



THE 15th PAN BOOK OF HORROR STORIES

Selected by HERBERT VAN THAL



THE 15TH PAN BOOK OF HORROR STORIES

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THE 15TH PAN BOOK OF HORROR STORIES

Edited by
HERBERT VAN THAL



A PAN ORIGINAL

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AMONG THE WOLVES

David Case

There was something about the killings which went beyond horror. All murder is horrible enough, of course, but one recognizes contingencies, one comprehends motivations and provocations and circumstances, and can understand, objectively, how a man may be driven or guided to murder. I feel I can glimpse into the dark minds which direct murder for profit, can dismember the warped violence of hatred and revenge, can pity the remorse of a killer swept helplessly along on uncharted currents and even, with a chill of grisly perception, understand the mangled patterns of a madman's mind reflected in mutilation or the insane fear of punishment which drives a sex maniac to destroy his innocent victim in the wake of satiated lust. These things are horrible, indeed, but they are conceivable – are no more than a distortion of normal human emotion, ambition, passion, greed – a magnification of urges which all men feel and most men keep bound and imprisoned in the deepest dungeons of the subconscious, shackled by the sensibilities. Sometimes – all too often – these shadowed impulses strike off the fetters of restraint and burst ravening from the corporal cell to stalk their prey, to command their former gaolers to violence. And then the crime is done. But somehow these murders were different. They invoked a feeling beyond such motivations as rage and fear, beyond even insanity as we have come to define it. It must have been a madman, there can be little doubt of that. No sane mind could have directed such crimes, no creature of chemical balance could have committed them. And yet – how can one express it? – the specific horror

of these murders was that they seemed so utterly *natural* . . .

I knew rather more about these crimes than the average person, through mere circumstance – was in at the start, so to speak; for the morgue was an extension of the museum in which I was pursuing my research. The museum was attached to the university, and the morgue was in a wing of the university medical centre. One supposes it was a convenient arrangement. The medical students required cadavers, and unidentified and unclaimed bodies gravitated to the morgue; and for the good of medical progress – but I have no wish to moralize on this point. Things are done, things often are necessary, an accomplished fact is a fact, no more. I mention it only to set the scene, as it were, for my casual and superficial involvement – an involvement, I must admit, due more to morbid curiosity than any more elevated motives. I am a scientist and, quite naturally, I am curious about behaviour which does not fit the natural patterns, which floats suspended at some unexplored level of the sentient sea and defies the tides and waves of society.

I had been doing my research for some time – far longer than originally intended, for research, by its very nature, feeds upon itself and grows, extends and spreads strange and devious branches from the fundamental roots – and so, quite naturally, I came to know a number of people connected with the museum and the university and, by extension, the morgue. I became acquainted with Detective-Inspector Grant of the homicide squad and with Doctor Ramsey who performed the autopsies for the police. With Ramsey, in fact, an arrangement had developed. We found that our homes were quite close, in the same suburb, and in time we began to share the task of driving into town, alternating our motorcars to lessen the traffic and parking difficulties on the campus grounds. He proved an interesting and congenial fellow and the arrangement was very satisfactory. We became more than acquaintances, if less than friends. And it was through Ramsey, indirectly, that I came to see the first body . . .

It was my day to drive and I'd left the museum library and

walked across the campus to the medical centre. It was a fine autumn day with brilliant leaves floating like colourful barques on a gentle breeze. Young couples strolled hand in hand across the lawns, and students reclined in the lee of oak and elm, talking of philosophy and love. It was a pleasant setting, slightly tinged with nostalgia – not at all the sort of time and place in which to encounter horror. I went into the medical building and down resounding corridors to Ramsey's office. He wasn't there, and his secretary told me he had been summoned to the morgue. She wrinkled her nose at the word and I didn't blame her. I had no liking for the morgue myself. It was not a place to spend an autumn day. But I went on down the stairs and along a corridor and entered the antechamber, a stark room with a tiled floor and a ramp leading up to street level and large metal doors. It was down this ramp that ambulance and hearse descended to disgorge their still burdens before rising, lightened once again, into the sunlight. It was a place of grim silence and foreshadowing. Worst of all, to me, was the smell – that sharp antiseptic scent. Does any odour smell as much of decay and corruption as antiseptic? It eats at the very core of sensation, invoking the essence of death – of more than death, of that which has never known life. The scent of decay and disease is foul but natural, that of antiseptic carries the stench of sterility. It parted like morbid mist before my passage and dampened my footfalls on the tiles.

I stopped at the glass cubicle.

The attendant looked up reluctantly from a lurid paperback, recognized me and nodded. The nod served to lower his eyes once more to the novel and he was already pursuing his pleasures as he gestured me through. I passed on to the operating-room, where Doctor Ramsey was washing his hands at the sink. His white gown was splattered with dark stains and he washed his hands carefully, rubbing them together like struggling serpents in soapy froth. There was a slab in the centre of the room and a shrouded form on the slab. Ramsey looked up with a solemn face and nodded. I advanced, avoiding the slab.

'Will you be long?' I asked.

'No. The necropsy is finished. I'm waiting for Grant to arrive. Identification.' The way he said it you could tell he didn't like that part of it. Maybe he didn't like any part of it. He took off the blood-stained gown and stuffed it in the hamper.

'No sense letting them see the blood, eh?' he said. 'Somehow the relatives always react more to seeing blood on a gown than to seeing the corpse.'

'Accident case?' I asked.

'It was no accident.'

I looked at him. He shrugged.

'The man was strangled,' he said.

'Oh. Hence Inspector Grant of homicide.'

'Exactly.'

'I'll wait outside.'

Ramsey moved his head.

'Yes. An unpleasant case. The only relative is a niece. Young, I gather. I hope they weren't very close. It's always rough when they were. And pointless.'

I raised my eyebrows.

'We know who the man was. No doubt of that. But legal procedure demands positive identification by a relative. It's funny how authority must always punish the innocent in the search for the guilty. Or maybe not funny.'

'Indicative maybe.'

'Maybe,' he said, and showed a sad smile. I turned to leave, and just then Grant came through past the cubicle. A uniformed policeman and a girl followed. Grant's face was set and the cop looked stern. The girl was quite young and gazed around the room with big eyes. She seemed frightened. Of authority, perhaps. She was also rather pretty – pretty enough for the attendant to raise his attention from the vicarious thrills of his novel and regard her bottom. It struck me as a reaction perfectly suited to an attendant at a morgue. It annoyed me, too. But the man was young and had seen a good many bodies wheeled past his cubicle. Perhaps the sum total of

his experience rested in the passage of death, and one must be tolerant.

Grant spoke softly to the girl, gestured to the cop and crossed the room. I noticed that his countenance was set more rigidly than normal and a lock of hair had fallen over his brow. He looked very much the way a police detective is supposed to look.

'Finished?' he asked Ramsey.

'Yes.'

'Lab boys been here?'

'Yes. I sent my report round with them.'

Grant seemed to notice me for the first time. We exchanged quiet greetings and he turned back to Ramsey.

'Anything that will help us?'

'I shouldn't think so. Must have been in his seventies. Hardening of the arteries, chronic...'

'Skip that. We know who he was, we can get those details from the reports. Not that they'll mean a goddamn thing. I mean any clue as to who did it? Or why?'

'Nothing. Nothing I could see. Not my job.'

'It was strangulation, wasn't it?'

'Oh yes. Definitely.'

Something in the doctor's tone caused Grant to look sharply at him.

'I mean his neck wasn't broken. He was asphyxiated. Must have been a rough death.'

'They're all rough,' said Grant, and his eyes shifted towards the girl. She was standing just inside the door, very pale, very frightened. The attendant was still regarding her. 'This is the rough part for us. The identification. The girl's only nineteen, hardly knew the old boy, and we have to put her through this. Well...'

He gestured. The uniformed cop took the girl's arm and led her forward. Ramsey walked over to the head of the slab and Grant stood beside the girl. His shoulders shifted. I had the impression he wanted to put his arm around her. But he didn't. He was a policeman and he couldn't. He nodded and Ramsey

drew the sheet down. He drew it down only enough to expose the face and I heard the girl draw her breath in with a sort of whimper. I looked down. I was surprised to see how old the man had been. I'd heard Ramsey say he was in his seventies, but somehow it hadn't registered — age seems irrelevant in discussing a corpse. But seeing him was different. Ramsey had obviously done his best to make the face seem relaxed and natural. But even so I could tell he'd died hard. The lips were forced upwards by the pressure of a swollen tongue and the eyes bulged beneath closed lids. The girl stared for a moment and then covered her face with both hands and turned away. Ramsey drew the sheet back over the old grey face.

'Miss?' Grant said gently.

She nodded behind her hands. It wasn't exactly a positive identification, but it satisfied the formalities, and Grant turned to the cop and said, 'Take Miss Smith outside.' He waited until they had left, then sighed.

'This will be a bad one,' he said. 'There's always so much public outrage when some old guy gets knocked off. So much interest and interference. And there seems to be no motive behind this one. Just a nice old guy. Killed in his own room. His landlady sort of took care of him, I guess. Anyway, she found the body this morning. Bringing him a pot of tea. He was on his bed and she thought he was sleeping. Then she looked down ... well, you know how they look with their tongues sticking out black and their eyes popping. She dropped the teapot, I can tell you that. The killer must have entered by the front door. Just walked in. Had to go right past the landlady's room, too, but she heard nothing. I think she's a bit deaf, although she got annoyed when I asked her about her hearing. Must be deaf or she wouldn't have been annoyed, eh? Just walked in cool as a cucumber and strangled the old boy and walked out again. Obviously not robbery. Nothing missing. Hell, he had nothing worth taking as far as that goes. Lived on a pension. Trimmed the hedge in return for his meals. Had a few friends his own age and drank an occasional glass of beer with them. No enemies as far as we know. No

opportunity to make an enemy, the way he lived. Just a quiet old chap waiting to die . . .'

'Well, the waiting is over,' Ramsey said.

'For him, yeah.'

Ramsey and I both looked at Grant.

'For us, it's just beginning,' he said. 'A crime without motives. Well, you know what that means. We wait for the next one.'

'You think he'll kill again?' I asked.

'The mad ones always do,' Grant told us. He pursed his lips; became aware of the displaced lock over his brow and brushed it back impatiently. 'They kill and they kill again, and all we can do is wait until a pattern develops, a general motivation rather than a specific motive. Oh, we get them in the end. The pattern always emerges. But it isn't a line on a graph or a pin stuck in a map. The pattern is made by the corpses of the victims. A man can have nightmares about that, you know. Any man. You dream of a tapestry, and it's all vague shapes and forms and then you get closer and see the design is made up of dead men. It isn't a tapestry then, it's a filigree of intertwining limbs and arched torsos. And faces. The faces staring out from the pattern, mouths open in silent screams of accusation, eyes wide in sightless fear. A man . . . well, he dreams.'

Grant broke off abruptly; looked rather ashamed of the intensity with which he'd been speaking and jammed a cigarette in his mouth. It was the first time I'd ever thought of a policeman as human, I think. He puffed on the cigarette, his cheeks sinking in, his eyes thoughtful.

'Would you say it was the work of a madman, Doc?' he asked. 'I mean, from the examination . . .'

Ramsey looked troubled.

'I'm not sure,' he said. 'Some aspects . . . and yet . . . Well, it's all in my report, Inspector. Black and white. It will mean more if you read it than if I talk about it. A report is always more objective and logical.'

'Sure. I'll read it.'

Grant turned as if to leave and then turned back, the cigarette in his teeth, his cheeks hollow.

'I'm delaying,' he said. 'I don't want to face that kid again. Have to, of course. But what if she asks me why the old man was killed? People ask cops things like that, you know? And will she feel better if I tell her it was a maniac? That there was no purpose, no reason; that nothing was gained by his death? Oh, I'm supposed to tell her I can't discuss it at the present time. Against regulations. Not allowed. But will that make her feel better? You drag some kid in and make her look at a dead body ... ah, hell. It's not pleasant, Doc.'

Ramsey nodded; looked at his hands thoughtfully. His hands had been scrubbed spotlessly clean, and there was nothing there to see. But he looked. I stepped back, feeling I was intruding. Grant's eyes had gone blank and his brow furrowed. The ash dropped unnoticed from his cigarette, a long ash that disintegrated when it hit the tiles and looked very improper in that sanitary and disinfected chamber. Somehow the ash looked too clean on that sterile floor.

'I hope to God it wasn't a maniac,' he said very softly.

Ramsey lowered his eyes. I took another step back. Then Grant turned sharply and walked out with his shoulders square. The attendant did not look up from his book, and it was some time before Ramsey looked up from the floor ...

We left the building and walked across to the parking lot. Most of the motorcars had gone by this time and the big concrete space looked strangely abandoned and neglected and forlorn. Ramsey hadn't spoken; he seemed to be pondering something – something both disagreeable and interesting – his expression that of a little boy using a stick to poke at the decaying carcass of a dead animal. He was thinking about the murder, of course, and I sensed he was considering that part which was in his report and which he hadn't wanted to talk about. It had captured my interest and, by this time, we were close enough to speak openly.

'Well? Was it a madman?' I asked, when we were in the car.

Ramsey shrugged.

I made an elaborate task of fitting the keys into the ignition but did not start the engine.

'There was something – some aspect – in your report, which troubles you, wasn't there?'

'There was, yes.'

'None of my business, of course ...'

He waved a hand.

'Oh, it isn't that. It troubled me because ... well, because it was unusual. And gruesome. I've been a doctor too long to get upset by violence and bloodshed, John. But this was different. It was ... well, calculated. Ghastly but calculated. The fact itself implied frenzy and rage, and yet there was none of that in evidence. It was as if the killer had coldly and deliberately set about his ghoulish act ...'

The term startled me.

'Ghoulish?' I asked.

'Oh, perhaps I'm being too dramatic. But ... well, when behaviour normally associated with maddened impulse and blind fury is suddenly transposed to an act of rational logical expedience ... well, it shakes a man. We are all prisoners of our own perceptions, you know. We have all learned to see things in a certain way and to interpret them in the light of our training and experience. And when a familiar object or action is suddenly glimpsed out of context ... seen from a different angle ... it causes turmoil within our preconceived limitations. It takes a while to get our bearings, to adjust our stance, to focus properly ...'

'What on earth happened?' I asked.

Ramsey didn't seem to hear my question.

'When I was younger, I used to ice-skate,' he said, speaking slowly. I blinked. I thought he was deliberately, and rather discourteously, changing the subject, and I reached for the ignition keys. But Ramsey continued. 'I learned to skate quite well,' he said. 'I was never particularly adept at sports or

games but in ice-skating I seemed to be more talented than most. I enjoyed it enormously. I learned to figure-skate, to cut designs across the ice. People used to watch me, admiring my abilities. But there was one strange thing. I wouldn't skate when it was dark. All the young people used to go to the rink at night, but the very thought gave me a chill. I had a vague dread – a fear even – of what lay beneath the ice at night. I visualized it – saw it in cross-section, as it were. There I was, cutting my smooth figures across the flat, predictable surface of the ice, and beneath that level there was the dark body of unfrozen water. The ice and water were related and yet they were not the same. I fashioned my designs at one plane while beneath me lay uncharted depths and inconceivable forms. So it is with life – with the human mind. We live our allotted years and carve out patterns upon a solitary level of existence, content and satisfied perhaps, and then something happens which opens a window, just for an instant, through the surface and allows us to glimpse the deeper, darker dimensions with which we share existence. We peer through this hole, we see cowed shapes and malformed concepts bloated in the waters and we shudder and look away until the ice freezes over once more and our world is smooth and flat again. Our world is as we know it, as we wish it, and we skate off and leave our pitiful little etching under our runners. And yet, from time to time, those broken areas of open waters appear to disrupt our placid world. Most men shun the glimpse, ignore the depths, pretend the ice is solid. But not all men. In the minds of a few, the hole does not freeze over quickly enough, they stare too long through the break – long enough for something to rise and crawl from that hole and take possession of the upper levels . . .'

Ramsey coughed and looked out through the windscreen.

'Madness?' I said.

'Who knows? Not sanity, surely. But madness belongs to our surface ice. After all, it is we who have defined it. It is our minds which have hardened into ice. What may come up from below, from those regions we have not labelled and named because we have not conceived of them . . .'

He shrugged and we sat in silence for a time. I began to feel uncomfortable and once more reached for the ignition. Ramsey's eyes slid sideways at the motion.

'Yes, I am surely being too dramatic,' he said. 'I was reacting to a personal awareness. The facts scarcely warrant such imagery. And yet they are disturbing. I expect I owe you an explanation.'

I was far too curious to decline. I waited. The keys still waited in the ignition. Ramsey, who seldom smoked, asked for a cigarette. He inhaled and then studied the smoke, as if wondering whether he were doing it properly. Then, his voice very matter-of-fact now, he said, 'The remarkable aspect of the murder is this: the victim was killed by human teeth.' And he stared at me.

'Good Lord,' I said.

Ramsey nodded.

'But you told Grant he'd been strangled ...'

'And so he had. Indeed he had. He had been strangled by the pressure of human jaws.'

I shook my head.

'That is the extraordinary thing – the combination of the two. I've seen corpses who had been strangled by human hands before. I've heard – although I've never encountered it, thank God – of instances where a man, in a fit of blind rage or insane passion, had committed murder with his teeth. But the combination is quite unique. The flesh was not even broken on the throat. There had been no attempt to tear or slash, nor even any bloodshed. The pressure of those jaws had been applied slowly and carefully. Thoughtfully, even. Obviously, the killer did not want his clothing stained by blood. It appears he had used his teeth strictly for convenience. For efficiency.'

'But why?' I asked.

'I can only surmise ... you see the object of my rambling talk of darkness beneath the ice? Of course. It is exactly that. It is alien to me and I can only draw conclusions within my own frame of reference. They are undoubtedly inaccurate. But this is what I assume. The killer, for some unknown reason,

wished to kill this old man. He had no desire to torture the man, for every action was designed to bring death. There were no bruises or contusions to imply a beating, no signs of any attempt to cause suffering, no wounds other than the death grip. The killer, again for unknown reasons, did not use a weapon. I can reconstruct the scene within my own scheme of deduction. The victim was probably sitting or lying on his bed. It was a small furnished room with only a straight backed chair, and I think it likely he used the bed to relax. He was, after all, an old man. He would have wanted what comfort was available to him. But that is irrelevant. The murderer came in through the door. Whether he was known to the victim or not would, of course, alter the preliminary movements. But that, too, is irrelevant here. Whether already there, or forced there, the old man wound up on the bed, on his back. The killer knelt over him, one knee on either side of his chest and placed his hands on the man's throat. The man struggled – his fingernails were broken where he clawed at the killer's hands and forearms – but he was old and weak. The killer tightened his grip remorselessly. I feel sure there was no haste, no frenzy. He merely closed his hands with great deliberation. But perhaps this was the first time he'd committed murder with his bare hands. This seems likely. And it always takes a long time, relatively speaking, to choke a man to death. It must seem very long indeed to the killer . . . and to the victim. The old man's tongue came out, his eyes ballooned, and yet he did not die. It undoubtedly seemed, to the killer, that he had been strangling the man for sufficient time to kill him. And his mind was working, calculating. It occurred to him that he was not able to bring sufficient pressure to bear with his hands – that some air was still passing into those lungs. At this point, most men would surely have panicked. They would have shaken the man violently and snapped his neck, or seized a heavy object – there was a large glass ashtray beside the bed, I understand – and bludgeoned him into unconsciousness. But not our killer. There was no panic, no frenzy. He misjudged the time factor and then he sorted all the aspects out quite logically in his

mind and decided that more pressure was necessary to complete the act. And when he had decided this, he followed the rational course . . .'

'Rational,' I whispered.

'Absolutely rational. He lowered his head and placed his mouth upon the man's throat and proceeded to close his jaws. He didn't snap, he didn't tear, he used his teeth not as fangs but as a vice. The human jaws are very powerful. They are capable of exerting incredible strength. And so, after a while, the old man was dead and the killer unclenched his teeth and that was that.'

I stared at Ramsey. I could feel the blood draining from my face, heavy and sluggish. He read the contortion of my countenance and nodded.

'Oh yes,' he said. 'It was horrible.'

'To use his teeth for . . . *efficiency*!'

'Exactly. That was the point that disturbed me.'

'It must have been a maniac,' I said.

'Or a philosopher,' said Ramsey, and he looked at me and I looked at him and after a while I started the motorcar and drove away. The traffic was light. The wind blew and the leaves fell and as the sun slipped down behind the afternoon angles I felt a distinct chill at my spine.

The second murder occurred several days later.

I wasn't present at the identification this time, and came to hear of the crime through a particularly sensational newspaper story – a borrowed newspaper, as it were, belonging to one of the regular visitors to the museum. Museums seem to be addictive. They each have a set of regulars who have formed the habit of frequent visits, and in the course of my research, I came to meet several of these people time and time again. One of these was a middle-aged gentleman who walked with a stiff leg and used a malacca cane, a quiet and dignified man who always nodded pleasantly, wore well-cut tweeds, and seemed a trifle lonely. I usually encountered him wandering through the natural history rooms but in this instance we met in the lib-

rary. I had just finished my book and was about to go to lunch when he entered, his cane tapping through the resounding silence of leather and oak. He took a seat next to me and placed a folded newspaper on the table. I glanced over to nod and happened to notice the headlines.

'So the killer has struck again,' I said.

'It would appear so.'

'May I see your paper?'

'Of course.'

He handed it to me and I unfolded it.

'Not the paper I usually take,' he said, smiling, as if to apologize for the gutter press. It did not, in fact, seem the sort of paper this rather dignified gentleman should subscribe to, and I had always avoided it. But it carried a very detailed account of the crime, stressing the sensational aspects. The story had been written from the point of view of one of the children who had discovered the body. He was twelve years old. It was the sort of thing that sold newspapers, no doubt of that.

'It's a terrible thing,' I said.

'What's that?'

'These deaths.'

'Death? Oh, death is natural.'

His attitude surprised me.

'Death, yes. But not murder.'

He shrugged and tilted his hand in a gesture.

'Murder? But what is murder other than a form of death? It is only unnatural in legal terms, you know. Murder did not exist before we came to define it; before we made laws against it. It is law which is unnatural, not murder.'

I looked at him, wondering if he were serious. He seemed so.

'I'm sure it didn't seem natural to the victims,' I said.

'Oh? I should think it did. It may have seemed unjust, but certainly natural. But then, at the moment of death, one does not think in forensic terms.' He smiled slightly. 'Death is a jealous concept. It will not tolerate other thoughts to exist with

it envelops the mind, it refuses to share with alien sensations.'

'You seem well acquainted with the subject, sir.'

He smiled again.

'Oh, I've held the concept of death,' he said. 'I've been very very close to dying and, I assure you, it was the most natural thing in the world.'

'What manner of death?'

'By violence,' he said. 'By violence.'

I could not picture him in conjunction with violence. I waited for him to continue, but he said no more; sat there with that slight smile. After a moment I turned to the newspaper.

The twelve-year-old boy and several other lads had been playing by the river at the old disused wharf. There was always a great deal of debris in the water at that point. The docks and pilings had collapsed over the years and timber and planks had broken away to float in the river while the pilings which still stood acted as a bottleneck, gathering the various flotsam of the river. The children had developed a game in which the debris was an enemy fleet of warships and they were a defending shore battery, using rocks and stones for ordnance. It was an exciting game. The object was to sink the enemy ships before they came into contact with the pilings and the youths were positioned along the embankment and on the dock. They were laughing and shouting and having a fine time. Their artillery was proving accurate and effective and they had already sunk an orange crate destroyer and scored several crashing hits upon an empty oil can escort vessel. Suddenly one shouted a warning. The enemy fleet was being reinforced by a new ship which came floating out from beneath the pilings in treacherous sneak attack. It appeared to be a gnarled log dripping with moss and sea weed and it floated just below the surface. The children decided it must be a nuclear submarine and posed a most serious threat; knew they had to sink it before it could release its missiles and turned the full force of their lithic ordnance on it. They bombarded it from all sides and with every calibre. Small stones cascaded around the ob-

ject, and larger rocks hit the water with great splashes, causing the submarine to roll and sway in the riled waters. But all the awesome might they unleashed proved ineffective. The submarine was actually rising to the surface. In desperation three of the youths joined forces to lift a huge slab of stone and carry it out on the dock, directly above the menacing ship. The slab was an aeroplane piloted by a suicide pilot willing to give his life for his country. They took careful aim and tilted the stone from the edge of the dock. It fell, turning in the air, and scored a direct hit amidships of the submarine. The vessel seemed to crack in half. The bows and stern rose up and the children howled in victorious glee. And then, very very slowly, the log rolled over and spread out arms and it wasn't a log at all. The children fell silent. They stared in shocked disbelief. This was something unique, beyond the rules of their game, and for some time they stood lined along the dock, gaping down at the body. It was an old woman. Her body bobbed about and her grey hair spread out like moss around her bloated face, writhing on the surface. And then comprehension came and they ran for help with shouts which were not of gaiety...

The police were summoned and they dragged the body out. It was the old flower seller who had a stall on the embankment, not far from the wharf. Investigation showed she had been dragged to the water and immersed until she drowned. There were no injuries on her body and she must have been conscious the whole time. The time of the murder was estimated at nine o'clock the night before, about the hour she usually closed her stall. There was still light at nine o'clock. There were invariably people strolling on the embankment and along the docks and perhaps young lovers had stood, hand in hand, directly above the old woman dying beneath the pilings. It was an eerie thought. One could not help but wonder what thoughts had screamed through her mind during those eternal instants of silent struggle, while the water felt like an avalanche of hard rocks pouring into her erupting lungs. It was far easier to imagine her thoughts than to conceive of

those dark concepts in the mind of her killer – the mind of a man who killed without motive, without reason, without passion.

It seemed obvious that the killer was the same man who had strangled the old pensioner a few days before. The two murders fitted the same pattern of having no pattern. The woman had no known enemies and no one could possibly have profited by her death. The killing had been cold and efficient. The police had no clues and asked anyone who might have been in the vicinity to contact them whether they had heard or seen anything or not. Anyone who had noticed a man with wet clothing anywhere in the city was asked to notify the authorities. The theory was that it was the work of a maniac. It seemed the only solution. The thought of a madman is always terrifying and this was magnified by the fact that the victims had been old and helpless and had died without reason. The police stated it was likely the man would kill again – would go on killing at regular intervals until he was captured. I had a sudden image of Detective Inspector Grant poring over all the details of the two crimes, trying desperately to project and predict and prevent, and knowing with painful frustration that he had insufficient data – and that there was only one way in which to acquire more data and that implied more victims. He would be chain-smoking cigarettes, pacing across his office, snapping at his subordinates, cross with his wife. But they would understand the great unrest of his thoughts, and would tolerate his surly behaviour. And thinking of tolerance, I found myself contrasting Grant with this gentleman whose newspaper I held – who looked at the murders in such a calm and unexpected way. I looked up from the paper; glanced sideways at him. He was turning the pages of a large volume with vague disinterest. I placed the paper on the table and he closed the book; folded the paper neatly.

‘Thank you.’

‘Why of course,’ he said.

‘Say what you will, it’s a gruesome business.’

‘Oh, I daresay the papers make it seem worse than it is, you

know. Circulation and all that. The human fascination with the macabre. I find myself fascinated with that strange fascination. As a scientist . . .'

'A scientist?' I said, interrupting him with an abrupt impulse to change the subject. I did not wish to hear his opinions on human failings – if indeed he thought them failings, for he had a tendency to make the unexpected statement; to view from unconsidered angles.

He nodded slowly.

'What is your field?'

'I am a naturalist.'

I raised my eyebrows slightly at the old-fashioned term and he interpreted the gesture correctly; nodded and repeated the word. 'Yes, a naturalist. I use the old word deliberately – to imply that I have spread myself over the natural sciences rather than specializing. A fault of modern thinking, specialization.'

'But surely knowledge is accumulating too quickly for a man to encompass everything?'

'Ah, but is that valid? If all knowledge is related – and it must be, if there is any basic law to the universe – then isn't a shallow immersion in a wide subject better than penetration to blind and limited depths? I have always wished to form conclusions which draw all the branches of natural science into a tighter pattern. An ambitious goal, certainly, and yet in some ways curiously limited.' He paused, peering at me sharply. I had the impression he was judging my comprehension and his glance was curious – his countenance resigned and placid on the surface, yet with sharp inquiry coming through. It was like a flash of sudden lightning exposing the inner fabric of the storm clouds for a brilliant instant. Then it faded. 'Oh, I fully understand the necessity for specialists,' he continued. 'Men – men of that sort of mind – must probe the depths of limited fields and form little cones of knowledge – little submerged and isolated studies from which more well rounded scholars may draw as they grope for a totality. Necessary, yes. But it seems a shame that knowledge has outpaced the evolution of

the mind, does it not?' And again that keen glance probed me. 'You interest me.'

'Yes? I've always believed that a man who has wide interests will prove interesting.'

'And are you pursuing your interests here at the museum? I've seen you quite often and wondered if you might be doing research of some nature.'

'Nothing specific. In point of fact, I come to the museum for pleasure. As some might go to the opera or the theatre. I dearly love to wander through the natural history halls. But research – no, my research is in the field. It was, at least, until my accident. Now I must content myself with less strenuous studies. Although recently I have been able to do a bit of field work. Just a bit. An application of former conclusions.'

'Accident?'

'My leg. I lost my leg, as you may have noticed.'

He glanced down.

'Oh, I didn't realize,' I said, a trifle embarrassed.

'I've managed to adapt myself to it. One does, you know. I have an artificial limb, of course, but I'd have adapted without it. That's the story of survival. But it hinders field research, nonetheless.'

This fact seemed to sadden him. He fell into a thoughtful silence. Then he looked up and smiled.

'But we've not been introduced,' he said. He held out his hand. His grip was firm.

'Claymore,' he said. 'Edward Claymore.'

I told him my name. His name had a familiar ring and after a moment I placed it; said, 'I believe I've read one of your books. Dealing with ecology, was it?'

'You please me. One has vanity, of a sort. Of a sort. One hopes one's ideas are of value. And valid, of course. Yes, ecology has always been my prime study, dear to my heart. The linking of relationships between creatures within the scope of their environment, the incredibly complex interplay between organisms, subtle, slowly emerging as one gathers experience, and in no other way. These relationships cannot be

predicted in the laboratory nor projected in the library. One must be there. One must observe and record. A falsehood may be written but what one has seen is truth – the conclusions may be wrongly drawn but one cannot argue with the basic premise of objective fact, eh?’ I nodded agreement. A certain intensity had come into his voice as he spoke of his work and I felt a new respect for the man. His book, as I recalled it, had been lucid and straightforward and unpretentious; had been an early work which, in its simplicity, had stood the test of time. It was no longer read much, for the theory had advanced beyond its scope, and yet the material had been proved correct and had greatly affected later research along those lines, foreshadowing understanding. I had read it long ago, and yet found myself able to recall certain passages of bright illumination and even simple eloquence in his descriptions of the wild reaches of our northern forests, the perfect balance of nature, the harmony of life and death. Seen in the context of his work, his unusual method of looking at events was no longer surprising. I determined to look up his book and read it again, in the new light of our acquaintance.

Claymore was thoughtful now; seemed to be looking back into the past, looking northward to the forests of former times. I stood up and excused myself. He nodded absently. He was still sitting at the table, staring at far places, as I left.

I did not encounter Claymore for the next few days, and forgot my intention to look up a copy of his book. He may well have been at the museum but my research had taken a sharp turn which kept me in the library through the day and he did not appear there. I did not, in fact, see him again until after the third crime had been committed. This third crime was different. It did not fit the pattern of the preceding murders and, at first, appeared to be an accident. It was far more horrible, in its quantitative effect, than the other crimes and yet did not excite as much public outrage because it was impersonal. It caused anger rather than morbid fascination. The facts were these: the home for incurables on the outskirts of

the city caught fire and, in a great inferno, burned to the ground. Twelve men and women died in the flames, including a heroic nurse who had rushed again and again through sheets of fire and saved half a dozen lives; then, making a last desperate attempt, she had been trapped as the walls collapsed and had died in the incandescent ruins. When her charred body was found she still held an old man shielded to her breast, their flesh melted and then annealed together so that the corpses were inseparable. It was some time before the embers had cooled and a proper investigation carried out and then it was discovered that the fire had been deliberately set, a case of arson; some further time before connections were made and the authorities believed it might have been the work of the same madman who had killed twice before. But it was impossible to be sure. The police were keeping an open mind and investigating the background of every patient, both victims and survivors, in an attempt to discover if anyone would have gained by the death of one of them. It was a ghastly thought, but valid in these times when bombs are placed on aeroplanes, killing dozens as a side effect of collecting insurance on a solitary passenger. Nothing came of this line of investigation, however, and I, for one, felt certain it had been the maniac.

When next I saw Claymore, I recalled his calm attitudes concerning the former murders; was interested in what he thought in this instance. I asked him whether he considered this crime natural. I'm not sure what reaction I expected, but he surprised me by screwing up his face in obvious internal conflict, a genuine attempt at decision. I was amazed. I would not have been shocked had he taken an attitude opposed to normal morality, but had not foreseen this struggle within himself. Several times he opened his mouth to speak, and then hesitated. I watched his face, my interest greatly aroused.

Our meeting had taken place in the Hall of Saurians, a great vaulted room of silence with implications of vast and imponderable time. The skeletons of brontosaurus and allosaurus loomed over us. A high skylight sent filtered illumination dropping from the dome, washing the bones and casting Juras-

sic shadows across the floor, articulated adumbrations of the cons. Presently, without speaking, Claymore moved on, still shrouded in thought. I followed. He moved, as it were, through the path of prehistory; came to the Cretaceous period and sank down upon the edge of a platform with a tyrannosaurus rearing above, the great jaws in the gloom of the arched roof. I sat beside him. It seemed that even the shadows of those bleached bones had a great weight – that they lay upon us with the burden of knowledge, not insight to the mind but some truth known only in our most primitive cells, long forgotten to the magnifying mind but remaining dormant in the glands, the secretions of primordial instinct. I could not understand why this strange mood had come upon me; wondered if, somehow, it could have emanated from my companion by some basic transference, as a dog senses fear in a man.

At last, he spoke.

‘The nurse should not have died,’ he said, quite simply.

‘The nurse? Why only the nurse?’

‘The nurse. Her actions were so very human and so very unnatural.’

‘But surely noble?’

‘Nobility is unnatural. That, like law, has been created outside nature. Created by man. And man stands at some undefined point between nature and logic. Only man, you know, and possibly the elephant who is mighty enough to afford it – or was until man came along – show concern and respect for the aged and infirm, tolerate the useless elements of the pack, the tribe, the species. It was quite natural for the nurse to risk – and give – her life, but only in the framework of human terms. Not natural science but philosophy. The fault lies deeper than behaviour, it is in the system itself – a system that flaunts and reverses nature and creates homes for incurables, protects the helpless, preserves the weakest units to clutter the species.’

He looked sideways at me.

‘You can’t believe the nurse’s sacrifice wrong?’

‘Not by human judgements.’

'Well then...'

'But I am speaking objectively. I am standing outside the system and wish I had a lever long enough to move it. But one man cannot, there is no fulcrum, a man can do his little part and nothing more.'

'You speak objectively. But don't you feel human sentiments?'

'Of course. With my human mind, I must. But I can also look through them, penetrate the veil of emotion, and attempt to act accordingly. If man were natural, you see, he would let the useless die, as our ancestors abandoned them to the lion and the hyena. And if man were logical he would, for instance, form his armies from the ranks of the cripples, the defectives, the malformed. War is quite natural – perhaps necessary – to our species. It is a safety valve for the pressures of survival. But it would be a far more effective valve if the casualties came from the weak, allowing the strong to live. But man lies somewhere in the void, groping upwards for elusive logic while his feet are slipping from their purchase on the natural. We are driven by false instincts we term rational – instincts created within ourselves long after nature had finished imprinting her pattern. We weaken ourselves by tolerance and, at the same time, destroy other species by inverse selectivity. Only man – man, the hunter – seeks the finest trophy, the largest antlers, the beast in the prime of life. We kill the best specimens and spurn the weak; we plunder nature as we follow our own descent.'

'You have strong views,' I said.

Claymore nodded. His slight shadow slipped across the floor, within the dinosaur's vaulted ribcage, as he shifted his position; crossed his leg over the artificial limb.

'Yes, the dichotomy has long troubled me,' he said. 'As these conclusions first solidified during long winter nights in the open, I often lay awake in my sleeping bag and saw the cold starry sky as a background to my concepts. How implacable that sky seemed, how pitiless. It was then that I saw natural science cannot be isolated, can never be an enclosed

sphere of knowledge, for even the non-objective sciences are inextricably linked to ecology. Man is unique. He stands above nature and imposes his half-considered concepts on the natural scheme – forces them in where they do not fit. It seems that the experiment with the big brain has taken a wrong turning – a turning nature never intended but is powerless to correct – to guide us back to the proper channel. Nature has created a Frankenstein's monster which threatens to turn upon its creator. And to destroy nature is suicidal. Far better, perhaps, if homo sapiens had been allowed to survive by virtue of thumb and upright spine, and never granted the gift and curse of vocal cord and concept; to survive like the cockroach which, I daresay, will outlast us yet.'

He stretched out a hand towards the tower of bones behind us, the lesson of the extinction of the mighty, the roaring rulers of earth for millions of years reduced to skeletal silence on a platform.

'I planned a book on this subject,' he said. 'I never completed it, however. It would never have been published. It would merely have invited outraged attacks.'

'The idea certainly invites attack,' I said.

'You don't agree with me?'

'I see your logic. But surely man is above the laws of the jungle. We have mastered survival and now it is curiosity which directs us, governs us, brought us through dark ages and may yet take us to the stars.'

'Curiosity? Ah yes. That will take us – somewhere . . .'

For a time we did not speak.

'However,' said Claymore, at length, 'all this is conjecture. I am truly sorry about that nurse . . .'

Following this remarkable conversation in the Hall of Saurians, I took the trouble to locate a copy of Claymore's book. I reread it. It was the book I had remembered and none of his anti-social ideas were expressed there. It dealt with observation and obvious conclusions and no more; implied nothing hidden beneath the level of his writing. I found it difficult to

see Claymore, as I knew him, as the author of this book and decided he was not – that something had caused his outlook to alter in the interval so that the man who had written so expressively and objectively in the past was not the same man who had spoken with such intensity in the shadow of dinosaur. I could not imagine what this might have been, what experience could have warped and embittered his mind – perhaps the loss of his leg, I wondered. And yet he'd seemed to have adjusted easily enough to that loss. I was curious and would have been most interested to know about it, but could think of no way to bring the subject up; decided to wait and hope that, in the course of our meetings, the truth would come to light.

As, indeed, it did.

But first the maniac struck again.

In many respects, the next attack was the most perplexing of all. The strangest aspect was that the victim survived – was allowed to survive the ordeal. And certainly the most horrible aspect was that the poor fellow was blind, his affliction adding to the monstrous nature of the unprovoked assault. These facts added a new twist to the emerging pattern, complicating and confusing the issue. But what really struck me was purely subjective.

I was acquainted with the victim.

His name was Bill, a big jovial sort who refused to let his blindness change his cheerful nature. He'd lost his sight in the war, spent some time in hospital, and emerged with complete selfconfidence and a fierce independence. He refused even the assistance of a guide dog and was frequently seen roaming the familiar streets with a firm and steady step, behind dark glasses and a fibre-glass stick; pausing at kerbs to listen for approaching traffic or halting for a moment at a corner, head raised and senses alert as he got his bearings. I was appalled when I read of the vicious attack which had taken place in his own basement flat. It is always so much more shocking when it is someone one knows. Bill had been brutally battered and beaten and then left alive on his floor. And that was the extraordinary thing. He had not been supposed dead, for he was

still conscious. The maniac had simply walked off and left him, and that behaviour was so far removed from the other attacks that the police were not ruling out the possibility of a second madman amuck in the city. However the method of attack, until it had ceased, fitted the pattern. It was calculated and efficient.

I phoned the hospital immediately and inquired about his condition; found, to my relief, that he was recovering and asked how soon he would be able to have visitors. Apparently he had already been demanding that visitors be allowed in, which was very much to be expected of Bill, and I went to see him in the morning.

He was sitting up in bed, a white bandage around his head and a cigar in his teeth. His big solid shoulders sloped down beneath the sheets, he greeted me in a loud voice and roared cheerfully at the nurse who told him he must be quiet. She turned her eyes upwards and smiled despite herself. Bill was able to make people smile that way. He was pleased to have a visitor, we chatted for a few minutes and then, without urging or suggestion from me, he told me what had happened. He seemed more angered than frightened by the attack, his self-reliance had survived and he did not, in his dark world, understand how one with sight would project and magnify the terror of his position.

'Well, Johnny boy,' said Bill, 'I don't know if this bastard was waiting inside my flat or if he followed me home. The coppers think he was already inside, on account of one of my neighbours, old widow down the street, got an idea she's got designs on me, you know? – well, this widow saw me come home and says there was no one following me. But I'm not so sure. Seems I would have sensed his presence if he'd been waiting there. Maybe the old gal don't see too well. Anyway, don't matter which way it was. I'd been out for my afternoon walk and I never bother to lock the door so it was a simple matter for him to get in before me or behind me, whichever. I went right into the kitchen as soon as I got home and put a pan on for coffee. I leaned my walking stick against the stove and

stood there, waiting for the water to boil. Then I heard him. Just a faint sound, at first, but we blind guys get used to listening for those soft noises. I turned around real sharp and heard his foot scrape as he stepped back in surprise. "Who's there?" I asked. Y'see, I wasn't worried at that point, I thought it might have been a friend or maybe even that old widow come to tempt me. Maybe even one of the younger gals on the street. Plenty of gals like to call on a blind guy, Johnny. Gals that don't like it known they're passionate – figure they can get me to give 'em some lovin' and never even speak, see, so I won't know who they are. Happens all the time. 'Course, once they gets to pantin' and snortin', why, straight off I can tell who it is, long's I've heard their voice before. Easy to tell by the way they pant, how long their hair is, how wide they are in the hips. But, 'course, I don't let on I know, 'cause then they won't come back. I just go along with it, askin' who they are even after I know and then they think they're on to the perfect set-up and come back again. Yeah, this bein' a blind guy got some advantages. An' if their husbands find out, why I got the perfect excuse. Ha ha. Not a bad old game. Got some real fine unfaithful wives on that street, real fine.

'Anyhow, that's what I thought – thought it was one o' them passionate wives, so I wasn't worried. Just asked who it was and sort of smiled. Then when there was no answer, I was sure it must be a gal. I stood there, waitin' for her to come up and start snugglin'. But nothing happened for quite a while. The water started to boil, still nothin' happened. I guessed the gal was shy – figured it was her first visit, see? So I said, "Want some coffee, whoever you are?" and then I heard the bastard take a deep breath, real quick, and I thought: Oh ho, Billy boy, that ain't no gal... What I thought was it was an irate husband, come to rant and rave. That was when he jumped on me...'

Bill paused. His brow furrowed beneath the bandage and I noticed several scratches on his face and neck, parallel rows that looked like fingernail marks. His big shoulders shifted as he recalled the violence of the attack and his heavy jowled face

was set. I stared at him with great respect – saw that he was reliving only the violence, not the horror. Blindness has always seemed so ultimate a handicap and I had already imagined the scene – imagined Bill cringing, asking who and why, his sightless face questing at the strange sounds, unguided hands groping before him protectively, helpless and terrified, all this in the darkness of his affliction... This I had imagined; had pictured with my vision. But this was not the way it had been for Bill. He remembered only his anger and rage.

'He grabbed me by the throat,' Bill said. 'Well, Johnny boy, that was a mistake. Pretty strong fellow, I could feel his strength in his fingers, but 'course with both his hands on me I knew just where he was. I didn't panic. I got my feet set right and then gave him a couple of good belts in the belly. Good short shovel hooks. Bang bang, just like that.' His shoulders rolled, his arms moved under the sheet, the long muscles in his jaw tightened. 'He let go real quick then, boy. Real quick. I heard his wind rush out hard as he stepped back. But I hadn't caught him in the solar plexus like I planned and he didn't go down. I took an almighty swipe at where I reckoned his jaw oughta be, but I misjudged it. Missed the bastard. But I followed up, pulling my shoulder around and tuckin' my chin down behind it and coiled into a hitter's crouch. I still sort of suspected it was one o' them irate husbands. Wasn't worried much. I got both fists cocked and my head down and I said, "Come on, you bastard! You want a fight, you found the right blind fellow. Just come in here, let's see what you can do!"

'Well, he didn't do anything for a while. I could hear him gettin' his breath back and sort of feel his eyes on me. Weird feelin', that. I could tell he was sizing me up, plannin' his attack – could tell he was a pretty cool fellow. He was standin' just out of reach. I thought about lungin' for him, but figured it was better to wait – try to time a haymaker as he came to me. So I fainted a couple of times, to get him to make some sounds movin' but he stayed real calm. I guess we stood like that maybe two minutes. Then I heard him move to the side, very quiet. I thought he was leavin', that he'd had enough. But

then I heard the cupboard door open and straight off I knew what the sonabitch was doin'. He was looking for a weapon. Well, there were bottles and things there he could use to club me and I didn't like that idea; tried to play on his pride; said, "Hey, you need a weapon against a blind fellow? What sort o' man are you?" But that didn't work. He started movin' towards me again. Then I got a little worried. I reached behind me and got the handle of the pan and held the pan in front of me. The water was boilin' away real good by then. I could feel the steam. He hesitated and I swung the pan across my chest, waitin'. I figured if I could give 'im a face full of steam I'd have a chance to get my hands on him. That's all I wanted. Just to get my hands on the bastard. Should've grabbed him straight off when he was chokin' me, 'course, but at that point I didn't know how serious he was and figured a couple o' belly hooks would be plenty. But he was cautious now. I couldn't hear him movin' at all. Then somethin' hit the pan and tilted it and the hot water ran down my forearm. I threw the pan away and missed him and somethin' smacked me alongside the head. In the temple. The coppers told me it was a whisky bottle. How about that? Smacks me with my own Scotch, the swine. Anyway, it was a pretty good wallop and I had to cover up and he hit me again, behind the neck that time and the floor slammed against my knees. I kept trying t' get a hold on him but he stayed out of reach and belted me a few more times in the head and neck and then, for the first time, I realized he wanted to kill me. Not much I could do, just kneel there and dart my hands out in different directions hopin' to get him. He was a cool one. No hurry at all. Wasn't even breathin' hard enough to hear now. Couple o' times I thought he'd gone, even, and then whop! he clubs me again. Would've killed me, I guess, 'cept I touched the handle of my cane then as I slid to the side and I got the cane and made a great wide sweep in front of me, low down, and felt it whip against his leg. Good snappy cane, fibre glass, gave him a helluva slash. Heard him yelp. So I saw that was my only chance, and I sat there with my back against the stove and swung the stick back and forth

in a low arc in front of me, fast enough so he couldn't get close without gettin' hit. I was in a bad way by then. Sort of dizzy and sick from the hammerin' I'd had. But the only thing I could think was: Grab the cane, you dirty bastard! Just waitin' for him to grab it so I'd know where he was and could lunge at him. Just wanted him in my hands, y'know. I'd have broken every bone in his body.'

Bill shook his head; shrugged. Then he passed a hand along his jaw. The anger left his countenance and a look of perplexity replaced it.

'Then he left,' Bill said, simply, and he shrugged once again. 'Hard to figure out. I was pretty helpless by that time. And there's no doubt he wanted to kill me. Only thing I can figure is that when I hit him with the cane I hurt him pretty bad. Worse'n I thought. Took the heart out o' the bastard. I guess maybe that's what happened, 'cause he was limpin' when he left. I heard him go. Thought maybe he was trying to fool me - that he'd wait by the door an' then come sneakin' back after I stopped whippin' the cane about. But he left all right. He wasn't breathin' hard and he walked calm enough but he seemed to be favouring one leg. I heard the front door close. I sat there for a long time, holdin' the cane ready and listenin' but he was gone all right. Then I crawled out to the street and called for help. And that was that. Hard to figure. The coppers said it might have been the guy who killed a couple of other people, too, so I got to think he bit off more'n he could chew with ol' Billy, eh?'

'I expect you're right,' I said.

'Guess so.'

He nodded. His cigar had gone out while he spoke and he lighted it again, holding the match cupped in his hands to guide the flame. The leaf had started to uncurl and there was white ash on the bed. He held the cigar in his teeth. He was very much alive. We chatted for a few more minutes and then I left. As I was going out several other visitors came into the room. They nodded to me the quiet way one nods in a hospital and went over to Bill's bed. They were all women. Widows

and unfaithful wives, no doubt. Bill greeted them cheerfully and I went out and walked to the museum.

I found it impossible to concentrate on my research.

I sat in the library and ran my eyes over the pages, again and again, without comprehension. My thoughts kept drifting back to Bill's account of the attack. The most remarkable aspect was that he had been left alive. Whether or not Bill actually believed he had driven the attacker away with his cane, it seemed obvious to me that was not the case – that Bill had been helpless at the end. He'd been terribly battered and must have been nearly unconscious. And yet, even in that brutal beating, there was an element of calculation related to the murders. The blows all appeared to have been struck with the solitary purpose of causing unconsciousness and subsequent death – not pain. There seemed no element of sadism in the method of attack. There had been pain, certainly, but not deliberate, not as an end in itself, the agony no more than a side effect of an amateur attempt at striking a mortal blow. And this created a paradox for, when the end was in sight, the maniac had broken off the attack. It had not been panic. He had not fled and, by Bill's own account, had been cool and calm. And still he had left the job unfinished. Or was it unfinished? Was there some purpose which escaped me? If the goal had been death, why should the man have settled for less? And if the goal had not been death, why had his blows been so obviously intended as lethal?

My mind spun over these disturbing questions again and again, as my eyes moved back and forth across the page and the text failed to register. At last I pushed the book away and looked at my watch. I decided that research was impossible at the time; that I might as well have an early lunch and try again in the afternoon. I replaced the volume on the shelves and left the library. At the main doors, however, a notice caught my eye and I remembered that the new natural history exhibit had been opened the day before. I'd not yet had a chance to visit it and had been eagerly awaiting the pleasure

and this seemed an excellent opportunity. I turned back and took the elevator up to the new hall.

It was there I once again encountered Claymore . . .

The new exhibit was the Johnson Memorial Hall of North American Mammals and I knew it had been planned somewhat differently to the other rooms. Johnson had been a wealthy industrialist who had, in later years, found great peace and pleasure in the Canadian wilderness and had left a large sum of money for the express purpose of creating the new hall. He had also stipulated conditions. It was to be as natural as possible. The whole room was to be fashioned into a simulated forest and there were to be no straight corridors, no display cases, no guard rails. There were not even signs to identify the various flora and fauna, on the principle that the animals in the wilds did not wear labels. Johnson's desire was to create a room where one could wander at random, in simulated solitude, in the mood of the far-reaching forests. It seemed a fine idea to me, and I was anxious to see how well it had been carried out.

I was pleased as soon as I entered the hall.

The plans had been well executed. The entrance was irregularly shaped with roughly plastered walls so that one had the impression of passing through the mouth of a cave. The forest stretched away within, the walls hidden behind backdrops of distant mountains which conveyed a sense of great distance and taped music softly repeated the forest sounds, birds and breezes and vague cracklings. Water dripped rhythmically from an artificial cataract. I stood beside the entrance for a time, letting myself fall into the mood, and then advanced. It was very realistic. Narrow paths wound about between arbours and brush and rock, seemingly at random as I turned my head from side to side. At first I saw no animals. Then abruptly the vegetation opened out and I found myself looking at a colony of beaver beside a plastic pool blocked with fallen timber. The animals were there, but one had to look. I strolled on; glimpsed a lynx stretched along an overhanging limb, tufted ears laid back, snarling; turned as the path angled and stopped

short as a Kodiak bear reared up. The taxidermy was excellent, the animals were realistically grouped in lifelike positions, often I caught just a flashing glance as I passed some small mammal peering from the undergrowth. I thought Johnson would have approved.

Then, turning on to a secondary trail, I found myself face to face with Claymore.

'A splendid hall, this,' he said.

I nodded. Somehow, seeing Claymore, my thoughts left the artificial wilderness and returned to reality ... to the crimes we had discussed before. I mentioned I'd just come from the hospital where Bill was and Claymore appeared interested.

'Ah yes. The blind gentleman. How is he?'

'Recovering.'

'Ah. The newspapers stated his condition as critical. But then, one learns never to have faith in journalism.'

'He's a tough one,' I said.

'Tough? Yes. Yes, I should imagine so. Obviously he had the will to survive. Admirable and natural. He will undoubtedly live until his time to die.'

'Unlike the others.'

'Others?'

'The other victims.'

'Oh. Oh, no doubt it was their time to die.'

I made no comment. Claymore nodded. 'No doubt,' he said again and then turned and strolled on. I followed. The path was too narrow to walk side by side and I trailed behind him. His limp seemed more noticeable and he seemed very interested in the exhibits, very alert, as if this were truly a wilderness and he were keeping an eye out for dangers or prey. From time to time he paused and used his walking stick to part the growth, revealing some secreted animal I hadn't even noticed, looking up and down. Fox and wolverine and badger lurked on every side. Presently the path opened into a clearing and Claymore halted. He sighed. A deer was bounding tangentially from us, white tail bobbed in graceful flight. At first glance I imagined the deer had been positioned as if fleeing from the visitors'

approach down the path, but then I looked sideways and saw differently. Emerging from the opposite side of the clearing charged a pack of timber wolves, frozen in an instant of action, lean and fierce. I was about to point them out to Claymore when he spoke.

'Ah, it makes me long for the wilds,' he said. 'Books ... books can only teach what other men have learned, not what each man must learn for himself ... the sensations, the moods, the tone of nature. The totality.'

He leaned on his stick.

'Well, I'm just as pleased these brutes are stuffed,' I said, jokingly. 'How would you like to face that lot in the flesh?'

Claymore turned, his eyebrows lifting. He saw the wolves. His reaction was startling. He cried out and took a staggering step backwards, raising his walking stick like a club. I stepped forward, afraid he would fall, but he caught his balance: lowered the stick. His face was white and he was sweating.

'Good heavens, man. What is it?' I asked.

Gradually he relaxed. The blood returned to his face and he looked embarrassed.

'Forgive me. A thoughtless reaction.'

'What's wrong?'

He shook his head; moved towards the wolves and regarded them, then motioned at the pack with his stick, holding it like a fencer.

'You ask if I should like to face them,' he said.

'A silly comment,' I said.

'Ah, but I have,' said Claymore.

I waited, hoping he would continue, sensing the past trauma in his sudden reaction. I noticed he had raised his stick more in a position of attack than defence and that even now his eyes were bright as he looked at the wolves.

He said, 'They are fine specimens. Very fine. That big fellow must have weighed well over a hundred pounds, I should think. It saddens me to see a wolf which has been killed in his ferocious prime. I love wolves. I hate them but I love them for they have taught me so much. Everything is there to be

learned in *canis lupis*. Territorial instinct, the pack urge, monogamy. And mystery. People have always thought the wolf as different from other predators. Finer somehow, and yet inspiring fear far greater than its size and strength should warrant. Why, there is even a disease in which one believes himself to be a wolf. *Lycorexia*. I wonder if there is a philosophy, as well?’

He shrugged.

‘You have been attacked by wolves?’ I asked, hoping to hear the tale.

‘No. Not attacked. But I have faced them. I faced the pack and therefore they did not attack me, you understand? And facing them, I learned to face all – to face the past as well as the future and to see myself with humility, a small part of existence, of little importance in the total scheme of life ... and of great importance in that I learned to act as nature intended.’

‘You stared them down, you mean?’

He gestured vaguely.

‘Oh, one might say that. But it was far more than that.’

‘You interest me greatly.’

‘Ah, it was ... interesting. You wish to hear the story?’

‘Very much. If it won’t disturb you to remember ...’

‘No, not at all. I constantly remember it. You take your knowledge from books – from still lives, as it were – and perhaps you should know how my knowledge came to me.’

‘I should like to know.’

He nodded and glanced at the wolves once more. Then he moved away with a sideward step. A fallen tree had been propped against a stump across the clearing and Claymore took a seat on the log. I sat beside him. For some time he collected his thoughts while I waited. A man passed, pausing to look at the wolves and then looking at us. Then a middle-aged woman with three children crossed the clearing. They, too, observed us for a moment. We must have looked as out of place as they did. But our ectopia was of a different nature, and I felt I belonged there, listening to Claymore as a sceptic might have

listened to Socrates, knowing one need not agree to learn. The taped sounds played on and the waterfall rustled and presently Claymore spoke.

'Several months after publication of my book I returned to the north,' he said. 'The book – I believe you mentioned reading it? – dealt with ecology in general and now I had decided to make a study in depth on a specific relationship. For several reasons I selected that existing between wolves and moose. The most important reason was expediency, for both are territorial animals. The wolf pack sticks within its own boundaries and will tolerate no others there and the moose, in deep snow at least, remains in his own small area or yard. Well, this territorial instinct enables an observer to define the limits of the area and use the square miles within as a field laboratory with checks and controls far more accurately than if the observer had selected his own boundaries at random. I have little patience with those who set aside a tract of land without regard for the animals' own limits . . . less with the modern practice of observing from aeroplanes. This may be a scientific prejudice on my part, and I've considered that sort of work since losing my leg, but cannot see it leading to accurate conclusions. However, I didn't have that problem. All my research was done on snowshoes with a pack on my back, far from the world of society. It would have been difficult to be farther. It was a world of true desolation and abandoned beauty, and my base camp was a little cabin of rough logs beside a stream which opened out, some miles below, into a river. The river was ringed by fir trees and frozen in winter. I had but one companion – my guide – a man of dubious ancestry called Charles. He had spent his life in the wilderness and was a rough, silent man with vast practical knowledge and experience. He hadn't the faintest idea what I was studying and did not care at all. He was paid and that was sufficient. That was the way I wanted it, as well, for all men are susceptible and I might well have let my conclusions be affected by a companion who understood the subject. I could ask Charles

questions and he would answer from his experience, accurate and precise, not knowing what answer I sought and therefore unable to commit the common error of slanting the answer to give me satisfaction. We carried all our supplies with us and relied on Charles to provide fresh meat. I have always believed in travelling light and Charles was the sort to regard even my meagre equipment as luxury.

'We went into the wilderness in the late autumn and prepared the base camp. I made preliminary investigation and identified the wolf pack I would study – a pack some twenty strong – and the outline of their territory, where they would remain as long as the food supply permitted. Then it was necessary to wait, for wolves seldom hunt the moose until winter. In open water an adult moose can wade out so far that the pack must swim to reach him, and that is not a pleasant prospect for the wolves. But in winter the water is frozen, the beaver keep to their lodges, the snowshoe hares are insignificant meals for pack strength, and then there is the moose.

'Well, winter came.

'Charles and I followed the wolf pack. It was a time of great physical hardship and exhaustion, of dogged perseverance. Often we were away from the cabin for weeks at a time, as the pack ranged over the outer limits of their land, describing a wide and predictable circle which allowed us to anticipate them and often wait for them. This was necessary for they travelled far faster than we could follow. I learned many things but my main goal was to witness the confrontations between the pack and the moose. Seldom did I manage to be present at the actual kill, although often we arrived before the remains were devoured. This was important. It was absolutely essential that I gather data about the victims – to do an autopsy on the remains. This was no simple matter. For one thing, a healthy wolf will eat about fifteen pounds of flesh a day and, if we were far behind the kill, there was little left to examine. On the other hand, when we managed to arrive before their first hunger had been satisfied, the pack was understandably reluctant to surrender their feast to science. These were

wolves of the wilds, they had not yet learned fear of man, and to shoot them would have completely ruined the natural balance existing there. The pack regarded us with curiosity and, when they sensed no fear in us, with respect. Undoubtedly they saw us as fellow carnivores, but not as rivals, as they would have another wolf pack or a fox, and territorial defence seldom extends beyond the genus. So my findings were difficult and not extensive, but I persevered and gradually certain aspects of the relationship began to take form.

'Have you ever seen a moose, full grown in the forest? The wolves had a healthy respect for their prey, and it is understandable. Seven feet tall at the shoulders, weighing a ton and a half, unpredictable in mood and often changing from docile grazing to a thundering charge without a period of transition ... they are formidable indeed. Often a moose in deep snow can outdistance the wolves with that awkward, long-legged stride. More often they choose to stand defiantly against the pack and invariably the wolves move on in these cases, searching easier prey. I witnessed this several times and came to the conclusion that the pack tested at least ten moose for every one against which they pressed the attack. This conclusion led me to predictions which only sufficient autopsy examinations could prove and I pressed on, faithfully inspecting gnawed bones, scraps of hide, uncoiled lengths of intestine. Eventually it was enough to convince me my predictions were correct – that the wolves' depredations were essential to the moose's survival as a species; that they systematically culled the old and the infirm and left the finest specimens to benefit from limited winter food supplies. Invariably my examinations of the remains showed the same results. The victims suffered from bone disease, cysts in the lungs, tapeworm. Their teeth were worn with age and an abundance of ticks implied they suffered from a weakened condition due to innumerable other diseases. And every victim I examined, discounting calves, proved to be more than seven years old – beyond their prime. Without the wolves these old moose would have lived for a good many years yet, consuming vast amounts of food and

depriving the young members of the species.'

Claymore had begun to talk rapidly, warming to a subject dear to him. Now he paused, glanced sideways at me, and shrugged; smiled thinly.

'But all this is common knowledge now,' he said, apologetically. 'I must not bore you with this. Another aspect of vanity, eh? In my day it was just coming into acceptance and I shamelessly feel pride in my own small role in bringing it to light; in bringing it, perhaps a trifle sooner than it would have been. Still too late, of course. Too late against ignorance. I fear we shall both live to see the day when the last wolf is mangy and cowed in a zoo, when these exhibits are labelled extinct, or the museum equips an expedition to seek the last remaining pack. Perhaps. Still, they fight for survival. This is the first necessity. On the day a creature ceases to flee or to snarl, then it must die . . .

'But enough of this rambling theory. Theories hold true for all, but I must tell you my own experience.'

I waited. When again he spoke his tone had changed. He still spoke with intensity, but it was a subjective quality now and there was terror lurking restrained in the timbre of his voice . . .

'There came the day when circumstances forged the links of events - events engraved in the receptive awareness of aroused sensations. There were two separate disasters, insignificant in themselves but combining to form a sum greater than the parts. The first disaster came when Charles broke through the ice. We had travelled far from the base camp, skirting the frozen lake, and night came. We stopped to make our camp. I regretted the delay and was impatient to continue for the pack had not killed in several days and they were lean with hunger. I knew they would press an attack very soon, and hoped to be present. I was standing in the trees, looking in the direction the pack had taken, when I heard Charles cry out. I rushed back. A segment of the bank had collapsed beneath him and he had crashed through the ice. I saw his head bob in the cold

water, one hand gripping the jagged splintered edge. I threw myself flat to spread my weight and grasped him; managed to haul him from the icy waters. He was gasping and shaking. The instant the air touched his clothing it began to crackle and harden. Fortunately we had already made the fire and I helped him to strip his clothing off, wrapped him in a blanket and gave him a stiff shot of brandy. For a long time he lay still beside the fire, shivering, his eyes pressed closed. Finally the chill left him and I saw he was all right. But he had a strange look in his eyes. The first words he spoke were, "My rifle ... I've lost my rifle." Well, I assumed he was worried about the loss alone, and offered to replace the weapon when we returned from the field trip, but that was not what troubled him. He had lost his pack, including the tent, but it was the rifle which distressed him. He said that he would have to return to the cabin - to get his other gun before we continued on. I argued. Fate brought out my stubbornness, an ally of disaster. But Charles couldn't conceive of going on without a weapon. I felt greatly frustrated. I knew the wolves would kill soon, and could not bring myself to miss the opportunity to witness the kill. I refused to go back. He refused, at first, to continue - did not even want to stop the night, but to go back in the darkness. He had completely changed. It was as if he had lost a vital organ instead of a rifle and all his taciturn confidence had vanished. Objectively, it was more interesting, a strange twist of the personality of a man who has come to rely on something apart from his own body. But subjectively I could not tolerate it. I could not bear to miss the opportunity ahead. I became angry and Charles, completely out of character as I'd known him, hung his head sullenly and accepted my abuse. I even, I fear, spoke of cowardice. Even this did not sting him to reply, other than to mutter, shaking his head, that a man could not stay in the woods without a gun. I carried no weapon, of course. But I saw no danger. I recalled his own assurance that he'd never known wolves to attack a man. "Not a man with a rifle," he mumbled. "But these wolves don't know what a rifle is, how can that make a difference?" I asked. He shrugged.

"Maybe we might smell different without a weapon," he said. He kicked at the ground and swung his head from side to side and behaved like a spoiled child. But I was adamant and, after a long while, he reluctantly agreed to go on in the morning. Very reluctantly. And even then he continued to mutter about how impossible it was to go on without rifle and tent. I let him ramble on after he'd agreed; got into my sleeping bag beside the fire. His bag was lost but there were sufficient blankets and my groundsheet and he wrapped up in these. He was still muttering when I drifted into sleep.

His sullen, fearful mood continued through the next day. The wolves were moving fast and far and, the farther we moved from the extra rifle at the base camp the more frequently he paused to look back over our trail, his eyes longing to retrace our steps. Still, we advanced. In the afternoon we were able to leave the pack's spoor and cut at an angle across the predictable circle, moving over rolling hills with deep snow between the slopes and stark pines on the crest. Evening was approaching. Charles was lagging and I had to urge him on, often walking well ahead of him; turning to find him gazing backwards; shouting to him, whereupon he would come forward, head down and shoulders hunched. Then sunset struck with golden shafts across the western sky and it was in this violent glow that we came upon the wolves . . .

I topped a ridge and saw them like a string of dark slugs advancing across a rippled snowfield. I took my binoculars from their case and focused. Charles came up to stand beside me, breathing harder than usual. The wolves moved like a single segmented organism, in a perfect twisting line. Then suddenly the line broke up, the pack formed a semi-circle, sitting back on their lean haunches. Charles grunted and pointed and I turned the glasses along the line indicated, saw a copse of dark trees and, after a few moments, saw the moose.

He was a huge fellow, completely motionless, facing the pack. He'd not yet shed his antlers and they spread like two giant hands as wide as his great height. His ears were laid back, his mane erect. The wolves rose and advanced a few

paces; settled on their haunches again. The moose moved then. The bell beneath his neck swung as he turned his head. He pawed the ground with great platter feet. The wolves showed prudence despite their hunger. Their tongues lolled out and their flanks rose and fell. Finally the leader rose and advanced cautiously, turned sideways to his quarry, testing the moose's temper and resolve. The moose didn't wait. He came with a sudden rush, awkward and mighty. The wolf leaped sideways, turning in the air and the pack spun and scattered. The moose halted, snorted and pawed, and then backed into the trees again. The wolves came silently back and drew together, exactly like a conference, heads lowered, muzzles close. From time to time one raised his head to gaze at the moose. The moose pawed spurts of snow and did not look worried or reluctant . . . looked as if he would welcome an attack. I watched, fascinated. This was an important observation. I knew the wolves had not eaten in days and wondered how much hunger was necessary to override caution. A great deal, apparently, for they rose abruptly and trotted off, shoulders rising and falling in a rhythm uncannily like a human shrug in time of resignation. They crossed the snowfield and vanished from sight. The moose began to peacefully strip bark from the trees. Charles snorted and went back down the ridge, wondering what I had seen worth seeing and I stood there for some time, watching the moose in the deepening shadows. The sky had reddened, the tallest trees gathered the last light and darkness fell spreading over the ground. When I could no longer distinguish the moose I turned and started back down the incline, picking my steps carefully. Not, however, carefully enough.

'And then the second disaster struck . . .'

Claymore winced slightly.

'The definitive disaster,' he said. 'I had just settled my weight on my leg when something struck me just above the ankle. It didn't hurt. I thought the limb of a tree had somehow fallen on me and there was what seemed a great interval before I heard the solid clang of metal – seemed a great time lapse, although I was still suspended in the midst of falling when the

sound reached my brain and as I dropped into the snow I already knew what had happened – that I had stepped on the pan of a trap. I had fallen on my back, twisting the imprisoned leg. I sat up, brushing snow from my arms in thoughtless habit, and leaned down to inspect the damage. I still felt no pain, no feeling at all, but the moment I saw the trap I knew I was severely damaged.

‘It was a huge trap made to hold a bear. The vicious jaws had sunk deeply into my leg – so deeply it seemed the toothed edges must nearly meet between torn calf and shattered shin. I inspected it very calmly; found it was old and rusted and must have lain there for years, forgotten by some long departed trapper. I looked at it from every possible angle, tilting my head this way and that, and then took the jaws in my hands and tried to open it. I could not budge it. I sat back, wondering what to do – I’d completely forgotten Charles and was undoubtedly in some form of shock. But then he called from the shadows below, asking what had happened. I felt a sense of relief as I heard his voice and shouted to him. A moment later, in a spray of snow, he was kneeling beside me.

‘He winced as he saw the wound; bent over my leg and inspected the trap. His hands moved slowly at first but gradually his face darkened and he began to jerk and haul violently. His efforts twisted my leg and the first tingling of pain advanced past my knee. I clamped my teeth shut and watched him without protest, with complete confidence in his experience and ability. But then his face changed again, he cursed and squatted back. He looked sick. His forehead was glistening with sweat. He told me in slow, thoughtful tones that the release mechanism had become jammed or broken during the long untended time and that he wasn’t able to open the jaws. He repeated the last several times . . . “Can’t open it, won’t open, can’t get it to open . . .” Then he cursed some more. I still felt no real panic. It seemed impossible that I was hopelessly trapped as long as I had a companion with me. I asked what we should do, quite calmly, I believe. Charles didn’t answer. He wiped the back of his hand across his brow and leaned over

the trap again, digging in the snow until he found the chain. He followed the chain, lifting it from the snow foot by foot, like some clanking serpent with a frozen spine; found the end secured to a large tree, encircling the bole and fastened with a stout padlock. I watched as he took the chain in both hands and hauled on it, bracing one boot against the tree and winding the links around his wrists. His shoulders heaved beneath his heavy mackinaw. Sounds came brittle on the cold air. His heel scraped the bark, he grunted and snorted, the chain rattled. At last he gave up the effort and bent to the padlock, inspecting it carefully, turning it over in his hands. His breath hung about his face like a halo. He straightened and rubbed the back of his neck, then came clumping back to where I sat. He moved behind me without a word and began fumbling with my pack; eased it from my shoulders and laid it open, searching for a tool. But there was none. Whatever we had possessed which might have proved effective had been lost through the ice. Presently he returned to the tree. He seemed to have difficulty crossing the deep snow and paused, breathing deeply, before drawing his hand axe. It was a short-handled affair, the blade flat backed, and he struck the padlock several times with it. It clanked dull but distinct and did no good at all. From his posture, the way his shoulders sloped and his head hung, I got the impression he hadn't expected the blows to be effective — had tried them for mere formality. Once more he returned to me. He knelt, cleared the snow away and struck the spring and release mechanism several sharp ringing blows. The axe rebounded and the lock refused to yield. Flakes of rust splint-ered from the steel and bright marks scored the metal but it would not break. Charles shook his head. The pain was in-creasing now. He reversed the axe and attempted to use the handle as a prying bar, but could get no leverage between the tightly clamped teeth. After a moment he chopped the axe into the earth in a gesture of frustration; grasped the jaws in his hands again and pulled. I leaned forward to help. Together we applied all our strength. But that trap was fashioned to hold a bear. We could not budge it.

"It's no use," he said.

"I looked searchingly at him.

"His face clouded with anger, he scowled at me. "Well? What do you expect? It's no use, I tell you!" He gestured at the trap. "The big brown bears can't open these, what can I do? Eh? What can I do? Sometimes when a bear is caught like this they escape. You know how this is, eh? They escape by gnawing their foot off. That's how. The big bear chews his own paw through, so what do you expect me to do?" I said nothing. Gradually his anger lessened. He glanced towards the tree. "I might chop the tree down," he said, but even as he spoke we both knew it was impossible. He had only the hand axe, the tree was large, even if it were possible it would take far too long. "Even then, you would still be trapped. I would have to carry you, dragging the trap and chain. Or build a litter and haul you behind me. If one had a rifle, the spring could be shot apart, of course. But one does not have the rifle." He looked sharply at me as he said this. Despite the growing pain, I felt indignant at this reproach; said, "That's right. We haven't the rifle. So what shall we do?" He didn't answer for a while. Then he shrugged. "I will need tools. The hacksaw, the crowbar. Also the first aid kit. The spare first aid kit ..." He nodded to me, to himself. "Yes, that will be necessary, your leg must be treated before you can be moved."

"But those things are at the cabin," I said.

"Charles looked away.

"Then I felt the first awful weight of panic ..."

Claymore looked at me almost with challenge. I was staring, open mouthed, completely absorbed in his tale, caught up in the complex mood behind the words.

"He left you?" I asked.

Claymore nodded.

"Yes. He left me. It was the fact of not having his rifle, you see. I feel certain that, had he not lost the weapon, he would have found some other solution; wouldn't have abandoned me. But he had lost the gun and, with it, his courage, his confidence. All his experience was related to the possession of a

firearm, and without it he could not function, he could not relate circumstances to past experience. Standing over me he seemed to have no more substance than his shadow; could no more direct his own behaviour than that shadow could defy the commands of the fading light. And then, of course, there were the wolves . . .

'All our efforts, although they seemed to have lasted a long time, had passed quickly. Time had been suspended by stress. The sky was still violent with gold and fire behind strato-cumulus formations. I distinctly remember turning to look at this flaming sunset; noticing it without relation to my plight, as my mind turned away from reality in self-defence. I thought quite composedly how beautiful the colours were with the dark pines thrusting up like a palisade. And then, gradually, I became aware of other broken silhouettes above the ridge. It was as if the tournure of the land had shifted subtly, as if during our suspended period of time the world had continued to age and upheavals had altered the contours. I shielded my eyes and stared into the incandescent sunset and gradually the objects took form and became the wolves.

'The pack sat on top of the ridge and regarded us in silent hunger. I spoke – I used my voice, although the syllables were broken and did not take verbal form – and Charles turned to look; jerked up sharply, his face mangled by fear. The wolves followed his motion with their yellow eyes. "They never attack humans," I said. And Charles knew this as well as I, but he did not have his gun. He whispered, "They have no fear of us. You would not let me kill them . . ." Trying to shift the responsibility on to me, of course; to justify his act even before he committed it. And then I knew, definitely, that he would leave me.

'Charles began making preparations then, without another word. I watched him in silence with the fires of agony spreading through my thigh and hip, eager for fuel. He made a fire. He gathered all the wood in the immediate vicinity and stacked it beside me. He took the blankets and sleeping bag from my pack and wrapped them carefully – tenderly even –

around me. His actions were stiff and jerky and he could not look at me; could not bring himself to tell me he was leaving. Strangely enough, I felt I should make it easier for him, since it was an irrevocable decision. I asked, "How soon can you be back?" He looked at me then; seemed relieved that I was not pleading or arguing; that I accepted the necessity. He assured me he could travel very fast alone and unencumbered; that he could be back in two days, maybe less, no more. "All right," I told him. "Obviously you must have tools to free me." "And the other rifle," he added, quickly. The axe was still jammed in the ground and he drew it out; looked at it for a moment, reluctant to part with his only weapon. Then he handed it to me. He held it out by the handle, as if still undecided – as if he might snatch it away at the last moment. But when I grasped the blade he let it go. He tied his snowshoes on, fumbling with the laces and glancing sideways at the ridge. Then he stood up and nodded. "It is the only way," he said. "Yes," I said, "it is how it must be." "I will hurry. I will return with the rifle." The way he said it, I could tell he believed he would be returning not for rescue, but revenge. Then he moved off, swinging the big snowshoes wide and moving fast. I watched him until he had passed into the trees. Then I turned and watched the wolves and they watched me . . .

'My God,' I said, the exclamation forced from me as Claymore paused. He was looking at the mounted wolves across the clearing. It was lunchtime now and no one else had passed through the hall for some time. We seemed very much alone and, somehow, I got the impression that Claymore was talking more to himself than to me. I had no wish to destroy the mood with which he spoke, and stilled the urge to comment. He lowered his eyes and regarded his legs then looked at the wolves once again. They stared back with glass eyes.

'I took stock of the situation,' he said. 'I felt, at first, that I would be able to survive until Charles returned. I kept telling myself that there are few, if any, recorded instances of wolves attacking humans in North America. I had the axe and

my sheath knife and the fire. I had a plentiful supply of firewood. I tried to look upon my plight as an experiment, a chance at first hand observation, and actually managed to feel almost cheerful for a short while. But it could not last. I don't suppose I'd expected it to, really. There was the pain and there were the wolves. The pain had become unbearable and the wolves were hungry. I told myself the wolves would not approach the fire and fashioned a tourniquet for my leg, using one of the groundsheets and turning it tight with the axe handle. I was able to cut off the pain this way, but was afraid of stopping circulation too long and each time I released the pressure the agony flooded back worse than before, increasing with each turn of the axe. Time passed with incredible slowness. The sunset lingered, the wolves waited. Then, at last, it was night. I shifted another length of wood on the fire, raising the flames and increasing the circle of light. I could no longer see the wolves, but I could hear them panting. And then, suddenly, I could see them. They had come down the slope to the very rim of the firelight, formless grey shapes with glowing eyes. I threw small flaming sticks at them and they backed away calmly. I held the axe in one hand and the knife in the other, turned my back to the fire and waited. Panic faded into a stupor. I blacked out.

'I couldn't have been unconscious long, only minutes perhaps, certainly less than an hour. The fire still burned brightly. But when I awoke it was with a cold and certain resolve, as if my mind had fashioned a formula while my consciousness was gone. The situation was very clear. I knew that if I remained there I would die. The pain, the cold, the wolves – by one or all I would die. And I was determined not to die; thought of the moose driving the pack away with his charge and then thought of the bear for whom this trap had been designed – the bear who would devour his own leg to escape, governed by a natural instinct far deeper than pain could delve. I saw the only possibility of survival quite objectively.

'I had the axe.

'I had to remove my leg.

'It was decided. I considered no other course of action; refused to contemplate the blinding agony and the unspeakable horror of the act. I used only one rationalization – telling myself my leg was hopelessly mangled already and would never be of use to me again; that I would be cutting away a thing already dead. But I didn't really need to convince myself of this, for I was merely an animal in a trap. Very carefully I began to plan the operation.

'I placed the blade of my knife in the hottest embers of the fire. It was a large triangular blade, very keen, which I used to dissect the remains of the wolf pack's kills. I tested the blade of the axe with my thumb. It seemed sharp – it had to be sharp enough, for I had no way to hone it. Then I waited for the knife to heat. I was very calm. I took out my pipe and tobacco and lighted it with a burning twig. I smoked slowly and contemplatively, watching the smoke rise against the flames. I timed it just right, so that when the pipe had burned out the knife had begun to glow. I knocked the ash out and put my pipe in my pocket, then tightened the tourniquet just above the knee. I raised the axe with both hands and marked an imaginary line across my shin; lifted my torso, threw my shoulders back, and brought the axe down.

'But my nerve failed.

'At the last instant, involuntarily, I twisted the stroke to the side. The blade bit into the earth beside my leg and the concussion leaped at my elbows and shoulder sockets. I cursed myself for a coward. And, as if the wolves could sense the failure of my courage, they moved nearer. One wolf advanced ahead of the pack – the same, I thought, that had advanced to test the moose. Anger surged up in me. I screamed loudly and the wolf retreated, lowering his muzzle. The anger helped. It purified my perceptions. I took one of the blankets and draped it over my leg, smoothing it around the calf so that the contour could be seen. I was very annoyed with my leg. But, covered with the blanket, it ceased to be a leg, it was a lump beneath a blanket, no more. I drew the axe edge across this lump at the

proper spot, wrinkling the blanket to leave a visible line. I raised the axe once more. I looked at a wrinkle in a blanket. Just a wrinkle in a blanket in the wavering light of a fire. And then, very accurately and very hard, I chopped down.

‘This time I did not fail.

‘The blow did not sever the leg, but it broke through the slender shin bone and cut deeply into the flesh. I stared at it. I tried to raise the axe but it was stuck. I had to heave with all my strength to withdraw it, and the blood spurted behind. There was more blood than I had imagined and it rose with incredible force, towering above me and then splattering in all directions. The blanket turned instantly dark. I was seized by frenzy. My mind rushed from my body and I saw myself from above, a wild madman broken in dancing flames, spewing heavy blood in wide arcs, roaring and jerking and lifting the axe. I had but one thought: I had to finish the task. I fell upon my leg, hacking savagely time and again, no longer capable of accurate strokes but chopping and slashing with insane fury, sawing the blade back and forth across parting tendons and pounding the edge through convulsing muscle.

‘I have no recollection of when the leg finally parted. I did not know at the time. But it did and I found myself pounding the earth, digging great furrows in the soaked ground, separated from the trap and from the grisly burden it held.

‘A semblance of sanity snapped taut in my brain then. I dropped the axe and grasped the glowing knife; clamped the flat blade against the ghastly stump. The odour of charred tissue and boiling blood sprang up in overpowering waves. I held my breath and held the knife and the bleeding stopped. The pain, too, had stopped. My nerves could not convey this message of horror, this agony beyond sensation’s scope. I sat there, gasping and gaping. I stared at the trap. Blood bubbled and coiled from the shapeless, lifeless lump in the clamped jaws. It was hideous. I did not want this monstrous object near me. I leaned forward and raised the trap, swung it and threw it from me with all my might. It flew, the chain clanking, and

the blanket dropped away. The trap bounced twice when it landed.

'Again I blacked out.

'And again awoke.

'I awoke with a sense of relief and with the wolves making sounds very near. I gripped the gory axe and surged upwards. Every trace of fear had left me, severed as surely as my leg, and I rose to fight. But the pack were not attacking me. They were clustered about the trap. They snarled and growled and their powerful jaws snapped. The wolves were devouring that useless scrap I had abandoned, and somehow that fact was more terrible than the amputation. I shifted back, my arm brushed a burning log and the flames leaped higher. A wolf raised his jowls, his muzzle dark with blood, his eye reflecting the flames. His jaws worked slowly, crunching down, and the flesh disappeared. Some part of my mind insisted it was just flesh and some other part knew it had been my leg and I vomited into the fire ...'

Claymore's head jerked.

'And so it was,' he said, and spread his hands.

I stared at him. I felt like vomiting myself. He turned and ran that searching glance across my face.

'You do understand?'

'I ... My God ... I don't know what to say ...'

'Oh, the horror of it, yes. But you do understand why I did not die ... why I am alive to tell you this macabre little tale?'

I didn't answer.

'The wolves did not attack, of course. I was too ... aroused ... for fear. They tested me and I waited with the axe and they drew back and squatted and then they moved off to seek easier prey. I did not shout at them, did not depend on the fire; I drove them off by the instincts they sensed within me. I daresay they would have found the moose better quarry that night. I was more than a man, because I had become less and it was more than a leg that I cut away. I waited until dawn. I remember little of that time. I believe I ate a bit of food from

my pack and systematically loosened the tourniquet. At any rate, I did whatever survival demanded. In the morning I began to crawl. I hardly thought about directions; knew my instincts would guide me. As they did. My mind was free for other thoughts, for concepts. I envisioned revenge upon Charles for a time, but not seriously, for I realized he had acted in accord with nature. The pack does not wait for the injured individual, the species does not risk survival for the organism, the body does not pause for the loss of a cell. Hatred and rage dried up in the basin of my brain, emotion evaporated and laid bare the true fabric of the mind. And in this dry bed all my experience flowed together, all branches met and shared the same natural roots. Some might say I went mad in the long hours of my ordeal, but whatever I lost it was not sanity . . .

'And that was that.

'Charles found me later that day, the next day, whenever. He had his rifle and his confidence and, when the first shock had passed he respected me greatly for what I had done. He did not understand, as a man reasons, but he sensed, as a man should. And do you?'

I could not answer.

I don't believe Claymore expected an answer, beyond what he saw in my face. That was sufficient. Presently he stood up; leaned on his stick for a moment, then nodded pleasantly and moved away. I remained on the log and he went down the trail between the trees. I wondered where he was going. He had told me that lately he'd been doing a bit of field work. Just a bit, he'd said. An application of former knowledge. But that could mean anything. I watched him as he came to a bend. His limp was more noticeable as he turned. The man who had attacked Bill had favoured one leg when he left. But Bill might have injured him. And Bill, of course, had survived. He had been tested and he survived. Then Claymore was gone and I sat there for some time. Presently, just as if this had been a real forest, a chill seemed to move through the trees and caused me to shiver, there among the wolves . . .

UNDER THE FLAGSTONE

Morag Greer

The warm perfumed sunlight beat down on Ira's golden head as he gnawed idly at the shreds of meat clinging to the bone. His hunger appeased, he leaned back against the granite headstone and watched the coruscating flight of a darting dragonfly. Slowly the boy's eyelids dropped, his head became heavy, and he slept.

He was awakened by a shriek of horror from the gateway of the graveyard. Scrambling to his knees, he peered round the edge of the polished grey stone. A young man and woman stood just inside the gate, staring wide-eyed at a mound of newly-turned earth, where pieces of rotten wood protruded, and shattered bone gleamed amid moist, reddish clods and bruised flowers.

Suddenly the woman noticed Ira, and nudged her companion.

'Little boy!' called the man. 'Hey, little boy. Have you seen anyone around here – a man – digging up the graves?'

Ira solemnly shook his head.

'It's horrible,' mumbled the woman, shuddering and clinging to the man's arm. They made their silent way past the opened grave, heading for the east side of the cemetery, but as they drew level with Ira the woman shrieked again, pressing a clenched fist against her mouth, eyes wide with shock. The man simply stared.

Grey shirt and trousers smeared with dirt, delicate, pale, angelic face lightly flushed with the sun, the little boy sat on another heap of fresh soil, holding in one small hand a human

shin bone to which were attached a few scraps of skin and flesh.

'Oh, my God!' exclaimed the man. 'Drop that bone at once, child! It's filthy! D'you hear me? Drop it at once!'

Ira dropped it, beside the other shin bone, five ribs, two shoulder blades, a knee-cap and a dozen assorted fingers and toes. He raised his eyes, which till then had been demurely lowered, and golden lights welled up from the fathomless pupils and flickered across the pale lilac irises. Full red lips drew back in a lopsided grin, revealing sharply pointed ivory white teeth. And a restive breeze, flitting over the graveyard and through the hemlock trees, teasingly tossed his blond curls, tickling his furry ears and tweaking the stiff, black tufts on their tips.

The woman fainted, falling with her arm touching Ira's left foot. Fastidiously, he withdrew it, and watched while the man, pale and shivering, patted her face and tried vainly to bring her round. Silently the boy stretched out a small, grubby hand. The man's head snapped up and he made a protective gesture over the woman's body, but the child's expression sent him cowering back. Ira gently laid two fingers on the closed lids of the woman's eyes, then on her lips and finally on each ear. Sitting back on his heels again, he whispered something so softly that the man could not distinguish the words.

Immediately, the young woman blinked and sat up. Rising to her feet in a matter-of-fact manner, she calmly dusted her clothes and patted her hair into place.

'Come on, darling,' she said cheerfully to her amazed companion. 'Goodbye, little boy. I hope we meet again some time.' And she smiled fondly at Ira, who seemed to be studying her closely. He grinned again, sending icy sweat trickling down the man's back as he hustled the woman out of the cemetery with never a backward glance.

Far away across the purple hills a howl shivered up to the evening sky. Ira glanced at the westering sun, then began gathering together the bones he had taken from the two graves. Wrapping a torn strip of shroud around them, he tucked the

bundle under one arm and skipped gaily between the graves and under the branches of the hemlocks and weeping willows till he came to the north-west corner of the graveyard. Like a little grey squirrel he skittered up and over the wall, and vanished into the woods.

Dusk was creeping stealthily up the valley when Ira reached home, and the first sprinkling of stars shimmered wanly in the fading blue. Slipping quietly between the rusty wrought iron gates as they hung askew on their warped hinges, he sidled past the high flowering hedges and bulging rhododendrons, under the low spreading limbs of the blazing copper beech, and over the sagging, rotten boards of the broken bridge. Beyond the stream his route left the long, winding, overgrown driveway that swept up the hill like some great twisting serpent till it reached the dark shape of the house, brooding above the terraced lawn. Instead, Ira confidently plunged into dense undergrowth and trees that huddled close together, blotched here and there with sickly livid outcroppings of fungus. The matted branches excluded almost every glimmer of light from the rapidly darkening sky, but he knew his path well and in a few minutes came out at the edge of the unkempt lawn beside a chipped statue of a satyr, clad in choking swatches of bindweed.

Glancing right and left, the boy ran through the long, rank grass, startling a tiny fieldmouse which scuttered away in panic from under his feet. Up the crumbling steps he went, on to the wide, curved, weed-infested terrace with its marble balustrade, patched green and grey with lichen where it managed to show through the rambling roses and clinging brambles. Although the greater part of the house now lay in tumbled ruins, the doorposts still stood firmly, surmounted by a heavy carved lintel. A bush of deadly-nightshade grew by the left hand pillar, while purple and white foxgloves graced the right. Across the lintel twined and twisted long drooping ropes of ivy, bottle green and fiery red.

Ira darted through the doorway and clambered lightly over chunks of fallen masonry till he came to a large flagstone

raised slightly at one corner. Sliding easily under it, the child pattered down the steep, slippery steps to the cellars below. As he turned the corner at the bottom he came face to face with his sister Huldah, the shy one, who drew back fearfully, then quickly faded into the dripping stone wall as her brother grinned at her. Organ music, broken and discordant, came faintly from the far end of the passage, telling Ira that his mother was awake.

He headed towards the sound, and bounded into the dim, dusty room. Selina Keturah sat in icy, ashen loveliness, clothed in trailing raven draperies, her long, slender fingers caressing the scarred, yellowed ivory keys. She turned her sable head as her younger son entered, but did not cease her playing.

'You're late, my child,' she murmured. 'Didn't you hear Rodolphus calling to the night?'

'I heard him, mother, but I was far away. It took a long time to reach home.'

'I've told you before, my darling; if you think you're going to be late, come home the quick way.'

'Yes, mother,' replied the boy dutifully. 'But I like to see things, and I can't if I come through the tunnel of thought.'

'What sort of things, little one?' Her hands glided over the keys as if each finger had a life of its own.

'Trees, flowers, animals, clouds. I like thunderstorms and blizzards, and sometimes ...' his voice sank low and husky, 'sometimes I see people.'

The music stopped abruptly.

'People?' Selina Keturah's face flushed ever so slightly as she regarded her son. Her brows contracted and her dark eyes glittered as roused interest caused a disturbing eddy in her languid thoughts.

'Did you see - people - today?'

'Yes, mother. I saw a man and a woman.'

'Did you ... speak to them?' she asked, with a hint of hope and longing which her self-control could not quite suppress.

'They spoke to me. The woman fainted and I put the call of hearing, seeing and speaking on her.'

'And the man?'

'He was afraid. But I went into his mind; he'll remember nothing.'

'You've done well, my son, very well indeed. Ah, I can hardly wait! It's been so long. Come! We must tell your father.'

She rose and placed one hand on Ira's shoulder, and the sweet headiness of incense enveloped him as he accompanied her from the room. Half-way along the corridor, however, both halted suddenly, hand to forehead, as a spasm of pain crossed each face simultaneously.

'Your grandmother is awake, Ira. We must say good evening.'

Retracing their steps a few yards, they entered a small room where a ray of the dying sun struck down through a jagged gap in the roof, dimly revealing a rocking chair, heavily draped with dust and cobwebs, in which sat an old, old woman, her face so wrinkled and brown that it was difficult to imagine that any spark of life remained in the mummy-like form. But when her parchment eyelids lifted, all doubts on the subject were dispelled. Her eyes flamed with a fierce inner fire, green and feral, irresistibly compelling. From neck to feet, but for her hands, she was encased in a loose winding-sheet, stained brown and brittle with great age. She began to rock gently, and the dreadful creaking of her chair shattered the silence like the shrieking of creatures in unbearable agony.

'Good evening, mother,' Selina Keturah's voice chimed softly.

'Good evening, grandmother,' said Ira.

The flame in the ancient eyes flickered warningly, and Selina Keturah hastily instructed her son to relate the day's happenings. He complied in clipped, concise phrases, for there was nothing that annoyed old Harriet more than unnecessary speech, and she had been known to inflict drastic punishment on any who dared to indulge in such an activity in her presence.

'And I put the call of hearing, seeing and speaking on her, and cloaked the memory of the other,' he finished.

Not a word issued from the brown, leather lips of the wizened old woman, but Ira felt her inside his mind, telling him he was a good boy, a credit to the family. Abruptly, she dismissed her daughter and grandson.

Lucius, Ira's father, had already begun his night's work on his eternal hobby when they came to him. His room, a large rambling chamber, was crammed from floor to ceiling with the results of his labours; chairs, tables, ornaments, tiny figurines of animals, birds, flowers, all with a soft creamy gleam like old ivory. His fat, pallid cheeks wobbling with delight, he pounced on the bundle carried by his son.

'Ah! A beautiful collection, my child,' he cried, unwrapping the gruesome burden. 'Beautiful! These finger bones are exactly what I need to complete this group.'

He indicated an exquisite cluster of minute figures dancing past a fire in a clearing among grotesquely twisted trees. Each figure seemed about to erupt into life, hair flying, legs kicking, as the carved flames leapt high. And the branches and leaves of the crowding trees could hardly wait for the fickle breeze to toss them to the waiting night sky. For a moment Ira was one with the dancers, whirling madly beneath a blazing moon, with the wind on his naked body and the firelight in his eyes, then he blinked and was back in himself again, standing beside his gross little father and his tall serene mother.

'Tell your father what you've accomplished, my son,' murmured Selina Keturah proudly, and the boy obediently repeated his story, word for word, as he had told old Harriet.

A slow smile illuminated Lucius's smooth hairless face, and his squat, jelly-like body writhed sensuously. 'And when will she arrive?' he asked, saliva trickling from the corners of his full, scarlet lips.

'She'll be here at dusk tomorrow,' the child told him.

'We'll be ready,' said Lucius, nodding contentedly. 'This will be a most welcome visit. It's been such a long time. Selina Keturah, my dear, you'll make all necessary arrangements to receive our . . . our guest.'

'Of course, my husband. I'll attend to everything.' She

turned to Ira, who was stifling a yawn. 'To bed now, my son. You must rest. You'll be up late tomorrow, remember.'

The little golden-haired boy kissed his parents and trotted off to his own room. Curling up in the dusty leaves in the corner, he pulled the tattered sere-cloth over his shoulders and soon was fast asleep.

A few minutes later, Huldah appeared from the wall and stood silently gazing down at her little brother. She loved him dearly, but he frightened her when he grinned, and she became so shy and confused that it hurt terribly. She wished sometimes that she could be more like him; able to go out, to see things, not afraid to visit strange places. How big the world must be, how awesome and wonderful. She had never in all her life ventured even as far as the wide flight of steps leading down from the terrace.

Once, only once, had she tremblingly, and after many false starts, climbed the stair from the cellars and pushed aside the flagstone. The moon was full to bursting that night, she remembered, and the stars were sharp needle points of light, breathtakingly beautiful, but cruelly painful to eyes accustomed to gloom. There was no sound save the incessant talk of the wind in the trees. She moved forward slowly, hesitantly, picking her way awkwardly across the crumbling slabs of masonry, stark black and white in the flooding wash of moonbeams. Ahead reared the huge doorway, uncanny and terrifying. Huldah stopped, panic fluttering at her heart. If once she passed through this portal she might never find her way back. But the world lured her, coaxing her on, and she recalled the many wondrous tales she had heard her brother tell as she stood silent and unseen beside him in the wall.

Shuddering, half fearful half entranced, she stepped through the doorway, touching with wondering hands the bush of deadly-nightshade and the foxgloves that grew on either side. She gazed around and saw the ruined terrace strangled with roses, the abandoned lawn sweeping down to the impenetrable wall of trees whose towering peaks tossed against the limpid lantern of the moon. She breathed the warm night

air, sweet with the scent of roses, sharp with the rank smell of nettles.

A sudden gust of wind twisted her mouldering green dress around her legs, and whipped her long black hair across her eyes, blinding her. A nightjar screeched, and on the terrace something rustled. Huldah whirled, and ran whimpering back the way she had come, stumbling and falling, sobbing for breath, till she reached the flagstone and safety. It was her greatest and only adventure. For ever after she must experience the world through the words of her fearless, golden-haired brother, Ira.

Sighing in regret for what could never be, Huldah faded sadly into the dank wall.

As dusk fell the following evening, the entire family, with an air of tense expectation, gathered round grandmother Harriet's chair. Selina Keturah stood, tall and ethereal, beside Lucius, whose cheeks oozed, rolling oily drops of pleasurable impatience. On the other side, Rodolphus, the elder son, hunched his emaciated, lupine frame in its musty black suit close to his sister Hortensia, the heady scent of whose lilies vied with her mother's incense and the smell of mortician's balm from Harriet's winding-sheet. Hortensia's tangled white hair, in which a little bat was sleeping, cascaded over her ivory coloured robe, and her pink, myopic eyes blinked and watered painfully as the last weak sunbeam fell across her from the hole in the roof. Ira sat at his grandmother's feet, while Huldah, as always, had concealed herself, but was watching and listening from the wall.

The ancient, rotting table was set with heavy antique silver, gleaming dully against the dark wood. Silence reigned as the light ebbed, and still they waited. It was Ira, as the one who had summoned her, who first heard the woman coming, far off and hesitant.

'She's approaching the gates,' he murmured. 'She has passed between them ... under the beech tree ... over the bridge ... she's in among the trees ... stumbling ... falling ... stopped. The cry of the owl must have scared her. Moving on

again . . . she's come to the edge of the lawn . . . standing beside the statue, looking up at the house . . . crossing the lawn, now . . . up the steps on to the terrace . . .'

Now they all could hear the faltering footsteps as the stranger made her uncertain way between the doorposts and across the rubble to the flagstone. The stone screeched harshly as she moved it aside and began to descend the stair. At the bottom she halted and peered around at the wet, green, slimy stone walls, the spiders' webs, the deep drifts of dead, brown leaves that lingered from last autumn. Turning left, she slowly walked the few steps necessary to bring her to Harriet's room. As she entered, a collective sigh of pleasure arose from the lips of the family. The woman looked from one to the other, unable to see their faces clearly in the gathering gloom.

'I . . . I had to come,' she said, in a defensive tone.

No one replied.

'I hope you don't think I'm intruding,' she continued, with a quaver in her voice. 'I . . . I've had the queerest feeling all day. In fact, I've had it since yesterday. I fainted in a cemetery, you see, and when I came to, there was this little boy with the brightest golden hair you've ever seen, and I . . . Why, that's the boy!'

She bent down to look closer at Ira, and he grinned at her, which caused her to recoil sharply and catch her breath.

'He's . . . he's been in my thoughts all the time,' she explained. 'Everywhere I looked I saw his face. Whenever anyone spoke, it was his voice I heard, and every time I spoke, I found myself talking about him. So, you see, I just *had* to come.' She spread her hands in bewilderment. 'I *had* to.'

'We understand,' said Selina Keturah, drifting forward at Harriet's silent bidding. 'Please, sit down. You are our guest; our very welcome guest.'

Seven places were set at the table, but Selina Keturah ushered the stranger to the end which lacked a setting, bearing only a large, delicately chased silver bowl. The woman glanced around uneasily, but failed to notice that Lucius had circled round behind her, his vast paunch quivering as he unclasped

his sweating hands to reveal a tiny steel blade, thin and honed to a razor edge.

Rodolphus and Hortensia, meanwhile, had moved grandmother Harriet's chair to the head of the table where the ancient crone now sat in regal splendour.

As the woman raised her eyes, she looked straight into Harriet's, and immediately felt herself drawn down into their immeasurable depths. She struggled for a moment till the clinging web of control tightened and held her motionless. Then, for long seconds, nothing else happened. The family remained silent and unmoving as Harriet explored the guest's mind, playing on every facet of fear that she could find.

The woman felt the warm, repulsive, furry touch of rats scurrying over her feet, squeaking and chittering, then darting up on to her lap, claws and teeth scrabbling at her cringing flesh, sewer stench clogging her nostrils. The horror-filled silken caress of a spider's tiny feathery feet scuttled over her eyebrow, down her eyelid, past her nose, and round on to the rigid curve of her ashen lips; then the probing legs were past her clenched teeth and moving over her tongue. She retched painfully, but couldn't vomit. Icy black water surged backwards and forwards in heaving, salty, sullen waves, gurgling and sliding over mouth and eyes, choking and blinding her, while searing, suffocating flames teased her luxuriant hair with eager yellow fingers. She tottered on the sulphurous brink of a howling, steaming pit, and hurtled down through the clamouring smoke to appalling nothingness below.

As the knife slit her jugular vein, tearing, agonizing spasms of pain racked her body, out of all proportion to the extent of the wound. Deep, deep in those glittering eyes she swam in a sea of stark horror, her brain shrieking hysterically while her body remained paralysed and silent. She could feel her heart pumping strongly as its precious fluid jetted into the large silver bowl, and, by straining her frozen eyeballs downward, could dimly see the splattering drops rebounding and splashing on the table.

When the bowl was full, Selina Keturah placed one slender

finger over the tiny gash which closed promptly and firmly. Then Lucius, with outstretched little finger, delicately ladled the thick crimson liquid into seven large ornate silver goblets which Hortensia handed round, including one which she thrust towards the wall. A small white hand emerged from the stonework, grasped the goblet, and retreated. The guest sat and watched, nauseated, terrified, helpless, as the family drank her blood, savouring it and making soft disgusting sounds of satisfaction.

When the goblets were drained and set back on the board, Selina Keturah, aided by Hortensia, slowly removed the woman's clothing, fingering each garment and tossing them one after the other into a dark corner, till she was naked. Then, still unable to stir, she was lifted on to the table by the drooling Rodolphus. Her head, its gently waving amber hair dishevelled, lay by the knife and fork set at Harriet's place. With infinite enjoyment the ancient evil green eyes leered down at the sick, horror-stricken brown ones, rigidly staring in the blanched face before her. Stiffly Harriet's gnarled fingers reached out to grasp her cutlery, and the others followed suit, their features lighting up in anticipation of their first full meal for almost twelve months. Six knives and forks plunged down to cut and tear at the living flesh, the plates were filled, and the family began to eat, Selina Keturah fondly passing a heaped platter to her unseen daughter hovering behind her by the door.

Harriet's unrelenting will held the guest immobile on the table, fully conscious and with all her senses operating at screaming pitch – only she couldn't scream, couldn't relieve her pent-up emotions in any way. She could smell sweet cloying incense, the heavy scent of balm, the rotting odour of green-slimed walls; her ears were assailed by the noise of tearing, champing teeth and smacking lips; she cringed immovably as she glimpsed the joyful, corpselike faces above her; saltiness trickled into her mouth from her lips where drops of her own blood had splashed; she felt the searing agony of each gaping, seeping wound; but she was unable to utter a single sound, to

move a finger, to produce one tear from her dry and burning eyes.

The first helping devoured, the family fell silent once more. Grandmother Harriet poised her bloody knife over the woman's face, while Lucius and Selina Keturah aimed for the abdomen. In unison they struck. Still the guest was voiceless, though now she writhed in fiendish agony. The old woman's blade had pierced the face between the eyes, and she twisted it from side to side, tearing and crunching at the bone. The woman felt her right eyeball plucked from its socket, the muscles and membranes ripping with a wet, slushy sound. Then the other eye was torn away, and the world disappeared. But she could still hear and taste – until the knife slashed down past her cheekbone and neatly sliced off her silent tongue, before sliding back up to stab at first the left eardrum and then the right. She no longer heard the wild howls and cries of delight as the other knives thrust and wrenched and churned her intestines into a crimson, jammy pulp.

Ira, Hortensia and Rodolphus joined in, quickly working themselves into a frenzy of sweat and blood and splattering gouts of flesh.

'This is for you, Huldah!' screamed Ira, striking for his unseen, shy sister who, of all the family, took no part in the terrible mutilation.

At last, Harriet relaxed her mental control to allow the woman one short, choking gurgle before life finally dripped away over the worn edge of the ancient carved oak table.

When the meal was ended the younger members of the family carefully removed all traces of it, while their elders sat quietly, enjoying each other's company and remembering other meals they had had in years gone by. Sated, bloodstained and weary, they watched as the night gradually lifted and dawn splashed its watery radiance over the sleepy hills and down on to the dreaming house. Hortensia was the first to leave; she could not endure the hot fiery touch of sunlight. It seared her cruelly, and she cringed from it, shielding her weak eyes behind a raised sleeve as she drifted along the passage to her bed

amidst the night-blooming plants, the tending of which was her only occupation and consolation.

The others followed, one by one, till grandmother Harriet was left alone, rocking contentedly in her chair. Yes, it had been a long, long time. She hoped she would not have to wait so long for her next meal.

AMANDA EXCRESCENS

Conrad Hill

A TENTATIVE EXPERIMENT TO DETERMINE THE EFFECT OF EXTRANEOUS ORGANIC MATERIAL UPON FUNGI IN NATURAL HABITAT.

Preliminary Notes

Before commencing informal observation of the selected site, I wish to dispel any misgivings the reader may have concerning my use of human material.

The body to be used was not procured by any sinister Burke and Hare method, but is merely that of my late wife. It became available as the result of a common domestic altercation. However, instead of wasting the corpse by cremation or restrictive interment, I resolved to put it to good use, thus also saving the cost of futile ceremonials.

An interesting adjunct to this study was the manner of death itself; caused by the ingestion of three caps of *Amanita phalloides* substituted for those of the cultivated mushroom, *Agaricus hortensis*. Death occurred six days after ingestion, preceded by all the classic symptoms of hypoglycaemia and caryolysis, together with degeneration of the liver, kidneys and cardiac muscle.*

After dissection and examination of affected organs, the remains were reduced to small manageable pieces and were stored for twenty-eight days in a warm greenhouse to assist

* For further details see my *Progressive Action of Amanita-Toxin on the Human Body*.

putrefaction. Blood, lymph and viscous detritus are stored in a separate container.

The site is located approximately half a mile to the rear of the house and is easily reached by crossing two fields. It consists of a circular area of soil some thirty feet in diameter with a larch tree, *Larix europaea* almost exactly in the centre. The surrounding pasture originally formed part of a park belonging to some long-dead local dignitary but is now used for occasional sheep grazing. The larch is the sole remaining tree (the others sadly demolished by a Philistine farmer) and as such, provides some sort of shelter for the animals during inclement weather. Consequently the area is rich in highly nitrogenous material and produces twenty different species of fungi, including some fine examples of the rare *Boletus cavipes*.

Day 1

Transportation of prepared extraneous organic matter to site. Matter consists of 44 kilogrammes (inc bone) corporeal remains of human origin, together with approximately 4 litres of mucilagenous liquid from the same source.*

Experimental matter was evenly distributed over the surface of the site; each portion being inserted into the soil by gentle pressure of the hand. In this way disturbance and possible destruction of existing mycelia is minimised. The liquid matter was sprinkled over the area by means of a watering can, but frequent blockage at the spout necessitated the removal of the rose, allowing the viscous lumps to flow freely with the liquid.

A note was taken of the number and species of all fruit bodies currently growing on site.

Day 2

No change on site. No new fruit bodies of any species. Opportunity to collect for supper some large Ox mushrooms, *Agaricus villatica*, from surrounding pasture. Also three caps of *Boletus elegans* fruiting on site. Delicious.

* See my Preliminary Notes.

Day 3

Marked absence of fructification. On the contrary, all existing fruit bodies exhibit signs of decay. Impossible to believe material introduced on Day 1 was in any way toxic. Conclusion hesitantly reached that distribution of material resulted in soil disturbance, thus interfering with mycelium development of all species.

Day 4

All fungi on site are dead and in advanced state of decomposition.

Indication of some sort of growth in one place. Tentative examination reveals massive white emergent volva approx 60 centimetres in diameter!

Unable to identify precisely at this stage, but the structure is concordant with that of a huge *Amanita*.

Larch tree displays symptoms of white heart-rot.

Day 5

Great excitement. The large volva is 21 centimetres above soil level and remains unbroken. Investigation of surrounding soil reveals extensive mycelium; some of the hyphae as thick as a man's arm! More fruit bodies are therefore anticipated.

If the prodigious dimensions of the hyphae are in any way proportionate to those of the mature fruit body, a fungus of unparalleled size can be expected. The nutriment requirements of such a fungus must be colossal and could explain the early death of all other fungi on site. There seems to be no trace of the decaying remains observed yesterday. Such rapid putrefaction and apparent absorption into the soil defies explanation; unless (and the premise is faintly absurd) this unknown fungal growth is capable of vastly accelerating the conversion of dead matter into nutrient.

Day 6

The young fungus has broken out of its volva. Cap is large white and roughly rounded with a circumference of 56 centi-

metres and appears to be wrapped in a partial veil as in the genus *Amanita*. The stem is curious, due to a flattening at opposite sides giving an ovoid effect. It also has a membranous covering of similar texture to the partial veil and has a circumference of 41 centimetres. Overall height of structure is 51 centimetres.

I confess that I am unable to identify this species.

Sixteen new growths noted on site; all in the emergent volva stage and of the same mystery species.

Larch tree completely rotten. Several large branches dropped off during my visit to site. My theory regarding nutriment requirements of this new fungus leading to starvation of other species can almost certainly include this tree. Obviously this strange toadstool is too large and insatiable to form a satisfactory mycorrhizal association with the tree roots.

What causes the advanced decay?

Day 7

Soil area of site expanding into surrounding pasture! A study at the periphery of the soil area showed the grass literally dying and decomposing before my eyes. I withdraw my theory of nutriment denial; the process is too rapid for that. This fungus is attacking living organisms and converting them to nutrient almost immediately. My fanciful speculation on Day 5 is therefore almost correct, for with the substitution of one word, I can make an unheard-of statement: This unknown fungal growth is capable of vastly accelerating the conversion of *live* matter into nutrient.

Specimen measures 94 centimetres. To my knowledge this height greatly exceeds that of any known toadstool. Partial veil on fruit cap beginning to disintegrate. The curious stem of the fungus has started to thicken, the circumference today being 52 centimetres. No corresponding increase in size of fruit cap.

Larch tree in dangerous condition.

After today's visit to site, it is with considerable restraint that I refrain from contacting the British Mycological Society.

But I am sure that the inevitable tiresome moral issues raised by the more reactionary members would diminish the importance of this experiment.

Day 8

Larch tree fallen on its side. Whilst on site I witnessed the alarming spectacle of it disappearing into the ground at a steady rate followed by the stump.

Sixteen new growths observed on Day 6 are developing as original specimen. Hundreds of new growths appearing. Soil area now has a diameter of approximately 75 yards and still expanding.

Height of specimen 1 metre 32 cm. Partial veil has peeled to expose fruit cap. To anyone with a sensitive disposition, the appearance of the fruit cap would be quite unnerving, even hideous for it carries an unpleasant parody of a human face. Indeed, if I allowed my imagination a free rein, I could even say that the face is familiar! The 'features' comprise two indentations some six centimetres apart, situated two thirds of the way up the cap. From the centre of, and slightly below these indentations is a gently ridged protuberance flaring slightly at the base. This protuberance bears a marked resemblance to a human nose, minus, of course, the nostrils. Two-and-a-half centimetres below the lowest point of the protuberance is a deep aperture, the entrance to which is 5 centimetres in width and 1 centimetre high. Inside this aperture a pink fleshy substance is visible. Presumably the substance is some form of gill assembly for bearing the spores. The 'features' are on one side of the fruit cap only and are in line with one of the flat sides of the stem, giving the fungus a 'Front' and a 'Back'.

Extraordinary development in stem. The diameter of this (76 cm) now exceeds that of the fruit cap which has remained constant at 56 centimetres.

Day 9

Fascinating and dramatic new development today. Upon approach to site I detected the bleating of sheep emanating from

somewhere near the centre of the soil area. I was unable to see them at first due to a veritable army of growths, but eventually found three sheep lying on their sides in an advanced state of decomposition, and, although they had stopped bleating they were *still alive*. Within seven minutes of my arrival, the three animals were reduced to compost; the upper sides disappearing first. It would seem that this fungus is not only a voracious parasite of plants but of animals too . . .

One is faced with the prospect of widespread cumulative destruction as the mycelium advances in search of ever more nutriment for the rapidly multiplying retinue of fruit bodies developing in its wake.

Original specimen 1 metre 57½ cm. No size increase noted in stem or cap. Membraneous material on stem has peeled revealing two arm-like appendages extending from the top of the stem to approximately half way down. No discernible reason for these appendages, except perhaps to underline a vague resemblance to *Homo Sapiens*. Fruit cap texture is similar to that of the Puff Ball, *Lycoperdon hiemale*. This combined with the grim aspect of the 'features' gives the impression of a polystyrene death mask. One of Nature's disquieting little jokes. Diameter of soil area 150 yards. New growths constantly appearing. Specimen marked with blue dye to assist identification.

Day 10

Field in which site was located is almost entirely soil. Hedges on three sides have disappeared with 20 yards of grass remaining between the advancing mycelium and the last hedge, beyond which is the field adjoining the rear of my house. Upon climbing the connecting gate, I was confronted with the breathtaking sight of thousands of white fruit bodies giving a kind of low pyramidal carpet effect; the little growths at the periphery of the soil area becoming progressively taller towards the centre. Difficulty experienced in reaching original specimen due to densely-packed growths.

No increase in specimen height since yesterday (1 metre 57½

cm.) It seems that the fruit body has reached maturity at last. Faint foetid odour from within the spore cavity, otherwise no change.

In view of the somewhat nebulous similarity between the fruit cap 'features' and those of my late wife, Amanda; plus the fact that her height corresponded almost exactly to that of the mature fungus (5 feet 5 inches), I intend to name this species *Amanda excrescens*. Thus I can both perpetuate her memory, and acknowledge in a small way her contribution to the success of this experiment.

During my return journey I experienced a burning pain in my feet and was disconcerted to discover both soles of my wellington boots missing, also the bottoms of my socks. Since then, the feet have become painfully swollen and inflamed. This is the result, then, of spending too much time on the contaminated soil today, and presents a problem for which I can see no immediate solution; for as the soil area extends, the distance to be covered between periphery and original specimen will be commensurably greater.

Unless I can devise some method of protecting my feet, tomorrow will be my last visit to the specimen.

Day 11

Intense pain in feet; badly discoloured and swollen to twice normal size. Walking is extremely difficult (an hour to descend from bedroom to study). Visit to specimen impossible.

Today I intended to remove a piece of the fruit cap for analysis and also to gather a soil sample.

From the study window I can see that the hedge at the top of the back field has been demolished and the virulent mycelium is beginning its advance down towards the house. If the progress continues unabated I must seriously consider contacting the Authorities. I sincerely hope that they can contain the fungus without killing it.

Whilst writing this, the soles of my feet have apparently been suppurating. Some of the pus must have coagulated to form an adhesive between soles and carpet, consequently, upon

moving my feet, long thick strips of skin remain behind on the pile.

I have examined the skin which gives every indication of putrefaction and emits an unpleasant odour.

I think I have gangrene.

Day 12

Severe pain until midnight last night, at which point purulent explosions of pus occurred. Thereafter feet became numb and started to shrivel. By 5 AM I was able to detach both members from their respective ankles. Fortunately there was no pain but the stumps show traces of discolouration. If the infection persists I will have to amputate further up the legs.

Mobility is seriously impaired; one is unaware of the value of feet until one has to manage without them.

Initially I attempted two methods of locomotion without much success: the first by fully extending my arms in a lying-down position and using them as forelegs; the second, in the same position but using the upper arms only, with the elbows acting as oars. Both methods were impracticable for I was exhausted by the time I had reached the stairs.

The stairs seemed to present an insurmountable problem; eventually overcome by rolling down the staircase. Crude and undignified perhaps but nevertheless effective, although I think that my left arm has been fractured in the process.

I employed the rolling method to gain entry to the study and despite the drawback of the damaged arm I managed to drag myself on to my chair and can now write this at the desk. In view of my present difficulties any lack of lucidity noticed in the text must be overlooked.

The fungus has advanced quickly across the back field. The edge of the soil area is now at the bottom of the garden and beyond are growths as far as the eye can see. The prospect of structural damage to the house gives cause for some concern.

I have just contacted the police by telephone only to be insulted by an impudent young duty officer. I attempted to explain the situation to him and as I did so, I heard him shout

to someone in the room. For the sake of posterity I quote him exactly. He said, 'Hey George, there's a nutter on the phone mumbling about having no feet and being attacked by five-foot toadstools.' This was followed by obscene jibes until I could stomach no more and replaced the receiver.

Day 13

Night spent in easy chair. Pain in arm permitted fitful sleep only, and this regularly punctuated by the sound of shattering glass as mycelium converted greenhouse frame to nutrient. Significantly, the chain-link fence and concrete posts at the end of the garden are still intact; as are the stone slabs of the path. Must be thankful mycelium is unable to deal with material of inorganic origin.

Telephone out of order. Just assume that the poles have been attacked away to the north west.

Garden completely denuded; flower beds, shrubberies and lawn all form part of the soil area now. New fruit bodies springing up just outside window.

Apart from sprouting fruit bodies, activity has been nil for 40 minutes. It is possible that mycelium, faced with so much inorganic material is bypassing the house? Confess notion affords some relief.

Creaking and splintering noises below study floor. Bad tremors throughout building. Foundation timbers being attacked.

Study floorboards rotting. Showers of plaster from ceiling. Safe gone through floorboards, crashed into cellar.

Situation serious, probably terminal. Floorboards, joists collapsed. Incurred extensive injuries during my fall into cellar. Movement, vision limited due debris and dust upper floor plus furniture expected shortly must consign this safe experiment resounding success regret unable conclusion.

'QUIETA NON MOVERE'

Sally Franklin

'It's all just the same,' Georgina said, climbing the terrace steps and looking down at the smooth, cool lawns below, the wooden seat under the cherry tree. 'I can't believe it's twenty-five years since I last came here. The place hasn't changed a bit. Except ...' she stopped.

'There are more weeds than there used to be and the hedges want trimming,' Aunt Millicent finished for her. 'And one of Leo's ears has crumbled.' Her be-ringed hand fondled the head of a sleepy-looking stone lion at the top of the steps. 'Remember the games you used to play with Leo when you were a child? Goodness, was it really all that time ago?'

'I suppose it's difficult to get good gardeners these days,' Georgina said, poking with gentle determination at a bit of loose trellis-work.

'Expensive,' Aunt Millicent said quietly. 'You know,' she slipped her arm through Georgina's, 'I can't believe it's twenty-five years either. Just imagine, you were ten then, with pigtails and a band round your teeth. And now here you are, with children of your own. Such a shame you couldn't bring them.'

Aunt Millicent had seemed tall and elegant in those days, Georgina reflected as they went indoors. But now there was a flabby, faded look about her and she walked with a stick.

'This is the same too,' Georgina said, looking at the rosewood table in the hall, the Ching vase. 'It's all just as I remember it.'

'Oh nothing changes,' Aunt Millicent said. 'It just gets a bit older, a bit dustier perhaps.'

And there were bottles of medicine and tablets all over the place that never used to be there, Georgina noticed. Aunt Millicent squeezed her arm.

'Come and see Sarah. She's as mad as ever, bless her.'

They went upstairs; the same wide, red carpeted staircase Georgina used to slide down on a tin tray when the weather was too bad for her to go out. The carpet had always been worn, but now it was almost threadbare, and the knob at the bottom of the banister was still loose. Georgina remembered Millicent saying she must get it mended, all those years ago, but she never had.

They reached the first floor.

'I see you've still got that old mahogany bookcase,' Georgina remarked, as they walked across the landing to the second flight of stairs. 'Aren't you afraid the woodworm will spread?'

'Well, it's been there a good many years and it hasn't spread yet. This way dear. Sarah's in the attic.'

'You ought to get one of those bookcases in sections that you can keep adding to,' Georgina said. 'They're marvellous.'

A curious yodelling sound was coming from beyond the attic door, and when they opened it, Aunt Sarah, wearing a pea green and purple kaftan and mustard yellow sandals, was standing in front of a large canvas, slapping dollops of vermillion on to it. A brush was clenched between her teeth and her eyes glowed like a tiger's.

'I'm having a bash at art,' she explained, removing the brush and pointing to the canvas with it. 'Genesis! That should make the world sit up, huh? Only snag is I've forgotten which figure is supposed to be Adam and which is Eve.'

She put the brush down and came over.

'You're looking very well, Georgina.'

'You too, Aunt Sarah.'

'Georgina's thinking of settling in England now, so we'll see much more of her,' Aunt Millicent said, patting her niece's arm. But Sarah had picked up her brush again and made a dive for the yellow ochre.

'Tea in ten minutes,' Aunt Millicent called back over her

shoulder as they went out. There was no reply. 'She gets so absorbed,' Aunt Millicent whispered, closing the door. 'So carried away. Dear Sarah, you mustn't mind.'

'Last time I came she was writing a novel – or was it poetry?' Georgina said, remembering a thin, intense figure creeping mysteriously about with a wad of manuscript clasped to her heart. 'I take it she didn't get it published?'

'I don't know if she ever tried.'

They went downstairs. A wispy-haired woman in a flowered overall and carpet slippers was wheeling a tea trolley across the hall.

'You remember Polly, don't you dear? Polly – do you know who this is?'

The woman left the trolley and waddled across, beaming toothlessly.

'Indeed I do, Ma'am. I'd have known you anywhere, Miss Georgina.'

Georgina smiled, remembering how, with a little persuasion, Polly used to sneak biscuits out of the kitchen cupboard for her when Cook's back was turned – little sugar-coated ones with pictures of animals and birds on them, done in chocolate. Georgina remembered the cook very well. A large, sour-faced woman. What was her name though? It began with S...

'Staff are so difficult to get these days,' Aunt Millicent was saying as they went into the drawing-room. 'What we'd do if Polly left I can't imagine. And as for William...'

'You've still got *William*? He must be getting on a bit?'

'He's over seventy, but in excellent health. With a bit of luck we should have him for another fifteen years. I hope so anyway. He just does *everything* for us.'

Aunt Millicent lowered herself into a chair and put her stick on the floor beside her.

'Sit down and make yourself comfy. Scone? They're home made.'

'They look delicious,' Georgina said, taking one. 'Did Cook make them?'

Aunt Millicent's hand, poised over the cups, shook suddenly

and milk splashed from the jug she was holding on to the tray cloth. Her face clouded.

'Oh dear, how clumsy of me!' She dabbed at it impatiently with a hanky. 'I get these sudden spasms in my wrists and hands. The doctor says it's a sort of rheumatic condition. Hence all the bottles of tablets you see around the place ... I'm sorry dear,' she said, relaxing at last, 'you were saying?'

'I wondered if Cook made the scones?'

'Cook?'

'I'm afraid I don't remember her name. I think it began with "S"'

'Oh - Oh, I know who you mean,' Aunt Millicent screwed up her eyes, 'Mrs - oh dear, whatever *was* her name?'

'She left then?'

'Goodness yes, years ago. Smith was it? Sinclair? No - it's quite gone. Anyway William made the scones.'

'Her name was Shutter,' a voice said quietly. Aunt Sarah was standing in the doorway. Aunt Millicent started violently and this time the knife slid off her plate on to the carpet. She stooped to pick it up and when she straightened, Georgina saw that she'd gone quite white.

Shutter - *that* was her name! Mrs Shutter. No, Mrs Shutter couldn't have made these, Georgina thought, eating her scone, because - she remembered now - all the cakes and things Mrs Shutter used to produce tasted like congealed sawdust. Aunt Millicent - neither she nor Aunt Sarah ate anything but bread and butter in those days - used to say she'd made them specially in her honour, but Georgina knew better. Mrs Shutter had made them because she was in one of her foul moods and determined to take it out on something.

All the time they were talking and Georgina was telling them about her life in the States, Gerald and the twins, their dreams of settling down in England, somehow Mrs Shutter was still there at the back of her mind. Alone in the garden after tea, further memories came flooding back. Mrs Shutter's muscular calves and turned-out toes. Her dark knot of hair, her

piercing eyes behind the horn-rimmed glasses, her yellow, sullen face – a face that could so suddenly twist into rage if something put her out.

Walking over the lawn towards the lily pond, Georgina remembered the boiler Mrs Shutter couldn't stoke up because of her heart, the shelves and corners in the kitchen she couldn't dust because stooping was bad for her back and stretching stirred up her rheumatism.

Kneeling on the grass and looking into the water, Georgina half-expected to see a little girl's face staring back at her; a child of ten with pink bows on the ends of her pigtails, and freckles. Instead, the woman's face reflected there seemed strange, almost frightening, as though there was someone standing behind her, looking over her shoulder . . .

She rose and turned away uneasily. She'd forgotten the garden was so quiet. The tall fir trees surrounding the place seemed to shut out all sounds from the road beyond. It was these same trees, Georgina reflected, that gave the garden that odd, bluish look. There were too many of them growing too close together. Aunt Millicent once said she was going to have them cut down to let in more light, but they were still there.

The last time Georgina had seen the cherry tree had been in spring, and it had been loaded with blossom. When she had sat on the seat beneath and gazed up through the branches she'd been almost unable to see the sky beyond. It didn't look as though there had been much this year. Only a few tiny green cherries were beginning to form and the leaves looked brownish at the tips. A strand of ivy was creeping up the trunk.

She walked on, up the crazy path between the lupin beds, and suddenly, there was the sundial. At least *that* was free from ivy, Georgina thought, bending over it and tracing the Roman numerals with her finger. There wasn't a suspicion of green on it. In fact it looked as though it had been washed quite recently and the circle of flower bed at its base neatly weeded. As she stood there a sudden flood of sunlight burst through the clouds, making the Latin motto on the sundial stand out glaringly:

'Quieta non Movere'.

As a child of ten Georgina hadn't known any Latin and if anyone had ever told her what the words meant she'd soon forgotten. Now, looking down at them a sudden, sharp chill feeling made her start, take a step backwards.

'Quieta non Movere'.

It meant simply 'Don't disturb the peace' – the very last thing, one would have thought, to give anyone a shock. But somehow in the sudden, brilliant shaft of light that struck it, it looked like a kind of warning.

A little way on, past the sundial, the crazy path ended in a flight of stone steps. These led down to a long, sandy path running from one side of the garden to the other. Georgina turned right and started walking along it. She remembered this path, the tall juniper hedge on the left of it, but couldn't recall what lay beyond. Through a green archway at the far end she could see an expanse of green which probably meant another lawn, but still no definite picture of it came back to her. Perhaps she hadn't been in this part of the garden so often. Perhaps, for some reason, she hadn't been allowed to, though, remembering the sort of child she'd been, Georgina doubted if that would have made much difference if she'd *wanted* to come here.

Perhaps something had frightened her...?

There certainly was something rather creepy about the tall, dark juniper hedge stretching on and on, and, to an imaginative child, its very stillness might have been upsetting. One could so easily imagine someone moving stealthily along on the other side.

As she at last reached the archway and went through it something seemed to flash through her mind, but whatever it was she half-remembered it slipped away again before she could grasp it. For a moment she stood there feeling curiously giddy. Then she pulled herself together and looked around. Another lawn, more flower beds, and a summer house – a

quaint, umbrella-shaped place with a thatched roof.

'William!' Georgina cried suddenly, hurrying forward. 'How nice to see you.'

William was standing in the doorway of the summer house which, from the mower and tools just visible inside, he appeared to have converted into a shed. His hair was grey, yet apart from this he didn't seem much older than when Georgina had last seen him. She understood now why Aunt Millicent hoped to have him for another fifteen years.

'Them marrows is doing well with themselves,' he commented, as though he still saw her each weekend instead of once in twenty-five years. He swung his spade towards some massive plants in the kitchen gardens beyond.

'And them hydrangeas in the front.'

'It must be an awful lot of work for you, a big garden like this,' Georgina said. William pushed his spade into the ground and produced an ancient pipe from his trouser pocket.

'Got rid of that dratted bindweed at last. Fair throttling things. Must get me axe to that ivy next.'

'I don't know how you manage this great place – especially as you have to do so much in the house now Mrs Shutter's left. Has she been gone long?'

William applied a match to his pipe and sucked noisily until it fizzed and crackled, filling the air with a smell like tar and old rope and horsehair. Then he took it from his mouth and looked at her through the smoke.

'About twenty-five year.'

'Twenty-five years? Then she must have left soon after my last visit?'

But William seemed unwilling to discuss Mrs Shutter. Instead he muttered something about bulbs and disappeared into the summer house. A large rat waddled out, contemplated Georgina for a moment, then went underground. Georgina gave a little scream and William reappeared.

'Ough! The beastly thing!'

'You don't want to take no notice of them hedgehogs, Miss. They're harmless enough.'

'It wasn't a hedgehog!'

But William had gone again. As Georgina turned away she heard his voice rumbling after her from inside the summer house.

'They do quite well with themselves round these parts, them hedgehogs.'

'Sell it? Sell Falcon Court?' Aunt Millicent stared horrified over the supper table. 'But we've lived in this house all our lives!'

'I only thought ... I mean, it's so big. Much too much for you really. I'm sure a small cottage somewhere, even a nice cosy flat ...'

'Never!' Aunt Millicent said firmly. 'Besides we have Polly and William. Dear William – he does just everything for us, you know. He's in the kitchen now, helping with the washing up.'

'I know he's marvellous Aunt Millicent, but he can't last for ever. And however healthy you say he is, his sight's definitely beginning to fail.'

'His sight? *William's* ...?'

'Nonsense!' Aunt Sarah exclaimed.

'Aunt Sarah, he can't even tell the difference between a hedgehog and a rat any more.'

'*William?*'

'Rat?' Aunt Millicent said faintly.

'The summer house is swarming with rats,' Georgina said, 'and William thinks they're hedgehogs!'

For a moment they sat there, staring at her in silence. Then Aunt Millicent turned and reached for one of the many bottles of tablets on the sideboard behind her. Aunt Sarah got up and switched on the light, then went over to the French windows and began to draw the curtains. High in the sky the heavy clouds were breaking up into smaller ones and skimming away across the moon, but the garden was as still as ever, and full of strange shadows. Georgina wasn't a particularly nervous person, yet suddenly she couldn't help being glad she was indoors.

'*Quieta non Movere* – don't disturb the peace.' There was something unnatural about that stillness though, not peaceful – as though the garden were holding its breath.

Aunt Sarah drew the last curtain across and came back to the table.

'All the same, a smaller place would be better in some ways,' she said slowly. 'If it had a nice large studio – or a room that could be made into one.'

'Sarah!' Aunt Millicent's cry was like a wounded animal's, 'How can you even *think* of it?'

'Oh – it would be a wrench leaving here, but all the same . . . Well, let's face it, the place is more or less rotting round our ears, and it is too much work, and Polly and William aren't getting any younger, and nor are we . . .'

'And I'm sure Gerald could find you or even build you just what you want,' Georgina butted in, as they went into the drawing-room. Aunt Millicent's eyes narrowed.

'Over my dead body!'

Aunt Sarah pulled a cigarette case from her pocket, jerking it open and thrusting it towards Georgina.

'You're a selfish old thing, aren't you Milly?' she said a moment later, through a haze of smoke. 'Doesn't matter a damn what I want; what's best for my art. Such as less domestic fuss and bother.' She snapped the cigarette case shut and tossed it on to the sofa. Aunt Millicent went white.

'We're *not* selling, Sarah! Besides, even if we wanted to, we can't. There are all sorts of obstacles.'

'Nothing that can't be overcome, I'm quite sure. In fact, the more I think about it, the more sensible the idea seems. You'll see it yourself in time, I'm sure you will.' She stooped suddenly, picking something up.

'Hey – what's this? Looks like the clasp of a necklace or something.'

It was the clasp of Georgina's bracelet. It must have come apart from the rest suddenly, and got caught in her sleeve, falling on to the carpet when she reached out to take her cigar-

ette. There was no sign of the bracelet itself, though. Georgina's heart sank.

'I . . . I must have lost it, in the garden. I must go and look. It was rather valuable.'

'There's a torch somewhere,' Aunt Sarah said. 'Though don't ask me where. Perhaps Polly knows.'

Polly was on her hands and knees, scrubbing the kitchen floor.

'A torch? Yes, there's one in that cupboard, Miss Georgina, by the door.'

Georgina opened the cupboard. A pair of shoes fell out with a clatter; large, lumpy-looking shoes with 'cuban' heels. For a moment she stared at them, then as she picked them up they were snatched from her and bundled back into the cupboard. She looked up, startled, into the ashen face of Polly.

'I'm sorry, Miss Georgina,' her voice was little more than a whisper. 'I . . . I don't know what I was thinking of. I meant the cupboard under the sink.'

'Those shoes? Weren't they Mrs Shutter's?'

'Yes Miss Georgina. I meant to throw them away long ago.'

'But they looked almost new. Why didn't she take them with her when . . . ?'

'She left in rather a hurry. There was a bit of a row you see.' Polly's face darkened, quivered in a sudden paroxysm of hate.

'She was a wicked woman, Miss Georgina, a wicked, evil woman!'

There was another, shorter path to the summer house. Georgina had come back that way but somehow she couldn't find it now. Everything looked so different and even the torch didn't help. She was sure she must have lost the bracelet somewhere along that path because she remembered it was still on her wrist when she reached William. She was fingering it as she talked to him. If only William hadn't gone home he could have looked for it. At least she supposed he'd gone home by now.

In the moonlight the sundial looked almost luminous, the

needle jutting up from its face like a nose. Mrs Shutter's nose. The wicked, evil, enigmatic Mrs Shutter whom no-one would talk about. Even Polly's sudden outburst in the kitchen had ended almost immediately in a stubborn, tight-lipped silence. Yet Mrs Shutter haunted Falcon Court and everyone in it like a ghost . . .

She reached the steps and paused, dreading that long, sandy path below, the juniper hedge running alongside it. There wasn't a sound, but suddenly she felt that there was someone behind her, following her. Taking a deep breath she gripped the torch with both hands and swung round, shining it directly on to the crazy path between the lupin beds. There was no one there.

'Idiot!' she hissed to herself. But her heart was pounding as she went down the steps.

'Whatever I do I must keep my eyes on the archway ahead,' she told herself. 'I mustn't look at the space between the bottom of the hedge and the ground. Because in the state you've got yourself into, Georgina Melford, you'll only start imagining you can see Mrs Shutter's feet moving along on the other side.'

She reached the bottom step and the moon disappeared behind a large cloud.

Rather to her surprise she felt better in the darkness. It enveloped her like a great cloak, hiding her, protecting her. About ten yards from the archway she glanced upwards. The moon was still behind the cloud – she should easily get through the archway before it came out again.

She began to feel very much better, in fact as she reached the archway she was almost laughing at herself for being so silly, for giving way to what was so obviously some foolish, half-remembered childhood fear. Perhaps she'd come along here in the dark before and been startled by an owl with a face like Mrs Shutter's. Horn-rimmed glasses, beaky nose – it wasn't so difficult to believe . . .

She went through the archway and walked across the lawn. The moon came out again just as she reached the summer

house and her bracelet glittered at her from a clump of grass. As she picked it up she noticed the latch on the door was undone, the padlock hanging open. William must have forgotten to lock up before he went home. 'Not only short-sighted but absent minded too,' she thought, with grim satisfaction. It was just as well she'd come back. Just to make sure there was no one inside she tapped on the door, then pushed it open . . .

A tawny shape shot past her into the garden and with a pounding heart she looked back over her shoulder. A large ginger cat was stalking away across the lawn. Mrs Shutter used to have a ginger cat; a huge brute of a thing that clawed and spat if you went anywhere near it. Perhaps this was one of its descendants.

She moved the torch round slowly. Two rats emerged from behind a sack of fertilizer and disappeared again, and suddenly the fear Georgina had known was swept away in an overwhelming flood of disgust. If William and the Aunts weren't prepared to do anything, she was! She was going to find out exactly what the rat situation was like. Supposing they spread to the cellars of the house and then further?

She found a pair of shears and gently prised up two of the floorboards. Then she got a trowel and poked about beneath. Suddenly, the thin layer of soil caved in and she found herself staring down at a network of underground passages made by the rats. There was something else – part of a spectacle frame sticking up from a mound of soil. She dug deeper and something flopped into her trowel. A skeleton hand attached to a skeleton arm.

The rats must have taken away most of the hair; there were only a few strands of it left at the side of the skull. Something green and soggy that looked as though it might once have been part of an overall was still clinging to the spine.

Somehow Georgina managed to get the boards back in place, then everything whirled round her and she leaned against the fertilizer sack, wondering if she were going to be sick. A moment later, as she got shakily to her feet, she saw something moving in the garden outside. If only she'd gone

then, immediately, she thought afterwards, she might still have got away unrecognized, but somehow the dark shape of William coming across the lawn with that great axe in his hand was too much for her. She stood in the doorway and screamed, then ran as though all the fiends in hell were after her.

'I don't know how to tell you – but I've just got to. It's Mrs Shutter. She ... she's dead. I found her under the summer house. I think she's been murdered.'

Panting and dishevelled Georgina sank on to the sofa and waited for Aunt Millicent to have hysterics. But she didn't.

'Oh,' she said at last, in a small voice.

'You – *know*?' Georgina breathed.

Aunt Millicent sighed.

'Oh, I realize I should have gone to the police, but – she was such a dreadful woman. She was blackmailing us over ... over something.'

'But this is *murder*! You can't just dismiss it. Do nothing!' Georgina got up and made for the door.

'You're not going to the police?'

'I'm going to talk to Aunt Sarah. Perhaps she ... ?'

'Oh Georgina – must you? It would be such a shame to upset her in the middle of her painting. It's only a cover you know, that tough act she puts on. Underneath she's so sensitive.'

Georgina closed the door firmly behind her and went upstairs. Aunt Sarah was still yodelling, and had gone suddenly mad in ultra marine.

'Aunt Sarah, I'm afraid I've got bad news.'

'Got to go? Never mind. I dare say you'll be coming again – to see if Millicent's changed her mind about selling, huh?'

'It ... it isn't that. It's Mrs Shutter. I've just found her under the summer house.'

Aunt Sarah's face clouded slightly, but she went on painting, slapping lumps of ultra marine on to the canvas.

'I say, that's tough. Still looking nasty, or is she a skeleton now?'

'You know about her?'

'Well actually, yes. I noticed the rats a long time ago. I was having a look-see and of course I came on the old ... on her.' She paused, studying the canvas with her head on one side.

'Hmmm, I think that background's shrieking for a spot of red.' She reached for another brush.

'I suppose you're wondering why I didn't call the police? Well, I did think about it for a long time but – well, dash it all, we suffered enough when the old bitch was alive without having to suffer because she was dead. No ...' she added, glancing at Georgina quickly from the corner of her eye, 'No, I've never asked myself who did it. Somehow it doesn't matter. Whoever it was, no doubt they had good reason.'

'But – why?'

'Blackmail. Heaven knows how many victims she had. By the by, I wouldn't mention any of this to Millicent. Don't want her fainting all over the place.'

Georgina went downstairs again. She found Polly in the scullery, peeling potatoes.

'I suppose you know all about Mrs Shutter's body under the summer house?' Polly put down her knife and burst into tears.

'Yes, Miss Georgina,' she sobbed, tears dripping down her nose into the saucepan. 'I know I done wrong but – I just couldn't bring myself to tell the police. We've been together so long, Miss Millicent, Miss Sarah, William and me and – I couldn't bear to spoil it all, just because of that awful woman.'

It was horrible. Three women living here surrounded by bottles of nerve tablets and tranquillizers, each knowing about the body under the summer house, worrying, wondering, yet saying absolutely nothing.

Georgina turned and left the kitchen. Polly ran after her into the hall.

'Please Miss Georgina, don't tell the police. What good can it do now? She was alone in the world – and she was bad, *wicked*. She could have ruined all our lives. Don't let her win after all. She don't deserve it.'

'Polly's right,' Aunt Millicent said quietly from the lounge doorway. 'Don't phone, Georgina.'

Georgina glanced towards the stairs. Half-way down, Aunt Sarah was standing motionless, watching her.

'But I've got to, don't you see? I must ring the police because it's the right thing to do.'

'Right thing, my foot!' Aunt Sally came suddenly to life. 'You're doing it because you want to get this house and garden off us, for your precious Gerald to convert into luxury flats and rake in a few more thousand. You almost talked me into it, too, for a few minutes. Only Millicent could see through you.' Her face was dull red, quivering.

'And now you're going to get it, aren't you? You've found just the means you wanted. You're just as bad as her – as Mrs Shutter!'

For a moment Georgina stood there silently staring at her. Then, abruptly turning her back on them all, she walked to the phone, picked up the receiver and began to dial.

'I wouldn't do that if I were you, Miss.' There was a heavy step beside her and a hand came down, grasping her wrist. Georgina replaced the receiver.

'It's no good, William, I'm still going to,' she said, slowly turning. 'Unless you kill me, like you killed Mrs Shutter. You did kill her, didn't you?'

William shook his head.

'No Miss, *you* did! Twenty-five years ago.'

'ME?'

'I was by the sundial,' William said quietly. 'I saw you. I saw everything.'

They were still there, standing around the hall, pale, motionless figures in a fantastic dream. Georgina thought, 'It isn't real, it *can't* be! I'll wake up in a moment, or else it's a play I'm watching on television, or a film. This woman standing here isn't me!'

She tried to say something, but couldn't find her voice. The silence was broken by Aunt Millicent.

'It's true Georgina. I saw you too – from my bedroom win-

dow.' Georgina seemed to be looking at her through a sort of mist and her voice echoed strangely, as though she were speaking from the far end of a long, empty corridor.

'You didn't mean to kill her – I'm sure you didn't. It was an accident. You were frightened.'

'You was always a one for poking your nose into things – even in them days!' That was William's gruff voice again. 'Poking into things and places what didn't concern you, and Mrs Shutter found out.' William's voice, followed by Aunt Sarah's, followed by Aunt Millicent's . . .

'You thought it would mean the end of your visits here. You panicked and pushed her, and when she fell you ran away. You didn't realize she'd hit her head on the stone steps . . .'

'You panicked . . . you panicked . . .'

Panic. It was closing in on Georgina now, smothering her, stifling her. With a cry she turned, pushing her way past them, out of the door, out of the French windows, out of the house. No one tried to stop her, but as she ran sobbing, stumbling towards her car she heard Aunt Millicent's voice drifting after her from the terrace.

'It happens sometimes, amnesia caused by a bad shock. That's why your parents took you away, to America. They hoped you'd never remember. They tried to spare you . . .'

'I still don't get it,' Gerald said, on the plane going back to New York. 'Why you've given up so easily, I mean. You were so keen on settling in England. You've talked of nothing else but our little scheme for weeks and weeks. In fact, it was *your* little scheme really, wasn't it?'

'They wouldn't sell. I told you,' Georgina said in a low voice.

'They'd have changed their minds, if the alternative was attractive enough. You should have let *me* talk to them.'

The plane swept into a belt of dark cloud. Georgina shuddered, remembering suddenly her walk through the garden that night. The yew hedge.

It was impossible though – she *couldn't* have forgotten what

happened. You couldn't forget *killing* someone surely, however great the shock. And just supposing she had – she was a child at the time, and it was an accident. They could have called the police. There would have been a bit of a fuss naturally, and a bit of publicity, but in the end it could only have been written off as 'misadventure' or something.

'Amnesia, my foot!' she sat up with a jerk. 'They must have been up to something – and something pretty shady for Mrs Shutter to be *able* to blackmail them. The old ... I've a good mind to ... !'

The plane soared out of the dark clouds into a burst of sunlight so bright that Georgina started and the magazine on her lap slid to the floor. As she picked it up she noticed, for the first time, the gay young bathing beauty laughing up at her from the sunny beach on the cover. As Georgina looked the picture seemed to change. She saw the sundial again, those Latin words that had seemed so much like a warning.

'Quieta Non Movere'.

Had the faithful William, who did 'everything' for them, been responsible for that too, she wondered. She was suddenly sure there had just been the usual '*Tempus Fugit*' once. She settled back in her seat again.

'To tell you the truth, Gerald – I'm the one who's changed her mind. I don't think it was such a good idea after all. In fact I've gone right off the idea of settling anywhere in England, ever. Besides, it would cost you a small fortune converting that place into flats or anything else. It's swarming with rats and ... and just about everything's wrong with it that you can think of, and I'm quite sure the woodworm in that old mahogany bookcase on the landing *must* have spread!'

DARK REFLECTIONS

Maggie Webb

She sat in the chair, holding the telephone in her left hand, waiting for them to arrive; feeling nothing, thinking nothing, just looking at him blankly, knowing that she had done it but that they would never know.

She still couldn't quite believe it. She had been so happy, so warm and content in the circle of his love. And her love for him had been so strong that it had directed and governed her whole existence. She sometimes wondered how she had got through the days before he had come along.

Then her mother had become ill and she had had to go away for three weeks.

When she came back it was to an almost imperceptible change in atmosphere. At first she had felt that it was just her imagination. She had always been rather 'fey'. But gradually the rapid, just audible conversations behind hands and the consolatory pats on the knee from erstwhile suitors forced her to the inevitable conclusion.

He had been unfaithful.

She knew it but she wouldn't believe it. She pushed the idea from her in revulsion and fear. Fear of what it might do to her comfortable, secure existence. She hadn't planned on him going away. Ever. How could she cope? How could she face the round of recrimination and denial? And worse, the inevitable, final admission?

The realization of her futility and utter helplessness was something that her brain could not grasp, frightening in its intensity. She started sleeping badly. Listening in case he

might talk in his sleep, giving her the proof that she wanted and dreaded. Her nights became long and dark with concentrated brooding on the things he must have shared with her rival. Her mind exaggerated every word, every gesture. Those silent looks of understanding, fingers touching fingers gently in a crowded room. The special, tender, wondering moments she had believed were hers alone had been shattered and violated by someone else.

And when she did sleep she found no respite from the torture for she dreamt constantly of their love-making. With endless variations they copulated until eternity in the confines of her skull.

At last had come the night when she had thought too long and too much. Seeking escape from the images in her brain she left the warm unsuspecting form sleeping beside her and went into the bathroom for a glass of water and a tranquillizer. Her body moved sluggishly but her mind smouldered and stung.

Guided by the meagre light from the bathroom she came and knelt in front of the dressing-table mirror. She looked at the everyday things which sat there, laid, as she usually laid them, in the neat precision of parading soldiers. The row of nail varnish bottles, the make-up box, the canister of hairspray beside the brush and comb, the scattering of hairpins, the container of wilting flowers. A shaft of moonlight falling on them from the window gave them a luminous, sinister quality.

And from them she looked up into the mirror, searching her face in the half-light, studying her features as though they were carved out of wood and wondering what she had done wrong. An ordinary face, neither very ugly nor very pretty, average in its lack of distinction, the features drawn now by an inner torment too strong for the body that held it.

And gradually, as she stared, the face staring back at her took on a new aspect, slight first but becoming stronger; until a look was there. A strange, cunning look. And with the look came a thought. A tingling that ran from the centre of her consciousness to the very tips of her limbs.

A great feeling of power surged through her and took charge

of her body so that, as she stared, the eyes that looked at her through the semi-darkness were eyes that had seen more than she would ever see. Eyes behind her eyes. Older and darker than time.

And in that instant she knew what she must do. It was all so simple. The wonderful, singing power that had possession of her body was the weapon with which she could still for ever the frightful rage that was consuming her.

She turned towards him then and she thought the thought. Spoke it clearly without words. A thought so black and strong and good in its evil that its fulfilment could only be right.

But, quite unexpectedly, he opened his eyes and the room became chill. For even in sleep he had heard her thought. His only movement was in the lifting of his eyelids. And then she felt a counteracting power, his will to survive, passing from him to cut off the thought before it reached his soul.

Neither moved for a while, thirty seconds worth of eternity.

She rose, and moved to the bed to look down on a face that had stamped on it the haggard horror of one who has woken to a nightmare.

'You won,' she said quietly.

Yet as she spoke she felt the power surge up in her again and it told her that his was a hollow victory. Temporary and transient. She laughed harshly and ran her fingers through her hair with a peculiar, nervous movement.

'Put the light on,' she said. 'There's something evil in this room. I need a drink.'

She poured two large brandies. Neat. And then, like the civilized people *he* thought they were, they discussed it. All of it.

He said he was sorry he had hurt her.

Sorry!

He really believed that was enough.

Afterwards they made love, violently and with more overtones than either of them had ever experienced before. And when the morning and the sunlight came at last he slept the sleep of exhaustion. For he had forgotten it all.

But she did not sleep. She had felt a power that she could not forget. Until it had fulfilled what it had come to do. Once again she left him, breathing softly and regularly like a baby that has been well fed. She despised everything about him now. And 'Justice' her body sang as she moved to the dressing-table. 'Justice'.

She decided to take her time, savouring the expectation of the moment. Carefully she brushed her hair until it shone in the reflected sun.

Deliberately laying her brush down in its accustomed place, she looked at her face in the mirror until the eyes and the thought returned. Then slowly, slowly she turned her head towards his sleeping body and stared at him . . . Until he died.

So now here she was sitting by the telephone, waiting for the ambulance to arrive, looking quite ordinary; but feeling nothing; thinking nothing.

For the eyes . . . and the thought . . . and her mind . . . had gone.

SCREAM!

John Keefauver

'And you say, Mr Anglos, that in these nightmares you turn into a cock?'

'That's right. Just before I kill each man I turn into a cock. Rip him to death, like fighting cocks do.'

'I see.' The psychiatrist moved back in his chair. Unconsciously, he lifted a small-boned hand, fragile as new snow, and flitted it through hair the colour of fog. 'I see.' Manicured nails caught mid-morning sunlight plunging in from office windows behind him. Twenty-two storeys below was downtown New York.

Anglos, with cheeks the colour of crushed cherries, watched the nails as the doctor's fingers smoothed down his long, tenderly-combed hair, once, twice, three times, the snowy hand rising, in an arc, each time he returned it to his forehead. Watching, Anglos thrust his own hand, his left, farther under the psychiatrist's desk, hiding it. His right hand lay on the desk, nickel-shaped fingernails incongruously dirty against the mahogany shine.

Then Anglos's right hand clenched in a spasm of anger: 'I wish you wouldn't do that, makes me nervous!' His voice was fist-hard.

'Oh, sorry.' The doctor dropped his hand into his lap. 'Habit of mine. Do it when I'm thinking.'

Anglos let an understanding grunt work through his lips, yet his eyes still seemed to sizzle, frying in a face worked up to the colour of flame. His hair, nearly as red as his cheeks, looked as if it had been kicked instead of combed. A wart perched on the

side of his chin, as if ready to jump off; fatigue made him look older than his late-twenty years.

He had come into the psychiatrist's office less than fifteen minutes ago, and he was still nervous: the doctor, so rich-looking, so clean and educated and *bossy*. His office rich too; all them fancy rugs and pictures, leather chairs and stuff. Money. He, Anglos, was sure out of place here, him and his beer joint ways. Ought to never have come here, like that ordinary doctor had told him to. But he was so tired, so tired; he just had to come, go somewhere.

The psychiatrist's nose was aimed beaklike at his patient now. Thrusting cheekbones seemed to point. Fresh bullet-coloured eyes, older and wiser, shot into Anglos's sleepless ones.

'Tell me about the cockfight, please.'

'Hell, doc, you know what a cockfight is. Two cocks fixed up with knives on their left legs, clawing each other until one can't go on any more. Usually he dies.'

'Yes, I know. But *your* cockfight, the one in Manila, what was it like?'

'Same thing. Blood all over the place, dead cocks on the ground.' Anglos's voice burst. 'It was horrible!' Below the desk his fingernails pressed into his palms. 'Horrible! But the men were worse. The men who were betting, all crazy nuts, all around me, throwing their hands up, betting with their fingers, some kind of code. Like claws. That's what their fingers looked like. Like claws! Like the knives men tape on the cocks' left legs. More I thought about it, the more they looked like knives.'

'Easy.'

'Easy, hell! I've been thinking about this, dreaming about it, ever since I left Manila a month ago. I was on my way back to New York from a construction job in Vietnam when I stopped to see this cockfight in Manila. Worst thing I ever did.

'Easy, crap! You see what happened? You see it? Men are animals! Knives for fingers, ripping the air, yelling, scream-

ing, betting. You see it? Men are animals! They're worse than the cocks. Day and night, that's all I can think about.'

'All right, all right. I understand. So the nightmares started then.'

'Yeah, yeah. Always the same. I'm in an arena ripping a man to death. The place is always jammed, and the men – the men watching – aren't men. They're cocks. All of 'em. Cocks. They're all yelling like mad, happy as hell that I'm killing a man.'

'Yes, yes ...'

'Like I say, just before I kill the man I turn into a cock myself – sort of. Least, I think I'm a cock. I rip the man to death with my fingers, rip his throat with 'em, like my fingers are knives, like the kind on a cock's leg. Cock's left leg. They always tie the knife to the cock's left leg. I always use my left hand, too. Like a cock. And I'm right handed ordinarily.'

'Logical,' the psychiatrist murmured. His hand was again smoothing his hair.

'After I kill the man, I always fly away. Like a cock. Fly right away. I feel swell. Guess I've killed thirty, thirty-five men, all told.'

'But ...' The doctor was frowning.

Anglos interrupted. 'Another thing: I only pick a man to kill after I see him raising his hand. You know, like the men did at the cockfight when they were betting. As soon as I see a man raise his hand, any man, anywhere, I go after him, I want to kill him. If he doesn't raise his hand, I leave him alone. I dunno how it happens. I just see a man raise his hand, and next thing I know I'm in this arena ripping his throat with my fingers.'

'Every morning since the nightmare began, I've been hardly able to get out of bed. Up until I came to see you, I thought it was simply because I wasn't sleeping good, as you can imagine. The other morning, though, maybe a week ago, I woke up and found blood on my clothes.'

Anglos dropped his head so that he was staring at the wrist and upper part of his left hand. He could see the fingers; they

were still stuck under the desk, as if he wanted to hide them from himself, as well as from the psychiatrist.

'Of course, at first I refused to believe ...'

'Of course.'

'But after I had seen more blood on the clothes I had worn the previous nights ... And when I read in the newspapers morning after morning of murders – throat cuttings, always men – in my neighbourhood ...' He shrugged. 'I understood. I had to admit it to myself. Especially when one of the places where I always found blood was under my fingernails – my left hand fingernails, the long ones.'

Anglos pulled his left hand out from below the desk and put it on top of the shiny wood, palm down. The fingernails, except for the thumb's, were almost an inch long – filed, glistening, deadly. Giving the psychiatrist only a glance at them, he quickly withdrew his hand and put it back under the desk.

'Right after I saw the cockfight I had a compulsion to let my fingernails grow – only on my left hand, and only my fingers, not my thumb. Compulsion – ain't that the word?'

'But it's not possible to kill a man with your fingernails,' the doctor put in. 'I don't care how long you let them grow, or how sharp you file them.'

Irritation came like anger on to Anglos's face. 'Don't tell me it ain't possible! *I'm* the one who found the blood. *I'm* the one who has read of the murders in the papers. *I'm* the one who hasn't slept for I don't know how many nights, afraid to go to sleep, afraid I'll kill somebody else. You understand! It's *me* it's happening to! It's *me* who has to fight the urge!'

'Easy. I understand. And you must try to understand too. You must try to realize that it is impossible to kill a man with your fingernails. They would snap, they would break, they would bend before you could do it.'

'Listen, doctor ...'

'You must also try to realize that your nightmares are simply just that – nightmares, and nightmares only. You have not killed anybody. Blood can get on anybody's clothing by

any number of means. You may have got blood on them in the past and simply forgotten about it. Perhaps you only imagine blood on your clothing. The mind plays tricks.'

'Doctor, there's one thing I haven't...'

'Especially *your* mind,' the psychiatrist interrupted again. He was slowly smoothing his hair. 'A mind that's been filled with guilt the last month – and probably before, for that much. First, guilt you feel in being a member of a mankind that will set two innocent animals against each other in a fight to the death; second, guilt you feel as a murderer, a supposed murderer.'

'Let me see those fingernails again.'

'No.'

Anglos watched the psychiatrist dismiss his request with a slight wave of his hair-caressing hand. And he only vaguely heard the doctor say, 'Here's something else too: you said earlier that you, as a cock, flew away after each killing. This is a violation of what I would call external logic, as opposed to internal, or psychological, or *your* logic. In other words, flying cocks violate day-to-day reality, and as such are in violation of a reality, or logic, apart from your inner psychological reality. This you must understand.'

Anglos heard the doctor cough. He watched his hand fly to his mouth.

'This all adds up to another fallacy,' the psychiatrist went on. 'You must simply understand that it is impossible for cocks, in external logic, to fly for more than a few feet.'

Anglos was not looking at the doctor's face now, at his eyes or his lips. He was watching the psychiatrist's hand play with his hair, rubbing the strands back, over and over, his fingers arching up high every time he brought his hand back towards his forehead.

'You're simply the victim of a very severe, very traumatic, very real nightmare, Mr Anglos, not that I want to take anything away from its importance or internal reality. If you can only understand this, we can proceed from that point very satisfactorily, I'm sure.'

'First, let me see your fingernails again, please. I'll begin by demonstrating to you their fragility.'

The words of the doctor bounced off the mind of Anglos. He was busy with his own thought – and with the doctor's hand, moving, rising, getting higher and higher each time he wiped at his hair. Almost soaring, the fingers were; almost soaring.

'Please, Mr Anglos, your hand, your fingernails.'

The psychiatrist never did see the fingernails. They came out from under the desk so fast they were only a blur. He felt them go into his throat. And he died without hearing the crow.

The crow came after Anglos got up on the windowsill, a great joyous crow to all the world.

Time to fly.

He was a cock, and it was time to fly. He jumped over the street, twenty-two storeys below. And crowed. Anglos flew.

When he hit the pavement only one of the four slivers of razor blade came uncemented. The other three remained secure in their hiding places under his left-hand fingernails.

A PROBLEM CALLED ALBERT

Roger Dunkley

A clear night, the stars rising raw and sharp. In the prowling, howling wilderness of the dark, nature was roused and tense.

Pain – sudden and shrill. A tearing of tendons. Agony, sharp-toothed, biting into shrieking nerve fibres, ripping at still living muscle. Still living. Twenty-three slow, excruciating heart beats to endure. That was the part Albert enjoyed most. Twenty-three, and then, for the victim, the stars would go out.

The body, still warm, its nerves refusing to die, was heavy and unhelpfully shaped for conveying up the path and into the house. But it had to be done. Some untidy, on the spot surgery got rid of the less convenient limbs and protrusions, and, glowing still with a profound exhilaration and pride, Albert negotiated the corpse upstairs, and pushed open the bathroom door. Its hinges squealed, as usual.

In the next room, Maud jerked awake and sat up in bed, trembling. Her eyes and ears strained after secrets in the darkness. Her heart pounded with unnecessary zeal.

'A burglar,' said her fear. Her calico clad bosom rose and waited.

'The loose slate,' replied her reason. The bosom sank, expelled a sigh and resumed work. She plumped up her pillow and prepared herself again for sleep.

A scuffling noise, dim but distinct, reached her from the bathroom.

'Or a murderer!' suggested her fear, with a horrified, internal scream.

Appalled, she poked her husband in the ribs. Henry Wortle stirred, extended an arm gnarled with arthritis, upset the smiling tooth mug by the bed, and grunted loudly. She hissed for silence still more loudly and applied her elbow again to his side with the cruelty born of desperation and marital privilege.

Like many men, Henry Wortle was not at his best at two o'clock in the morning. He was disinclined for conversation just now. The words were not there. He tried.

'What—?'

His wife clapped a hand to his mouth.

'What—!' he began again, less distinctly.

'The bathroom,' she whispered urgently.

A command? Had incontinence set in? He felt the sheets. A request, perhaps? Not, surely, after twenty years of competent married life? His comatose mind groped round the words without success.

'There's someone there. In the bathroom.'

Signals shivered along his brain; something clicked.

'It's probably Albert,' said Henry Wortle.

Nine stealthy strides later, Henry tugged dramatically on the cord of the bathroom light, flung the protesting door wide, turned to his wife and said, more in smugness than in anger:

'You see?'

Albert was sitting on the side of the bath. He blinked his yellow eyes and purred. Maud Wortle moved forward in a surge of affection and relief.

'Naughty Albert,' she began, 'frightening Mummy—'

Then she screamed. Her bare feet cringed. It was soft and warm and sticky. She looked down.

'What is it!' she gasped.

Albert looked proudly on.

'It would appear to be a rat, Maud,' said Henry Wortle.

'Without a head.'

Albert lifted a paw to his mouth, unfurled his tongue and with great dignity began to preen himself. Maud, her toes tightly curled, gazed at him with uncomprehending astonish-

ment. A shudder of nausea passed through her, followed momentarily by hatred.

'Or a vole,' said Mr Wortle.

'Whatever it is—'

'Rats are ... different.' Henry, normally fastidious, was tired.

'Whatever it is, we ought to punish him.' Maud struggled to be firm. 'Naughty, horrid Albert.'

The yellow eyes narrowed. Albert inclined a furry head to be stroked.

'It's disgusting. It's savage.'

'It's nature,' observed Henry Wortle.

'I don't know what got into him. Oughtn't we to show him he's been a bad boy, Henry?'

Albert leapt elegantly to the floor, seized the treasured offering in his mouth and looked up, seeking approval and gratitude. The creature, which had been on the point of devouring some lesser creature at the moment of its demise, hung from between Albert's fangs, its blood staining the synthetic fur of the bathroom carpet.

'Henry! Do something.'

Henry did something. He seized Albert by the scruff of his neck in the very zenith of the cat's triumph and generosity — he had after all only eaten the head — and struck him.

'Nasty,' said Henry, and, moved by an impulse as wild as it was obscure, hit the animal again. 'Vicious,' said Henry, and delivered a third blow.

Maud flinched. She put out a restraining hand. But Henry was red and excited. Savagely he picked Albert up, carried him downstairs and flung him out back into the rustling, preying jungle of the night.

Maud was sitting on the edge of the bed when he returned.

'That's taught him a lesson he won't forget,' he pronounced.

In the darkened room he didn't notice his wife was crying.

After two days of mutual mistrust, Albert surrendered once more to Maud's maternal ministrations. He lay, large, black

and furry, in her arms and allowed her to rock him to and fro, making curious cooing noises, because it evidently gave her pleasure. He stretched back his head for his neck to be stroked because it gave him pleasure. He avoided Henry.

'Mummy's naughty boy,' murmured Maud meaninglessly.

Henry looked up from behind his paper where 'Languid Lulu, 38-23-38; hobbies: sunbathing and posing', was sunbathing and posing extravagantly across the centre pages, and observed, with a familiar hint of jealousy: 'That cat's spoiled. That's his trouble.'

Maud smiled, cooed and tickled the warm fur.

'Pisces,' she demanded suddenly.

'What?'

'Pisces. What does it say? The long range forecast.'

Guiltily Henry forsook Languid Lulu and turned to the horoscopes. He lowered the page to find the correct focal length, wincing as arthritis creaked in his elbow.

"Expect a young arrival in the house towards the end of the month", he read.

"A young arrival". Maud held the cat closer. The silence was burdened with hopes, long dead, with regrets and resignation. No children would run in the Wortle house now.

'It just shows,' said Henry Wortle darkly. He looked at Albert cradled tenderly in his wife's arms. 'Spoiled,' he thought. He spoke on impulse: 'That cat will have to be seen to.'

'Seen to?'

'You know - adjusted. At the vet's.'

He bit viciously into his toast. Marmalade spurted on to his paper. Maud was tense.

'It's either that or the voles,' he said, with more passion than logic.

Albert purred noisily.

'If it was a vole,' he added.

Maud gazed down into those half-closed, ecstatically enigmatic, yellow eyes and sighed. 'It's against nature,' she thought. But she remembered the savaged corpse of the vole.

'No time like the present,' said Henry. 'I'll get it done to-day.'

Maud stroked Albert, kissed his head and slowly nodded.

And thus was Albert, protesting eloquently, strapped ignominiously into a shopping bag and conveyed to the vet's for his 'adjustment'.

On his return he retired into dark corners, slunk in the shadows out of reach, his narrow eyes smouldering and sullen. Maud was pale with worry.

'He's not the same,' she said to Henry once again.

'That's the whole point.' Henry's patience was ever threadbare.

'In himself, I mean. Not the same.'

'Different, yes. No voles, though.'

'No activity, no warmth, no nothing,' she said, her anxiety overriding her grammar. 'Just eating and sleeping.'

'He's certainly grown – even in a week. It's the operation.'

'Sleeping and eating,' she mused. 'He never used to have such an appetite.' She hoped Henry hadn't found the remains of the shoulder of mutton which Albert had seized and devoured last Sunday morning. Her husband had certainly complained at length about the corned beef which she had hastily served up as a last minute alternative.

'It's just a phase.' Henry Wortle was not interested.

'But he doesn't – love us any more,' said Maud, infinitely sad. 'He always avoids us now.'

And the door opened to admit Albert.

He loomed large against a chair – Henry was right: he had grown remarkably – gazed at each of them in turn, crossed over to Henry, lowered his head and bit him. He savoured the experience. Then, ignoring Henry's yelp and the invitation of Maud's outstretched arms, he sprang to the sill and disappeared through the open window.

'He bit me,' said Henry.

'Albert never bites,' said Maud.

'He bit me.' Henry was adamant and aggrieved. 'Hard.'

'His spirits are returning. At last!' said Maud, pleased. That was the last they saw of Albert for a whole week.

Maud's grief at the cat's absence was as great as Henry's indifference. But both were profoundly affected by Albert's return. Henry, who had reversed the custom of a lifetime and gone downstairs to make his languishing wife an early morning cup of tea instead of waiting in bed for the tea to come to him, celebrated the event by dropping a saucer.

Maud, disturbed more by the ensuing silence, empty of expletives, than by the actual crash, came hurrying down, her curlers awry.

The sound of her descent had obviously stimulated Henry into an uncharacteristic flurry of activity. He stood up as she entered the kitchen, his features contriving successfully to be ashen and flushed simultaneously.

'Henry, whatever's the matter?' Maud Wortle was shocked. It was a new husband who stood before her, registering alien, incomprehensible emotions. Then her bewilderment surrendered instantly to delight.

'Albert!' she cried. 'Henry, it's Albert.' Henry knew. Her voice changed gear abruptly. It began to croon. 'Mummy's here, darling. Where's Mummy's naughty pussy been to then?' She reached out a hand to fondle him.

'Don't!' shouted Henry Wortle.

'Don't?'

Albert licked his lips, rose rather stiffly and heavily to his feet and stretched. His claws bit into the patterned linoleum. Maud stepped back, aghast.

'Henry! Look at him. Look at – the size of him!'

Henry looked, but his mind was elsewhere.

'Is it a disease?'

Shaking her head in a vain endeavour to dismiss her confusion and anxiety, and succeeding only in dislodging a precarious curler, Maud stooped to pick up the remaining fragments of the saucer. She crossed to the waste bin.

'No!'

Maud jumped. The curler clattered to the floor. 'Henry, you quite frightened me!'

He raised a hand to stop her and something dropped from his arthritic fingers. She picked it up.

'What is it? A cloth? A shawl! What are those stains?'

Henry snatched it back, stamped on the pedal of the bin and dropped it inside. As the lid fell shut, Maud gave a noiseless scream.

She could see the object with perfect clarity. It projected still from under the lid. The tiny fingers were clenched round a small blue and white plastic rattle.

'Henry,' she gasped, 'why is there a baby in our waste bin?'

'"Expect a young arrival in the house",' said Henry Wortle bitterly. 'Anyway, it's not a baby - exactly.'

'But I saw an arm...'

'That,' said Mr Wortle, 'is all that appears to be - left.'

'There's the shawl,' said Mrs Wortle, and fainted.

Albert stalked magnificently towards them. Henry backed away and the cat moved on, contented and triumphant, into the next room where he curled up hugely in front of the television and slept the sleep proverbially reserved for the just.

'It isn't as if we didn't feed him.' Mrs Wortle was reinvigorated by three cups of tea and some unaccustomed sympathy. 'Nibblebisks and Pussomeat. He's always had as much as he wants.'

'He hasn't come home for a week,' Henry reminded her, lowering his voice quite irrationally lest his words should carry as far as the object of their deliberations in the next room. He paused. 'The question is,' he whispered, and stopped. His mind struggled to formulate the problem. 'The question is - what are we going to do?'

Maud's mind was dazed. 'The stars. What do the stars say?' she asked.

Pinioned between irritation and helplessness, Henry seized the paper and thrust it at her. She fumbled. 'Page three,' he said.

Maud scanned the columns.

'He'll have to be put down,' said Henry. 'And then there's the police...' His mind clouded over again.

'"A number of obstacles will stand in your path",' intoned Maud, disguising difficulty – she always refused to admit she needed spectacles – as drama. '"A death may provide some solution".'

'There! He must be put down,' repeated Henry, decisively.

'But Henry ...'

'"A death". "Solution". It's in the stars!' Henry Wortle had scored his point. He folded his arms and closed his mind. His case rested.

'It's only a phase,' suggested Maud. 'You said yourself. He'll grow out of it ...'

The unhappy reference to growth won her little sympathy. They sank into a moody and unprofitable silence.

'The baby ...' said Henry.

'Mummy's naughty, furry baby,' mused Maud.

'A mother somewhere has lost her child,' he asserted aggressively. Couldn't she see the gravity of the event and the inconvenience for them when the police began their disbelieving inquiries into Albert's unfortunate new pastime?

His wife looked back down the barren, childless years of their marriage and was silent.

Then she put her cup down suddenly on the table. Tea surged to the brim. A dark stain materialized on the tablecloth.

'The men ...' she said abruptly.

'Police? ...'

'Dust. They come on Thursday. Tomorrow. They'll find that – thing.'

'Arm,' said Henry. They would have to act now. He wondered whether to tell her about the mauled torso, its ribs picked clean, as well. Then he wondered, uneasily, how they would manoeuvre Albert to the vet's; a trunk would be more appropriate than a shopping bag now. Finally he wondered, with growing alarm, how they would get Albert into the trunk in the first place.

Problems branched into tangling thickets of problems. Henry saw only trees. But Maud could see the wood clearly.

'You must bury the arm,' she said. 'Tonight. In the allotment.'

Henry thought fleetingly of his sweet peas. It was an ignoble objection. He imagined again the scornful laughter of the police. Principle fought, lost and surrendered to expediency. He agreed.

'I'll get the vet to - deal - with that cat as soon as he can send a van round,' he said, placating his conscience.

Maud blanched. There was a streak of cruelty in her husband which she had never been able to understand or condone. She tortured her handkerchief in her clenched palm, while her forefinger traced the dahlias of the tablecloth with savage intensity.

Henry strode to the phone. 'I'll call him now,' he said, his voice abandoning the hushed, conspiratorial tones he had maintained up to now.

The deed done - the vet would send an assistant over tomorrow to collect Albert: Thursday was their day for difficult customers - Henry replaced the receiver and turned back to his wife.

Framed in the doorway between them loomed the great bulk of Albert. His eyes burned uncompromisingly in the gloom of the hallway.

Henry stifled his report. 'They'll send those extra tins tomorrow,' he announced, gesticulating rather wildly and speaking with the exaggerated volume and clarity reserved for mental defectives and foreigners. 'Cat food,' he explained in Albert's direction. The absurdity of his impulse only intensified his irrational sense of guilt.

The bright eyes narrowed.

'I thought you locked the door,' hissed Henry.

'I did,' said Maud.

She beamed maternally at Albert. 'Mummy's clever boy,' she crooned.

Then they discovered the claw marks and primitive lacerations round the lock.

Evening died. The shadows of night preyed stealthily about the Wortle household. Henry, clutching a torch and clad in his ex-army gardening coat and the checked cap, which always offended Maud's social pretensions, came into the bedroom. Maud's chins were slippery with cold cream.

'He's still in the cellar,' whispered Henry.

'Henry!'

Henry started dramatically.

'That cap! What would the neighbours say?'

Henry choked back his customary retort. 'He's still in the cellar,' he repeated harshly. 'Asleep, I think. The dresser's across the door.'

'But his food, Henry ...'

'He's had quite enough food for one day.' Henry had just parcelled up the gnawed ribs in the kitchen and dropped the arm in a polythene bag. 'And he won't be needing any tomorrow.'

Maud's lip trembled.

'If you hear any noises, put on a coat and leave the house. Quickly. I'll be in the allotment. It shouldn't take long.'

Maud turned away, her eyes tightly shut, and Henry went out into the night. Awkward parcels bulged furtively beneath his coat.

Mrs Wortle's sleep was fitful. She tossed and thought about her husband. She turned and worried about Albert. No, she tried to reassure herself, Henry wouldn't be so cruel as to take Albert away from her. He wouldn't destroy his own family. It was against nature. Only half persuaded, she was just slipping back into the shallows of sleep when a harsh grating sounded deep in the house. She lay taut, listening.

A stair creaked. Then another. A heavy tread. Henry must have finished already. She sat up and put on the light as the footfalls reached the landing. They paused. The door swung open.

Albert's eyes confronted her, glaring fiercely. She gasped. *Whatever was happening to him? Such a size!*

He stood a moment in the doorway, flexing his enormous muscular shoulders and, before she could move, sprang on to the bed. The springs objected. Maud stifled a squeal and pressed herself back into the pillows. Albert's head approached. His yellow eyes narrowed to a fiery slit. Then he bared his teeth, yawned and curled up beside her. Maud held out a tentative hand. Like a superannuated traction engine, Albert began to purr.

'There,' she murmured, affection displacing fear, 'Albert can sleep with Mummy. Just like he did in the old days - when Daddy was away on nights.'

And adjusting her position to accommodate Albert's hefty contours, she fell into a deep and contented sleep.

The sly light of dawn insinuated itself through the moth-corrupted shrouds of the bedroom curtains.

The mound in the bed stirred, shifted its position and Maud opened her eyes. She could not say for sure what it was that had awoken her. She extended an elbow instinctively towards Henry. There was no Henry to prod. She remembered Albert, looked, looked again and found only the rumpled sheets and a large depression in the bedclothes.

Concerned, she got out of bed, wrested her dressing gown from the hanger and cautiously tiptoed from the bedroom. She hesitated at the top of the stairs.

The sound of activity reached her from below. Her anxieties melted. Henry was downstairs, she realized, making a cup of tea. She was about to return to bed when she became aware of a different, more subtly pervasive sound. The noise, part rumble, part drone, teased her still sleepy mind. It was something she felt as much as heard vibrating up the walls and along her nerve ends.

'Henry,' she called. No response. She became uneasy. The droning noise, insidious and uncanny, intensified her fears.

She made up her mind. She gripped the banisters firmly,

descended the stairs and approached the kitchen. The sound increased. Maud pushed open the door with some difficulty. Glancing down, she realized why. That cap! Henry had dropped it and it had wedged under the door. Such an untidy man; his mother *had* warned her.

As she stepped back to tug it free, she skidded and nearly lost her balance. A marble? In the kitchen? She peered more closely. The round, glassy object peered back.

She reached down and picked it up. Perhaps reading glasses might be a good idea after all, she thought. The gelatinous sphere clicked into focus. Blood-encrusted ligaments trailed untidily from the displaced eyeball.

But Maud Wortle recognized that look. And she knew only too well the ownership of the severed legs and arms, mutilated and reorganized in an unnatural and improbable heap about the central torso in the middle of the kitchen floor: the bleeding fingers – those that remained – were knotted with arthritis.

Even without the head, Maud knew the anatomical anarchy to constitute the greater part of her late husband, Henry Wortle. Her vision went grey at the edges. The room lurched. She turned.

Albert, serenely triumphant, bloated with Henry and pride in his nocturnal achievement, sat awaiting approval. Little bits of Henry adhered stickily to his whiskers.

‘Naughty Albert . . .’ she began.

Then she looked up. The noise had grown thunderous – an insistent, jungle drumming of pulses more ancient than man. Horror flared her nostrils.

Pressed against the windows of the kitchen were hundreds of pairs of green and yellow eyes, gleaming in the greyness, feasting on the dismembered carcass. Hundreds of furry throats vibrated with noisy anticipation. Maud heard, but could not understand, the death rattle which shook the fabric of the building and threatened to drown so many centuries of feline dependence and domesticity.

The reproaches died on her lips. Helpless, she tried to remember: what solution had the stars to offer?

'Mummy's clever boy,' she said, with difficulty. She stooped to pick up the blood-stained spade. 'The dustmen will be coming soon and Mummy's got a job to do. In the allotment. Albert must stand by his Mummy and help her now.'

Albert's purr rattled. He kneaded his crimson claws.

Out in the wild dawn a thousand animals did the same. The few stars that remained were far and cold, already fading back into the endless dark behind the coming day.

'It's only natural,' pleaded Maud Wortle.

Impatient claws started to rip at the kitchen door.

FINGERS

Harry Turner

Lonsdale Prince surveyed his female companion over the rim of his brandy glass. She was fortyish, but had the well-preserved, handsome look of a successful career woman. Her well-cut clothes and carefully-arranged hair suggested Bond Street, or even Paris, as did the gentle bouquet of perfume that lingered about her.

'What I am about to tell you,' he said, 'is considerably unpleasant. Indeed I would go so far as to say that it is a tale of *exceptional* hideousness.'

The woman drew deeply on her cigarette and met his gaze unblinkingly.

'Don't worry Mr Prince, I *am* a journalist. I've met the seamy side of life more than once I can assure you. Nothing you tell me will shock or horrify me - I'm immune to that sort of thing.'

Prince selected a thin cheroot from the humidor on the table and lit it carefully.

'I invited you here, Miss Hope, *alone*, so that what I tell you is not overheard by gossiping servants or, even worse, rival journalists who might wish to plagiarize what is after all - an incredible scoop.'

Joan Hope smiled at Lonsdale Prince and noted that for a man of sixty-eight, he was still strikingly handsome and powerfully built.

His phone call to her newspaper, and his invitation to dine alone with him at Caspar Hall in Yorkshire had been too exciting to ignore.

Lonsdale Prince, explorer, world traveller and distinguished raconteur had been abroad for the past fifteen years and she was certain he had returned to England for a special reason.

Now they were alone in the great hall of his vast Elizabethan manor, a log fire blazing in the hearth and leaping shadows cast against the walls by the soft glow of a dozen candles.

Prince took a small, flat box from his jacket and placed it on the table in front of Joan Hope. 'That box,' he said slowly, 'contains the central character of my tale. Here, you open it.

Joan Hope picked up the box without hesitation and raised the lid. In spite of herself she gave a gasp of surprise. Inside, nestling on royal blue velvet, was a severed human finger. It was clearly mummified, the skin having a dry, parchment-like quality, but it was nonetheless perfect, an ebony-black index finger with a long, curved nail.

'What a curious keepsake,' she said, closing the box. 'Where did you obtain it?'

'It came from the island of Malekula in the New Hebrides. It was cut from the hand of a witch doctor while he was still alive and is said to possess incredible magic power.'

'Oh,' said Joan Hope, trying hard not to smile. 'A magic finger. What do you do with it—? Wave it like a wand and turn pumpkins into gold coaches?'

Prince's face clouded, and he picked up the box. 'Miss Hope, I didn't invite you here in a spirit of jest. I must ask you to treat what I tell you with the utmost seriousness.'

Joan Hope nodded, her reaction had been born of surprise rather than doubt.

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'Do continue.'

Prince leant forward in his chair and poured some fresh coffee. 'This finger,' he continued, 'belonged to a witch doctor called Oguko. He was a powerful wizard and much feared throughout the island.

'He was *Tambu* – a native word that denotes supernatural ability – any person who obtains the description *Tambu*, Miss

Hope, earns my earnest and fearful respect and you would be well advised to remember that.

'Oguko was a witch doctor to the big Namba tribe who inhabit the northern tip of Malekula. The Nambas were, until some years ago, cannibals. The devouring of human flesh was to them as natural and as logical as the devouring of roast beef is to us. They were, and still are, a savage and primitive people, essentially shy of strangers.

'Some years ago a mysterious plague swept through the island of Malekula. Its manifestation was not bodily sickness but infertility. For almost a hundred moons no woman in the Namba tribe was able to conceive a child. This caused a great deal of sorrow among the natives and they appealed to their witch doctor Oguko for help.

'He was, by all accounts, a fearsome creature, at least a hundred years old and blacker than pitch, with one staring eye that blazed out of its socket like a demon's.

'Well, Oguko quickly realized that this particular crisis called for special measures and he gathered all the womenfolk together outside his hut. Then, with a theatrical flourish he cut off his own forefinger with an axe and waved it above his head. As you can imagine, this impressed the assembled ladies no end. When they were suitably awe-stricken he pointed the severed finger at several of the younger girls while at the same time keeping up a barrage of screams, grunts and other colourful sounds.

'A few weeks later each and every one of the girls at whom the finger had been pointed became pregnant. The finger was preserved as a holy relic and it even had a sort of shrine built for it.

'Well, to get to the nub of my story, a group of British anthropologists visited Malekula about fifteen years ago – they were anxious to study tribal life and take photographs. It wasn't an easy mission and required enormous patience and tact. One of the party, who was a journalist like yourself, Miss Hope, was foolish enough to steal the finger and bring it back to England as a souvenir.

'After the novelty of showing it off to his friends had passed he threw it into a chest in the attic and it was forgotten. Meanwhile, he met and fell in love with a beautiful young girl, and after a hectic courtship they married.' Prince paused to relight his cheroot and for a moment his face was obscured by a dense wreath of smoke.

'Yes, Miss Hope, they married, and it was a happy union. The young man's work as an anthropologist was bringing him to the attention of important publishers in London and he was contributing regularly to various scientific journals. He wrote a definitive study of the Namba tribe and it was highly praised in specialist circles – further commissions followed and within two years they were comfortably off, with a maid and a fine period house in Knightsbridge. Only one thing was lacking, and I'm sure Miss Hope you have already guessed what *that* was.'

Joan Hope put some more sugar in her coffee and stirred it carefully.

'Children,' she said, smiling gently.

Prince nodded, eager to continue with his story.

'Yes, *children*. They couldn't have children. Do you know what happened then?'

Joan Hope made a mock-puzzled face and looked hard at Prince. 'Let me *guess* that too. They got the finger down from its box in the attic, pointed it at the wife – and presto – she was pregnant.'

Lonsdale Prince shifted in his chair, a look of irritation spreading over his face.

'It's *obvious*, of course. But let me fill in some of the details which could not be guessed at, Miss Hope. I think you will find them fascinating.'

Once again Joan Hope observed the angry, furrowed brow, and the hint of menace in his voice. She decided to adopt the pose of an enthralled listener, even though Lonsdale Prince's story was clearly ridiculous.

He drew hard on his cigar and settled back in his chair.

'The wife became pregnant – certainly – but her pregnancy

was accompanied by a mysterious fever that no doctor could diagnose. She became delirious and to her husband's dismay took to gibbering in her sleep. Well, perhaps gibberish is not the right description. She spoke in a sharp, Namba dialect – the language of Malekula – and she spoke it like a native.

'Her husband could only put this curious manifestation down to his study of the Namba tribe, his work, he assumed, had subconsciously imprinted itself on her brain. Nevertheless, it was a harrowing time for both of them.

'Worse, however, was to come. When his wife was admitted to the nursing home during her ninth month of pregnancy she went into a coma so deep that the doctors almost gave her up for dead. Only a faint pulse beat indicated that she was still alive.'

Joan Hope crushed out her cigarette and leant forward cautiously. Lonsdale Prince seemed distressed now, a sheen of perspiration gleaming on his forehead.

'And the child?' said Joan Hope softly, anxious not to offend him again.

Prince pushed his chair away from the table and went over to the lacquered Japanese sideboard.

Glasses chinked, and he came back with two large tumblers of whisky.

'The child,' said Prince, sitting down again, 'was born at midnight on the thirteenth of August. That date won't be significant to you, Miss Hope, but it happened to be the equivalent of the Namba new year. That was *nothing* however, compared to the shock the doctors received when the baby was actually delivered. It was pitch black and horribly wrinkled – like some gruesome forest monkey – and it had one eye that stared from its socket like a blazing coal.'

Prince paused and took a long pull at the whisky.

'The creature, for it could hardly be described as a child, was hidden from the mother – the doctors thought the shock of seeing it might finish her off.

'The girl never recovered properly from her coma and she

remains to this day in a sanatorium, her body perfect but her mind in a kind of floating limbo.

'The husband, as it turned out, refused to even see his wife: after the birth of the - thing - he accused her of treachery, infidelity and all manner of hideous things. His rejection of her made it certain she wouldn't recover - in spite of the doctor's pleas that he should at least help her get back to normal. Callously, he left her to rot in the sanatorium while he continued a life of ease and luxury still further cushioned by his wife's inheritance.

'Oh yes, Miss Hope, ironically, the wife's mother died the same week that her daughter was in the maternity home, leaving her fifty thousand pounds. This money, of course, went into the husband and wife's joint account and was heavily drawn upon by the husband.

'He skilfully avoided divorcing her - knowing that this would put an end to his high-life junketing. He met another woman - a hard bitch with even fewer scruples than himself and between them they set about enjoying his wife's inheritance.

'Two years passed and the doctors at the sanatorium contacted the husband, telling him there had been a slight improvement in his wife's condition. If he could spend a few days with her it might just push her back over the threshold to normality. He refused, claiming he was too busy.

'A week later the bank manager advised him that funds were almost non-existent - his spending had become more prolific in recent months. The hard bitch who had ensnared him wasn't so keen on his company now that he was no longer a rich man - she walked out on him and left him to his own devices.

'The penultimate chapter in the story is that he hanged himself a month later, because, the coroner claimed - the balance of his mind had been disturbed.

'Nasty little story isn't it?'

Joan Hope picked up her whisky glass and swallowed a mouthful.

'Mr Prince,' she said, 'you used the word "penultimate". Is there a final chapter?'

Prince grinned, but it was a mirthless, bitter grin.

'Oh yes,' he replied, 'all stories should have a proper ending. Aren't you curious about the child – the wizened creature with one eye that so closely resembled Oguko the witch doctor?'

Joan Hope nodded cautiously. 'As a journalist, Mr Prince, I like to have all the ends tied up. What *did* happen to the child? *And* the wife for that matter?'

Prince laid his cigar carefully in the large onyx ashtray and stood up.

'If you follow me Miss Hope, both your questions will be answered, and the story completed. Come.'

He gestured towards the door.

Joan Hope had spent the best part of twenty-five years in journalism – she had reported wars, famines, coronations and murders and never in her entire career had she been afraid, even the most horrendous events were reduced, in the end, to mere stories in a newspaper. As she followed Prince across the room however, she was conscious of a faint prickling at the nape of the neck.

Prince held open a large studded door, beyond were stone steps leading down. He nodded towards them.

'The cellars, Miss Hope. Don't worry, I'll lead. We don't want you falling and breaking your neck do we?'

The steps curved sharply round a central pillar of stone and with each step the air became cooler, the shadows longer. Eventually, they reached the cellar floor, and Prince switched on another light. In front of them, set in the granite wall, was an iron gate. Beyond this was darkness. Prince produced a key from his coat and inserted it into the massive lock. The gate scraped open and he stepped inside, beckoning her to follow.

As she moved after him she found herself in an enormous vaulted room lined on both sides with barrels and racks of dust-laden bottles. A few wisps of straw were scattered on the flagstones and the place smelled as cold as a graveyard.

Prince rested his hand on a large cask of Amontillado and smiled.

'The wines in this cellar would fetch a high price today, Miss Hope. They represent every bit as good an investment as old silver or rare porcelain. I've had them insured for a very large sum. My ancestors who built this place didn't have the benefit of insurance, of course, they had to provide their own security. Look, I'll show you.'

He turned quickly and walked towards the far end of the cellar. As Joan Hope followed she could make out another gate set in the stone. Prince stopped by the gate and put his finger to his lips.

'This little recess,' he whispered, 'was originally built to house ferocious guard dogs. Ancestors of the Doberman Pinscher I understand. Any unwelcome wine thief would have been ripped to shreds.'

Joan Hope peered through the bars – it was black as night inside.

'Look, Mr Prince,' she said in a low voice, 'this is all very fascinating but—'

Prince interrupted her with a soft, purring laugh. 'But you think I digress – that I'm rambling far from the theme of my story. An understandable assumption Miss Hope, but *not true*. Not true at all. Pray let me continue. Even though I have no need for guard dogs I still have a use for that little cell they once occupied.'

Prince reached up and flicked on a light, at the same time drawing back a huge bolt in the gate.

Joan Hope gasped and took a pace back. The cell was tiny, no more than five feet square and the floor was heaped with straw. Something was moving under the straw. Something quite large that gave off a curious, cloying musk.

Prince prodded the straw with his foot and snapped out a sentence of guttural words that Joan couldn't understand. The straw parted and as it did so Joan Hope's fist went into her mouth to stop the scream that was coming. Crouching there, less than a yard away, was a grotesque creature, with gnarled

limbs and wrinkled black skin. The body, bent double, was like a hideous, hairless monkey and from its face blazed a single savage eye. The black, leathery lips drew back in a mute snarl, revealing yellow, pointed teeth and a darting, moist red tongue.

Prince seized Joan Hope's arm to prevent her from falling and his face was alight with triumph. 'I told you it would be a scoop didn't I?' he said, pressing her against the wall.

'No, *don't faint*, don't do anything as womanly as *that*, Miss Hope. Young Oguko is fettered by his ankles, he can't escape. Just *look* at him Miss Hope, feast your eyes.'

'Oguko,' gasped Joan Hope, unable to tear her eyes from the naked creature in the straw. 'Did you say Oguko?'

'Son of Oguko to be precise,' said Prince, tightening his grip. Joan Hope tried to free herself but the fingers that held her were like steel clamps.

'Why?' she gasped. 'Why do you keep him?'

Prince's face suddenly took on an expression of cunning, his eyes narrowed and his mouth tightened.

'Why?' he repeated. 'I'll tell you why Miss Hope. Because he's my grandson.'

Joan Hope felt her senses reeling. Prince was clearly insane. She pushed against him with all her remaining strength.

'Let me go!' she cried. '*Please!*'

Prince held her fast, his face close to hers now.

'Not until I've finished the story,' he said harshly. 'My daughter has been rotting in a sanatorium for fifteen years, Miss Hope. Ever since the birth of her son. That wastrel of a husband left her when she needed him most. Left her for a whore who eventually spent all his money and then, in turn, deserted him.'

'Do you remember walking out on him Miss Hope? Do you remember? Or have there been so many men in your life that you don't recall this particular one?'

Joan Hope screamed but it was half mixed with sobs. Prince shook her roughly by the shoulders.

'His name was Charles Taylor. *Tell me you remember!*'

Joan Hope felt her knees buckle but she couldn't fall.

'Yes,' she groaned. 'I remember. Now please let me go – for God's sake.'

Prince pulled her in front of him and thrust her towards the cell. His breath fanned her neck as he spoke.

'Charles Taylor was a weak man whose puny talent as a scientific writer was bolstered by my daughter's money. Money, Miss Hope, that my wife had passed to her by deed of covenant.

'When my daughter was declared insane I swore two things. First that I'd track down the woman who snatched her wretched husband from her – and second, that I would release her from the blight of madness that has afflicted her these past fifteen years. Well, I've achieved the first. I've found you! It cost me a great deal of money to bribe the authorities to let me take possession of Oguko. I've kept him here since he was six months old, and all the time I've been studying the magic rites of the Namba tribe, probing, sifting, reading, checking. Oh yes, Miss Hope, I haven't been *abroad* as the world supposed, I've been *here*, looking after Oguko and preparing for tonight.'

Joan Hope twisted round to look at Prince. His face was gleaming with sweat and his eyes rolled insanely.

'Tonight,' she gasped, 'what do you mean?' Prince gave a dry laugh.

'I mean, Miss Hope, that I have discovered the Tambu formula that will heal my daughter's mind. It's quite simple, really. The old witch doctor whose finger I showed you was angered that his gruesome talisman had been stolen. He cast a powerful spell on all who dared to use it, a spell that would bind them to eternal madness – unless – their offspring should eat human flesh.

'Well, I've robbed a dozen graveyards this past few years to no avail. It seems that fresh-killed meat is the only thing that will suffice, meat that will shed warm blood – and now, Miss Hope, my story ends.'

With a sudden thrust, Prince cast Joan Hope forward into the cell. She fell heavily on to the piled straw and Prince

slammed the gate shut, driving the heavy bolt across into its socket.

As he turned and walked away he heard her screams pile-driving out of the darkness and then the awful sounds of rending flesh and splintering bone.

ON THE BOX

Alex White

She looked up at him archly, laughed affectedly, and then shook her head at him mock-disapprovingly. 'You're a fast worker,' she said. 'Aren't you?'

He looked back at her solemnly. 'Yes,' he replied. 'I work fast if I want something very much.'

'But we've only just met!' she protested. 'You can't be as keen as that, already!'

'Oh but I am,' he assured her.

Something in the quality of his voice disturbed her a little, and she tried to see his face more clearly, but since she was too vain to wear her glasses, all she could tell was that he was unsmiling, and staring at her intently.

He was very good-looking; that at least she could see. He was tall and broad shouldered, and probably in his late forties, though sometimes when she used her glasses, she got quite a shock at how much older people were than she'd imagined them. He had a charming speaking voice – very deep, and very smooth, and he was amusing to talk to, in a sardonic sort of way.

It was extremely flattering that he found her so attractive. She seldom attracted people so violently these days. A few years ago she'd had plenty of boyfriends, but not now. She wasn't at all clever; in fact she knew that a lot of people found her downright silly, but she'd been ravishingly pretty, with curly blonde hair, large blue eyes, a pink-and-white complexion, and a perfect figure. Now the hair was dyed, her skin was slightly leathery, with the jaw-line blurred, and her neck

sagged a little, unless she remembered to keep her chin held high. Her figure too, was ageing, and running to fat. Yet here was this man, Archie something or other, positively begging her to have dinner with him, as though his life depended on it, and they'd met only two or three minutes ago.

It was rather exciting, really.

She knew nothing about him of course, not even his surname. He'd been brought to the cocktail party by another of Angela's friends, who also seemed to know nothing about him, though she thought he might be something to do with show-business. Pamela (known as Pim-Pim to her friends) decided to stall for time, although in fact she had already made up her mind to accept the invitation to dinner. 'What do you do?' she asked him.

'When?' he countered, bending over her attentively.

Pim-Pim laughed, roguishly. 'When you are working,' she said.

'I'm in Chambers,' he answered.

'What on earth does that mean?' asked Pim-Pim, opening her eyes wide, in pretended innocence.

'I'm a barrister's clerk,' said Archie.

'Good heavens!' exclaimed Pim-Pim. 'Doris said you were in showbusiness!'

'The law courts can put up quite a good show when they want to,' replied Archie.

'Oh, you know what I mean!' exclaimed Pim-Pim. 'Television. Films. Stage. That sort of show.'

'No, I'm not in the theatre,' answered Archie, 'though as it happens I'm very interested in showbusiness, in my own humble way.'

Pim-Pim was disappointed. 'What a shame!' she pouted. 'I thought perhaps you'd get me on the box.'

For some reason this amused Archie enormously, and he laughed silently.

Again Pim-Pim had a small but definite feeling of disquiet. 'Why are you laughing?' she demanded.

'At your expression "on the box",' said Archie.

'What's so funny about that? That's what actors call it. I happen to know.' Pim-Pim spoke defensively.

'I suppose I find it funny, because it's just where I'd like to get you,' said Archie.

Pim-Pim took this as a tribute to her charms, and simpered seductively. 'Oh,' she said. 'That's rather sweet.'

'What do you do?' asked Archie. 'I'd have thought you were an actress, yourself.'

'Not now,' said Pim-Pim. 'I used to be, but I didn't have much luck, then I met Nicky and married him.'

'Nicky? Is your husband here?'

'Oh no! We got divorced ages ago. Five years to be exact.'

Archie seemed relieved. 'Did you come on your own?' he asked.

'Yes. All on my ownie-ponies.'

'So why won't you come out to dinner?' he urged her.

'We've only just met,' said Pim-Pim.

'So?'

'We don't know each other.'

'What better way to get acquainted?'

'What about Doris?' objected Pim-Pim. 'She brought you here. Won't she be upset?'

'She's going on to another party,' said Archie. 'She told me so.'

'Why should you think I'm not?' flashed Pim-Pim.

'I don't. I simply hoped against hope that you weren't.'

'As a matter of fact you're right,' said Pim-Pim. 'As it happens, I'm free.'

Archie grinned. 'That's great,' he said.

'Not so fast. Not so fast,' laughed Pim-Pim. 'I haven't said "yes" yet. As I told you, we don't know each other yet.'

'That's absurd,' said Archie. 'Either you'd like to come, or you wouldn't. You're not going to know me any better in a few minutes' time . . . not so that it can make any possible difference as to whether we're able to dine together or not.' He suddenly sounded bored. 'All right. Have it your own way. I can see I'm getting nowhere, and I'm not the kind of man to

force myself in where I'm not wanted.'

'Good heavens, it's not that!' protested Pim-Pim anxiously, worried now that she had lost her date. 'I'd love it. Simply love it. Really I would. My friends are always telling me I'm too cautious, and I probably am. It's one of the reasons I didn't marry again, when Nicky left me.' – 'Damn!' she thought. 'I've told him that it was Nicky who left me, and not vice-versa. Now he'll be less attracted.'

He didn't seem it, however, because he put both hands on her shoulders, and said simply, 'I knew I was right.'

'Right about what?'

'About choosing you tonight.'

He sounded immensely satisfied – almost triumphant – and for the third time, Pim-Pim felt faintly alarmed.

She opened her handbag determinedly, and said over-girlishly, 'I'll have to confess.'

'To what?'

'I wear glasses ... or I should do ... but I always leave them off for a party. Since we're having dinner together, however, and I'll have to wear them for reading the menu, I might as well see who I'm dining with.'

He laughed. 'Why not?' he agreed.

She put on her glasses, and looked at him frankly. She'd been right. He was extremely good looking. He had black hair, which he wore rather long, and which came to a widow's peak low over his forehead. His eyes were such a dark brown that they seemed almost black, and his face was sallow. He had a strong nose, deep lines flanking a narrow-lipped mouth, excellent teeth when he smiled, and a determined chin. He looked as she had guessed, as if he were in his forties, though perhaps even a little younger than she had thought, and he had a magnificent physique ... at least as far as she could tell, with his clothes on. She'd really got herself a dish! And at her age, too! It was quite a feather in her cap.

'Well?' he asked her gravely.

'Well, what?'

'Do I pass?'

To her annoyance, she blushed, but she answered steadily, 'Of course.'

'Then shall we leave this rather dull party, right away?'

Pim-Pim looked round the room. She hadn't found the party dull, and one part of her very much wanted to stay for a bit longer. If she was in such good form that she could attract a young man as handsome as this, she might perhaps have added another scalp or two to her collection, before leaving in triumph with Archie. But Archie was getting restive, she could sense it.

'OK?' he replied.

'OK,' she replied.

'Good,' he said. 'Take those silly glasses off. You're a stunner without them, and I'll read the menu, so you won't need them in the restaurant.'

Obediently she took off the offending spectacles, put them away carefully in their red case, then shut the handbag with a click, and said, 'Where are we going?'

'Le Million,' he said. 'Off the King's Road. D'you know it? Excellent French cooking; nice and quiet, and they know me. That suit you?'

'Yes.'

'Good. It's not the Savoy Grill, but it's a first-class restaurant, and at a price that a barrister's clerk can afford.'

He piloted her through the screaming, laughing, crowd, towards the door.

'What about Angela?' asked Pim-Pim. 'Shouldn't we say thank you and goodbye? And what about Doris?'

'No one is going to miss us in this racket,' laughed Archie. 'And I'm getting hungry.'

Pim-Pim looked round vaguely and recognized no one in their immediate vicinity, so she contented herself with a general wave of goodbye, and allowed herself to be led from the room.

They found a taxi almost outside the door. Archie gave the driver the name of the restaurant, then he leaned back and took her hand. 'Pim-Pim,' he said. 'What a funny little name, but it suits you.'

'I hate it!' exclaimed Pim-Pim, pouting winsomely. 'But I hate the name Pamela even more.'

'Pim-Pim is charming,' said Archie, firmly. He stroked the back of her hand insistently, and a sudden thrill of physical attraction ran up her arm. Archie watched her intently. 'Enjoying yourself?' he asked.

'So far,' she answered, primly.

He grinned. 'Cautious, cautious little Pim-Pim! Never mind. Later on this evening you're going to throw all caution to the winds, and I'll get you on that box, after all.'

Pim-Pim said quickly, 'Sure of yourself, aren't you?' But she spoke softly; almost invitingly.

'Very,' he replied ardently, and her heart began to hammer.

'Well!' she thought, surprised. 'It's a long time since I've been this interested in anyone!'

Just for a moment Nicky's face came in front of her mind, and she wanted to cry. She'd loved Nicky. He was the only man she ever had loved, but she had lost him because she couldn't resist having affairs with any man who asked her, and he had hated it. Naturally. He hadn't been jealous exactly, but he had found it, in his words, 'not the kind of marriage I'd wanted'. So he had left her for another actress, who, again in his words, 'really cared'. He hadn't understood how much she'd cared, too, but couldn't help herself. Anyway Nicky and this other girl were now doing extremely well in America ... had in fact both become big names ... and here she was, living in a dreary little flat in London, leading a lonely and fairly dreary existence, doing occasional jobs as a temporary secretary, and missing Nicky like hell.

She hoped this evening was going to be a good one. It certainly held promise. She'd know a bit more about Archie soon, and perhaps they'd become friends, then lovers, and perhaps sometime, even marry. She sighed unconsciously. She'd reform for someone like Archie, she knew she would; especially now, when temptations to stray were becoming fewer and fewer.

Archie heard the sigh, and smiled.

The dinner was all that she had hoped for, though no one in fact had seemed to recognize Archie in the extremely overcrowded restaurant. Archie was attentive ... almost relentlessly attentive. He seemed to hang on her every word, and she obviously amused him, too, because several times he laughed his silent, slightly sinister laugh. His interest in her spurred her to even greater efforts, and to ensure that she remained the life and soul of this particular party, she drank more than she knew she ought to ... so much in fact, that by the time he ordered the bill, the world seemed to be spinning round her.

Archie didn't seem to notice anything unusual, thank goodness; in fact he kept on encouraging her to let herself go. 'It's good for you,' he said. 'You've been unhappy too long. One evening of letting your hair down with a friend is worth twenty visits to a psychiatrist.'

For a moment this pulled her up short. 'A psychiatrist?' she echoed, stumbling slightly over the word. 'What the hell do I need a psychiatrist for?'

'You don't. That's just what I'm telling you. Because you're with me.'

'But if I weren't with you?'

'You've been unhappy,' he soothed her. 'Dreadfully unhappy, with Nicky and that new woman doing so well in America. After all, he should have understood that a pretty woman needs cossetting. Affairs are nothing, these days. They don't mean anything at all. Hasn't he ever heard of Women's Lib?'

Pim-Pim wasn't quite sure if he was taking the mickey, so she only said, 'Yes, he should have understood. You'd have understood,' and her throat ached with unshed tears.

He grinned at her. 'I understand you very well. Better than you understand yourself, probably.'

'How's that?' she asked, and her words were becoming slurred.

'Being connected with the law, you get to understand about human nature.'

'I suppose you do.'

The thought suddenly struck her that she still knew no more about him, than she had at the beginning; not even his surname. She was just going to ask him what it was, when the waiter arrived with the bill. She put her hand over her mouth, and giggled.

'What's up?' he asked.

'I'll tell you later,' she said, nodding towards the waiter.

Archie nodded affably, and said, 'I'll see you home.' He paid the bill, then continued, 'But since we're only a few yards from where I live, may I show you my little house, first? I won't keep you any longer than you want to stay, but since I hope this evening will be the first of many, you might as well know more about me.'

'How extraordinary!' exclaimed Pim-Pim.

'What is?'

'That's just what I was going to say when the waiter came! I still don't know any more about you than when we first met. Not even your surname.'

'You will soon,' said Archie, and a note of urgency had crept into his voice.

Instantly her earlier intimations of a hidden danger came back to her, and as though he had divined it, he said more calmly, 'There I go again! Frightening you with my impatience! Bear with me, Pim-Pim. I keep forgetting we're almost strangers. I feel as if I'd known you since time began.'

'Since time began,' repeated Pim-Pim in surprise. 'That's extraordinary, too, because so do I.' And now something so strange happened, that she could hardly believe her eyes. Nicky was standing in front of her, shaking a warning finger at her. He'd done this only once before, the night before he left her, but then he'd done it in reality. Now he'd done it again, but he was only a ghost. Or was he? It was Nicky! It really was! There he was, as large as life. He'd come back for her as she'd always dreamed he would, one day! She must make sure though. She blinked several times in an effort to dispel the vision, but Nicky still stood there, looking at her. A feeling of almost incredible happiness seized her, and she scrambled to

her feet to kiss him, but as she stood, he disappeared, and she sat down again in total bewilderment. She was utterly desolate. Tears welled up in her eyes, and she began to sob.

Archie stared at her in consternation. 'What's the matter?' he asked. 'What have I said?'

'Nothing,' wailed Pim-Pim. 'Nothing at all. It was Nicky.'

'Nicky?' Archie sounded suddenly nervous. 'Where is he? I thought he was supposed to be in America.'

'He is,' said Pim-Pim, 'but I saw him. He was standing just beside you, waving his finger at me.'

'Ghosts,' said Archie, uncertainly.

'Ghosts,' agreed Pim-Pim dismally.

Archie sounded cheerful and energetic. 'I've pampered you too much,' he said firmly, 'and it's brought it all back ... the feelings of caring, and being cared for. You're right. You need a man in your life. I'm the man you need. You're the woman I need. No arguments now. You're coming to my place.'

'I don't want to start an affair. That's what Nicky was waving his finger at me about,' said Pim-Pim. 'I suddenly understand.'

'You won't start an affair, because I don't want it either,' replied Archie.

'You don't?'

'No. Come on.'

'No.'

'Yes.'

'If you don't want an affair,' said Pim-Pim, uncertain whether to be angry or relieved, 'what's the point of going to your place?'

'To show you my house. I'm very proud of it, and I think it will appeal to you. Though I say it as shouldn't, it's absolutely unique. I may be a barrister's clerk in the day-time, but at night, I'm a magician.'

'A magician?' she murmured stupidly.

'That's right. A magician.'

'Black magic?'

'Certainly not. Rabbits out of a hat. Cards up my sleeve.'

Streamers from your hair. Sawing a woman in half. That sort of thing.'

'Silly!' exclaimed Pim-Pim, more herself, now. 'How many women have you sawn in half?' she giggled.

'None so far,' he smiled at her. 'Perhaps you'll be the first.' He stared at her intently again, and she felt her usual discomfort.

'Silly,' she repeated. She blew her nose, dried her eyes, hiccupped slightly, put her hand to her mouth in embarrassment, then returned her handkerchief to its place down the bosom of her dress, and smoothed the material over her cleavage.

'Ready?' asked Archie.

'I'm ready.'

'Feeling better?'

'Much.'

'No more ghosts?'

'None.'

'And you'll come home with me?' Again there was the urgency, but this time it left Pim-Pim unaffected.

'Of course.'

'Splendid.'

The night air outside was cool, not cold. There was a full moon in the cloudless sky, and they walked arm in arm in silence, towards Archie's house. Pim-Pim stumbled once or twice, but Archie was supporting her, and they reached the front door quite quickly. Archie fumbled in his pockets for the keys, found them, fitted one into the lock, and they entered the long, narrow hall. Archie switched on the light, and shut the front door behind them. Pim-Pim put on her glasses.

'Very nice,' she said, politely.

Seen from here, the house seemed very ordinary. A staircase with white banisters climbed up the righthand wall. To the left were two doors; both painted white, and beyond the well of the stairs, at the far end of the passage, was a scarlet door. The floor was tiled with black and white vinyl tiles. A large coat-stand, with an umbrella-stand surround, was to the right, and the hall was papered with a sea-green paper.

Archie opened the nearest door. 'The sitting-room,' he said proudly.

The room was surprisingly large. It was attractively furnished in a fussy, chintzy way. There were prints on the wall, and a small, but pretentious chandelier hung from the ceiling. Pim-Pim was impressed. 'Oh, but it's charming!' she exclaimed. 'So bright and gay. And so homely. I love it.'

'I hoped you would,' said Archie, gravely.

'Who furnished it for you? One of your girl-friends?' To her amazement Pim-Pim found that in spite of her drunkenness, she was jealous.

'No,' said Archie. 'I did it myself.'

'You ought to take up interior decorating!' enthused Pim-Pim. 'You'd make a fortune.'

'Come and see the rest of the house.'

She followed him meekly into the well-designed, clinical-looking kitchen, with its dozens of cupboards, its cooker, its deep freeze, fridge, and methodically arranged shelves. The whole room was decorated white, and gave the feeling of some sort of hospital room. There was only one splash of colour. On the long shelf above the cooker, was a row of red glass bottles, with brilliant green screw tops.

'What are those for?'

'I'm a great cook,' said Archie, and he laughed.

He took her up to the three bedrooms, which again were furnished in a surprisingly feminine way, and into their well-ordered bathrooms, then he said, 'Now a night-cap, then I'll show you my magic parlour. It's the room with the scarlet door.'

Pim-Pim was disappointed. Now that she was on the bedroom floor, she found that she desired him more than she'd thought possible a few minutes ago. She desperately wanted him to make love to her, but he was already heading for the staircase.

'Hey!' she called.

'What is it?' he asked.

'Don't you want to?'

'What?'

'You know.'

'No I don't. Tell me.'

'I want to.'

'Want to what?'

'Don't make me spell it out.'

'Why not?'

'Come here,' called Pim-Pim, softly.

Archie returned to her. 'Well?'

'Come in here,' said Pim-Pim, drawing him towards his bedroom.

'I thought you didn't want to have an affair,' said Archie, seriously.

'So did I,' replied Pim-Pim.

'Changed your mind?'

Pim-Pim nodded, speechlessly.

For a brief second a look of contempt was on his face, then he took her in his arms, gazed deeply into her eyes, and kissed her.

She'd never experienced anything like it before. Her knees had turned to water, her mouth seemed on fire, and she felt as if she was literally melting with passion. Fantastic. He kissed her again, slowly stroking the back of her neck. She clung to him, and it seemed as if the whole of her life had been made for this single kiss. When he released her, he said, 'Take off your clothes.'

'You take them off,' she said.

He did so, expertly, then laid her on the bed.

'Take off yours,' she said.

'Don't talk,' he replied.

He didn't undress, but he made love to her so perfectly that she was, for the first time in her life, entirely satisfied, and when it was over, he picked her up in his arms and carried her downstairs to the sitting-room, where he put her gently on the sofa. He fetched a bottle of whisky and two glasses. He poured her out a strong one, and she protested feebly, 'No.'

'Yes.'

'No. I shouldn't.'

'Yes.'

'But...'

He poured the drink down her throat, until she had finished the last drop, propping her up in his arms. She tried more and more dazedly to push him away, but he kissed her each time, and each time she submitted. She was still naked, and now she found she wanted him again, even more passionately. She was so drunk that she was almost incapable of thought, but she still desired him in a kind of muffled agony. It was extraordinary.

The glass was empty, and the world was reeling. She attempted to speak, but couldn't, so she simply shook her head.

He leaned forward, and suddenly bit her savagely on the lip. She gasped, but he kissed her again, and she slumped back in his arms.

'Now,' he said, 'for my magician's parlour.'

Again he picked her up, and this time he took her along the passage to the red door. He fumbled for his keys again, unlocked the door, set her down in an armchair, and said, 'Watch.'

She was in a huge studio; or it looked like a studio, except that though the room had an extremely high ceiling with one part of the roof sloping dramatically towards the others, and finishing in a sort of oblong through which passed the flue of a huge stove, there were no windows. Two arms of the flue branched backwards into the room, and ended in grated hoods, and the ceiling near them was almost black. There were air bricks painted red, laddering up the sloping part of the ceiling, and an enormous extractor fan was in one of the walls.

Round the room were hutches full of live rabbits, mostly black or white, and all of a tremendous size. A trestle table was in the centre of the room, covered with scarlet oilcloth, and there were several huge iron chests scattered about the floor.

Archie locked the door behind him.

Pim-Pim was only vaguely aware of her surroundings, and she had an urgent wish for sleep.

Archie fetched a scarlet shawl from one of the chests, threw it round her, then took a black rabbit out of its hutch, and threw it on to her naked lap. The startled animal kicked out wildly, and as Pim-Pim opened her mouth to scream, Archie put a gag of cotton wool in it, and tied a piece of torn sheeting quickly and tightly round her head. He then picked up a long piece of white cord, pinioned her arms behind her back, and tied her legs together.

The rabbit scuttled away, but Archie caught it, did a few idle tricks with it, then hurled it against the wall, breaking its back, and left it on the ground, shrieking in pain.

All the time he watched Pim-Pim struggling for her freedom. Tears were pouring down her face. She was sweating, and waving her head pathetically from side to side. Her struggles became feebler, and Archie came and stood in front of her, his legs wide apart. In one hand the rabbit, moaning now, and struggling as feebly as Pim-Pim, hung dangling by its ears. Finally Archie spat in Pim-Pim's face, bent over her, bit her savagely on the neck, and then took her over to a curious-looking metal contraption in the corner of the room.

'This is the box I said I'd get you on to, you silly bitch,' he said. 'D'you know what it is?'

She rolled her eyes wildly, and shook her head.

'It's a machine for sawing a woman in half,' he said.

Her eyes widened in idiot terror, and her tears began to flow again.

He took off his coat, placed her across the machine face-downwards, put a clamp round her neck, another round her legs, and a third round her body, below her breasts. He then undid two bolts, and moved the sides of the machine apart, so that Pim-Pim's torso was now unencumbered.

He rolled up his sleeves, carefully chose a large saw from one of a number in a cupboard behind them, and then inspected her minutely, prodding her slightly, as he pondered where precisely to make the first incision. Satisfied, he started sawing, and as he sawed he sang.

Pim-Pim made one convulsive final effort to escape, and

fainted. Archie continued his work unaffected.

It took him quite a long time to complete the job, and after he had bisected her, he methodically chopped her up into smaller, more manageable proportions. He sawed off her head, shaved it, bundled the hair into a plastic bag, tossed the head itself into the stove, and also her hands and feet. He packed the torso and the limbs into neat parcels made of sheeting, and took them to the kitchen deep freeze, excluding only one piece of thigh. For this he found a suitable dish, and with the thigh on it and a little fat from one of the glass jars, put it into the oven and switched it on. He looked at his watch. Five minutes past midnight. Plenty of time. He went into the sitting-room and sat down to read. The book was *The Purple Book of Fairy Stories*.

An hour and a quarter later, he returned to the kitchen, and opened the oven door. He took out the roasted joint, took an empty red glass jar from a shelf, waited for the fat to cool a little, then poured it into the jar, and screwed on the lid. He found a label, and in a neat script he wrote, 'Fat Pim-Pim. Thigh', then he added the date.

He went upstairs to the bedroom, fetched her clothes and handbag, and, after extracting the money, put the whole lot in the studio incinerator. 'Silly bitch,' he said, as he watched the clothes catch fire. 'Silly, horrible, thrusting, sexy old bitch. Well, that's another one out of the way.'

He went upstairs again, whistling this time, undressed, and got into bed. He switched off the light, and stared up at the darkened ceiling. 'Barrister's clerk by day, and magician by night. Who would believe it?' He yawned hugely, and laughed.

He found himself dozing off, but suddenly shook himself awake. 'Dearie me!' he exclaimed. 'I nearly forgot my prayers!'

He got out of bed once more, and knelt down with his head in his hands. 'God bless Mummy,' he said. 'God bless dear Mummy in heaven.'

SANCTUARY – FOR THE PIPED

Charles Thornton

It was 9.30 AM. Nellie Crupp took the chamber pot from under her bed, shuffled to the back door, and tossed its contents to the wind. Precisely as it landed on a pile of decaying rubbish, she slammed the door of her back yard and returned the receptacle to a floor ringed with odious stain.

Remaining in a bent posture, she let her gnarled hand grope in the gloom and filth.

‘Tweeny . . . Tweeny . . .’

Her voice wheezed with old age.

‘Come on my pretty – I know you’re there – must not hide from mummy.’

She bent further down, squinting her old eyes into wrinkled slits.

‘There you are then – out you come – up . . . up.’

It leapt to her shoulder – a rat – bulbous, sleek and black. Its tail dangled like a spliced cord half-way down her upper arm, its nose dabbed with affection at her left ear. Nellie stroked the smooth back and inclined her head, rubbing her cheek across its head.

‘Nice little Tweeny – we must find you something to eat or you’ll be squealing at me again.’

Her feet in loose soiled slippers flapped on the lino as she made her way to the kitchen. Faint squeals were coming from behind the door, and she stopped momentarily.

‘I think we have *more* company this morning – Tweeny can hear them – can’t you?’

The rodent perked its head forward, then in a flash des-

cended her arm. As Nellie opened the kitchen door, a group of rats moved in a cluster to surround her feet, and with open mouths commenced to squeal like banshees. Nellie's toothless smile wreathed her face as she whispered.

'Goodness me – there were only four yesterday – we *are* getting to be a large family.'

Nellie moved towards a musky shelf. They followed, loping in her footsteps. The polythene bag that she lifted down had been gnawed overnight, causing some of the contents to spill on to the floor, and the rats fell upon pieces of soft red meat, cheese rind, and the moist balls of oatmeal. She watched them for a few moments, then scattered a few more morsels before placing the bag, this time, inside her small sparse pantry. Nellie waved a thin finger at the ravenous group.

'Mustn't be greedy – bad little rats – not to bite through the bag – mummy will feed you when the times comes and not before.'

As she left them to their meal, a caller was knocking. The bang of the old iron piece echoed through her barren hall. She took her time in answering, and as she made her way through the passage, two more rats were making their way to the kitchen.

The man on the doorstep carried a briefcase. He was middle aged and paunchy. He appeared nervous – hesitant – and stood well back. Nellie squinted as a watery sun hit her eyes.

'Oh – it's you again.'

Her tone carried contempt.

'I'm sorry to bother you, Miss Crupp – but the estate office are insisting that you pay them a visit – you know what it's about, don't you?'

She posed in an attitude of defiance and juttred out her bony chin.

'I am not moving from this house, and that's final – too old to go into other premises – lived here all my life, and so did my mother before me – what do they expect?'

As though the smell of the house were affecting him, the man moved farther away.

'But you know what is happening my dear - Cog Street is coming down, and at this moment the bulldozers and demolition men are working overtime pulling down one house every two days. All your neighbours have gone, and very soon yours will be the last one standing. You can't remain then. Surely, Miss Crupp, you are not going to turn down a nice clean flat - are you?'

'Who say's my home's not clean?'

The man tried to smile.

'Now I didn't say that, did I? But we do know you have rats, and as more houses come down they will increase - you don't want that, I know.'

'Nothing wrong with rats, mister, I've known humans to be far worse - God's little creatures, they are - I've got nothing more to say about it. Tell your office I will leave this house when I'm dead, and not before - now leave me alone.'

The door shuddered as it slammed. The man stepped away, and gave the house a final incredulous stare. He slowly turned, realizing he was responsible for a hopeless task.

Ten days later, and with Cog Street five houses less, Nellie again attended to the regular rite of feeding her pets. In the early days they merely inhabited, now they swarmed. As her hand dipped into the bag, so did they. They clung to her skirt and to her cardigan. They climbed up her back and across her shoulders. When she went to bed they were there, and when she got up - they were *still* there. When they disturbed her sleep, she would gently scold them as boisterous children, hopelessly knowing that it would make no difference. The contamination was building up, and Nellie was coping less and less. When another man called to make one more try to get Nellie to move, he had fled for his life on seeing the rodents massed in the hall. He had stopped long enough to throw her a letter from the Health Officer, but Nellie never read it - it was torn to shreds by spiked teeth.

One morning, as the bulldozers got nearer, Nellie looked about

her and realized that she was no longer able to afford the abundance of food to keep the rats contented. She looked at the ring on her finger. It had belonged to her mother, and Nellie knew it was of some particular value. As she fingered it she watched them probing and sniffing. They seemed to be sensing that soon they would be hungry, and even her own food, which up to now had been locked away, was rapidly being devoured. Great holes were appearing in the pantry door, and it was clear that her pathetic control over them had gone.

As she put on her coat to visit the jeweller's, her head began to swim, and Nellie reeled giddily towards a chair. A fever had suddenly hit her, and she weakened with a frightening speed. Shivers vibrated her thin body, and she stretched a wavering arm towards the one she called Tweeny. It sat huddled in the hearth.

'Oh Tweeny - what can I do now?'

Her breathing quickened as she became colder.

'You - you and your friends - I - I must get some food - if only you could help me - Oh dear.'

As she tried to heave herself from the chair, her arms and legs became powerless. Nellie slumped back again, letting her head droop on to her chest, as the throbbing threatened to dislodge her brains. Curled in the chair she sat motionless. The hours passed. The sound of the rats rustling seemed to come from every corner, and the distant clank of bulldozers began to decrease, as their drivers finished work for the day.

The rats wanted food. Regular feeding had spoiled their patience. They were gathering in the room. Nellie tried to respond to their inquiring squeals, but by now she was too weak. An invisible weight had settled upon her. She was immovable. As the squealing of the rats increased, so they pushed their sleek bodies nearer to her feet. A few were poised on hind legs peering at Nellie, and nosing - nosing in the air. Then

with a spring a leading rodent took off and landed in her lap. Its suddenness startled her, and she placed a feeble hand on its back to clutch and lift it away, but it twisted sharply and sank two front teeth deep into her flesh. The blood flowed immediately. Her stifled cry of pain meant nothing above the squeals, and now with blood running freely, the rats could smell their food.

As though beckoned by an unseen hand - they came. A black carnivorous tide, leaping, clawing and biting, in their avarice. Nellie Crupp appeared to sink beneath the weight of numbers. Great squeals drowned her cries, until she was neither visible nor moving - only the rats. A pool fed from a scarlet tributary spread across old lino, and in their hordes they fought each other to lap at its tepid contents.

Outside, the last few labourers were preparing to leave. Horrified, they momentarily forgot their tubes, buses and trains, as they turned to face the direction from which the squeals were coming. They had heard the rats before, but this was different. Their curiosity took them to the front of Nellie's house, and as they peered into the window their eyes viewed a scene that defied belief.

Having fed heartily, the beasts had stopped their squealing. They lay scattered, hardly able to move, their bloated bellies heaving under the weight of fulfilment. Bones gleaming white among shreds of wet red flesh, littered an old armchair, and in the far corner of the room a particularly large rodent, who would never again answer to the name of Tweeny, crouched, gnawing on a solitary finger that still wore a golden ring.

THE GATES WERE LOCKED

Morag Greer

Dear Ellen and Robbie,

I'd be delighted to come to your ancient Highland castle for a holiday. You've no idea how envious I am of you, getting such a fantastic job. It must be marvellous living in a real castle – all those ghosties and ghoulies and things that go bump in the night – but, of course, you two never did believe in anything like that.

I'll try to arrive before nightfall, so that the ghouls won't get me. (More prosaically, so that I'll find my way. From your sketch map, it looks pretty hairy.) Since the Frazers are leaving on the morning of the 29th, I'll knock on the creaking doors some time in the afternoon of the same day, so as to miss not one minute more than necessary.

Thanks again,
Love,
Janet.

That letter was posted a week before I left Glasgow, heading north-west into the wild open spaces of the Highlands. And, despite my careful following of Robbie MacKinnon's map, I did go astray. Night was falling, the trees crowded the single track road, and my headlamps seemed quite incapable of penetrating the thick gloom. Also, I suffer from a vision defect which, at dusk, renders everything within a hundred yards as flat as if I were looking at a piece of shaded grey cardboard. When darkness is complete I'm all right, but not in

the gloaming, so, being a careful and, in this instance, a lost driver, I pulled into a layby and waited.

And then I saw it, through a gap in the trees. The embers of the dying sun silhouetted its towers and steep roof peaks in jet black, soaring high above a shimmering silvery bay. The castle's height was accentuated by strategic positioning so that, on one side, a sheer cliff took over where the masonry left off. The effect was quite dizzying. I felt a tiny delicious shudder run down my spine. It was perfect, just what I'd always imagined a castle should look like, a truly fairy-tale structure. All it needed now was a bat-like creature to emerge from one of the windows and flap round the turrets.

As I gazed, a pale orange light came on, high up in one of the towers. 'Must be Ellen and Robbie's quarters,' I mused. 'Right up there where the creepies creep.' A figure moved across the window, came back, stood for a moment, then both figure and light vanished. 'Hey! Don't go to bed yet!' I said out loud.

Starting up the car again, I moved off slowly along the twisty little road with its umpteen offshoots, heading desperately in what I hoped was the correct general direction.

'At last!' There were gates ahead; open, I was pleased to note. I certainly wouldn't have liked to have had to move them myself. They were at least fifteen feet high and twelve feet wide, of heavy tortured wrought iron, hanging on massive hooks set in vast granite blocks that glistened in the beams of my headlights. I drove through, and tooted.

No answer. No lights flashing on, no welcoming cries, no smiling faces. Nothing. It was only ten o'clock, a bit early for bed, surely. I tooted again, loud and long. Nothing. Damn! They *had* gone to bed! Annoyed, I got out of the car and, taking a flashlight from the boot, began an exploration. The huge main doors were shut, as expected, but so was the smaller door which Robbie had described in his letter as leading to the staff quarters. I wandered round the gravelled courtyard, shining my light in at the windows and calling loudly. Suddenly, as the light passed over a row of seven tall, bowed windows, I

saw a movement inside, but as I steadied the beam I found myself staring at a white marble figure of a coy, nude maiden, who gazed blindly back at me in that unnerving manner that so many statues have.

At that moment, the sound of a car engine burst on my ears. I swung round sharply and dropped the torch, which went out. As I groped around for it, the car stopped, its headlights shining straight at me through the wrought-iron gates, casting long, twisted shadows across the gravel. A man got out, unlocked the large padlock, swung the gates wide and was returning to the car when a woman's voice said, 'Robbie! There's someone in the courtyard!'

The car drove in, the doors opened, and Robbie and Ellen MacKinnon stepped out.

'Janet!' exclaimed Ellen. 'What in the name of the wee man are *you* doing here?'

'Well, that's a grand Highland welcome, I must say!'

'Och, I don't mean it *that* way, and fine you know it. We're always pleased to see you. But how on earth did you know where we were? We've been meaning to write, but we were so busy we just couldn't find time till ...'

'Well, *someone* did,' I interrupted, 'and they signed themselves "Ellen and Robbie".'

'Pardon?' said Robbie, getting a word in.

'Your letter,' I said acidly. 'The one that invited me to stay with you for a month while the Frazers are away.'

'We *did* write you a letter, Janet,' agreed Ellen, 'but only today. We posted it in the village tonight. But I'm glad you're here, anyway. How did you know our employer's name, and that he's away?'

'Could we continue this discussion inside?' suggested Robbie. 'I'm freezing and I'm hungry. You get the coffee made, Ellen, and I'll put the car away and lock the gates again. Back in a minute.' He moved past my scarlet Mini, and stopped. 'How the hell did you get in, Janet?'

'I *drove* in; how else? The gates were open, so I just ...'

Our eyes met and we stood in bewildered silence for a mo-

ment, all three of us. 'The gates were locked,' said Ellen finally.

'Yes,' I muttered. 'I saw you open them. I must have come in through another gate.'

'This is the only gate you could get a vehicle through, even one as small as that crimson corset you drive.'

'Well, standing out here while the thermometer plummets won't solve the mystery,' stated Robbie. 'Coffee, woman! And jump to it!'

As Ellen and I made our way along a wide corridor, lined with oil paintings and moth-eaten boars' and stags' heads, I remarked, 'The rest of the staff must be stone deaf, or too scared to come to the door at night. I tooted that horn to wake the dead, and shouted till I was nearly hoarse.'

'A lot of good that did you,' giggled Ellen. 'There's nobody here but us. The others are all away with the Frazers at the villa in Rome.'

'Then who put on the light in the tower?'

'A light? In the tower? You're imagining things. You always were too eager to be scared stiff. I remember you from schooldays. If there was nothing in the dark to frighten you white, you soon invented something with that rampaging imagination of yours. In here.'

She threw open a door, touched a switch, and there we were in a warm, bright kitchen, with a large polished kettle simmering gently on a vast electric stove.

'We always leave the kettle on if we go out,' said Ellen, bustling about, clattering cups and spoons. 'Saves time when we come in. You know how Robbie is about his coffee: must have it two minutes before he wants it. Lovely big kitchen, isn't it? I like room to move around. White?'

'Eh?' I was startled. Ellen's train of thought was constantly being derailed or shunted up a dead-end siding, and nobody ever knew quite what to expect next. Most of her friends listened with only half an ear to her babbling, and were left wondering what they were supposed to answer when she suddenly shot a question at them. I glanced round the pale green and

primrose kitchen, saw nothing white, and turned an inquiring eye. 'Pardon?'

'Coffee. Black or white?'

'Oh. White, please. But there was a light,' I insisted, taking off my coat. 'And I *did* get a letter from you. How else would I be here?'

'I've no idea,' she replied cheerfully, 'but we didn't write till today. Sugar? Well, I know I didn't write. You didn't, did you, Robbie?'

Her husband, who had just entered and now had his mouth full of scalding hot coffee, shook his head emphatically in all directions, and I wasn't sure if he meant, 'No, I didn't', 'Yes, I did', or 'For Pete's sake, woman, I'm burning!'

'No, I knew you wouldn't without telling me,' burred Ellen. 'It's a mystery to me, Janet.'

'I answered it, too,' I said, 'the same day.'

'It never arrived, I'm afraid.'

I was bitterly disappointed, and saw myself driving disconsolately back down to Glasgow the following day, but when I asked if they would put me up for the night, Ellen was most indignant.

'For the night! Now you're here, you'll stay. We'd love to have you, in fact, we invited you in that letter we posted to-night.'

'This letter, Janet,' said Robbie. 'Have you got it with you?'

'Yes, I have. *And* the map you drew.' I produced the papers from my handbag, laying them on the kitchen table beside Robbie's cup. My friends bent their heads over the two sheets of pale blue notepaper, one bearing a grossly out-of-scale road sketch, the other covered with Robbie MacKinnon's characteristic spider scrawl, with a few words in Ellen's dumpy back-hand at the bottom.

'I just do not understand this,' Ellen sounded annoyed. 'It's the letter we wrote, only we didn't write it till today. And that map is definitely the one Robbie made. Nobody else could draw it so badly.'

'Does anyone else know you're here?' I asked. 'Anyone in the gang, I mean, who might want to play a joke on us?'

'No. We got the job only five weeks ago, and we had to leave Paisley at very short notice. We didn't even have a chance to phone anyone. We've been run off our feet since we arrived, because the Frazers were getting ready to go away, and we had to get to know the house and what was to be done in their absence. We wrote to all the old crowd today, not that we invited them all.'

'D'you have the envelope?' asked Robbie.

I brought it out and handed it to him.

'Did you look at the postmark, Janet? Or the date on the letter?'

'No. Why?'

'Look.' He handed them back to me. 'The date is the 29th - today. And the postmark on the envelope is the 30th - tomorrow.'

'That's ridiculous!' I objected, but he was correct.

'And look!' exclaimed Ellen. 'It's definitely the same envelope, because the stamp's on the wrong corner. Remember, Robbie, I commented on that this afternoon. The envelope was upside-down in the pile, and I just stuck all the stamps on without checking. It was only afterwards that I noticed it.'

'Oh, well,' I remarked, 'this sort of place always has a few mysteries. It wouldn't be a real castle without some hauntings and unexplained happenings.'

'But it doesn't have,' protested Ellen. 'There's nothing nasty in this house. We expected something of the sort when we came - I was a bit wary, actually, although I've always denied any belief in ghosts and so on - but there's absolutely nothing odd or scary. If that's what you're looking for, I'm afraid you're going to be disappointed. In fact, it's a very peaceful, happy place. Even all the pictures look happy; none of those long, dismal faces you normally get in old portraits, where the people look as if their corsets are killing them. What about your luggage?'

'Eh? Oh, it's still in the car.'

'I'll bring it in,' offered Robbie, and I needed no coaxing to accept. I was pretty tired after my long drive, and I wanted nothing more than to fall into a bed.

I said as much to Ellen, who promptly began bustling again.

'Come on upstairs. The spare room's ready, I've just to put a fresh pillowcase on, and then you can pop straight in. D'you want a bath, or would you prefer to wait till morning? Poor girl, you do look exhausted. Water bottles. Where did I put the hot water bottles? Oh, yes, I remember, they're in the linen cupboard. There's the bathroom, Janet, and this is your room here. Just treat it as your own. I'll go and fill the bottles now.'

My head was reeling, what with weariness, bewilderment and Ellen's normal prattling, and it wasn't till she mentioned it that I heard footsteps coming up the stair we had just climbed. 'Here's Robbie with your cases. My, he was quick. I never heard the door shut.' She whisked out into the passage, saying, 'I'll take them, Robbie. Janet's getting undressed.' Then she stopped. 'That's funny. There's no one here.'

At that, the outer door slammed, and Robbie's footsteps were heard starting up the stairs. 'My goodness,' exclaimed Ellen. 'I'm beginning to hear things. That's your talk of strange happenings, Janet Carmichael. You're infecting me.' She brought in my cases, trotted out, returned with two piping hot water bottles, turned down the bedclothes and slipped a fresh pink pillowcase on to the soft, plump pillow, all in the time it took me to get down to bra and pants.

'Well, I'll leave you in peace. There's the switch for the bedside light, and don't bother about getting up early tomorrow. Just lie as long as you like. Good night.' And she was gone, clattering down the stairs again.

Shattered, I clambered wearily into my pyjamas, wandered next door to the bathroom where I simply wiped a damp flannel across my face, then staggered back and fell into the most luxurious bed ever. I must have blacked out before I could turn the light out, because, some time later, I surfaced slightly and saw Ellen's face leaning over me as she put my icy-cold arm under the blankets and switched off the lamp.

The sun was fairly splitting the roof tiles when I awoke at half past nine on a brilliant frosty morning. Blackbirds and thrushes were singing fit to burst, and a cheeky little sparrow was perched on my windowsill, tilting his head this way and that as he peered in at me. I threw the covers back and bounded out of bed, which is something I *never* do in Glasgow. A dash of freezing cold water to waken me fully, then a long, slow warm shower made me feel marvellously fresh and cheerful, and I dressed gaily in my new tight lilac cord trousers, and soft, white polo-neck sweater with a matching lilac band around my hair.

In the kitchen, Ellen was already well into her baking. She's one of the terribly efficient and energetic type, and does everything with such ease and capability that usually she's finished before I've made up my mind to start. As I entered, she plumped bread dough into tins and set them near the stove to prove, then, without a break in her actions, she opened a cupboard and set before me a packet of cornflakes, and a bottle of milk from the fridge. Before I knew it, three rashers of bacon, two sausages and two eggs were sizzling in the pan, the toast was browning nicely under the grill, and a pot of tea was steaming gently beside me.

'I can't eat all that!' I protested.

'Of course you can! You're in the country now. Anyway, if you don't finish it, Robbie will. Since we came here, he's lost his appetite and found a horse's. Did you sleep well? Isn't it a gorgeous morning? Damn this grill! I'm used to a gas stove, and I always turn this thing too high. Does it matter if it's a bit black down one side? Take plenty of milk, now.'

I refrained from answering, partly because my mouth was full of cornflakes, and partly because, unless she puts a direct question, Ellen rarely expects an answer or hears one if it's offered. She was right, though; I did eat all she gave me. When I finally poured my fourth cup of tea, Ellen had mixed and put into the oven a batch of scones, and was cutting out oatcakes to cook on a griddle. By the time I reached the sink to wash the dishes, the scones were out and the bread in. Her egg

whisk was going like the clappers as she beat up one of her famous featherlight Austrian sponges while I dried and put away the dishes. And when I halfheartedly asked if there was anything I could do to help, she laughed and shooed me out of the door. 'Away and prow! Janet. I know that's what you're dying to do. The doors that're locked are the Frazers' private quarters, but you can go into any of the others.'

'Okay. I'll be back sometime. Oh, by the way, thanks for tucking me in last night, and putting the light out.'

'Tucking you in? What're you havoring at? Your light was out when Robbie and I came upstairs, and you were snoring fit to rouse the village – and that's six miles away.'

'But – I wakened last night, I don't know when, and you were leaning across me. I must have fallen asleep with my hand out to the lamp, because it was frozen solid, and you covered me up and turned off the light.'

'I did nothing of the sort. You were dreaming. Away you go, now! I'll call you when the lunch is ready.'

I needed no more persuasion. Leaving the staff area, I wandered along a parquet-floored corridor whose walls bore umpteen paintings, mainly of the 'Shepherd and Flock in a Snowstorm' type, till, turning left, I entered a long, wide hall illuminated down one side by seven tall bow windows, and chockful of white marble statues. There were about sixty figures all together, and between them they boasted one tunic, three slipping draperies, and a pair of sandals. I recognized my acquaintance from the night before, the coy nude with the unnerving stare, and discovered that she held, clasped to her bosom, a frog, of all things. The others were mainly bulky-hipped women, undeveloped girls, chubby cherubim and modest seraphim with fortuitously drooping wings. But there was one magnificent carving of a Greek athlete, in the act of pulling back to hurl a discus; he was the one with the sandals. The wall opposite the windows was strewn, as I found to be the norm throughout the castle, with oil paintings, and at one end of the hall, up in the gloom, there was a tiny gallery which I supposed to be a musicians' gallery. Try as I might, I could

find no way into it, and had wild visions of fiddlers and harpists swinging Tarzan-like on the chandeliers to reach their nook.

There were so many openings off this statue hall that I had difficulty at first in deciding where I should go. Peeping round a corner, I found myself confronted with two pairs of massive doors, both shut. I tossed for it, mentally, and chose the left-hand pair. They swung back, heavily and reluctantly, to disclose a long library, lined on three sides by ten-foot-tall, glass-fronted bookcases, every one of them bulging at the hinges with the amount of reading material in them. There were four windows looking out on to the gardens, and, just in case the strain of reading should prove too much, numerous couches were provided, along with tables, comfortable chairs and a large locked cupboard which I decided was the castle equivalent of a cocktail cabinet.

Everyone who was anyone in the literary world was there, each in his entirety in uniformly-bound volumes: Scott, Stevenson, Goethe, Voltaire, Dumas, Stendhal, and so on, and so on, world without end. It was the only room in the castle with no paintings, but it did have carvings. There were figures and scrolls cut into every available surface; curlicues on the bookcases, bas-reliefs on the doors, lions' heads for table feet, devils' heads for handles, and cherubim falling off the mantelpiece. Some chiseller had had a ball in that place. Even the ceiling was carved in such a way as to make the unsuspecting visitor duck for fear he would be hit on the head by an apple or orange or any other type of fruit which cascaded downwards in long bunches.

Torn between delving further in the sea of knowledge, or exploring the rest of the house, I chose the latter, and saw with mild surprise that the doors which I had left open were now closed. When I reached them I discovered that they had not simply swung to, but had actually engaged the lock. I was more than mildly surprised at that, since the doors were so heavy and ponderous that I was sure I would have heard them click or bump or something. I experimented once or twice,

opening the doors, then giving them a push and moving to various parts of the room to listen with my back turned. I heard the click each time. Oh, well, I'd wanted things like this all my life. As Ellen had commented, if there was nothing to scare me, I'd soon invent something. In this place, I'd no need of invention.

The second of the two sets of doors led to a vast drawing-room, papered in pale pink, and dotted here and there with exquisite chairs and tables, all of which looked so delicate that I was afraid to touch anything in case it crumbled to dust under my hand. Plucking up courage, I finally eased myself gingerly into one of the more robust pieces, a straight-backed confection which seemed to be constructed of nothing but petit point and spun glass. Tall, elegant ladies peered down their aristocratic noses at me from every wall, some with languid roses in their hands, others wafting cobwebby fans as if to swish away any taint of plebianism.

'You needn't flutter at me, madam!' I snapped suddenly, glaring at a particularly exalted looking female wearing one of those 'rather disgusting odour under the nose' expressions. She promptly fluttered. I sat up abruptly and stared. Not a flicker. Of course not, I told myself. How the devil could a portrait wave its fan around? But she had done, I was positive. It might have been a trick of the light, but I preferred to think that m'lady had taken umbrage at my tight sweater and trousers, so I thumped back in the chair and crossed my legs. They all fluttered, and a barely audible chorus of tutting ran around the room. I spun my head round quickly, trying to catch them, but there was no movement. However, I decided I didn't like the drawing-room. As I closed the door behind me, I was sure I heard a faint sigh of relief from within.

Finding myself back in the statue hall again, I moved towards the farthest end, at which a wide staircase swept up a semi-circular gable wall and vanished into the thick gloom far above. The only windows at this point were worse than useless, since they were constructed entirely of stained-glass allegorical figures in the darkest colours possible, casting distorted shad-

ows instead of light. The balustrade was richly carved in dark walnut, consisting mainly of flowers, bowls of fruit and sheaves of grain. But, as I bent low to examine one of the ornaments, I was startled to find the wicked grin and knowing eyes of a satyr staring at me, right in the middle of a huge rose.

I stumbled back, reaching out a hand to steady myself, and recoiled again as I felt sharp teeth nip my fingers. It was another satyr, with rough splinters where the wood of his carved mouth had been chipped. Chiding myself for being so jittery, I began the upward journey. I had climbed thirteen steps when I felt a compelling gaze between my shoulder blades. Turning, I was terrified to behold Lady Macbeth gliding towards me, pale and ashen with grey draperies and bloody hands. I let out a tiny shriek which changed to a choked giggle when I realized that the strange shadows cast by the stained-glass windows had imparted an effect of movement to an extremely life-like full-length portrait. Blowing a rather wavery raspberry at the lady, I resumed my ascent. There were another twenty-six steps to complete the flight, at the top of which welcome daylight flooded across the highly-polished floor of what appeared to be a ballroom. The seven bow windows of the statue hall were duplicated up above, where they formed deep comfortable seats in which couples could rest from the rigours of the dance while still watching the others. Various sofas and chairs were set around the walls, and vast glittering crystal chandeliers practically obscured the ceiling.

‘Lunch!’

I gasped and stiffened with fright, as my heart pounded and my palms became moist.

‘It’s ready, Janet. Don’t be long.’

I turned in time to see just the suggestion of movement at the far end of the ballroom as quick footsteps hastened away along a corridor and down steps. When I had stilled my poor racing pulse, I followed, and met Ellen coming upstairs.

‘Oh, I’ve found you, Janet. Lunch is ready.’

‘Yes, I know,’ I replied. ‘I heard you the first time. My God,

you scared the living daylight out of me!’

‘What d’you mean, “the first time”? I only said it once.’

‘You said it twice. That’s why I was coming along here; I was following you, instead of going back down the main staircase.’

‘Janet, you’re hawering again. You couldn’t have been following me, because I’ve only just newly got here. But you can follow me now. Robbie’s started already, I’ll bet. Lord, the amount of food that man can dispose of!’ She marched off back the way she had come, chattering all the time. ‘He’s been out working in the grounds. Not that he knows all that much about gardening, but he does the heavier work in the wilder parts of the estate; you know, clearing fallen trees, and so on. Did you see Lady Macbeth on the stair? Isn’t that a beautiful picture, so soft and delicate. Makes me feel sorry for the poor woman. He fell down a ditch this morning; he was black from head to foot when he came in, covered in peat muck. But he enjoys himself. Says anything’s great after working in a factory for so long. I quite agree with him; I’ve had enough of city life myself. I don’t want to go back, ever. It’s venison, by the way.’

Her train of thought had been derailed again.

The lunch, of roast venison and fresh garden vegetables, was delicious, and was eaten at the long kitchen table, the other end of which groaned under its load of fresh baked bread, scones, oatcakes, fruit loaf, biscuits, Dundee cake and two sponges (which, admittedly, contributed very little to the weight).

‘How on earth did you manage to bake so many things in such a short time?’ I asked, thinking of my own efforts which required two or three hours of decision, an hour or so of preparation, the actual baking time, and an apparently interminable period of washing-up.

‘I’ve got three ovens,’ she replied unconcernedly. ‘I can easily mix one lot while the two others are already cooking. Have some more.’

‘Pardon?’

'Venison. Take some more; there's plenty, the freezer's full of the stuff, plus steak, mutton, pork. The Frazers buy meat like you'd buy fish fingers.'

'I never do,' I interjected, but she didn't hear me.

'There's some work I have to do upstairs this afternoon. D'you fancy giving me a hand? I'll be sorting out dresses that belonged to Mr Frazer's great grandmother, she was back about the beginning of Queen Victoria's time, and they've been packed away in a cupboard ever since. Mrs Frazer discovered them just the other day, and she asked me to go through them and discard any that are falling to pieces. The rest'll be kept for charades and fancy-dress balls. They're terribly old-fashioned, the Frazers. Apparently they always play games at their parties, especially charades. Would you?'

'Eh? Oh, yes, I'd love to. I like handling old dresses; some of the materials and colours are so beautiful. Everything's so garish nowadays.'

'Right! Dishes first, then dresses!'

The cupboard in question was on the third floor, and was actually more what I would describe as a medium-sized room. Along one wall was a row of four small windows looking out on to a corridor and thence through its windows to a view of the hills.

There were trunks, and trunks, and more trunks, all inches deep in dust, stacked one on top of the other.

'How did she manage to live long enough to wear them all?' I wondered, hauling at the handle of a small brassbound specimen.

The hinge shrieked protestingly as the lid swung back revealing drawers: not the kind you slide out and in, but the ones you pull on and off. We counted them, layer upon white-embroidered layer, and totalled ninety-six pairs! Some poor seamstress's fingers had worked miles of lace and frills round the legs, and added roses by the gardenful in pale pink and tea yellow.

The next offering was of gloves: short, soft white kid; long, smooth lilac silk; crocheted purple mittens; strong silver

leather riding gauntlets; decent black silk for funerals. They were all there, each pair tidily placed palm to palm, and tied with a ribbon.

Ah! At last, the dresses. The first, of floating lemon muslin, floated right out of Ellen's hands, and drifted as dust to the floor. Three in that chest disintegrated, but the others were of sturdier stuff and would stand the test of several charades, so they were put back. A second dress chest had a loose lid and proved to be so infested with moths that there was scarcely a stitch of clothing left. The entire trunk and its contents were hurriedly removed to the corridor for disposal by Robbie when he returned in the evening.

'I can't get this one opened at all,' complained Ellen, struggling with a rusted lock. 'Damn! I've torn my nail! I'll go and get a hammer, and smash the damn thing open!' And she departed in a whirl of dust.

Left to my own devices for the moment, I began fingering the material of a magnificent shot-silk ball gown of apple green. I held it against myself and wished there was a mirror. If it were to be used for charades, surely there would be no objection to my trying it on. I'd ask Ellen when she came back. No; I'd surprise her! Whisking my sweater off, I slipped the gown over my head and, with a struggle, managed to fasten most of the buttons at the back.

Just then I heard her returning, and swung gaily towards the door, tilting my head coquettishly, and smiling, but the footsteps swept past the door and along the corridor. Through the dirty, dusty windows, I glimpsed her short figure hurrying past, then a door opened and closed, and there was silence. Puzzled, I waited, but she didn't come out again, so, wondering what she was up to, I went to find out.

Trilling a little fanfare to announce my entrance, I threw the door wide and curtsied, drooping my head in the oh, so elegant manner that Victorian ladies are supposed to have affected. Rising again, I was startled to see dozens of women, all in apple-green ball gowns, all rising and putting hand to mouth in identical gesture. I yelped in fright, and stumbled

back against the door, which had closed behind me. Gazing round, and allowing my heart to slow its maddened rhythm, I realized that the room was panelled throughout in mirrors. A mirror being exactly what I wanted, I moved out into the centre of the floor and examined myself from all angles. An electric chandelier afforded excellent illumination, allowing me to see that, but for the one or two buttons in the region of my waist which refused to fasten, the gown fitted perfectly. 'I should have hunted for some stays,' I thought to myself, 'then it would be just right. And I could put my hair up in great loops at the back and soft ringlets at the side, and carry a gossamer fan, and... Where the hell's Ellen?' I'd been so busy admiring my reflections that I had completely forgotten my original reason for entering this crystal room. Obviously I had mistaken the door; Ellen must have gone into the next room along.

I turned to leave, and stopped short. Where was the door? I could see no trace of one anywhere, nor could I find a window. It was then I realized that there was no furniture, either; only mirrors. I rotated, gazing intently at each wall in turn, while the apple-green women moved with me. The handle would give the game away, surely, I reasoned, and went in search of one. I went right round that room, examining every mirror, and could find no handle. Faster and faster I moved, panic welling up inside me in earnest for the first time. The other little scares I had had since my arrival had been caused, I was sure, by mundane factors such as shadows and creaky boards, but this time I was really afraid. Wilder and wilder grew my gyrations as I hunted for a way out. The apple-green women spun with me, dipping and swaying as gracefully as willow branches in the breeze, their fans fluttering seductively, their exquisitely coiffeured heads inclining as they curtsied, ringlets tossing as they rose.

I stopped dead in my tracks. I had no fan; my hair hung loose on my shoulders. The apple-green women danced on, light as gossamer, smiling their soft and gentle smiles. I turned and retreated, trying to back away, but they were all round

me. I screamed, as loudly as I could, but the sound died immediately, and I screamed again, my hands clenched into fists that pressed hard against my teeth. I screamed and screamed till I felt blood in the back of my throat, then, sinking down on the polished floor, I tried to curl up, to shut out the sight of those whirling, wheeling, smiling women; and I cried, sobbing, whimpering, choking.

'Oh, there you are, Janet.'

A shriek of sheer terror ripped from my aching throat as Ellen opened the door and stuck her head round.

'What on earth's the matter?' she asked, coming forward.

'Those women,' I muttered, 'those dancing women.'

'Where? What're you talking about? There's only you and me here.'

Reluctantly, I raised my eyes. The mirrors reflected only Ellen's dumpy figure in sensible skirt, jumper and shoes, and myself, a crumpled pile of green shot silk on the floor.

'I couldn't get out,' I mumbled. 'I couldn't find the door. There's no window, and how did the light go on? Ellen, I was so frightened. Those green women...'

'Good God! They're *green* women now, are they? If I didn't know you better, Janet Carmichael, I'd say you'd been at the bottle. Come on. I found the hammer, but the trunks can wait. What you need right now is tea.'

She led me out of the room by the arm, helped me off with the dress and on with my sweater, then guided me firmly downstairs to the kitchen. Over strong tea and Austrian sponge, she answered my questions, making light of all my fears.

'There's no window in that room for the simple reason that having a window would negate the purpose of all the mirrors. It would give you a point to fix on. Besides, you'd also get unwanted shadows everywhere. The light came on as you entered, because Mr Frazer, being the kind that has more money than he knows what to do with, has had a special type of electronic switch fitted at the door. It's sensitive to body heat, so the light goes on when someone enters, and other, hidden

switches around the room keep it on till the room's empty again. He thinks it's more effective for his guests than having to switch on by hand. "There should be an ethereal, fairy-tale effect, my dear Mrs MacKinnon, and you can't get that if you have to search in the dark for such a mundane item as a light switch." And he showed me how to find my way out. I was going to take you into that room, but you beat me to it. Did you notice the floor? It's of light-coloured wood, with a design built in it. There are huge curves of darker wood, but the design is broken at one place, a curve being replaced by a point, and that point points to the door! Simple! You just put your hand on the wooden frame at the right hand side of that particular mirror, and press. Hey presto, the lock opens, and the door swings wide!

'Oh,' was all the comment I could muster.

'What took you in there, anyway?' asked Ellen.

'Well, I was trying on that dress, and I heard you go past along the corridor and into another room, and when you took so long to come back, I thought I'd come in and surprise you. But I mistook the room.'

'I didn't go along the corridor and into any room. I was downstairs here all the time, hunting for the hammer. Robbie's got a terrible habit of putting things in odd places. D'you know where I found it? Right at the back of the cutlery drawer. When I came back up, I went into the cupboard and you weren't there, then I heard you crying next door, and I came in. Janet, you'll have to try to control your imagination, you're getting worse.' She poured another cup of her cure-all tea. 'Drink up, and when you're finished, I think we'll go for a walk in the grounds. You need fresh air.'

I did, and it was wonderful. All the fears and fancies of the afternoon were swept away by a strong, clean east wind blowing from the hills and bringing the sharp tang of the pine forest with it. Wrapped up against the cold, we wandered through formal gardens with flower beds in regimented rows, bright with autumn berries and foliage, an intricate and meticulously trimmed maze of golden privet, and a stretch of

ground almost two acres in size, given over entirely to roses. There was a walled kitchen garden in which was grown every vegetable required for the castle, and a good many fruits. A huge hot-house provided pineapples, grapes, peaches, and even bananas.

Leaving the formal area, we descended a long slippery flight of steps cut into a rock face from which cascaded numerous trailing plants. At the bottom were three natural pools fed by a narrow waterfall which made a spectacular leap of about a hundred feet from the top of the face and landed on a long grooved triangular tongue of rock which jutted out in exactly the right position to split the stream of water into two perfect lacy fans of rebounding spray.

I stood for some time, entranced by the delightful display. 'Is that tongue natural,' I asked, 'or did somebody think to put it there?'

There was no reply. When I turned, there was no Ellen either. Immediately, the fears came crowding back. 'Ellen!' I yelled. 'Ellen, where are you?' Only the tumbling water answered. I froze. I could feel something at my back, just as I had done with Lady Macbeth, and I was scared stiff. Slowly, I managed to force my head round, and there was nothing to be seen but the rock face, the plants and the dancing surface of a pool. 'Ellen!' I shrieked, my voice cracking.

'Yes?'

'Oh, my God!' I snapped back round to see Ellen in the act of straightening up from behind a bush with a bunch of reeds in her arms.

'Yes?' she repeated, gazing quizzically at me.

'Were you there all the time?'

'Yes. I decided to take some of these reeds back to the house for the vases. I've got dried grasses and everlasting flowers, and there are plenty of plants with berries and coloured foliage, but there's very little greenery, and I prefer to have something green. These'll do perfectly. What d'you mean, "all the time"?'

'I've been shouting your name. I called at least three times,

and there was no reply. I couldn't see you, and I didn't know where you'd gone.'

'I never heard you. The noise of the water must have drowned it.'

'But you can hear me now, and we're still standing where we were, and I'm not shouting.'

'Well, don't let it worry you. Maybe it's because I was bending down with my ears close to the waterfall. What was it you wanted, anyway?'

'It wasn't important.'

'Will we go back now? I'm getting a bit chilly, and it's time I put the potatoes on for dinner. Or d'you want to stay?'

'No! I'll come back with you!'

She eyed me seriously. 'You're as jumpy as a cat.'

'So would you be if you'd seen what I did!' I retorted, suddenly angry at the matter-of-fact way in which she had dismissed everything I had said.

'All right, Janet. No need to bite my head off.' She swung round, and began the trudge up the steps again, the bundle of reeds borne before her like the Banner with the Strange Device. We walked in silence till we arrived at the staff door, where I stopped and said, 'I'm sorry, Ellen. I didn't mean to snap at you, it's just that ... well, I seem to be hearing and seeing so many odd things, and you don't believe any of it.'

'I believe that you *think* you saw and heard these things, even that you're *positive* you saw and heard them, but I don't believe they exist outside your imagination, which both you and I know to be practically unlimited.'

'D'you think I'm making it all up, then?' I snapped, completely forgetting that I didn't mean to. 'Or should I see a headshrinker?'

'Oh, come and have some tea.'

'Tea! It cures everything, doesn't it – even incipient madness!'

With raised eyebrows and pursed lips, Ellen entered the kitchen and proceeded with the preparation of a pot of strong tea. Setting a cup before me, she took a small bottle from a

drawer and tipped out two green and black capsules which she handed to me.

'What are those?' I demanded.

'A tranquillizer.'

'I don't need drugs, thank you!'

'Janet, you're as tense as an overstrung fiddle. These'll relax you a bit, and they won't do you any harm at all. Please.'

'Oh, all right. If it'll make you any happier, I'll take them.'

For the remainder of the day I relaxed, which means simply that I forced myself to remain in the company of Ellen and Robbie, to eat most of a huge dinner, to watch television and to make cheerful and coherent conversation. Inside I was still tense and quivering.

That night I made sure that the bedside light was out and my arm in, but again I awakened to see Ellen bending across to turn off the lamp and tuck me in.

After breakfast the following morning, at which I made no mention of her nocturnal visit, Ellen asked if I wanted to help her finish the sorting out of the ancient clothing, or would I just wander round the parts of the castle which I hadn't yet seen. I opted for the latter, and departed, full of forced gaiety, to the upper floors. I didn't really relish exploring the empty, silent rooms, but even less did I relish the thought of being near that mirrored chamber. I found myself hesitating, listening intently outside doors and peering cautiously round corners before proceeding.

I felt terrible. This castle was exactly what I had wanted all my life; I had so looked forward to creaking floorboards that lifted as one walked, creating a second set of footsteps following behind; draughts that opened doors one was positive one had closed; suits of armour whose visors dropped with a crash as one passed by; bad plumbing that emitted all sorts of eerie noises in the wee small hours; and here I was, scared white and not enjoying it at all. I had always professed a belief in ghosts and evil spirits, but only in a sort of bedtime story way, as in the type of book that warns its reader not to be alone or to look over his shoulder. The main trouble was, of course,

that, apart from the footsteps on the first evening, when Ellen had thought Robbie was coming up with my cases, no one but I had heard or seen anything untoward. Could I really be, well, just a little bit round the bend?

Then I remembered the gates. Having found no logical explanation to the puzzle, Ellen and Robbie appeared to have dismissed it from their thoughts, but it still niggled in mine. In my walk with Ellen I had noticed, though it didn't register at the time, that there was, indeed, only one gate through which a vehicle could be driven, none of the others being more than two feet wide. So, how the devil had I got in?

The clatter of running feet shattered my reverie, and sent me cringing back against the wall as first one unseen form passed me, then another, accompanied by high-pitched, happy, childish giggling. Along the corridor a door opened and slammed shut, and the silence closed round me once more.

Shaking with fright, I moved along the wall, pressing hard against it and shuffling sideways so as to have something always at my back, till I came to the door which would take me out of the corridor on to a bright, airy balcony leading to the ballroom. Twisting the handle frenziedly, I whisked through and banged the door shut behind me. Too late, I discovered my error. I was not on the balcony, but at the top of a narrow spiral staircase, lit only by a slit in the stone wall, and vanishing so steeply round the central pillar that only five steps were visible. In panic I pushed backwards, but the door refused to open. Blindly I struggled with the knob, too scared to turn my back on that dark, terrifying wall. The door was immovable.

Fear prevented my crying out this time, as my throat was paper-dry and my lips drawn tightly back over my rigidly-clenched teeth. My heart thumped fast and hard as I stood there, whimpering, my mind a terrified blank, not knowing what to do, until finally the intense chill of the stone wall cut through the thick blanket of fear, and made me realize that if I were to get out of there it must be by some effort of my own.

Still the door would not open, leaving the staircase with its

unknown goal as the only means of egress. Wrapping my wavering courage in a shuddering sob, I began the downward journey, keeping hard against the outer wall, the easier to see whatever might be lurking at the bottom. The wall slits were so far apart that most of the time I was in almost pitch darkness, and could make my way only by feeling with my foot for the next step.

At last, I came to another door, but found then that I had no desire to open it. I was trapped between a locked door upstairs and a door opening on to the unknown downstairs, and I simply stared at the heavy wooden panels in a stupor of indecision.

Abruptly, my mind was made up for me. From above came the distinct sound of a lock clicking and hinges creaking. I lunged at the door in front of me, turned the handle and pushed in one movement, and was out in the middle of a large stone hall by the time footsteps began to descend the staircase I had just vacated. Wildly I hunted for an exit. There was a pair of massive doors at one end, secured by long, heavy bolts top and bottom. Another, smaller door in a corner caught my eye and I raced to it, pulling, pushing and thumping on it in panic. It also was locked.

Stiffly, I moved my head round towards the small doorway at the foot of the spiral stair. The sound had almost reached the bottom, and, as a foot came into view, I thrust my fist into my mouth and screamed.

'For heaven's sake, Janet, it's only me!' Ellen's dumpy figure emerged from the darkness. 'I heard you banging at the door, so I came to let you out. I forgot to warn you about that door. The lock's broken. Mostly it works perfectly well, but every so often it jams. Robbie's going to put a new lock on when he gets around to it. Are you all right?'

'Yes, I'm all right now,' I replied. 'But you couldn't have heard me banging upstairs because I didn't. I was too scared. I *did* thump this door, but only as you were coming down.'

'Well, I must have just heard the door closing. It's as well I did, because you'd have been stuck here till we came looking

for you at lunch time. This is the main entry hall, by the way. A fine, welcoming place it is, too. All those suits of armour glinting away in the light. You should see it when the fire's lit. Everything gleams; those settles are like satin in the firelight, and the paintings all come alive. Or, maybe I shouldn't have said that?'

'I wish you hadn't,' I agreed, shivering. I felt that Ellen's taste in beauty had diminished somewhat. Certainly those dull pieces of rusty armour and tarnished weaponry didn't appear welcoming to me. The furniture was scuffed and wormy, and I didn't like the look of a single one of the ancient lords and ladies in the paintings. 'How do we get out?'

'Back the way we came, of course. I jammed the door open.'

'Must we?'

'It's the only way – unless you want to wait here while I go upstairs, along the corridor, through the ballroom and down the main staircase to open that door there.' She pointed to the one on which I had pounded so frantically. 'It leads into a corridor between the staff quarters and the blue drawing room.'

'I'll ... I'll come with you,' I decided, gathering my courage around me, 'but I wish there were three of us.'

'Why?'

'Then I could be the one in the middle.' I attempted a lighthearted laugh, but it came out strangled. 'You go first.'

She did, and I *was* in the middle. The sounds behind me were quite distinct to both of us, although Ellen, as usual, dismissed them as an acoustic effect caused by our own feet. I, on the other hand, knew perfectly well that there was someone close at my back, and I was not in the least happy about it, nor did I dare to look round, for fear of losing sight of Ellen again.

For the next few days I stuck very close to Ellen, so much so that I once found myself automatically following her into the bathroom. She didn't know whether to be amused or annoyed, but finally she suggested that I might like to walk in the gardens while she got on with her work. In other words, I

was getting under her feet; so I took the hint and went out.

The air was keen and frosty, gold and russet leaves drifted in brilliant clouds on to the paths, and the clear blue of the sky was so sharp it hurt the eyes. There were birds everywhere, singing, chattering, whistling, rustling in the dead leaves for grubs. Against the emerging skeletons of the deciduous trees the evergreens stood out strongly: fir, pine, holly, rhododendron and hemlock. Hemlock: I've never liked that tree, for no reason I could put my finger on, merely an unnamed dislike, probably engendered by its frequent use in graveyards.

I was standing in the middle of the driveway, about a quarter of a mile from the gates, letting the wind tangle my hair and watching the gigantic Douglas firs tossing like tall-masted ships in a storm at sea, when a cry sounded faintly from the direction of the castle. It was a broken, wordless cry, as if the wind had whipped the words from the speaker's lips before they could be fully formed. I turned and, through a gap between two hemlock trees, I could see a figure on the wide terrace that ran round two sides of the castle. The figure was waving its arms erratically, and practically jumping up and down in an effort to draw my attention. Then I recognized the voice of Ellen as it came on the wind.

'Janet ... quick ... Robbie ... broken ... Janet ... come quickly ...'

I sprinted up the drive and reached the gates, breathless and gasping, as Ellen came charging across the courtyard towards me.

'What's wrong, Ellen? Is Robbie hurt?'

'What on earth's the matter, Janet?'

We halted and stared at each other.

'You called to me from the terrace,' I said.

'I saw you from an upstairs window,' countered Ellen, 'and I heard you calling for me.'

'I didn't call,' I denied.

'Nor did I.'

For a few long seconds we gazed into each other's eyes, and I could see a tiny flicker of uncertainty in Ellen's honest brown

ones. She was about to speak again, when Robbie came bounding up a flight of steps that led from the kitchen garden.

'What in the world's the matter?' he yelled. 'What's happened?'

Our gaze broke as we both turned to stare at Robbie.

'Well? What is it? Are you all right, Ellen? For God's sake, will one of you answer me! What were you shouting about, the pair of you?'

'We weren't,' whispered Ellen.

'Oh, come on! I heard you! You were yelling from the terrace and Janet from the driveway. Then the two of you started calling for me. Well, I'm here. What's wrong?'

'There's nothing wrong, Robbie...'

'Then, why did you call?'

'We didn't,' I said. 'Each of us heard the other calling, and came running. We met right here, and asked what was wrong, then you arrived. But neither of us called; for you or anyone else.'

'This is the damndest thing I ever heard of!' exclaimed Robbie. 'We knew you'd hear and see things all over the place, Janet, but now we're infected too. I think we need something to drink.' And he put an arm round each of us and led us back to the kitchen where he sat us down and produced a bottle of whisky from which he poured three large measures.

'I think perhaps I should leave,' I suggested into a bleak silence.

'Don't be ridiculous,' retorted Robbie and Ellen in unison, and somehow that broke the ice. We all chuckled, then laughed and soon we were talking quite happily about nothing in particular. Ellen made a pot of her ubiquitous tea, we munched cake and biscuits to the utter ruin of our appetites for lunch, and Robbie went back out to continue his work.

For about ten minutes more Ellen and I talked on, chatting about friends in Glasgow, but gradually the conversation ran down, becoming trivial, meaningless with an overtone of brittle nervousness. We faltered, stopped, and sat staring into our teacups, hunting for words we knew we wouldn't find.

After a brief interval, Ellen raised her head decisively, and asked, 'What do you know about ghosts and spirits, Janet? I mean, seriously, not just scarey stories.'

'Nothing. Not really. I've read a lot about the subject, but that's not the same as experience, and I must admit this is my first real experience of anything of the sort. I'll tell you something: I came here prepared to scare the pants off myself while enjoying every moment of it, instead of which I find I'm honestly terrified. The castle itself is just what I always dreamed such a place should be, but the delicious thrills and tremors are conspicuously absent. There's only deep chilling fear. I'm afraid I don't like your Highland home as much as I thought I would.'

'You're not serious about leaving, are you?' asked Ellen, and I was astonished to catch a trace of panic in her voice. 'It gets a bit lonely here during the day when Robbie's out and the other staff are all away.'

'They've only been gone five days!' I protested, immediately wishing I hadn't, since in doing so I had let her see that I was aware of her growing fear. 'Of course, I'll stay!' I tried to repair the breach. 'I've cancelled the milk and papers for a month anyway. No sense in going back just yet.'

She sighed in relief, trying to change it into a giggle half way. 'I'm glad. I'd hate you to lose your holiday because of a few strange sounds.' She looked sideways at me as she spoke, and as our eyes met we suddenly had a closer friendship than ever before. I knew now that she would never doubt me again when I reported odd sights and sounds; I knew also that, since it was so new and alien to her, her fear could well prove greater than mine. Perhaps if I were the comforter I might not be so frightened myself. Yet, even as that thought entered my head, I dismissed it as nonsense. In a situation such as the time I was surrounded by the dancing women, or trapped in the spiral staircase, I would have no spare willpower with which to whisper reassurances to anyone.

During the next week Ellen and I spent almost every waking minute together, parting only at bedtime, but I refrained

from telling her that she still came to my room every night to turn out the light and tuck my arm under the bedclothes. We turned out rooms, tidied cupboards, aired linen, washed china, polished silver, cleaned pictures, and generally kept ourselves as busy as possible till, on the second Thursday after my arrival, Ellen said, 'You know, Janet, I think it's time you began enjoying yourself. You didn't come here just to wash dishes, you know. I think everything's going to be all right. I haven't heard any more shouts, or anything, in fact I feel quite happy again. So, why don't you get out and see the place. Besides the castle and the grounds, there's a lot of beautiful countryside round here. I'm sure you'd like it. But look out for Willie Sanderson, the butcher in the village. He's always eager to talk with any strangers, particularly attractive women, and you're never quite sure what way the conversation's going to go. It's a pity you're not a man, you could go fishing. The Frazers have the rights to the river, and they told us we could fish as much as we liked. The gamekeeper, Jim Kerr, is very friendly, too.'

I smiled, not bothering to display any modesty at her comment about attractive women. She was babbling again, and that showed she had recovered.

'I think you're right, Ellen. The place certainly has been quiet lately. Maybe I'll take a run in the car today. By the way, I've been meaning to ask: what's that little statue thing on the terrace? I've seen it from various windows, but I could never make out what it was supposed to be.'

'It's a sundial, believe it or not. I suppose they do get enough sun here at times to operate it. If you're going to look at it today, you'd better go now. I think it'll rain by mid-day.'

I took her advice, and went out through huge French windows on to the wide, moss-grown terrace. It was surrounded by a carved marble balustrade, with rambling roses clinging tightly to it and cascading down to the gardens below. On my right, at the bend in the terrace, stood the sundial with a ray of somewhat watery sunlight striking it, but by the time I

reached it the shadow it cast was so pale as to be almost non-existent.

On a flagstone at my feet, I suddenly noticed some moss-filled indentations that looked as if they might be letters. Getting to my knees, I began scraping away the moss and dirt with my fingernails, and gradually revealed the name Adam MacVicar and the date 1809. Who on earth was Adam MacVicar that his name should be carved here? Maybe he killed himself for love of a girl of the Frazers, so far above him as to be inaccessible? Perhaps he was a young officer who left for the wars in 1809 and never returned? Was there a war going in 1809? I didn't know, but I crouched there romanticizing, till I recalled Ellen telling me that the castle was completed in 1809. Adam MacVicar must have been one of the masons who worked on the construction, and was determined not to be forgotten. How mundane!

I heaved a sigh of resignation as my romantic notions blew up in my face, and was rising from my cramped position when, along the terrace came the sound of two pairs of feet, not running as they had been in the corridor, but strolling. One pair was taking long, slow, confident strides, accompanied by a faint jingling, the other, barely audible, was tripping lightly, with a crisp rustle.

From where I was standing I could see the entire terrace, which was empty. I could also see, to my consternation, that the only escape route other than the French windows lay in a flight of steps up which the unseen couple must have come. I was trapped, and terrified. I crouched down again in a small alcove beside the sundial, and hoped whoever or whatever it was would go away. But they didn't.

Nearer and nearer came the footsteps, with a soft murmuring of voices. As well as being scared I now felt embarrassed, for I could make out some of the words. They were the words of a man and a woman courting. They murmured and laughed, a deep, rich chuckle and a sweet, tinkling trill. There was the sound of a stolen kiss, a maidenly remonstrance that faded into silence, and then the contented sigh of a woman whose

intention all along was to be kissed, and who thoroughly enjoyed it.

The strolling continued, coming closer and closer till I was sure they were upon me, then the woman's voice gasped, there came a sharp slapping sound, a swish of skirts, and the lighter feet sped off down the terrace, followed for a few yards by the heavier ones.

A few seconds later I summoned enough courage to stand up, and in doing so scraped the heel of my shoe noisily against the balustrade. Immediately, the heavier feet sounded again, coming rapidly towards me.

'Who's there?' demanded the voice. 'Come! Show yourself! I'll have no prying into my private affairs! Come out!'

Shivering with fright, I huddled down again, and hid my face. The steps halted right beside me, and I waited for the worst.

'Where are you?' insisted the voice. 'Damn me, I could swear I heard someone. Hm! Not a soul.' So saying, the footsteps departed along the terrace at a smart pace, leaving me a trembling, sagging wreck that somehow managed to creep back into the house via the French windows and get as far as the kitchen corridor before fainting.

I came to with Ellen leaning over me, slapping at my face, and looking very white.

'What happened, Janet?'

Haltingly, I told her of the footsteps and voices, and how I had been heard. Shockingly, Ellen began to cry, hopelessly, making no attempt to stem the flood of tears that poured down her cheeks and soaked into her pink wool jumper. I managed to get up and somehow reverse our roles, but it took me quite some time to comfort Ellen and stop her weeping.

Sitting hunched at the bottom of the stairs, mopping her face with a sodden handkerchief, she stumbly related her experiences during the time I was absent on the terrace.

'I was in the middle of kneading the bread,' she sobbed, 'when I heard the door open. I looked round and there was no

one there, and the door was shut. Well, I thought I'd got over all this stupid fear of noises and things, but when that happened I got quite shivery. And then I distinctly heard footsteps coming towards the table, and I backed away. There was a thump, like something being laid down, then a clatter of dishes, and the sound of a chair being scraped across the floor. Then, worst of all, someone sat down on the chair; I could hear it creak. And there I was, trapped in the kitchen, alone, with someone I couldn't see. I didn't know what to do.

'But, after a little while, there was no more disturbance, and I decided that the best thing would be to carry on as if nothing had happened. So I went ahead with kneading the dough, and suddenly ... Oh, my God! It was horrible! Horrible! Oh, Janet, what's happening here?'

'Suddenly what, Ellen?' I demanded. 'What happened then?'

'Well,' she gulped, 'I took my hands away for a moment to get more flour for the board, and ... and ... another pair of hands began kneading the dough! I could see them! I mean, I could see the impressions of the fingers, and the dough was being lifted and turned in a competent manner. Whoever it was knew what she was doing. It was then I realized that whoever it was must be standing in exactly the same spot as I was, and that's when I ran. I was coming to find you on the terrace, but I found you here, flat out on the floor. Janet, I'm scared. I'm scared stiff.'

'Let's go and find Robbie,' I suggested. 'We'll both feel better if we're with him.' I helped her to her feet, and we were each straightening our hair and clothing when the staff door burst open and Robbie came hurtling through. Ellen and I screamed in unison, and gazed wide-eyed and dumb as Robbie skidded to a halt.

'What's going on?' he demanded. Then, as we remained silent, 'What's burning?'

'Burning?' I asked.

'Yes, burning. There's smoke belching out of the kitchen window. I saw it from the garden. What happened?'

Ellen and I still found nothing to say, and, with an exasperated grunt, Robbie pushed past us and raced down the corridor to the kitchen. As he opened the door, sickly sweet choking smoke wafted out towards us.

'My meringues!' exclaimed Ellen, and we both ran.

Robbie was throwing windows wide as we entered, and I began fluttering a dish towel about in an effort to disperse the thick fumes. Ellen shrieked faintly, pointing to the table, and clutching my arm. There, in four loaf tins, was the dough she had left when she fled the kitchen. They were placed neatly at one end of the long table to prove, the board had been cleaned, and the huge mixing bowl washed. Ellen and I stared, aghast, while Robbie, of course, could see nothing untoward.

'What's in the oven?' he asked. 'Whatever it was, it must be in cinders by now.' He swung the door wide, allowing more smoke to come thrusting out at us, and extracted a tray of burnt meringues, charred black lumps, such as Ellen had never produced in all her life.

'You're still not used to this electric cooker, are you?' he laughed, pointing to the regulator which stood at 650°.

'That's not what I put it at,' muttered Ellen, switching it off with a twist that nearly loosened the knob. 'It must have been her.'

'Who? Janet?' inquired Robbie, with a grin. 'You should know better than to let Janet Carmichael try her hand at baking.'

'No, not Janet: she was out on the terrace. I mean whoever it was that started kneading my dough.' And Ellen burst into tears once more.

While her husband tried to comfort her, I repeated what Ellen had told me and what I had heard myself. He was, to say the least, not amused.

'This is going beyond a joke!' he snapped. 'I'd like to know who's responsible for all these "mysterious happenings"! He looked up at me sharply. 'It wouldn't have anything to do with you, I suppose? Something you and the gang cooked up just to enliven the place; something you'll all have a good laugh at

later. "You should have seen Robbie and Ellen. Oh, my, they really believed it. Scared to go to the loo alone." Well?"

'Robbie, I'm scared silly, myself,' I declared. 'I'm not beyond a little practical joking, but this is not in my line of humour. I don't know what's causing it or why it should only have started when I arrived, but you must remember I did offer to leave. I'll go now if you want me to.'

'No, no.' He shook his head morosely while patting Ellen's shoulder. 'I don't want you to leave, Janet. I just don't understand all this, and the only thing I could think of was that someone was setting it up. I . . . I don't blame you. I've seen how scared you are.'

That night, as every night since my arrival, Ellen appeared, leaning over me to put out the light and cover my cold arm. As usual, I refrained from comment in the morning. But, on this particular day, Ellen was edgier than I had ever seen her, and could hardly wait for Robbie to go out till she could ask me what I had been doing in their bedroom, and why the bedside light had been on. I gazed at her in silence.

'Does Robbie know about this?' I finally asked.

'No. I didn't want to bother him; there's been enough queer things happening without troubling him further. What was wrong? Were you sleep-walking, or did something frighten you? I'm sorry I wasn't of any help, but I was so sleepy I must have just dropped off again. Is everything all right?'

'Yes,' I replied dully. 'Everything's fine, only . . . I wasn't in your room last night.'

'You were! I distinctly saw you bending over me, then you put the light out.'

'Just as you have bent over me and put the light out every night since I came here. You remember I spoke of it the first morning? Well, it's happened every night without fail. I didn't say anything at first because neither you nor Robbie believed me, and then when *you* began hearing things I didn't want to alarm you. But, I assure you, I was not in your room last night.'

In silence we washed the breakfast dishes, and, when Ellen

began her baking, which she had abandoned entirely the previous day, I watched for a while, then went upstairs to tidy my room and write some letters.

About an hour later, as I licked the flap of the last letter, the door of my room opened and in walked a middle-aged woman wearing the black, long-skirted uniform of a house servant of Victorian times. She was taking off her apron as she entered, and, fascinated, I followed her movements about the room till abruptly she looked in my direction, screamed, and ran yelling from the room.

'That,' I thought to myself, 'was another ghost. A visible one, for a change.' Oddly, I felt no fear or discomfort this time, and remained seated at the desk by the window. 'I wonder what frightened her? Could she have seen me? She certainly acted as if she'd seen something out of the ordinary. But, can ghosts see people?'

As I mused, the door opened again, slowly this time, and with much whispering and giggling from outside. Two faces peered round the edge and hurriedly withdrew. 'She's still there!' exclaimed a female voice. 'Don't be such a goose!' advised a young male voice. The door swung violently inwards, revealing a footman, resplendent in green uniform with gold frogging, white stockings and buckled shoes. 'My God! There is a ghost!' he exclaimed, beating such a hasty retreat that his white wig tipped askew over his left ear, making me giggle girlishly. The door slammed and feet pattered away down the staircase.

Quite cheerfully, I went down to the kitchen to tell Ellen about the poor frightened maids and footmen, but found her unconscious on the kitchen floor, eggs and flour scattered and splashed everywhere. Hurriedly, I soaked a towel in cold water and mopped her face and neck to bring her round. She regained consciousness slowly, and when her eyelids fluttered open she seemed not to recognize me. Instead, she screamed again and again, pushing at me, thrusting me away with pitiful cries of terror, and calling hysterically for Robbie. I slapped her cheeks to calm her, and at last her shrieking subsided in

broken sobs and hiccups and she cried weakly.

'Robbie. Robbie, take me home. Oh, Robbie, take me home.'

'What is it, Ellen? What happened?'

'Take me home, Robbie; please, I want to go home.' And that was all I could get out of her. I managed to prop her limply sagging body up against the wall, then I ran to fetch Robbie. But I couldn't find him. I called and called, wandering through the grounds, wondering where he might be, worried about leaving Ellen.

In the formal gardens I stood, hands on hips, cursing under my breath, when, from the depths of the golden privet maze, came the sound of a stifled sob. There was something quite horrifying about it; not in a supernatural way, but because it was a man's voice. A man was somewhere in the maze, crying.

I headed in the general direction of the sound, swearing impatiently at every dead end, and right in the centre of the maze, blindly pushing and squirming against the hedge, I found Robbie, weeping like a terrified child. His face was red, eyes clenched shut and swollen, his fingers were in his mouth. When he heard me call his name, he slowly turned his eyes towards me, then shrieked, high and shrill, before fainting in a heap.

I didn't know what to do then, and for a couple of minutes I struggled futilely, trying to revive Robbie. I couldn't possibly carry him, so I went back to the castle and telephoned to the village for a doctor.

By the time Dr Strathearn arrived, the gamekeeper, Jim Kerr, and I had half-carried, half-led Robbie as far as the kitchen where Ellen sat slumped against the wall, just as I had left her, whimpering and begging to be taken home. They were both treated for shock and put to bed, then the doctor asked to have a few words with me.

'Tell me, Miss ...'

'Carmichael.'

'... Miss Carmichael, did you manage to find out anything from either Mr or Mrs MacKinnon about what happened to them?'

'No, doctor. They were just as you saw when you arrived.'

'Any ideas, then?'

'I have a rough idea. In fact, I can tell you the *type* of thing that occurred, although I don't know *exactly* what it was.'

'Please explain, Miss Carmichael.'

I told him about the eerie events of the past few days, and at the end of my tale he sat musing, rubbing his chin with his hand.

'That's very odd, Miss Carmichael,' he said, 'very odd indeed. There's never been any report of strange happenings at the castle before. Never. No legends, even, despite the age of the place. It's well over two centuries – the original part, that is. Even the later parts are quite elderly, but nothing has ever been seen or heard that could be described as frightening. If there had been, the entire village would know about it. You see, most of the staff are village people; always have been. And they wouldn't work here if there was anything strange.'

'I can assure you, doctor, there is something queer here.'

'Mm. And you think it was something . . . eh, supernatural that caused these two people, independently, to go into shock as they did?'

'I can't think of anything else.'

'I take it, you believe in the supernatural yourself, Miss Carmichael?'

'Since I came here, I certainly do.'

'Did Mr and Mrs MacKinnon share your views?'

'Not at first. In fact, they laughed at me and told me it was just my imagination. But later, when they began to experience these occurrences themselves, I'm pretty sure they thought there might be something in it after all.'

'Hm. Well, we won't know for sure until they recover – and maybe not even then. Sometimes the shock can be so great that the subconscious rejects it altogether and the patient remembers nothing at all. I don't want to take them to hospital unless it's absolutely necessary; the long journey wouldn't do them any good. They'd have to go to Inverness, you see, and that's all of 150 miles, over single track road most of the way. I'll

phone for a nurse from the village, and she'll stay beside them all night, in case they need any attention. And I'll be here first thing in the morning to see how they are. If need be, I'll contact the Frazers in Rome.'

In the morning, Ellen had recovered sufficiently to tell us what had happened, but Robbie, far from coming out of shock, only went deeper. As the sedative wore off, he peered fearfully around at those standing by his bedside: Dr Strathearn, Nurse MacPhee and myself. His eyes screwed up tight, and he hunched under the blankets and howled. No matter what reassurances we made, he acted like a pitifully terrified child, crying, shuddering, weakly fighting us off with the feebly waving fists of a baby. Eventually, he curled up with his head tucked down on his chest, his arms pulled in, and his legs gathered up with the knees against his forehead.

'The foetal position,' murmured the doctor.

'The what?' I asked.

'The position of the foetus in the womb,' explained Dr Strathearn. 'It indicates complete withdrawal from reality. The mind has decided it can't cope, and has fled back to the safest situation it ever knew: the warmth and security of the mother's womb. He'll have to go to hospital now; this is far outside my capabilities. I'll go and arrange it, Miss Carmichael, and I'll send word to Mr Frazer. I'd be obliged if you'd find out what you can from Mrs MacKinnon. Don't tell her about her husband, though; just tell her that he's had a shock too, and that he's still under sedation. And tell her she's to stay in her bed: doctor's orders.'

Ellen, of course, knew nothing of her husband's upset until she wakened in the morning, and it took quite a lot of persuasion on my part to prevent her staggering into my room where Robbie had spent the night.

'Come on, Ellen,' I coaxed, 'tell me. You'll feel better once you've talked about it.'

'All right,' she sighed. 'I'll tell you. You remember you left me in the kitchen: well, shortly after you'd gone upstairs, I was bending down to take a tray out of one of the ovens, when

I heard a startled gasp from behind. I turned round, and there was a woman, staring at me. She said, "It's a ghost!" Gradually, other people took shape, as if they were emerging from a mist, and I was surrounded. There were four women, two of them elderly, one about twenty and the last just a girl about fifteen, all wearing floor-length black dresses, with starched aprons and white caps . . . mob-caps, I think they were called. The older women were scared stiff, and the girl promptly had hysterics, but the other one seemed quite unafraid; she just stood looking at me with her head on one side. "You're right, Mistress MacIver," she said, "it is a ghost."

'Just then the door opened and three men came in. They were dressed in a dark green uniform with gold frogging, and when they saw me their eyes popped wide. One of them said, "Who have we here?" and came round the table towards me. Then he looked me up and down, and said, "Good God! She's showing her legs!" The woman called MacIver slapped his face and told him not to use such language in front of decent women, but he just stuck his tongue out at her. Then he came up close to me and tried to put his arm round me, but . . .' She broke down and sobbed for a few moments, shuddering and gulping, then, gripping my hand so tightly I thought the circulation would stop, she continued, 'It went through me, Janet. Right through me! He jumped back and yelled, "It's a ghost!" just like the woman had done. Me! A ghost! It was *him* that was the ghost, *and* all the others!

'And I just stood there. I didn't know what to do. To get to the door, I'd have had to walk through them, and I couldn't bring myself to do it. They were all staring at me, and babbling away, and one of them went to fetch Mrs Frazer – not *our* Mrs Frazer, you understand, but the one that lived here when those people were alive. She came sweeping in, all grand and supercilious. "Show me your ghost!" says she. "I'll warrant it's nothing more than a shadow or some chambermaid in a sheet!" She took one look at me, and fainted clean away. Everyone started screaming and running about, and two men burst in suddenly, demanding to know what in the world was

happening. The servants all stopped talking and began curt-seying and bowing, "sirring" away as hard as they could go. One of the men was the then Mr Frazer, you see, and the other was a minister. When Mr Frazer saw me, he strode across and ordered me to explain myself.

'I still couldn't speak, and Mr Frazer suddenly swung his hand in a temper to slap my face. When his hand went right through, I . . . I couldn't help it . . . I started laughing. I was terrified, and I suppose I was a bit hysterical, but he looked so taken-aback. The minister broke into a stream of the most atrocious dog-Latin I've ever heard, and waved his bible around, and that set me off in another gale of giggles. Mr Frazer lashed out again, but of course he couldn't touch me, and he got so angry his face went purple, and I thought he was going to burst the collar of his shirt. I laughed and laughed, and there was absolutely nothing he could do about it. And the minister was parading up and down, spouting fractured Latin, and looking very disturbed and put out because I didn't vanish.

'Then some more servants dashed in shrieking that there was a ghost in Lizzie's room, and Mr Frazer practically had a fit. Mrs Frazer was coming round by then, and she began screaming at him to get rid of me, and *he* screamed at the minister who was getting quite distraught because nothing he said could shift me. And I just laughed and laughed and laughed.

'And then, suddenly, I lost all control. I grabbed up a box of eggs and hurled them, one by one, at that screaming woman's head. My aim was good, too, but of course they went through her. So I chucked the flour bag, then the mixing bowl and the egg switch. When they were gone, I threw pots and pans, then I ran out of missiles, and the men, including that uneducated minister, converged on me, and began poking at me with their fingers, and . . . and . . . I just couldn't stand it any longer. I screamed and cursed, and one of the footmen started laughing, and . . . Oh, Janet, it was terrible. I thought I was going mad. And then I fainted.

'Janet, I can't take any more of this. All I want now is to go home; back to Glasgow. We'll go into digs till we can get a house. I don't care what area we stay in, just so long as we're away from here.'

She sat quietly for a moment, her hands working restlessly with the edge of the blanket. 'How is Robbie?' she demanded suddenly. 'Why can't I see him? He must be in a terrible state if he can't come to me. Tell me, Janet!'

But, of course, I couldn't; it would have killed her.

Next day, the Frazers arrived from Rome, accompanied by Mrs Frazer's brother, a Roman Catholic priest, who entered the house loudly proclaiming that ghosts were simply unhappy earthbound spirits whose welfare must be everyone's first concern.

I met them in the entry hall, explaining who I was and how I came to be in their house. Mr Frazer was friendly and worried about the MacKinnons, but his wife held herself aloof and icy, and I sensed a fear in her.

We were walking in a straggling line through the statue hall, Mr Frazer declaring his bewilderment at the whole business, when a shriek rang out behind us. Turning quickly, we saw a young woman standing half-way down the great staircase, her hand to her mouth. Mr Frazer glanced at me.

'Another friend?' he inquired.

'A ghost,' I replied.

'Nonsense!' Mrs Frazer's voice cracked despite her emphatic denial. 'There are no such things! Who are you?' she called, but there was no reply. The young woman was no longer there. 'A trick of the shadows,' she declared.

'There *are* such things as ghosts, Jennifer,' her brother assured her. 'I've told you, they're unhap—'

'I do not believe in ghosts, Francis!' She stalked on.

As we neared the passage leading to the staff quarters, a girl in a black dress and white apron emerged, carrying a small silver tray on which sat two glasses and a decanter. When she saw us she screeched, threw the tray wildly over her head, and collapsed. Mr Frazer ran to her and knelt beside her, but when

he tried to touch her forehead his hand sank into her head, causing Mrs Frazer to howl on a high sustained note till Father Whitelaw, her brother, slapped her soundly on both cheeks.

Abruptly, the maid on the floor faded and vanished, leaving us all shaken.

In the kitchen I made tea, which the Frazers and the priest shared with Ellen and me. It was as well that they didn't want theirs served in a drawing-room, since Ellen, newly up from her bed, was in no fit state to carry it upstairs, and I had no intention of playing the parlour maid for anyone. Perhaps it was a feeling of democracy that made them sit there in the kitchen, perhaps it was nervousness and a desire for company, no matter whose.

Whatever the reason, they drank gloomily for a time while I related some of the occurrences which had necessitated their early return. When I finished, Father Whitelaw, with immense heartiness, began to outline the course of action he proposed taking in order to quieten the unhappy spirits, as he insisted on calling them. I ventured to mention that, apart from being scared at the sight of us, the spirits seemed to be perfectly happy.

'Nonsense, Miss Carmichael,' he replied, in a tone very like that of his sister. 'Allow me to correct you. This sort of thing is more in my line of business than yours, I imagine, eh? All ghosts are restless spirits, seeking release from something or other that binds them to the place in which they died. If a rite of exorcism is conducted, they'll find that blessed release, and be able to move on.'

I was about to ask, 'To what?' when Ellen spoke with an agitated edge to her words. 'In that case,' she said, 'how is it that they can see us just as easily as we can see them? And why have they never appeared before?'

'You just imagined they saw you, my dear Mrs MacKinnon, as did Miss Carmichael. I assure you, they did not. As to why they have newly appeared: well, probably something has happened, some change in circumstance that we are unable to

recognize, that has given them increased strength, enabling them to make themselves visible and thus call on us for the help they so badly need.'

I saw temper and indignation in Ellen's eyes, such as I had felt when neither she nor Robbie would believe me, and I awaited a violent anti-religious outburst. But the door opened just then, forestalling her, and the postman entered with a bundle of letters.

When the man had gone, Mr Frazer quickly glanced through them and handed one to Ellen, then asked for further details from his brother-in-law. I listened with interest, for I had never witnessed an exorcism, and only Ellen's strangled gasp drew my attention back to her. She was staring wide-eyed and open-mouthed at me, the letter fluttering from her nerveless fingers. As I made a move towards her, she yelped, her eyes rolled up and she toppled unconscious to the floor.

Mrs Frazer and I were busy trying to bring her round when Mr Frazer suddenly exclaimed, 'Good God! It's true!' I looked up to see him standing grey-faced as Father Whitelaw took Ellen's letter from his shaking hand. The priest read it, turned paper-white, and gently disengaged Mrs Frazer from her ministrations. Mr Frazer grabbed his wife and held her tightly, despite her astonished protestation, as the priest brought out a large gold crucifix from inside his coat and, holding it in front of him as he approached, handed the letter to me.

The writing was immediately familiar, but I failed to place it at first.

Dear Ellen and Robbie,

I'm so sorry you've had to wait so long for an explanation for Janet's failure to arrive...

I stopped reading in surprise. My failure to arrive? Abruptly it dawned on me that the writing was that of my mother. I glanced up and saw Father Whitelaw taking items

out of a small case: a book, a silver container of some sort, a long ribbon, another crucifix. I read on.

... especially after she wrote saying she'd be delighted to come. She was so looking forward to her holiday with you.

You know how odd Janet's vision could be at dusk; I've warned her a dozen times not to drive in the dark, but she never took any heed. Well, she apparently got herself lost and went on driving as night fell and, to cut a long story short, she went off the road into a ravine about fifty miles west of Inverness. The police found her the next day after someone reported skid marks going off the edge. Her neck was broken and the back of her head crushed.

I know I should have written earlier, but I just couldn't. I'd be very grateful if you could write to the rest of her friends. You know them better than I do, and I wouldn't know what to say to them, anyway.

Love,

Jean Carmichael.

'In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost . . .'

WALLY

Conrad Hill

Wally wasn't merely fat, or even obese. He was enormous. How could a child of six weigh fourteen stone? The succession of internationally famous specialists who flocked regularly to see him didn't know, so his parents, Ron and June Rainbird, certainly didn't know. After all, they had only produced him in the normal manner – despite insinuations that nobody could produce something like Wally in a *normal* manner.

June was bitter about the whole business. She hadn't wanted a child in the first place, maintaining that it ruined the figure, made you sluggish, and kept you poor. But somehow she and Ron had got carried away on the tide of euphoria that accompanies the final evening class before the summer recess. Somebody had suggested that the ladies' keep-fit class should meet the gents' class after for an *au revoir* drink. As June and Ron were the respective instructors, they couldn't really refuse. Give Ron a couple of whiskies and he's vulnerable – unprotected you might say. And he must have still been that way when they went to bed later . . .

The outcome was that June started to feel queer, her monthly computer blew a fuse, and – worst of all – she began to put on weight. Desperate work-outs in the private gymnasium Ron installed in the conservatory didn't help. She gained a whole pound in six weeks and was so dismayed that she paid a visit to the doctor. He not only informed her that she was pregnant and would have to start taking it easy, but he also mentioned that she would probably gain another *two stone* before the baby arrived.

Heartbroken, June hurried home to tell Ron, who immediately went into training. (Ron was a fanatic who used the flimsiest excuse to get into training.)

They tried everything to get rid of the baby: Dutch gin in a red hot bath; rolling down the stairs; seventy wide-angle splits before breakfast, but that little foetus clung like Ron on the parallel bars. June tried to get it dislodged on the National Health. They wouldn't hear of it, probably because it was in the early days of the new abortion laws when they were being scrupulous about who qualified for the operation: 'We sympathize Mrs Rainbird, believe me we sympathize but . . . well, your case doesn't comply with the legal requirements.' Nowadays, of course anyone can get it.

A private abortion was out of the question for financial reasons. Like most young married couples, Ron and June were burdened with a mortgage commitment, furniture payments and suchlike. So June had to make the best of it. She endeavoured to gain as little weight as possible, and ran her evening class up to the very last moment, which resulted in Ron rushing her from the Further Education Centre to the hospital with five minute contractions.

Thanks to stringent dieting and strenuous exercise, June had gained only a stone (much to the dismay of the uddery battleaxe in charge of the ante-natal sessions). Thus, a supremely fit Wally mounted the maternity ward scales at a streamlined four pounds. June felt this to be an auspicious beginning to a healthy life, for he was the slimmest quietest baby in a ward full of bellowing blubbery seven-pounders. Not so the maternity staff, dedicated as they were to their Mother-And-Child-Welfare ideals. They took Wally away from June for special treatment. She didn't mind too much about that, due to the fact that he had begun to pull her breasts out of shape, but she wasn't at all amused when they returned him to her as chubby and unhealthy looking as the rest of the brats. They tried to make her feed him again too, putting forward a variety of crazy arguments as to why she should. She flatly refused, and after a bit of a row she had her way. All the same,

she still took home a paunchy Wally. Naturally Ron was horrified and promptly went into training.

Things improved for a while after that. June was back at the Centre running her keep-fit class the night she came out of hospital, and consequently she quickly lost her few stretch marks and the awful flabby belly which she had had to endure for the past months. In short, she began to feel like her old self again. She cut out all the fattening milk nonsense from Wally's diet, feeding him instead with liquidized health food plus a dash of sherry to make him sleep.

At the end of the first year Wally was a trim, slim thirteen pounds with the makings of a first-class athlete. On his first birthday he stood up unaided, curled his fists towards his shoulders, and adopted a classic Mr Universe stance. Ron was thrilled – to such an extent that he set about making a miniature set of weights to begin Wally's training programme. And sure enough, he developed a nice little cluster of muscles: triceps, biceps, pectorals ...

In addition to being fit, Wally was quite bright, bright enough to thumb through old copies of *Physical Culture* with a degree of understanding. Ron guarded the current issues as though they were the new edition of the Pentagon Papers, so for Wally's second birthday June thought it a good idea to present him with his very own subscription. Ron surpassed himself and built Wally a present to end all presents – a scaled down rowing machine.

All was well until Wally started school, aged five. He was of average height for his age, three feet six inches, but at two stone three pounds he was thinner – much thinner – than any of the children in his class. By God, he was fit, though. He could run rings around any of those lethargic milksops.

The trouble was that he started gaining weight. Not only that, he was becoming lazy and decidedly stropic. He refused to do his four-hour evening work-outs, complaining of fatigue after his day at school. Ron blamed it on the school dinners; too many filthy stodgy carbohydrates. June thought it went deeper than that; either his PE mistress was indoctrinating him

with her own scurrilous 'modern' ideas about health education, or he was somehow getting at the little girls during play-times. They went to the school to air their views on the subject. The headmistress promptly put her foot in it. She tried to tell them that Wally was (a) grossly underweight and (b) too full of energy for a normal five-year-old, and what was happening to him was a 'settling down and catching up' process. Unfortunately June lost control of herself upon hearing this. She put a triple elbow deathlock on the headmistress which could have ended with the poor soul's early demise had not Ron's wise counsel prevailed.

Wally's weight still didn't improve. On the contrary, it deteriorated to such an extent that six months after starting school, he tipped the scales at four stone four pounds. If this had been linked with a correspondingly dramatic increase in height he would have had a fabulous physique – a regular mannikin mountain of muscle. But it wasn't. At three feet eight inches he had gained a mere two inches.

Ron and June were ashamed; it was so degrading to have such a corpulent porker for a son, particularly as they had previously boasted to all and sundry of his superb condition. A visit to the doctor showed the sort of bland reassuring quack he was. 'Too much of the wrong food,' he purred. 'Not enough exercise. Cut out sweets, pastries, cakes, fried foods, biscuits. Step up fruit, vegetables, proteins. Make sure he has plenty of outdoor activity.' Patent nonsense, because for the past fortnight June hadn't given him any food at all and Ron was running him up and down the garden at night with a hundred-weight barbell strapped on his back.

Wally got heavier and plumper yet he was receiving no domestic food. His school dinners had been stopped because June wouldn't pay for them. But he continued to gain weight. How?

Nobody knew except Wally. And perhaps the men who came to empty the school dustbins wondered why they were carrying less weight than they used to.

It was whilst selecting tit-bits from the garbage one day

after school, that Wally tasted his first fresh meat for a long time. He caught a rat. It struggled a little, even tried to bite him, but it tasted delicious; so much so that he took to visiting the sewer outfall on his way home. He spent many happy hours there, gorging himself upon the juicy inhabitants. Ultimately, as one might expect, the rat population at the outfall began to decline, thus Wally was forced to seek his sustenance elsewhere. He did, and people's pets began disappearing.

Things were becoming serious. Every item of Wally's clothing had to be specially made. The cost was staggering and June wept tears of frustration as she saw Wally growing out of them at an alarming rate. Ron gave up forcibly exercising him because he just wouldn't (or couldn't) do it. Even when Ron kicked him in a rage, it seemed to have no effect on Wally; it was like kicking a lump of jelly – wherever the plimsoll connected, the flesh merely yielded to accommodate it.

At ten stone, the tour of specialists began. They examined every part of Wally from his bowels to his brains. The ano-rectal man suspected that Wally's bowels weren't working, giving rise to a storage problem. June said she knew for a fact that they were working, because each time he went, the drains got blocked up. The psychiatrist mumbled something about reaction to the over-strict training in early childhood. Ron screamed 'Ruuuu-Bish!' as he bisected the man's silver ink-stand with a karate chop.

Wally went into hospital for observation, during which time the child in the next bed vanished without trace, proving they weren't very observant. How Wally did it without making a mess is a mystery, but then we already know that he was quite bright...

Meanwhile, without their son slurping about the place, June and Ron became two different people. They found peace and happiness again and time to exercise at length and at leisure. Wally's absence soothed most of the burning ignominy of having the neighbours associate such a monstrosity intimately with *them*. Another reason for rejoicing was that Wally's future was now assured: either he came back from hospital com-

pletely cured, or he would be sent to a special centre for afflicted children.

Three weeks later Wally returned . . . eight pounds heavier after a crash diet at the hospital. It seemed that they didn't know what was wrong with him. They suggested that June do that which she had been doing unofficially for some time – withhold all food from the patient.

Ron and June made frantic applications to get Wally into a home, but to no avail. Refusal was swift and outright – on the grounds that the sight of Wally would disturb the other children.

At thirteen stone, the specialists started visiting Wally at home. June spent most of her time preparing tea and sandwiches for the innumerable conferences the medical men held in the front room. Then came the reporters and TV men, unsavoury people who filled the house with coarse laughter as they prodded Wally, threw him bananas and photographed him balancing a beach ball on his head. The final straw for Ron came when a man appeared from the *Guinness Book of Records* wanting to enter Wally's name as the fattest six-year-old in history. He threw everybody out of his house there and then.

One evening shortly after Wally had attained a mighty fourteen stone, June and Ron had a talk. She was on the kitchen floor doing press-ups, he was by the sink working out with chest expanders, Wally was gurgling and belching at the table hopefully awaiting the arrival of some food. He wasn't actually starving, as the yapping Jack Russell terrier at the end of the road had provided him with a snack on the way home from school. But he could always use some more food.

'Look at him, Ron,' June said. 'He only thinks he's going to get something to eat.'

'That'll be the day,' Ron retorted, grappling grimly with the chest expanders.

June paused on an upward thrust, her voice breaking slightly. 'I can't stand it any more. He's got to go. We've got to get rid of him.'

'Bloody right we have,' Ron agreed. 'How?'

Wally wasn't listening. Or if he was he wasn't taking any notice because his parents were conversing in their usual manner – spasmodically between exercises. Besides, his mind had taken a new food-orientated course; he was watching June's shapely buttocks, two fresh and juicy rump steaks quivering tautly as she performed her press-ups.

'You're the practical one Ron,' June said. 'Can't you think of anything?'

Ron was indeed quite good with his hands. Between training bouts he was an ardent and skilful do-it-yourself-er. Now, as he savagely manipulated the chest expanders, his thoughts turned to the disposal of Wally. He stopped for a moment and looked at June.

'When you say get rid of him, we haven't actually got to ... do him in. Have we?'

June shook her head violently.

'No, I wouldn't want to go as far as saying that Ron. No I mean just ... just getting him out of the way. For good – so that he won't come back. Mind you, it would have to be painless. I couldn't stand hurting him, not our own flesh and blood. Can you see that?'

Our own flesh and blood. Ron was a trifle disconcerted at the prospect of the legal consequences arising from the disposal of Wally, but a glance at the misshapen mess across the room assured him that it was worth taking the risk. Slowly he developed an idea ...

Ron and June were lucky. If they had delayed the decision to do away with Wally any longer, Wally would have done away with them. As he grew ever larger, his appetite increased accordingly. He wasn't a particularly discriminating diner and his parents were suitable and available. Downright handy in fact. But before he had time to formulate anything definite about his proposed two-course meal, Ron knocked him on the head with a dumbbell, gently of course, because, as June said, they didn't really want to hurt their own flesh and blood.

Ron was a coalman, an occupation in which perhaps he

didn't utilize his inventive dexterity to the full. More important to him was the muscle toning aspect of the job; coal-man was an ideal career for someone as body-conscious as Ron. So, not unnaturally his plan for Wally involved some preparatory work at the coal yard. When he tried to apprise June of the plan, she covered her ears, screwed up her eyes, shook her head and said: 'No, Ron, don't tell me. I'll feel better about it if I don't know. I trust you . . . Like before, do you remember?'

Ron did remember. The time he bought a puppy in the market just after they were married. When he took it home he discovered that June was terrified of dogs (some trauma about attempted rape by a bulldog when she was a child). She asked him to get rid of it – but without hurting it. Ron tried to comply by asking everybody he knew if they wanted a puppy. They didn't so he took it along the M1 in the sidecar and let it out on the hard shoulder. As he was driving off, he couldn't resist a glance behind and was overjoyed to see the puppy scrambling down a bank into an adjoining field instead of doing anything stupid like scampering across the carriageways. He opened up the Norton then with a clean conscience. If he was strictly honest with himself the incident left him with more than a clean conscience – he felt positively Christ-like, dispensing salvation to the weak and helpless.

This was different though. Wally was their son. 'It's not *exactly* like before you know, June . . .'

June soothed him. 'I know, Ronnie. The puppy was nicer. This will be much easier for you.'

'But—' Ron started to protest, although he couldn't think of much to say.

'Ron,' June said with concern on her face and in her voice, 'you're getting a bit flabby round the waist.'

'Wha—!' Ron uneasily kneaded his waist with his fingers.

'Poor love.' June was solicitous. 'It's all this worry about that thing.' She pointed at the unconscious Wally. 'You're not getting enough training time in.'

Any scruples Ron may have had were quickly suppressed by

fear that he might not be, or might not be thought to be fit. He suddenly became very businesslike. 'You'll have to give me a hand with him out to the sidecar,' he said.

'See what I mean?' June said, reinforcing her previous remarks. 'You *are* losing your touch. A couple of months ago you could've done it on your own.'

'Fourteen stone is nothing to me. Nothing,' Ron retorted primly. 'It's the shape of him that's awkward, that's all.'

June agreed to help, for although it was dark there was always the possibility of being observed by Neighbour Intelligence, as Ron called them. He was referring to the occupants of adjoining houses, renowned in the street for their high standard of vigilance. June felt it better for both of them to be seen carrying a reasonably respectable bundle than for Ron alone to be seen dragging something pulpy.

Ron directed June to strip Wally whilst he donned his motorcycling gear and crash helmet. 'No sense in unnecessary advertising is there?' he said. June thought that there was perhaps more to it than that, but didn't query it. Instead she complied without relish, feeling positively nauseous at the sight of Wally's flabby nakedness.

Getting Wally out to the motorcycle combination was difficult, due to the amorphous nature of his carcass. At one point June slipped on the front path bringing Wally down on top of her, inexorably followed by Ron. For a few moments June was the bottom slice of a Wally sandwich being suffocated by a ton of glutinous lard. (Can you imagine such a thing?) She wriggled free and regained her feet none the worse for the experience, but she was worried lest the flopping and plopping sounds sent the neighbours scurrying to their curtains via their light switches. She watched and listened anxiously, but all seemed normal. She breathed a little easier, for although she wasn't aware of Ron's precise plan for the disposal of Wally, she knew that it would be humane, but intervention by neighbours at this stage would mean some awkward questions.

They scooped up the inert heap on the path and staggered without further mishap to the combination parked at the kerb-

side. Now they found that Wally was too wide to fit snugly into the sidecar. He was jammed half-way in, with rolls of fat hanging over each side. Impasse. Ron scratched his head. June scrutinized the street and nearby windows with bladder-bursting apprehension. Then Ron hurried back into the house to reappear a few seconds later holding a spade. With a little deft manoeuvring using the flat steel blade like a shoe horn he succeeded in bedding Wally firmly down. There was a bit of bother with the roof not closing properly, but with Ron and June both leaning on it they could just lock the catches. Ron didn't much like the way the Perspex bulged. Still, it wouldn't hurt for the trip to the coal yard.

'How are you going to get him out . . . wherever you're taking him?' June asked quietly.

Ron patted her arm and pinched her cheek reassuringly. 'Don't worry about it,' he said. 'I can manage.'

'Make sure no one sees you, Ron.'

'Not a chance at this time of night.' Ron kissed her goodbye and pushed the heavily laden combination to the end of the road before kicking the starter.

Ten minutes later he was approaching the coal yard. He cut the engine to coast silently up to the high wooden gates.

Ron was a conscientious, long-serving employee of the coal merchant and as such he was entrusted with a set of keys. He was always the first to arrive in the morning, as he not only had a coal round himself, but he also did the daily loading of the lorries. Not that he was a money-grabber of course - he just liked the additional exercise.

He undid the padlock, pushed open one of the gates and wheeled the combination into the yard. He parked it outside the fitter's workshop with his crash helmet looped about the handlebars. Quickly retracing his steps, he checked that the road outside was empty before closing the gate. He hoped nobody would notice the open padlock.

All the strength Ron could muster didn't budge Wally from the sidecar. He did it in the end by levering him out with a long crowbar, twisting the aluminium side panels in the pro-

cess. With a final, almost superhuman effort, he dragged the naked, maggot-coloured body into the workshop. He blundered around in the darkness until he found an inspection lamp, which was ideal, for it played only a narrow beam in front of it instead of flooding the building with tell-tale light. A workbench ran the entire length of one wall. Among the tools, boxes of nuts and bolts, and oily engine components that littered its surface, Ron found a packet of heavy duty inner tube patches and an economy sized tube of Wondarub, new formula rubber solution for which the most amazing results were claimed on the outer cardboard container. Ron was about to test the validity of those claims.

Wally was still unconscious. Or was he now sleeping? Ron wasn't sure, so he gave him another gentle tap on the head with a pipe wrench to make certain. Then he proceeded to seal all Wally's orifices with the rubber patches helped by liberal amounts of Wondarub. Details are best left to the imagination, suffice it to say that Ron found certain aspects of the task most distasteful.

The next stage of the operation involved the use of instruments and could have caused Wally a little pain – hence Ron's desire to have him completely anaesthetized. The instruments required were a hammer, punch, and Shraeder commercial tyre valve. Ron eventually found them on the bench but they were coated with grease and grime. Most unsanitary. To minimize the risk of infection Ron, like a good surgeon, sterilized them in diesel oil, and for good measure did his hands as well. Unfortunately no gloves were available so a thick layer of Rozalex barrier cream had to suffice instead.

Ron clipped the jaws of the inspection lamp into the soft rolls of fat on Wally's neck and began operating.

Due to the blubbery flesh obscuring Wally's navel, Ron had to locate it by probing with his fingers. This done, and using one finger as a guide, he hammered the punch through the navel into Wally's abdomen to a depth of about four inches. It wasn't until Ron tried to withdraw the punch that he encountered a problem. Blood. Large quantities of it. He was

fascinated, he hadn't seen Wally's blood before and was genuinely surprised to find that it was just like anybody else's. Things, meanwhile, were getting a trifle messy, so much so that he had to push the punch back into the navel to act as a plug whilst he applied several coats of Wondarub to the bulbous base of the valve. He wondered whether the inventors of Wondarub had evaluated its setting properties under such conditions. He doubted it somehow.

The delicate part of the operation was at hand. Ron removed the punch and quickly, to prevent any more blood spurting from the navel than was necessary, he forced the base of the valve into the hole. The diameter of the valve base was quite large, therefore the hole had to expand sufficiently – without its edges tearing – to allow the base to go through it into the abdomen. If the tissue around the hole started to rip, then the operation would be rendered useless. Ron tensely bit his bottom lip as his hand slowly increased its pressure on the valve. The blood-soaked guiding fingers of his other hand could feel the hole stretching ... stretching ... Suddenly the base was through and the taut skin at the hole's circumference snapped shut on the neck of the valve. Ron exhaled a huge sigh of relief, using the back of his hand to brush the globules of perspiration out of his eyes.

He unclipped the lamp from Wally's neck and inspected his handiwork closely. The tip of the valve peeped discreetly from the top of the mountainous stomach, although the point of entry into the navel was, of course, hidden at the bottom of a tight fatty fold, preventing Ron from actually seeing whether the fit was perfect or not. He wiggled the tip gently. It seemed nice and firm but a small crackling noise accompanied the movement. He found the reason for this by investigating the fold with his finger: some of the blood was already starting to congeal. He pushed a damp diesel swab down, working it around until he could feel no trace of unpleasant matter. He then dried the area with a clean rag and ran his fingers gingerly down the valve to the point where it entered the flesh. It felt like a beautiful fit: no ragged edges; no fresh blood seep-

ing past the joint. Leak proof. Ron had good cause to feel pleased with himself – after all it wasn't everyone who could do a neat job like that. He should have been a surgeon. He smiled wistfully as he elaborated the notion: *Doctor Rainbird, no – MISTER Rainbird to the operating theatre please . . .*

Pointless getting carried away at this juncture. Despite good progress, there was still work to be done. He squeezed out some more Wondarub and smeared it around the valve-navel joint. To allow it time to set, he cleaned up, checked whether Wally was still breathing (he was, albeit shallowly), and switched on the electric compressor.

The time had arrived for the crucial test.

When the compressor pump had built up sufficient pressure in the tank, Ron connected the air line to Wally's valve. He carefully let in air, keeping a watchful eye on the pressure gauge. Wally expanded, the deep creases in his skin gradually smoothing themselves out. Several times Ron switched off the compressor to anxiously bend his head over Wally's distended form, listening for the hiss of escaping air. Nothing.

When the pressure gauge indicated twenty-five pounds per square inch, Wally was an indescribable shape. He also developed a tendency to float upwards; fortunately the air line acted as a mooring rope, otherwise he would have risen to the roof of the building. Ron smartly hauled him in and clamped the left foot in a vice before he disconnected the air line. Once more he checked for leaks. Then he poked the balloon like structure of his son and was gratified to find that it was soft enough to accept a considerable increase in pressure, although he wasn't going to fully inflate Wally until he was out in the yard. So far, so good.

Ron now had to let the air out of Wally in order to get him through the doorway. He jammed a sliver of wood into the valve. Wally rapidly went down to his normal size, gently tipping over until he was hanging limply upside down with his foot still in the vice. Ron unclamped him and dragged him into the yard. He returned to the workshop for the air line and a piece of wire. The wire was for mooring purposes; he didn't

want Wally getting airborne before he was ready. He tied one end of the wire to the bumper of the nearest parked lorry, the other end was linked to Wally's ankle. Once more he plugged in the air line and Wally inflated with a low hissing sound. Ron watched the pressure gauge needle with gritted teeth as it swept on past twenty-five ... thirty-five ... fifty ... sixty-five ... He released the air line trigger at seventy pounds per square inch; not daring to go any higher for fear of an explosion. Apart from the subsequent fall-out of entrails over a wide area, Ron himself risked grave personal injury.

Wally could have come straight out of a Gerald Scarfe cartoon. The torso was fifteen feet in diameter. When Ron flicked the surface of the skin with his thumb and forefinger, it pinged like a rubber band. The legs, arms and head had more or less remained the same size, although the swollen cheeks reminded Ron of childhood bubble gum. The whole monstrous frame swayed from side to side, jerking at the restraining wire on its ankle.

Ron went into the workshop for a pair of wire cutters. He returned to find Wally conscious, regarding him with pain-filled, wide-eyed incomprehension.

Ron felt a stab of compassion. 'Does it hurt then Wally?' he asked. Wally didn't answer, due to the large rubber patch sealing his mouth. Ron sighed and re-entered the workshop for an anaesthetic. 'Never mind,' he said when he came out. 'It's only wind ... You'll get used to it.' He gave Wally's head another soothing blow with the pipe wrench. Then, humming 'Up, up and away ...' he cut the wire.

A perfect launch.

Wally shot into the air. For a fleeting moment the light from the street lamps outside glinted on his undercarriage before he disappeared for ever into the night sky.

Ron returned to the house at 12.30 AM to be greeted by a joyful June. He didn't say much, but his quietly reassuring smile explained everything. June prepared a celebration wheat-germ supper and they toasted the departure of Wally in fine style with a bottle of tonic wine.

Tomorrow, decided Ron, would see the beginning of an intensive training programme.

Now that, dear reader, is what *should* have happened. However, if you feel (as I do) that far too many indignities were heaped upon the unfortunate Wally, I can provide both you and him with an infinitely more satisfying sequence of events. If you can bear with me for just a little longer, I will recount what actually *did* happen. To do this, we must return to the coal yard. Ron, remember, had levered Wally from the motorcycle sidecar and dragged him into the workshop. He found the inspection lamp and was searching the top of the workbench for certain items...

Wally regained consciousness. His head hurt abominably and he was cold, although both discomforts were insignificant when compared to the awful pain of his hunger. His quick little eyes appraised Ron's back as he searched the bench top.

Dad didn't look too appetizing in his motorcycle leathers, but this was an emergency.

He rose silently to his feet and lunged. Ron didn't have a chance to defend himself as fourteen stone hit him from behind. He toppled to the floor, cracking his head on the vice as he did so.

Wally, being of immature years, hadn't much sense of propriety when it came to eating, so instead of disrobing the prostrate Ron and preparing him properly, he began gnawing at the face and hands. He soon discovered that his dad was almost inedible; tough and stringy – leathery almost. In fact, there didn't seem to be much difference between the flesh itself and the shreds of motorcycling jacket mixed up with it. Compared with Ron, the Jack Russell had been the last word in succulence...

But, as ever, Wally was his father's son: inventive, creative, truly a six-year-old innovator. From the moment his eye fell upon the oxy-acetylene welding set in the corner of the workshop, it was inevitable that in a short time it would be

serving three useful purposes: to cut Ron's clothes off; to cut Ron himself into handy-sized joints; and to cook said joints to a turn. Wally also enjoyed the fringe benefit of some warmth for his naked body.

The smell resulting from this culinary preparation was a bit off-putting, but well worth enduring for it transpired that Ron rare was a big improvement on Ron raw.

Fifteen minutes later, all that remained of Ron was a smoking heap of assorted material interspersed with a few bones. Wally, his hunger temporarily assuaged, now looked speculatively at his late father's motorcycle combination. He donned the crash helmet, which surprisingly fitted him well, and for the next few minutes he was absorbed with the intricacies of gears, clutch, brakes and accelerator. At length he kicked the starter, gaining confidence as the roar of the engine echoed about him in the yard. Unfortunately he let the clutch in a little too quickly, allowing the bike to shoot forward and crash into the unopened gates. Apart from a buckle in the front wheel, some dents, and a few things dangling the machine was still roadworthy, so it was a somewhat chastened Wally who opened the gate and made a much smoother start along the road.

At 0015 hours, police traffic patrol Jaguar Lima 25 was parked in a side street just off the main road with its interior light on. So far it had been a quiet night and observer, PC Dimbleby was taking this opportunity to write up his paltry notes. Driver PC Lovegrove was examining the current issue of *Penthouse* whilst coping with a surreptitious cigarette. 'Look at that!' he exclaimed, brandishing a double page colour photograph of a pubic Pet Of The Month under PC Dimbleby's nose.

Dimbleby looked up from his notes and pushed back his cap. 'Christ,' he said, 'She's got a bigger pair than WPC Rogers.'

Their laughter had barely subsided when they heard the sound of a motorbike.

PC Lovegrove cocked his head to one side and looked

thoughtfully at his observer. 'Tearaway? Might be worth a pull, Phil...'

Dimbleby laid his notes in the side door pocket and switched off the interior light. He listened. 'Umm, sounds like he's going some too,' he murmured. 'OK Arthur, let's give it a whirl.'

Wally went past the top of the road at ninety. Naked. With no lights.

The white Jaguar screamed into the main road in hot pursuit. PC Lovegrove was nonplussed. 'What the hell is it?' he asked as the headlights lit up the back of the motorcycle combination.

PC Dimbleby watched the pair of huge buttocks hanging on either side of the seat.

'Whatever it is Arthur,' he announced grimly, 'it's nude. Put the light on.'

The piercing blue light from the roof flasher added a final touch to the bizarre scene.

PC Lovegrove sighed at the injustice of the copper's lot. Somehow, it was always disgusting freaks who were involved in these indecent exposure incidents. Just for once, couldn't it be Pet Of The Month?

'Sick isn't it, Phil,' he said. 'We'll throw the book at this one. Speeding ... no lights ... dangerous driving ... indecent exposure, yet he's got the nerve to wear a crash helmet.' He pressed the accelerator to waft the powerful car alongside the combination.

PC Dimbleby snorted. 'Crash helmet? Looks more like a pimple on a pig's—' He broke off abruptly as he got his first glimpse of Wally close up. Both he and the driver boggled with horror. The police car dropped back. Quickly.

Dimbleby was aghast. 'Ugh! I've never seen anything like it. It's obscene,' he said.

Lovegrove agreed. 'It's a bad one. We'd better call control.'

Dimbleby snatched the microphone from its clip and switched to transmit. 'Lima 25 to QH...'

Interminable seconds passed before the controller's comfort-

ing voice crackled through the loudspeaker.

'QH to Lima 25. Go ahead, please.'

'Lima 25 to QH. We have – er something on a motorcycle under surveillance heading east on the ring road about two miles before the Grangewater Hotel. Could we have an "All Cars" on this please? Over.'

'Lima 25. Can you be more explicit about this "something"? Over.'

'Yes – well, we think it's human, but we're not sure. Over.'

Disbelief tinged the controller's voice. 'Lima 25. Describe it will you? Over.'

PC Dimbleby did his best to comply. 'Lima 25 to QH. Difficult to describe – except that it's dumpy, very fat, blood-stained and unclothed ... and ... and it looks dangerous. Over.'

The controller replied in a tone of weary exasperation: 'I see. Tell me Lima 25, is this something actually riding the motorcycle combination? Over.'

'Yes. Over.'

'So unless it's a bug-eyed monster from Mars, and an intelligent one at that, it must be human. Do you agree?'

PC Dimbleby got flustered. 'Yes, no – we're not sure. Repeat, we're not sure. That's why we want an "All Cars". And can you check the zoo please? Over.'

Resignation superseded the exasperation in the controller's voice. 'Roger, Lima 25. Suggest you stop this, whatever-it-is at the Grangewater Hotel and we'll put out an "All Cars" to converge on that location. The zoo check will take a little longer. Best of luck. QH out.'

Dimbleby glanced at Lovegrove. 'He didn't believe us, Arthur,' he said bitterly. 'That chairbound bastard didn't believe us!'

'Can't say I blame him,' came the tight-lipped reply. 'Look Phil, if we've got to stop him – it, at the Grangewater Hotel, I'd better get weaving.'

PC Lovegrove pushed the accelerator to the floor. The Jaguar surged past Wally with a white-faced observer staring

at him through the passenger window. Three hundred yards from the Grangewater Hotel, Lovegrove switched on the illuminated red POLICE STOP sign in the rear window and gently applied the brakes . . .

The first car to arrive on the scene as a result of the 'All Cars' message was Lima 37. The crew found two torn and bloody uniforms next to a battered Norton motorcycle and a sidecar with a crash helmet on the pillion seat. Lima 25 was missing, but the trail of bones and other discarded objects at several hundred yard intervals would make it fairly easy to trace.

June had been waiting at the front room window for over an hour, hoping to see her beloved Ron pull up outside at every moment. The first inkling she had that something had gone terribly wrong was when the police car squealed to a halt at the front gate. She rushed to the door and threw it open ready to confess everything, give herself up. Where was Ron? She needed his strong arms now.

The second inkling she had that something had gone terribly wrong was when she saw her naked blood-spattered son lumbering towards her along the path, with a policeman's cap perched rakishly on his head. Furthermore, he was still hungry . . .

In her final agonizing seconds, June might have derived some comfort had she known that Ron, although a little disjointed, was indeed nearby. And soon she would be reunited with him.

Inside Wally.



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