but he did not choose to believe. He visited it, declared it to his liking, and decided to build a summer retreat. He had ample time to reflect upon our warnings during the years that he spent upon the Ile. He was rash enough to wish when he first set foot there that he might pass the rest of his life in this idyllic spot. As usual, his wish was granted and as usual it became a source of regret.'

'What happened?' Dora demanded.

'His wife died first of all. She was being rowed across from the mainland by a boatman who had lived here all his life. Inexplicably, he misjudged the crossing. They were caught in the tide-rip and drowned.

'As if this were not sufficient sorrow, his daughter was taken from him that same year. One wing of the house was not yet completed. The child was playing there when a wall collapsed.

'Instead of leaving the scene of his bereavement, our island dweller shut himself up in the house. He grew melancholy, neglected his financial enterprises; he made business trips to Paris less and less. He was a director of many companies, prosperous but not solid, except in build. The Stavisky scandal broke over him like a thunderstorm, for which he was completely unprepared. In a week his shares, like those of so

many others, tumbled; his frantic speculations on the Bourse all failed. He returned to the island broken in mind and body. Within a week it was apparent he was mad. His servants in terror sought refuge on the mainland. He was left alone on his island. For fifteen years he lived there. When he died, another madman took his place.'

'I don't understand —' Dora was beginning.

'No one understands, madame. One afternoon the boat-crew, unloading provisions, were hailed by a different man. No one knew where he had come from. To this day we do not know his name. He was succeeded by another, and another. The one you saw must be at least the sixth. Nor do we know how they get to the island in the first place, since no boatman has ever taken one across, but you have shown us, madame, that it is possible to hire or steal conveyance, and our madmen, who do not lack cunning, could easily have done as much.'

'But how do they know when to go there?'

'How does the swallow know when to journey south? There are things, monsieur, that science does not answer. And now, my wife calls that your sole is cooked.'

The proprietor came out from behind the bar-counter, not without a certain hesitation, Peter thought. And as he served the food and poured the wine, Peter noticed that the proprietor kept as much distance as he could between himself and his guests. Nor did the proprietor's wife issue forth after supper to receive their compliments on her cuisine, and the little chambermaid, seeing Dora coming, crossed herself and took to her heels. It was as though the whole village feared that disaster was going to strike them, some sudden death-in-agony in the night. Like the boy who had so rashly eaten blackberries on the island, and now lay in the churchyard with a twig of mountain ash on his grave. In this climate it was easy to see how superstition became established. The will to perceive causality was already there.

Next morning, when they came down safe and well to breakfast, Peter detected a slight disappointment in the air, mingled with relief that they were going and could therefore bring down no wrath on Kérouralhac. Not a soul was to be seen and

yet all eyes were upon them as the proprietor himself saw them off in the direction of Brest and St Malo.

During the next six months their recollection of the island faded as preparations for the wedding got under way. For Peter's sake, Mrs Matthews had determined to speed things up; long engagements were bad for the nerves, she said.

Peter was indeed in a state of considerable nervous tension, but not for the reasons that his future mother-in-law supposed. The impending union weighed heavily upon his spirit. He wished it were over, or else that it need never take place. But when he voiced his doubts to Dora she became tearful – an act in which long practice had made her adept – and rushed to confide in her mother, who discovered that April was a better month than June. Peter suffered her sympathetic understanding with outward gratitude and inward rage. He displayed the same stoic self-control when enduring the banter of his colleagues at the Ministry of Ag. and Fish. He had little time to reflect – or, when he did, to ponder – on the events on the Ile des Regrets. As for Dora, the island would have passed out of her memory completely had it not been for the vexing business of the snaps.

Every one of the snapshots she had taken on the island came out blank. The chemist's assistant talked knowingly about a faulty shutter, but the camera, when examined, was all right. Nor was Dora a tyro photographer, unused to light-readings and the like, or one who forgot to wind the film after each exposure or failed to take it out of the camera with care. The chemist's assistant maintained that he had not been negligent; he and Dora united in blaming the film; but the manufacturers, to whom Dora complained energetically, replied after six weeks that it was not their fault. The film had been tested in their laboratories and had emerged with flying colours. No other in that batch had been reported faulty and they could therefore accept no liability. They added, in what read like an afterthought, that the film appeared to have been exposed to strong white light. Dora crumpled the letter angrily when she received it and refused to have the matter mentioned any more.

Three weeks before the wedding, which was at Easter, Dora went down with a cold, caught while preening in her wedding-dress in an unheated bedroom before the only full-length mirror in the house. The cold made her feel heavy and miserable; her temperature began to rise. Despite a couple of days in bed and endless aspirins, the indisposition failed to respond.

The doctor, when he came (rushed off his feet by a measles epidemic), was not unduly alarmed by Dora's case. He satisfied himself that she had not got pneumonia, and departed, leaving a prescription behind. Peter fetched the prescription from the chemist – the same chemist who had developed the photographs – and was served by the same assistant, a small black-bearded young man. Peter thought he glanced at him accusingly as the white-wrapped sealed package changed hands, but he dismissed this as due to his imagination; it was not his fault that Dora was ill.

And ill she was. No one could accuse her of malingering. Her temperature had continued to rise. At 101° it was not dangerous, but it steadfastly refused to come down. Dora herself seemed fretful and restless, suffering now here, now there. So many of her organs seemed in turn to be affected that it was tempting to seek some psychosomatic cause. The doctor called again, looked baffled and remained cheerful, though there was no doubt his patient had lost a lot of weight. A BCG test for TB proved negative. Even so, the doctor's cheerfulness did not fade. Dora, he assured her mother and her fiancé, was one of the healthiest young women he knew, and as usual when the healthy succumbed to illness, they were apt to worry and make recovery slow. He had no doubt that Dora's disease was due to a virus – exactly which he was not prepared to say. The viruses, like the Joneses, were so numerous as to defy classification; from uniformity came diversity. He suggested that Dora should go into hospital for observation and admitted that the wedding might have to be put off.

Dora wept when the suggestion was put to her. She had made up her mind to be an Easter bride. Her mother and the doctor tried to soothe her. Peter felt guiltily that he ought to do the same, but his half-hearted attempts were so unsuccess-

ful that Mrs Matthews ordered him from the room. On the landing he paced up and down uncertainly, a prey to the conflict of his thoughts.

Dora did not improve in hospital; instead she grew steadily worse. Wasted, feverish and hollow-cheeked, she was scarcely recognisable. The wedding was indefinitely postponed.

It was while Peter was visiting her that she dropped her bombshell. She put her burning hand in his and said: 'Darling, I'm not getting better - I'm not going to. It's because we went to that wretched Ile des Regrets.'

'Nonsense, Dora,' Peter said sharply. 'What are you talking about?'

'I don't know.' Her eyes filled with tears - of weakness this time. 'It's just the way I feel about it all.'

'Sick fancies,' Peter said with attempted heartiness. 'You'll be as right as rain very soon.'

'But they don't even know what's the matter with me. A virus disease can mean anything.'

'Or nothing,' Peter tried to reassure her. 'You mustn't upset yourself like this.'

'No,' Dora agreed with unaccustomed meekness. 'Only I keep thinking about that wish.'

'What wish?' Peter demanded.

'The wish that I made on the island - that I might believe in magic. Like you.'

Peter also had expressed a wish on the island, though he preferred not to think about it now.

'I don't see any connection between your wish and your illness,' he objected.

'But there is.' Dora lowered her head in confusion. 'I believe in magic now.'

The icy fingers on Peter's spine made him shiver. Without conviction, he said: 'You're being a bit extreme, like all converts. This could be coincidence.'

'No.' Dora shook her head with something of her old vigour. 'I've never been ill like this. It's like that boy who ate blackberries on the island, except that his was mercifully quick.'

'And you're not dying,' Peter said with what cheerfulness he

could muster. 'And you didn't have anything to eat. Or did you?' he asked, alarmed by Dora's silence.

'No, Peter, I ate nothing.'

And then it all came out in a torrent of self-justification. She had taken something from the Island of Regrets. 'Only a fir-cone, Peter, like the ones I was pelting you with. And I never intended taking it. It must have fallen into my bag. I didn't find it until two nights later in the hotel at St Malo, and then I said nothing to you.'

'What did you do with it, then?'

'Nothing, darling. I brought it home and put it in a drawer.'

'You mean you've still got it?' Peter demanded with sudden excitement.

'Yes. It's in the top drawer of my desk. Unless Mummy's tidied it away,' Dora added. 'She does sometimes. But it was there before I fell ill - I saw it. It's opened a bit but it's otherwise perfectly preserved.'

Peter stood up. 'In that case, we must return it.'

'Do you think that will do any good?'

'It won't do any harm, and your doctors are not being successful. Restoring the fir-cone is your only chance.'

'But there's no postal service to the island. And no one from Kérouralhac would go.'

'If you like, I'll take it,' Peter offered.

Dora made objections, but allowed them to be overruled. She gave him instructions where to find the fir-cone, and Peter went at once to her house. Mrs Matthews looked startled and not too pleased to see him, but she held the door open none the less.

'What is it? Is Dora worse?' she demanded as soon as Peter had stepped into the hall.

Peter shook his head and explained his mission: Dora wanted something from her desk.

'Why didn't she ask me to bring it?' her mother protested.

'She only thought of it just now.'

'It must be very urgent if it couldn't wait till tomorrow.'

'It is urgent,' Peter assured her. 'It's a matter of life and death.'

She followed him reluctantly to Dora's bedroom, where the desk was kept unlocked. It was a walnut Queen-Anne-style model with small drawers that pulled out sideways, but there was no fir-cone in any of them. Peter began to poke about among the papers stuffed into pigeonholes above the writing flap.

Mrs Matthews watched him in silence, like a professional burglar assessing an amateur's attempts. 'If I knew what you were looking for . . .' she suggested.

'I'm looking for a fir-cone,' Peter said.

'A fir-cone!' Mrs Matthews's voice was remarkably like her daughter's. 'You're not going to tell me that Dora sent you here to pick up that?'

'It has sentimental associations,' Peter said lamely.

'A fir-cone, indeed! I can tell you, you won't find that.'

'You mean you know where it is?' Peter asked hopefully.

'I put it in the dustbin last week.'

'What!' Peter spun round, leaving the desk-drawers gaping.

'What in heaven's name possessed you to do that?'

'I take it I may act as I wish in my own home,' Mrs Matthews reproved him. 'Dora is my daughter, after all.'

'That doesn't give you the right to dispose of her belongings. Couldn't you have waited till she was dead?'

'Peter!'

'I'm sorry. I didn't mean it. Forgive me.'

'My poor boy, you're thoroughly overwrought.' Such demented distress was so flattering to Dora that Mrs Matthews was prepared to be generous in return.

But Peter ignored her generosity. 'Which day does your dustman call?'

'Tuesday morning,' Mrs Matthews answered.

'Then there's just a chance that the fir-cone is still there.'

He was already on his way to the kitchen when Dora's mother succeeded in catching his arm. 'Peter, listen. I know you hate to disappoint her, but there's no point in turning my dustbin upside down. The fir-cone won't be any use if you find it. It was mouldy. Rotten to the core.'

With a cry, Peter broke away from her. 'Are you certain?'

'Of course I am. That's why I threw it away. You don't really think I'd dispose of Dora's things for no reason?'

'But she told me the fir-cone was all right.'

'I expect she hadn't looked at it lately.'

The sweat was standing out on Peter's brow. 'I've got to have it,' he cried. 'Oh God, I've got to have it.'

He made a dive toward the kitchen-door. There was a clatter as the dustbin was up-ended. The refuse rolled in all directions over the yard. Mrs Matthews watched with mingled alarm and horror as Peter, unheeding, flung himself on his knees among the cinders, tin cans, withered flowers, empty bottles and rotting cabbage-leaves.

Even so, he almost missed the fir-cone, which had rolled as if trying to escape. Then he spied it and rose, stained but triumphant.

Dora's mother looked at him pityingly. 'You see? It's exactly as I told you – not worth keeping. Dora won't want to have it now. In fact, I doubt if the hospital would allow it. It's not a very hygienic souvenir.'

Something about the fir-cone's soft, rotting substance made Peter's gorge rise until he wanted to retch. He fought down the nausea with an effort. It was as though his fingers had touched decaying flesh.

He put it in his pocket and turned to Dora's mother. 'I'll take it back,' he said in a hollow-sounding voice.

'I should leave it till the morning,' she said gently. 'They won't let you see Dora now.'

'No, no. I don't mean to Dora. I mean I'm taking it to the Ile des Regrets.'

To Peter, that evening was the beginning of a nightmare. It proved impossible to book a seat on a plane. The Easter holiday rush had already started and there was nothing for it but to travel by boat and train. But he had already missed the night boat from Southampton and he could not afford another twenty-four hours' delay. The fir-cone in his pocket seemed to be mouldering faster. Eventually he settled for the crossing Newhaven-Dieppe. From Dieppe he could travel cross-

country to Quimper, and from Quimper by bus to Kéroualhac. He did not know how he would cross from there to the island, but trusted that he would find some means of accomplishing this last lap. He would beg, buy, borrow, even steal a boat if need be. Desperation would show him the way. The fir-cone had to be returned if Dora's death were not to be on his conscience, for had he not wished that their marriage might never take place? Admittedly he had not wished that any disaster should befall Dora and nothing had been further from his thoughts; but it was the way of the *Ile des Regrets* to grant a wish and cause one to regret its granting – as Dora regretted being ill.

At the thought of that mysterious malady, Peter's scalp prickled. Dora, like the fir-cone, was rapidly wasting away. Unless he could return it in time, he knew too well what would happen. And now, when he most needed speed, he encountered only adversity and delay.

The Channel was rough and the boat was an hour late on the crossing, which meant he had missed his connection with the fast train. At St Malo a porter gave him wrong information and allowed his train to pull out under his nose. The excited Englishman in a stained suit, unshaven, untidy, speaking unintelligible French, was an object of mirth rather than of pity to this Breton, who, when he understood the purport of his questions, amused himself with over-literal replies. No, there were no more trains until tomorrow. The last bus? That had left an hour ago. There would not be another till Saturday. A daily service? *Bien sûr* there was a daily service, but it did not run on the Friday before Easter, of course. Yes, monsieur could hire a car if he preferred it, and no, the garage was not open this afternoon. And who had said anything about there being no means of getting to Quimper? Monsieur had been asking about getting there *direct*. But if he took a bus to La Rocaille and there changed to another bus, he could be in Quimper by half past four tonight. Only the bus for La Rocaille was on the point of departure; one would telephone and ask it to wait . . .

It was when he was on the bus and had got his breath back

that Peter first saw the Face. Small and malignant, it leered at him from a peasant-woman's market-basket and seemed to require some leer or gesture in return. Its expression was one of malicious satisfaction, as though it were pleased that the journey was late and slow. Yet when Peter moved his head in an effort to escape its triumph and looked again at the basket, it was no longer there.

Thereafter it played hide-and-seek with him among the passengers; it peered at him from over the shoulder of the man in front; it grimaced at him from the crook of a woman's arm hung with parcels; where two children put their heads together and whispered, it made an evil and, to all but Peter, invisible third.

It vanished each time he moved abruptly on the narrow seat, to the discomfort of his neighbour who glared at him with such intense ferocity that Peter felt impelled to explain.

'Il y a quelquechose dans le panier de cette dame-là,' he murmured.

'Et vous, vous avez quelquechose dans le cul.'

Between dread of seeing the Face and mortification, Peter did not know which way to look. No one else seemed to have perceived this grotesque, non-fare-paying passenger. Peter began to wonder if he was imagining things; he had slept very little on the crossing . . . And then the Face put out its tongue at him.

Quick as lightning, Peter returned the compliment, only to meet the horrified then angry gaze of the woman opposite. She gave a small, involuntary scream. Peter's neighbour cautioned him to mind his manners. Any trouble and they would put him off the bus, him and his remarks about 'something in her market-basket'. Just let him try anything with Madame Blanche, that was all.

In vain Peter protested that his gesture was not intended for the lady. The whole bus looked at him with pity and scorn. *'Mais voyons!'* his self-appointed gaoler-neighbour expostulated, 'there is only Madame Blanche who sits there. Therefore you intended to insult her. Whom else could you have intended

to insult?' And the other passengers joined with the Face in looking at him accusingly all the way to La Rocaille.

The second bus was waiting in the town square. It appeared incredibly old. The windows did not fit, and they bumped and rattled as the bus threaded its way over La Rocaille's cobblestones. The woman with the market-basket was no longer with them, but as he turned to look at the landscape, Peter saw with a shudder of fear that the Face still was. Only now it had been joined by other Faces. There was a whole row of them above the electric lights. They grinned and gibbered, put out their tongues and made long noses, leered and winked at him in an obscene, revolting way. He passed a hand across his eyes, and found it wet with perspiration. The sweat was standing out in beads upon his brow.

'Stop the bus and let me off,' he commanded.

Someone behind asked if he felt all right.

'Yes. No. I want to get off,' Peter repeated.

Impossible, the bus was late already, he was told. There was no time to wait for someone to puke by the roadside. From somewhere his fellow passengers produced a stout brown paper bag.

'But I don't feel sick!' Peter protested emphatically.

'You wanted to stop the bus.'

'Only so that I could get out and walk a little. Away from those Faces up there.'

He jerked his head in the direction of the light-bulbs, three of which had failed to come on. His fellow passengers followed the gesture blankly. It was evident they saw nothing there. One or two of them tapped their foreheads significantly. The woman behind Peter ostentatiously moved away. Only his gaoler-neighbour seemed unaffected. Peter wondered if he could see the Faces too. He concentrated on staring out of the window at the countryside, still desolate after a late cold spring, while the row of faces looked down with their air of malicious triumph, whose cause he was to discover soon enough.

A few miles from Quimper the bus stopped with a particularly bone-shaking rattle, and the driver-conductor got

down. He walked, bandy-legged but purposeful, towards the radiator, unscrewed the cap and let off a head of steam. '*Encore une foise,*' Peter heard the other passengers whispering all around him. It was evidently not a rare event. The driver leaned negligently against the bonnet, while clouds of steam rose into the evening air. From somewhere he had produced a can of water; he had also produced a cigarette. The passengers inside were likewise furnished. Everyone seemed prepared for a wait. And through the window Peter could catch a glimpse of the sea in the distance, sullen and heaving, and the tide was coming in.

In another hour the tide would make the channel between Kéroualhac and the island impassable. And after that, darkness would descend and he would be subject to another night's delay. In vain Peter tapped his feet and fidgeted with impatience, drumming his fingers on the rattling window-pane. Through it he could see the line of white which broke against a headland, and watch its progress, whipped by the wind, along the shore. If he looked inwards, he could see the mocking Faces, whose mockery was reserved for him alone. One of them in particular had descended from the ceiling and hovered a little way to the left of him in the air. The tongue ran over the lips in anticipation as they pursed themselves, ready to spit . . .

With a cry, Peter struck out at this monstrosity, an ill-aimed buffet which caught his gaoler-neighbour's lighted cigarette, knocking the glowing stub among the other passengers in an avalanche of swearing and stamping it out.

'Can't you save your tricks until you're back among the inmates?' the angry victim exclaimed. 'I could report you to the gendarmes for this one. You a pyromaniac, or what?'

'I beg your pardon,' Peter murmured in English.

'English, *hein?* We know that the English are mad. But, *sacré nom!* why can't you go mad on your side of the Channel? Don't you know that's what the English Channel's for?'

Peter's answer (if he made one) was lost in the revving of the engine. The bus, recuperated, moved off with a spine-jarring jerk. Through the window he could see that the line of

white around the headland had devoured a good deal more of the shore.

At Kérouralhac he was one of the first passengers to alight. The bus had stopped outside the Coq d'Or, which, as yet not open for the summer, presented a shuttered, cloistered front to the main street. Pausing only to note this inhospitable welcome, Peter sought the short cut to the harbour through the churchyard. Here there was no lack of hospitality. An open grave, boarded over, yawned near the path. The Faces, whom Peter had temporarily forgotten, peered at him round the corner of the church. In his pocket, where his hand stole now and then for reassurance, the fir-cone seemed deliquescent to his touch.

As he came out of the churchyard into the harbour, he became aware for the first time of the baying of the sea. It kept up a continuous worrying of the weed-covered rocks and the sea-wall, like hounds who have cornered a beast and are holding him at bay. The few boats drawn up on the hard were beached in safety. The fishing fleet had not left the port today. The only sign of life was a dinghy chugging its way across the harbour, piloted by an oil-skinned and sou'westered man.

Peter leaned against the harbour wall and feigned interest in the water, watching the man out of the corner of his eye. There was no other boat he could use to reach the island, and his chances of hiring it seemed small. No boatman would venture outside the harbour, let alone entrust the boat to someone else, for within the next half-hour the tide-rip would block the channel to the island; it was already dangerous to attempt to cross.

The man in oilskins seemed unaware of Peter's presence. He made fast the dinghy to a ring in the harbour wall and scaled the iron ladder from the water, leaving his boat bobbing below. He had stripped off his heavy oilskins for ease of movement and he wore the usual seaman's jersey underneath. A local fisherman, Peter thought – perhaps one of those who had been hostile when he and Dora returned from visiting the Ile des Regrets.

As the man approached Peter, he stared curiously. It was too early in the year for visitors.

Peter, feeling that some remark was called for, could think only of inanities.

'A bad day,' he volunteered with a glance towards the fishing fleet in harbour.

'Not unusual at this time of year.'

The fisherman was passing without so much as a second glance in his direction when Peter remarked: 'Not much activity here today.'

'Ah, monsieur, you come at a time of sorrow. We mourn the death of one of our best-loved men. I knew him all my life. He was like a brother. And now he is drowned, God rest him, and to be buried in the morning. It is sad when a man must carry his best friend to the grave.'

'The storm must have been a very bad one.'

'He was not drowned in the storm. He was drowned here in the harbour in calm water by that boat of his on which there was a curse. We urged him to get rid of her, but he was stubborn. He laughed at us for believing in bad luck. But last night the boat, a dinghy like mine with an outboard motor, capsized near the harbour mouth. The motor struck Yves on the head as he went under. He was dead by the time we got him out. In all my days I have never known a dinghy capsize like that one. There was no reason for it, except that the thing was accursed.'

'What do you mean?' Peter asked uneasily.

'A stranger would not understand, monsieur.'

'No,' Peter insisted, 'please explain. I am interested.'

'It has to do with the island in the bay, the Ile des Regrets, as we call it. The place is unlucky; no one from Kérourhac will go there, Yves no more than the rest. But last summer a young English couple of more than usual stupidity helped themselves to Yves's boat, which thus spent some hours on the island. The boat has been accursed ever since.'

'And the couple? What happened to the English couple?' Peter tried to keep the urgency out of his voice.

'I don't know, but I hope they have not gone unpunished. Since they have caused a death, they deserve to atone.'

'No!' Peter cried, and was astonished at his own vehemence. 'One of them has atoned enough. She lies sick of an illness that has defeated all her doctors, and unless I can reach the island tonight she will die.'

'It would be madness to try to reach the island,' the fisherman warned him. 'Apart from ill-luck, the tide is almost at its height.' He had already stepped between Peter and the seawall, as if to protect his boat.

'I will pay you good money to hire your dinghy,' Peter promised.

'Think I'd ever see my boat again in this sea? Or that I'd ever want to after she'd been to the island? No, monsieur, there's not a man in Kérouralhac will help you in getting there.'

'In that case I shall have to help myself,' Peter retorted.

'It's suicide,' the fisherman warned him grimly.

Peter's hand closed round the fir-cone as he thought of Dora. 'It will be more like murder if I don't.'

The man looked at him strangely, without blinking, and Peter recognised suddenly and with blinding clarity that here was the original of the Face. The lips were not pursed now to spit forth contumely; the expression seemed rather to be one of malicious glee. As Peter watched, the mouth began to stretch and widen until the lips were taut and distorted as an extended rubber band. The eyes, which were narrow and near together, seemed almost to be buried in the flesh. With a cry of horror, Peter lunged at the mask before him and heard rather than felt his knuckles connect with bone. He had no clear idea of what it was he was destroying; he knew only that destroy he must.

The fisherman went down like a ninepin. Peter, not normally a fighter, was suddenly shocked and appalled. His first instinct was to offer aid and explanation. His second to make for the boat. The second won, for already the fisherman was dazedly stirring. Then, as he saw Peter disappearing over the iron ladder, he gave a great shout and began to struggle to his feet. Peter's fingers wrestled clumsily with the moorings. He

cast off the rope just in time. As the fisherman's head appeared over the sea-wall, the boat began to glide away. The fisherman yelled something unintelligible and minatory. Peter stood up, his movement rocking the boat. He fumbled in his breast-pocket and produced his wallet, still stuffed with worn thousand-franc notes.

'Here!' he shouted, as a sea-gull screamed in derision. 'I don't want to steal your boat.' And he hurled the wallet with all his might towards the quayside, where it landed with a satisfying thump.

The fisherman, whose face seemed to have reverted to a normal Breton peasant's, gazed from Peter to the wallet, but made no attempt to pick the latter up. Then, with a shrug of massive resignation and a glance all around the empty wastes of the sea, he made off as fast as sea-booted legs would carry him. He crossed himself before he turned away.

Outside the harbour the waves began in earnest. The seabed seemed to be tilting this way and that. The waves did not break, but slid smoothly towards the coastline, intent on trying to vanquish its battered rock. Sea and land were locked in a sempiternal struggle in which countless vessels had been sacrificed to no effect. It seemed too much to hope that a dinghy might survive it, but to Peter's relief it did. After he had got used to the long glide over the surface of a shoreward-mounting swell and the heart-stopping moment at its conclusion when another wave reared up ahead, he began to realize that the dinghy (for the moment) could take it better perhaps than a bigger boat. He calculated the distance to the island. He might yet do it in time.

But the wind and water were against him. His progress was maddeningly slow. The tide, frothing in the channel, had made the water-level dangerously high. Without warning, the sea began to boil all around him, the wind and waves contending with the tide. The water, compressed into swirling eddies, began to race with the speed of an express train. The dinghy, almost on the shoreward side of safety, was borne broadside, parallel to the isle. In vain Peter struggled to turn her bows into the tide-rip. She heeled over, righted herself, heeled over,

further over, and overturned. Peter had a glimpse of her, carried keel upwards towards the jagged rocks at the island's harbour mouth. Then the sea propelled him in the same direction, and he struggled desperately to keep himself afloat.

The wave which flung him finally shorewards was one of the largest yet to break. The impact knocked all the breath out of his body, but at least he fell on sand. The sand was smooth, sliding treacherously beneath his fingers, until he realised he was caught in the undertow. Panting, heaving, straining to gain some purchase, his scrabbling fingers encountered a furrowed slab of rock. His hands were so numb that he could scarcely distinguish rock and fingers. Sea-water streaming down his face left him choking and half-blind. And then another drenching wave broke over him, and again he had to fight the undertow.

This time, by an effort he had believed beyond him, he dragged himself beyond the ocean's clawing reach. Spewing sea-water and retching his heart out, he lay prone and shivering among rock pools and seaweed, too terrified and exhausted even to think.

It was the cold that brought him to his senses. He was cold within and without. But surprisingly, his legs responded to his summons. Dizzily, staggering with the effort, he forced himself to his feet. There was blood on his hands and on his forehead where he had cut himself upon the rocks. His trousers flapped sodden and heavy about him. In the maelstrom his shoes had been sucked off. Behind him was a waste of whirling water, racing like a river in flood. Before him lay the now sharply remembered horrors he had encountered on the Island of Regrets.

At least, Peter thought, wringing the water from his garments, I have not made a wish this time. And that thought reminded him of the fir-cone. Suppose, in that wild sea, it had been washed away? But no! It was safely there in an inner pocket, no more pulpy than everything else he possessed. He beat his arms to restore some vestige of circulation, and set off inland towards the wood.

The path by the stream was spiked with reeds and marshy, with a green-tinged, evil-smelling ooze. His feet sank in above the ankles, his trouser-legs became solid with the slime. The stream which had babbled so delightfully now ran silent, swollen into flood. From the bushes no birds sang, despite the season. The light was beginning to fail.

In the pinewood it was darker still and more silent. A curious stillness prevailed. Peter almost preferred the desolation of bare branches to the pine-trees' sinister, everlasting life. He found the tree without difficulty from which the fir-cone had come. Other fir-cones lay on the damp, decaying needles. Reverently he laid his down. Its mildewed, water-logged appearance made it easy to recognise, yet when he looked a moment later, it had vanished clean away.

At once there was laughter all around him, thin, shrill laughter which had a spiteful ring. At first he thought it was the madman, but it lacked the raucous cackling of his cries. Besides, this was not one laugh but many. A chorus of malice echoed among the trees. And then he saw the Faces all around him, peering from behind tree-trunks, in the branches, even in the air at the level of his eyes.

Awkwardly in his bare feet and sea-sodden garments, Peter began to run. He ran downhill because it was the way he was facing, and also because a house was at least somewhere to go. The tenant might be mad – that did not matter. He was a fellow human-being after all. Anything was better than the company of the unseen dwellers on the island. Almost sobbing with relief, Peter pounded the solid oak of the front door.

It swung inwards, and he saw at a glance that nothing was different, except that the place was damper and exuded a musty smell. In the drawing-room some plaster had fallen from the ceiling and a strip of wallpaper was peeling from the wall. The whole house was even more silent than he remembered and had a curiously dank and vault-like chill. Or was it merely that he was soaked to the skin and shaken by rigors in every member? In the hope of attracting his weird host's attention, he pulled long and violently at the bell.

Silence. And after silence, more silence, welling in the dark on the heels of retreating light. In the hope that the madman might have kindled a fire, Peter made his way to the kitchen, but a glance at the ashes in the grate snuffed out his hopes. On a shelf stood several tins of food, unopened, but here also the dust lay thick. A plate in the sink contained some rock-hard unidentifiable substance which might have been edible once.

Peter peered out into the garden. The brown grass had been beaten to the ground by the fury of the winter storms that swept over the island. Of the madman there was no sign. Peter consoled himself by reflecting that the man might have been removed to a lunatic asylum on the mainland, though he knew in his heart this was not true. He shouted once or twice, but the only answer was silence. Not even an echo gave back his halloo.

Frightened more and more by this atmosphere of lurking evil, Peter made his way up the stairs. They groaned as though deploring his passage, which left a trail of water everywhere. The first bedroom he came to was empty, bare even of furniture. Two others, shrouded in cobwebs, opened off a corridor. At the far end was another doorway, masked by a moth-eaten portière. It crumbled and tore in Peter's fingers as he pulled it to one side and went in – and came face to face with the madman, propped up in a foully disordered bed. It took several seconds for him to realise that the staring eyes were sightless and that the madman, in fact, was dead.

The shock stopped his breath for a moment. When he exhaled, it was with a hoarse, choking scream. He turned and blundered blindly down the corridor, away from the hideous sight. But at the turn of the stairs a further shock awaited him. Confronting him was the madman's ghost. Wild-eyed, white hair disordered, the pallid face streaked with grime, the lips drawn back into a taut, tetanic rictus, the creature stood awaiting him. Peter threw up his hands in horror and the madman raised his arms to draw him in. There was a magnetism about his red-rimmed eyeballs. Against his will, Peter found himself advancing towards the outstretched arms. His own hands were outstretched to defend himself against the horror which left

him powerless in every limb. Yet his legs continued to bear him forward and the madman to hold out his arms.

Peter knew that the creature's touch would be icy, but he was not prepared for quite such burning cold. Involuntarily his hand withdrew from the contact, and the madman's arms fell to his sides. For an instant the two men confronted each other. Then Peter Quint began to laugh. His mirror image joined him in insane peals of grim amusement. 'The new tenant, ha-ha-ha!'

Whether Peter had always been mentally unstable, or whether the shock of Dora's death sent him over the edge, has been hotly debated by his and her relations, but neither Peter nor Dora care. Both in their different ways are past all caring – Dora in the tomb and Peter in a home, where his relations expeditiously placed him as soon as his condition became known. The proprietor of the Coq d'Or will tell their story with very little prompting from his guests, who find it makes an excellent *apéritif*. There is a new madman on the Island of Regrets.

NEVER TALK TO STRANGERS

By Alex White

LOTTIE BLAKE was travelling by train from Birmingham to London, and she was extremely nervous. She was a big heavy girl, with dark hair, flashing eyes and apple red cheeks. She had never left Henley-in-Arden before, and as well as being nervous she was very excited at the prospect of finding work in a large city. She loved the countryside but had the feeling that in London, instead of existing, she would really be living; that among the bright lights, the gaiety and the sophistication, she might find romance, and even perhaps fame.

She was a romantic girl.

Stella Smith, who had been to school with her was already in London, working in Paddington. She had been a little vague as to what her job actually was – some sort of job in a hotel she had said (a receptionist as far as Lottie could gather) but she was excellently paid, and she had suggested that Lottie should join her.

Lottie's parents had been against it at first, but the lure of the money (£20 a week as a start) was too much for them all, so here she was, on her way.

One thing however was marring her excitement. During the past two years there had been a series of murders in the district where she would be living, and the victims were always young girls of between sixteen and twenty, and Lottie was seventeen. The murderer not only killed the girls, but he dismembered the bodies, so that the police had to find the pieces – an arm here, a torso there, and a head perhaps in a hat-box like that play Lottie had done at school by Emlyn Williams. What was it called? Oh yes, Night Must Fall. Horrible! Stella however had made nonsense of Lottie's fears. 'You'll be perfectly safe with me,' she had said, 'if you keep yourself to your-

self and don't talk to strangers. You can share my digs which are smashing, and I'll look after you, until you're on your feet.' She had also promised to meet Lottie at Paddington Station. 'The great thing is,' she had written once again, 'never get talking to strange men, and then you'll be all right.' And Lottie promised her parents that she'd heed the advice.

She was travelling third class, and the carriage was crowded. There were six men and one other woman. Luckily the woman who was middle-aged and motherly was sitting next to her, and they struck up a conversation, and Lottie was able to ignore all the men. So at least she knew she was safe until she saw Stella.

'We'll be there in a jiffy,' said the motherly woman suddenly. 'Will you be all right on your own dear?'

'Yes thank you,' replied Lottie politely. 'My friend Stella Smith will be meeting me, and I'm sharing her digs, so I shall be fine.'

The train slid into the station, and the occupants of the carriage streamed out on to the platform. One of the men helped Lottie with her luggage, much to her dismay, but the moment he had put it on the platform, he lifted his hat and to her great relief left her.

The motherly woman was still a little anxious. 'Sure I can't help you love? I can easily wait a few minutes. Can you see your friend? Certain you'll be all right?'

'Oh please don't bother to wait,' answered Lottie confidently. 'Stella is sure to be here. She promised she would be, and she's very reliable.'

But Stella was not there. She was nowhere to be seen.

At first Lottie waited quite happily. This was London, and she had never seen such crowds in her life. It was all very thrilling. Birmingham had seemed busy enough, but this was fantastic.

People were hurrying about in all directions. Thousands and thousands of them. The huge trains wound in or steamed out of the long platforms. Whistles blew, guards shouted, an occasional dog barked. People met each other and kissed, left each other and cried - waved, shouted, ran, strode purposefully.

Mountains of luggage piled on trollies, were wheeled towards the barrier. It was all wonderful, and Lottie was in high spirits.

But there was still no sign of Stella, and now the big platform was almost empty.

Slightly worried, she picked up her two small suitcases and made her way to the barrier. 'Stella is sure to be waiting over there!' she chided herself – 'What a silly I am! What's the sense of buying a platform ticket when she only has to meet me, and then go straight out again?'

Only two other people, both men, were still on the platform with her. Even the porters had gone. But the ticket collector was still at the barrier. Lottie trotted towards him.

The ticket collector held his hand out for her ticket.

'Actually I'm waiting for someone,' said Lottie, 'so I'd rather stay on the platform. Do you mind? I just want to look past you to see if my friend is waiting for me that's all. OK?'

'That's all right my dear. Take a look round. Why not? I'll trust you!' He chuckled in a fatherly manner.

Lottie peered through the barrier – Stella was nowhere in sight.

She confided in the ticket collector again. 'I've never been to London before,' she said. 'I expect my friend has been held up. What would you advise me to do?'

'D'you know her address?'

'Yes.'

'Well I should wait another few minutes, then if she still doesn't come, take a cab to where your friend lives.'

'Good idea!' said Lottie gratefully. 'Thank you.'

She returned to the platform and sat on a bench with her two suitcases beside her.

One of the men came and sat down beside her.

He was a villainous looking man of about thirty, with a swarthy complexion, a mane of black hair, a large nose, and a loose-lipped red mouth. He was powerfully built and had huge square hands with swollen veins. Lottie studiously avoided looking at him, but he seemed determined to make her acquaintance.

'You a stranger to London?' he asked.

She didn't reply.

'You live here?' he insisted.

Lottie moved further away from him.

'You were expecting someone, weren't you?' he said. 'I bin watching you. You looked up and down the platform, then you talked to the ticket collector, and now you're waiting. Where d'you want to go?'

Lottie kept silent.

The man sounded impatient. 'Look here,' he said. 'There's no need to be so stand offish. I know London. I can take you anywhere you want to go. Tell you what, I'll give you something to eat as well.'

'No thank you,' said Lottie.

'Oh come on,' urged the man. 'What's the sense? I'm doing you a good turn.'

Lottie got up and moved away. The man followed her.

'Look,' said Lottie. 'You go on pestering me, and I'll ask the ticket collector to get rid of you.'

At that moment the second man came alongside them. He lifted his hat.

'Forgive me if I'm intruding,' he said in a pleasant rather light voice, 'but I wondered if I could be of any assistance?'

Lottie looked at him. He was tall and thin, with fair straight hair, blue eyes and a scrubbed rather pink and white complexion. He was quietly though well dressed, and he had a very pleasant smile. She warmed to him at once.

'Yes you can help, thanks,' she said gratefully. 'This man keeps on pestering me, and he won't go away. I'm waiting for a friend who promised to meet me, and this man has been watching me and wants to get fresh.'

'Allow me to take the place of your friend for a few minutes,' said the pleasant man. He then turned to the other man, and said, 'Perhaps you'd be good enough to leave the lady alone. I'm quite willing to take care of her.'

The big man started to protest, but finally shrugged his shoulders, and departed, and Lottie's new friend smiled at her

with great charm. 'Now,' he said cheerfully, 'anything else I can do?'

Lottie gave him her name and told him all her troubles. 'So I'm a bit lost,' she added anxiously. 'I don't know whether to stay here or go to her place.'

'Come with me Miss Blake,' said the pleasant man, 'I'll take you to your destination. My name is Clandon by the way - Peter Clandon.'

He took her by the arm. They passed the ticket collector and once outside the platform, he suggested refreshments in the refreshment room. 'And we can look out of the window and watch for your friend,' he comforted her. Over their scrambled eggs and coffee they became very friendly, and by the time they had finished eating, darkness had already fallen.

It was a fine night, and Lottie was delighted with the way things had turned out. She was even glad that there was no sign of Stella.

'This is quite an adventure,' she told Peter and he seemed pleased.

He now suggested that he should show her round London a little before taking her to her digs, and she readily agreed. He took her by bus up Oxford Street and down Regent Street, and she chattered to him excitedly all the way.

He was vastly amused by the fact that she had thought the man from whom he had rescued her was the killer of Paddington, and told her that it was his theory that killers seldom looked like killers, or they wouldn't get any victims. They both laughed heartily at this.

'Well at any rate I can see you're not one,' she said. 'My friend told me never to talk to strangers which is why I was clamming up on the other fellow, but you're quite different. You don't look like a stranger.'

And they both laughed again.

Finally she said she really must go to her friend's digs in case Stella was worrying about her, and Peter agreed.

'First come back to my place,' he said. 'I've got a job to do, and some gear to collect there, then I'll take you on to your final resting place.'

'What a horrid expression!' laughed Lottie and Peter once again joined in the laughter.

Peter lived in a surprisingly squalid part of Paddington. His room which was on the third floor of a near derelict house, overlooked a nearly deserted lane leading to a disused warehouse. Lottie didn't like to show her surprise and dismay, but she felt a distinct lowering of her spirits as she looked about her.

An iron bedstead with a filthy brick-red cover, over what judging from the bumps appeared to be an exceedingly ill-made bed, was in the corner. Beside it was a chipped wash basin. A tall fumed oak wardrobe with a vaguely art-nouveau acorn motif was beside this, and in the centre of the room was a fumed oak circular gate-legged table and two bentwood chairs. The floor was covered in very old stained linoleum, on top of which was a threadbare rug in black and dirty mauve. On the wall opposite the cupboard was an unframed strip of mirror with a crack running across the top right hand corner, and on the other side of the window was a built-in cupboard. The window which had green hessian curtains of different lengths and a tattered frill on the top was shut, and there was a sickly rather sweet smell in the room, which reminded Lottie of something she was unable to place.

'Sit down my dear,' said Peter cheerfully, 'and we'll have a glass of milk.'

Gingerly Lottie sat on one of the two dilapidated wooden chairs.

Peter rummaged in the built-in cupboard, and first of all produced two glasses and a bottle of milk which he set on the table by Lottie with a joking, 'You pour out and be mother,' then from the lower part of the cupboard he took out a hacksaw, some twine, a linen triangle which reminded Lottie of a boy scout's scarf, an old fashioned razor, a hammer and some nails. These he also put carefully on the table having first spread out a clean but torn pillow case, as a table cloth. He then went to the wardrobe and dressed himself in a white plastic boiler suit, which he zipped up to his neck over his suit. The boiler suit was fitted with a pixie hood, also in white plastic.

'Good heavens!' laughed Lottie nervously. 'Whatever sort of a job are you going to do?'

'My favourite kind,' said Peter. 'The job I like doing best in the world.' He sounded excited.

'What's that?' asked Lottie.

Peter smiled. 'Don't ask questions and you won't be told lies,' he replied. He smiled gaily.

Lottie drank her milk hurriedly. She found that she was suddenly frightened; she had no idea why. Perhaps it was the sight of Peter in his plastic overalls. He certainly looked rather sinister. Perhaps it was only this unlikely and hideous room, which even by Lottie's standards was depressing beyond belief. Perhaps it was the way Peter was now looking at her, with what she could only describe to herself as a calculating intensity. She finished the milk quickly and set down the empty glass.

'Well,' she said with an effort to sound gay and unconcerned, 'we'd better be off hadn't we? Stella will be mad at me.' She stood up.

Peter got up too, crossed swiftly to the door, and locked it.

'What are you doing?' asked Lottie in amazement.

'Locking the door,' said Peter flatly.

'I know,' said Lottie. 'But why?'

'Because you should never talk to strangers,' he answered.

Before she could reply he gagged her with the triangle of linen, and in spite of her frantic struggles he dragged her over to the iron bedstead.

'I'll have you first,' he said, 'and then I'll kill you like all the others, and I'll tell you how I always do it. I saw off your arms and legs while you're still alive, and though you're in agony you don't die until I saw through your heart. I've always killed them like that. It's the way they struggle most – and it gives me a real kick.' He laughed so hard that the tears came into his eyes.

She fought with all her strength but she was no match for him.

And as she fought with him on the bed she realised what the

smell was that had been puzzling her since she came into the room.

It was the smell of blood.

The last thing she heard him say when he had cut off both her arms and was preparing to saw off her legs, and just before she lost consciousness completely, was 'Never talk to strangers. Never talk to strangers.' And there was exultation and hatred in his voice.



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She saw the hideous, blackened shape that had once been a man. Its shrunken, hairless head stared with eye-less sockets, and handless, the stubby arms lay in pools of congealed blood. Her eyes fell upon the burnt and twisted legs. The skin had burnt away, leaving the bones exposed; long tapering claws in a bed of ashes...

Imagine a dead white face made of wax, give the face a pair of huge black gleaming eyes filled with a terrible hunger that a thousand years of sated lust will not satisfy, watch a pair of thin lips as they mouth silent obscenities, and you have a fiend that is begging someone to share its Hell...

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