THE 16th PAN BOOK OF HORROR STORIES

Selected by HERBERT VAN THAL

The 16th Pan Book of Horror Stories

Herbert van Thal has compiled a number of anthologies which include some of the writings of James Agate, Ernest Newman and Hilaire Belloc, as well as a volume on Victorian Travellers. He has also resuscitated the works of many neglected Victorian writers. In 1971 his autobiography, *The Tops of the Mulberry Trees*, was published.

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Edited by Herbert van Thal

The 16th Pan book of horror stories

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Norman P. Kaufman

An Experiment with H_2O

Bashing old Stoddart's head in was absolutely no hardship at all. Did I say hardship? Ha! Excuse me while I have a quiet chuckle. It was a pleasure, mate . . . No, not just a pleasure, it was a gratification: there was honest-to-God personal satisfaction in clobbering the doddering old half-wit with that coke-hammer.

Jeeze, you never saw such a bloody mess! Great chunks of bone kept bouncing up from where the hammer was splintering his skull; his remaining seven or eight yellowish teeth were crushed down like little marble gravestones, embedding themselves into his protruding tongue; and – get this – I was continually splashed by bits of brain that flew out from under the head of the hammer like great globules of off-white mud. As for the blood – do I need to tell you about the blood? Let's just leave it at this: I've never seen so much of it coming out of one person at any one time. All pinkish, it was, just the kind of stuff you'd imagine he'd have in his pathetic veins.

Mind you, I will be fair – I must say this about him: he took a hell of a long time to die. It was uncanny; it was – well, if nothing else, mate, it was frustrating. I mean, look, I'm not trying to be facetious or anything, but there was I, laying this heavy weight on his balding dome, and with the blood gouting up from his nose and mouth in seemingly endless jets . . . and the bastard simply wouldn't lie down.

And listen, here's another thing: he kept on looking at me. *Looking* at me! And with no emotion in his face, either. What I mean is, if you're belting somebody with a blunt instrument, you'd expect to see a spot of fear or pain or whatever; and you'd be fairly confident of hearing a scream or two, I reckon. But Stoddart – ! Well, for Chrissake, there was his cranium dis-

integrating, fresh waves of blood constantly veiling those myopic eyes of his, his whole stupid life leaking out of him . . . and not a murmur. Nary a whisper.

Well, then I got good and mad, see? I changed the hammer to my left hand and delivered a real stunner to his right eye. This time, mate, *this* time I got results. Pretty startling results too, because he let out one hell of a shriek, and reached up to clutch at his eye – or rather where his eye had been, as most of it was now clinging jelly-like to the head of the coke-hammer. But I still kept on hacking away, and as his thin fingers clutched at the empty eye-socket, the hammer caught him centrally across his hand, pulverizing the bones into match-sized fragments.

He fell over then, just keeled to his left and dropped to the floor of his shed . . . or laboratory as he preferred to call it. For a few moments, he lay there, spewing his previous meal up through his mashed and lipless mouth; his body threshed about for a little while – reminding me of a stranded fish – and then the jerking and the twitching stopped. Just like that. Stoddart simply lay there, his body twisted, his face contorted; his one eye gazed emptily at me and through me and beyond me.

The old sod was dead this time, no doubt about that. I looked at the head of the hammer; it was covered with that watery blood of his, plus of course the various bits of him that still stuck grimly to the heavy steel block. I took the hammer to the sink at the far end of the shed, switched on the hot-water tap. Most of the stuff rinsed off, but his right eye would not budge, and I had to hold it under the tap and scrape it off with my penknife. But if there's one thing I'm really good at, it's not being squeamish; in fact, as I said, I'd quite enjoyed myself really. It had been good exercise too; I'd sweated right through my shirt and jacket; and of course it had been a means to an end, hadn't it: Stoddart's end.

Stoddart! I thought about him as I plodded home through the dusk. I harked back to when I'd been a kid of – what, thirteen, fourteen? And he had been Chemistry teacher at the Grammar School. A tyrant, that'd been him. An oppressive, victimizing tyrant. And when I say victimizing, the victim was

me. Every time. All right, so I was no good at Chemistry. I didn't even *like* Chemistry. Some things you can be lousy at, but still tolerate them; but I loathed Chemistry, and I began to loathe the teacher, too. Always *picking* on me. Always sneering at my homework, holding me up to ridicule in front of the class, comparing my work with that of Ripley. Bloody Ripley! One of these under-developed drips – but a real swot he was, as if to make up for his weediness . . . Oh he's something big today: Professor of Physics or whatever, at some Government establishment; in fact, I think they've knighted him if I'm not mistaken . . .

But I'm digressing; what I wanted to point out was that old Stoddart deserved nothing less than what I gave him a little while back. Well, look, he did get me expelled, didn't he? Indirectly, anyhow. I mean, don't get me wrong, I'm not denying I threw the acid at him – and it was concentrated sulphuric acid, too. It stripped the skin off his face like a blowtorch, and he was lucky to retain his sight, so I'm told. But I'd just about reached the end of my patience with him; and I was only a bit of a kid when all's said and done.

Anyway, they threw me out of the school and into a borstal for a year or two, and of course that wrecked my chances of a decent job, so that for the past twenty years, I've been – what, a bum, is that the best word for me? Scratching a living here and there, that's what I've been doing. Casual work, menial jobs, crummy wages . . . yes, that's been me. And basically old Stoddart's fault. Well, now he's there on the floor of that shed-type lab of his – or what's left of him; and I feel a whole lot better at having done him in. Say what you like about these old proverbs, but the blokes who wrote them must have been wise old birds. Because revenge *is* sweet, and don't let anyone tell you anything else—

Christ!

The hammer!

I've only left it by the sink, haven't I! And I didn't wash the handle, only the head of the hammer, so that my fingerprints will be all over the haft . . . Oh, you stupid bastard! I'd better get back there – but quick.

I'd all but reached home when I remembered the hammer – if you can call it home, that lousy two-room dungeon with that lousy ratbag of a money-loving landlady . . . But the Law has my dabs on file, ever since I drew a three-stretch for mugging that old dear ten years ago. There was just eight bob in her handbag, too! The old whore! Eight shillings, and nothing else! But that was how desperate I'd been for money – thanks again to Stoddart.

I hurried back through the near-empty streets. Rain was pelting down, harder now than it had done all day, and it was close on eleven o'clock when I reached the gates of Stoddart's house. I peered through the gloom, and just about made out the outlines of the shed at the far end of the garden. There was no light showing, and all seemed quiet; nor was there any sign of life in the house itself – no lights, no movement, nothing. I knew he had a wife and a couple of daughters, but assumed them to be out of the house altogether, although where they would go on such a filthy night was beyond me.

I moved cautiously through the gates and across the garden, and approached the darkened shed. Ever since his retirement, Stoddart had been using his shed as a laboratory, to continue various experiments, to extend his school-time employment into a spare-time hobby. Imagine it! He hadn't had enough of all those bloody Bunsen burners and retorts and test-tubes and Christ-knows-what-else! Makes my head spin just to think of doing that sort of thing for pleasure . . .

The door responded to my gentle shove, and I glanced in. In the dimness, I could still see Stoddart lying there where I'd left him. Even in the obscure gleam of light from a distant street-lamp, I could see he looked like nothing human – but I could hardly stop to preen myself now. There was something else for me to do first, something much more important; and, after all, I could sit back in comfort tomorrow and read all about my efforts in the press.

I stepped over the thing on the floor – I'd already ceased to think of him as Stoddart – and inched my way across to the sink. A million million years ago, I had left a coke-hammer on the draining-board. The coke-hammer would have to be re-

moved and wiped clean, otherwise it was yours truly for a spell in prison that might just last until they've shovelled the last spadeful of muck on to my pinewood box . . .

But as I strained my eyes into the gloom, a rather odd feeling came over me: a feeling something like fear. Or maybe even panic. For the hammer was *not* there, it was *not* where I had left it to the left of the tatty old sink. It was not on the floor either, nor was it on the right of the sink. It was, as far as I could make out, nowhere in sight . . . I swallowed hard, tried to think. Where the hell . . . 'Where the hell,' I said out loud, 'is that bloody hammer?' I heard my own voice, heard it rising, but felt powerless to quell the burgeoning dread in my breast.

'Where the bleeding hell,' yelled my voice, 'is that Christing hammer? WHERE—'

Report by Mrs Hilda Stoddart and Misses Leila and Marsha Stoddart on the experiment conducted on 28 January, to which we set our signatures herewith:

We waited for some ten or fifteen minutes after finding Mr Stoddart's body in the laboratory at the foot of our garden, and after securing and concealing the coke-hammer left behind by the murderer. We were fortunate that our assumption proved correct and that the murderer returned for the forgotten weapon. He entered cautiously, as we expected, and upon finding the hammer missing, he said, 'Where the hell is that bloody hammer?' The subject then added, 'Where the bleeding hell is that Christing hammer?' He then commenced another sentence, with the word 'Where', at which point we struck him over the head with his own hammer, a blow that merely rendered him unconscious, as required.

We then proceeded to prepare the subject for the experiment. As the subject was a light-weight, it was hardly any problem for the three of us to manhandle him on to the workbench, where we then divested him of all his clothing. We subsequently manoeuvred the subject into the large glass tank, taking care first of all to bind his hands and ankles tightly. We arranged him in a seated position with his back supported by the width of the

tank. It was at this point that the bound man began to regain consciousness, and it was necessary to subject him to a further blow from the hammer so that we could continue the experiment without interruption, until such time as we were ready for him to be shown our arrangements. We then hoisted the tank up on to four large metal supports.

It then took some fifteen or twenty minutes for us to fill the tank with cold water, utilizing various large vessels. It should be pointed out at this juncture that the glass tank was one that was specially imported some years ago by the late Mr Stoddart, and that had exceptionally thick glass, resistant both to blows and heat. We continued filling the tank until the water came to just below the subject's chin, seated as he was.

Having adjusted half-a-dozen Bunsen burners beneath the tank, we then ignited them and wakened the subject. This latter took some considerable time, and we assumed the reason for this was that we had been over-enthusiastic in administering the blows to his head. The subject, thus awakened, glanced round dazedly for some little time; then, having noted his predicament, he began to struggle and to swear in a most obscene and unbecoming manner. However, we knew he could not get to his feet on the slippery surface of the tank base, and it was not yet time to stop him from speaking.

After thirty-two minutes, we tested the water and found it to be fairly warm; we then inquired of the subject – who was still swearing spasmodically – if he would submit docilely to being gagged, or if he would prefer to be rendered unconscious first. After some consideration, he submitted meekly enough, and we should record that it was some relief to have stifled the absolute filth that issued from his lips.

We waited a further half-hour and tested the water again; this time the heat was quite respectable, and it was plain, too, that the subject was beginning to feel it.

Another quarter-hour passed, during which the temperature of the water increased considerably, to the obvious discomfort of the occupant of the tank, who was twisting about vainly in his attempts to rise. The vaguest bubbles were now discernible,

heralding of course the advent of boiling-point. At this juncture we commenced our motion-picture camera work, recording for our personal archives the antics of the subject.

We began to perceive vague mewing noises, emanating from behind the subject's gag. Whether or not these sounds were entreaties or cries of pain, we could not ascertain at that time. They may even have been a continuance of the obscenities earlier described. But it is a fact that the subject's eyes were watering as if in self-pity, so that as an intelligent guess, one would have thought the noises to be pleas for clemency. Shortly afterwards, however, the sounds increased in volume, and we assumed that the pain was overriding the subject's lucid thoughts.

A further eight minutes and thirty seconds elapsed before we noted the blood on the gag: this of course we took to be evidence that the subject had bitten into his tongue in his agony. A thin wailing was now clearly audible from the seated man. The boiling-point had now of course been achieved, and we witnessed the rather distressing spectacle of the subject's simultaneous urination and defecation, thereby strengthening our mutual belief that fear does in fact cause a person to lose control of both bladder and bowels.

It did in fact give us mutual and pleasurable satisfaction to view the disintegration of the subject's genitals and penis, and at the same time to see the vomit issuing from behind the subject's gag.

Almost concurrently, the subject's now-congested face took on an even deeper hue of scarlet; and some two and a quarter minutes later, the subject's eyeballs popped, the blood streaming ceaselessly into the now turbulent water, the gelatinous substance of the eyes mingling with the blood as it slid down the subject's cheeks.

We switched off the Bunsen burners, allowed the water to cool, then emptied the contents of the tank on to the garden. This of course we carried out in the early hours of the following morning. The subject was then buried in our garden. There was no prayer said over the body.

This report will be placed in our deed-box at the bank, and instructions left with our solicitor that the deed-box should not be opened until after we are all three deceased, when the report – and the film – will be available for perusal.
Signed
Hilda Stoddart
Leila Stoddart
Marsha Stoddart
28 January

Maureen O'Hara

The Evil Innocent

Alone on the golden beach a solitary, ragged old sailor stood gazing far out to sea through the film of smoke which rose curling from his pipe. He shivered spasmodically as the breeze whined through his scant garments and tickled him with chilly mirth.

The air was potent with sea salt, which sank deeply into the mottles on the sailor's weatherbeaten face, stinging him mercilessly. But Kip was immune to the harsh treatment of the sea. He had sailed many a sea and had weathered many a storm. He was reminiscing now – reminiscing on the adventures and misadventures which he had sailed through, every one of them on the crest of a heaving wave, on the slippery deck of a swaying ship.

It was not usual for Kip to come down to the beach before dawn. He was a weary old sea-dog and could sleep the night through – and, indeed, half the day. But his nights of late were wakeful and restless. Last night there had been an ominous warmth and a foreboding stillness in the air which he had found almost unbearable.

Right now Kip's eyes were blind to the beauty of the sea which he had loved all his life. They were looking inwards upon a conscience which gave him no rest. If only he could do something brave and honourable to counteract his dreadful feeling of failure.

It was six weeks now since Jack and Monica had drowned. That was a day Kip would not easily forget. He had, at the young couple's request, taken them for a trip in his old rowing boat. Just as they were turning back to land a sudden violent wave had capsized the boat. Kip had felt at the time that there was nothing he could do for his passengers. It was indeed a

tragic misfortune that neither of them could swim.

Kip was too old to make the effort to right the boat again. Too old to help Jack who was clinging to the upturned vessel, shouting frantically, 'Save my wife! For God's sake help my wife!' Too old to help the struggling, screaming wife weighed down by her unborn child.

So he had left them and struck out for the shore alone. He heard Jack's frantic pleading for help as he swam away. But he hadn't looked back once. The last words Kip heard from the drowning man were: 'I curse you! I curse you and all that is yours!' As Kip swam on, his limbs aching with age and effort, he thought he heard the sea echo Jack's last words but he took little notice.

Though the boat was later retrieved, the bodies of the drowned couple were never found. Now that the tragedy was over, Kip felt guilty and sick at heart. He could have tried, God he could have made an effort to help, however futile it may have been.

He now stood on the shore, still in a state of restiveness, a halo of black billowing smoke lingering about his head. The rays of the morning sun appeared on the horizon and then the sun itself. Kip knocked out the contents of his pipe and turned towards home, back to his cottage where the wife he so dearly loved would have his breakfast ready, and his baby son would be yapping tormentedly in his humble cradle.

Kip threw a last glance over the undulating surface of the ocean and the inrushing waves. He never knew why he turned to throw that final glimpse over the sombre waters; he reckoned afterwards that the cruel hand of fate had just meant it to be that way. He glanced at the incoming tide and then half turned to go. But something made him look again and as he watched he suddenly caught his breath and stared, his eyes unbelieving. He espied the tiny arm for only a fleeting second. He raced like a youth to the water's edge, his beady eyes fastened on the prodigious breaker from which he had perceived that helpless arm protruding a minute before.

The waves rolled in, gurgling and lapping about his legs, and once more Kip saw that same arm reaching up piteously from

the swirling foam. He made a desperate attempt to grab the hand, missed it and fell on his face in the water. He staggered to his feet and looked around wildly for the drowning child. And then once more he saw it: the little arm reaching up out of the water, the child itself never breaking surface. This time it was but a few yards from Kip and was being washed into shore.

As the soaking, bedraggled Kip lashed through the water after it, he saw for the first time the child itself. The blue, deathlike body of the tortured infant broke surface and rose up on the crest of the swell. Then it was borne closer and closer to shore, until at last it was washed up on a dry stretch of beach.

Kip splashed dazedly into land and to the place where he had last seen the baby. His heart was fraught with apprehension for he feared that the child would be mutilated. But this was not so. He came to an overhanging rock and there he met with the pitiful sight of the naked infant rocking to and fro in a pool of water.

Kip picked up the baby and placed it gently in his arms. Its body was frozen – so cold was it that he almost dropped it again. He did not doubt for a moment that the child was dead – a frozen corpse it was! Howbeit, an almost irrational impulse made him press the child's heart close to his ear. He listened for some time but could not hear even the faintest throb of life.

Kip removed his anorak, tucked the baby inside, and walked slowly homewards. His heart was weighted with sorrow, yet his curiosity hungered. He knew not of any such child as this. It could not be more than a few hours old, therefore how had it come to be in the water? Kip suddenly had a thought that struck terror into him and as he walked away he thought he heard a familar voice call frantically from a long way off: 'I curse you! I curse you and all that is yours!' Poor Kip. The guilt he felt inside was beginning to play tricks on his imagination. But was it just his imagination, he wondered fearfully.

He ascended the steep cliff, the child held close to his chest. He shuffled along the boulder-strewn path towards home. On the threshold stood his young and lovely wife, apparently in a state of solicitude over his absence. She pushed back a wisp of

straying blonde hair, waved to her husband and came hurrying to meet him.

'Where on earth have you been, Kip?' she demanded in a frail, sweet voice. 'Kip, is anything wrong? You look so dreadfully pale.'

'It's a child, Mary. It was washed up with the tide.' Kip pressed the wet bundle into the astounded woman's arms and told her of his early-morning adventure.

After much hesitation Mary ventured to look at the contents of the bundle. With nervous fingers she uncovered the infant and stared at its blue, expressionless face. 'Oh, Lord, have pity of it!' she cried, hot tears of compassion welling up in her eyes. 'I have never seen a baby dead, nor yet alive, that looked so truly fascinating.' Her voice lowered to a soft whisper of reverence as she gazed at the inert features of the child's beautiful and serene countenance.

'But, Mary, what are we to do with it?' said Kip, and he suddenly wished he had left the baby in the water and said nothing of it, for he felt a strange and inexplicable fear.

Mary had no conception of what should be done with the baby. But the whinny of an excited pony and the rattling of cart wheels on the cobbles provided the answer.

'That's the doctor come about Johnny's tonsils,' said Mary. 'He'll know what to do.'

'But, Doctor Jim, you *must* be mistaken!' cried Kip. 'Why, it is incredible!'

Doctor Jim smiled. 'It's incredible, but it's true. See for yourself: look at the movements. He's alive and kicking as sure as you are, Kip!'

From the broken-down cradle there came a vacillating whine. It was indeed a miracle that the child should live after being lashed about in the angry sea, probably for many hours. The frozen body was thawing rapidly and a ruddy warm glow was beginning to shine on the child's delicate skin.

Four years later the baby who once had been a frozen corpse was now a healthy boy playing peacefully on Kip's doorstep.

Kip had adopted the baby through no wish of his own. It was Mary's tearful pleading that had caused him to relent, for she had shown a strange and loving attachment to the boy since he had first been laid in her arms.

Dolphin was by no means an ordinary boy. Though he was four years old he had not yet learned to walk; yet he could swim like a fish. He would crawl and tumble clumsily down to the water's edge. Once in the water he would glide away with graceful, adroit strokes.

He spoke fluently, in precise and stilted English, though often what he said could not easily be understood because of its intricacy.

Dolphin threw aside the toy goldfish with which he had been amusing himself and stared dreamily at the horizon. He sniffed the salty breeze which blew in from the sea making him shiver and ruffling his golden locks.

It was late in the afternoon and the sun was sinking slowly in the west. The sky was blotched with white fleecy clouds and dotted about with yellow and red patches. Occasionally the pleading squawks of the seagulls drifted across the water, at last to reach the ears of the wistful Dolphin.

Dolphin loved the seagulls with all his heart. Every day he would sit upon the cliff above the sea and feed the hungry birds. They would dash and swoop about him, uttering their cries of greeting, and he would talk exultantly to them, calling them his 'brothers and sisters'.

A hand was laid gently on Dolphin's shoulder. 'It is getting late, my dear,' said Mary softly, grasping the boy's tiny hand. 'Supper is ready.'

Dolphin gazed lovingly up at her and he smiled – a kind of smile that was meant only for Mary. He followed her inside. Johnny and his father were already seated at the table in the dimly lit dining room.

Tonight Dolphin looked more radiant than ever. His hair shone dazzlingly in the flickering candlelight and gave the illusion that he had perched upon his head a crown of glittering jewels. It was usual for him to go to bed immediately following supper. Tonight he did not.

Instead he told the others a story. That was a memorable night for Mary and a terrifying one for Kip. Dolphin told them a story of tragedy; a story of a young couple left to die in the sea but who had not really died. Buried in the very heart of the sea they still lived on, unable to breathe but living nevertheless, their minds tortured, their bodies changing slowly every day until soon they would no longer be human – unless they were freed, freed by one act of monstrous and wicked evil visited upon the one who had brought them to their fate.

As he talked Dolphin never once took his gaze from Kip, and the look of hatred in his eyes turned Mary's blood cold. Unable to listen further, she interrupted him.

'It is past your bedtime, dear. You must come along to your room now.'

'Oh, Mamma, I am sorry,' said Dolphin. 'Sometimes I talk a little too much. It is my imagination. It quite runs away with me at times, so you must not always take me seriously.'

Mary ushered him to his room where she helped him undress and tucked him into bed.

Later on that same night, when everything was silent and everyone asleep, Mary lay thinking of Dolphin. She dearly loved this child of prudence who, she believed, had come to her alone from the very womb of the sea. He had hypnotized her, cast a spell about her from which she neither could nor wanted to escape.

Mary did not understand Dolphin's strange story. She was not aware of the true circumstances of Jack and Monica's deaths. In fact she had forgotten all about the unfortunate incident. She wanted so much to believe that Dolphin had just been fantasizing and yet she felt strange and rather apprehensive.

The old grandfather clock chimed out the hour of midnight. Mary rose and crept silently from her room. She went along the corridor until she reached Dolphin's door. From within there came the sound of breathing, barely audible. Mary hesitated a moment and then entered the room.

Outside the open window the wind whined woefully and the sea rose and fell restlessly against the cliffs. A small bird chir-

ruped peacefully in its sleep and in the distance the shrill screaming of an owl sounded as it swooped upon its prey. The leaves on the tall sycamore tree rustled and whispered to one another in their own peculiar language. The night sky was alight with yellow, twinkling stars and the moon itself shone down from its eminent throne, right upon the face of the sleeping child.

'Mamma!'

Startled, Mary turned from the window and looked guiltily at Dolphin, who was now sitting upright in bed. 'Mamma, why are you here?'

Mary was suddenly overwhelmed by her pent-up emotions. Tears welled up in her eyes and she saw Dolphin through a swirling mist. The blue eyes, the golden hair, the shining white teeth all merged into one, to become a dazzling, flashing, shapeless beauty. She fell upon her knees at his bedside. Grasping his hands in her own, she whispered hoarsely, 'Oh, my child, my Dolphin, I beg you to tell me who you really are. Where have you come from? Are you not an angel from Heaven? Oh, why do you make me love you so, yet you confide so little in me?'

Dolphin extended his tiny hand and stroked her perspiring brow. 'Poor Mamma,' he whispered and his voice was broken with sorrow. 'Do not cry, dear Mamma.'

As suddenly as Mary had lost her composure she recovered it. She dried her tear-stained face and slipped her arm about Dolphin's slim waist. 'Dolphin, my baby, promise me you will never leave me – never!'

'I am sorry, Mamma, but that I cannot promise you. Neither can I tell you what I am about, for if I did the consequences would be tragic for us both. I should be compelled to live under the oppression of great torture and torment and you would no longer have me for your own. You would not wish that, would you, Mamma?' Dolphin's voice was high-pitched and seemed to come from far off, as if from the depths of the very sea itself.

'Oh, no, my child, such a thing must not happen! But why must you leave me? What wicked spell has its ugly claws

grasped about you, that you should be tormented by it?'

'You do not understand, Mamma. I love you and I shall never cease to love you. But one day I shall be called henceforth and that call I must hearken to and answer. I shall be compelled to bid you goodbye for ever.'

'I shall come with you, my dearest, no matter where. I will never let you go!' cried Mary in a frenzied voice.

'No, Mamma, no! If you are foolish you will try to follow me. Pray do not, for the road upon which I shall tread will be a road meant only for *me*. If you pursue me, you will be persecuted. You will encounter great peril and eventually death itself. I myself mean you not ill, Mamma, but my father is wicked and may desire to hurt you through me. At times he extends orders for me to execute and I have no choice other than to obey.

'After I go communication between us will not be impossible. For if you listen carefully, perchance you shall hear my voice in the wind, and if you peer across the water on a dismal day, perchance you shall see my profile in the mist, if but for a moment.'

Tears glistened in Dolphin's eyes. 'Remember once more, Mamma, my plea to you not to pursue me. My mind tells me that you are likely to forget this plea at the moment of decision. Oh, Mamma, it breaks my heart to think of what torment such a forgetfulness would bring you.

'It is a cold heart which beats in obscurity behind the innocent face upon which you now look. It is a cold heart, frozen by the ice that floats in the winter ocean, and not even my own hot tears can melt it to softness, for it is not my own but that which I inherited from my cruel father. Forgive me, Mamma, I am wicked against my own will. Go from me now and do not forget my words, for every one of them is of the greatest importance.'

Mary ran from the boy's room, a look of sheer dementedness on her pale face. She walked as a somnambulist, her eyes red and unseeing, her movements mechanical. She staggered from the cottage and down to the beach.

Down the perilous cliff she stumbled, the scabrous rocks

tearing her skin and bringing forth blood. When she reached the bottom she ran wildly to the water's edge and there she flung herself upon her face. She cried aloud in a stricken voice and pleaded with the heaving ocean to spare Dolphin, to banish the spell which it had cast about him. The poor woman was so heartbroken, so bewildered, that she knew not what she was saying. The cold salty water soaked her through and through – though she felt it not – and dulled her senses. And it was by the water that Kip found her just before the waking of the dawn.

A couple of days in her warm bed and Mary was again well enough to attend to the household chores. She prepared Dolphin's favourite lunch and then called out to him from the window. He did not reply. No doubt he would be playing on the beach, thought Mary. She would take his meal to him where he could eat in peace in the sunshine and feed crumbs to the seagulls. Strange, thought Mary, how Dolphin never seemed hungry. He ate so little, yet grew stronger and more healthy as each day passed.

She put his lunch in a basket and strolled towards the cliff-top. The tide was in and Dolphin was nowhere to be seen. Mary called his name again, anxiety rising in her voice. And then she saw him, swimming a long way out and heading still further away. He disappeared below the surface and Mary waited patiently for his return. She scrambled down the cliff and spread Dolphin's lunch on a dry, flat rock. Then she returned her gaze to the sea.

Five minutes had passed and Dolphin had not broken surface yet. Mary waited pensively. Yet another five minutes and there was still no sign of Dolphin. By this time Mary was panic-stricken. And then it was twenty minutes and she was becoming hysterical. She covered her face with her hands, crying and praying and knowing she had lost him. Her body shook with grief as she cried his name aloud, over and over again.

'Mamma, you called me. Why are you weeping? Did you think I had gone from you?'

Mary looked at the drenched boy standing before her. She threw her arms about her baby, crying and laughing simultane-

ously. 'Whatever happened to you, my child? I thought you had drowned.'

'Nothing happened, Mamma. And why should you fear I might drown when you know I can swim so well,' replied Dolphin.

Mary's grief was now replaced by irritation. 'For a whole twenty minutes you do not need to breathe whilst you stay underwater! You are deliberately being mysterious, Dolphin.'

'Not deliberately, Mamma. It is simply that I thought I heard my father call, but I was mistaken.'

'Oh, Dolphin! I could slap you like I do my own child and demand that you stop fantasizing. But there is so much about you I fail to understand.'

'There is much about myself that I, also, fail to understand,' said Dolphin sadly. 'Now may I eat what you have brought me.'

Later that afternoon Mary cycled into the village to buy food for her family. She thought of paying a visit to Doctor Jim to discuss Dolphin but finally rejected the idea and returned home.

As she approached the cottage she became aware that there was something wrong. From within there came the sound of voices, raised and angry. She entered unnoticed and stood silently in the hallway. What she saw and heard struck horror and disbelief into her heart.

Dolphin, his face blue with rage, was screeching vile obscenities at her trembling husband. The look of hatred in his eyes, the wicked expression on his face, the words which flowed from his mouth like filth from a sewer – no it could not be true, it could not be her loving Dolphin, her child of innocence who had never before showed a sign of human failure. But the voice which poured forth those dreadful words was not Dolphin's. It was the husky voice of a fully grown man.

'Dolphin!' cried Mary, running towards him.

'Don't touch him. Don't pamper him, Mary!' Kip's voice trembled. 'He is an evil boy. We must send him away or else he will destroy us.'

Dolphin looked strangely at Mary for a moment, then ran

crying to her arms. No longer a monster, he wept like a baby and begged her to forgive him.

'What did you do to my child to upset him so?' demanded Mary of Kip.

'I simply gave him a slap because he refused to eat his food.'

'You must never do such a thing again,' said Mary sternly and led Dolphin to his room.

'I heard those things you said, Dolphin. It could not have been you. Tell me it was not you.'

'I can only beg your forgiveness, Mamma. I do not know what took possession of me. Please, you must not let him send me away, not like he sent my real parents away.'

Mary was totally confused. 'What are you talking about, Dolphin? You must tell me what you mean. You must!'

'Oh, I do not know! I do not know!' cried Dolphin, looking bewildered and frightened. 'Please stop asking questions, Mamma. Please leave me alone!'

The weeks passed into months and the months into years. For Dolphin and his friends time passed happily and quickly. But for Mary time did not pass so blissfully. Since that memorable night in Dolphin's room she had been haunted by his words. For she knew not when that call would come for her baby, when he would have to set out upon that journey of which he had spoken.

Day by day Mary kept a constant vigil over him, observing with joy the development of his body and beauty. She would walk along the beach with him and hold his hand in her own and she would be lost in a haze of happiness. At noon Dolphin would wander off alone over the downs and furtively, stealthily, he would be followed by Mary who was terrified lest some peril should befall him.

Dusk would descend upon the world and bedtime would come, when Mary would say a protracted goodnight to Dolphin. But when she laid her head upon her pillow all the happiness of the day would desert her and she would think of those ominous words and weep bitterly. Maybe tomorrow, she thought, he would leave her for ever. Maybe the following day.

Maybe even tonight he would steal silently from her and she would be left alone to die of heartbreak. All through the night her mind would be tortured as she thought of the boy who by day gave her great happiness and by night caused her great pain of mind and heart. Mary had long since ceased to care for her husband or her real son, Johnny. It was for Dolphin only that she cared and feared, and it was by night that she felt her fear most, for it was then that she was wont to think profoundly of the boy.

The heat of the night was almost unbearable. Mary sat crouched upon her bed. She smiled happily as she thought of the forthcoming day. The clock chimed thrice and was silent again. Everything was peaceful within the cottage.

Outside, the restless heaving of the ocean and the distant baying of a wakeful hound were all the sounds that disturbed the night. It was the fifteenth of June in the year 1958. That date bore great significance for Mary, for it was on the same date, ten short happy years ago, that Dolphin had first been laid in her arms. She was excited now for she loved birthdays, most of all when they belonged to her Dolphin.

The clock ticked the minutes slowly by and at last Mary fell into a state of lethargy. She awoke again to hear the clock chime five. She felt hot and thirsty – she would have a drink. Getting out of bed, she tiptoed to the door; the ancient floorboards creaked jeeringly underneath her and threatened to arouse Kip. She went along the corridor, but was destined never to reach the bathroom nor have that drink.

She stopped dead as from Dolphin's room there came noises – harsh, throat-racking sobs! Turning cold, Mary ran to the boy's room. He was standing by the window, his hands covering his contorted features.

'Oh, my darling child, what is the matter? Oh, please do not cry so,' pleaded Mary, throwing her arms about the convulsing body of the boy.

'Mamma, dearest, dearest Mamma!' Dolphin sobbed, burying his head in her bosom 'Forgive my wicked heart!'

Mary tried to comfort the sobbing boy but her efforts were

futile. Suddenly he wrenched himself free from her grasp, stared at her through bloodshot eyes for a moment, then turned and, like a fleeting ghost in the night, was gone! Through the door he fled, away from the cottage.

Mary stared with eyes of horror at the white, evanescent figure fleeing towards the beach. Dolphin disappeared down the cliff and Mary, with a terrified shriek, was out of the door and staggering blindly through the darkness in hot pursuit of him.

Her screams aroused Kip, who reached her just in time to prevent her mad descent of the cliff. He grabbed her with his strong hands and pulled her down beside him on the hard rock. They peered over the edge, Kip probing the beach with his torch for any sign of the fugitive.

It was Mary who first caught sight of the white, ghost-like figure of Dolphin as he raced over the slippery rocks towards the water. At last he slowed down and stopped, observed by two pairs of glazed and frightened eyes from the cliff-top far above.

It all happened in seconds. Suddenly a dazzling flash of lightning rent the sky overhead, illuminating the sea and glistening rocks. A rumble of thunder growled deep-throatedly; a downpour of hissing raindrops spilled from the heavens. The sea rose up like a portentous monster, clawing this way and that, hurling itself about as if in writhing agony.

Dolphin sat still upon the rock and it seemed to the two above that he heard not the thunder, felt not the rain, saw not the lightning nor the raging, cascading breakers. He relaxed upon his hard perch and gazed unseeingly ahead as if in a trance.

What happened next was not very clear in the fuddled brain of Kip Galt. Suddenly, out of the sea rushed a prodigious wave. Up the beach tore the great wall of water, straight towards Dolphin. Awaking from his trance, the boy jumped up on the rock with his arms outstretched, a cry breaking from his lips as the great wave descended upon him. Kip did not know whether Dolphin's last cry had been one of exhilaration or terror; he would never know.

Mary screamed hysterically and tore at her hair. She flung aside the restraining hand of Kip and started down the cliff, simultaneously yelling, 'Oh, my child, my Dolphin, come back, come back!'

With frightened eyes Kip watched her as, stumbling and slipping, she raced down the beach. She splashed through the water, doing her utmost to reach Dolphin, who was riding back out to sea on the crest of the great wave.

Over the ocean's undulating surface skimmed the white seagulls, screeching a cordial welcome to Dolphin, 'their brother'. The waves hurled and lashed like a great many demons, and the horrified Kip, who was now racing down the beach, could no longer see either Mary or the boy.

The lightning ceased to flash, the thunder to rumble. The rain stopped and the water settled to its former calm. Alone on the golden beach a solitary, ragged old sailor stood, gazing far out to sea through the film of tears which clouded his sunken eyes. He was the very same sailor who had stood on the same beach, on the same date, ten years ago. But this time he was not alone. By his side stood his son, Johnny, with the same haunted look in his eyes as his father. Today the sun had forgotten to rise and the sky was masked in frowning grey cloud-banks. The man and boy threw a last heartbroken glance over the accursed waters and then dragged themselves up the cliff. When they reached the top they went in opposite directions, for each of them wished to be alone with his emotions.

Later that same tragic day the wind rose again and with the fall of dusk became an incessant howl. Inside the cottage a candle flickered and sputtered, which in turn made dark ugly shadows flicker and dance upon the walls.

Kip Galt sat beside the cold hearth, his son opposite him. They had pale, strained faces and were tense and nervous. They were afraid, very afraid, for that wind which howled woefully outside was not just a wind but something monstrous, something evil. The sea splashed thunderously against the cliffs and the cottage shuddered under the impact.

Suddenly the howling wind changed and became a sobbing

wail. A voice, half human, was crying in the wind, crying bitterly. It was familiar and seemed to cry out: 'Oh, my child, my Dolphin . . . come back . . . come back!'

Kip shut his eyes and tried not to listen, but nothing could shut out that wailing, tortured voice. Hot beads of perspiration burst out on his forehead and trickled down his face. Johnny was sobbing with terror. 'Dad, make it stop!' he cried, his trembling hands held tightly over his ears.

Something hit the window with a thud and they jumped nervously. The curtains were closed and they could not see out. Kip was held fast in a grip of horror but he could not allow himself to be silly. With great effort he rose and hobbled to the window.

'Don't, Dad, please don't!' Johnny pleaded hoarsely, but Kip heeded not. He must find out what had hit the window; something told him that it mattered. Johnny watched his father put his trembling hands against the curtains, hesitate for a moment, and then tear them aside.

Kip stared and stared. He saw not the lashing rain nor the lightning which tore great gashes in the sky. He saw only the stricken face of his wife as she stared back at him, a face which yesterday had been young and beautiful but which was now scarred almost beyond recognition. The bitterness which was reflected in those eyes, the leer which distorted the woman's features were enough to turn any man's blood to ice. Johnny heard his father scream, 'Mary, oh, Mary, you look so—!' Then Kip fell back upon the floor unconscious.

Johnny ran to his father's side, looked out of the window but saw only a sheet of pelting raindrops and the darkness. He drew the curtains again and bent over the unconscious man. But he did not have to feel his pulse or listen to his heart: Kip was obviously dead.

Suddenly from without there came the sound of roaring laughter, malicious and without mirth. Harshly it rang out. Now it was by the window; then away in the distance; and back it came again riding on the wind, to recede once more and fade altogether.

Johnny cowered against the wall and sobbed aloud in terror.

He knew that he could not stay here any longer, for this was no longer his home but a hell surrounded by demons. He must get away from this haunted place, away from the sobbing Dolphin, the pleading of his poor mother, the crackling laughter of the monstrous ocean, the dead body and staring eyes of his aged father

As if reading his thoughts the door suddenly blew open under the force of the gale. There were all the horrors of the night inviting him to come out and join them. Johnny knew he had little chance of survival if he ventured forth but he knew he must get away.

Lying flat upon the ground, he crawled away from the cottage. Splinters of cobbles flew through the air and cut him mercilessly. The wind lulled and then rose again with fresh ferocity. The rain beat against his body like hail; but he must go on, he told himself, he must go on. His fingers clutched wildly at chunks of rock and tufts of heather as he dragged himself forward slowly, laboriously.

For a moment the gale rose even higher and Johnny was caught in its grasp and rolled over and over. He would have rolled right over the cliff if it had not been for a boulder which he caught at and used to steady himself. He was breathless and piteously lacerated. For another ten minutes he crawled on, sweat teeming into his eyes and blinding him.

The gale rose once more. Johnny lay low and held tightly to a rock. But the pressure was too much. He was torn away and rolled over and over. Faster and faster he was going now and he could not stop himself. He grabbed at boulders and heather but everything he touched came with him. His clothes were torn and blood-stained and he bit his lip in agony. His tortured body was cut and broken everywhere. A sudden jolt on hard rock and then he was in sheer space. Down, down he was falling to the waiting sea.

Above the howl of the monsoon a tortured screaming rent the air: the screaming of a boy falling to a fate worse than death. It stopped as suddenly as it had started and the gale grew into a steady moan. The thunder ceased to rumble. All was silent except for the wailing of the wind and the hoarse roaring of the

receding waves. The storm was abating; it seemed to know that its purpose was achieved.

But in the abysmal depths of the murderous ocean a gurgling, mirthless laughter still rang out. And now it was even more horrifying, but there was no one left to hear it and soon it faded and died.

David Lewis

Diary of the Damned

On the North-west coast of the island of Sumatra, ten miles from the town of Benkoelon, a rocky promontory rises from the Indian Ocean and on it stands the remains of a small cemetery. Today all that can be seen are a few headstones, strangled by grass and tropical vegetation, and here and there the outline of a boundary wall. Once the burial ground for a large rubber plantation, it was abandoned just after the First War and within two years had fallen into disrepair. Graves hacked in the thin soil had been eroded by the violent winds which lashed the rock in winter. Headstones had cracked and tumbled, and pieces of bone protruded through the thick, coarse grass which flourished in that place of desolation and death.

Then on June 23rd, 1920, a hurried burial took place as dusk was falling, the last which the old cemetery was ever to witness. In the violent scarlet of a tropical sunset a small procession made its way up the narrow track which led from the coast road. There were two Indonesians carrying spades and pick-axes, a short, bald-headed Negro who drove a small mule cart, and a Spanish priest who had been on the island fifteen years. His name was Father Alberto Castanos, a tall, gaunt man who swung a lantern in one hand and walked with long, easy strides beside the rattling cart.

On the cart, wrapped in canvas sheets, were eight corpses, six men and two women, one of them hardly more than a child, who had been brought to the island in the waterlogged hulk of a ship's lifeboat.

On reaching the cemetery, Father Alberto struggled for a few minutes with the rusted padlock which held the high iron gates. Finding it impossible to open, he ordered one of the

Indonesians to strike the chain through with his pick, then the gates were thrust protestingly open and the funeral cortège moved inside. The men set to work to dig a mass grave as close as possible to the entrance, thus saving themselves the labour of hacking a way through the mass of vegetation.

As they dug, the priest sat on a tombstone and stared thoughtfully at the eight canvas shrouds. The admitted reason for their burial in this remote, dismal cemetery was because the cove, into which the tides had drifted their boat, was no more than a mile away. It was easier to make this journey, the Dutch officers had said, than take them into the nearest town.

But that was only part of the reason. The other the priest now held in his hand, regarding it by the wavering light of his lantern.

It was a metal cross on a long, fine chain. Although it seemed to be made of iron there was no rust either on the uprights of the cross or on the finely carved figure of Christ affixed to it.

But what had disturbed the officials and the priest was not the inexplicable state of the metal after months exposed to salt air, but the figure of Christ himself. For the face of the Saviour on this parody of the Church's most holy symbol was carved into that of a hideous and grotesque gargoyle, and the figure itself was nailed – upside down!

When the pit was ready, the labourers lifted the corpses one by one and placed them in the hard, boulder-strewn earth. After a moment's hesitation the priest took the strange mockery of a cross and laid it on the longest shroud, reasoning that whatever the meaning or purpose of this anti-Christ device it was better lying in hallowed ground.

As insects fluttered around the lantern, Father Alberto read the service for the dead and the Indonesians hastily shovelled earth back into the grave. From the cart Father Alberto lifted out a crudely made cross, shaped from timbers taken out of the rotten lifeboat and, fixed with wooden pegs and carved with a simple inscription. It was the only epitaph the people of Sumatra could give to these wretched, anonymous corpses who had drifted into their lives. It said: 'Washed Ashore'.

A fisherman sheltering from a sudden squall had found the

lifeboat. It had been at sea so long – up to three years, it was estimated – that no ship's name could be read on the blistered timbers. Nor were there any clues to be found in the sealogged boat or on the corpses whom long exposure to sun and sea winds had reduced to little more than skeletons.

A canvas awning, made from the torn lifeboat sail erected on broken oars, had been put up to provide some shade in the centre portion of the boat. Under this awning the remains of the two women had been found. The smaller skeleton, wearing the tattered shreds of what had once been a nightdress and coat, lay in the arms of the other female corpse with both hands grasping a rusty metal box. Her fingers were curled around it as though it were the most precious thing she possessed and must be near her, even in death.

Two male skeletons were found in the front of the boat and four in the stern. Seated at the tiller, a few scraps of gold braid still clinging to a salt-stained cap stuck grotesquely on his skull, was a man – presumably an officer – who held the rudder arm fast between bone hands, on which scraps of dry flesh still clung. His eyeless sockets stared straight ahead as though searching for the landfall that had come too late by years for him and his pathetic cargo.

But it was the skeleton which lay at his feet that provoked the superstitious islanders and the bewildered officials to demand burial for these strangers in the remote cemetery. Tall and perfectly white, the skeleton lay in a posture of agony along the bottom of the boat. The strange cross was attached to this skeleton by the chain, and broken bones and several fractures in the skull suggested that he had been beaten to death. A dagger was found beneath the skeleton, and a service revolver in the bottom of the boat which the police chief at Benkoelon decided had been used to inflict some of the head injuries on the tall skeleton.

Apart from the weapons the boat contained only a compass, two empty water bottles and two barrels which had apparently contained biscuits. All the other people aboard seemed to have died from exhaustion, thirst and dehydration.

What had happened aboard that strange craft nobody could

decide. There had obviously been a killing for some reason, but why or how this had occurred could only be guessed. Nor could the authorities do much to identify the craft. Seamen said it could have been drifting aimlessly in the ocean for thirty-six months or more, and the doctor confirmed this from the state of the corpses.

In that time it might have travelled hundreds, perhaps thousands of miles and in that time also there had been numerous sinkings of cargo vessels, liners and many smaller craft. It was hardly worth their while to bother with the matter. The sinking lifeboat was holed, the dead were buried, the bottles, barrels, dagger and useless revolver distributed as souvenirs amongst the men who had had the unpleasant task of carrying the skeletons up from the cove.

Father Alberto kept the box. It was strong and watertight, measuring about 12" by 3" by 10". Opened by the authorities, it had contained nothing to help identify the boat or its passengers so they allowed the priest to look after it, in case any identification was ever made and next of kin came to collect personal effects.

Inside were three photographs in leather frames: a small boy seated on the lap of a white-aproned nurse, and portrait shots of a man in tropical kit and a full-faced, pretty woman. The box also contained some pieces of cheap, worthless jewellery, two pencils with silver-plated caps and a diary which sealed with a metal clasp. On the outside were written the words: 'Angela Norton – Her Book'.

Thinking it might provide some help, the police had opened the book. But the pages were stained with salt water and deeply marked by some thick black juice. The language, too, was strange to everybody who tried to decipher it. The priest put the box at the bottom of his bookshelves and forgot all about it.

For five years the tin box and the unreadable diary stayed gathering dust in his small study. Then a European company with large rubber estates in the area sent out a young English doctor named Andrew Turner to look after its employees.

Turner was in his early thirties and soon found life in the

remote, inhospitable region lonely and tedious. Although he had no particular interest in religion, he became friendly with Father Alberto. They would play chess together several times each week and sometimes walk together in the cool of the evening. One day six months after Turner had arrived in North-west Sumatra they walked farther than usual and reached the graveyard above the ocean.

Turner wandered curiously amongst the by now almost totally overgrown tombs. The gate pillars had collapsed and the fallen iron and stones had been buried beneath the undergrowth. Only in one place had the luxurious vegetation drawn back, in an oblong twelve feet long. It was as though it feared to grow on that particular space, as if some deadly poison had shrivelled the roots.

The earth was hard and reddish, and a wooden cross leant at a drunken angle casting a long shadow in the evening light.

'Does somebody weed it?' Turner asked, puzzled, but the priest shook his head.

'It has been like this, unattended, for years. The bodies were buried here five years ago; they had come from the sea. I think perhaps the salt they contained has caused the grass to die.'

'After so long?' Turner said, unconvinced. 'Surely the tropical rains would have seeped down and washed any salt deposits away?'

'It is an altogether curious story,' Father Alberto said, and on their way back to his villa recounted the incident of the lifeboat, the naked murder victim and the tin box with the unreadable diary.

'Do you still have the book?' Turner asked, for the story had fascinated him.

The priest nodded, and after a brief search unearthed it from beneath a pile of old newspapers. 'It is written in a language that I cannot understand,' he commented, 'or perhaps in some sort of code.'

He handed over the book, and the young doctor started to turn the pages. Many of them were still stuck together, and those in the middle were held by a stiff black liquid which had

dribbled out along the binding. It looked like some sort of juice and the priest had taken it to be just that, perhaps spilled on the lifeboat as the wretched occupants sucked moisture from fruit they had found.

'The pages are fixed by sea water and—'

'By sea water and blood,' the doctor told him. 'This writing isn't in code, Father, nor in a foreign language. It was the thinness of the strokes and perhaps your own lack of English which deceived you. This is mirror writing, the words set down right to left and in reverse.

'It is a skill which can be acquired quite easily with some patience. Since the whole diary is in this writing we must assume that the poor girl meant her thoughts to be a secret, yet not so secret that one with a little skill and patience should not decipher it.

'May I take this diary back to my bungalow tonight and try to read it? Perhaps we shall have some clue as to what happened.'

'By all means,' the priest agreed. 'It has saddened me all these years that the relatives of those wretched people should live without knowledge of their death.'

Turner took the book away and said he would come back the following week. When he failed to arrive for nearly three weeks the priest walked the half-mile to his bungalow to see where he was. Through the insect screen he could see, in the last light of evening, a figure hunched over the table. He tapped lightly on the outer door but, receiving no reply, pushed it open and went in. Turner was bent forward across a table. Suddenly darkness folded like the wings of a bat over the room, and Father Alberto felt a sudden fear.

Years later he was to explain, 'I neither exactly heard anything, nor saw anything, yet the hair on my head stood up, and that primitive mind which lurks beneath the veneer of civilized reasoning in us all screamed at me to beware. There was a rustling, as though something light had brushed the insect screen behind me. I turned and a dry, rasping sound seemed to come from the table at my back. Somewhere in the darkness of that small room something hideous and profoundly evil was watching me.'

'Turner,' he called, 'in the name of God, man, strike a light.' Now that his eyes had grown more accustomed to the gloom he could make out Turner in his white coat and trousers still motionless at the table.

'Turner . . . strike a light, I beg you!' he pleaded, and reached out to shake the doctor, as he thought, from sleeping.

The flesh was cold and stiff beneath his fingers, and when he removed his grasp the man slumped sideways to the floor.

Now he could see a shape, no more, nothing more definite, standing in one corner . . . a featureless something that seemed outlined with a strange, pale-blue phosphorescence. It moved, and in his terror Father Alberto saw, though he knew not whether with his mind or his eyes, a tall man in a dark suit standing over him.

As he was later to write, in the account on which this narrative is based: 'The man was beckoning, but the fingers were without flesh, and the sockets which gazed down at me were eyeless. I heard a rushing sound, like sea sucking and lapping against the side of a small boat. I was sure I could smell salt air, but above the freshness of the water, the stench of decaying flesh. It filled my nostrils until I started to retch and felt hot nausea well up inside me. In my mind I had a searing image of a lifeboat drifting sluggishly, and a tall, handsome man with blue eyes holding a metal cross above his head, and in his other hand . . . a knife that dripped blood on to the pages of an open book while a girl screamed and screamed . . . and across the stern seats, held by tightly bound thongs . . .'

Suddenly, Father Alberto knew what he must do. As the strength and will-power drained from his body, his fingers found the crucifix that hung at his belt and he managed to raise it in front of him.

In a voice that quavered uncertainly at first he cried aloud: 'The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want . . . Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff comfort me.'

Strength seemed to flow back into his body, and he felt a surge of hope. 'Our Father . . . ' he began, and the vision of a boat and the sea vanished like some chalk picture suddenly

drenched by rain. In its place appeared the vision of a man tall and deeply tanned with long dark hair. He held an iron cross before him. As Father Alberto watched, the tanned flesh darkened, then grew puffy and seemed to ooze a watery, yellow fluid which dripped into the darkness . . . and was gone.

When Father Alberto recovered, he was lying full-length on the bungalow floor. Andrew Turner lay beside him, the fallen chair across his body. Wearily the priest rose to his feet. He felt utterly exhausted and his thin body was covered with sweat. He noticed that his cross was still clutched in one hand and he let it fall.

Gently he turned the dead doctor on to his back and shuddered at the sight of his features. In his time Father Alberto had seen many die, but the expression on the young doctor's face defied any description, the lips curled back, the mouth fixed in a soundless cry of horror, the eyes wide . . . He had no doubt what had killed his friend . . . Andrew Turner had died of terror.

On the table, Father Alberto found the diary and a thick notebook almost filled with script. It was clear that the doctor had been transcribing an enormous amount of the mirror writing. The priest gathered up the papers and went slowly back to his own home.

The police would have to be informed, make of the case what they might. But before that Father Alberto knew he must read what Andrew Turner had written to try and find some sense, some rational explanation for the events of the night.

He made himself coffee and sat down at a small table by the window. Sipping the scalding liquid helped to wash the taste of fear from his lips. Before he opened the notebook he went across the room and through a door which led into his small chapel. For many minutes he prayed, asking the Blessed Virgin for strength, and then returned to the room and opened the notebook at the first page.

When he had read through it, the priest secured the pages in a stout leather folder and attached a description of his own part in the affair and the mysterious circumstances surrounding the death of the doctor.

From the notes transcribed by Dr Turner it is possible to reconstruct the horrific story of the journey of the damned, of their ordeal and their final destruction. It is not a pretty story but it has become a classic of its kind.

The first page, dated January 12th, began as follows:

Today, Paul, Nanny and I embarked upon our great adventure, and I am using this diary which Papa gave me to record these brief memories, so that on arrival in India I may be able to tell them about the voyage. The ship is a very big one, and we have lovely cabins with portholes.

I sincerely hope that the weather will remain calm, for as the last voyage showed, I am far from a good sailor.

I am so looking forward to seeing Papa again. I have his picture in front of me as I write, together with one of Nanny with Paul when he was only a tiny baby. I shall keep them safe in the tin box which Uncle Joseph had especially made for me.

The next entry in the journal concerned lifeboat drill which, said the writer, at least gave her the chance to meet and talk to some of the other passengers.

There are twelve of us in all, but I have not yet had a chance of noticing more than some of them. There is Miss Glover, a charming lady in her late twenties, I should judge, who is going to Ceylon to act as a governess. She is not beautiful, but striking-looking with very dark hair and dark eyes.

There are no other ladies in our party but several gentlemen, and one especially caught my attention. He is very tall with jet-black hair and very piercing eyes. He caught me staring at him and smiled. He is quite the most handsome man aboard, and I found out that his name is Lucian Caines. There are many rumours about who he is. Some say he was a priest who was caught out in some diabolic rite and unfrocked. They say he has a metal crucifix on a chain which he carries with him everywhere and which has the image of Christ upside down.

The next note in the diary recorded a mysterious, and ominous, incident:

Last night a white cockerel which is travelling as freight in a special pen disappeared. This morning at dawn it was found on the bow with its throat cut.

A crewman discovered it and the captain would have hushed

things up, I think, but one of the passengers, a Mr Percy, was there when the bird was discovered. He says that a small altar had been constructed and the bird laid on it. There was a cross made from pieces of wood and this had been snapped into pieces and laid on the bird.

A sort of gloom has settled on the whole ship. I know it is ridiculous and illogical, but it seems as though some curse has been put on us.

The prediction was soon to come true. The following night a violent electrical storm raged around the ship. The after-deck was struck by lightning and a serious fire broke out, causing the lifeboats to be launched. Two boats were swamped by the heavy sea, but the boat containing the diary-writer and her diary survived and stayed near the blazing hulk hoping to be picked up by rescuing vessels.

Mr Frobisher, our officer, is in charge of our boat. He has a compass and steers as best he can. But our sail was lost in the storm and we must rely on the drift of currents.

We have lost sight of the ship, and the last position of our boat, according to Mr Frobisher, placed us a few hundred miles west of the Laccadive Islands. We are on a shipping route so our chances of being picked up would seem good.

I can write little about the actual shipwreck because everything was such a confusion of noise and panic.

The survivors were adrift for three days. The third night one man died and was dropped over the side the following morning. That night the last of the water supply was exhausted, and there seemed little chance of rain to replenish it.

The sky, said the diary, *is as hard and blue as a precious stone. There must be little hope for us unless help comes quickly.*

But help did not come. Instead a new and frightening influence took over the tiny boat and those who lay near delirium inside it. Lucian Caines, strangely, hardly affected by the ordeal, began to work a sinister sorcery.

February 8th – I can only write with difficulty, but I must say what is happening. They are going to kill my brother Paul. Mr Frobisher produced a revolver from his jacket, but Mr Caines took it from him and now he is as helpless as I am to save Paul.

It all started when Mr Caines stood up in the boat and said that

only he could stop us from dying. Mr Frobisher shouted that nobody would die and that every hour brought us nearer to the shipping lanes.

Then Mr Caines began to pray. But they were strange prayers, and he held up this strange crucifix. An hour later it began to rain . . .

Heavy, thick drops fell like ripe fruit, and the castaways threw back their heads to catch the cool water. After twenty minutes the rain stopped, but enough had been collected in the boat water-bottles.

'Now,' said Mr Caines, who had sat quite still and made no attempt to drink, 'do you believe in my Master? Will you deliver yourselves to him and be saved?'

'Coincidence . . .' Mr Frobisher gasped. 'You . . . you noticed the cloud and decided to take some crazy advantage of it. I am in command of this boat and I say you must stop this.'

But to the near-demented castaways Lucian Caines had become a miracle-worker. *'What do you want us to do?'* one man shouted. According to the diary account, Caines replied: *'There must be a living sacrifice. The boy must die.'*

I must have fainted then, the diary goes on. *I came to with Miss Glover holding my hands and rocking me gently. It was still dark but the night was softening and I could tell dawn would come soon.*

'Paul,' I whispered and tried to pull away, but she held me tightly and put her hand across my eyes. I broke free but she held me.

As the sky lightened, I saw the men are naked . . . Paul has been undressed and bound to the seat . . . men kneeling. Paul's legs are strapped together, hands by his side. His head is turned towards me but he cannot see me. They have blinded him. He . . . he cannot cry out for comfort . . . they have cut out his tongue.

Mr Caines . . . has a knife. He is naked, kneeling before Paul. The sun is mounting higher in the sky. We drift with the sluggish current almost motionless, the sea flat. Now Mr Caines . . .

There were no more entries. The ritual's terrible conclusion can only be guessed.

In his notes accompanying the transcription, Father Alberto

recorded what he did next. 'I opened the book where the thick layers of blood were caked into strange patterns on the page and saw there was writing there in a different hand. It was very faint. I angled the page to the light. The inscription was as follows:

Thee I invoke, the Bornless One.
Thee that didst create the Night and the Day.
Thee that didst create the Darkness and the Light.
Thou art Asar Un-Nefer, whom no man hath seen at any time.
Hear thou me, for I am the Angel of Ptah.'

What happened then can only be imagined. Did the wind stir outside his window? Did a coldness fill the room, and shadows gather?

Father Alberto concluded: '. . . and now I shall go forth to do that which must be done. Of the powers of darkness whom I nearly, so nearly summoned I have no fear. Of the thing that lies beneath a few feet of hard Sumatra soil perhaps there is terror in my heart, but with God's help and strength I shall overcome all. If I die then at least this devil book and the devil himself will have perished also. I swear before the Holy Mother of God as I value my soul on the Day of Judgement that every word of my account is true. [Signed] Alberto Castanos, priest of Benkoelon.'

There is little more that can be said. Andrew Turner's body was discovered and a verdict of death through natural causes returned. Father Alberto's body was found three days later on the rocks beneath the cemetery: he had apparently plunged to his death.

The diary was never recovered. The transcript of the diary and his prayer book were returned, with other personal belongings, to his family in Spain. Unable to read English, his elderly mother simply pushed the transcript into a trunk.

It was only two years ago that these papers came to light, having survived unscathed in the trunk through a flood, a world war and a fire which gutted the old house. The trunk was bought by a Madrid dealer on the old woman's death. He sold it, unopened, to a French professor looking for a suitable container for some books he wished to send to Paris.

Thus, after nearly fifty years, the story of the diary of the damned came to be discovered. There has been no official inquiry. What would be the purpose after all these years? The ravings of an old priest, of a girl driven from her mind by her horrifying experience of shipwreck, a girl whom nobody could identify, prove ever existed.

The story is better ended there. But did Alberto succeed in his last task to destroy the remains of the man who called himself Caines?

Perhaps he did. A local investigator sent looking for the cemetery tells us that no trace at all remains. The ground is densely covered with vegetation; there are no bare patches.

And what of the diary? Did those pages of anguish flutter down with the tumbling body of the priest until the water seeped into every page, washed out the blood of the dead boy, dissolved the paper on which a young girl had described her journey into hell?

We must hope that it did. And that it did not, in some incredible way, survive, to lie now in a dusty attic, on the bookshelves of a collector, or amongst the rubbish of a Sumatra junk shop, waiting with the patience of the devil for somebody to pick it up and once more read the incantation 'I invoke the Bornless One' that will summon into their terrified presence Satan himself.

Giles Gordon

Morning Echo

It sounded like the teeth of a rapacious animal trapping a small beast, snapping its vertebrae, devouring it in one mindless mouthful. One moment the flat had been silent, the next that sudden snarl. Perhaps there was a new delivery boy this morning, Mrs Rutherford thought, as she shuffled out of the kitchen, into the hall. There it was, the *Morning Echo* lying on the carpet a couple of feet back from the door. Usually it was lodged half in, half out of the metal letterbox, and as that was four feet up from the base of the door she didn't have to bend down to pick up the paper. At her age she was grateful for that, as such bending inevitably made her feel dizzy these days. Though only aged sixty-three, she liked to think of herself as eighty, sometimes older. Today the paper was on the floor, like a gauntlet thrown down waiting to be picked up. It challenged her, defied her. She bent down carefully, stretched out an arm and plucked up the *Echo*, then straightened herself. Only a little dizziness. It came, remained there for several seconds – like a distant view swimming into focus – then dissolved, at first slowly, then quickly. She walked back to the kitchen.

When Robert had been alive she hadn't read the paper much at all. She had glanced at the headlines but had only read the women's pages with any thoroughness or interest. There had been no need for more than a cursory look at the news as Robert had read out to her, across the breakfast table, everything that he thought mattered, that she should know. And during the day she sometimes heard the news on the wireless – not by intent, but because she was listening to a play or to music while washing up or doing the ironing. Robert had died three years ago, and from the day after he died, before the funeral even, she had begun to read the paper in detail, page by

page. She even read the sports pages, as a sort of tribute to Robert. He had read them, though never aloud. Her only interest in cricketers and footballers and athletes was how they fared from day to day in the columns of the *Echo*; she didn't think of them as having real lives beyond the newsprint, or apart from the posed photographs of them at their endeavours. Whether they won or lost was a game the sports writers indulged in day by day.

Since Robert had died she found it difficult to occupy the hours of the day, unless she was seeing people, staying with them away from Borthwick. John and Clare, and Paul and Jane were quite good at having her to stay but they seemed to think that she had to be entertained continually. It was entertainment more than enough in being with her son or daughter and her grand-children, though they exhausted her easily. She was only asked once or twice a year at the most, and had never stayed longer than a week. Sometimes she invited Mrs Robbins or Mrs Trevor to tea, but not more than once every three weeks. If they came more often than that it might seem that the relationship between them was more than it was. Acquaintanceship more than friendship, if such a distinction could be made. They knew each other, and quite a bit about the routine of one another's lives, rather than being particularly close. And Mrs Rutherford usually had tea with them, at their homes, about once every three weeks also.

Her interests and concerns had become those of the world – the big, wide, international world rather than the affairs of Borthwick. It was exciting to wonder whether France would drop her H-bomb; if the new regime in Afghanistan would be recognized by other countries within days or within months; if the Law Lords would decree that no newspaper might write a story about the thalidomide tragedy. She read the local news last because, being local, it was of least significance to the world of which she was a citizen. Butcher's boy stole the petty cash; Lord and Lady Appleseed's daughter Belinda engaged; distinguished Borthwick citizen passes on; Borthwick opera society perform *Brigadoon*. It made her feel, well, important to be reading about major issues and events the day after they

happened. She could go out shopping or for a walk secure in the knowledge that the world was still around her, that Borthwick wasn't, unbeknownst to itself, the only part of the planet still extant; that the catastrophe had passed her by.

The *Echo* usually arrived after she had eaten her boiled egg but before she embarked on her toast. This morning she had consumed half a slice of toast before the paper was thrust through the door. She leafed through it quickly, turning every page before settling down to read it in earnest. Satisfied that it would be in order for her to read it from page one to page thirty-two (omitting the classified advertisements), she folded the *Echo* and propped it up against the jar of homemade (but, as she pointed out to visitors, not by her) marmalade. While munching toast – with her teeth, a slow process – she read.

She absorbed the news in a curiously detached way, giving equal weight to every sentence, whether headline or last paragraph of a lengthy story. Watergate prosecutor and senators issue subpoenas as Nixon refuses tapes; hijacked jumbo jet lands in Damascus; navy warns off Soviet ships. She ate through her breakfast, had – as every day – a third and final cup of tea. She only liked to make one pot, and a fourth cup from the same pot would be stewed and cold. She turned to the local news. Fire destroys Borthwick supermarket. Cause unknown. It wasn't often that she identified with local news to the extent that she did in this instance. The supermarket in question, Wilson's, was the one at which she shopped, and she had been there yesterday morning. No sign of a fire then, she reflected, partly with relief at not having had her shopping expedition disrupted, partly with disappointment at having missed a dramatic local event.

She read on. The fire brigade had been called at ten past four, and though three engines were at Wilson's within minutes of being summoned, the shop was virtually gutted. Many of the goods on sale were inflammable said the *Echo*, unhelpfully. She felt uneasy about the supermarket burning. There was something curious about it, beyond the fact of the fire, but she couldn't puzzle in her mind what it was. She stared across the kitchen, over the top of the paper, wondering what it was that

worried her, but she could think of nothing relevant. After all, just because she had been in the supermarket that in itself was no reason why, later in the day, it shouldn't catch fire. Buildings did. It was nothing to do with her.

Old lady knocked down on zebra: killed. She'd been with another elderly lady, who'd been pushing a shopping basket. The woman who was killed had been masked from the view of a sports car by another vehicle, a van, that had, quite properly, stopped at the crossing to allow the women over the street. The sports car hadn't seen the lady in front – until too late. Her identity hadn't yet been revealed. The police were anxious to interview the lady with the shopping basket who accompanied the deceased. The identity of the victim was known to the police but they weren't prepared to reveal it yet. Again, reading this story, Mrs Rutherford had an eerie feeling, almost of *déjà vu*: as if the accident had happened to her. It had taken place in Thrumbill Street, five minutes walk away.

Hold-up at Midland Bank. It was the branch in Gower Road. She'd often passed it in the 14 bus. The bank on the corner at Catt Street, she was pretty sure that was the Midland. The robbers had all three been women, two wearing stocking masks, and they'd made off with £10,000. The number of the getaway car had been noted by a passer-by. Mrs Rutherford thought £10,000 a substantial sum but the bank manager only expressed the opinion that he was relieved no one had been injured. A rather negative attitude to adopt, she felt.

Body found on allotment. The police did not rule out the prospect of foul play. The body had been identified but the name and address were being withheld until the next of kin had been notified. Mrs Rutherford was surprised that a local murder wasn't given greater prominence in the paper. Were the police trying to play it down for some reason?

Finally, as every day, she looked at the weather forecast. Today was going to be thoroughly wet, with frequent thunderstorms. Heavy clouds. No likelihood of sun breaking through. She frowned, looked up from the paper and out of the window. She had to close her eyes slightly, there was such intensity of light. The sun was already hot and – she looked at her watch –

it was not yet nine o'clock. She pushed her chair back from the table, stood up, walked the few steps to the window. There wasn't a cloud in the sky, a glorious July morning. Unusual for the immediate forecast in the *Echo* to be so wrong, she thought; and thought no more about it.

She'd see if Mrs Trevor would like to come to lunch today. It had been two weeks since she'd been to her flat, thought Mrs Rutherford, then checked the date on the calendar. Today was 23 July, a Wednesday; she'd been there on the 9th, also a Wednesday, two weeks ago to the day. She walked through to the living room, dialled the number. Before doing so she had looked it up in the address book she kept by the instrument, though she knew it well enough. She never liked to risk the embarrassment of dialling a wrong number, though it wasn't her fault if a call was misrouted and she got a wrong number anyway.

'4384,' said Mrs Trevor. It irritated Mrs Rutherford that Mrs Trevor never announced the three numbers of the exchange when answering the telephone, only the last four digits. Mrs Trevor's number was no different from anyone else's in having seven figures.

'Lorna, it's Edith Rutherford.'

'I was just thinking of you.'

'You were?'

'Yes.'

There was a pause. Mrs Rutherford hoped that what the thought had been would be revealed, but it was not volunteered. Mrs Trevor wondered why Mrs Rutherford didn't continue speaking, as it was she who had phoned and presumably not merely to pass the time of day.

'I wondered if you'd be free to have lunch with me today, Lorna.'

Another pause. They'd never had lunch together, always tea. Was Mrs Rutherford in some kind of distress, Mrs Trevor wondered?

'Yes. Yes, I would, Edith. That would be very nice. About twelve-thirty?'

'Any time you like. Twelve-thirty would be fine.'

'I've a lot of shopping to do this morning. Ruth and Roger are coming on Friday to stay for the weekend.'

'Oh,' said Mrs Rutherford, wishing her children would visit her as often as Mrs Trevor's did her; and added, making instant use of newly acquired knowledge, 'you'll not be able to shop at Wilson's, of course.'

She waited, a little pleased with herself, to see how Mrs Trevor would react.

'Why ever not? They don't close for a summer holiday, do they?'

Mrs Rutherford was triumphant. This was precisely the kind of situation she relished, and she liked to be magnanimous in victory. 'I take it you haven't read the paper today?' she said, unable entirely to disguise a note of superiority in her voice.

'I've looked at the *Echo* as much as I ever do.'

Mrs Rutherford prepared for the kill: 'You didn't read the local news?'

'I always read the local news. To be honest, it's all I read.'

Mrs Rutherford was irritated with her friend now. 'Then you must have seen that Wilson's was almost gutted.' She tried to anticipate how Mrs Trevor would react.

'When?' she asked, sounding flustered.

'Yesterday,' said Mrs Rutherford, now dominating the conversation. 'Otherwise it wouldn't have been in today's paper, would it?' she concluded, smugly.

'I don't know how I missed that,' said Mrs Trevor. 'Extraordinary. Well, I must go out now, Edith. Shopping'll take me longer than it usually does if I can't go to Wilson's. I'll see you just before one, then.'

The telephone receivers were replaced, and Mrs Rutherford thought a little bitterly how long it was since she had been able to shop for more than one person, except when she was having a visitor to the flat for an hour or two. She felt annoyed with herself at having deliberately, indeed ostentatiously, scored points off Mrs Trevor. She wouldn't have bothered doing that when Robert was alive.

She looked at her watch. It was already after ten. She was taking longer and longer these days in having her breakfast, and

reading the paper. She was aware of this. She was also aware that there was no longer a reason why she should hurry at anything. Whatever she did, she always had plenty of time. For three years she had had no need to do anything. The only necessity had been to keep herself alive. She found it depressing that her life had had no apparent climax, no apex; that she and Robert had coasted along for thirty-two years – to what purpose? He had retired from his job as an accountant, and two years later had dropped dead; and years before that the children had left home, to work in London (why had they *both* had to go to London, and within eighteen months of each other though there were four years in age between them?) and soon married. It all seemed so futile. She had worked hard all her life, and the only result was that she was old and certainly lacking purpose in existence. If she had been a church-goer she supposed she might have felt different about everything, but she didn't think so. She and Robert hadn't gone to church, and she wasn't going to start now.

She wasn't usually as reflective as this she realized as she tried to snap out of her gloom. She cleaned the very few dishes she had used since the last time she had washed up, laboriously hoovered her three rooms, dusted the living room and bedroom. It was a minute to noon when she had done. She sat down in the living room with a tiny glass of sherry (she felt guilty about this indulgence, before Mrs Trevor arrived), and switched on the wireless. The dollar is still falling, Nixon refuses to hand over the White House tapes, hijacked jumbo jet lands in Damascus, a leading British film star dies. Then the local news. A hold-up at a branch of the Midland Bank in Borthwick.

Until then Mrs Rutherford had only been half listening, but the recent familiarity of that piece of news jolted her mind into total concentration. The three robbers were women, though they had worn stocking masks – presumably to try to disguise this fact. They had made off with £10,000. The number of the getaway car had been noted by a passer-by, and given to the police.

The newsreader moved on to the next item, about the rise in prices of vegetables and fruit in the county. Though Mrs

Rutherford didn't turn off the wireless, she had ceased to hear what was being said. She sat in her deep armchair, staring at the empty armchair opposite her, with the occasional table between the chairs on which stood a silver tray bearing a decanter and two sherry glasses. She still sometimes thought she saw Robert sitting in his chair. Indeed, his presence on such occasions seemed more real to her than her own. She was sure of him, far from certain of herself. She knew he had existed but had no proof that she herself did – even when looking in the bathroom mirror. She could hardly confirm her own existence, hardly be a witness to herself.

As her thoughts meandered on in this somewhat self-pitying way, she realized with a flash of insight that what had been wrong in the reading of the news was that *yesterday*'s news was being presented. The bank robbery in Gower Road couldn't have taken place *this* morning because it had been reported in today's paper. Today's paper recorded yesterday's events. The bank robbery would have been – should have been – mentioned in the news bulletin twenty-four hours ago. Unless there had been a second, identical robbery? No, that was impossible. Or if not impossible, more than improbable; and reference would have been made to the earlier robbery.

She was so hot – it was surely one of the sunniest days of the year so far. She walked across to the window, pushed up the lower half of the frame that had been closed. The weather forecast in the *Echo* had indeed been wildly wrong. She looked down at the street, at the few people passing. Between now and two o'clock the number would increase as people walked about during their lunch hour, in open-necked shirts and cotton dresses. With a start, she thought she saw Robert. He had died on such a hot day as this. How curious it hadn't occurred to her until this moment that tomorrow was the third anniversary of his death. She'd remembered it three or four days ago: a Thursday this year, the same day – and the same date – as that on which he died. The 24th July. The funeral hadn't been until the Monday, four days later. She'd placed a notice in the *Echo*, delivering it by hand two weeks ago to make certain it would be in time, an '*in memoriam*'. She'd done it for him, and for herself. She didn't expect that anyone else would notice: they

wouldn't be looking for it. The fact that it was there, in print, was what mattered. It would be the first thing she would read in tomorrow's paper. She wandered into the kitchen, having turned off the wireless, and began to prepare the lunch: vegetable soup and boiled eggs. She hoped Mrs Trevor wouldn't expect more.

She arrived at ten to one.

'I hadn't expected you for a few minutes yet, but do come in,' said Mrs Rutherford, opening the front door and standing back to allow her visitor to pass into the flat ahead of her. Mrs Trevor was perspiring quite a bit, and dragged her basket on wheels filled with shopping after her.

'You're feeling all right, are you?' she asked Mrs Rutherford, without even greeting her. Mrs Rutherford closed the door, and they walked into the living room.

'Yes, fine. Why do you ask?'

This was most unlike Mrs Trevor, thought Mrs Rutherford. Was *she* all right? She must have had a very exhausting morning, shopping in that heat. She did look worn out.

'Didn't you say that Wilson's was burnt down, or did I imagine that?'

'Yes, of course. In the paper, the *Echo*. This morning.'

'Can I see the paper?'

Mrs Rutherford was now certain that something had happened to Mrs Trevor. She was under stress. She would have to humour her.

'Of course,' she said. 'It's in the kitchen. I'll just get it. Help yourself to a glass of sherry.'

She returned to the living room with the paper.

'Please show me the bit about the fire,' said Mrs Trevor.

Without another word, Mrs Rutherford turned to the relevant page, folded the *Echo* in such a way that Mrs Trevor could easily read the story, handed the paper to her. She read with mounting incredulity.

'Wasn't it in your paper?' inquired Mrs Rutherford. 'Maybe you received an earlier edition?'

'No,' said Mrs Trevor. 'That's not possible. There's only one edition for Borthwick.'

She handed the paper back to Mrs Rutherford and picked up

from the table the glass of sherry she'd poured herself. She sank down into what had been Robert's armchair, and sipped her drink. Mrs Rutherford stood above her, bemused.

'Edith,' Mrs Trevor said solemnly, 'I've just been to Wilson's. As usual I did most of my shopping there. It's not burnt down.'

Mrs Rutherford moved slowly to her armchair, put her hand out to grasp the arm of the chair without really feeling it or seeing it. Mrs Trevor was in a worse condition than she had realized. She ought to see a doctor. She sat down, opposite her visitor, and said slowly and clearly, as if talking to a child or a mental defective, 'Lorna, you must have made a mistake. Wilson's was burnt down yesterday. It says so in the paper. You've read it. They couldn't have made it up, now could they?'

'Edith, I'm sorry to contradict you – and the *Echo* – but I've just been there. I've done my shopping. If you don't believe me, look at the bags out there in my basket. They're Wilson's bags.'

Mrs Rutherford didn't attempt to verify this information, but said, 'Are you suggesting that the paper's got it wrong? Said Wilson's is burnt down and it isn't?' She laughed. 'Admittedly it's got the weather wrong – utterly wrong – but this is different. People saw the supermarket burning down. It's reported there. There must be photographs somewhere.'

Mrs Trevor stared at her, quite certain now (which she'd previously seen hinted at) that Mrs Rutherford was no longer totally in command of her faculties. The death of her husband had obviously affected her more than she had at first realized.

'What about the weather?' asked Mrs Trevor, trying to return the conversation to a rational basis.

'The *Echo* says it'll be thundery today, and pour with rain. No sun forecast at all. And look at it out of the window.'

'Let me see the paper again,' said Mrs Trevor, finishing her sherry in one gulp and quickly getting to her feet. Mrs Rutherford passed her the *Echo*. For a second she glanced at the page at which it was folded open, then said, in a loud, excited voice, 'What's the date today?'

'The 23rd,' Mrs Rutherford answered, without hesitation.

'You're certain?'

'Yes, tomorrow's the date of Robert's death.'

Mrs Trevor held out the paper to Mrs Rutherford. 'That's today's paper?'

'Yes, of course.'

'Then look at the date at the top of the page.'

Mrs Rutherford took the paper, looked at the date on the page that was open, then turned to the front page. She looked at the dates on other pages. It was the same everywhere: 24 July.

'You've got tomorrow's paper,' said Mrs Trevor.

'It can't be,' said Mrs Rutherford, now utterly bewildered. 'It was delivered this morning.'

'But it's dated tomorrow.'

'It's impossible.'

'Then today's the 24th.'

'No. I know it isn't.'

Both women were reduced to silence.

'That explains why, on the wireless just now, they said that a bank robbery here in Borthwick took place this morning when it had already been reported in today's paper,' said Mrs Rutherford.

'Tomorrow's paper, you mean.'

'Well, yes.'

'May I have another glass of sherry, Edith?' asked Mrs Trevor, indicating the decanter.

'Of course. I'm neglecting my duties.'

She stood up, and poured out two more glasses. 'We certainly need this! So it's *tomorrow*'s weather in the paper. Tomorrow will be thundery and wet.'

'And, more important, we know what tomorrow's news'll be,' said Mrs Trevor.

'What do you mean?'

'I mean that perhaps ... it sounds ludicrous but maybe Wilson's will burn down *this* afternoon.'

'How could anyone know in advance, unless it was arson?' said Mrs Rutherford.

'But the supermarket is – or was an hour ago – still there. Does it say in the *Echo* what time it burnt down?'

The two women looked closely at the paper as Mrs Ruther-

ford turned the pages, back to the appropriate place.

'Yesterday afternoon, it says. That means this afternoon. We must phone up Wilson's immediately and warn them, if it's not too late already.' She took a step in the direction of the telephone.

'And say what: excuse me, we thought you might be interested to know that your building's about to be burnt down? They'll either think we're crazy, or that we know more than we do.'

'Then tell them to look in their paper. They'll have seen it anyway.'

'If it wasn't in my paper, why should it be in theirs? I don't believe it was in anyone's but yours. Otherwise something would have been done, about all the news. It would seem, Edith, that you are privileged with the only copy of ... tomorrow's paper.'

'Then we must inform the police.'

'They might arrest us.'

'Not if we show them the paper.'

Mrs Rutherford dialled 999, feeling very brave, but secretly having wished to do so all her life. She was put through to the police and explained about the copy of the *Echo* which had been delivered to her. She explained that it had tomorrow's date on every page, and about the report of the fire at Wilson's; and, for good measure, as the officer who took the call seemed in no particular hurry, about the weather report and the bank robbery. The whole conversation took about ten minutes, and it was obvious to Mrs Trevor, listening, that the policeman thought he was dealing with a lunatic.

She took the receiver from Mrs Rutherford and told the officer that she was a witness, that the paper *was* dated tomorrow, and, by the look of it, carried tomorrow's news – or today's news; the matter was complicated. They should do something about the fire at Wilson's while there was still time to prevent it, assuming it hadn't begun. It was too late to prevent the bank robbery. The police knew that, madam, said the officer.

Mrs Rutherford took the receiver back from her visitor.

'Officer, you haven't by any chance found a body on an allotment, have you?'

There was a long silence. Mrs Rutherford could hear the heavy breathing of the policeman.

'How do you know about that?' asked the officer.

The member of the public who had discovered the body, completely hidden by leaves, rented the allotment himself. He had been at the station since reporting what he had found, two hours ago. No one else, other than the murderer, could have known about the incident.

'It's in tomorrow's *Echo*,' said Mrs Rutherford, rather testily.

'I think we'd better come to see you,' said the officer.

'No, thank you; we'll come to see you. Your station is only round the corner. I pass it frequently. You're much busier than we are, or you should be.'

'Not that busy right now, madam . . .'

'I'm sorry, officer. I've never had the police in my home and I don't intend starting now. My friend and I will be with you in half an hour. We're going to have our lunch first. And, officer?'

'Yes, madam?'

'Do do something to prevent the fire at Wilson's.'

'We'll do what we can, madam,' said the policeman, resignedly, and before he could say more the receiver was replaced in its cradle at the other end.

Two policemen were dispatched to Wilson's. As soon as they reached the supermarket they asked to see the manager. He was grateful to them for warning him, but how could he do anything to prevent a fire when the building was not only not burning but showed no sign of doing so? He could hardly summon the fire brigade! The manager was courteous – you never knew till too late, but mightn't these two 'officers' be hoaxers in disguise?

At the same time, two other officers were sent to observe and follow two middle-aged-to-old ladies who might be seen leaving Mrs Rutherford's address and proceeding in the direction of the station. The officers waited a bit down the road, on the opposite side of the street, able to see the front door of the building in which Mrs Rutherford lived. After about forty

minutes two women who answered the necessary description left the house, and sure enough began to walk up Harvill Street, in the direction of the station. One of them was pushing a basket on wheels stuffed with shopping, the other clutched a newspaper under her arm.

The officers followed them, but of course not close enough to be able to hear what they were saying to one another:

'What if this happened every day? – if some people knew the news in advance. Millions of lives could be saved. Accidents wouldn't take place – murders, crashes, natural disasters. Deaths could be averted.'

'I think not,' said Mrs Trevor, less carried away by the prospect than her friend. 'If someone is going to die, they will die.'

'But a day later than they expected.'

'Would they be pleased to read their obituary? And twenty-four hours ahead of the event?'

'I would. I would love to know what posterity would think of me. Or had thought of me.'

'Posterity? You mean the present?'

'No, the past, actually.'

The two women laughed as they began to cross the road by a zebra, having set off from the pavement after a van had drawn up. Somehow Mrs Rutherford was ahead of Mrs Trevor, no doubt because she wasn't dragging a shopping basket behind her. However, from that day until her death many years later Mrs Trevor couldn't explain why she was not abreast of her friend, but whatever the reason it saved her life.

With horror, she saw the left mudguard of a red sports car hit Mrs Rutherford, shoot her off her feet and drop her off the stripes of the zebra crossing. She had been crossing the road in a straightforward fashion one moment, the next she was in the air, then lying in the road, a crumpled heap. There was a pile-up of traffic in all directions, a few people, then a dozen, then scores. Two policemen were on the spot immediately, one of them blowing his whistle. Disregarded, ten feet from the body, was tomorrow's paper. Mrs Trevor retrieved it, and stood helplessly above her friend.

An ambulance materialized within minutes, one of the police officers having phoned for it. Mrs Rutherford was dead before the hospital was reached. Mrs Trevor suffered from extreme shock, and had returned to her home as speedily as possible, as soon as the ambulance had left the scene of the accident. No one had suggested she should accompany her friend to the hospital, nor make a statement, and for this she was relieved. Besides, she knew Mrs Rutherford was dead, or was dying. In the unexpectedness of the accident, in the confusion, the policemen had not noticed her departure, nor had they known her address.

The next day the *Echo* carried a story about an elderly lady who was knocked down by a red sports car while crossing a zebra. The police had reason to believe that she had been accompanied by a friend, who was pushing a shopping basket on wheels. The police were anxious to interview this lady. The identity of the victim was known to the police but they weren't prepared to reveal it yet. The driver of the sports car accepted that he was entirely to blame.

For some reason, the Trevors had two copies of the *Echo* dated 24 July. No one would have believed Mrs Trevor had she said that she'd had one of the copies the previous day. That would have been impossible – the news reported hadn't then taken place.

Pondering the strange circumstances which caused her to have two copies, idly her eyes looked down the classified advertisements. An 'in memoriam' read: 'In memory of my beloved husband, Robert Rutherford. Died three years ago today. E.R.' Then she chanced upon a notice under 'Deaths': 'Rutherford, Edith. In a road accident in Borthwick, 24 July; beloved widow of Robert.'

Lorna Trevor couldn't tell her husband that the only people who could have placed that notice in the *Echo* (and before Edith Rutherford's death) were herself or the police. She hadn't done it, and she knew – from the news item elsewhere in the paper – that it hadn't been the police.

There was only one other possibility. Robert.

Harry E. Turner

The Tunisian Talking Ferret

Howard K. Benson, showman extraordinary, shouldered his way through the dense crowds trying hard not to breathe too deeply of the ripe, fetid stench that filled the Bazaar.

The narrow cobbled streets glistened with slime and the humid alleyways buzzed with flies. High above from an azure sky the North African sun hammered on to the flat white houses and the crumbling city walls. Its relentless heat punished every surface, fingering its way even into the shadows and turning them into black, broiling, stinking places.

Mangy dogs cringed limply in the shelter of the faded awnings, pink tongues lolling. Naked children sucked at the husks of warm fruit while their mothers, veiled and cloaked, argued with the shopkeepers in shrill, insistent voices.

The merchants rolled their eyes and protested loudly. Voices rose and fell, arms spiralled, fingers jabbed, shoulders shrugged. Nearby a donkey hee-hawed and emptied its bowels into the street.

A blind man, very old and with a face fissured like an ancient cavalry saddle, was being led firmly through the crowd by his tiny grandchild. Benson hesitated at the entrance of a dark and winding alleyway. The Bazaar was a maze of streets and he had lost all sense of direction. As he paused, mopping his face with a silk bandana, a willowy youth disfigured by smallpox sidled up to him.

'You American?' wheedled the boy.

Benson shook his head. 'English,' he replied sternly.

'Ah, sir,' said the boy, bowing. 'You see saucy show. Lovely girls. Four dinar only. Very cheap.'

'No,' said Benson. 'I am looking for the Talking Ferret.'

The youth rolled his eyes and extended a brown palm, fingers

cupped in the begging gesture. 'I take you – long walk – easy to get lost – no good alone. One dinar?'

Benson slipped out his Gucci wallet and carefully removed a one-dinar note. The boy watched him hungrily, like an animal.

'One dinar,' said Benson, and the boy reached for the bank-note. Benson withdrew it quickly and tucked it into his top pocket. 'You shall have it *when* we see the ferret.'

The boy looked disappointed, then shrugged. 'Follow me, sir,' he said. 'Stay close. Long way.'

As they moved off into the milling throng Benson lit a small cigar; its smoke, he hoped, would act as a palliative to the rancid stench of humanity and the reek of unfamiliar spices.

Benson was a tall man, spare and gaunt with a mop of white hair and an aristocratic face. His white tropical suit and highly polished shoes gave him an air of wealth and authority. In Europe and America he was rich and famous, one of the most familiar faces on television. His show 'Benson's Corner' was the most successful programme of the decade; its audience exceeded sixty million – weekly. Its prime ingredient was novelty. Always something *new*, bizarre, riveting.

A friend, Morris Simpson, holidaying in a remote Tunisian resort, had written to him of an incredible talking ferret in the city's labyrinthine Bazaar and it had at once inflamed Benson's curiosity. Simpson was an anthropologist whose very nature precluded exaggeration and his story of the Ferret could only be true.

Benson had flown at once to Monastir in his private jet, pausing only briefly en route to tape an interview with the Tunisian President who happened to be in the vicinity. Simpson had greeted him at the El Hala Hotel in Sousse, a grand establishment with one of the most unexpectedly superb grill rooms in the Middle East. Over steak au poivre washed down with rich Tunisian wine, Simpson told him about the amazing phenomenon of the Talking Ferret.

Benson listened carefully to his old friend and when the tale was finished decided on the instant that this rare treat should be the subject of one of his future television programmes. He elicited from Simpson the whereabouts of the ferret and his

Arab handler. It was not to be an easy task – the Arabs were at best suspicious, at worst hostile towards rich Englishmen.

The city in which the phenomenon could be observed was a day's drive from Sousse, and Simpson begged to be excused from the excursion, claiming that the crowds in the Bazaar gave him claustrophobia and that his discovery of the Talking Ferret was a matter of mere chance. Undaunted, Benson then made plans to go it alone.

Now he lengthened his stride as the Arab youth broke into a loping trot. The alleys grew narrower and darker and the smells more repugnantly exotic. The heat was merciless and soon Benson's white suit was stained with patches of sweat. After thirty minutes weaving and twisting and jostling they arrived at a small cobbled square. It was flanked by crumbling houses from the windows of which scores of grinning Arabs leaned. In the square itself a crowd had gathered and the air was thick with the smell of mint and human excrescence. Half a dozen Negro tumblers were entertaining the crowd with somersaults and intricate balancing displays. Their recompense for these exertions, judging by the leather satchel which lay at the corner of the tableau, was derisory.

Benson pushed to the front of the crowd and lit a fresh cigar. The Arab youth was hard on his heels, hand outstretched. 'If you please, sir,' said the boy excitedly, 'you pay me now.' Benson ignored his wheedling blandishments and concentrated on the architecture of the square. Its old white houses and castellated walls would form a superb location for his television programme. It might prove difficult getting a complete live broadcast unit through the thronged streets but nonetheless . . .

Suddenly the Negro tumblers dispersed, snatched up their satchel and melted into the crowd.

From a corner of the square a bizarre trio had enjoyed the performance; two of them resembled hairless apes, so grotesque was their appearance. They might have been Malays or Chinese by the yellowish hue of their skins and both were muscled like Atlas. They wore ragged pantaloons, studded waist belts and long-toed ornate slippers. Between them was a vicious-looking dwarf in a white kaftan. His shaved head was surmounted by a greasy fez and he was, Benson decided, one of the most

manifestly evil men he had ever seen in his life. He carried a wooden cage half obscured by a black cloth, and leant with his other hand on a fabulous carved walking-stick.

After hobbling to the centre of the square, he deposited the cage at his feet and whipped away the cloth. A small brown animal was pressed against the bars. It had a pointed, ugly snout and fierce black eyes.

Benson moved forward eagerly to obtain a better view but was restrained by a tug at his sleeve. He turned to see the pleading face of the Arab boy. With a shrug of impatience he placed a dinar in his hand and waved the youth away.

The dwarf had opened the cage and lifted out the ferret. He nursed it in the crook of his arm and muttered a few words in Arabic. Benson felt the crowd all around him stiffen, like the hairs on the nape of his own neck.

The ferret's mouth gaped, revealing yellow, pointed teeth, and then it spoke. Its leathery lips formed distinct and separate sounds. Arabic was unfamiliar to Benson, but the voice itself was unmistakably human.

He was a yard from the dwarf now and the crowd were applauding. Coins had started to shower into the square from the overlooking houses and the two yellow giants began to gather them up swiftly. The dwarf's eyes met Benson's, and held them challengingly. His face was the very mask of evil and Benson felt his stomach churn.

The ferret's dialogue continued, hideously, and it turned its snout towards him. The animal's head was very curious. It swelled out from the snout like a bulbous, matted pumpkin. Just above the eyes there was a livid indentation over which its hair had partially grown. It seemed to be directing its torrent of Arabic directly at Benson now, the long, wolfish tongue slicking over guttural phrases with scarcely a pause for breath.

Benson pulled a wedge of fifty-dinar notes from his wallet and held them towards the dwarf. 'This is for you,' he said carefully, 'if you will meet me here tomorrow – alone. Do you understand?'

The dwarf stared at him with unblinking malice. He gave a nod of understanding.

'Listen,' persisted Benson, 'I can make you extremely rich.

You have here an unbelievable phenomenon. I want you to appear on a very important television programme. You will not need to travel – I shall make all the necessary arrangements. It may take time. I will pay you fifty dinars for *every* day you wait, provided you meet *me*, every one of those days, here in the square, alone.'

The dwarf ran a horny palm over the ferret's head and spat suddenly into the dust. 'No, infidel!' he cried, and his voice was shrill. 'No. Leave me alone. Begone!'

Benson began to protest but the dwarf became very agitated. He returned the ferret to its cage and snatched it up defiantly. 'Go!' he screamed. 'Go, I say!'

Benson was suddenly aware of the two musclemen who had come gliding up to flank the dwarf. 'Very well,' said Benson, shrugging, 'but I meant no harm. The offer stands and I shall return tomorrow.'

'No,' shouted the dwarf, 'begone!'

Benson had no wish to exchange any further pleasantries with the grisly trio and with a sense of frustration he turned to go.

The intricate nature of the Bazaar made it difficult for him to retrace his steps, and there was no sign of the Arab youth. After starting along several blind alleys, he eventually found himself in a long, crowded street. It was lined with open-fronted shops in which various craftsmen toiled. A coppersmith sat cross-legged on the stone floor of one, his tiny hammer tip-tapping out the shape of a huge dish. Next to him a butcher was stripping the carcass of an ox. The pavement was slippery with blood and offal. Beyond this, a tailor worked on the stitching of an elaborate burnous. He used an ancient, blackened Singer sewing-machine and held a collection of coloured cottons between his teeth. Everywhere prevailed a symphony of unfamiliar smells: heavy, pungent spices, the gamey stench of uncured animal hide, ground pepper, incense, tallow.

Benson moved swiftly past the shops, brushing away the importunities of their gabbling merchants, and headed towards the landmark of the mosque. As he rounded another corner he found a long, crumbling wall against which several beggars sat. They were all blind, and clothed in filthy rags. Benson's eyes

scanned them without interest; they were, alas, a commonplace sight. Suddenly he felt his heart leap and his throat constrict.

Propped up between two of the beggars was the young Arab boy who had acted as his guide. The boy's head lolled unnaturally and his lips were drawn into the waxen rictus of death.

As Benson drew closer he saw clearly that the boy's throat had been cut. In the dead fingers of his right hand was clutched a crumpled one-dinar note.

Benson knew better than to act as unofficial policeman. With scant regard for dignity he broke into a run and kept running until he was clear of the Bazaar and back in the main part of the city.

Two hours later, safe in the comfort of a small French hotel, he telephoned Morris Simpson in Sousse. Simpson was amazed that he had located the ferret so quickly, and agreed to contact Benson's television company in London.

When Benson told him of the murdered Arab boy, he expressed no real surprise. 'Murder in the Bazaar,' he said, 'is an everyday occurrence. What are *you* going to do?'

Benson explained that he would travel immediately to Tunis and arrange finance and interpreters, Simpson on Benson's instructions would cable London and get a director, camera crew and sound engineer flown immediately to Monastir. Benson would meet them there and finalize plans for what he hoped would be a rare and wonderful piece of television reporting.

'And Morris,' pleaded Benson, 'as I shall be in Tunis for a day you *must* come *here* and *make certain* the ferret and his dwarf don't leave the city.'

'How on earth—' protested Simpson.

But Benson was adamant. 'You are my *friend*, Morris. I *need* you. I can't afford to let this opportunity slip. Go to the Bazaar. Take *all* the money you've got. I'll leave a hundred dinar *here* at this hotel for you to collect. At all costs you must keep the dwarf *in* the Bazaar until I get a camera team organized. *Please*, Morris.'

Grumblingly Morris Simpson agreed, and Benson put down the telephone. Smiling now, he pressed the bell for room service and lay back on his bed. With a bit of luck, in just a few days, he would have a piece of television history in the can.

Tunis with its French boulevards and swaying palm trees was a welcome change. Benson organized a meeting with the manager of the Bank of America. Later, after successfully arranging a large cash withdrawal, he set about finding two top-notch interpreters. As dusk fell he completed a feverish day of phoning, negotiating, and writing an outline script for his programme.

At midnight, after a substantial supper and a bottle of Tunisian claret, he showered and climbed into bed. His head had no sooner touched the pillow than the telephone rang.

It was an unfamiliar voice, thickly accented. 'Mr Benson,' it said, 'this is Captain Tourgaba of the Police Department. You have a friend by the name of Simpson – Morris Simpson?'

'Yes,' said Benson, 'is anything the matter, what's wrong?'

Captain Tourgaba cleared his throat importantly. 'He has met with a serious accident, and is at present in hospital. We found a note on his person which led us to your whereabouts. I think you should come back to Sousse immediately. I cannot explain fully on the telephone how important this is. Goodbye, Mr Benson.'

Then the line went dead.

Benson stared into the receiver for a moment, half in disbelief, and then got up hurriedly.

Events, it seemed, were taking a most unwelcome turn.

The hospital at Sousse was cool and white. Benson was led to Morris Simpson's private room where two policemen greeted him politely and a doctor motioned for him to sit down.

Morris Simpson was unconscious, propped against a huge pillow. His entire face and head were obscured by bandages.

The doctor spoke briefly to the policemen in Arabic and then withdrew. One of the policemen, impressively uniformed and wearing a revolver, nodded curtly at Benson. 'I am Captain

Tourgaba,' he said. 'I am afraid your friend is very ill indeed. He was most brutally and grotesquely attacked. He may not live. When we found him he had this note, addressed to you, in his pocket. Please read it.'

Tourgaba passed a folded envelope across to Benson; it was covered in Morris Simpson's spidery handwriting. Benson unfolded it. The note read:

Howard, you must cancel all plans to film the Tunisian Talking Ferret. I have discovered a cache of such evil that my very soul must be in jeopardy. The dwarf refuses your money. Let him. Forget the television programme. I am tainted by what I have uncovered. The police must be informed. This note scribbled in haste in the Bazaar – I cannot escape. They approach. I am no match for them. Goodbye, Howard.
Morris

Captain Tourgaba nodded grimly as Benson looked up in horror. 'We found him, scarcely alive, in the Bazaar. We are still seeking the dwarf. It should not be difficult.'

'What can I do to help?' said Benson weakly.

Captain Tourgaba stood up and readjusted his holster. 'Nothing very much, sir. North Africa is not London. Those who penetrate the Casbah must expect trouble. It is not a playground.'

Benson glanced at the sad figure of Morris Simpson. He seemed to be hardly breathing at all.

Captain Tourgaba scratched his ear and looked hard at Benson. 'What is it that your friend discovered, Mr Benson? Do you know?'

Benson shook his head slowly. 'The Talking Ferret was phenomenal enough—' he said, and Captain Tourgaba grunted impatiently.

'We know that. It is a Bazaar trick. There are also rabbits that dance. What we are curious to know about is this cache of evil your friend writes of.'

Benson stood up. His face was pale and drawn. 'I wish I knew, Captain,' he said softly, 'I wish I knew.'

It was a vivid dawn, already scorchingly hot, and the Bazaar was alive with early-morning sounds. Benson parked his rented Thunderbird in a patch of shadow and lit a cigarette. He was tired and unshaven after driving all night from Sousse, but he knew he could not rest until he found the Talking Ferret again. Whatever horror Morris Simpson had uncovered could not remain a secret for ever. Captain Tourgaba had advised him not to leave Sousse – but Benson was not one to play lap-dog to petty officialdom. In spite of the warnings he had set off determined to resolve the mystery himself.

He locked the car and struck out for the centre of the Bazaar. It was less crowded than it had been in the big cobbled square. A clutch of pigeons took flight at his approach and soared in an arc about the castellated walls.

Benson hurried across the square to the small alleyway that had previously afforded entrance to the ferret and its grisly handler. It sloped away into the shadows, curving sharply to the right behind the crumbling houses. It was so narrow that Benson had to turn sideways and make progress crab-like between the filth-spattered walls. The alley continued for about a hundred yards past blind windows and rusting, empty lamp brackets. Eventually it terminated in a small courtyard with cracked flagstones and a disused well-head. Directly opposite was a shuttered house with large studded doors. A red cross was painted crudely on the wall.

Benson paused and crushed out his cigarette. If the dwarf had emerged into the big square from the alley then he could only have come from *this* courtyard. There were no other sidestreets or turnings, only blank walls.

As he approached the doors he saw one of the window shutters move. Behind it he caught a fleeting glimpse of a yellowish face and a glistening, muscular body.

Of course, one of the dwarf's bodyguards! Emboldened, he raised a hand to the door – and then he hesitated. What in God's name was he, an unarmed civilian, doing outside this forbidding place? What indeed was he going to do, even if he obtained entry?

Suddenly his drive from Sousse and his keen curiosity

seemed faintly lunatic. Why hadn't he listened to the police captain and let them handle it as they had suggested? Chastened by his own recklessness, he turned to retrace his steps into the alley. As he did so the nerves of his belly bunched with fright.

The alley was blocked by a yellow giant in ragged pantaloons. From his right hand dangled a curved dagger.

Benson took a cautious pace forward and then stopped. The giant was crouching like a panther about to spring. Benson retreated, step by step, and the giant followed him, knife-arm raised. When Benson's back was pressed against the studded door the giant suddenly straightened up and slipped the knife into his waistband.

Behind him Benson heard a bolt scraping and felt the door swinging inwards. He turned and found himself facing the second yellow giant. Any attempt at escape was clearly ludicrous, and with a resigned shrug Benson allowed himself to be escorted into the house.

It was a tall, granite building built around a small courtyard. Stone steps led to a first-floor gallery at the end of which were a pair of richly carved mahogany doors. The first giant pushed them open and beckoned for Benson to enter. He found himself in a spacious, vaulted chamber with high, barred windows and bare walls. The floor was ankle-high with chopped straw and smelt like a zoo. Various wooden cages were piled one on top of the other against the far wall. To the right was a heavy steel bench fitted with a vice and some curious metal clamps. Behind the desk, in a studded chair, sat the dwarf. He still wore the greasy fez but his kaftan was covered by a white surgeon's coat and his hands were clad in rubber gauntlets.

A small furry creature was spread on the bench in front of him, and although it was breathing it appeared to be unconscious. In a large cage next to the dwarf were two baby ferrets, romping playfully. As Benson took in the scene he noticed that all the cages contained live ferrets too.

As he drew level with the bench, the dwarf seized the furry body in front of him and held it towards Benson. It was a ferret, but with a monstrously oversized head. The eyes, stretched either side of the bulging cranium, were livid and bloodshot.

Dried blood and thick new stitches scored the shaven skull.

The dwarf seized the ferret's tail and twisted it fiercely. Its jaws gaped, and it spoke. 'For pity's sake, Howard – in the name of God you must help me!'

Benson felt a scream rising in his throat but he stifled it. The voice that had issued from the ferret was that of Morris Simpson. The dwarf gave a mocking laugh and threw the creature to the floor where it scampered to a nearby cage. The wave of nausea that had engulfed Benson was replaced by a boiling fury. 'You monstrous little devil!' he cried. 'I'll see you hang for this!'

The dwarf grimaced hideously. 'Meddling infidel,' he said softly, 'you will regret your curiosity, of that I can assure you.'

Powerful hands seized Benson's arms on either side and he was dragged backwards and forced into a chair. The dwarf snapped his fingers and the two giant attendants secured Benson's wrists and ankles with strips of goat-hide.

'Prepare!' screamed the dwarf, and the giants lumbered over to the piled cages and began taking out the ferrets. All at once the room was filled with a dreadful babble of voices – shrill, human voices that rose to a pitch of hysteria punctuated by sobs and anguished cries. Above the din came the plaintive weeping of a child.

The dwarf pointed at a small greyish ferret that the first giant had released, and it was brought to the table. The dwarf prised open its mouth and thrust a small pill into its gullet, then he closed the jaws and held them, forcing the animal to swallow. Its body convulsed, and then arched almost double, but the dwarf held fast. Slowly its struggles grew weaker until after half a minute it rolled over and lay on its side breathing deeply.

'Watch closely,' he said, flexing his fingers, 'and you will not be disappointed. You will notice that I intend performing a highly complicated and delicate piece of surgery. *Two* pieces of surgery, in fact, and I will do so without the massive resources of a large hospital. When I was deported from the United States, many years ago, they told me that I was a menace to their precious social order. They prevented me

continuing with my experiments merely because I didn't hold a worthless piece of paper which they insisted, in their foolish and pathetic obstinacy, was necessary to prove I was a doctor.

'Well – I have proved it well enough now, and in full and generous measure! See how deftly I shave the ferret's head – such swift, sure strokes. No hesitation here. No sign of weakness. Watch! See how simply I cut through the ferret's skull – as simply as cracking an egg. Now see its living brain – all grey and wet, and pulsating with life. How can I keep it alive – is it not impossible? Ha! I see you gape and not even blink for fear of missing my skilful work. See how it *moves* – even in the bowl – alive – throbbing – scheming. See how I prise open the empty skull – wider – wider still, like the bloody, gaping mouth of an alligator. See the sightless eyes stretch – see the tiny blood vessels burst in the eyeballs as I push them wider and wider apart. Now the *cave* is ready, a soft, moist, open place hungry to be filled. Now I must move swiftly before the body starts to deteriorate – we have half an hour at the most. Talus and Shimba must prepare you . . .'

Benson felt hands on his neck, hot rancid breath in his face. The chair tilted backwards, he caught a whiff of ether, saw a razor glinting, heard the dwarf's monstrous chuckling, then silence. Darkness, oblivion.

When he regained consciousness he was aware of a massive throbbing in his head. He tried to sit up but hands restrained him. He opened his mouth to scream and a hand covered his mouth. But it was a gentle hand. Soft. Feminine. Gradually his eyes focused on a white-clad figure standing over him. The face was young, composed, pretty.

'Please try to sleep,' a voice said. 'You can talk later.'

Benson lay quite still trying to unscramble his crazy thoughts. Another figure appeared – and this one was familiar: the uniformed figure of Captain Tourgaba. He was unshaven and hollow-eyed.

The young girl spoke briefly with him and then stood up. The captain sat cautiously at the bedside and took off his cap. 'The nurse says I may have five minutes with you,' he said.

Benson nodded weakly. It was a nightmare. 'Where – what has happened?' he said.

Captain Tourgaba pulled a very wry face. 'You don't remember?'

Benson shook his head. The movement was excruciating.

Captain Tourgaba grinned suddenly and patted Benson's arm. 'We arrived in the proverbial nick of time – I think that is the expression, eh? The dwarf is dead. He tried to pull a gun on us – we were obliged to shoot him. All the ferrets are dead also, and by special government order – the house is to be demolished. Nothing will remain. It will be as if it never happened. I think it is better that way.'

Benson tried to sit up again but he felt a wave of giddiness.

Captain Tourgaba shrugged, as if to himself, and took out a pack of cigarettes. 'Don't tell the nurse that I smoked.' He grinned. 'She will scold me.'

'For *God's* sake,' croaked Benson, 'what were they doing to me when you arrived?'

'Shaving your head,' said Tourgaba, lighting his cigarette. 'There was a struggle – a bit of a fight. Unfortunately a table landed on your head – nasty bump but nurse says it's not serious.'

'And Morris Simpson?' said Benson. 'How is he?'

Captain Tourgaba drew on his cigarette and then exhaled slowly. 'Bad news, sir. I am afraid the doctors could not save him. He did regain consciousness briefly but, alas, when they took away the bandages he tried to bite the nurse. He was most violent – it took several men to restrain him. His snarling and barking were terrible to hear.

'They administered a strong sedative – too strong, I'm afraid – and – well – it was perhaps better that way. Do you not agree?'

Benson tried to fight back the hot tears that had started in his eyes. He looked at the captain and nodded.

'Yes,' he said softly. 'It *was* better that way.'

Christopher Bray

The Municipal Gardener

He stopped as he was passing the sergeant and the man behind stumbled against him. It was clear he had something to say and that nothing less than a bullet was going to stop him. There was anyway such a harmonious kind of innocence about him that no one even tried. And what harm could he do with his hands clasped behind his dirty neck, the strong fingers that still held the black half-moons of soil laced tight together? The sergeant shook his head at the corporal and inclined it towards the supplicant, prepared to be amused.

'Speak and be quick!'

'Yes, yes. Be quick. Yes, of course.' He cleared his throat. 'I've only this to say . . . ' He paused again and in that slight pause the tension rose. What *would* this man say? Would he make a confession? Would he pour out desperate abuse? Even attack? But no. It seemed this man was different. He spoke quietly. Though dirty and with a three-day growth of beard his face showed no immediate malice. In the yellowed eyes there was only the glow of an abstracted hate. And his words, when he finally spoke them, made no sense at all. They were stupid, ludicrous, the words of a simpleton.

' . . . Only this. When I get there I will let you know. And when I return I will also send you a postcard.'

The sergeant didn't often laugh. Nor was the sound of laughter normally heard in that particular courtyard. But now the walls resounded. The air was blown with gusts of tobacco-tainted laughter, filled with the sight of lifted moustaches, yellow teeth, drawn lips and the shadows of vacant mouths.

The gardener had spoken seriously, gravely. He had not expected laughter. Simple though they were, these were not words to be laughed at. Would a man joke about such a thing?

Would a man make such a promise idly at such a time? No. They must understand it was not a joke. The grubby fingers unlaced. With the same deftness and speed with which he was known to plant a string of spring flowers the length of the Alameda he put one hand to his mouth, bit into a vein and smeared the thin rush of blood on to the sergeant's immaculate uniform. Against the clean grey cloth it lay in long stitches from the right shoulder to the left abdomen. In the fallen silence he put his hands together again behind his neck and laced his fingers tight as if he had never moved. The blood from the broken vein trickled freely down his back beneath the collar of the coarse brown shirt. What, after all, did a little blood more or less matter now?

It took little time, those few words with the sergeant. And the time it had taken for him to put his seal, as it were, on the uniform of the sergeant, that too had taken no time at all. Yet, by some power, perhaps only by the desperate simplicity of the man, that sacramental act at once began to extend itself, to expand, to shadow the sky above the courtyard like the proverbial cloud that was at first no bigger than a man's hand.

The sergeant recovered quickly, though his face was still pale. It was as if the blood from it had been drained down into that running scarlet wound on his uniform. There was no more laughter. Laughter was dead. Slowly and thoughtfully he replaced the pistol that had sprung so quickly into his hand. He ignored the gardener, nodded to the corporal to carry on and strolled the short distance over the dusty ground to the line of men who stood at ease with their rifles. He spoke briefly to them all and then to one in particular. They nodded, indifferent, only slightly puzzled.

On the corporal's command the rifles sang the one necessary note. The men, who had been marched and halted against the pockmarked wall, pitched and fell with a curious soundlessness. Before the echo of the rifles had died away the arms, the legs, the clenched hands had given their last involuntary shudder and were still. Blood ran into the fresh sawdust. The smell of it and the smell of terror new-mown rose sweet and sour into the

clear air, and the gardener, who alone of all the men had been shot in the stomach and was now slumped back against the wall, breathed it quick and sharp in high little breaths. He alone, of all the men, was still alive. He knew why he had been given this special honour. The sergeant, the sergeant had ordered it.

The gardener lowered himself on to the sand. He wiped the sweat from his face with his forearm and looked down at his belly. Such a little hole. Small enough to plant a pepper seed. Then he began to feel the pain in earnest and to realize how great was the honour he had been granted. He jerked up his head. The corporal was marching the soldiers away. The sergeant was strolling towards him.

His face was still pale. But he was smiling. He stood and looked down at the gardener.

'Well? How about a few last cretinous words?'

The gardener licked his lips. Then he shook his head slowly. He looked steadily up at the sergeant. Even when the sergeant took the pistol from its holster and held it a centimetre from his half-open mouth his eyes never faltered. Even when he pulled the trigger.

'Off you go, then,' said the sergeant, holstering the gun.

The gardener, however, had already left.

Walking back across the courtyard the sergeant registered the fact that even at the last moment the gardener had not looked at him with hatred, nor even contempt. No. It seemed there had been no time for self-indulgence. He was looking, the sergeant decided as he entered the shade and solace of the administration building, he *had* looked (he quickly corrected himself) with the eyes of one who had made a promise. And would keep it.

But this was too much. It made him laugh all over again. He stopped in the wide arched doorway and looked back at the fallen line of men. Two orderlies had already begun to throw the bodies on to a cart. A bullock stood patiently in the shafts. The sergeant shook his head, took out a white handkerchief and dabbed vigorously at the bloodstain on his uniform. He managed to clean it a little. His wife would do the rest. He

tossed the soiled handkerchief carelessly on to the ground and walked inside the building.

The new administration centre was housed in what had been, a fortnight before, a Jesuit school. It had been damaged in the fighting. One of the gables had been shattered by a shell from an ancient 88mm gun and in the front façade several windows were missing and the frames badly splintered by gunfire. But it had not suffered too badly.

Two sentries now lounged outside the entrance hall, sheltering from the force of the sun in the thin shadow of the building. They held the automatic rifles like old friends. Although it was clearly their duty to challenge anyone entering the building uninvited, the small black and white mongrel dog that had just trotted through the high front gates certainly thought itself beyond military regulations. It cocked a leg against the trunk of the camellia tree halfway across the forecourt and then trotted purposefully on towards the sentries. As it passed them one of them tried to give it a playful kick, but missed. They both saw that it held a piece of paper in its mouth. Before they had time to think about that the dog had vanished. The two sentries looked at each other and shrugged.

The sergeant was sitting at the desk in his office. On it was a rubber date-stamp. A collection of pens, a packet of cigarettes, a long black cigarette holder and an open file. The wall to his left was the window, untouched by gunfire, behind him was a blank wall with yellowing paint and a large photograph of a military man (the new president) festooned with bunting like a warship newly arrived in a friendly port. The wall to his right was covered with numbered files.

The sergeant was bored. He stared at the door in front of him for several minutes without blinking, without thinking. Then he sighed and turned again to the file that lay open before him. He toyed with it, ran the familiar phrases over his tongue, made a few notes and decided to smoke another cigarette. He preferred black tobacco. It held in full strength that particular fragrance that was the pride of South America. He tapped out a

cigarette from the packet, fitted it to the long holder, struck a match and blew the first lungful of smoke into the air among the dancing flies. Then he turned in his chair and stared out of the window at the sunlight and at the shadows that were drawing into the shelter of tree and house. It was very quiet in his room at that moment and he heard the scratching at his door clearly.

'Come in.'

He blew more smoke at the flies, turning back in his chair, facing the door, arranging the file. Whoever it was, it would soon be time for siesta. The scratching came again at the door and this time he did not bother to call out. It was obviously some wretched animal. Safe within the administration building he had no fears, least of all of a dog or a cat or whatever it was. He got up from his chair, walked round the desk and opened the door.

He saw the postcard at once. He squatted, careful for his immaculate uniform, and rested his hand carefully on the little dog's neck.

'Well, what have you come to see me about, eh? Are you lost, hm? Or looking for a girlfriend, is that it? You won't find any bitches in this building. None at all. Now what are you carrying there?'

The animal looked at him and let the postcard fall from his mouth.

The sergeant picked it up. 'May I read . . . ?'

The postcard was clearly addressed to him. The handwriting was legible and firm. He read it slowly and aloud.

'As I promised, so I do. I have arrived.'

It was unsigned.

He read the message many times. It made no sense to him. None at all. He looked at the dog and laughed. Then he remembered. He was a prosaic, unimaginative man and the dumb panic that hit him was soon under control and at once his habitual thought processes presented him with the necessary explanation and countermeasure.

He swept the dog into his office with the toe of his black boot and closed the door. Then for a moment he stood frowning before the wall of files. Then he selected one, took it to his desk,

opened it and sat down to read. He nodded to himself, lit another cigarette.

'No relations,' he muttered to himself. 'No known relatives.'

He looked down at the dog. It lay at his feet, resting, panting, as if waiting further orders. He picked up the telephone, dialled an internal number. A minute later two men in civilian clothes knocked at the door and entered. They listened in silence while the sergeant gave his instructions. They looked down at the dog. They read the card that the sergeant finally flicked across towards them.

'No one,' said the sergeant, 'no one threatens me. And remember, if you lose that dog I'll have your hides.'

The two men grinned. The sergeant lifted the dog from the floor with the toe of his boot. It stood and stretched itself, shivering from head to tail and then, as if knowing exactly what was expected of it, trotted out into the first of many corridors. Hastily the two men saluted, closed the door, and followed.

The sergeant looked at his watch and crossed his legs. He closed the open file and gazed out of the window, remembering. There had been many deaths, many killings, many executions, in those early weeks. There were fewer now. But he remembered the man clearly. Apart from anything else the bloodstain on his uniform was a painful enough memory. And of course there were those ridiculous words! A simpleton! A cretin!

In the ordinary course of events such a man would remain in obscurity. But, of course, the revolution was no ordinary event and the foreign journalists had come prying, talking to anyone and everyone. One of them had even talked to the municipal gardener. The municipal gardener had been fool enough to talk back. His words had been taken up. They had been printed in a foreign newspaper and then they had re-bounded, as it were, and been re-translated and printed in the official newspaper. The few words had caused a few smiles in police and military circles. Nothing more.

The sergeant opened the file again.

What had he said? Oh, yes. 'They win, they lose. But during revolutions green plants don't get enough water.'

No more. No less.

The sergeant had been the only one who did not laugh or even smile. It was no joke. No joke at all. It was a statement of contempt, a tacit denial of the glory of this revolution to end all others.

He had summoned the municipal gardener to his office and flung the newspaper at him. 'Did you say that?'

The gardener picked the newspaper from the floor and laid it reverently back on the desk. The sergeant stabbed it with a soft, blunt finger. He had already begun a file on the man. He had already taken a strong dislike to him.

'That!'

The gardener leant forward. His eyes wandered over the page. His lips moved silently.

'Please, sir, would you kindly read it for me. I cannot . . .'

The sergeant snatched away the paper, leant back in the chair and began to read. By heavy emphasis he managed to convey his sense of outrage, indignation.

The gardener listened, his head slightly on one side, the straw sombrero motionless in his strong hands. It was high time, he was thinking (looking sideways out of the window) that that camellia tree in the forecourt had some water too. It was dropping its pink blossoms too soon. They were withered in the bud.

'Did you say that?'

'It . . . sounds like me.'

'To a *foreign* journalist?'

The gardener shrugged. 'It was a long time ago.'

'Two weeks ago.'

'That is what I mean.'

The gardener sighed. Both the sergeant and the sergeant's office were spotless. He had been mulching the carnations that bordered the Alameda when the soldiers had come and taken him away. He had had no time to wash his hands or put on a clean shirt and he thought it was perhaps because of this that the sergeant was getting so angry.

'Green plants,' muttered the sergeant.

'Yes, sir.'

The sergeant was indeed finding it difficult to control his anger. He lit another cigarette. And it was for cretins like this, he told himself, that the revolution was fought! *Is still being* fought (he corrected himself), remembering the fighting in the mountains. Cretins like this staring like dumb cattle in the face of glorious deeds, desperate sacrifices! 'Green plants, indeed!' he suddenly shouted, making the gardener jump.

'Yes, sir.'

'It is no time for your green plants, least of all two weeks ago.'

'It is all I know.'

'Mother of God! Don't you see? It's nothing to do with green plants! It's either *for* us! Or *against* us!'

The gardener turned down the corners of his mouth and shrugged. What did these meaningless words mean? What difference did they make? The carnations needed mulching or they would wither in the fierce sun.

The sergeant shouted at him again. 'Imbecile!'

Perhaps the gardener began to sense the danger. He looked away from the camellia tree and counted the pens on the sergeant's desk. There were eleven and they stood in a plastic cup. 'I am an ignorant man,' he finally said.

Both men were quieter now. The sergeant spoke softly. 'But you must decide. If you are not *with* us we must assume . . .'

The gardener's face turned as solid as a block of weather-hardened wood. 'Who am I to decide? Who am I to judge? I cannot.'

The sergeant sat back in his chair and drew on the cigarette. He looked out of the window. He no longer wished to look at the gardener, even to impose his contempt on such a creature.

'Well, die, then. And learn the value of life, human life. And forget your green plants, as you call them. This is a revolution. D'you hear me?'

The gardener drew the battered sombrero up to his chest. He, too, looked again out of the window. He made no protest. The guard led him away.

Die . . .?

* * *

That long stain of blood, the sergeant observed, staring down at his uniform, was still faintly discernible, although his wife had washed it well. Now it was only possible to see the stain if you were actually looking for it. For no reason in particular he grinned, the moustache lifting, showing his teeth.

And now the dog.

He picked up the postcard and read it over again. Yes. In fact it looked as if he had been right after all. Call it instinct. A case of political subversion. And now, whoever they were, the dead man's friends had played right into his hands in a stupid attempt at intimidation.

The soldiers in civilian clothes knocked on the door and entered. They stood at attention on the other side of the desk. The sergeant was surprised to see them back so soon but he looked up at them eagerly, confidently.

'Well?'

Neither of the soldiers seemed willing to speak. They looked uncertainly at each other.

'We . . .'

'We lost it.'

'No. No . . . It, in an empty street, just outside the gate, it, the dog vanished!'

Next morning the sergeant visited the two men in their cell. They had been living on bread and water. When they saw him they struggled to their feet and stood unhappily at attention.

'All right. You've had a chance to think about it. Now what exactly do you mean, vanished?'

They looked at each other.

'Mother of God! Look at the schoolgirls! Don't look at each other. Look at me! Now . . .'

One of the men began to shake his head sadly. He pointed to the stone floor of the cell a few feet in front of him. 'It was just one minute there. By a tree, doing his business. And then it vanished. It vanished!'

The sergeant turned to the other man. 'Is that your story too?'

'Well, you see, Sergeant . . . Yes, it is.'

The sergeant hit him in the face with his closed hand. It hurt them both. The sergeant at least felt better for it.

'Fools!' he said bitterly, and slammed the door.

Two days later, at the same time, the scratching came again at his door. It made him catch his breath. He hadn't expected such luck. It was strange too because only a few minutes before his office had been bursting with NCOs to whom the sergeant had relayed relevant orders for the coordination of the two supply columns that were to converge beyond the town and make for the sierras. And now his office was empty and here was the scratching again at his door. He opened it. The little black and white mongrel at once trotted briskly in, tail wagging. There was another postcard in its mouth. The sergeant shut the door, took the postcard, walked to his chair, sat down and read it.

The balance of his mind was for a moment thrown by the sheer accuracy of the words. It was as if whoever was writing these cards had actually been there at the time they were spoken! The impossibility of this quickly brought his reason to heel.

He laid the postcard on his desk and lit a cigarette, not bothering to use the holder. Then he picked the postcard up casually, as if he were seeing it for the first time. He even read it aloud.

' "As I promised, so I do." ' He cleared his throat. ' "I have returned." '

The sergeant began to laugh quietly to himself. The file of the municipal gardener still lay on his desk. He took out the first postcard and compared the handwriting. Identical.

'Now we're getting somewhere,' he told himself. 'That bastard couldn't write. He couldn't even read.'

He rose decisively to his feet and began wandering around the office, opening drawers. At last he found the rope he wanted and quickly knotted one end to the dog's stout leather collar. He took the automatic pistol from its holster and replaced it, thinking to himself that as it was clearly a trap he would be ready for it.

'All right,' he said to the mongrel, which now looked up at him with moist, inquiring eyes. 'Lead on, Houdini. No tricks with me. Not this time.'

He opened the door and gave the dog an ungentle kick.

'Come on.'

The dog led the way directly to the Alameda. The town was busy. Workmen were clearing rubble from the streets. The shops and the banks were open and doing a cautious trade. The cafés and bars had no lack of customers. The streets were noisy with military vehicles and the swaying, jostling trams, and the pavements, along which the sergeant hurriedly made his way, were as full of people as they ever were. The town had changed. There were whole buildings missing, bullet-marked walls and broken windows. Over coffee and cognac it was still possible to read of the fighting with the guerillas that was taking place in the sierras only twenty miles away.

At first when he left the administration building the sergeant had been self-conscious, with that little dog leading him on the end of a piece of rope. Now, in the busy town, he no longer thought about it. The dog seemed to know where it was going, which justified everything. If he was thinking about anything he was thinking about the praise his initiative and courage would earn him from his superiors. He had no doubt at that time that the dog would lead him to some slum backstreet, to a small nest of reactionaries who it would be his pleasure to eliminate. It was part of what he liked to call the romance of revolution.

From time to time the dog looked back at him, at the man it was leading. The sergeant had to pull on the rope at intervals to stop it going ahead too fast. He liked to be cautious.

But when the dog reached the Alameda it stopped. At once the sergeant was alert, looking swiftly around him. People walked past without showing either him or the dog any special interest. The dog pulled over to a bed of withered plants that ran the length of the square and cocked a leg. The sergeant took the opportunity to reach into a pocket and mop his face with a large white handkerchief. Sultry clouds were reaching out over

the lowland and it was becoming unbearably hot and sticky. He put the handkerchief away and looked down at the dog, smiling under his thin moustache. He had decided, while mopping his face, that the wisest thing to do would be to find where the dog lived, keep the place under surveillance, and then pounce, having called for reinforcements. There were after all sensible limits to heroism, especially after the worst fighting was over.

He had put from his mind the earlier panic, that sudden dizzy loneliness that had fallen on him. His right hand came to its habitual rest on the grip of the automatic. And that was always reassurance enough against anything.

But he was growing impatient. Not content with one withered plant the dog had moved to another. And then another. He gave the rope a little jerk. But the dog paid no attention. It moved farther down the line, quickly and purposefully, lifting a leg, scattering a few drops over each in turn.

The sergeant felt the back of his neck begin to redden with embarrassment. He looked around. Three workmen were lounging on chairs outside a café. And a middle-aged woman. And a prostitute. But none of them was in the least interested in him or the dog. He gave the rope another jerk, pulling the dog away from the plants. It turned and growled and the sergeant gave way, slackening the rope. Quickly and methodically the dog covered another six plants. In spite of himself the sergeant was fascinated. Where was it all coming from, all that piss? Did it really intend to . . .

It had happened again. That terrible loneliness had fallen on him in a great white wave and for a long while, it seemed to him, he was smothered in it, struggling for life. He broke free of it and his mind began to work again, to give him some sort of definition, a rule of thumb that would give him a guide, any guide. Yes. He decided. Another ten. Yes. Ten. It was beyond all reason . . . He began to count carefully while the dog continued to move busily from plant to plant. There was no brief scatter of drops now. Only that one repeated movement, plant after plant. The sergeant quickly mopped his face and dropped his hand again on the pistol grip. He looked around furtively at

the people sitting outside the café. The prostitute was watching him now. She smiled. He turned away. And he had lost count. Mother of God! Mother of God, what am I doing! Ten, fifty, a million! So what! What did it prove. It was madness!

He gave the rope a savage jerk, pulling the dog away on to the pavement. It fell and rolled on its back and then stood again, facing him. The sergeant jiggled the rope impatiently.

'Come on, you little bastard. Lead the way.'

The dog stood motionless, looking down at the pavement. The sergeant stared at it and then, unable to bear his impatience any longer, kicked it hard with the shining toe of his boot. The dog howled with sudden fury, leapt forward and buried its teeth in the sergeant's calf.

In one blinding surge of anger and terror, right there in the Alameda, the sergeant drew his pistol and fired.

The bullet made a neat hole just about at the top of his boot-laces. It passed clean through his foot, struck the pavement and rebounded into the heel of his boot. All this was clear when the three workmen helped him to a chair outside the restaurant and he sat in the shade of the awning while the café owner and the prostitute vied with each other to untie the laces. The boot was already filling with blood.

The shock of pain had settled the sergeant. He had recovered himself. He no longer felt alone. He smiled gratefully at the workmen, at the café owner, at the prostitute. He could have reached out and patted their heads. They were good people. All good people. He asked, very politely, if someone would be so good as to apply a tourniquet. The café owner made one from a tea cloth. The sergeant directed its application. Wounds he could deal with. The boot was removed. Then the sock. The café owner held up a large glass of brandy. The sergeant nodded. The café owner poured a little on the wound and gave the rest to the sergeant to drink. The sergeant smiled. The terrible loneliness had gone. He drank down the brandy. The workmen sat at a table close by, the café owner stood, solicitous and attentive, watching to see that the whore made no mistake. The whore was gently washing the blood from his foot. The

sergeant looked down at her, at his foot, at the neat red drill hole. The brandy had braced him. He was . . . happy.

It occurred to him.

'What happened to the dog?'

There was a silence. The whore was busy bandaging his foot. The café owner said he would go at once to fetch another brandy. The three workmen eased themselves back on their chairs. The sergeant looked at them. They looked down at their hands, at the callouses, at the marks of toil. One of them said brightly:

'Carlitos will fetch another brandy. He is a good man.'

The café owner returned. The sergeant drank the brandy in three level gulps and then asked again what had happened to the dog. Again there was silence.

They are frightened, thought the sergeant. They are frightened of something.

He allowed his right hand to settle on the grip of the pistol.

The three workmen drew in their breath, the café owner stood very still, and the whore, who had finished bandaging the foot, sank slowly back on to her haunches. All stared at him.

'I order you to speak,' said the sergeant.

The café owner spread his hands, lifted his shoulders. 'But I was inside. I was serving a customer. I saw nothing.'

The three workmen shifted under the sergeant's stare. They looked at each other. 'We were talking together,' said one. 'We, I, that is, saw nothing. Not even you. Certainly not a . . . a dog.'

The other two at once agreed, nodding vigorously.

'Yes, he's right.'

'Only when the shot . . .'

The sergeant snarled at them. 'Ah! So you actually *heard* a shot, did you? And in that split-second you *must* have looked up. So what did you see? What?'

The warmth and the friendliness was long gone. The sergeant sat besieged on the metal chair in a whelming tide of loneliness. He longed to be back in the administration centre. Civilians! He hated them! The fear in their eyes! Their cringing . . .

The three workmen were unable to answer. They had seen what they had seen.

'Sergeant . . .'

It was the whore. She was smiling gently at him. 'Look, there was really no dog. Really. No dog at all.'

And now it was out, now it was said, the three workmen spoke, almost as gently, as soothingly, all with an eye on the hand that clutched at the pistol.

'She's right, you know.'

'There really was no dog. It's true.'

The sergeant leant back in the chair and smiled. He lifted his eyebrows. He spoke mildly. 'True? True, is it?'

'Yes, yes.'

He brought his fist down, crashing on the metal table at his side, the fist that still held the length of rope.

'Then why this piece of rope, which I was using for a lead. And why,' he said, remembering now the dog's howling attack and the sharp teeth sinking into the calf of his leg, 'why do I have teeth marks on the calf of my . . . leg?'

He had stopped and pulled the grey trousers up to his knee. He had meant that last word to be a challenge, a vindication, to have in it the ring of shaken manacles. But in fact the word sagged and fell flat.

There were no teeth marks. No sign of any rending of flesh. Not even a scratch.

'Here,' said the whore quickly, 'let me tie that bandage a little tighter. Next thing we know it'll be coming undone.'

She reached forward, practical and businesslike.

The sergeant pushed her aside. He reached down and began to put on the boot. He did so savagely, welcoming the pain. He didn't bother with the blood-soaked sock. He stood to his feet.

'Get out of my way.'

Nobody was in it.

He threw down the length of rope, took some coins from his pocket and dashed them on the table. He found, after a few trial steps, that by walking with the sole of his right foot flat on the ground he could get along quite easily.

* * *

He lay in bed, staring at the ceiling. The day before the army doctor had visited his house, cleaned and bandaged the wound. The army doctor had been delighted with his work, had beamed and snatched a kiss from the tips of his fingers 'Magnificent. In five days . . . you will walk!'

The sergeant saw no reason to doubt it.

And now his wife had gone shopping. Before she left he had asked her to close the shutters against the brief twilight. The mosquitoes were bad that year. Now the room was dimly lit by a light bulb that burned naked above his wife's dressing table.

He lay in bed, staring at the ceiling. There was nothing to think about. Nothing he wanted to think about. Nothing at all. In repose his face was pale and sullen. His wife had insisted on shaving him, trimming his moustache, brushing his hair. He had resisted for a while and then given way. His wife had enjoyed doing those things for him.

He sighed and lifted his head from the pillow, saw through the cracks in the shutters that night had already fallen. When he rested his head again he was aware of the solid reassurance of his pistol under the pillow. How many years had he had it? Too many to count. And always at his side. Why that cold, clever piece of metal was like a . . . like a . . . and his mind reeled away on all the things it was like, all the things it meant to him, until he was laughing, noisily and defiantly. And then instinctively he was suddenly quiet and the room was so still he heard a cockroach scurrying over the floor and he could have sworn he also heard something snuffling and scratching outside his door.

He shook his head. There was nothing.

He reached up beneath the pillow and closed his hand round the cold metal grip. He rested his finger along the trigger guard and smiled. He lay in the bed, staring at the ceiling. He looked at the walls. The place was as good as a prison. He couldn't leave it. He was trapped. He thought of the two men who were locked in the cell in the administration building on his orders and his immediate reaction was to have them released. But then, he thought, if I do that I'm as good as saying that I believe them, that I believe . . .

There was no doubt this time about the sound at the door.

The hair on the back of his head bristled. He drew the pistol down from under the pillow and held it across his chest, waiting, holding his breath, hoping that that sound would go away, that that wretched dog would leave him in peace; that he wouldn't have to act, to think, to consider again that absurd, terrible possibility.

And there was, for some time, silence.

And then again came the scratching, persistently echoing inside the silent bedroom, demanding that the door be opened.

Smothered by fear, the sergeant was still able to discover within himself a tiny flicker of resistance, a small flame of fury, of pride. He nurtured it as his only hope, nourished it, coaxed it higher and higher until he was able to get down from the bed, walk painfully and softly to the door, turn the handle and fling it open.

His pistol was down, ready to fire, but he stood in his night-dress looking down the empty flight of stairs, looking at nothing but the slow disintegration of something he had *known* to be there.

And then, behind him, inside the room, the dog howled.

He slammed the door and wheeled around all in one white, furious movement. He couldn't see the dog. He thought it must be under the bed, that he had it cornered, that he could kill it easily now, whenever he wanted. And, strangely, he delayed looking, delayed actually getting down on his hands and knees and making sure. And all the time the howling continued until it seemed to him to come from within his own head.

Then somewhere out there, beyond the aura of this sound, he heard the tread of his wife's feet quite distinctly coming up the stairs. He could even hear her voice. She was calling to him as she always did.

'Told you I wouldn't be long.'

The sergeant went to the door and locked it against her. She must not know! She must not see that howling dog, or hear it! He could explain it later, in time. But now he must lock the door. As the key turned in the lock the room fell suddenly silent, and when he looked around he saw that the municipal

gardener was standing on the far side of the bed, not ten feet away.

Eagerly, happily the sergeant fired the gun. He fired twice, to make sure. But he must have missed because the municipal gardener moved away, slowly and calmly, around the bed, moving towards him, fixing him with that remembered look of stubborn simplicity. The sergeant took careful aim and fired. He was aware of his wife screaming and hammering at the door but that sound came from so far away, from another world. There was only a bedroom, a sergeant, a municipal gardener and a gun. And the municipal gardener did not seem to mind the bullets that the sergeant fired as he walked towards him. And as for the sergeant, it must be said for him that he didn't flinch. He stood his ground and fired the gun. In his mind he was obliterating that hard peasant body, those shabby clothes, that stubble beard, those simple eyes. As he fired he obliterated the municipal gardener with words, too, shouting Cretin! Imbecile! until that imperturbable image, moving closer and closer to him, at last seemed to merge, to impale him where he stood, and an unspeakable coolness at once filled all his body and he lowered the pistol and sank down on to the edge of the bed.

The pain in his foot returned. He looked down at the blood-soaked bandage. And then he heard his wife sobbing at the door. The sergeant smiled. It was, he felt, all over. He had come through. He rose to his feet, called to his wife to stop crying, that everything was OK. He unlocked the door and opened it and stood there smiling at her. She dropped the shopping bag, her hands reached to cover her face. She screamed and screamed. The sergeant stepped towards her, frowning, and she turned and fled down the stairs and from the bottom screamed up at him in fury now and terror:

'My husband! What have you done to my husband!'

He stood there and frowned down at her. Then he smiled. She was upset, shocked. It would pass. There were so many things he knew now, things he was surprised to find he understood. He understood this woman, this screaming. Though that wasn't very clever. He understood, too, that perhaps in the past

he might have been over-hasty in some actions, over-reacted in the red haze of revolutionary fervour. But it was over. It was all over now. And his wife would come back. She was tired, looking after him. He was tired. The whole world was tired. Let the world rest.

He opened the shutters of the bedroom and breathed in the night air. The stars were already bright in the deepening sky He looked down into the street and saw how pleasing the shape of the chestnut tree was, how the streetlight danced on its leaves. He smiled. A breeze rose up and died away and he smelt the air with delicacy, as if a beautiful woman had hurried by and left her fragrance lingering. He smiled again. The fragrance was rain.

He left the window and went to his wife's dressing table. It was his intention to brush his hair, to perfume himself a little. Every time he put his right foot to the floor it left behind a damp smudge of blood. But he didn't mind. And it hurt now but he didn't mind that either. When his wife returned he would calm her fears, take her in his arms and make love to her. He was amused now at the bullet smashes in the soft wall. A miracle, he saw, that the mirror hadn't been shattered. He sat down before it and reached for the hairbrush. He paused. His hands moved upwards towards his face, felt the coarse growth, the weather-hardened skin. He stared at himself with fascination, with a suddenly injured innocence. His body sweated with terror yet the face that stared out at him from the mirror remained impassive, and implacable. From the depths, from another world the remembered hand fell on the grip of the remembered gun and opening his mouth wide, almost greedily, he shot himself.

Dulcie Gray

Jump To It

The two men, one shabbily dressed, and one dressed expensively and with great care, faced each other across the rare and valuable carpet. Both were drinking brandy out of enormous balloon glasses. The larger, expensively dressed man was fat, with a red face, and the smaller man was thin almost to emaciation. He looked white and exhausted. The larger man, Gerald, was laughing uproariously. The small man, Paul, was looking serious; almost sombre.

'By God!' exclaimed Gerald. 'It must be a sign of age, Rowley old man, but it's been damned good to see you! As one grows older, one grows fonder and fonder of the people one has known all one's life, even if one began by thinking they were fairly average deplorable. No offence, old man! But we didn't really get on well in the old days, did we?'

'No,' said Paul.

'Yet I haven't enjoyed an evening so much for years! Good to reminisce a little. Good to mull over one's youth, and one's achievements since, don't you think?'

'It's you who have done all the achieving,' said Paul. 'Not me. I've lost out, all along the line.'

'Oh come, come, old fellow! Our firm is still using that invention of yours, and every housewife in England must be blessing you whenever she uses her electric cooker.'

'Except that I didn't get the kudos for it,' said Paul. 'Or the money.'

'The firm knew it was you who thought of it, you know that.'

'They didn't promote me, or put up my salary,' said Paul evenly, 'but they promoted you, and put up yours.'

'Not for your invention, old man!' expostulated Gerald. 'You're not suggesting that, are you?'

'I've never been too sure,' replied Paul.

'Good God!' exclaimed Gerald. 'Don't tell me you thought that badly of me!'

'Yes, certainly I did,' said Paul. 'Quite that badly.'

Gerald, who had just started on another paroxysm of his loud laughter, stopped abruptly, and with his hand still raised ready to slap his knee, almost gaped at the little man in front of him. 'Well, I never!' he said feebly. 'Well, I never!'

'I'm not a complete fool, you know,' said Paul quietly.

'Never thought you were,' replied Gerald. 'Never thought you were.'

'Oh yes, you did. You always have, from the very first moment we met,' said Paul.

'We were seven when we met, weren't we?' asked Gerald. His voice was muffled, and he seemed to be suffering slightly from shock.

'Seven and a half,' answered Paul.

'Can't remember the very first moment, I'm afraid,' said Gerald.

'I can. Vividly,' said Paul.

'Why? Anything special happen?'

'Oh yes. Very special.'

'What?'

'We had both just arrived at Maberley's, that dreadful prep school of ours, and we were in the cloakroom, blubbing a little because our parents had just left us, and my new school mackintosh fell off the hook where I had just attempted to hang it, and out of one of the pockets fell a few odds and ends including a small cardboard folder, a slab of toffee, and a penknife. The folder fell open, revealing a photo of me and my family – me, my mother and my father, and they both had their arms round me. You seized the snapshot and waved it round your head. "Look fellows!" you bellowed, "young Rowley here has a fat mother!" All the other boys crowded round and grabbed at the photo, screaming with laughter. And from then on they used to tease me by asking, "How's Fatty?" I didn't enjoy it.'

'Can't remember,' said Gerald.

'Perhaps you remember that you used to ask me to your home at half-term, and sometimes in the holidays, because you couldn't get any of the other boys to visit you, and your mother wanted you to bring home your little friends? You bullied me.'

'Oh, come off it!' exclaimed Gerald. 'You're making me out to be some sort of monster.'

'I'm not making you out to be one. You are one,' said Paul, calmly. 'You've bullied me, and used me, and harried me all my life, from when I was seven and a half until now. You married the girl I loved, saw to it that I never got any advancement at work, and for as long as I can remember you've made my life a misery.'

'I gave you a job,' said Gerald.

'Because you needed what I had to offer.'

'What did you have to offer?' sneered Gerald.

'My inventions,' said Paul. 'There you go again,' he added. 'Always sneering at me. Always belittling me, and until tonight, always frightening me.'

'I'm so glad you're not frightened tonight.' Gerald was sarcastic.

'No. I'm not frightened tonight.'

'What is so different about tonight?' asked Gerald.

'You'll see presently,' replied Paul. He drained his brandy glass and said, 'That's beautiful brandy.'

'Glad you appreciate it,' answered Gerald sourly. 'D'you want another?'

'Please,' said Paul.

This surprised Gerald, but he shambled to his feet and said, 'I may be a monster, but I've got good taste in brandy, is that it?'

'You have good taste in everything,' said Paul. 'This house is beautiful. The furniture is beautiful. The pictures are beautiful. The china is beautiful, and the glass is beautiful.'

'Meriel was beautiful, too,' said Gerald, sighing.

'Yes, she was,' agreed Paul. 'She was a wonderful wife to you, too, and you led her one hell of a dance.'

'She didn't mind,' said Gerald.

'That's where you're wrong,' said Paul. 'She minded very much. She told me so.'

'She told you so?' echoed Gerald in astonishment. 'When, for God's sake?'

'We used to go out together sometimes, when you were out with your other women. I think I helped Meriel quite a bit.'

'You and Meriel went out together?' asked Gerald, astounded. 'How often?'

'Ten or twelve times a year. Sometimes we'd dine here.'

'Here at my house?'

'Meriel's house.'

'This house is mine.'

'Meriel bought it.'

'Meriel may have been better off than me when we first married,' said Gerald, 'but by the end I was far richer than she was.'

'Yes, I suppose so,' agreed Paul. 'Nevertheless this was her house.'

'No longer,' said Gerald. 'So Meriel told you she was unhappy with me?' he continued.

'She did.'

'And I always thought she was so loyal!' Gerald was indignant. 'My God! The bitch!'

'Under the circumstances she was fantastically loyal,' answered Paul quietly. 'After all, she and I were engaged to be married when you met her. You broke it up.'

'I suppose you're going to tell me that she regretted her choice!' said Gerald, and again there was contempt in his voice.

'No, alas,' said Paul. 'She didn't regret her choice.'

'Ah!' exclaimed Gerald, triumphantly.

He poured them both out a large brandy, lifted the decanter to the light, turning it this way and that so that the cut glass sent out flashes of rainbow colours, then he walked heavily back to his armchair beside the fire. 'So?'

'That's all,' said Paul.

The room was indeed a beautiful one. It was high-ceilinged, with lovely seventeenth-century plasterwork. The marble mantelpiece was seventeenth century, though the picture set into the over-mantel was a Gainsborough. There were Lely and Kneller portraits on the walls. The furniture was almost

priceless. Gerald was excessively proud of his home. On his own considerable earnings, plus the money his wife had left him, his life-style was easy, luxurious, and undemanding, and he thoroughly enjoyed it. The house was a very big one. He and his family used the right wing, and the staff, the left. It dated from the sixteenth century, but there were seventeenth- and eighteenth-century additions.

Gerald's wife was now dead, his elder son Michael was doing well in America, and his younger son, Stephen, had turned into what his father called 'a damned hippy' and was living with his wife and child in a commune near Gloucester. So Gerald now lived alone, but he was looked after most expertly by his new couple, Mr and Mrs Chalmers. They had arrived after Meriel's death, and with the help of three dailies from the village, he didn't have to lift a finger. On Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays he went to the office, driven by Chalmers, who was butler, chauffeur and valet all in one. He left the house at nine-thirty, reached the office at ten-fifteen, took one and a half hours off for lunch, and left the office punctually at five. On Fridays, Saturdays, Sundays and Mondays, he played golf.

Paul's life was somewhat different. He lived in a semi-detached house in Stanmore with his invalid mother, who was deaf and querulous. He rose at seven, cooked breakfast for them both, then caught the eight-thirty train to the city. He generally took a sandwich lunch with him. He worked until six, Monday through Friday, and on Saturdays until one o'clock. His house was ugly, the garden unkempt, and his mother a burden. A woman came in three times a week for half a day, to help as much as she could, and he would have found his circumstances intolerable except for the fact that he hated Gerald with a hatred so intense and obsessive that it gave him immense excitement.

Since Meriel's death, his obsession had turned into a kind of madness. He dreamed, night and day, of some way to revenge himself on his enemy, because that is how he thought of Gerald. He plotted endlessly and passionately, whenever he wasn't forced to think of something else. It was a problem made more difficult by the fact that he and Gerald so seldom met

these days. He also had to think of a revenge which couldn't lead to retribution for himself.

And then one day the idea came to him.

He knew Gerald's house well. He must somehow get himself invited there for dinner, and if the routine was still observed under the Chalmers' regime, he must stay on until they had retired to bed in the left wing at eleven o'clock. He must also find out how much they knew about Gerald's 'inventions' room in the tower. For the rest he'd have to trust to luck, and to Gerald's avarice. His plan could be foolproof if Gerald swallowed the bait.

The moment of discovery, or as he preferred to call it, of recognition, came to him just as he was wheeling his mother in her chair from the kitchen to the sitting room, and it gave him a shock so sudden and so savagely sweet that he let go of the chair, and she careered down the short passage on her own, bumping uncertainly into the wall near the sitting-room door. She was very angry, but he didn't care . . . indeed his only emotion was one of profound satisfaction.

He rang Gerald over the intercom at the office and asked if he could see him on a matter of some importance. Surprised but not uninterested, Gerald suggested that he come over right away. Once in the big man's office, Paul's feelings of hatred and envy nearly overmastered him. The room was four times the size of the one that Paul shared with Perkins, and it had been newly decorated. There were sumptuous sofas and chairs covered in wild silk. The partner's desk was genuine Chippendale. The floor was close-carpeted, the walls papered with an expensive Chinese paper, and there were good pictures. Gerald was smoking an expensive cigar. His secretary, a blonde in her early twenties, was gorgeous to look at, and evidently admired her boss. To Paul, she was almost brusque. Paul felt physically sick, and could scarcely hear Gerald's bluff words of welcome.

'Well, well, this is a surprise!' said Gerald heartily. 'What brings you, old fellow? It had better be something good, because I'm damnably busy today!'

'Oh dear!' said Paul. 'This is rather a complicated affair, I'm afraid, and will take rather a long time. Tell you what, why

don't you come down to Stanmore and have dinner with Mother and me one night next week, and I can explain it to you, and even give you a demonstration?'

Heaven forbid, thought Gerald, remembering Paul's mother only too well, and dreading the sort of dinner he would be given. He shook his head. 'Nonsense, old man,' he said condescendingly. 'You come over to my place. We don't want to put your mother to any extra work. How is she by the way? Any better?'

'I'm afraid not.'

'Sad. Very sad. Give her my kind regards, will you?'

'Thank you.'

'Meanwhile how about my offer?'

This was so exactly what Paul had hoped for that his heart began to hammer. 'Sure?'

'Of course. Got a car, haven't you?'

'Yes,' replied Paul. His car was so old and shabby that he preferred not to use it to the office, but on this occasion it would be essential.

'Splendid,' said Gerald. He put down a switch on the desk and his secretary said deferentially, 'Sir?'

'What night am I free next week or the week after, Heather?'

'Tuesday of next week, and Monday and Thursday the following week,' came the prompt reply.

'Excellent,' said Gerald. He put up the switch again. 'How would Monday week suit you?' he asked Paul.

'Couldn't be better,' said Paul.

'That's settled then.'

'Most kind,' murmured Paul. His voice was husky with excitement, and his knees seem to have turned to water.

'You won't want to go back to Stanmore after the office, I imagine, so don't bother to change,' said Gerald.

'Right.'

'And we'll make it about eight.'

'Good.'

'Be seeing you,' said Gerald dismissively, and Paul left the room.

Once outside the secretary's office he had to lean against the

wall to support himself. He felt as weak as a new-born kitten. He was sweating, and he took out a handkerchief to dry the palms of his hands.

Monday week came at last, and at eight o'clock precisely Paul drove through the gates of Amplefold Manor. He was now so dangerously excited that his state bordered on hysteria.

Gerald seemed delighted to see him, and as always he was an excellent host. The food was superb, and the wine better than anything Paul had drunk for several years. It almost went to his head, and he astonished Gerald by being intermittently amusing. The conversation never flagged all evening.

At eleven o'clock punctually both the Chalmers came in to say their ritual goodnights. For a few minutes afterwards the two men talked spasmodically, then Gerald leaned forward eagerly. 'You came here to tell me about your invention,' he said. 'Ready to talk about it now?'

'Certainly,' replied Paul, 'but as I intimated in your office, it's rather technical. To explain it fully, I'd have to illustrate it.'

'Illustrate it?' inquired Gerald. 'You mean draw something?'

'No. No. Show you. With your cooperation.'

'You mean sort of act it out?'

'Exactly.'

'What's in it for the firm?'

'A great deal.'

'Anything in it for me?'

'The usual,' replied Paul quietly.

'What does that mean?'

'You show it to the bosses. You get the kudos and also, I presume, the rise in salary.'

'And you think you're really on to something?'

'I think it's a winner. I've never been more excited about anything in my life.'

'And you? What do you get?'

'The usual. Job satisfaction.'

'Nothing else?'

'That's up to you, isn't it? If you're feeling generous, perhaps you could really help me a bit this time.'

'Maybe I could,' replied Gerald. 'You never know.' He looked at Paul speculatively. 'You know you're an odd chap,' he said. 'Here you are, a sort of genius in some ways, yet when it comes to the practical side of life, you're a bloody fool.'

'I expect I am.'

'Well, anyway, let's look at this invention of yours, and we can make up our minds how to follow on from there, afterwards.'

'OK. Here we go.' Paul could feel his excitement mounting, and it was all he could do to keep his voice steady. 'The idea as I told you before is a domestic one, and could save the housewife endless time and trouble. It's a way of enabling an iron to work by itself, and to ensure that nothing ever gets burnt.'

'An iron?'

'Yes,' said Paul impatiently. 'The kind housewives use to iron clothes with. You've probably never seen one, but I assure you they exist, and they are used pretty frequently.'

'No funny stuff!' warned Gerald. 'I don't like it. How the hell can an iron be made to work by itself?'

'That is what I shall have to demonstrate. I've left my gear outside. May I go and fetch it?'

'Of course.'

'It's in the car. Won't be a minute.'

'Right.'

Paul went out, and for one surprised moment Gerald thought he heard a car being driven away, but Paul returned shortly, with two large parcels under his arm. 'Here we are,' he said cheerfully. 'Now the problem is, where to perform the demonstration.'

'You can't do it in here?'

'I'd rather not. It might mess things up in here. Have you still got that quote "inventions room" unquote of yours?'

Gerald looked uncomfortable. 'You know about that, do you?'

'Certainly. Meriel told me about it. She even showed it to me. It made me laugh quite a lot in a hollow sort of way. Of all the con-games! She said you used to show it modestly to the high-ups when they came to dinner.'

'I had to bear out my story that I was an inventive sort of bloke if I was going to act as salesman for your ideas,' muttered Gerald.

'Yes. You're a good salesman all right. Shall we take this stuff up there?'

'As a matter of fact I haven't been in the tower for years. God knows what the place is like. Filthy, I should think.'

'Why? Does no one ever clean it then?'

'What's the point? Meriel is dead, so her little study isn't used, and it's a hell of a long time since you came up with any idea worth selling.'

'Perhaps you shouldn't have been so greedy. If you'd made the whole thing more worth while for me, who knows, we might have made a fortune.'

'Maybe it's not too late,' said Gerald.

'Maybe it's not,' replied Paul agreeably.

Things were going so exactly according to plan that Paul found it difficult to believe his luck. At this rate his scheme looked as if it could go ahead with the utmost ease. 'Would you lead the way to the tower room?' he asked.

'Right you are. How long will the demonstration take?'

'That rather depends on you.'

'Oh? Why?' Gerald jerked up his head.

'D'you know anything more about electricity than you did?'

'Nothing at all. I couldn't even mend a fuse.'

'And you're supposed to be the great inventor!' Paul sounded bitter.

'Your fault for getting yourself into such a ridiculous position! You needed a front man, because you've got no courage, and no sense. I provided both. One last drink before we go up those damned stairs?'

Paul hesitated. It might be a good idea if Gerald got himself a little tight. Another drink might dull the edge of his mind a bit. He knew that Gerald's head for drink wasn't as strong as he pretended. Yes, it might be a good idea. 'Can you spare it?' he asked, humbly.

'But of course. You and I don't meet all that often, do we, old chap? And after all you're probably my oldest friend . . .'

Some friend, thought Paul wryly.

Gerald poured out a third drink. 'To the invention,' he said, raising his glass to Paul.

'Amen to that,' replied Paul, with a beating heart.

They drank the brandy in almost total silence, then Gerald said briskly, 'Well now, jump to it.'

This was a well-known joke between them, and Gerald had used the expression since they were boys together. If he said 'Jump to it', Paul was expected to obey immediately.

'Lead on,' said Paul quietly. He could feel the hairs crawling up the back of his neck, and he mopped his forehead.

Gerald heaved himself out of the chair with a grunt. 'Hope it's worth all this nonsense,' he said.

'I swear to you that if it succeeds it will be my life's crowning achievement,' answered Paul. He spoke with such ferocity that Gerald experienced a slight feeling of uneasiness. Paul repeated insistently, 'Lead on.'

Gerald opened the drawing-room door and they went through the dining room, through the kitchen to the right, and up the back stairs to the turret. The short, squat, thick-walled tower was a remnant of the original house. 'Sixteenth century,' Gerald never ceased to observe proudly to visitors. The two men clattered up the winding stone steps, Gerald puffing because he was fat, and Paul winded because of the parcels he was carrying, which Gerald had made no offer to carry. They passed the first door on the right, which had been Meriel's 'secret study' and which she had made charming, with books lining the walls from floor to ceiling and a desk in the window, and on to the next landing, where they came to a second door. An enormous iron key was in the lock. Gerald turned it and threw open the door. '*Voilà*,' he said heartily. 'By God it's cold! I'll tell you this, old man, if there wasn't money in this, I'm damned if I'd come up to this depressing cold ice-box. Just look at it! Nothing touched for over four years. Switch on that bloody little fire, will you?'

He threw himself down on the only comfortable chair in the room, and Paul, after carefully putting his parcels on the floor, switched on the fire and looked round the room. How familiar

it was and, as Gerald had said, filthy! It was furnished like a laboratory with expensive and practical equipment and, as a con-game, it had been beautifully and carefully designed. There was a polished steel table, now covered with dust, in the middle of the room, with a revolving office chair behind it. There were microscopes, Bunsen-burners, test tubes, and two small but efficient-looking computers. Electric wiring and cables of all sizes, thickness and colours were neatly coiled on the large wooden shelf under the window, and there were tools of every conceivable shape and size positioned on a magnetic steel board especially made to fit the curving wall.

Paul put on some leather gloves, then unwrapped the first parcel, closely watched by Gerald. From it he drew out two irons attached to a plug with a converter on it, and put them on the table. He then took out a smart new pair of steel-tipped boots, a woman's lace boudoir cap from a bygone era, much frilled and ruffled and with two long pink streamers dangling from it, a jointed metal contraption that resembled an old-fashioned clothes-horse, and a steel wheel with a large scoop soldered to it. From the second parcel he took out three small black metal boxes, some headphones made in metal (not plastic) to which a metal chin-strap had been added, and a large white cape, as befrilled and beribboned as the boudoir cap.

'Great thundering heavens!' exclaimed Gerald. 'What the devil is all that paraphernalia?'

'I'll show you,' said Paul. 'See these irons?'

'Course I do.'

'They have been specially adapted. You say you know nothing at all about electricity?'

'Nothing whatever.'

'Well, I have in fact reversed the earth and phase connection. Does that mean anything to you?'

'Nothing at all.'

Relieved, Paul went on. 'Oh dear, then a lot of what I shall be saying to you will be meaningless. Just mumbo-jumbo, but I assure you that it will work. Now comes the first difficulty.'

'How can it?' asked Gerald reasonably. 'We haven't done anything yet.'

'Precisely, but this is where I have to have your collaboration. I have to persuade you to wear some of this clobber.'

'D'you mean put on some of those ridiculous clothes?'

'Yes.'

'That bloody silly bonnet, as well as the boots?'

'Yes.'

'Sorry. Nothing doing.'

'OK. Then the whole evening has been a waste of time.'

'You don't really imagine that I'm going to dress up as a bloody woman, do you.'

'No one would take you for one, and no one is going to see you up here anyway, so what's the fuss? If this experiment works tonight, we'll demonstrate it the other way round in the office. I'll wear the gear, and you can show them your miraculous invention, though this time I'm expecting a cut, I warn you.'

'If every woman who uses this invention first of all has to wear a bloody baby's bonnet and enormous headphones, not to mention boots, and that grotty old cape, you can stuff that invention back where it came from, because it's a non-starter,' exploded Gerald.

'Of course she doesn't!' returned Paul testily. 'You're seeing the very first demonstration, so we're still using the stuff I used myself, to see if I could make it work. The cap and the cape are old ones of my mother's. By the time we get the invention shown at the office they can be dispensed with, and the headphones, which are a cumbersome way of using a transmitter-valve working on electronic impulses from the brain to the iron, will be replaced by a contraption no bigger than a deaf-aid. Most headphones these days are made of plastic anyway, but I had to make these myself, so I used metal.'

'Why should I have to wear the bonnet, then?' demanded Gerald.

'To keep the headphones firmly in position,' said Paul, 'otherwise this experiment could be slightly uncomfortable for you. Ditto the cape. I'm only thinking of your own good.'

'And the boots?'

'The steel tips will eventually be included in a machine which

combines that thing there' – he pointed to the clothes-horse with the wheel – 'and they'll be fixed simply, and easily, to the housewife's ironing board.'

Gerald looked at Paul with distaste. 'All right,' he said finally. 'If it's vital to this demonstration I suppose I shall have to wear the damned things. Anything for the money, but by God, Rowley, you'll have to pay for it if you've made a hash of things!' He smiled mirthlessly.

'I'm willing to take that chance,' replied Paul, very seriously. He handed Gerald the boots. 'Put these on first,' he said. He took off the monogrammed velvet slippers Gerald was wearing and helped him on with the boots, which fitted perfectly, as he knew they would. He then put on the headphones. 'Comfortable?' he asked.

'Not bad,' answered Gerald dourly. He fiddled with the chin-strap. 'This thing is so bloody small, it goes across my mouth.'

'Sorry about that,' said Paul. 'It was designed for a woman, remember. It would, I think, fit most women.'

'Now what?' demanded Gerald.

'The cape, and then the bonnet.' He put them both on Gerald and looked at him critically. 'That chin-strap *is* a bore,' he said judicially. 'You'll have to wear it across your mouth for the time being, I'm afraid. But not for long.' He adjusted it carefully, but Gerald pulled it away from his mouth angrily. 'I can't say a flaming word with that thing over my mouth,' he said.

'You won't have to,' replied Paul easily. 'Now watch out, and for heaven's sake don't make a scene about it, but I shall have to tie these ribbons across it so that they don't slip. What's more, I'll have to tie them in a double knot.' He tied the knot deftly, and Gerald furiously wagged his head from side to side, but he made no attempt to pull off the bonnet or the headphones. 'And now for the rest,' said Paul. He opened out the clothes-horse, manipulated it into a contorted shape, screwed the wheel with its hood and clamp to the steel table, and handed the irons to Gerald. 'Take these in each hand, and we'll get going. They both look exactly alike to the lay eye, but I have,

in fact, adjusted both to do their separate jobs. The one in your right hand, although you are right-handed, will perform the ordinary routine, but the one on the left will perform my miracle, working from the impulses from the brain which I was talking to you about just now. Both are fitted with pulsators. OK?'

Gerald murmured something and nodded his head. His eyes were watchful.

'Good,' said Paul. 'Now I'm going to jump to it.' He grinned. 'And so are you,' he added. 'I'm going to plug in both irons like this' – he suited the action to the word – 'and the pulsators will regulate precisely the amount of energy needed for the experiment. Of course, as I said before, the whole thing will be much more sophisticated when we come to show it to the bosses, but I wanted you to be in on the ground floor, so to speak. Here is another little regulator which I will secure under the bonnet you are wearing, thus.' He secured it firmly. 'That will enable the current to be increased at definite intervals. I have of course planned the increase down to the last fraction. Now I shall put this instrument which I have named the "clothes-horse" between you and the table. As soon as I have turned on all the switches, you will slide the right-hand iron along this ridge on top of the clothes-horse, and it will slip to the end of the table and remain out of the way. Then you will do the same thing with the left-hand iron, and you will find that with the aid of this instrument here' – and he tapped the headphones under the bonnet – 'you will be able to set its course and it will follow your setting wherever you like. I've got an old shirt here,' and he fished in one of the parcels, continuing, 'which I brought along for demonstration purposes. It is quite clean, but extremely creased. Here it is, and I shall lay it on the table, so.' He spread it out on the table. 'Ready to get going?' Gerald nodded again. 'Righty-ho.' And he crossed over to the wall and, one after the other, he turned on the three switches which connected the plugs.

The effect was horrific. Gerald was thrown out of his chair in a series of violent twitches. He tried to let go of the irons, but he was unable to open his hands. Meanwhile his head was jerking and twisting like some monstrous marionette. His back

arched, and then straightened, and he gyrated in wild jerky movements all over the room. He tried feverishly to push off the bonnet and the headphones with the two irons, but his involuntary dance precluded the possibility of this. He then pushed frantically at the mouthpiece, but again couldn't get near it. His eyes were starting out of his head, and from behind the mouthpiece came a noise like a muffled scream.

Paul stared at him impassively. 'There,' he said calmly. 'That is my latest invention! My dear Gerald, if you could only see yourself! But you can't, and no one else will either. What a shame! The bonnet, and the cape! I hoped they'd look funny, but by God, as you would say, they have exceeded my wildest dreams! All my life you have said to me, "Jump to it, Paul." Well now you'll have to jump to it, all the rest of yours. That's true, Gerald. You're going to spend the whole of the rest of your life jumping and twitching, and screaming. The muscles in your legs won't be able to bear it, but they'll have to. You'll never be able to drop down exhausted, because the electricity won't let you. You'll starve, but be able to get no food, and you'll be thirsty, but you'll find no drink. Even those silly tears which are beginning to rain down your face won't help your thirst, because they'll never reach your tongue. No one will hear you up here, and when they start looking for you tomorrow, it will take the Chalmers some time to think of the tower. You've told everyone both here and at the office that it is you who are the inventor, so when they do find you, they'll not connect me with the experiment; that is if they ever do find you. You see no one knows that I brought any equipment here, and I was careful to tell Chalmers that I would be leaving early. If you remember, I went out to my car and drove it out of sight soon after the Chalmers had gone to bed, and since their room overlooks the drive, I'm sure they will think that I did indeed go early. And when they came to say their goodnights, you were in the best of health. Remember? That I think will take care of my 'non-involvement' in the business. There is, however, one further refinement. The small black box under your bonnet has a timing device on it. In exactly twenty minutes' time a bell will ring, and simultaneously you'll get the first of the electric shocks designed to impair your brain. Each time

the bell rings, which it will do from then on at twenty minute intervals, you'll get another 'dose of brain damage', if I may so put it. By the time you are discovered, if indeed you are discovered, you'll be an incurable and gibbering idiot. Poor Gerald! Greedy Gerald! You have, I'm afraid, brought all this on yourself. If you had even once given me my deserts for my inventions, if you had looked after Meriel, after taking her away from me, instead of cheating on her and humiliating her by letting her know that you were unfaithful, if you had even once done me a kindness instead of making a fool of me in front of everyone whenever you could, if you weren't a sadistic bastard, and a lying hypocrite, and even if you weren't a fool, my dear Gerald, oh yes, a fool, because indeed it is you, not me, who has ultimately had to pay for his folly, then this wouldn't be happening to you now! And you're doubly a fool not to have taken the trouble to learn the first thing about the inventions from which you made so much money! This experiment has worked, as you can see, but you, fool that you are, were so taken in by the mumbo-jumbo of the boots and the cap and the cape that you had no eyes for what I was really doing.

'Jump to it, Gerald, in your baby's bonnet. Scream, Gerald, behind those baby ribbons. Starve, Gerald. Go mad, Gerald. Arch your back and dance, Gerald. And cry, Gerald. Cry. Because you're going to jump to it until you're dead.'

Paul sat in the armchair watching him until the bell under the bonnet rang for the first time. He saw the pupils in Gerald's eyes contract with shock, and he was thrown almost over to where Paul was sitting. 'Good,' said Paul in satisfied tones. 'Excellent. Everything is nicely under control. I'm just going to move the clothes-horse and table out of any possible reach. You see I wouldn't want to cause your early death. There! And now, sad as it may seem, I shall have to tear myself away, old man. Mustn't be home too late or Mother will be worried. Thank you for a wonderful evening, my dear chap. I couldn't have enjoyed it more. Delicious food, and a most entertaining time. Jump to it, Gerald. Jump to it, you sod.'

And he turned, and without a backward look he went out of the room, shutting the door behind him.

Charles Thornton

Debt Paid

Within the hour I shall be dead and I have yet to live. Tremendously my heart leaps and I wipe clammy hands across my corrugated brow.

My eyes fleet towards my guards. There is no pity and their blue uniforms are as sombre as death itself. They fight to avoid my gaze. From somewhere close to me I can hear the chanting voice of a priest but the words are lost as the pounding of my heart fills my head.

I think of the time that is left and great torrents of blood gush through my veins – feverish but healthy blood that turns my legs to string.

This bunk is soft and I roll on my back to stare at the light that never goes out. Beyond the light, the ceiling and the sky – the birds. Oh God! If I was a bird – if I was anything but me.

My head falls and for the millionth time I look at the other door made of steel. Its stupid bolt secured as if I would want to rush and look beyond to peer at its hypocritical secret. A guard sensing my thoughts blocks my view. God! – she wore blue that night – a pale, tempting blue. I was a fool but now she is better off than I and she died contented – during pleasure. Unpredicted for her – predicted for me. Is that a tooth for a tooth?

Christ, no, not yet! My guards are moving me towards the table. There are no cards now, no stupid dominoes. They want me to sit down between them – to wait. My back is turned. A thousand porcupines are climbing my spine and I cannot see the cell door. Only the other one on my right. How will it be? I have not the time to reflect on a future that is minutes away, for a key is turning behind me.

The clank of its rotation reverberates as determined footsteps

envelop me and I overflow with dread. The guards make me stand. I feel their hands, almost unsure, tremble at my armpits. A strap bites into my wrists and I look down at my legs for confirmation that I am still standing. Numbness is paralysing my soul.

The other door comes nearer – I must be walking. It is already open and I stare at an apparatus clinically set for death. A plain rope that ends in a heavily knotted noose dangles like a rabbit's snare – waiting. Firm hands have pushed me closer and the snare now hovers above my head. My feet have landed on wood divided and bordered with hinges that gleam with oil. A strap below my lifeless knees cause my ankles to meet and I see my executioner. For one passive moment his eyes meet mine – cold and determined. Can this be the devil already – surely not God. His hands deftly manipulate an article that will mortally blind me for ever – a white hood. It slips easily over my head and rests below the open collar of my shirt. I suck in air as my heart smashes within my rib cage, and the stiff linen jams between my lips taking my last saliva. The knot is against my left ear. I want to scream but my throat is closed. God! There is nothing beneath my feet . . .

It is sometime in the future, I cannot be sure. My neck hurts and my sight will not focus. I am hungry but I cannot swallow. Human shapes, sometimes in white, sometimes in blue, flitter before my eyes. My hearing is slowly returning and through a languid brain I am beginning to hear conversation.

'He's lucky and he can thank the girl for recovering and using the phone.'

'What happened, Matron?'

'According to the report, he raped the girl, then tried to strangle her. Then he hanged himself but they arrived in time and cut him down. Drugs apparently were the cause.'

'Yes, Matron – it always is these days – I believe they call it a "trip". When will they ever learn?'

Through a haze I can see them looking at my face. I am smiling but they will never know why.

Elleston Trevor

The Chicken-Switch

As soon as I arrived the guards handed me over to a courteous young Air Force captain, and he escorted me along corridors where warning notices became more and more blunt in their phrasing: *If you do not have Special Pass A-Q 6, you are already in trouble! You are entering the Top Security Zone – obey your escort without hesitation!* And so on. But I was unmoved: I did have my Special Pass A-Q 6, and my escort was treating me more as a privileged guest than a doughboy on duty. I even had a signed note from the chief-of-project himself. Despite this, my nerves were playing up a little, because this was my tenth special assignment for Associated Eastern Press, and it was always at this stage of a news-story (nearing completion) that I began to wonder whether the stuff I had written was really any good after all.

Well, it would just have to be. Today, Monday, I was here to observe the start of an isolation test, and a week later I would be here again, to see it end.

The young captain led me past other notices, where doors were let into the long perspective of the passages:
Chief of Test Laboratory. Strictly No Admittance. Monitor Room. Red Light Means Off Limits. And so on. But I was used to this atmosphere of distrust; it had been the same at the other places – the Aero-Medical Establishment, the Research and Development Centre, the Missile Flight-Plan Headquarters. They had shown me everything – everything, perhaps, except those few top-secret details that maybe only the President himself had access to. I had watched the teams of guinea-pigs – young, fit, cheerful men at their training inside the echoless chambers and the claustrophobic booths. I had watched them pulling their bodies out of the dreadful spins and gyrations of

the multiple-axis apparatus for Project Mercury. I had watched their willing subjection to black-out, grey-out, red-out, as the blood was drained from the brain or forced back into it by the centrifuges and the other machines devised by man for the testing of his own kind, designed to simulate every known condition of manned rocket flight. Now there was this last mission to observe; and already I was shaping out the introduction in my head, from long habit. Something, perhaps, like this:

On this fine June morning I am two hundred and fifty feet below ground level in the hermetically sealed super-beehive known more formally as the Aero-Medical Psychological-Stress Research Laboratory for Man-High Project III . . . I am here to meet one man. It may be that within the year he will become one of the men whose names make up the signposts of human history, for if plans go right, he and his team of astronauts will be leaving us, bound for the unknown. His name is Charles J. Loomis . . .

My thoughts on the article were interrupted. The young Air Force captain had led me into the test room. It was small, high, clinically clean and mortuary-calm.

My escort spoke softly: 'Major Loomis, this is Mr Robert Jasen of Associated Eastern Press, here to observe your entry into the capsule.'

'Nice to have you around,' said Loomis. He looked like other men, ordinary men: a young, pink-skinned face, level eyes, a crew-cut. Only his clothes were strange. He was being helped into them as he answered my few questions, so that, as we talked, the aluminium space-suit and its complicated accessories gradually took away his identity – or lent him a new one, not of this earth.

It was, he said, the fifteenth time he would have been sealed inside the big metal capsule, each time for a longer period, to get him used to prolonged isolation. Yes, this was the actual nose-cone that would be fitted to the big Atlas-D missile when they made the big shoot. 'I wouldn't,' he said with a smile, 'be keen to go out there in anything strange. This capsule's already

become my home-from-home, I'm that used to it.'

I looked up at the capsule behind him; it loomed coldly, a tomb, a tower. Home ... for this one man. He went on answering my questions calmly, cheerfully:

'That's right, this trip is for seven days – around the time it takes to hit the moon and bounce back. No, the capsule won't even move from this room during that time – but all they are testing is my resistance to claustrophobia. For the next seven days I shan't see another soul, or hear another voice. Maybe it doesn't sound very hard to do.'

I said it sounded just awful. I even told him – such was the ease with which he invited confidence – of the time I'd been shut by accident in a cupboard, for just one hour, and still suffered nightmares about it years after.

The space-doctor came into the room and began studying Major Loomis unobtrusively while he talked to me and looked steadily into my eyes, appraising me – I thought with a tremor – – as if I were going into that capsule with him, as if he had to measure my worth, as a companion under stress.

Had he anything, I asked him, to occupy his time in there, for seven days and seven nights? He shrugged.

'I have routine checks to report – reading instruments and compiling data. But no incoming radio: no voices. And no television panel: no faces. The sense of isolation has to be complete. All I have in there to help me,' he said with his eyes steadily on mine, 'is my own brain. And my gimmick.'

'What gimmick is that, Major Loomis?'

'Maybe I'll let you know, Mr Jasen, a week from now when we have our next date: noon, Monday.'

This 'gimmick' of his intrigued me, but I didn't persist. The trained dressing-crew were securing the white studded cylinder over his head – the space-helmet. Now they connected the straps and intricate network of electrical leads. I reached for one of the skin-tight wired gloves and shook it, almost surprised to feel a human hand inside.

'Good luck!' I mouthed at the face-panel, and the big white helmet nodded. Then they helped him inside the capsule, and a minute later the test director spoke to him by radio; and I knew

that this was the last human voice he would hear for a week.

'Stand by, Major: we're disconnecting you!'

An operator moved his hands on a panel, cutting a switch. There was silence in the room. An amber light on the panel flicked out, as finally as death closing an eye. As I walked out with the crew I wanted to shout to them, 'But you can't just leave him in there alone, sealed up for seven days!'

I controlled my fears for him. This was what had been arranged, meticulously planned. This was what had to be.

On my way to ground level, I asked the young Air Force captain, 'Did you ever go inside that thing yourself?'

'Sure,' he said, 'I held out for almost five hours – then I had to flip the chicken-switch and tell them to get me out. I don't aim to try it again.'

I said: 'Can Major Loomis use the chicken-switch, if he wants?'

'Oh, sure. But I guess he won't do that. He's peak-trained now, and he has a very special kind of mind.'

Outside in the free world of grass and trees and people, I felt the sunshine had lost its warmth. I couldn't stop thinking of Loomis, down there alone, entombed for seven days.

Monday night – the first night – was normal, but I found Tuesday less easy to bear. I couldn't get him out of my mind. The third day, Wednesday, I skipped lunch because I had no appetite. That night I took a couple of sleeping-pills. Next day, Thursday, my wife Dorothy tried to talk me out of my acute depression, but all I could think about was what the space-doctor had told me at the Research Base:

'The technical boys are ready for the big shoot, and now there's only the human factor to beat. When we send our first cosmonaut on a trip as far as the moon, he'll be entering a new element, and that hasn't happened, you know, since the time when man crawled out of the primeval slime and learned to breathe air. Right down at the root of our cosmonaut's brain there's going to be opposition to this enormous change we're forcing upon it. The most serious psychological barrier working against him is what we call the break-off effect, and it's comparable with the shock undergone by every infant at the moment of its birth; it is the reason why it cries, and knows fear

for the first time: fear of the unknown. In these "guinea-pig tests" we've had a grown man scream, for that same reason. He was convinced he was losing touch with his mother: his mother-earth.'

The words of the space-doctor were still in my mind as if written there, etched in acid. Would Major Loomis, in that isolated coffin of his, be screaming now? If so, nobody would hear him.

Friday, the fifth day, I was like a rag doll. I tried to tell Dorothy how I felt, and she understood, I thought; but her reasoning didn't help. She said, 'Look, Jay, this test is for him, not you. It's only bad for *him*.' She was right: and now I had an added fear – that I was somehow losing my own identity in that of Loomis's.

We tried going to a movie but I had to come out halfway through, because the movie-house was full, and I felt the beginnings of claustrophobia. We couldn't even take a cab home, though it was raining: the cab had foam-rubber seats on a tubular frame, just as the pilot's seat was made, in that capsule where *he* was.

Saturday was very bad, and Dorothy called in Doc Jones, who gave me some pills; but my induced sleep was nightmare-ridden. I was in that capsule, alone, sealed up, cut off; and the umbilical cord between the known and the unknown worlds had snapped. When I woke, I became half-aware of how crazy I was acting – shouting at people as if I were so far off they couldn't hear unless I yelled. Sunday I was calmer, because of Doc Jones's pills; but Dorothy had left the apartment to stay at her sister's. She wasn't safe with me any more. The doc had moved in a male nurse who gave me shots when I began shaking and looking around for the chicken-switch . . . my only hope. I couldn't seem to find it, and I kept yelling for it. The only time the male nurse left me, I had a bad turn. In my complete isolation I fought it out with the telephone, trying to strangle the thing with my bare hands. I thought I was through to the Research Centre. I was shouting, 'Tell him to flip the chicken-switch – you hear me? You just get him out of there!' Nobody answered. Nobody heard.

Monday I was pretty weak, because of the shots I was being

given. Doc Jones came for me and we drove out to the Research Centre for my date with Major Loomis. The doc said I'd be all right again, once I'd seen Loomis, safe and sound. We were checked in and escorted to the test chamber, just before noon. It was crowded with technicians and medical men, waiting to let the guinea-pig out and vet him. The blade of the wall-clock quietly carved the air, cutting off the last of the minutes – and suddenly it was noon. Noon, Monday. The technical crew got to work. The amber light came on, and a voice intoned: 'Release-pressure zero, sir. Air-balance negative. Both relay-equalizers running. Ready now.'

'Tell him,' the test-director said. The mike was cut in, and a man said gently, 'Major Loomis . . . we are opening up. Stand by, please.' Two men moved to the levers on the hatch-door of the capsule and the door swung open. They stood back. What happens, I thought, to a man in there, alone for seven days? We all waited. In a couple of minutes Loomis came out – and I felt Doc Jones's hand on my arm. 'Steady up,' he said quietly.

'I'm okay,' I said. 'I'm okay now, Doc.'

They took the white space-helmet off, and Loomis looked around him. His face was pale, but his tone easy. 'The old place hasn't changed,' he said.

In an hour, after the doctors had examined him, I was allowed my interview. Lamely I began, 'Well, Major, you made it.'

'I guess I did.' He smiled. 'Wasn't so bad, though. The gimmick worked.'

I nodded, making notes. 'This "gimmick",' I said. 'You told me you might explain that to me, today.'

'Sure, Mr Jasen.' It surprised me – that he'd remembered my name, the name of a stranger, after that prolonged and dreadful isolation-test. 'For what it's worth,' he went on, 'anyone can try it. It's like this: when I'm inside there, and I start losing emotional equilibrium, and get the urge to flip that chicken-switch, I just project my thoughts – and my fears – outside the capsule. I make myself imagine I'm in the normal world again – you know, seeing a movie, eating a good steak, talking to my wife – everyday things like that. And it works.

I've put the burden on someone else, outside.'

I wanted to get this right. 'On someone else?' I asked him. 'You mean on one *particular* person?'

He nodded calmly. 'That's right. Nobody in this place, of course – I know they're all working, and not seeing a movie or anything. I choose someone whose face I've taken a good hard look at before going into the capsule, so I can remember him easily.' His grey eyes gazed at me steadily, just as they had a week ago, a week ago today. 'A stranger is best, Mr Jasen. Someone like you.'

Roger F. Dunkley

Virgin Territory

Slightly breathless after the long walk up the desolate hillside, Andy sat down, gratefully leaning against one of the ancient stones. He patted the ground beside him invitingly.

Eve remained standing. The car, the road were out of sight. The stones, thrusting massively out of the moorland, misshapen by slow centuries of gnawing winds, were no consolation for the civilization they had left behind.

'"Brooded",' said Andy.

'Pardon?'

'"Brooded." That's what they say. "The sombre sky *brooded* menacingly over the grim, jagged sentinels of the Stone Age temple where the two lovers were locked—"'

'Objection. "Lovers": it's inaccurate, presumptuous and – indelicate.'

'Overruled,' said Andy. 'Poetic licence.'

'More licence than poetry,' corrected Eve.

'"—Where the two lovers were fully interlocked in an embrace as old as—"'

'Time itself, perhaps?'

'Ah, a fellow lover of literature! We were made for each other. Come here, love.'

He tugged at her sleeve. She withdrew her hand instinctively, recognizing his mood. Andy, in a familiar surge of resentment, tugged again and, caught off balance, she found herself abruptly on the ground beside him. Then in his arms.

They were both surprised. Andy, braced against the rearing stone, tightened his embrace, roughly.

'Andy. Your hand. Please!' There was an undignified struggle. The gaunt rocks stood impassive guard.

Eve pulled herself away and straightened her blouse. In-

dignation fought with bewilderment.

'Why?' she demanded.

'Why not?' Andy's cheeks were flushed.

'Is that why you brought me here?' She looked beyond the lonely, circling stones to the far, empty horizon. 'The party. Even *that* isn't till tonight. Our engagement. Remember?'

Andy winced at her high-school decorum. 'Propriety, decency and chastity,' he thought, and pulled angrily at the grass, fertile, ageless, beneath his right hand.

'Mere formality,' he said. 'Ritual. Anyway it's spring.'

'So?'

'Time for an honest, down-to-earth, sap-rising fertility ritual!'

'Sex, you mean.'

'Love, I mean.' He wondered whether he did. 'Love!' he repeated, flinging out a histrionic arm. 'The Primordial Urge. The Biological Imperative. How many lithe young maidens have sacrificed themselves on this very spot . . .?'

'To satisfy the lusts of some dirty old Druids,' said Eve.

Andy shrugged. 'They called it Agriculture then,' he said.

Eve pulled her jacket more tightly about her. 'Times change,' she said. 'I'm not sacrificing myself to get the crops going . . .'

Andy stood up, looking and feeling aggressive. Eve backed against the moss-crusted stone. She tried evasion tactics. 'Let's . . . count them,' she suggested. 'See how many . . .'

'We're alone,' he said. 'No one here.' His hand pressed against the stone. The passion returned. 'Virgin territory. Isn't it time for a maiden voyage?'

His eyes were growing wild. She tensed, apprehensively. Then his head turned sharply. Eve followed his gaze. 'What is it?'

He strode across to the edge of the inner ring, to the dominating, central monolith. He walked round it. 'Strange.' The wind? The edge of a cloak? Someone watching?

Eve came warily across to him. 'I want to leave,' she said. She stood beneath the great stone and shivered, feeling hemmed in by the waiting rocks.

'No. Not yet.' Andy was puzzled. The wind? 'Let's stay.

Yes – we'll count them, if you like.'

They set off in opposite directions, counted and met again ten minutes later at the centre stone.

'Seventy-five,' said Andy.

'Seventy-seven,' said Eve.

'Give or take a stone or two?' suggested Andy. But she was adamant. So they counted them again.

When he got to forty-four – or was it forty-five? – Andy felt the mists clouding his mind. He leaned against a granite column, oppressed by the futility of the exercise. What did it matter how many stones there were anyway? He watched Eve disappear behind the distant outer ring. Such determination. Such misplaced, sublimated energy! He called to her and suddenly, alarmingly, there she was almost behind him. Impossible. But there was certainly someone. *Surely* there had been someone. He looked across to see Eve reappearing in the distance, methodically starting on the inner circle . . .

Andy investigated the nearby stones with growing unease. He found himself fighting an increasing fear, as foolish as it was irrational, of finishing the counting. A figure? The wind? A warning?

Eve was waiting for him at the first stone. 'Well?'

'Seventy-eight,' he confessed.

She smiled triumphantly. 'Seventy-seven! Again.' Andy bristled. He resented her grinning complacency, the way she fed on his error. 'Want to check?' she taunted.

He didn't. 'All right.' No, he definitely didn't. And she knew it.

'What's the matter? Frightened?'

'Why the hell should I be frightened?'

She had caught him off guard. 'It's the third count. You know what the locals say. I thought you'd grown too old for village superstitions.'

The locals. What did the locals say? Why was she so aggressive? 'I said "All right",' he asserted. And they began the third count.

'Third time lucky!' she called.

'Now who's superstitious!' he retorted.

He watched her go, marking off the stones one by one. Such method. Such madness! Perhaps there *were* seventy-seven stones. Why did it matter? And yet he felt increasingly, disturbingly, that it *did* matter. Why couldn't they agree? Why couldn't *he* arrive at the same number each time? Why was she so consistent? And if she was so sure she was right, what obscure mathematical zeal was driving her, step by rational step, to make a third count?

Thirty-nine. His pace was flagging. He forced himself doggedly to go on counting. The Third Count. What was it the locals said? A superstition. He struggled with the mists that blurred his memory, the mists that were starting to blur and warp the crouching stones. On impulse he whirled round.

There! By the centre stone. A tunic tugged by the wind. He peered through the haze. A farmer? A priest? One of the villagers? He ran gesticulating towards the figure. 'Wait!' he called. 'I must know . . .'

And then his mind cleared. A profound sense of dread settled darkly inside him. He stared at the monolith. The figure was no longer there. But now he knew . . . He knew that Eve must be stopped. She must not complete the third count.

He ran, bruising his shoulder against the raw, looming stones, trying to catch sight of the white jacket moving in and out of the stunted columns of the primitive temple. She was nearing the end of the circuit.

Red-faced, gasping for breath, he caught up with her and gripped her by the shoulders.

'Seventy-four,' she said. 'Andy, that hurts.'

'You've got to stop,' he said, trying not to shout. 'You mustn't finish the count.'

'Seventy-five. Who says?' She looked at him. Annoyance and scorn joined the determination which glared in her eyes.

'You know why. The locals. Tell me what they say about this place.'

'Country bumpkins.' She laughed.

His grip tightened. 'Tell me.'

Eve recited the words dully, mechanically, as to a child. '"The man will never live who thrice shall count the Stones

and thrice shall count aright." There! And it doesn't even rhyme.' She tried to wrench herself free. She pointed at the next stone. 'Seventy-six,' she said.

'For heaven's sake, Eve.'

'You *are* scared,' she mocked. 'Why?'

'For my sake, then,' he protested.

'Give me one reason.'

'What's got into you? Do you love me or not? Isn't love a reason?' His voice rose. 'Can't you sacrifice anything for me?'

Eve struggled in his arms. 'Same old reason,' she said bitterly. 'Primitive man. Lusting after his virgin sacrifice . . .'

She tore herself free and ran to the final stone, the centre stone. She raised her arms in a mock theatrical gesture. The surrounding stones stabbed silently into the blind, cold sky.

'Behold,' said Eve.

Andy fought through the sudden mists to where she stood; a shudder of passion and rage ripped like lightning out of the earth through his body.

'Don't do it!' He raised an angry fist.

'The seventy-seventh stone!'

Andy never found out precisely what he had done.

The fit ebbed away and he found himself leaning against the Maid Stone with his intended bride cradled at last in his arms. As he watched the life-blood seeping down through the matted hair and trickling from the ancient rock into the grateful earth, he knew – as the silent watcher knew – that the locals would be assured of a fertile harvest that year.

Maureen O'Hara

On the Eve of the Wedding

I had never considered myself to be a woman of cruelty or of wrong-doing. Rather did I consider myself to be of quite meek and – if I may be allowed to indulge in a little self-praise – very pleasant nature. Minor offences and even brazen insults I could brush aside with a smile, and hurt that was intended would not occur.

However, there was one offence that my soul could not tolerate. Accuse me and if I am guilty I will plead so. Deliberately accuse me of a crime of which I bear no guilt and inside I burn with an intense hatred. A hatred that can turn me into a wild and destructive animal.

A young woman, a good friend to me all my life, came to be destroyed by my hands because she dared to mouth accusations against me of wrong- and evil-doing of which I myself had no knowledge. I could have brought myself to forgive Josephine, and refrained from harming her, had it not been that I believed her accusations were made with deliberate and malicious aforethought and solely for her own gain.

The evening of September 2nd, 1972, I shall never forget, and the sequence of events which took place on that evening I relate as follows.

We were having a small celebration in Benjamin's home. Benjamin was the man I was to wed on the following day and I loved him dearly, though I had known him but a short time. A dozen or so of his friends were present, as well as his parents. My parents were not there, for they were long since dead, and I invited the only close friend I had, Josephine.

Unwittingly I had done something foolish by asking Josephine to come along to the party, for I believed that she was in love with Benjamin, just as much as I, but I had no fears on

that evening for I did not see how she could steal my beloved one from me at this late stage. It did not occur to me that she would even attempt to do such a wicked thing, for she was a true friend; of that I had no doubt.

At the party we sipped our drinks and mixed and were generally sociable. I became separated from Benjamin when a young man – his name does not matter – requested that I dance with him. We exchanged a few words of polite conversation while we danced and then the young man became engrossed in relating to me a funny incident. But I was not listening now for, peering over his shoulder, I saw Josephine quietly beckon Benjamin from the room. Benjamin looked confused for a moment, then followed her into the hall.

I did not feel afraid, just curious. I excused myself from my dance partner and followed quietly into the dimly lit hall.

I heard Benjamin say, 'What is the matter, Josephine?'

She replied in a hurried, anxious voice. 'There is something you must know, Benjamin, something you must know before this night passes, something about Anthea.'

They were unaware of my close proximity.

'What is this "something", Josephine? I do not understand.' Benjamin sounded slightly annoyed.

'You must not marry her, Benjamin! She is not all that she seems.'

Benjamin was abrupt. 'Josephine, tell me what you feel obligated to tell me and then let us return to the merrymaking.'

Josephine spoke hesitatingly and I could see her wringing her hands in frustration. 'Oh, Benjamin, I really do not know how to tell you. It is all so dreadful and you will feel so terribly hurt.'

'For God's sake, Josephine, do not keep me in suspense. Speak your mind now or do not speak at all!' Benjamin was growing increasingly irritated.

'She has murdered, Benjamin! With her own tongue she told me of how she gave birth to an unwanted child. And of how she killed her child. And as she spoke of this cruel deed she was laughing, Benjamin, laughing!'

'You are drunk!' said Benjamin harshly. 'Now please allow me to return to my fiancée.'

But Josephine was holding to him as if she would never let go. 'Benjamin, you must listen to me. You must believe me and you must not marry her. I only tell you this because I care about you and have no wish to see you completely destroyed by that – that animal.'

I could not believe that Josephine would go to such lengths to try and take my man from me. I wanted to kill her right then. Hatred was eating at my body and soul like poison and yet I felt not hot, but cold, and suddenly very calm. A calm yet intense hatred that would destroy me if I could not destroy the one who caused me this great pain.

Josephine was still trying to convince Benjamin that her sick lie was truth. 'You do not know Anthea like I know her, Benjamin. I have known her nearly all my life and you have known her but a few short weeks. Yet you wish to marry her, and she still a stranger to yourself.'

'I cannot believe this thing,' Benjamin said to her, and then he was sick. And between his bouts of nausea he kept repeating, 'I cannot believe this thing.'

'You must not marry her,' pleaded Josephine. 'You must get away from here and I shall meet you later at my house and tell you more about your intended one. And you shall be glad that I intervened. Now go, Benjamin!'

He walked quietly from the house, his face looking pale and sick. I returned quickly to the living room, picked up a glass of sherry and spoke cheerfully to someone across the room. Josephine re-entered. I gave her a bright smile and said, 'Where have you been, Josephine? I missed your company. Have you seen Benjamin? I cannot seem to find him anywhere.'

'No,' replied Josephine. 'I have not seen Benjamin. I have been in the bathroom awaiting the sickness from too much sherry to subside.'

'Yes, you do look a little pale,' I told her, false sympathy in my voice. 'I feel a little sickly myself. I think the sherry must be of poor quality. Do let us go for a walk to the hilltop and breathe the fresh country air.'

She hesitated but, seeing my pleasant smile and look of concern, did not refuse.

'I will get our coats,' I said and excused myself. When I had

found the coats I proceeded briskly to the kitchen and was relieved to find it vacant. I quickly removed the sharpest, longest knife from the cutlery drawer. With this implement tucked inside my coat I returned to the living room and told Josephine I was quite ready.

We went outside and strolled up the hill at the rear of the house, chatting idly about the forthcoming happy day. Josephine even ventured to giggle and say lightly, 'Forgive me, Anthea, but I think I am a little jealous. You know how fond of Benjamin I am.'

'I know,' I replied briefly. I could see her smiling face and her bright eyes in the moonlight. 'Dear Josephine,' I said and I, too, smiled, 'I am sorry to tell you this but Benjamin will never be yours.'

Josephine stopped and took a gentle hold on my arm. 'Do not worry about my fondness for your Benjamin, dear Anthea. It is not love I feel for him but great sympathy.'

'I do not understand,' I replied. 'Why should you feel great sympathy for a man who is endowed with wealth, good looks and wisdom?'

'Anthea.' She said my name gently, an air of protectiveness in her voice. 'Anthea, you are a good friend to me and it is my wish that you should be shielded from unhappiness. I care about both you and Benjamin as a mother would care about her first-born twins. I do not think you and Benjamin are suited and I feel a maternal desire to protect you both from each other. Though it breaks my heart, I feel that it is my obligation to tell you the truth about Benjamin.'

'Do tell me, Josephine,' I said calmly. 'Do tell me what truths you know, even if they be hurtful, for you have known Benjamin much longer than I and must, without doubt, know more about him than I do.'

'Anthea, you must not marry Benjamin!' She spoke with great urgency. 'He is not all that he seems.'

'Tell me more,' I said and wondered what evil untruths would pour from her lying tongue.

'He has a psychiatric record, Anthea. For several years he lived in a sanitorium until he regained his sanity. However, the

doctors say it is inevitable that his mental stability will soon again waver and he will once more become dangerous. I can speak no more of this, Anthea, for it is breaking my heart!'

I saw a tear trickle down her cheek but I was unmoved. I spoke to her calmly. 'You were a good friend to me, Josephine, over the years of my loneliness. But now the friendship is ended and though I should feel only pity for you now and turn away from you for ever, I cannot, for my soul is engorged with hatred, not for you, my pitiful friend, but for your evil, lying tongue.' I pushed her to the ground and sat astride her small body. She had a tiny, weak-boned structure and the overpowering of her was a simple task.

She lay quite still, the moon playing full upon her face, and the look of fear in her eyes turned to horror as I removed the kitchen knife from my coat and held it before her so that she could see its sharp blade glinting in the moonlight.

'Anthea, have you lost your senses? What I have told you is truth, for I have never lied. You must believe that!' Her voice was faint with fear.

'Your tongue, Josephine,' I said, feeling no horror at my intentions. 'Please stretch out your tongue as far as it will reach from your mouth.'

'But why, Anthea, why?' Beads of perspiration shone upon her forehead.

'You are basically good, Josephine,' I told her, 'but you have an evil, lying tongue. I must cut it from your mouth so that you will lie no more.'

She began to scream and struggle violently. In an effort to placate her I drew the blade of the knife between her eyes and down her cheek, cutting the skin just deeply enough to draw forth blood and terrify her into sedation. Bright red blood poured heavily from the scar and she ceased to struggle. I then placed the knife between her lips, forcing them open. Her teeth remained clenched and I found it necessary to be quite violent in order to get her mouth open. When I had succeeded in this task I then grabbed her tongue. When I had a firm hold I inserted the knife and sawed through her tongue until, after much hacking, it eventually came away quite loose in my hand.

I looked with disgust upon the offensive piece of red meat and then flung it far into the distance.

'Now, dear Josephine, you will lie no more,' I said with great satisfaction. I looked upon her bloody face and for a moment I thought she was dead. But no, her pulse was still beating and of that I was glad for I did not wish my friend to die, only that she should learn a lesson.

I walked quietly away from where she lay and took a short-cut through the fields to the house where I lived alone. I washed the blood from my hands, discarded my blood-stained clothes, and went to bed. But I did not sleep. It had now occurred to me that I would find myself in great trouble if the truth of what I had done to Josephine should be discovered. I worried for some little time and then I suddenly smiled. Josephine was now without tongue, therefore she could not tell the name of her assailant. But then I realized that she still had hands with which she could write my name and I lapsed into a state of worry again. I could so easily have severed her fingers from her hands but it had not occurred to me at the time that it was necessary to do so. I finally drifted into a troubled slumber and slept until daylight came and a knock at the door aroused me.

It was Benjamin's father. 'You disappeared from the party last night, Anthea. Why did you depart so suddenly?'

I looked at him and smiled. 'I do not wish to offend you, but the sherry you served at the party must have been of poor quality, for it made me feel quite ill and I had to return home to rest.'

'You have not forgotten that this is your wedding day, Anthea? Benjamin is already dressed for the ceremony.'

'Benjamin!' I exclaimed. 'Dear God, I had indeed forgotten. The sherry, you see, it was of such poor quality.'

'I agree that the sherry was foul. Benjamin was taken quite ill also, though he is recovered now. But I carry bad tidings also. Your friend Josephine was found dead two hours ago upon the hill. She was attacked and brutally wounded by some demented person.'

'Josephine dead?' I gasped outwardly and assumed a look of horror, whilst within me I was feeling a great sense of relief.

'But who would want to kill such a dear young woman. I am indeed distressed.'

Benjamin's father looked kindly upon me. 'We do not know or understand why she came to such a wicked fate. The doctor says her attacker did not murder her but left her in a state of unconsciousness. She swallowed her own blood and choked to death. It is indeed a tragedy. But you must not dwell upon this dreadful matter, Anthea, for you have much to do in preparation for marriage to my son.'

I married Benjamin and for three short weeks I was very happy. Then, suddenly, his behaviour became quite strange and irrational. When I found our pet kitten strangled I went hurriedly to see Benjamin's father and told him that something must indeed be amiss.

He looked rather sad. 'The doctors were right,' he said, shaking his head. 'Benjamin's sanity is indeed wavering again. I must telephone for an ambulance and have him returned to the sanitorium immediately before complete madness takes hold of him.'

I suddenly remembered Josephine's words, words which I had believed to be wicked lies, and I was dumbfounded.

He continued: 'I have not said a word of this to anyone else but I am quite certain that Josephine met her fate at Benjamin's hands. He is a very sick young man, Anthea.'

Suddenly I had a vivid recollection of an incident in my life that had until now been blotted from my memory. A vivid recollection of a young baby boy being smothered to death because his mother did not want to be burdened with him.

I spoke calmly. 'It was I who killed Josephine, not Benjamin. When the ambulance arrives you must have me taken to the sanitorium with my husband, for I too am insane.'

He nodded calmly and said, 'I will do as you ask.'

'Are you not surprised?'

'No,' he replied, 'I am not surprised, Anthea. You see, when Josephine told me of your past I knew you would make a perfect match for Benjamin and I was overjoyed when you agreed to marry him. Have no fear, Anthea, for the sanitorium

is where you and Benjamin belong and you will both be very happy there.' With that he took his departure.

I sat upon the doorstep, feeling quite serene, and waited for the ambulance that would take myself and my husband home.

Lavan E. Coberley

Revolt of the Ant People

At sunrise an old man came out of his South-western New Mexico ranchhouse. Leaning against the porch post, he looked contentedly across the closeby mountain range.

At that moment, he was being observed by billions of killer ants. Noticing several on the lower steps, he stepped on them instinctively, unaware they were merely an advance guard – a scouting-party. But when he lowered his gaze to the front yard, his eyes bulged with instant panic.

Every living thing, flowers, every plant's and shrub's foliage, had been eaten up – leaving only skeleton branches. Fear spun the old rancher around and back into the house. His wild screams: 'Killer ants! My God – they're attacking us! Billions of 'em . . . *billions*!'

His family tried to calm him. His babbling became hysterical. 'Ants. Killer ants . . . *Billions*!'

His eyes were wild, insane. His wife glanced meaningfully at their daughter. 'His mind . . . something's gone. Quick, call Doc Simmons right away!'

The phone was dead. Mother and daughter stared at each other, eyes alarm-filled. The young girl released a breath that seemed to tear at her lungs. 'The dogs. Where're they at? They're not around the yard . . . like always.'

'They must be somewheres close. Call them. I got to see to your dad . . . the chores ain't done.' Her voice became a quavery, uncertain murmur . . . 'The dogs . . . try to get them dogs up to the house.'

The yard had already become a black-crawling carpet. Ant bodies crunched under the young girl's feet. Violently sick, she ran to the barn. The dogs were there, the little that was left of them – bones, white, bare of flesh and tissue.

The ants had done their job. The last of the attackers were crawling from the empty eye sockets. The girl choked up, screams bubbling in her constricted throat. The fatty calves of her legs tingled, and she felt the first fierce, vicious bites, the warmth of her own leaking blood. Wheeling, she broke for the house, her own screams pursuing her like banshee wails.

Her foot caught on the top step, spread-eagling her on the rough-boarded porch. She thrashed wildly about, unaware her mother was slamming her broom on the ants now covering her entire body. Finally, in desperation, her mother dragged her into the house.

Ants darkened the floor, the ceiling, the faded furniture, crawling, taking possession. The old woman beat frantically at them, slamming the broom down until the floor was fairly clear. Then she swept the dead ants into a heap and on to the porch. She closed her eyes at once, not daring to look again, stumbling back into the house.

She had to warn the others.

'We *are* being attacked . . . by killer ants. I . . . I don't understand. It's like the whole desert's turned black with 'em!' Her hands knotted. She tried separating them, gave up helplessly. 'We can't leave the house,' she mumbled. 'None of us. God help us . . . we've got to stay here . . . and they're comin' in – like black flood water.'

Her words snapped her husband back to reality. By God, he'd faced crises before; somehow he'd face even this one. He spoke sharply, 'Plug up the doors and windows! Use carpets, sheets, towels – anything. You do that, Ma. Daughter, grab that broom and start killin' the ones that already got in.'

A sheet dangling from her hand, his wife stopped abruptly at the window. Now her eyes bulged with near-madness. 'They're coming. Oh God, they're coming! All of them . . . straight for the house!'

Across the yard, the ants were zeroing in, moving in relentless waves towards the house. When the building was surrounded, the march stopped. As if awaiting a next command, they held position, an army of small carnivorous billions, ready to attack and devour.

The rancher pointed a shaky finger, his nail tattooing on the window glass. 'Our neighbour's riding up the road . . . coming this way. That's why the ants stopped. Gotta warn him . . . save him . . . maybe . . .'

He grabbed for his shotgun, sweeping shells heedlessly from the rack to the floor, scattering them like peas. He snatched up enough to load the shotgun. From the window, he fired several warning shots. Too late. Like disciplined troops the ants had already moved, circled this new enemy.

The tormented horse lunged, then screamed piteously and reared, throwing his rider. Slipping and sliding on ant bodies, the horse lasted a moment then fell sideways.

The ants instantly attacked. Before their prey could regain footing, the ants were crawling into ears, mouths, eyes, eating steadily while blood formed small glistening pools beneath horse and rider. In a few horrifying moments it was all over. The ants about-faced and marched again towards the house. Inside, the small family heard the scary sound of the ant army occupying the roof.

Uncontrollable fear panicked the daughter. Before she could be stopped, she was outside the house, running wildly. The rancher pulled back his wife. 'You can't help her now, Ma. She's . . . gone. Just don't look . . . please, please don't look.'

The taste of more flesh and blood spurred on the ants. Still orderly, but moving faster, they resumed their deadly march into the house. In seconds, they ripped through the lower walls.

The rancher cried, 'Upstairs! Maybe they won't follow us.'

They crowded into a bedroom opening into other similar rooms through the tiny bathroom. The rancher checked the windows. 'We'll plug 'em . . . then the ones in the other rooms, in case we have to move again.'

It was futile, the ants ate through everything, moved steadily into the room. Killing as they went, the family retreated, realizing it was impossible to continue their hopeless battle.

They fled ahead of the relentless black tide. In the cramped bathroom, their last point of retreat, the rancher glanced out the window, and said numbly, 'There's a car on the road . . .

ahh God! it's our neighbour's wife – come lookin' for him. She'll be done for if she don't stop soon.'

She *did* stop. She saw the crawling horror, took off like Satan chased her. The ants had moved even more quickly, clinging by the tens of thousands to the car's undercarriage, crawling determinedly inside, hungrily intent on a new kill. The woman made it to the town's centre, fighting maniacally, before she finally died.

The driverless car crashed over the sidewalk into a store front. When the police chief opened the car door, her bloody ant-ridden body tumbled out. The chief checked the ownership licence. 'Jesus! She must of brought these . . . these *things* from their ranch.' He looked around, conscious of the pale, drawn faces, the wide stary eyes of those gathered by the wrecked car, people who couldn't remove their gaze from the bloody blob that had once been a human body, who were watching it disappear like melting lard. Pulling out his Service pistol, he fired a shot that whirled heads around.

He snapped, 'Get away from there, all of you! We got to do something about this – pronto! Get in your cars. We got to get out to this woman's ranch.'

Close to the ranch, they saw parked cars, motors still running. Millions of ants were devouring the dying and dead drivers. The chief pushed back his cap. He decided quickly. 'I can't handle this alone . . . whatever it is. Hell, I won't even try.' Switching on his radio, he put through an emergency call to the army. When he finally, sweating and cursing, convinced the Officer in Charge he *was* a police chief and wasn't hallucinating, he banged down the receiver, snapped out orders to his own men: 'Set up road blocks. Make damned sure no one else stumbles into this hell!'

The men started off, then froze, standing like catatonics, faces turned towards the house. Scream after scream, piping high, ripped through the still air. The chief's voice was awed. 'No one can still be alive in that house . . . no way!'

He had to find out. It was his purpose here.

He started slowly forward. His feet came down carefully, like a man walking on eggs – or mined ground. As he moved, he

shouted, 'Hey, in there! Hang on. Help's coming . . . we'll save you if we can. Hang on!'

At last, the rancher answered. 'We hear you. Hurry. For God's sake . . . please hurry . . .'

Recognizing opposition, the ant army separated efficiently into two forces. Force one moved with military precision on to the road, forcing the chief and his men back towards the town. The second ant army invaded the house from all directions.

The rancher watched the black doom crawl closer, closer. There was nowhere left for the two of them to go. He touched his wife's arm gently. 'Get in the tub, honey. I'll fill it with water. That might help keep them off you.'

There was no time. The ants were underfoot now, swarming under the door, through crevices and cracks, through walls that disintegrated like sand-castles met by riptides. The old woman began a wild dance, a clown dance, lifting her feet high, flailing at them with bloodied hands, trying to rid herself of the biting, feeding invaders. She slipped and fell, thrashing and screaming.

Helpless, desperate, the farmer began scooping out tub water, dousing the ants.

The ants reacted instantly. In a body, they retreated from the bathroom. Hope filled the rancher with wild energy. He found a pail, filled it and doused the retreating ants again. The army moved down the stairs, faster now. Another pail, then another – and now the killer army were on the porch, in the yard.

The human army met them head-on. The soldiers counter-attacked with flame-throwers. Flames did little to hold the ants; they moved forward, millions, suffering losses of mere thousands.

The smell of roasting ant bodies hung like a pall on the still air. The soldiers put on gas masks . . . moving backwards . . . backwards as the ants stubbornly marched on, devouring everything in their path, leaving nothing – animal or human.

The rancher was alone now in his wasted yard. In the distance, he saw the ants moving towards the town, the soldiers fighting their futile battle. He had the secret; only he knew the force the ants couldn't face – *water*!

Using his tractor, he headed straight across the devastated fields to the army command jeep. Sighting the officer, he cried out frantically, 'Water! Get water . . . it's all the ants fear. Use water on 'em!'

The officer proved his training. 'Where do we get it? We'll need a riverful to stop this horde.'

The rancher said quickly, 'Order everybody into the park. Let the ants think we're all trapped there. Then get men on the waterin' hoses – more men on the building fire-hoses. There's plenty of both.'

On the officer's order, the townspeople retreated helter-skelter into the huge park. The ant army followed, deadly, relentless. The soldiers moved efficiently, quickly. Hoses stretched like great snakes across the no-man's-land between ants and humans. Drawn breaths sounded like tearing cloth in the long dead hush before the army officer gave the command.

'*Now!* Turn them on. All of them. Turn on every hose full power!'

The heavy streams struck like pile-drivers, blasting ants aloft in wet black clouds. Few were killed. They re-grouped, about-faced, and made an orderly retreat. No one in the park moved until they were out of sight. Then the water was turned off. The drip, drip from hose nozzles sounded loud.

The army officer spoke to the rancher. 'Maybe you don't realize it yet, but you're responsible for saving a town – maybe much more than a town.'

They stared at each other, pale-faced. The rancher asked fearfully, 'But . . . do you think that's the end of the ant people? Or will they be back?'

The officer shifted uncomfortably on his feet. He looked away, up to the clear, very blue sky. He spoke softly:

'Who knows? Who really knows?'

Raymond Miller

The Time Room

'Are you coming, Doctor Hayman?'

'No, not just yet, Ruth.' Anthony Hayman looked up and smiled at his young assistant. 'There are just a few more things I want to clear up.'

She eyed him suspiciously.

'Don't worry. I'll be finished in about half an hour.' He tried to sound reassuring.

Ruth sighed. She knew from experience that the half-hour could well turn out to be half the night. But it was no good arguing with the man, trying to tell him he was working too hard. There was little point in arguing with someone as stubborn as her boss.

'Well, don't be too long. Even you need to sleep sometimes, you know. Goodnight.'

'Goodnight, Ruth.'

Hayman listened to the door closing and the footsteps dying away down the long corridor. He suddenly remembered having promised to phone Helen sometime before six o'clock, to let her know if he would be able to come over that evening. The clock on the office wall said it was now twenty past six. He dialled the number and a full thirty seconds passed before Helen's voice answered.

'Hello, darling, it's Tony.'

'Hello. I thought you'd forgotten to ring. I was just going to take a bath.'

'I'm sorry. I would have phoned earlier, but I was a bit tied up here as usual.'

'That's all right. But you are coming round tonight, aren't you?'

'Yes, of course. Shall we say about nine?'

'Oh, can't you make it any earlier, darling? It doesn't give us much time, does it?'

Hayman smiled to himself and made up his mind. Even after nearly a year, the attraction Helen held for him had not waned, and still filled him with a sense of anticipation.

'OK, I'll be over as soon as I possibly can. But you do know how much work I've got on my plate at the moment.'

'Of course I do. How is the project going, by the way? I hope you're not torturing a lot of poor dumb animals.'

'Certainly not. We're extremely humane.' He acted falsely indignant, and she laughed.

There was silence for a few moments, and then Helen asked hesitantly: 'Have you talked to your wife yet?' She always referred to Margaret as 'your wife', never by her Christian name.

'No.' He was searching for an excuse, some explanation, and was angry with himself for not having thought of one before phoning.

'But Tony, you promised.'

'I know I did, and I'm sorry. But it's difficult – I don't want to hurt her, that's all. I mean I can't just say, "Look, Margaret, I'm in love with a woman half my age and I want a divorce." Not after twenty years of marriage.'

'But you're going to have to tell her sometime, so you might as well face the fact and get it over with.'

'Look – let's talk about it when I see you.'

'All right then. Promise me you won't be late, darling?'

'I promise. Bye.'

Hayman was a distinguished and forceful-looking man in his early forties. He was six feet in height, slender of stature, and retained a youthful face and healthy complexion, despite the long hours of concentrated work to which he frequently subjected himself. These features, coupled with the fact that he still had a full head of black curly hair, without the first trace of grey in it, gave the impression of a man in his early or mid-thirties, rather than one of forty-two.

At this moment, however, Hayman's face was wearing a frown. What, he wondered, was he going to do. He had met

Margaret during his time at university. One weekend he had been invited home by a friend who introduced him to his sister, an attractive and charming girl with blonde hair and mischievous blue eyes. They had instantly fallen in love and six weeks later were engaged. It had been as simple as that. Margaret had been his first real experience of love, a naive young student taken in by good looks and ambitious enough to want to marry above himself – for her family were wealthy, at least when compared with his own.

How she had changed in those twenty years, however. Or had she? Surely it was he who had changed, and become aware that his wife was not his intellectual equal, or anywhere near it. That by itself was not enough to wreck their marriage, of course; but not only was Margaret empty-headed, she was also frivolous and totally lacking any sense of responsibility. He had had to employ a maid to look after the housework and do the cooking. And it was not as if they were well-off, certainly not in the early years at any rate. Margaret cared for nothing but party-going and clothes and her friends, most of whom were as empty-headed and irresponsible as herself. In short, they had nothing in common.

In those twenty years of marriage any remaining bonds of communication between them had been slowly but steadily severed. He had given her a child, hoping that that might induce in her the responsibility she lacked and at the same time bring them closer together. And indeed it had, but only for a time, for it proved to be only a postponement of the drift apart, as had the second child. So now their marriage was reduced to a partnership of convenience for the sake of the children, a boy and a girl, and they would soon be old enough to go their own ways.

During all this time Hayman had more and more immersed himself in his work in a search for the satisfaction his marriage failed to provide. That part of his life, at least, had been a success. He had become one of the top biochemists in the country. About a year ago now he had been appointed to lead a small research team in a hush-hush government project, investigating possible ways of slowing down the ageing process

in animal tissue. The project had been prompted by the shortage in the world's food supplies, which it was feared would reach a crisis point within the next few years. If the ageing process in tissue could be slowed down, to extend the milk-yielding life of cows, for example, or the egg-laying span of hens, then this would be a major weapon in averting such a crisis. Because of the ethical implications of the project and the live experiments which were being performed, it was felt that Hayman and his team should work in secrecy, at least for the time being. In any case it was widely believed that the project had little chance of success, so that it had been given only a small budget and the work had to be carried on in cramped, overcrowded conditions, and there was the ever-present possibility of it being stopped altogether. Hayman knew, however, that if he could achieve any sort of breakthrough, it would mean that he had really reached the top. And the breakthrough was so near now, so very near.

Almost a year ago he had met Helen. Suddenly and unexpectedly he had fallen in love, just as he had with Margaret all those years ago. But Helen possessed all the qualities Margaret lacked – she was intelligent, his intellectual equal, he could talk with her about all those things he longed to talk to Margaret about, but couldn't, because she couldn't understand. The fact that Helen was in her early twenties while he was past forty did not matter to either of them.

Only one problem remained – Margaret. How many men had found themselves in the same position he was in now, he wondered. Would she give him a divorce? He feared not. She had sensed, rather than discovered, that he was having an affair; and he knew his wife well enough to guess that she would grudge him his happiness, especially if it were with another woman. And that was why he dreaded asking her.

Hayman decided his paperwork could wait until the following day; he would check on the experiments and then leave for Helen's. Taking a bunch of keys from his desk, he made his way out of the office and along the corridor a short way, stopping at a door on the right-hand side marked 'Laboratory-Research Personnel Only'. He unlocked it and entered a room

much larger than one would have anticipated from the small size and scale of the corridor outside.

Along each of the two sides of the laboratory, stretching about three-quarters of the way to the far end, were tables on which stood an assortment of cages of many shapes and sizes. In these were kept an even more varied collection of animals, from mice and guinea-pigs to chimpanzees. This enormous menagerie kept up a constant buzz of noise which increased in intensity at the sound of Hayman's approach. In the middle of the laboratory was another table, broad and of heavy wood, stretching the same distance as the tables at the sides. On this central table stood what would have seemed to the stranger a disorganized jungle of scientific apparatus.

Hayman passed slowly down the room, pausing here and there to look more closely at a particular experiment. Finally he moved on to the far end of the laboratory, where the most important experiment of the whole research programme was being carried on. Here there stood a perfectly round glass-panelled chamber, eight feet high and ten feet in diameter, built on a steel frame. The most unusual feature of this structure, however, was the fact that it was slowly revolving, being supported underneath by an electronically controlled steel axle.

The experiment involved a playful and highly intelligent little chimp called Freddie, who had been christened thus by one of the lab assistants. Freddie led a solitary existence inside this cage of glass, and as the chamber revolved he was subjected to waves of ultra-violet radiation from all directions. Many levels of intensity of radiation had been tried out, and finally one had been hit upon which had a remarkable effect. Freddie had been in the chamber now, with the radiation at this particular level, for over a month; and during that time the regular tests which were made on him had shown that not one of his tissue cells had died or been replaced. Since normally all the living cells in the body of a mammal are replaced every three months, it was hardly surprising that Hayman believed he was so near to making the breakthrough he had been waiting for. For Freddie was literally not growing any older.

He still had no definite proof, of course, and there would

be many more months of tests on other animals and on Freddie, to see if his organs continued to function as efficiently even as he approached what should have been his old age, before he could present his findings and expect to be taken seriously.

On seeing Hayman's approach the chimp began to jump feverishly up and down, giving vent to high-pitched screeches which Hayman was spared from hearing because the chamber was sound-proofed. Hayman decided to go into the chamber and play with the chimp for a few minutes, to whom he had grown quite attached. It was not unusual for people to go into the chamber for short periods, either to carry out tests or to play with the lonely little chimp, as the level of radiation the chamber was being subjected to was mild, and had no effect on humans over short periods. As the doorway of the chamber came round to where he was standing, he opened it and climbed in. Freddie was glad to see him and almost leapt up into his arms.

'Well then, Freddie, how's it going?'

For an answer the chimp gave a long drawn-out screech and bared his teeth in a wide grin, at which Hayman could not keep from laughing. He set the chimp down on the ground again, but failed to notice that its sharp little eyes were riveted on the half-open door which Hayman had not closed behind him. Freddie did not hesitate in making up his mind – he hated living in this solitary glass cell away from all the other chimps. He wanted to go back to his friends. He made a bolt for the door and was through it and away before Hayman had time to know what was happening. As he made his escape, however, his paw brushed against the chamber's control panel, which was within a few feet of the chamber itself. The speed control gauge caught the full force of the glancing blow, and was knocked downwards – to the maximum level. Immediately the floor seemed to Hayman to have propelled itself away from under him; he was knocked off his feet and unable to prevent his head hitting against the side of the chamber as he fell, unconscious.

On coming to, Hayman experienced a strange sensation, as if he were on a funfair roundabout, except that he was lying flat on

his back. He lay there for a time while he worked out what had happened. He tried to get to his feet but fell down again on the noiselessly whirling floor. Finally he managed to haul himself up bit by bit, using one of the steel struts supporting the chamber's glass frame, and held on unsteadily. Then, edging himself around the framework until he reached the still-open door, which was flapping wildly in and out as the chamber spun around, he caught hold of both sides and threw himself forward, landing heavily on the tiled floor of the lab. It was several minutes before the sense of dizziness left him and he was able to pick himself up and push the speed and radiation controls back to 'Stop'. The chamber slowed and came to a halt.

Freddie was outside the cage of one of the other chimps, leaping up and down and screeching in his own characteristic way, while the other chimp replied in like manner. Hayman failed to see the humour of the situation. A whole month's work had been ruined the moment Freddie had left the chamber.

'Come here, you little bastard,' he shouted, making for the startled chimp, who retreated to the far end of the lab. Hayman began to soften slightly, as he realized that the whole episode had been his own fault, and that he would never get Freddie back into the chamber by terrifying him.

'All right, you old ape, come to Uncle Tony,' he said in a much friendlier tone. Freddie hesitated, and then with a grin and a screech advanced towards Hayman's outstretched arms. He caught the chimp up like a baby, but held him firmly to make sure he did not escape again, and deposited him back in the chamber. When he had made sure that the door was firmly closed this time, he went over to the control panel and adjusted the controls to their usual settings. The chamber began to move again at the same slow speed as before.

One could only hope the experiment was not completely ruined, Hayman reflected, as he now inspected the damage to himself. He had a bruise on the head where he had knocked himself out, and he felt extremely sore in one or two places; apart from that the only thing injured was his pride.

At the door of the lab he stopped, startled. The door was locked, and although it locked from both sides, he felt certain he had not locked it after coming in. The key was still in his

pocket and he let himself out, puzzled. As he put on his coat and switched off the lights back in his own office he failed to notice the time on the clock above his desk.

Outside, something again seemed odd. Surely the sky was particularly dark for an early evening in May. Hayman had assumed that he had only been unconscious in the chamber for twenty minutes or half an hour at the most, but now he began to wonder if perhaps he had been out for longer than he had imagined. His watch said it was just after seven o'clock – and it was almost dark! The only explanation was that his watch had been damaged in some way and stopped when he had fallen, though it seemed to be working perfectly now.

By now Helen must be becoming impatient waiting for him, he thought, as he hurried off in the direction of his car. As was his custom, he stopped at the news-stand on the corner to buy the evening paper. He paused for a second to glance at the headlines – but this was yesterday's newspaper! It must be a mistake. In disbelief he watched as other people came up and bought identical papers.

Further down the street was a newsagent's shop. He went in and bought both evening papers. They were both yesterday's editions, yet people were buying them eagerly.

By now Hayman was completely mystified. He was certain it was Wednesday the 28th of May, not Tuesday the 27th as these papers would have him believe. Could he possibly be mistaken, or was someone playing an elaborate practical joke on him, or . . . A third possibility occurred to him which he immediately dismissed as being impossible. Or was it? The locked door, the premature darkness of the sky. What was happening to him? Had the blow on the head as he fell made his mind play tricks on him? But no, there was no doubting the evidence of the papers, and he was convinced that when he had left home this morning it had been Wednesday, not Tuesday.

He walked on, and was relieved to see that his car was in its usual spot. At least that was where it should be. Now, he had to think. The theories that he was wrong about the date or that vendors were for some reason selling yesterday's newspapers or that there was some other simple explanation could be checked,

and if all proved incorrect . . . He took a deep breath at the thought.

Half an hour later he was convinced. Today he had listened to the lunchtime news bulletin on the radio, and could remember too many details about events which had occurred since the evening paper of the previous day had come out to throw any doubt on his conviction that it was Wednesday evening and not Tuesday; and he was too rational a man to accept that his mind could be playing tricks on him. He had driven around the city and visited several other paper-stands, all of which were selling Tuesday's papers with Tuesday's news, which people were buying and reading.

All this left him to face the inescapable conclusion, which for some reason that he could not quite understand he was reluctant to face, namely that during his spell in the chamber the particular levels of radiation and speed to which he had been subjected had combined to send him back through time nearly a day. It was incredible, but it must be true. He had actually travelled through time.

Above all else, Anthony Hayman was a practical and realistic man. He realized what his discovery would mean for him, were he correct. There would be fame and fortune. An admiring world would place his name alongside that of the great scientific discoverers. His mind, however, did not now linger on these things. Instead, he turned his attention to the task in hand – of proving beyond doubt that he really had travelled through time.

It being late evening, there was no one in the building with the exception of the caretaker and a few cleaners, and Hayman was able to make his way back to his office without being seen. According to the desk calendar the date was Tuesday the 27th of May. The clock said 9.24. Hayman went into the laboratory and locked the door. The chamber was revolving slowly and silently as he had left it. He lifted out Freddie and carried him to the other end of the room. Now, he must put the speed and radiation processes into reverse, at the same levels and for the same length of time as when he had travelled back in time. This was possible, but it was by no means certain that reversing the

process would enable him to travel forward in time in the same way as he had travelled back. Besides, the chamber was not meant to be run at maximum speed for prolonged periods, and might not be able to stand the stress. For how long had he been in the chamber? He had phoned Helen at twenty past six and Freddie had escaped roughly ten minutes later; and when he had checked his watch in the street it was just after seven, again say ten minutes from when he had left the chamber. That left twenty-two minutes, but he could be several minutes out on either side.

One major problem remained: the chamber could not be controlled from within, only from the panel about four feet away. That meant he would have to make the adjustments first from outside and then somehow jump through the narrow doorway into the rapidly moving chamber. It would not be easy.

The door of the chamber opened outwards. Hayman brought a ball of string from the laboratory shelves and used it to secure the door to one of the steel supports of the chamber's frame, to prevent it swinging out and in as the chamber spun round and so making his task of entering all the more hazardous. Moving to the control panel, he adjusted the speed control to the maximum. The pace of the chamber as it revolved increased almost instantaneously. It was exactly 9.30 by his watch. At the instant the doorway came up level with him he leapt forward, grabbing for the sides with his hands and propelling himself through. He landed clumsily, but this time was prepared for the fall and able to cushion himself with his hands. After loosening the string and closing the door he crawled to the side of the chamber and sat leaning against it to wait out the twenty-two minutes.

At 9.50 he crawled back over to the doorway and hauled himself up on to his feet. Then at 9.52, exactly twenty-two minutes after entering the chamber, he jumped out and clear. By this time he had become accustomed to the awkward landing and the accompanying bruises. Five minutes later he had adjusted the speed control to its original level, replaced Freddie in the chamber, and let himself out of the laboratory and was back in his own office. The room was in darkness. He switched on the

light and looked at the clock. The time was 6.34; the desk calendar gave the date as Wednesday the 28th of May.

Helen Roberts was twenty-three years old, tall and slim and graceful, with a pretty, girlish face and friendly manner, which altogether made her extremely attractive. Hayman had met her at a party thrown by a fellow scientist. He had gone alone, as most of the other guests were to be scientists and their wives or girlfriends, and Margaret found such gatherings not really suited to her tastes. Helen had gone with another young scientist who in the end neglected her in favour of the opportunity of having a conversation with some of his more senior superiors, or rather of listening to their monologic discourses. Hayman noticed the attractive girl standing alone and started a conversation, and soon found himself talking with complete ease to this girl who minutes before had been a total stranger. They were on the same wavelength. A few nights later they had slept together, the first time since he married that he had gone to bed with another woman. Now, ten months later, his wife was the only obstacle in the way of their fulfilment.

When Helen opened the door to let Hayman in she was wearing a tight sweater and jeans which emphasized her neat, curvy figure. He kissed her lightly on the mouth by way of a greeting. She noticed the bruise on his forehead, which by now had turned a dark purple colour.

'Why, Tony, what have you been doing to yourself?'

'Oh, it's nothing. I tripped over something in the laboratory and my head hit one of the tables.'

'It looks painful. I can put something on it if you like.'

'No, it's fine now, really.'

Helen, like most people who came into contact with Hayman, had come to know the futility of arguing with him, and she let the matter drop.

'Would you like a drink?'

'Yes, please. I'll have a brandy.'

She poured him one from the supply kept specially for his visits, and a sherry for herself, and then sat down beside him on the leather settee.

'Well, how's the work coming along?' she inquired.

Hayman told her about the progress of the project, but left out the surprising developments of that day. Helen listened, genuinely engrossed.

'And what have you been up to today?' Hayman asked in turn, and Helen went over the happenings of her day at the college where she was a lecturer. They both enjoyed these dialogues where each would talk about how their work was going. It was a good way of winding down at the end of a tiring day, and Helen knew that she was the only person Hayman could really talk to like this.

'Tony, do you still want to marry me?' she asked suddenly.

'You know I do. More than anything else in the world.'

'Then why don't you prove it?'

'By telling Margaret I want a divorce.'

'Exactly.'

At that moment the idea that had been floating around in his head took shape and became clear.

'Well, I've decided to tell her, finally and definitely, that our marriage is over. I promise you she won't be a problem very much longer.'

'Oh, Tony.' Helen put both her arms round his broad neck, and pulled him down on to her.

That night Hayman told his wife he wanted a divorce; she refused. Although she probably had as little feeling left for him as he had for her, and had had more than one affair over the years, he was right in guessing that she would get a strange sense of satisfaction from denying him his freedom. She told him that she would fight a divorce every inch of the way. Until then Hayman had felt only apathy towards his wife. That night he realized how much he hated her.

In the next few days, after the rest of the research workers in the lab had gone home, he made several more trips in the time chamber, until he was certain that the first trip had not been some sort of scientific fluke. He learned the exact rates at which the chamber could propel one backwards or forwards in time. The speed at which the chamber revolved was the key: the faster it spun round, the faster one was propelled. The ultra-

violet radiation had to be kept at the exact level and had to be directed on the chamber from all sides.

Hayman tried to imagine what his discovery would mean, but it was difficult to conceive. Man could some day discover whence he had come, where he was going – and with that knowledge control his destiny. If he announced his discovery now, his name would rank with that of the great men of the twentieth century, of all time for that matter: the first man to discover the secret of time travel, and the first man to actually travel through time. But the announcement of his discovery could wait for a few months at least. As a research scientist, Hayman had learned the benefit of patience. The glory would come soon enough, and in the meantime there was no possibility of anyone else stumbling across the secret. For, as head of the project, he could direct tests using the time chamber away from those particular speeds of revolution and level of radiation which made time travel possible. Besides, the chamber was not supposed to be allowed to revolve very quickly, as it was not built to withstand such stress. He knew that he was taking a risk using it in this way himself, but his journeys in the chamber were all comparatively short.

The following Monday, a little less than two weeks after his first trip in the time chamber, Hayman was ready. He waited until everyone else had gone home at the end of the day, and then he himself left the building. He bought a paper at the newsstand on the corner, but when he reached his car he paused only to lift out a brown paper parcel before making his way back to the laboratory. In his office he left the paper on the desk and opened the parcel. It contained an overcoat, hat and gloves, all newly bought, and a pistol. He donned the hat and overcoat and put the pistol, gloves and newspaper into the pockets of the overcoat.

In the laboratory, he made his usual preparations before entering the time chamber. He checked his watch: it was 6.15; and then he leapt headlong through the open doorway as it came round past him, landing cat-like on the floor. He untied the string and closed the door as usual before sitting down again and preparing to wait. He took out the newspaper which he had

brought to pass the time in the chamber, but found he could not concentrate on it at all. His mind could only think about what lay ahead in the next few hours, and finally he folded the paper and put it back in his pocket.

When he left the chamber it was 8.30 the same morning. He had to leave at this time, before anyone arrived. On coming out of the building he took the tube to Waterloo, where he changed to the main-line train. This in turn brought him to the station close by where he and Margaret lived, in the southern outskirts of the metropolis.

In this exclusive neighbourhood people kept to themselves, for which Hayman was at this moment thankful, as he wanted at all costs to avoid being recognized. It was a dull day, and the overcoat and hat, which would have seemed out of place had it been sunny, looked perfectly natural. As he walked up the tree-lined avenue, with the well-kept, detached houses on either side, he pulled his collar up tighter around his neck.

Margaret, he hoped, would be in the house and alone. He had phoned that day from work just after arriving and had asked her as casually as possible if she intended staying in the house that day, and if she was expecting any company. He often phoned sometime during the day, usually to tell her he would be working late at the lab. She had said she had no plans to go out until around noon, when a friend was to pick her up and they were to go out to lunch together. It could not have been better. If someone else was in the house now, he was ready with a story of having been taken ill and being given a lift home by a friend. In his phone call he had made a point of mentioning that he was not feeling well, adding that it was probably indigestion which would clear up before long. It was now half-past ten, late enough for him to have made the journey from the lab.

He was about to use his key to open the front door when he heard his wife's voice in the hallway. He feared for a moment that there was someone with her, but listening carefully it became clear that she was talking to someone on the telephone. Moving stealthily round to the back of the house, he went in by the kitchen door, which was unlocked. From the kitchen one

door led into the living room and another into the hall. He silently opened the one into the living room. The lighted cigarette balanced on an ashtray beside the settee and the magazine lying open on the floor were enough to tell him that his wife was alone.

He closed the door again. Margaret was still on the telephone, and for the first time he noticed that her voice sounded odd, almost distraught. He concentrated on what was being said: whoever was on the other end of the line was doing most of the talking and he could not catch what they were saying. Margaret spoke for a few seconds and then the voice at the other end again. The conversation sounded as though it was coming to a close, and Hayman felt for the pistol in his pocket.

'Goodbye.'

He sprang into action. He pushed open the door: her back was towards him. Before she even had time to scream he had grabbed her by the hair and fired one shot from point-blank range into the right-hand side of her head. He did not allow the body to fall, but leant it against himself while he replaced the pistol. Then he caught it up in his arms and carried it upstairs. On the landing he stopped and leaned it against the wall while he went into her bedroom and pulled the blinds. He carried the body in and stood it in the middle of the floor. Placing the pistol carefully into the fingers of her right hand, he lifted the hand up to the tiny bullet hole from which blood was only now beginning to seep and let the body go. It fell heavily to the floor; the pistol did not leave her hand.

There would be no suicide note – a forgery could be very easily detected these days. His wife had taken it very badly when he said he wanted to divorce her; in a fit of depression she had taken the loaded pistol from his drawer and shot herself. With luck, the friend calling to take her to lunch would be curious when Margaret did not answer the doorbell, curious enough to come in by the back door and discover the body. He wanted to avoid having to 'discover' it himself, and if the friend called at the appointed hour he would have an unbreakable alibi: he would be working at the lab in the presence of about a dozen other people. And in any case it was doubtful that a

verdict of suicide would be questioned. He had committed the perfect murder.

Closing the bedroom door, he went back downstairs and into the living room, where he stubbed out the cigarette and folded up the magazine. Once out of the house he took off the gloves and went back the way he had come. From Waterloo he went to the West End where he had lunch in a busy restaurant and spent the remainder of the afternoon lost among the crowds of shoppers and tourists.

It was not until after seven o'clock that he risked returning to the lab. Above all he wanted to avoid being seen and so creating the least suspicion. He went first to the basement, where the incinerator was located. He opened the small iron door and pushed the overcoat, hat and gloves through into the red-hot furnace. It was now after eight o'clock. If he travelled back in the time chamber to six o'clock, and then spent the evening at Helen's, he would have an alibi for the whole day. He went through the operation for entering the chamber without mishap. For the first time in that long day he began to feel relaxed. Everything had gone perfectly to plan. He could now look forward to the future: the fame and the glory, and with Helen beside him.

He remembered the evening paper still in his pocket and took it out to read to pass away the short journey in the chamber.

It was not long before the headline of one of the articles caught his eye. At the top of the page was the heading 'Double Tragedy'. He read: 'Mrs Margaret Hayman, wife of the eminent scientist Dr Anthony Hayman, was found shot dead early this afternoon, shortly after hearing by telephone the news of her husband's mysterious death. Earlier today his charred body was found amongst the burnt-out wreckage of a large chamber used in one of the experiments he was working on. It is not known what Dr Hayman was doing in the chamber at the time. Later today it was announced that the project Dr Hayman was working on is soon to be scrapped anyway, as part of the government's cutback in spending.'

There was more, but Hayman did not stop to read it. He

made a dive for the door – it was stuck. The handle had jammed somehow. He tugged at it desperately with all his strength – it still would not budge. Something in the machinery below the chamber now began to rattle, indistinctly at first and then steadily louder until it became almost ear-splitting. The floor was becoming hotter – he could actually feel the heat through his shoes. He tried to smash the glass of the chamber's walls, but he knew it was unbreakable. In the few seconds that were left of his life, Hayman only had time to make a last vain bid to wrench open the door before the whole chamber exploded in a massive ball of flame.

Conrad Hill

The Bushmaster

Minerva Cannington was distraught. She could *feel* the house spawning dirt as she sat there. Each passing second allowed a further million particles to gather unseen and unheard.

The tide of battle was turning in favour of the house and Minerva imagined it sniggering as it contemplated final victory. The ultimate degradation. Her face burned with shame at the prospect of friends and relatives, garbed in protective overalls and wellington boots, wading through a knee-high layer of dust and filth, smirking behind their gas masks at her misfortune.

Problem: Minerva's principal strategic weapon was temporarily out of front-line service; the VibraGlide, fully automatic, remote-controlled vacuum hover-cleaner had broken down. Although only five months old, this brain child of domestic warfare technology was at present lying on a repairer's workbench, its powerful motor silent and exhausted, casualty of too many hard-fought campaigns.

True, Minerva possessed a variety of secondary armaments which she used to supplement the VibraGlide. These included brooms, dustpan and brushes, a hand-operated Ewbank cleaner, chamois leathers, dusters, and an array of solvents and polishes. But all these were small-arms to be deployed in conjunction with, not as a substitute for, the VibraGlide. They could vanquish the superficial dirt, the type that massed on window ledges, floors, and carpets, but they hadn't the power to cope with the *deep down* dirt cunningly secreted by the house from its putrid glands. However much she swept, dusted, and polished, she knew that without the VibraGlide the war was being lost.

Since the VibraGlide had gone AWOL, Minerva's nerves, tautly tuned at the best of times, were developing frayed edges.

She found herself unable to concentrate on anything for more than a few minutes at a time. Thus she might begin to scrub the kitchen floor when into her mind would flash a picture of the bathroom windowsill passively allowing itself to be defiled – raped by huge ejaculations of dust. Immediately she would fly to the bathroom brandishing brush and cloth and polish, there to commence a ferocious assault upon the befouled area. Halfway through, she would remember the three bedrooms standing uncleaned for at least two hours . . . Bursting breathlessly into the first bedroom to deal with carpets, covers, curtains, she would be mentally catapulted back to the unfinished kitchen floor and conjure up visions of the cat (staunch ally of the house) strolling in from the garden, leering as he contemplated the muddy paw-prints on the gleaming, still damp tiles . . .

The whole process was debilitating and self-defeating. There were too many holes in the dike and Minerva hadn't enough fingers to plug them all. Physically exhausted and on the brink of nervous disintegration, she would collapse into an armchair, gulping sedatives, stimulants, and a hastily made cup of tea, invariably the colour and consistency of thin acorn soup.

But even sitting quietly, gratefully accepting the restorative action of the pills, she was unable to rid herself of a feeling of doom, a certain knowedge that, without the VibraGlide, the insidious dirt was likely to engulf the house. Nevertheless, her resolve was strong. She would never surrender; she was determined to die fighting rather than be driven ignominiously from her own home.

She and Roger *must* have an emergency conference tonight when he returned from the office. They would plan the rear-guard action to be fought until the VibraGlide was returned. Roger would know what to do. He was a pillar of strength, a fount of wisdom. In short, he was Commander-in-Chief, Combined Forces.

Roger Cannington wasn't enjoying his lunchtime beer and sandwich because Minnie was on his mind. Or rather, Minnie's mind was on his mind. There seemed little doubt that her

unhealthy preoccupation with the house had become an obsession, particularly since the vacuum cleaner had broken down.

He had consulted his GP some six months ago who had then seen Minnie without finding anything seriously wrong: 'Onset of the menopause – affects different women in different ways,' he had explained glibly.

'Try riding with it, old man, things are bound to improve.'

Menopause? At thirty-six?

The doctor backed his diagnosis with a barrage of tablets, which had given the first-aid cupboard in the bathroom the appearance of a chemist's dispensary. Shortly after, Roger bought the VibraGlide for Minnie. Three hundred and ten pounds worth of electronic wizardry. Just to clean the bloody house. But, upon reflection, it had perhaps been worth it.

During the act of purchase, the rapturous look on Minnie's face had transported Roger back to their honeymoon days. For a time, speculation was intense and exciting, but alas those far-off libidinous weeks were not to be recaptured, at least not by him. Minnie, though, had seemed to gain a lot of satisfaction from having the VibraGlide in the bedroom and fondling it well into the small hours . . .

As a vacuum cleaner, the VibraGlide was efficient. It provided Minnie with a peace of mind not seen by Roger for many a month. Although still mumbling about the 'legions of dirt' in the house, her condition, whilst not improving, had at least stabilized. That is, until now. A new motor within five months didn't augur well for his wallet once the guarantee expired.

He left the pub and strolled through the comparatively quiet streets off Shaftesbury Avenue, heading for his favourite shop. Ngomo's fascinated him, plucked him from his own mundane world to one of mystery and menace, charm and cheerfulness. It was packed with fine examples of contemporary African craftwork as varied as the continent itself. Gorgeous headdresses and exquisitely carved figurines were displayed beside earthenware pots and combs fashioned from bone. Occasionally he would purchase some small article which took his fancy, knowing only too well that he would be braving Minnie's scathing disapproval, the little *objet d'art* being indiscriminately labelled

'dust trap' and consigned immediately to Roger's garden workshop.

Minnie intruding, trespassing on his thoughts again. He quickened his step.

That she, with her qualifications, should choose to rot away in the house day after day was nothing short of criminal negligence. Why the hell didn't she get a job or an outside interest? He had suggested it once and recalled her reaction as bordering on the physically violent. Likewise his suggestion that they take a holiday: 'Do you know,' she had said, aghast, 'have you *any* idea what would happen in this house if I left it for any length of time? Well, have you?'

No, Roger had replied. Could she enlighten him?

'This house would be so full of dirt that you wouldn't be able to get in the front door!' She spoke the words with a sense of triumphant relief, as though revealing a terrifying secret which previously only she had been privy to.

Roger hadn't dared to laugh, although the impulse to do so had been overpowering.

He had tried to discuss selling the house with her, but she would have none of it. She said she wasn't going to be defeated that easily, and anyway who in their *right mind* (he giggled at that, but she hadn't noticed fortunately) would buy it? Besides, she said, the same problem would face them wherever they moved. Look at sister Lucy, look at the battle she was fighting – and she lived in a *brand new* house. Sister Lucy, Roger had reflected at the time, was not the best person to hold up as an example, for the psychosis, or whatever it was, seemed to run in the family. Brother-in-law Barry was having a hard time of it too . . . However, Roger hadn't said anything, just listened, nodded or shook his head in the appropriate places . . . He was 'riding with it', to quote the doctor.

Ngomo's was a lonely corner shop, an oasis of simple culture amidst streamlined, complex office-blocks and anonymous, crumbling warehouses.

Roger allowed his eyes to adjust to the interior gloom of the shop lest he stumble over and damage anything valuable.

* * *

Minnie pondered the possibilities of survival. Three days! Three days before the VibraGlide came back and could be hurled once more into the front line. In the meantime, Roger would help, she could rely on him. He must take time off from work. She longed to hear the heady whine of the VibraGlide's big motor and see the quivering, aesthetically pleasing machine move into action at her command.

She started as her gaze fell upon the television in the corner of the immaculate room. *The television!* Gasping, she rushed to it and swung it round on its little table until the screen was facing the wall. She cupped her hands to the sides of her head and peered through the ventilation louvres cut in the fibreboard back.

No need to pull the fibreboard past its retaining clips – she could see the fluff and dirt caking the chassis. The condition in there emphasized the deteriorating overall situation. Only last week had she removed the back of the television and, using the VibraGlide's sophisticated TV Interior Cleaning Module, every speck of dirt inside the cabinet had been sucked out under her close and critical supervision.

She lifted the television, her arms trembling with the strain, and staggered into the kitchen with the intention of depositing the disgusting thing in the garden for Roger to deal with when he came home. She rested one corner of the set on a convenient formica work-top, enabling her to open the door to the garden with one hand. As she manoeuvred herself through the opening, she tripped over the incoming cat (remember? staunch ally of the house). She yelped and the cathode-ray tube exploded as television and Minnie hit the concrete patio simultaneously.

In the brilliant afternoon sunshine little puffs of dust rose from the shattered set. For a few moments they hung together in the still air before settling at random on the prostrate, weeping form of Minnie.

Roger was peacefully browsing when he saw it, coiled unobtrusively in a secluded corner. He moved it gently into the slightly better light that filtered through the myriad objects piled in the window.

It resembled a large snake, but unlike that creature the dark green triangular head was out of proportion to the rest of the body. Made of a firm yet pliable substance beautifully moulded to simulate the features of a snake, it was approximately seven inches across at its widest point, twelve inches in length, and some four inches deep. The mouth gaped, giving the 'jaws' a seventy-degree angle of join. The head tapered sharply to connect with a muddy-coloured body perhaps four inches in diameter. The nondescript base colour of the body was randomly adorned with brilliant red and yellow designs.

Ngomo was an ancient but remarkably stealthy African gentleman. He approached Roger on silent soles to explain, in his most un-African BBC accent, that the 'Bushmaster', as he called it, wasn't merely an object of admiration: 'You will be interested to know, sir, that this,' he stooped to pat the coiled body, 'is a West African tribal equivalent of the vacuum cleaner. In the region where it is made each village owns at least one, to be shared communally for hut cleaning and suchlike.'

During the discourse the old man's eyes contained no tell-tale twinkle of humour. In fact when Roger intimated that he might be having his leg pulled, he became quite prickly and insisted upon giving a demonstration.

At the far end of the shop were several cane baskets brimming with what appeared to be rubbish. Ngomo deliberately tipped the contents of one of them on to the floor.

Roger sensed a movement beneath his immediate range of vision. He lowered his eyes quickly to the thing near his feet. The head was twitching, then it jerked twice and slid off the top of the coil to the floor. Behind it, the body began to unwind smoothly like oiled nylon rope.

Mesmerized, he watched the Bushmaster glide with a noiseless, undulating movement to the pile of rubbish. Empty cartons, balls of paper, matchsticks and cigarette ends disappeared at high speed into the open mouth. Within seconds the floor was clean and the thing now lay motionless in an elongated S-shape. He estimated its length at ten feet or so and also noticed that the tail, like the oversized head, was different to that of a conventional snake. It hadn't the tautness of the rest

of the body, and it fanned out to give the impression of a flat, crinkled paper bag. Roger broke the ensuing silence to say pointlessly: 'Electricity?'

'I see no wires,' Ngomo responded smugly.

Roger bent to prod the inert Bushmaster. 'How the hell does it work then?'

Ngomo hesitated, obviously shaping a careful reply: 'Our craftsmen have acquired their skills over many thousands of years, and yet they cannot manufacture nuclear weapons, computers – or even motor cars and washing machines. Why? Because we, the people, have no need of them. They make only what we need. And those needs are simple.'

He pointed a bony black finger at the Bushmaster. 'That is simple. So simple – and I mean no disrespect when I say this – that a mind like yours, confused and muddled by unnecessary complexities, could never understand how it works.'

'Magic?' Roger suggested whimsically.

Ngomo shrugged his puny shoulders and smiled indulgently. 'When I was a very young man and first saw an aeroplane roaring above the tree tops, I said, "Magic." And to me it *was* magic . . . No. Let us say that our technology – *ingenuity* is possibly a better word – has taken a different path to yours in the so-called civilized societies.'

Now there, thought Roger, was a fine piece of homespun defensive African philosophy. In an earlier age Ngomo would doubtless have been a precinct witch-doctor. Certainly it was easy to imagine him leaping and chanting around a cauldron containing a couple of lightly cooked missionaries . . .

He demanded, and was given, more demonstrations during which the Bushmaster unerringly devoured the contents of three more wastepaper baskets. Try as he might, Roger could see no power source or gadgetry of any kind.

'Please. Do not be too overawed,' Ngomo purred. 'This device has its limitations.'

'I'm glad to hear it.'

'Yes. Once it is full, the Bushmaster will cease to function for a time.'

'What d'you mean?'

'It needs time to . . . digest. The larger and denser the input, the longer the delay before it starts to work for you again. Nothing is perfect. It is functioning quite efficiently at the moment due to a light diet of easily assimilated material.'

From what he had seen, Roger was almost convinced of the Bushmaster's authenticity. Nevertheless he was unable to suppress entirely the notion that he might be the butt for some gentle, esoteric African humour.

'Is it guaranteed?' he inquired wryly.

Ngomo stared at Roger, his expression serious. 'If you treat your Bushmaster with care and consideration,' he intoned solemnly, 'it will still be with you when you die.'

'Yes, but if it didn't work at home, could I bring it back?'

'If you are not completely satisfied, yes, you can return it for a full refund.' Ngomo wagged a warning finger at the ceiling. 'But bear in mind the prime responsibility of the Bushmaster owner: he must never allow it to go without . . . food. It must always have dirt and rubbish to eat when it wants. If not, it tends to become . . . agitated and I as vendor cannot be held liable for this.

'Look carefully at the inside of my shop – see how wonderfully clean it is. When the Bushmaster first arrived from Africa, it cleaned the premises thoroughly, finding enough dirt here at first to fulfil its requirements. Although it still cleans for me regularly, and *because* it still cleans for me regularly, it no longer finds enough dirt to keep it content. Therefore it is necessary to have those baskets filled with my neighbour's excellent rubbish. Very occasionally the dustmen, against union regulations, kindly reverse their lorry to the door and tip in a few morsels. Naturally, being ignorant of the true motive behind my request, they look upon me as just another immigrant with dirty habits.'

Roger listened, hysterical disbelief combining with an almost overpowering sense of elation. *If only it wasn't a joke!* In the context of Minnie's pathetic little war, the Bushmaster would be her nuclear device. Even now he saw her, eyes gleaming manically, marching behind it as it slithered about the house consuming both real and *imagined* dirt.

'How much d'you want for it?' His question was compulsive.

'Forty pounds.'

For forty pounds Minnie would be receiving Harley Street therapy at a Woolworth's price. 'If this is on the level, Mr Ngomo, then it could solve a big problem.'

'Dirt, rubbish, trash, garbage, refuse – call it what you will . . . This is the only problem the Bushmaster will solve. Please do not expect miracles in any other sphere.'

Roger asked Ngomo about the bag-like appendage at the tail end of the Bushmaster. The old man squatted on his haunches.

'Like any other vacuum cleaner, the bag must be emptied from time to time,' he said.

He deftly removed the bag and handed it to Roger. It was made of a thin but strong skin-like material reinforced at the circular end where it joined the body of the Bushmaster. A third of the way up the inside was a black glutinous substance which gave off an odour of . . . swamps?

Ngomo reacted to Roger's quizzical glance by dipping a finger into the substance, then holding the damp digit aloft for inspection.

'A useful by-product,' he said. 'For each hundredweight of rubbish the Bushmaster devours, one bag full of this – an excellent manure – is produced. Our villagers use it on their crops, and when other people's fail through drought or disease ours grow tall and strong with unfailing regularity. I suggest you spread some on your English roses and see them bloom as they have never bloomed before.'

It occurred to Roger that if Ngomo wasn't a humourist – and he certainly didn't seem that way inclined – then he was probably quietly insane. He should meet Minnie . . . a couple of nuts together. Like her, Ngomo required careful handling.

Endeavouring, without much success, to keep incredulity from his voice he said: 'D'you 'mean to say that this thing actually cr— . . . defecates?'

For the second time Ngomo smiled. 'Almost the reverse,' he said. 'It converts unsightly, useless waste into a rich humus to be used to man's advantage. You say the dog is man's best

friend: we say the Bushmaster is man's best friend.'

To smother his laughter, Roger stooped to pick up the end of the Bushmaster. Apart from its size and unusual colouring, it looked like any other vacuum-cleaner pipe. Ngomo took it from him and refitted the bag, making an O-shape with his finger and thumb around the joint. 'Self-sealing,' he explained.

He must have detected Roger's extreme scepticism for he said, 'You yourself have actually *witnessed* the Bushmaster's cleaning capabilities, but if you now doubt my word regarding the contents of the bag, please speak to Mr Essenberg next door. He is a respectable businessman, an importer of precious stones. We have a barter arrangement: for every five baskets of rubbish he delivers, I furnish him with a one-pound tin of Bushmaster manure. Consequently his garden is the envy of Muswell Hill and he begs me to supply him with bulk loads.'

'Well, why not sell him the Bushmaster?' Roger asked.

The smile again, this time tinged with sadness.

'He would want them by the gross and our craftsmen do not have mass-production facilities. Besides, Mr Essenberg does not *need* the Bushmaster; he would ill-treat it, use it only for profit . . . No, he has his diamonds, he should be content with the profit from those.'

Roger was puzzled. That Ngomo was trying to sell him the Bushmaster was obvious, hence the demonstration and explanations. Yet on his previous visits to the shop, the old man never put in an appearance until Roger had chosen the item he wished to buy and wanted to pay for it. And far from being the loquacious individual of today, Roger had regarded him as taciturn, if not downright secretive.

'What makes you think *I* need the Bushmaster?' he asked.

'My intuition is rarely wrong in these matters. You have the air of a harassed man, a man with a garbage disposal problem on his mind. Please correct me if I am mistaken, but I think the Bushmaster will restore the lustre to your life.'

The air of a harassed man? The words disturbed Roger. He knew Minnie's behaviour was playing hell with his ulcer, but he hadn't been aware that his worry hung externally on him like a rusted halo. He resented the bitch for that. *Anything* was

worth a try which might cure her bloody nonsense . . . If this Bushmaster device turned out to be a pig-in-a-poke he could always stop the cheque, then hit old Sunshine here under the Trade Description Act.

'I'll buy it,' he said decisively.

Ngomo became positively effusive. 'My dear sir, you are the owner of the first Bushmaster in the United Kingdom. Furthermore, you have taken a step nearer to that priceless commodity, Peace of Mind . . . "A Spotless House *and* a Beautiful Garden" . . . Can Electrolux boast a slogan like that?' He coiled the Bushmaster and began wrapping it in brown paper.

Thinking of the VibraGlide, Roger asked, 'If it breaks down can you repair it?'

Ngomo paused, gripping a roll of Sellotape. Then he actually laughed, displaying a fine set of yellow teeth which appeared almost white against the blackness of his face.

'Breakdown?' he said at length. 'An emotive word in your modern pressurized society. You must have little faith in either yourselves or your products to be continually concerned with breakdowns. If it is of any comfort to you, sir, there is no recorded instance of a Bushmaster breakdown, merely petty malfunctions due to mistreatment by the malicious and the ignorant.

'The internal components are self-renewing up to a certain age. After that the appliance eventually expires. We have no parts-renewal policy or reconditioned exchange service. Both are neither necessary nor possible.'

'Fine,' Roger said. 'But how do I know I haven't bought an old one?'

With studied, good-humoured patience, Ngomo unwrapped the parcel he was about to seal. He lifted the sinister-looking head and pointed to the brightly marked flexible hose.

'The Bushmaster is old at fifty years when these colours fade. Simultaneously, the body becomes slack and sponge-like. At this point there are five years of serviceable life remaining and the thoughtful owner should assign the appliance to light dust-collecting duties only and give consideration to the purchase of a successor. As I said earlier, this one will outlive you,

sir, if we base the assumption on current longevity averages for the male Caucasian . . .'

Was the man insane? Or was the thing he held in his crinkled black hand an ad-man's dream come true?

'. . . I can assure you that this is a young, ah, new model designed specifically for export. By comparison, our domestic models are crude indeed.'

Ngomo may well have been a star Bushmaster salesman, but he was the world's worst parcel-wrapper. The result of his labours was a misshapen pile of brown paper held together with twenty feet of Sellotape.

Roger made out a cheque with some misgivings, then waited, watching Ngomo write rapidly, filling several sheets of paper bearing the heading 'West African Enterprises'. When he had finished he handed Roger the sheets in exchange for the cheque.

'A few operating hints,' he said. 'Some of them I have already covered orally, but I think it best if you have the important ones available for reference. Please study them carefully. Oh yes, one other thing . . .'

He slid, eel-like, through a beaded curtain at the rear of the shop to reappear clutching something membraneous. '. . . A spare collection bag for use when the other is being washed.'

Roger pocketed the bag and the notes. Ngomo presented him with the badly wrapped Bushmaster and accompanied him to the door.

Slightly dazed and a little rueful, Roger said, 'I'll probably want my money back, you know.'

'Most unlikely,' Ngomo replied with the assurance of superior wisdom.

As occasionally happened, Roger had no meeting to attend that afternoon or paperwork unable to wait until the morrow. Usually he took advantage of such a situation to call his lissome honey-blonde secretary into his office on the pretext of 'dictation'. Miss Hornby would perch opposite his desk upon the swivel chair (thoughtfully wound to its maximum height by Roger beforehand) dutifully recording in shorthand nonsensical letters to fictitious clients. By slumping low in his chair, playing

the overburdened young executive, he was able to get a leisurely and detailed view of Miss Hornby's anatomy above and way beyond the hems of her demure dresses. He often wondered why she didn't realize what was going on, for she must have spent a good few hours typing those phoney letters before leaving them in his 'in' tray for perusal and signature. Yet they never came out of his office, not even the copies, because Roger ripped them up and consigned them to the wastepaper bin.

Either Miss Hornby was lacking in job interest or she was well aware of what went on and actually enjoyed flashing her shapely thighs at him. He couldn't quite summon enough courage to find out which.

He picked his way furtively through her small outer office, ignoring her inquiring glance at the bulky parcel. In his inner sanctum he placed the Bushmaster in a corner and hung up his jacket. Instead of making preparations for the clandestine ogling of Miss Hornby as his instincts dictated, he settled comfortably in his chair to read Ngomo's 'operating hints'. The bold, powerful handwriting seemed oddly at variance with the Negro's diminutive stature.

The Bushmaster: another fine product brought to you by West African Enterprises

Operating:
Ensure that an adequate supply of refuse is always on hand for your Bushmaster.

The Digestion/Conversion Delay time (hereafter referred to as DCD) must be taken into account before tackling any job with your Bushmaster.

The DCD is the period of total inactivity required by the appliance to digest its last intake of material and begin converting it to a rich, manageable fertilizer. The DCD is variable and depends upon the density and quantity of the input: i.e. ten wastepaper baskets full of light assorted rubbish ingested by the Bushmaster in one operation results in a DCD of three hours, during which period the input-limiter mechanism built into your Bushmaster will cause it to disregard even the most succulent garbage proffered.

However, an infinite number of baskets will be accepted provided they are proffered one at a time at thirty-minute intervals. By staggering the input in this manner the limiter mechanism is not activated and DCD is avoided. This is a sensible and balanced method of operating your Bushmaster: by maintaining a steady flow of material through the appliance, it receives sufficient sustenance to allow it to be stored conveniently out of the way between feeds. At the same time, it is ready to tackle any detritus arising from a domestic emergency, i.e. a collapsed ceiling. (In this case, the nature of the resultant debris to be cleared would give rise to a very lengthy DCD – a small price to pay for such a task.)

With reference to the ratio of input quantity to DCD time, it must be emphasized that the mention above of wastepaper baskets is for example only – quoted because your particular demonstration involved their use. The constituents of garbage are many and varied; therefore the new owner must proceed by trial and error to discover how best his own brand and quantity of garbage can be dealt with by the Bushmaster.

Warning:
The Bushmaster reaches peak efficiency when empty (hungry). The appliance becomes difficult to control in this condition, developing a tendency to seek out the nearest dirt or rubbish regardless of fixtures and fittings standing in its way. Therefore, unless a large quantity of difficult waste material is to be disposed of or an experienced operative is on hand, the domestic user is advised to observe the golden rule of 'little and often'.

Routine Attention:
When the collection bag at the rear of the appliance expands to the shape and size of a South African rugby football, it must be detached (using yesterday's newspaper to catch any overspill of contents) and a replacement bag fitted. Superior design ensures that both operations are the work of a few moments only. Failure to remove the collection bag when full results in erratic and sluggish performance.

The Bushmaster requires an intake of 1 cwt (50·8 kg) of raw

material to eventually fill the collection bag with 4lb (1·8 kg) of excellent fertilizer. This can be distributed over ground containing decorative or edible plants without fear of toxic chemical side-effects. The soiled collection bag must then be washed in warm, soapy water (no detergents), rinsed and left to dry naturally.

Care and Maintenance:
None required other than the common respect which any owner should retain for his personal property.

A soft, damp cloth used occasionally on the Bushmaster will enhance its appearance.

Like most manufacturers' instructions, they had to be read several times before some sense could be made of them. Afterwards Roger sat for five minutes, gazing at the untidy parcel in the corner of the office, while he mulled over the essential message contained in Ngomo's written words.

In effect, the Bushmaster had to be fed at regular intervals.

So it would appear that Minnie was getting a bloody pet as well as a new vacuum cleaner. He imagined trying to explain to dear, unstable, unreasonable Minerva that she had to feed her vacuum cleaner in the same way she fed the cat. He would demonstrate, put their dishes side by side – saucer of milk for the cat, a plate of garbage for the Bushmaster . . . Observe her reaction to such undiluted madness . . . Watch whatever sanity she still possessed disintegrate as the few screws remaining in her head worked loose and dropped out . . .

He shook with silent laughter. Tears ran down his face to splat on the leather-edged blotter on his desk.

'Roger,' he burbled, 'you're nasty.' Then he sobered as the perpetual crushing responsibility he felt for her welfare came trickling back into his mind like liquid lead, causing heavy mental indigestion.

Surely even *she* would see that the benefit to be derived from the Bushmaster (if the damned thing worked) far outweighed its drawbacks? Perhaps not. In which case it seemed a good idea not to mention any drawbacks until she saw for herself what a boon the appliance could be to her.

Anyway, he thought maliciously, Ngomo's instructions presumably applied to *normal* operating conditions and few things Minnie ever did could be construed as normal – least of all her operating conditions. If, as she claimed, the house was spawning dirt at such a prodigious rate, then the Bushmaster need never be empty and the question of regulated amounts of rubbish need never arise . . .

Cynical reasoning perhaps, but somehow it was shot through with a compulsion to let her get the hell on with it without complicating things unnecessarily. If the Bushmaster brought about a psychological crisis so much the better: an immediate cure or a total breakdown followed by prolonged compulsory therapy in hospital. Either way the prognosis was positive . . .

The parcel started to move, tiny shivers and ripples rattled the brown paper. Alarmed, Roger frantically consulted the handwritten pages in front of him until he found what he was looking for: *ten wastepaper baskets full of light assorted rubbish ingested by the Bushmaster results in a DCD of three hours . . .*

He looked at his watch. An hour and a half had elapsed since it polished off *four* basketfuls during Ngomo's demonstration. So – Christ, it needed feeding again!

The parcel was now perceptibly rocking from side to side. Roger watched it, seized with the paralysis of panic. The paper ripped and the Bushmaster broke out. The first three feet of it protruded, erect and swaying, from the top of the parcel. Its appearance was that of some monstrous swan. Roger could swear it was looking at him, trying to skewer him with those dead/alive eyes.

He dived for the wastepaper bin next to his desk: four miserable balls of screwed-up quarto and an empty tube of butane lighter fuel. He rifled the drawers in his desk: half a box of paper clips, an obsolete £.s.d. pocket calculator, and a framed photograph of Minnie. He threw them all into the bin together with a few cigarette ends from his ashtray and tipped it out on to the floor in front of the Bushmaster. The evil triangular head dropped to deal with the little pile of rubbish.

Roger remembered the filing cabinets. From the top drawer of one, he selected the fattest file. A cursory examination of the

papers in it showed them to be a comprehensive history of the two-million-pound Economax account, including the records of the delicate negotiations leading up to award of contract. Without compunction, Roger tore the file in half and fed it to the thing on the floor. The Economax contract vanished into the ever-open mouth.

To be spread later on the garden . . .

He grinned sweatily at the irony of it. What else was the Economax contract but a load of crap anyway?

Apparently satisfied for the moment, the Bushmaster lay inert. Roger gingerly held the head with one hand, using the other to thread the exposed part of the body back through the tear in the parcel.

He suddenly realized that he had to get the Bushmaster home. On the train. Rush-hour train. Supposing it started misbehaving in a crowded carriage? The prospect propelled him briskly into Miss Hornby's office cradling his wastepaper bin. It had to be fed. Enough to keep it quiet on the train, but not too much, otherwise it wouldn't work when he gave a demonstration for Minnie.

'Janice, could we exchange bins?' he asked in a businesslike manner.

He bent down next to her and noticed, apart from her legs and the perfume she wore, that her bin was nearly full. Excellent.

'But Mr Cannington—' she protested, not so much at the removal of her bin as at the substitution of his own in its place: a flagrant violation of the pecking order, for hers was a plain dark green one whereas his was a junior-executive model sporting a stainless-steel rim and sprayed to match his tan nylon carpet.

'I'm fed up with mine,' he said, scurrying into his own office before she could reply.

He tipped out Miss Hornby's bin, noticing a chocolate-bar wrapper peeping ostentatiously through the used carbon paper. He wished he could admonish her. She shouldn't be spoiling a figure like that by eating chocolate. But thinking of her heavenly lips caressing the rich brown squares, he could forgive her anything . . .

The pleasant conjecture evaporated rapidly as the Bushmaster popped its head out of the parcel to deal with the fresh provender.

Roger got down on all fours, his face close to the mouth. The rubbish seemed to be *attracted* into it, rather like iron filings winging to a magnet. There was no sound inside to indicate a vacuum mechanism, so quite what the intake principle was he couldn't say. He watched a hefty piece of cardboard jam awkwardly across the mouth. This would be interesting . . . He caught a glimpse of the innermost edge of the cardboard rapidly turning into a soft, dark mush before the whole piece disappeared into the black void. He remembered when constructing radio sets as a boy how he used to feed the solder on to a hot iron and see its comparatively sturdy composition become instantly fluid.

Heat? He gripped the Bushmaster's head for confirmation. No. Chemicals? Possibly. But how did an African tribesman obtain a chemical sophisticated enough to dissolve a wide variety of garbage without damaging the Bushmaster itself?

The thing would have to be dissected.

Meanwhile, two immediate problems nagged at him as he replaced the quiescent Bushmaster once more into the parcel: keeping it in order on the train; and ensuring that it performed immediately Minnie saw it. He closed his eyes, kneading the lids savagely, trying not to think of the scene when he spread a load of rubbish around the lounge only to discover that the Bushmaster was ignoring its cue due to a Digestion/Conversion Delay, or whatever it was called.

He sighed. It required careful calculation. He rummaged around in the files to find a sheet of blank paper and took it back to his desk.

$$10 \text{ wastepaper baskets} = \text{DCD of } 3 \text{ hours};$$

$$\text{therefore:} \quad 1 \text{ wastepaper basket} = \frac{3 \times 60}{10} = 18 \text{ minutes.}$$

So: eighteen minutes for one. Eighteen minutes? He referred again to Ngomo's instructions: *However, an infinite number of baskets will be accepted provided they are proffered one at a time at thirty-minute intervals* . . . His eyes moved to the paragraph

above: *ten wastepaper baskets . . . light assorted . . . in one operation . . .*

The three-hour DCD was only applicable if the ten baskets were consumed in one operation, which made nonsense of any calculations designed to find a DCD for one basket. Full stop. Not quite – it could be done by estimating the volume of the contents of ten baskets, taking into account the fact that one basket fed at thirty-minute intervals created no DCD, then gauging how long the Bushmaster had been in his possession, and remembering exactly how much rubbish he had given it during that time. From here he might be able to estimate the further amounts of rubbish needed to keep it quiet on the train, yet active for Minnie . . . Oh, God!

For the next hour Roger grappled with complicated equations based tenuously on Ngomo's already tenuous figures. During this time he paused only once, when the Bushmaster came out again for food. Swaying. Menacing.

How easy, he thought, to change fear into farce by having a boot-polished, olive-oiled Miss Hornby, clad only in a turban, play some Far Eastern strangled-chicken music on a blow-pipe for the Bushmaster to dance to.

He fed it the Powertrain Inc file instead.

Finally he gave up. He screwed the tightly packed page of algebra into a small damp ball, nearly threw it into the waste-paper bin, checked himself, then rolled it along the carpet for the Bushmaster.

Ngomo had summed it all up in his instruction manual: *the new owner must proceed by trial and error . . .*

Yes, he would have to be content with that.

For the remainder of the afternoon Roger detailed a be-wildered Miss Hornby to collect full secretarial wastepaper bins from other offices, which he assiduously fed to the Bushmaster at half-hourly intervals. He knew she was bursting with curiosity but he frustrated her attempts to gain entry to his office by conducting the exchange of full bins for empty ones in a series of tight little rituals through a barely open door.

He might perhaps have been interested, if not quite flattered,

had he been able to eavesdrop on some of Miss Hornby's conversations with her fellow secretaries:

Miss Dennison (fanning herself with a copy of *Cosmopolitan*) 'Hi, Janice. Hot, isn't it?'
Miss Hornby 'Hello, Midge. Is your wastepaper bin full?'
Miss Dennison 'Uh?'
Miss Hornby 'It's Randy Rodge, he's playing silly buggers again. This time he wants all the full bins I can get for him.'
Miss Dennison (laughing) 'Is it another pet project or something?'
Miss Hornby (shrugging) 'No idea. Might be the heat. He's acting very strangely.'
Miss Dennison 'Somebody said his wife was a bit screwy. Perhaps it's contagious. (grinning) I think you should lay him, Jan, bring him back to his senses. He's pretty dishy so why don't you give him a service?'
Miss Hornby (ruefully) 'Opportunity would be a fine thing . . . If only he wasn't such a . . .' (taps temple significantly with beautifully manicured forefinger)

Just before he left the office, Roger gave the Bushmaster the last three binfuls of rubbish all at once. Then he filched some sticky-tape from Miss Hornby's desk and sealed the split in the parcel.

The 17.40 train from Liverpool Street was predictably crowded and extremely hot. Roger, unable to grab a seat or fit his unwieldy parcel into a luggage rack, was faced with fifty minutes of tedious discomfort, crammed into the carriage like a factory-farmed animal. With the parcel crushed against his chest as it was, he had serious misgivings regarding the efficacy of his hasty repair.

On the approach to Stratford station the train came to one of those interminable halts, pioneered by Southern but newly adopted by Eastern Region, to break the monotony of a smooth journey home. A thick, self-conscious silence, disturbed only by the polite rustle of newspapers, descended on the carriage. Directly in front of Roger was a very attractive head of hair –

masses of smooth copper, highlighted in gold by the dusty rays of the sun. Usually he viewed other passengers merely as items that filled a railway carriage to a high level of inconvenience, but the owner of hair like that *must* be worth a little attention. He moved and she turned her head fractionally to reveal a perfect profile. At the points where he gripped the parcel, he was suddenly aware of the backs of his hands gently pressing her shoulder blades through layers of hair and flimsy clothing.

Roger silently cursed the Bushmaster in his arms, for had he not got it, another two people could have jammed into the carriage, pushing him forward until his crotch was snuggled against her buttocks and his face lost in that marvellous hair.

A perfect finale to a hard day at the office.

Abruptly, wondrously, the object of his admiration turned her head right round to address him. As he had expected, the face was flawless, the angry eyes the colour of lush spring lawns.

The flaw was the voice; a strident, truculent East End voice; a querulous squeal, like badly maintained automobile brakes.

'D'you mind keeping your hands to yourself,' it said.

Like discreet applause at a pornographic film show, the newspapers all rustled in unison as commuters sought refuge behind the headlines.

Stunned, Roger said, 'I beg your pardon?'

'You're playing with my drawers,' she brayed to the world at large.

He watched the muscles flexing around her mouth, momentarily destroying the symmetry of her lips, causing them to twist into a snarl.

'Am I?' he asked. The idea of playing with her drawers appealed to him and for a few seconds he allowed an inane grin to hang on his face. Then the blood came rushing to his cheeks. He felt his features pulsing, burning, prickling as the blush took hold.

'Look, dear,' he found himself gabbling, 'how can I be doing a thing like that when my hands are up there?' He used his head to indicate the position of his hands on the parcel. The girl's eyes swooped downward as she attempted to survey her back.

They met his again, the anger in them supplanted by perplexity.

'Well, if it's not your hands, it must be . . .' She hesitated, then those big green eyes flared brighter than before. 'You *dirty* sod!' she shouted, struggling to push herself away from him.

The applause from a multitude of *Evening Standard*s grew deafening; the ostriches buried their heads in newsprint.

Roger didn't know whether to laugh it off or pretend to lose his temper, put on a display of indignation. His face felt thoroughly cooked. He was conscious of everyone in the carriage waiting for his next move. They probably hoped he would hurl himself through a window on to the track and make his escape through adjoining gardens, snatching underwear from clothes-lines on his way in the time-honoured manner of the fugitive sex-maniac.

He felt it. Something moving, twisting, curling round his ankles. He shifted one hand to the bottom of the parcel . . .

The Bushmaster was out.

His ulcer jerked into action, tearing at his insides, the agony sending perspiration rolling down his face. His executive training saved him from total confusion and collapse.

'Not guilty,' he said. 'It's my vacuum cleaner pipe.' Despite the turmoil within, he smiled at her disarmingly.

'Yeah? That's a new name for it.'

'No, honestly. Look!' In the limited space available, Roger caught a section of the Bushmaster's body, praying that the head was well below, out of sight. In his hot hand the body felt cool but not lifeless. It twitched, in fact the whole parcel was moving against his chest. He gave the girl just a fraction of a second to peek at the 'vacuum cleaner pipe' before letting go his hold. His relief was marginal; at least the head hadn't reared up in full view of the carriage. If it had, there would have been pandemonium. Although thankful for small mercies, Roger realized the situation was still desperate.

The girl seemed somewhat mollified; nevertheless she elbowed her way to the other side of the carriage.

'Lucky for you I'm liberated, else I'd have the police on you!' she grumbled loudly.

A distinguished-looking middle-aged man had snapped into

the girl's recently vacated place in front of Roger. He turned to glance apprehensively at the suspected sex offender before returning to his share prices.

The train jolted into motion. Roger mouthed a silent thanksgiving to the British Rail gods responsible. By the time it pulled into Stratford, the Bushmaster was positively thrashing about his legs. He noticed the scrawny sinews in the neck of the man in front were rigid. If the Bushmaster was assaulting him, he was too much of a gentleman to say so.

At last the doors slid open to disgorge Roger on to the platform. An observer, not preoccupied with the miserable business of getting home, would have seen in the crowds a youngish, attractive man with dishevelled hair wearing a rumpled ninety-guinea suit. The main point of interest would have been the convulsive nature of the brown paper parcel in his arms, not to mention the nasty thing hanging from it.

Roger battled with the mass of people waiting for the underground connection, impatiently thrusting bodies aside in his search for salvation.

He found it.

As litter bins go, it was of moderate size only, but it contained treasures to set the heart soaring: two banana skins, several apple cores, a newspaper and – most spectacular of all – someone's discarded jam sandwiches.

Roger slipped the head and front part of the body into the bin and then laid the parcel, still containing some seven feet of coiled Bushmaster, across the top.

And nobody noticed. Rush hour, someone letting what appeared to be a king cobra loose into a British Rail litter bin . . . and nobody noticed. Light-headed and silly with relief, Roger wondered if he would be noticed cartwheeling naked through the ticket barrier.

Having dined, the Bushmaster allowed itself to be pushed back into the sorry-looking parcel. Roger collapsed on to a seat to wait for the next Southend train. On top of everything else, he was going to be late now and be subjected to Minnie's martyr-like moaning.

The journey passed without further incident, but not until

the Bushmaster was safely stowed in the front of the car did Roger fully regain his composure. As he drove out of the station car-park he began to brood over the events of the day. What exactly had he got himself into with this Bushmaster thing? He felt physically and emotionally drained; his routine had been disrupted and, more important, his pride had taken a beating. He couldn't recollect the last time he had lost control of a situation, human or otherwise. But that afternoon had seen him cringing abjectly in his office and an hour ago charging along a station platform like a schoolgirl with a bladder problem. Not to mention the undignified scene in the train. He glanced at the parcel beside him. The Bushmaster was impossible, ridiculous, farcical, a sick practical joke. Yes, the emancipated black man's novel method of revenge for centuries of oppression and exploitation. Definitely the new White Man's Burden. After years spent pandering to Minnie's obsession, he himself was developing an obsession about her obsession. Why else, he reasoned, should he pay forty pounds for a 'West African tribal vacuum cleaner'? Absurd. Tomorrow Ngomo could have it back. As for Minnie, if her trouble got any worse she would have to be committed – forcibly if necessary.

Funny its going up that girl's skirt though . . . almost as though the thing had a dirty mind of its own.

He drove the car into the wide driveway separating two bulky pre-war semis. The one on the left was his and he was forced to admit that it looked very neat, very substantial, indeed almost pretty in the mellow sunshine of early evening. It exuded an air of security and solidity – a no-nonsense atmosphere precisely matched to his present mood. The house was perhaps the only sane foundation remaining to an insane marriage.

He parked in front of his garage doors, gathering up the parcelled Bushmaster and entered the rear gate to the garden.

His eyes rested on three hundred pounds' worth of colour TV. Smashed. On the patio.

Roger lost his temper.

'What have you done now, you stupid bitch?' he roared at the white pebble-dashed wall and glinting windows. He

stormed through the open kitchen door, seeing the cool *empty* cooker. No food ready. *What again?*

Into the hall, then first left. She was sitting at the dining room table staring blankly at the wall. She had been crying. Her eye make-up was smudged which made her look like a panda; the tears had cut canals through her face powder. She didn't acknowledge him.

He dumped the Bushmaster into an easy chair by the french windows.

'What the hell have you done to the television, Minerva?' he demanded loudly. 'Just what d'you think you're playing at?'

No reply. No change of expression. He noticed a nasty graze on her left kneecap and her tights were holed and laddered. She might have fallen over. He calmed down, a little ashamed of his outburst of wrath. 'What happened? How did you hurt your leg?'

'The house did it.' Her reply was delivered without moving any part of her body except her lips – and their movement was minimal. The voice was pitched lower than usual and had no cadence whatsoever.

She's catatonic or something, he thought. Maybe she's been at the pill cabinet.

'Quite, darling, but *how* did it do it?' he persisted with as much patience as he could muster.

She ignored the question. Instead she began to drone, 'Roger, we're doomed. You realize we're doomed, don't you? Prisoners of the house. Condemned to death. And do you know how we're going to die? No, of course you wouldn't know that, you wouldn't *want* to know that – you the unbeliever. Well, I'll tell you. By suffocation. We are going to suffocate in filth.'

Roger sighed, gazing round the room at the spotless paintwork, the burnished furniture, windows that positively scintillated. 'Yes, dear,' he said.

Further declarations apparently not forthcoming from those lunatic lips, Roger made a decision. The big one.

He went into the garden, averting his eyes from the wrecked television set. He returned twice to the dining room, each time with a dustbin.

'Now listen, Minnie,' he said slowly and clearly to her back. 'I've brought you home a present. It's a vacuum cleaner and a good one. Very special, much better than the VibraGlide. This one can't be beaten by dirt, by dust, or anything else. D'you understand, Min?'

She showed no sign of interest, of having heard even. Roger bent until his mouth was a few inches from her ear. If the Bushmaster failed now, he would impale Ngomo on it . . .

'To demonstrate it, I'm going to empty the dustbins on the floor. Do you hear? *I'm-going-to-empty-the-dustbins-in-here. Think-of-it: a-great-stinking-sticky-heap-of-rubbish-on-the-carpet!*'

Her head whipped round. 'What?' she said.

Certain now of her attention, he acted quickly. He ran to the Bushmaster, unceremoniously tore off the brown paper wrapping, then tipped both dustbins upside down in the centre of the room. A rotten-sweet smell arose from the piled garbage to waft gently to his nostrils.

Minnie leapt to her feet, screaming and sobbing alternately, beating at him with determined but ineffectual fists. 'You bastard!' she shrieked. 'You dirty sneaking rat! What have you done to my beautiful room?! You—'

She hesitated. Roger took the opportunity to dart to the other side of the big heap of rubbish. From there he saw her eyes narrow suspiciously. Then her face became one huge cunning leer. With her sooty eye-sockets and her hunched posture she was every psychiatrist's ideal case: Instantly and Undoubtedly Certifiable.

'Bastard!' she spat. 'You and the house together; both of you want to drive me out, kill me, don't you, bastard?'

Roger held out his arms with the palms of his hands turned towards her in a placating gesture. He was worried, frightened too if he cared to admit it. 'Now, now, take it easy, Minnie. Nobody's trying to kill you or drive—'

He sensed it before he saw it. 'Look!' He pointed eagerly at the Bushmaster heading silently for the rubbish, its body blending nicely with the thick Wilton. 'There's your present, darling . . . Watch!'

Minnie whimpered. She stumbled to the fireplace, snatched up a heavy antique brass poker, advanced on the Bushmaster. 'Snake!' she yelled, spraying saliva behind her like an aircraft contrail. 'The rat bought a snake!'

'Give it a chance, Minnie!' Roger shouted despairingly.

'The rat, the snake, and the house. Planning to murder poor Minnie the mouse . . .' She mouthed the impromptu rhyme over and over again, keeping the beat by savagely hitting the Bushmaster with the heavy poker. Impervious to the rain of blows, it deviated not an inch from its course. It stopped at the base of the heap and began sucking garbage.

Definitely a quality product, Roger thought deliriously. Try bashing a hoover like that and see what happened . . .

The sight and the sound and the smell of the horrifying little scenario being enacted before him brought on a curiously detached and disgusted amusement: *Is this my life? Does it only add up to this . . . this nauseating mess?*

How would he feel if that grinning Irish fellow – what was his name? Amos Andrews? – walked in now with a camera crew? Amos wearing ear plugs, a handkerchief over his nose, merry shamrock eyes averted . . . handing Roger the big book and mumbling: 'Roger Cannington. *This* is *your* life!'

Ashamed.

A sharp pain in his collar bone brought him quickly back to reality. Minnie had turned her murderous attention from the Bushmaster to him. He staggered backwards as she raised the poker for the *coup de grâce*. It narrowly missed him and splatted harmlessly into damp newspaper-wrapped potato peelings on top of the pile. By the time she had retrieved the situation and was ready for another strike, Roger was safely on the opposite side of the pile. To reach him, she would have to skirt the edge, only this time he wouldn't be caught napping. He formulated a plan to let her chase him round and round the heap until she tired sufficiently to see reason. He hoped she wouldn't take a short cut over the top, for that would involve defending himself and disarming her. The prospect dismayed him; Kung Fu jungle antics were not his forte.

She came over the top.

Her face contained no vestige of its former prettiness, it being now a dripping, twisted mask of hate. With the poker held high above her head like a double-handed sword, she resembled some demoniac avenger. To avoid an untimely end, Roger prepared to hurl himself through the french windows. Then her left foot sank into the summit of the stinking trash, throwing her off balance. The poker flew from her grasp as she fell face down into the muck. She lay there unmoving and wailing.

Inches from her head the Bushmaster was feeding voraciously.

Roger's sense of relief was so strong that he laughed, although the sound which reached his ears was that of an ailing bullfrog. Minnie's banshee wail suddenly dropped a few octaves to become a gurgle and finally petered out altogether. The reason was plain to see, although he didn't believe it.

Her head had gone.

All he could see on top of Minnie's shoulders, apart from some tufts of blonde hair, was a short stump of neck. And that was slowly disappearing into the Bushmaster's mouth.

His own scream triggered him into action. He grabbed her ankles and pulled, gritting his teeth with the effort. He . . . had . . . to get her . . . head out of . . . its . . . *mouth*! Minnie came free, slipping easily through the refuse.

Minus her head.

Roger dropped the ankles and puked, making his own small contribution to the unholy mess in the room. Seconds later he found enough self-control to examine . . . Ugh! Inconsequential observations somehow insulated him against shock.

No blood. No gore. Thankful for that anyway. In fact she looks quite normal really. Well, almost. And she isn't kicking up that awful racket any more. There were worse ways to go. Under a train for instance.

A ragged gushing hole in the centre of the shoulders is the type of wound consistent with the indiscriminate removal of the head. Not so in this case. The only evidence to suggest that Minnie ever had a head was a neat dark circular patch on the top of her torso. It looked like Bostik.

The Bushmaster was behaving strangely, as well it might. The front part of it was vertical, assuming the swan's-neck shape that Roger had seen at the office. Only now it was quivering, not swaying as it had done earlier. The imitation eyes fixed him with a beady, soulless stare. He couldn't remember reading anything in the instruction manual about a situation like this, but he nevertheless felt he was getting to know the Bushmaster a little better. Right now he suspected that it was aggrieved – probably annoyed at having the succulent Minnie removed so precipitately from its mouth.

But how . . . (Slowly, so slowly Roger's legs reversed him in the general direction of the door) . . . could such a proposition be feasible? The Bushmaster only dealt with rubbish . . .

A soothing, amplified voice within him said: Well, let's face it, Roger, Minnie *is* dead you know, and a body is only another piece of detritus to be cleared by Nature one way or another.

Behind the big voice was another – small, screaming, muffled, as though locked in a trunk: *She wasn't dead! She was still alive when it got her!*

The hard edge of the door frame gouged his back. He flung himself through the doorway and fled.

Before the sound of the wildly revving car faded, the Bushmaster was tunnelling through the rank hillock in the dining room.

Roger purged the taste of vomit from his mouth and throat by means of three high-speed double whiskies. After two more, his hands stopped trembling, and his face, reflected in the mirror behind the bar, regained some of its colour.

One thing was painfully obvious . . . He had to go back, whether now or later. But had he? Why not call the police? Were they not equipped to deal with the kind of horror that was back there? Of course they were! Although there was no mention of it in the recruitment advertisements, Roger was willing to wager that the mandatory handling of headless corpses was written into the policeman's contract of employment these days. Yes, it would be easy to take advantage of their admirable facilities. Superficially. But what then of the Bushmaster and all

its crazy ramifications? Could the Police Mind, welded shut as it was by inflexible rule and procedure, cope with something as incomprehensible as the Bushmaster? He doubted it, for the phlegmatic Essex Constabulary would put this most amazing of phenomena into its departmental mincer, thereby reducing it to a simple workaday murder investigation. With Roger as suspect number one.

Right sir, we'll go over this again, shall we? You say your wife attacked you for no apparent reason? . . . Accuse you, sir? Good Lord, no! Mr Cannington's jumping to conclusions, isn't he, Sergeant? But to be on the safe side, sir, perhaps I'd better warn you that anything you may say will be . . .

Suspicion, surveillance, interrogation, photographs, interviews, reports, statements, analyses, post mortem, inquest, innuendo, publicity. Trial.

No. No police.

Alternatives? One came to mind. Dispose of the body, dispose of the Bushmaster. Carry on normally, discreetly informing anyone interested that Minnie, after months of threatening, had finally left him. For the immediate family, a little more creative embellishment was required; something mildly scandalous for Minnie's repressed relatives to get their teeth into: Minnie stealing away in the dead of night, catching the inter-city sleeper to hasten her into the rampant arms of her secret lover – a pools-winning postman from Halifax or somewhere.

Roger drained his glass, lighted a cigarette, and began to feel better. He bought a refill, stood propped against the bar swirling the liquid. He attempted to muster some emotion befitting Minnie's early demise. None came. Admittedly he felt distressed, not so much because of her departure from life, but rather the deplorable manner of her going. Undoubtedly he would miss her as one misses a perpetual pain in the neck, but he could adjust to that, given time. No question though of ever obliterating the image of her, up to her neck in the Bushmaster's mouth.

He wished her well in her new environment, hoping that she had been admitted into the Kingdom of Heaven *prior* to making

a fuss about tarnished gates and grubby wings . . . If the Good Lord couldn't find her a cleaning job up there, they wouldn't get much Eternal Peace.

Roger was just sober enough to recognize whisky-ravings. He crushed them and suppressed the smile on his face. His problem, his immediate and gruesome problem confronted him.

He was surprised to walk out of the pub into darkness. Had he really been such a long time in there? One consolation to be derived from this unpleasant business; he was now able to go anywhere for as long as he liked without any more of those reproachful silences and the old dewy-eyed gaze from you-*knew*-who. He pointed the car in the general direction of home, his resolve stiffened by a good charge of alcohol and tempered with four ham rolls. Fear momentarily stabbed him in the stomach as he passed a police car lurking in a lay-by. He kept an apprehensive watch on his mirror but it didn't pursue him. He relaxed. So stupid to be afraid of a drunk-driving charge when something rather more terrifying awaited him in the dining room.

Was the Bushmaster lethal, or had it made a mistake? How did it differentiate between rubbish and anything else – living human flesh for instance? Perhaps it couldn't. Perhaps it ate whatever was in its way when it was hungry. True, he had actually seen the thing eat only rubbish (apart from Minnie's . . . head), but had Ngomo stated categorically that it would eat nothing *but* rubbish? Roger couldn't remember. If he hadn't, then the Bushmaster was highly dangerous in the wrong hands, for whatever it ate was entirely dependent upon the operator's definition of the word 'rubbish'. Adapt the old but sound adage 'One man's meat is another man's poison' and you had a formula for trouble.

On the other hand, Minnie *had* shamefully abused the Bushmaster with the poker, so maybe its subsequent behaviour was a reaction – a 'petty malfunction due to mistreatment by the malicious and ignorant' as Ngomo had put it. But if the 'malfunction' constituted a revenge killing, there was nothing petty about it and it also implied that the Bushmaster had the ability to reason. However limited that ability and rudimentary the reasoning, it nevertheless placed the Bushmaster in a

category above that of a mere exotic domestic appliance. Whilst Roger agreed with Ngomo that Electrolux were unable to claim for their products 'A Spotless House *and* a Beautiful Garden', he also realized that they had no need to conceal the derivative slogan: 'If You Kick It, It Will Kill You'.

Something would have to be done about the Bushmaster.

The headlights slashed a path along the driveway, illuminating the black windows of the house with brief reflected tracers of brilliance. Roger switched off the ignition and lights, sitting in the car for a few moments to allow his eyes to adjust to the night. An opulent wall-lit glow oozed through chinks in his neighbour's fence accompanied by the muted strains of quadraphonic Sibelius. A discreet but distant welcome back to the middle-class fold. Very comforting, very reassuring ... except that he was not about to enter the snug after-supper home of his neighbour, but his own bleak, lightless house of horror.

He got out of the car, walked through the fence gate into the garden. He turned right, away from the house, towards the distant outline of his workshop at the end of the garden. Despite his recently imbibed determination, he felt the pincer movement of suspense on his ulcer. He fumbled, cursing in the dark shed, then remembered his lighter. The flaccid flame barely provided enough light to find the long-handled axe which leant against the wall between the spade and the hoe. Once in his hands, the axe bolstered his confidence; he was able now to face the Bushmaster on equal terms. But the smooth wood was damp where he gripped it too hard.

A balmy, starlit Essex sky above his head, a well-tended green baize lawn beneath his feet. On either side, well-lit, solid, suburban houses casting comfort across spacious gardens.

In front: an open kitchen door, the yawning black entrance to Minnie's tomb. The Bushmaster's playground. The unbelievable stuff of madness.

The stench of decay was floating in the kitchen. Roger stood still in the gloom. Listening. Not daring to walk to the light switch on the far wall. His resolve was peeling off him in layers, like skin from an onion. Beneath, he knew, was raw fear. Could

it hear him? Could it smell the whisky bile on his breath, the stinking, streaming sweat filling his body creases? Could it sense his presence, anticipate the action he was about to take?

Something snaked around his ankles. *It was in the kitchen!*

He kicked wildly with both feet, caught a blurred, dim movement of something skidding on the tiles. Terror supercharged his reflexes. He brought the axe down so forcefully that it split the object into two smaller objects, then buried itself in the floor. 'Got you!' he breathed exultantly. He released the quivering axe handle to cross to the light switch, screwing up his eyes against the fierce fluorescence.

'Jeee-zus!' he sobbed.

The cat. He had axed the cat . . . in two pieces. The front half still twitched, glazing, censorious eyes turned up at him. His head reeled, the brain within rotating until the centrifugal force threatened to fracture the skull. He slumped against the washing-machine desperately wanting to make amends, do penance for his appalling deed. Minnie, he could find justification for her death. The cat, none at all, particularly as he himself had struck the death-blow. He wanted to hold the cat, comfort it, try to explain that it wasn't his fault. But he knew if he tried he would definitely regurgitate the rapidly rising ham rolls.

With a supreme effort of will, he pulled the axe out of the mangled lino tiles. There was still a job to be done. He faced the open doorway to the hall, braced himself, then strode purposefully into the dining room and turned the light on.

Everything was as he had left it except for one small item. Minnie wasn't there. The Bushmaster lay quietly on the carpet, its tail-end buried in the pile of rubbish. From its mouth protruded something thick. Guessing he had nothing to fear from the Bushmaster at the moment, and inured now to any further horror, Roger glided nearer to look. What he saw explained Minnie's absence from the room. Suddenly he felt remarkably placid. His physical discomforts receded, he was floating in an underwater world where he could hear nothing, smell nothing, feel nothing. Only his eyes informed him of reality – and even that was filtered kindly through anaesthetized lenses.

The thick object in the mouth was a pair of swollen legs from the knees downward. Two unshapely wedges of Danish blue cheese. Minnie's legs – he recognized the varicose veins, never much of a problem to her before, but now accentuated under pressure beneath the tattered tights.

The Bushmaster was obviously in the middle of a Digestion/Conversion Delay. Everything waited for a DCD so Minnie was stuck. Roger laughed, destroying his pleasant disembodied state.

The silly cow was enough to stick in anyone's craw.

He was grateful to the present slippery thinking which allowed him to step so deftly over the boundary between horror and humour. A fleeting impulse came and went – an impulse to chop the Bushmaster into pieces while he had the opportunity. Harmless it might well be during its DCD, but soon (twinge: how soon?) it would become reactivated, swallow Minnie's trotters and start misbehaving again. But, he reasoned, once already this evening the premature and panic-stricken use of the axe had given him cause for regret. Essentially he was not a cruel or ill-natured man and the accidental killing of puss had upset him greatly; in fact he made a note to grieve for her properly when the time was appropriate. After all was said and done, the Bushmaster could not be faulted. It had functioned as Ngomo said it would function. Indeed, if he considered Minnie's death the most successful and enduring treatment she was likely to receive for her illness, then the Bushmaster's performance had been admirable. So, little would be gained by the churlish destruction of such a benefactor purely because he had no further use for it. If anything, the Bushmaster should be rewarded . . .

There presented itself an idea. An idea perfectly tailored to both his and the Bushmaster's requirements.

Gingerly holding the back of the head at arm's length to ensure that Minnie's legs were as far away from him as possible, Roger dragged the Bushmaster to the car. He bundled it into the boot and drove cautiously to the main road, turning left in the direction of the railway. He was acutely aware of the likelihood of a late-night vehicle check. The effects of the alcohol had long since worn off, but if the police examined the boot his

explanation of the contents would have to be the ultimate in plausibility.

Two miles on, he turned right at the railway bridge into a narrow lane running parallel with the tracks, ignoring a 'No Through Road' sign on the corner. Soon the tarmacadam surface was replaced by ruts and potholes, forcing him to reduce speed. Beyond the headlamp beams lay a ten-acre wilderness. Ten acres of barren land in the midst of house-hungry suburbia which even the council's favourite speculators were reluctant to build upon. True, some of the land was currently being worked by the council itself but much of it, particularly to the eastward, had been returned to a semblance of its natural state and was ripe for profit. Roger's nostrils wrinkled, involuntarily reacting to the odour seeping into the car. Ethics didn't come into it, he decided. Only the zero sales potential due to the stink prevented them from building here. And the stink of a million maturing dustbins was a powerful dissuader.

The car passed through sagging high wire gates into the heart of the council rubbish tip. Forbidding mountains of refuse reached obscenely for the stars like lepers for the starched white hem of a passing doctor's coat. In front of him at the end of a canyon, Roger could see the most recent workings – distinguished by a cluster of stained, silent bulldozers and diggers. He parked nearby, taking tiny breaths as he got out of the car to minimize the suffocating stench of freshly turned, sun-warmed waste. No salary, he thought grimly, could be too high for the men who had to work here. Was it feasible that they were a species of super-man, immune from the smell and the disease-bearing germs? Improbable, for as far as he knew, any super-men working for the council sat behind desks plotting misery for thousands and were immune only from reality.

The pattering claws and squeaks of outrage of the tip's scurrying residents hastened Roger to the boot of the car. He removed the Bushmaster, noticing as he did so the distended tail section in the sullen glow of the rear lights. The collection bag was full to bursting point. He knelt down on to hard-packed rubbish and detached the bag as Ngomo had demonstrated, splattering some of the slime inside over his hands and

clothes in the process. Immediately the Bushmaster began twitching. Minnie's legs, mauve and hideous in the red light, slid smoothly into the mouth.

Not a DCD at all, Roger reflected, a little wiser. The reason for the Bushmaster's lethargy had been acute constipation.

He waved farewell to the disappearing soles of Minnie's feet, then jumped back as the head reared into the familiar menacing attitude. It twisted slowly, first one way then the other, as if confused by the thousands of tons of surrounding rubbish and trying to get its bearings. Roger tensed, ready to run for his life, but the head sank to the ground. The Bushmaster moved off. Roger watched the dark elongated shape of it slither alongside the car, then into the headlamp beams, gathering momentum; beautiful yet loathsome; ten feet of enigma melting into the night.

In his hand he still held the collection bag and was suddenly aware of what it contained (mostly mucilaginous Minnie). He flung it from him and heard it plop somewhere in the unconsecrated foothills of the nearest mountain. Distant thunder rebuked him for his disrespectful scattering of Minnie's remains. The rumbling grew to a roar, bombarding his ears, shaking the ground underfoot . . .

Behind the towering peaks the last train to Liverpool Street sped past on the embankment, providing a valediction apposite to Minnie's low-profile funeral ceremony.

Upon his return, Roger cleared up the mess in the house. The two dustbins were refilled and placed on the patio next to the scrap television set. He reverently shovelled the cat into a polythene bag, digging a hole for it in the vegetable plot behind the garage. A transplanted cabbage served as a temporary headstone. Using bucketfuls of hot soapy water and disinfectant, he scrubbed the dining room carpet. The kitchen was easier by reason of its smooth surfaces and washable wallpaper. When he had finished, only the mutilated tiles remained to tell of the small tragedy enacted there.

By 2.30am he was feeling like the floor cloth he had wrung out so many times. Weary yes, but jubilant too. It was all over bar the explanations; a bit of care and attention to detail here

would ensure that Minnie's departure caused little more than a few raised eyebrows. The close relatives who knew her for the clinging nutcase she was would be dealt with first. By portraying the incensed, deserted husband and hitting them over the head with his injured pride, he was assured of a sympathetic, if mystified reception. Yipee! And to think he could have actually *murdered* her and got away with it!

Roger took a shower, surprised to find himself bursting into song in the booth. When he stepped out on to his sticky, blemished suit, the tune became merely a soundless whistle. He donned his pyjamas, then stood indecisively in the bedroom, *their* bedroom.

He took two blankets and a pillow and slept in the car.

Janice Hornby had a shock when her boss walked in at a quarter to ten. He looked awful, like death warmed up. The trendy suit he was wearing (which she hadn't seen before) didn't seem to fit him either. That wasn't like Rodge at all – he was usually a swishy dresser. On second thoughts, maybe it wasn't the suit . . . It was him. He didn't fit the suit. All of a sudden he was out of shape. Add that fact to the black gutters under his eyes and the grey, caved-in jowls and the answer was: a heavy night. He'd been looking peaky for a long time now, but nowhere near as bad as this.

'Coffee. Black,' he snapped. 'And send out for some sandwiches.'

'Yes, Mr—' Before she could finish, he was through to his office and had slammed the door.

Rodge had a bit on the side.

Apart from effects of a sleepless night in the car, Roger felt good. For the first time in months (or was it years?) he had total command of an integrated self. He sat at his desk, hands outspread on its top, marvelling at the transformation, the billowing confidence, the positive feeling of control. This, he declared to himself, is Roger Resurrected, Roger freshly hatched from his shell of introversion. The office was no longer a place of escape where he could brood over Minnie, wallow in self-pity, or fantasize on Miss Hornby's sexual capabilities. Good God!

What an apathetic, snivelling worm he used to be. How many times had he unknowingly forfeited a seat on the Board because of it? Well here was the new Action Age!

He jabbed at the intercom switch. 'Janice?'

Her voice crackled brightly back at him. 'Won't be long, Mr Cannington. I'm waiting for the kettle—'

'Never mind that. Get your pretty little arse in here, will you?'

Janice couldn't believe her ears. She rushed in, not knowing quite what to expect. He was standing sternly by the window trying to snarl up the traffic below with the aid of mind-power. He somehow didn't look so bad now – the suit was beginning to fit him.

'I'm taking a holiday,' he announced briskly. 'Three, possibly four weeks.'

'Yes, Mr Cannington?' I was right, she thought bitterly. He's found himself a bird. No more views of the undergrowth for you, Sonny Jim. Have a fabulous time, Casanova . . . I hope it drops off.

'Would you like to come?' He smiled as he said it.

Janice was thunderstruck. Malice cooled to pity. Poor guy, he's flipped his lid at last. 'But Mr Cannington . . .'

'Roger's my name. Use it.'

'But, but . . . What about your wife?'

'Kinky, eh?' he joked. 'I suppose you want a threesome. Don't bother your gorgeous head about her. She's, ah, left me.'

Hope lived in Miss Hornby's shapely breast. 'I've had my holiday how can I get away they won't be able to manage here,' she said all in one breath.

Roger sat on his desk grinning. 'I'm going to see the Chairman in a moment, to see if I can persuade him to make it a working holiday – check up on the European offices, that sort of thing. If he agrees, I'll *need* a secretary, will I not?' He patted the space on the desk next to him. She joined him, felt his arm creep round her waist.

'If he vetoes the idea . . .' He shrugged. 'Then we'll go under our own steam. One thing this outfit can't begrudge me is a vacation. You can go sick or be called to your dying American

aunt's bedside. Don't look so serious.'

'I was thinking about the cost.'

'Forget it. Money absolutely no object as far as you're concerned. This will be five years' holidays rolled into one. Uhmm . . .' He rolled his lower lip between finger and thumb, casting her a sidelong, mischievous glance. 'First stop Rome . . . Coming?'

Janice pivoted into his arms, thrusting greedily at him with her lips. 'Yes, Roger,' she breathed. 'Whenever you like.'

The Chairman was affable and amenable, especially when, in response to a routine question regarding Minnie's health, Roger broached the news of her decampment.

'My dear boy,' he boomed. 'Congratulations! D'you know, I was about your age when my own dear bugger upped and left me for some machine-tool rep. I never looked back – had a seat on the Board in no time and dollies galore. And the whipper-snapper salesman wound up with one second-hand machine-tool he could never sell! Bloody hilarious!'

Roger waited for the laughter to subside before disclosing his detailed proposals and projected itinerary. The Chairman seemed to be totally involved with his cigar, chomping and choking on it with gusto. In fact, he was listening carefully to Roger's plans and was surprised by the change in young Cannington. Here was an example of a woman preventing a man from realizing his full potential. Now his wife had left him, there was only one way Cannington could go. Up. His idea to shake up the European marketing operations was near to brilliant. If the truth be known, the Chairman had a soft spot for dynamic, clean-cut junior executives. They were tomorrow's Captains of Commerce. And dammit, he was one once – a regular eager beaver . . .

He gave his blessing to Roger's project – with a jovial warning to watch the expenses.

Roger and Janice spent the morning making frenzied arrangements for a night flight to Rome. At lunchtime they parted reluctantly, each confessing that they were barely able to wait until they met again at the airport.

* * *

Roger entered the house accompanied by a vague feeling of trepidation, as though he expected to discover some enormous oversight, some catastrophic retrospective hitch to last night's propitious disposal of Minnie. In the train that morning a similar feeling had squeezed his bowels as the rubbish tip came into view, but no policemen or animated zoologists were swarming over the giant heaps. Thankfully the area had appeared dismally normal.

Other than a faint fragrance of dustbin and disinfectant throughout the house, and the gouged kitchen floor, nothing suggested that astounding and horrendous events had taken place the previous evening. The heavy hygienic hand of Minnie still lay over the spotless, impeccably arranged rooms, and would probably continue to do so in spite of any efforts by him to create a comfy pig-sty.

It only remained then to put this mausoleum on the market as soon as he returned from his European capers. And after that? For Roger, a cosy mews flat in London. Later perhaps a seat on the Board and a Dino Ferrari – not to mention hordes of eager young ladies flocking so forcefully as to be unavoidably impaled . . .

Freedom. Owed solely to the Bushmaster. Ngomo's voice rang in his ears: *You have the air of a harassed man, a man with a garbage disposal problem on his mind . . . I think the Bushmaster will restore the lustre to your life.*

Buster, how right you were. Minnie was the problem.

During the afternoon, Roger packed his suitcases. Surplus items, instead of being returned to drawers and wardrobe, were scattered about the bedroom. A cigarette was stubbed out on the cream carpet. He was hesitantly baiting Minnie's ghost, daring her to materialize and admonish him. Emboldened by lack of response, he tried goading her into paroxysms of helpless fury by playing hoopla with his underpants, managing to drape several pairs over the baluster post at the top of the stairs – no mean feat considering the distance from their point of launch in the bedroom doorway. That he could indulge in such behaviour without reproof was a sure sign of Minnie's spiritual absence. She must have been busy elsewhere; doubtless some

ethereal unfortunate was having his sceptre and baubles polished at that very moment!

In the bathroom, Roger's jocular mood fled upon sight of yesterday's suit screwed into a stiff filthy bundle next to the shower booth. He almost felt the squirting goo from the Bushmaster's collection bag. Dry-cleaning might well erase the physical evidence, but to wear it again meant enduring intolerable images and sensations. No, the suit would take its place alongside other Minnie memorabilia destined for the Oxfam shop.

As the afternoon wore on, Roger slipped steadily into depression. Something to do with the house. Looked at through renascent eyes, the place was a dull and anonymous prison. Hardly surprising that Minnie should have lost her sanity trapped in it day after monotonous day. Perhaps children (those two children which were flushed from her delicate body disguised as formless bloody lumps) would have helped; brightened her up, enlivened the house, and in turn given *him* an incentive to enjoy life. Perhaps. Perhaps not. If, as he suspected, Minnie was a latent lunatic from birth, then there would have been a couple of kids for him to cope with in addition to everything else. As it was, things had worked out nicely now – if a little later than he would have liked.

The house, though. How could he have held for so long the cherished belief that this dreary, nondescript edifice represented the sum total of his aspirations? Truly appalling, for the belief naturally implied that he himself was dreary and nondescript, and would probably have remained so. But for the grace of God and the Bushmaster. The future prior to yesterday was today easy to envisage . . . Roots irretrievably embedded in sterile suburban soil . . . Life's autumn within a few years . . . Roger Cannington, paunchy, balding, impotent stereotype commuting his way to retirement.

Whilst waiting for the taxi to take him to the station, his thoughts turned to the tops of Janice's legs. He cheered up no end.

Rome, Vienna, Geneva, Paris, Madrid. For Janice and Roger it was a case of love at first touch and then four licentious weeks

working hard and playing harder. Once or twice Roger found himself unable to rise to the occasion's demand due to a sudden stark, almost photographic recall of Minnie's ghastly blue-veined legs in the mouth of the Bushmaster. At such times Janice was Sweet Understanding itself ('As you get older, darling, you're bound to . . .'). In fact, she was so infuriatingly smug and serene in her presumptuous wisdom that he was tempted to tell her of the Bushmaster and the true circumstances of Minnie's desertion. But on the whole, their relationship took the path which many true lovers had trodden before them, and by the time their plane touched down at Heathrow on a dying, dull August evening, both were hale, hearty and – dare they admit it? – just a teeny weeny bit bored.

The taxi deposited Janice near her flat en route for Liverpool Street station. Claiming fatigue, Roger declined her half-hearted plea to stay and romp for the rest of the weekend. Waving gaily to her through the window, he wondered now whether his decision to proposition her had been a trifle hasty. All sorts of complications could arise out of an office romance – the fouling-your-own-nest syndrome. Still, he could always sack her as a last resort.

The grey, squalid station with its grimy waiting trains brought the prosaic, familiar facts of life creeping back. Saturday night on Liverpool Street station is a sobering experience for the most ardent dreamer. A small consolation for Roger was the absence of rush-hour crowds. At Stratford (scene of minor crisis, how long ago – a month?) his stomach began to knot. What awaited him at home? Policemen with warrants? The Bushmaster returned to roost? Minnie? . . . Was she really *dead*? He spent the remainder of the journey trying to rid himself of unwarranted fears, succeeding to a certain extent by scoffing at them. Deep down, however, he knew he wouldn't be satisfied until he saw for himself that everything was in order. That done, only the quest for his bachelor pad and the logistics of actually moving house need detain him for a few weeks further.

At last he felt the driver shut off power to the motors as the train began the long gentle descent to the station. He peered out of the streaky window into the darkness beyond. Not far below

was the rubbish tip, but he could see nothing save his own gaunt reflection and the distant yellow aura of town-centre sodium lamps with its twinkling suburban periphery.

A long white Ford bearing the illuminated red legend 'Shirley's Taxis' squatted on the station forecourt. The driver was a hard-looking blonde sporting a late-fifties hair style. Roger ascertained that she was for hire, put his cases on the rear seat and slid into the front beside her. He gave her the address, covertly noting details: thirty-fivish; a pair of rib-crusher thighs bursting the trousers of her lilac pants-suit; the jacket bulging with mammary magnificence.

The type attracted him. Even prior to his marriage to the wilting, insipid Minnie, he had harboured a secret but unfulfilled desire to dally with the ladies of social groups 4 and 5. He used to see them in pubs at weekends; vulgar, uninhibited creatures in shiny, clinging dresses performing 'Knees Up Mother Brown' after two gin and tonics. Somehow he had never been able to summon the courage to walk through to the public bar and pick one of them up for a slumming session in the back of his car. My, he thought. How things have changed since then. No qualms about charming the lilac pants off this Amazon . . .

God! From Roger Reticent to Roger Rampant in four short weeks. Remarkable.

She handled the big car with flair and expertise. Roger presumed, with a delicious tremor, that a gentleman friend would be handled likewise. Regardless of size.

'Nice tan you've got on you, love,' she said breezily. 'Been to Spain then?'

Roger smiled, hamming up the visuals (dazzling ruler-straight teeth in a handsome brown face), projecting hopefully an image of himself as rakish adventurer; peripatetic, virile quarter-millionaire. 'Water sports in Acapulco actually,' he said, extending his recent travels a little.

If impressed, she had a strange way of showing it. 'Oh, you're one of them queer beach boys, are you?' she asked, her face a study in mock concern.

Roger had no other choice but to laugh it off. Oh no, he

groaned inwardly. Please not a male ego deflation expert, not a conscientious soldier of the Women's Liberation Army . . . Maybe she was only a conscript doing her mandatory National Service . . .

What on earth was he thinking of? With a hair-do and an uplift like that, she would be deemed unfit for duty at the induction examination. He decided she just fancied herself as a comedienne – probably did a nice line in bedroom repartee too.

See how she managed in the back of a taxi.

He remembered the name on the roof of the car. 'You must be Shirley,' he said, slipping his arm along the back of her seat.

'One of them,' she replied wearily, as though the gambit had been made a thousand times before.

Puzzled, Roger said: 'How many are there?'

Another white Ford complete with glowing roof sign flashed an acknowledgement as it passed in the opposite direction.

'Just two of us. I'm Elaine Shirley, and that,' she explained, jerking a thumb rearwards over her shoulder, 'was my husband Reg. Ever heard of him?'

Roger shook his head dumbly.

She was aghast. 'Never heard of Shagger Shirley? Never seen him wrestling on the telly? I tell you, he's your actual local hero, love. He retired while he was still on top and set up this little business.'

She gunned the car out of the brightly lit speed-limit zone. 'We haven't been going long but I reckon we'll do all right. Reg put it all in a nutshell the other day. "Only two cabs, El," he said. "But we got the world at our feet." Wasn't that a nice thing to say?'

'Sensible forward planning,' Roger observed sourly. His hopes and desires receded at an alarming rate. He discreetly removed his arm from behind her.

'Got a heart of gold, old Reg has . . .' she mused. Suddenly she threw him a pointed glance. Caught in the beams of passing cars, the expression on her face was definitely humourless. 'Mind you, he hasn't got a suntan, and he's not what you'd call pretty to look at, but you ought to see the muscles on him. D'you know, I saw him tear our street door off its hinges with

his bare hands one night. All because we'd forgot to take the key out with us. I suppose his temper's his only weakness. With his strength he could easy kill someone when he only meant to push them around a bit. D'you know what I mean?'

'Quite,' Roger barked. Message received loud and clear. Obviously the erudite, dainty, intellectual Shagger was The Man in her life. Equally obvious was the need to attend weight-lifting and karate classes if he proposed to seduce the female proletariat.

In the aftermath of retarded lust, his stomach began a lazy downward spiral as the taxi sped him ever nearer the house.

Elaine – Mrs Shirley – broke a lengthy silence to ask in a lightly conversational manner: 'Did you hear about the council rubbish dump?'

Rubbish dump? His stomach hit bottom.

'No, what about it?' he asked casually. He wanted to grab her by the throat and beat every last scrap of information about the rubbish dump out of her, but she would never have guessed from the tone of his voice.

'Something weird's happened out there. It's been in the *Echo* for a couple of weeks. Have a look in the parcel tray, this week's is in there somewhere.' She switched the interior light on.

Roger found the local paper and stared at the screaming headlines: EYESORE BECOMES AMENITY AREA WITHOUT PLANNING CONSENT. COUNCILLOR ALLEGES GRAFT.

He hastily digested the report beneath. It seemed that most of the rubbish tip had been miraculously transformed within a few weeks. It was now a haphazard paradise of woods and wild glades. The council was hopping mad because the mammoth task had been carried out without their knowledge or permission. A separate Parks Planning Committee would have to be formed to examine ways and means of restructuring and improving the new facility to meet the requirements of the general public. The existing Parks Planning Committee, overburdened as it was with work, had nevertheless managed to provide broad guidelines for the new Parks Planning Committee to work to. These were incorporated in a preliminary report and recommended, among other things, two car parks, ornamental

gardens, a small shopping complex licensed to sell gifts and refreshments, and of course toilets. The Finance Committee, upon receipt of this preliminary report from the existing Parks Planning Committee, estimated that the cost of construction alone, before the salaries of administrators, landscape gardeners, park keepers, etc, would mean another two pence on the general rate. The Finance Committee though was prepared to wait for the detailed specification from the new Parks Planning Committee before attempting an accurate costing. The Housing Committee wanted the new land for council houses, and every other committee wanted it for every other purpose. The Cleansing and Sanitation Committee – naturally – wanted to keep it.

There followed inch after column inch of allegations of corruption in low places, denials, counter-allegations. The whole bureaucratic rat's nest was in uproar simply because a tiny piece of God's earth had reverted to its natural state without reference to, or regard for, the boss of the primates.

The last few paragraphs on the front page provided Roger with the comfort he badly needed:

According to observers at the tip, the mysterious philanthropist has abandoned his activities in the vicinity. However, a pointer to his present whereabouts is given in the current issue of the East Anglian Argus, *an Echo Group newspaper serving the area north of the R. Stour.*

The paper carries an account of council workers at the ultra-modern Lavenham Refuse Reception Centre finding their place of work overrun by young eucalyptus trees and elephant grass.

When informed of this new development, a spokesman for our own Cleansing Department said, 'Glad to hear it. This crank is their concern now and frankly I hope he stays there!'

Roger folded the newspaper thoughtfully. So, the Bushmaster had moved on to create pastures new. Jolly good luck to it.

'Interesting,' he said, his newly found ease permeating his voice. The dingy interior light pointed up the all-encompassing slab of make-up on his driver's face. He decided that he didn't fancy her after all.

'I went out there to have a look for myself,' she said. 'But

they've put a big fence up so you can't get in. You can still see some dirty great trees though – and big tall grass waving in the wind. Marvellous it is.'

The taxi swung into Roger's road.

'What I'd like to know is, how this filantrypissed bloke got it all to grow in just a couple of weeks.'

'Probably a hoax,' said Roger noncommittally. He retrieved his cases from the rear seat.

He paid the exact fare, omitting the generous tip which might have crossed her palm had she been more cooperative. The 'queer beach boy' remark still rankled too. He addressed her scowling face through the open window: 'Give my regards to Shagger.'

She executed a wild U-turn in the narrow road. The car mounted the opposite kerb, the offside wing passing inches from a solitary lamp-post. Then, with two wheels on the grass verge, it accelerated viciously away, throwing chunks of neatly trimmed sod behind it. Roger chuckled and shook his head reprovingly. Evidently it wasn't only Shagger who had a temper.

He faced the house, its bulk dimly outlined against the heavily overcast night sky. Shapeless, he concluded. Shapeless, miserable, characterless; a mediocre, *narrow* man's home. The sooner he moved the better.

The light from the lamp-post opposite suffered from the twin evils of inflation and a nit-picking Highways Department: each electricity-price increase heralded the arrival of three men and a lorry to replace the bulb with one of a lower wattage. Soon it would go out altogether. By courtesy of its feeble rays Roger made his way along the front path. He deposited his cases in the porch, selected the key, inserted it into the lock, turned it. Nothing happened. Annoyed, he realized he must have bolted the door from the inside and left via the kitchen door. Leaving his cases, he negotiated the lawn and flower border and jumped the low brick wall dividing the front garden from the driveway. He entered the rear garden through the gate in the fence near the garage.

Something large and solid on the dark patio directly in front of the kitchen door sent him sprawling. He sat on the concrete,

mouthing obscenities, nursing a bruised shin, and fumbling in his pocket for his lighter.

The flame flickered briefly, then died . . . Out of gas . . . It was one of those nights, but he had seen enough to send his heart to his mouth. A brown paper parcel. He reached out. To touch it, feel it, identify it . . .

He knew what it was by its contours.

The VibraGlide. Returned, repaired, from the shop. The idiot delivery man, finding no one at home, had dumped it. Roger relaxed, exhaling heavily. He smiled. Apparently there had developed within him a phobia about large brown paper parcels.

He regained his feet, brushed himself down and selected by touch the long key to fit the mortise lock on the kitchen door. After a thirty-second grope for the keyhole, the lock turned but the door only opened a fraction, as though jammed by a carpet or some similar object.

Bushmaster! Now miles away. You just read it. Reassured, he pushed as hard as he dared with his shoulder against the frosted glass.

The door opened a little wider.

Cursing loudly, he used his foot as a battering-ram on the wide wooden surround until the door moved inwards sufficiently to let him squeeze through.

Once inside the pitch-black kitchen the noxious, pungent atmosphere brought tears to his eyes, threatened to choke him. Something swirled around his legs to prevent him from walking. Above, the ceiling creaked ominously, and from every direction came strange sibilant sounds, like the hiss of sand poured erratically through a hundred paper funnels.

Coughing, wheezing, thoroughly alarmed, Roger fought his way across the kitchen, maintaining an upright stance with extreme difficulty. Even as his clawing fingers found the light switch the echoes of Minnie's voice came sprouting through his turgid mind like a fungus in the night. He knew instinctively that the words were true. The fluorescent light now provided sickening confirmation:

Do you know – have you any idea . . .

Thick clouds of dust floated in the kitchen. He had been

wading thigh-deep through dirt, fine black dirt with a topping of dust and fluff.

. . . what would happen in this house if I left it for any length of time? Well, have you?

Through the murk, he saw the quivering, sagging ceiling; the buckled polystyrene tiles and splintered joists causing gaps, open taps through which flowed streams of dirt from above. Some of the streams were liquid mud caused by the dirt mixing with water from fractured bathroom pipes.

This house would be so full of dirt . . .

The door between kitchen and hall had become detached from its frame and was lying, almost buried beneath the filth, on its edge against the dishwasher.

. . . that you wouldn't be able to get in the front door!

No need to turn the hall light on, even had he been able to reach it. From his position in the kitchen doorway he could see well enough what was happening. The dirt coming down the stairs had caused a drift so deep that the front door was completely obliterated. The subsequent back-up on the stairway had found an escape route over the top of the flush-panelled baluster and was pouring into the hall below. All the doors leading off had been torn from their hinges, allowing the dirt entry into the downstairs rooms. But for that, the hall would have been filled to the ceiling long before now.

Roger broke. With flailing, panic-stricken arms and legs he tried to retrace his passage across the kitchen to the garden and the life-saving VibraGlide out there on the patio.

He was halfway when the ceiling, and the countless tons of dirt behind it, fell on him.

As he suffocated in the quiet darkness he knew positively that he was about to die. Surprisingly the knowledge conveyed no terror; quite the contrary, for the pleasant, upward-floating sensation was soothing, restful.

He was being wafted gently towards a tiny light, far, far above. Gradually, as he drew nearer, the light took on shape and substance . . . a standing figure bathed in glorious incandescence.

It was Minnie, a tranquil, smiling Minnie attired in a delicate,

flowing gown of virginal white. In one hand she held a golden bucket and a jewel-encrusted tin of Vim. Her other hand beckoned him lovingly.

The terror came then.

Roger tried to scream but his mouth and lungs were full of filth.

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