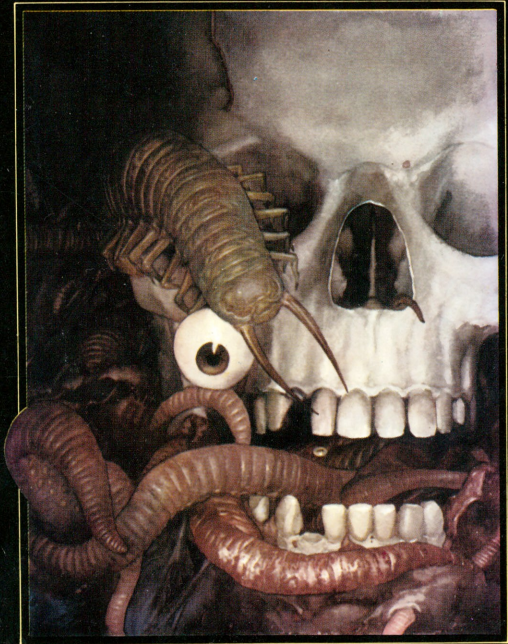




THE 17th PAN BOOK OF HORROR STORIES

Selected by HERBERT VAN THAL



The 17th 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 and 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, as well as *The Music Lovers' Companion* (with Gervase Hughes). He has recently edited Thomas Adolphus Trollope's autobiography and a two-volume work on Britain's Prime Ministers.

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Edited by Herbert van Thal

The 17th Pan Book of Horror Stories

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Monica Lee

The remains of reindeer

The noon of the early October day of 1970 hung in the translucent atmosphere like a single, enormous tear.

Fernhill Manor, a large building of Cotswold stone, with clusters of tall, brick chimneys, stood silently, as if waiting for the October tear to fall. Set in two hundred acres of woodland deep in Hampshire, with small lakes and rare, weeping trees, semi-wild gardens and beautifully designed topiary, the house was enveloped in a carefully acquired aloneness. The naked branches of climbing roses wreathed the tall window in the south wing, behind which Melissa Weldon was dying. She was fifty-five years old and was being rapidly swept away by leukaemia. The bedroom was the almost macabre result of her lifelong obsession with white. The floor was covered in a deep-pile white velvet. The walls coated with white damask. The bed, a swan-like creation of quilted white satin, had clusters of white chiffon roses suspended on silver chains, floating close to the ceiling. Identical roses formed the shade of the bedside lamp. Melissa was lost in waves of heavily embroidered pillows. Only her nose, thin, yellow and already sharpened by approaching death, was visible. And her hands. Her cherished, celebrated, adored, beautiful hands. Placed on the coverlet, palms down, the fingers slightly apart, wrists circled in layers of white gossamer lace.

Her brother Hubert sat in an armchair close to the bed. He was sixty-five and had spent all his life, with a few brief interludes, first with his parents and Melissa and after their mutual death in an air crash twenty years ago, with Melissa at Fernhill Manor. In the quietness of the death room he went back almost forty years. Back to Melissa's fifteenth birthday. He was twenty-

five and had just returned with a group of Cambridge University students from a Midnight Sun expedition to Lapland. He was positively enthralled with the primitive, yet majestic scenery of that faraway North. Fascinated by the ultimate power of the reindeer over the life of the Lapps. The reindeer was everything: food, clothing, bedsheets, transport, light. He will forever remember two old Lapp women nursing an injured reindeer with the utmost tenderness. And next day, the same two old women caught another reindeer in a lasso, killed him with a few primitive tools, skinned and completely dismembered him in less than three hours. Nothing was wasted. The head was carefully cut off with the antlers for the ever-increasing number of souvenir hunters. The hide was hung up to dry for clothes and sheets, the entrails thrown in the river to feed the fish, the chunks of meat prepared for smoking, the sinews wound on thick branches as sewing thread. Finally, the bones were crushed between stones and mixed with earth to ensure the harvest of grass.

Hubert Weldon was remembering the long article entitled 'The Remains of Reindeer' he wrote for the university magazine, when the old family doctor, Jason Forbes, entered the room. He carried a much larger black bag than usual and a bottle of brandy and two glasses.

'We'll need it,' he said, pouring the brandy. 'This room makes me feel as if I am buried in a snow avalanche.'

He handed the glass over Melissa's bed to Hubert and settled in the armchair on the other side. He drank the brandy in one gulp. Hubert sipped his drink very slowly, wondering why the old physician was so nervy. The doctor poured himself another glass and sank deeply into the velvet of the chair.

Hubert went back to Melissa's birthday. Until that day he was not much at home and hardly knew his sister. He gave her the proper presents on certain occasions and had tea with her on his rare visits home. He hated photographs and there were none in his university rooms. The day before the birthday celebration, his mother asked him to her boudoir.

'It is time, Hubert, that you took some notice of your sister,' she said. Hubert wanted to know why. 'She is very rich and very ugly,' his mother said with the coldest objectivity. 'Until now we have managed to keep it from her. There were no mirrors in the nursery or any of the rooms she was likely to enter. There were no children around at all. She had no chance to notice that her face was long and thin, her nose almost like a beak, her shoulders visibly hunched. The governess was most understanding.'

The old doctor took another drink and lifted one of the butterfly-like hands to feel Melissa's pulse. After a minute he looked at Hubert and said: 'Another hour, perhaps.'

It was uncanny, but Hubert Weldon did not leave his train of thoughts. He was right back in his mother's boudoir hearing himself saying: 'What do you want me to do?' He remembered his mother's face, pink and doll-like, framed with honey-coloured, fluffy hair. 'You will have to protect her from now on.'

Apparently his mother had a premonition, Hubert Weldon thought, as he watched Melissa's face sinking deeper and deeper in coma. The boys and girls invited to that birthday party were all children of parents who were in some way dependent on Melissa's rich father. Obviously they were told to adore her and celebrate with her. Everything went extremely well until the moment came for cutting the enormous cake, shaped like a basket of flowers. The ginger-haired and freckled son of Mr Weldon's business associate seemed to have had enough of the white-chiffon clad Melissa. As she cut the cake with the help of her brother, the freckled Tony shouted: 'You are an ugly duckling. We must play with you because your father's got all the money.'

Even now, forty years later, Hubert Weldon remembered the icy silence in the vast drawing-room. Everything after that was just cold, legal arrangements. Mr and Mrs Weldon set up a huge trust from their mutual estates. According to the trust Melissa got two-thirds and Hubert one-third, providing that he abandoned his Cambridge University studies and came to

live at Fernhill Manor for good. Should Melissa die before him, the trust would break up and all the money and estate would go to Hubert.

The doctor went out of the room. Hubert Weldon leaned over, close to Melissa's face. The sickly odour of death rose from the well of the pillows. Slowly, he touched his sister's hands – and that brought him back to that disastrous birthday party. To compensate Melissa for the freckled boy's rudeness, her parents took her to a top Mayfair jeweller to choose a ring or a bracelet. The old man in the establishment was absolutely smitten by the beauty of the young girl's hands. She chose a large sapphire ring with a cluster of rubies, and while the cheque was written out, the old man asked Melissa if she would agree to have her hands photographed, with the ring of course, and have it displayed in the firm's window.

Melissa was delighted and the cult of her hands was born. Hubert remembered vividly the long years of ecstasy and adoration. A resident manicurist was employed, with expert knowledge of herbal oils and essences and also a precise massage technique. Once a week Dr Jason Forbes, then a young practitioner, called to examine Melissa's hands, finger after finger, nail after nail, vein after vein. As time progressed, his sister's hands were photographed and even sculptured, with engagement rings, wedding rings, dress-rings, mourning rings. Bracelets and wrist watches. A stunted, pale-faced orphan girl was engaged to paste all the advertisement cuttings in large, white satin-bound albums.

Melissa did not accept money. The parents thought that vulgar. Instead she was presented with jewellery and her collection grew in number and value.

Dr Forbes re-entered the room, carrying a full bottle of brandy.

'I do need one,' Hubert Weldon said.

The doctor poured two large glasses and handed one to Hubert. The early afternoon drifted behind the window.

'About half-an-hour to go,' the doctor observed.

But at that moment Hubert was back in the late thirties,

when his mother suggested that it was time to find Melissa a husband. Hubert was appointed the chief hunter. He went ahead of the family to Paris, Deauville, Biarritz, Monte Carlo and St Moritz and Gstaad in the winter. He rounded up a few promising young men in the prominent bars and clubs.

Meanwhile, an elderly, clever dressmaker was engaged to dress Melissa. It was a problem. The thirties were the years of extremely chic fashions, slinky dresses, long beads and pearls, headbands with the swish of Birds of Paradise, sables and foxes draped in dramatic shapes. The dressmaker knew the answers. 'We must concentrate on her hands. The rest must be veiled over.' And she created plain dresses, mostly in white, floating fabrics with the accent on the sleeves, from which the celebrated hands emerged like jewelled doves.

When Melissa arrived with parents and servants and trunks, Hubert's acquaintances were invited to opulent luncheons and chandeliered dances at the top hotels of the resorts.

Those who were new to the international market politely excused themselves from the next invitation. The seasoned travellers on the social circuit jumped eagerly at the chance to marry the rich, ugly girl 'with the hands'. But as their intentions were so obvious they were coldly eliminated.

In 1944 the Weldons had had enough. On the terrace of the famous Les Ambassadores in Deauville, they decided, over cocktails, to go home the next day. And just then, Hubert recalled, watching Melissa's hands sinking in the coverlet, a young man entered the terrace. He was tall and lean, his tanned skin fresh and healthy, his auburn hair well groomed. He came straight to the Weldon's table. He bowed. 'My name is Henry Eyewetts. May I paint the famous hands?'

Hubert remembered asking curtly: 'How do you know whose hands they are?'

Henry Eyewetts smiled. 'In the same way one remembers the smile of the Mona Lisa.'

Next morning Melissa's hands were painted by Henry, without rings or bracelets, just suspended in the air against the backdrop of the blue sea.

The story of his life was starkly simple. He was twenty-six years old. His mother was a beautiful Creole who ran away from a dilapidated New Orleans mansion to Paris. His father was a mixture of French and English. He went through many occupations: from the skipper of a sand-barge on the Seine to a dresser in funeral parlours. It was when he was sixteen that Henry left home. He could not stand the distinct smell of death his father brought with him every evening.

He became a houseboy to a famous commercial artist and his talent for painting developed under his guidance. In the past five years he had lived all over Europe, painting for his dinners. Hubert remembered Melissa's ecstasy about Henry's painting of her hands. Next day he travelled with the Weldons for his long stay at Fernhill Manor.

Dr Forbes interrupted Hubert's wonderings. He felt Melissa's pulse again and said quietly: 'Only minutes now.' But it was time enough for Hubert to recall the first three years of Henry's residence at the house.

A large room on the ground floor was allocated as Henry's studio. Hubert was asked to go to London with Henry for a few days to buy easels, paints, brushes, frames. And anything the young man may need for the approaching winter. The sessions went on in the studio, the grounds, at the lake, the summer house, the Orangerie, the Topiary. Strange, haunting pictures were hung in the galleried hall, the Blue Drawing Room and Melissa's own boudoir. Melissa's hands with roses, butterflies, drifting lace handkerchiefs, silver baskets, pale green apples. Henry Eyewetts developed a remarkable technique of letting Melissa's face and shoulders recede into a misty background. He went to London with her for all her photographic sessions and the Bond Street jewellers commissioned him to paint 'The Hands' with their rings and bracelets.

Hubert thought of the many times he had hoped to return to Lapland. But his mother always reminded him of his duty to his rather delicate sister. 'You must watch him, Hubert. Don't forget his mixed background.' And the Midnight Sun remained distant and fading.

Dr Forbes poured himself another brandy. 'Miscalculated the timing,' he said gruffly. But Hubert Weldon continued his travels in the past. He recalled Melissa's rage at Henry's indifference towards her.

'I am thirty-two now, Hubert. And still a virgin. If I can't have him in the ordinary way, you must buy him for me.'

Hubert consulted his mother. Even now he felt the cold astonishment at her answer. 'Buy him in marriage. He is the only one in the running. At least he is clean and healthy. Make the offer big.' But Henry was too much of a Bohemian to agree to that. Also he was extremely generously paid by Mr Weldon and his bank account grew like plants in a lush greenhouse.

'I will sleep with her,' he told Hubert, 'as a sort of perpetual Christmas stocking. But I must feel free to leave, without scenes, tantrums, threats.'

After a long conference the Weldons agreed. There was a great chance that he might like her after all. And it was obvious that the security of Fernhill Manor was very important to him.

Melissa's head moved slightly to one side. Dr Forbes grabbed her pulse. 'Only thirty beats in a minute. Her heart has not given up yet.'

Hubert felt that he should not be thinking about all that just at this moment, but his thoughts ran away like a mountain river in storm. For almost two years Melissa had established a separate life with Henry. There was no room to hang up more of Henry's paintings of her hands. He took up landscapes and explored the wild scenery of the Fernhill Manor woodlands. His apartment was full of unframed canvases. He spent regular hours in Melissa's bedroom after dinner. As regular as his coffee and brandy. Nothing less, but also nothing more. Just before Christmas of 1949 he went to Mr Weldon's study.

'I hope that you remember our agreement, sir. I am leaving in one hour's time. For good.'

A removal van called shortly afterwards. Almost ninety canvases were loaded in. Melissa was still asleep in her large, white satin bed when Henry Eyewetts climbed in the cabin next to the driver. For months she did not speak, did not leave her

rooms. Only ate white bread and drank a few cups of coffee. For hours she sat close to the tropical fish tank in her boudoir watching the sleepy movements of the shoals of brilliant, miniature exotic fish. A year later, he remembered, his mother and father went away for a few weeks in Italy. That ended in a brief telephone call from the airport that they had died in a crash over the Alps. That was twenty years ago. Twenty years of ever-growing devotion to his emotionally mutilated sister. A devotion which almost reached the dimensions of an obsession.

The faint sound of Melissa's breathing stopped. Dr Forbes was holding one of her wrists and nodded to Hubert to take the other. Together they witnessed the end of Melissa Weldon's life. Hubert went to the window and drew the drapes of the white silk curtains together.

'Hubert, go and tell the servants. I will wait for you in your sister's boudoir. We must talk.'

As Hubert went down the heavy, carved staircase, lined with the pictures of Melissa's hands, the servants stood still in the vast, galleried hall. In the proper order of the servants' protocol – the butler, the housekeeper, the lady's maid, the cook, the two housemaids, the kitchen maid. The resident manicurist stood apart as she had no rightful place in the household line-up.

'My sister died a few minutes ago. You will be told about the funeral later. As for now, I wish to say that the household will go on without any change at all.' The butler bowed and the rest of the line bowed like chrysanthemums in the wind.

As he entered Melissa's boudoir Hubert was aware of the strange change in the atmosphere of that beautiful room. Dr Forbes sat close to the window, the black bag at his feet. It was 3 o'clock in the afternoon and the October air was bright and frosty. The fish tank – Hubert thought suddenly, the tropical fish tank was dark and motionless.

'The tank!' he cried.

'Yes, the tank,' Dr Forbes said. 'I switched off the heating system early this morning when I was sure that Melissa would

not live past the late afternoon. The fish are dead. Melissa's wish. One of her last wishes anyhow. Sit down, Hubert.'

There was a silence. The two men watched the lines upon lines of the tiny, tropical fish, their white bellies upwards, absolutely still above the pearly shells and green plants at the bottom of the tank. A few Harlequins and Striped Angels appeared grotesque, grouped around a fluorescent rock. Above it all, an impressive Black Mollie spread her veils in mourning.

'Melissa knew six months ago that she was dying of leukaemia. She wanted to know the truth. On my first visit after that conversation she gave me a letter.' The doctor bent down, opened his black bag and took out a long white envelope with Melissa's initials on it. 'This letter is for you, Hubert, to confirm her wish. She has written a similar one to me. As the time is short, I will explain it all to you. Read the letter later. As you know, I was your sister's physician for over forty years. When she knew about her ultimate disease, she asked me to carry out her final wish.' The doctor poured himself a glass of brandy. 'You had better have one too, Hubert. It is not easy to hear the rest.' He handed a full glass to Hubert and settled again in the white, fan-like armchair. Hubert fixed his eyes on the shining lines of the dead fish.

'Go on,' he said, and took a long sip of the brandy.

'Melissa asked me to sever her hands, embalm them and put them in a glass case to be kept on the Rococo table in the Blue Drawing Room. She selected the rings and bracelets to be put on her hands. And, with the surgical ink which I supplied, she marked her wrists exactly where she wished her hands to be amputated.'

Hubert sat motionless. The half-full glass of brandy slipped from his hand. A star-like stain was seeping through the white carpet.

'In a codicil to her Will, Melissa stipulated that the case with her hands and all the jewellery shall be finally buried with you.'

Still Hubert Weldon did not move. The frosty autumn sun shone in shimmering streaks through the lace curtains.

'Your sister and I have discussed the process in detail,' the

doctor continued. 'I have shown her all the instruments I will be using. I've told her that the hands will have to be steeped in natron for thirty days. It was then that she suggested that the tropical fish tank be used for the steeping of her hands. She wanted to know if the fish could be preserved as well. When told that it was impossible, she instructed me to kill the fish by switching off the heating system and to ask you to bury them in the White Rose Garden.

Hubert Weldon rose from his chair and went to the window. The October afternoon was sinking fast in the blue smudges of early dusk.

'Dear Melissa,' he said, pressing his palms on the fish tank. 'What a marvellous, endearing idea. In this way she will remain with me until my own final departure.'

If Dr Forbes was surprised at Hubert's reaction, he did not show it. 'We will have to move fast. The hands must be cut off within an hour, before rigor mortis sets in and the blood becomes congealed. Thanks to Melissa's precise planning, we can have the massage board which was used over her bath to put her on and let the blood drip into the bath and leave the taps running. I'll tell you the rest as we progress. When it is over, you will have to tell Melissa's personal maid, because she will have to dress her for the final exit.'

The two men acted swiftly. The massage board was put over the bathtub in Melissa's bathroom. The dressing-table was cleared of the numerous jars and bottles and frilly boxes, and Dr Forbes laid out his orthopaedic saw and a number of tools and bandages. 'We shall need a fairly large container to soak the hands in for ten hours.' Hubert produced a Victorian wash-basin, circled with rosebuds and butterflies. 'That will do fine,' the doctor observed. The two men lifted Melissa from the depths of the pillows and eiderdowns and carried her to the bathroom.

Dr Forbes pulled up the gossamer lace cuffs and there was a dark blue line about three inches above the wrists. 'That's where Melissa wants her hands cut - just enough room to put

on all the bracelets. You will have to hold her palm tightly, Hubert.'

In the next ten minutes the sound of the orthopaedic saw penetrated the atmosphere of the bathroom, filled thick with Melissa's White Rose essence. The cold water taps were turned on and Melissa's blood ran out into the drains.

With a jerk the right hand was severed – and, simultaneously, Melissa's eyelids shot up. Her eyes, dark blue and icy, stared at the two men.

'Trust your sister,' the doctor said. 'She wants to know if I am doing my job properly.' With great speed the old physician cauterized the blood vessels and bandaged the stump of her arm. 'Hold her hand above the bathtub, Hubert, so that the blood will flow away.'

The old doctor opened the cupboard, took out a large container and poured a pale green liquid in the Victorian wash-the shallow pool.

He took Melissa's hand from Hubert and plunged it into

'It's Palm Wine. Got it from Egypt two months ago, when I knew the clock was ticking fast. It will drain out every drop of blood from the hands – necessary for the embalming.'

The amputation of the left hand was completed; the hand sank in the Victorian basin which was covered with a thick bath towel and locked in the cupboard. Melissa was carried back to her bed, the cauterized stumps of her arms neatly bandaged and covered with gossamer lace.

'You will have to tell Melissa's personal maid all about this,' Dr Forbes said. 'There is exactly one hour left to wash her and dress her. Swear the maid to secrecy until the hands are completely preserved and laid out in the glass case.'

Hubert Weldon asked the butler to send his sister's personal maid, Maude Barrett, to the Blue Drawing Room. As she entered, Melissa's hands seemed to float in the air from the pictures on the walls.

'Your Mistress is dead in the common sense,' Hubert said. 'But I shall need you around all the same. At the moment your

task is to prepare her for the final journey. As it is the principal rule of your profession never to ask any questions and never to talk about anything concerning the lady you serve, I feel sure that there is nothing more to be said.'

The undertakers arrived soon afterwards and by 7 o'clock in the evening Melissa was laid in a white coffin, lined with white satin and lace, her arms tucked in a white mink muff. As the candles flickered round her in the Blue Drawing Room, Hubert emptied the tropical fish tank, put the dead fish in a silver cigarette box and buried it under the roots of Melissa's white roses. Following Dr Forbes's instructions he washed the tank with a solution of salt and surgical spirit and carried it into the bathroom. At three o'clock in the morning, exactly ten hours after the amputation of Melissa's hands, the old physician arrived. He filled the tank with the solution of natron and transferred the hands from the flowered basin into the sombre glass container.

He put the glass tank with Melissa's hands in it into a cupboard and locked it and handed the keys to Hubert. 'It must stay there for thirty days. But of course you can visit the hands whenever you wish.'

Three days later Melissa joined her parents in the white marble tomb in the village church. It was an early morning service and Hubert Weldon returned to Fernhill Manor just after eleven o'clock. He asked the butler to assemble the staff in the hall.

'Perhaps you will find my instructions strange,' Hubert said. 'If you do, then you will have to leave my employment. Otherwise your engagement here will continue, with double wages as from today. What I want you to do is to carry on as usual, as if my sister were still here. Her place at the table will have to be laid out. Her books and daily papers ready in the breakfast room. Her bath run morning and evening. Her bedroom ready for her and everything exactly as she used to have it. As far as I am concerned she is still here and will be as long as I live.'

Hubert's orders were carried out. At meal times the butler solemnly offered the silver dishes to Melissa's empty chair.

Her daily papers and magazines were delivered and set out at her window-seat in the breakfast room. The personal maid, who so far was the only one to know the secret of the severed hands, laid out dresses and hats and handbags and spread elaborate nightgowns every evening on Melissa's bed. Hubert went to see the Bond Street jewellers and ordered a glass case, lined with white satin and with a lace-edged cushion. For a fleeting moment he considered the longed-for visit to Lapland, but concluded that he could not leave Melissa's hands. Since her death he developed an overwhelming fascination for his sister despite the fact that she had deprived him of the Cambridge University studies, of Lapland, of adventures, women, everything. He was sixty-five now. Lost in the world he did not know. Yes, she was ugly, but a woman all the same. Her hands were of a rare, eternal beauty. Melissa was right to make sure that they remained with her brother until the last of his days.

Every night at eleven o'clock – the time he had said good-night to Melissa while she was alive – Hubert went to the sickly-scented bathroom and opened the cupboard. In the dim light of the cascade of white roses chandelier, the hands were floating in the transparent liquid. Hubert did not know if his feelings were just brotherly love or a conglomerate of longing and visions, or the results of ultimate fantasies. But every night he seized the glass tank with his arms, looking closely at the hands which were rather grotesque with fingers wide apart and the palms puffed up and green.

The glass case was delivered to Fernhill Manor early in December 1970. In the meantime, Dr Forbes took Melissa's hands from the natron bath, dried them in a pure linen sheet, injected them with a warm solution of pure beeswax and carefully formed the fingers and the palms into the exquisite shape for which Melissa's hands were famous.

He handed a key ring to Hubert. 'In the right drawer of her writing desk is the jewellery case containing the rings and bracelets, which she wishes to be put on her hands and wrists. But before that, Hubert, you will have to talk to the manicurist. The hands will have to be made up in the way she did it for

Melissa's photographic sessions. Obviously the process of embalming has discoloured them. Also the nails will have to be varnished. After that, her services will not be needed as the hands will be sealed in the glass case for ever. I suggest that you offer her a substantial cheque as a parting gift – you might mention that you would be grateful if there is no publicity about the matter.'

'I would prefer you to be present during my conversation with the manicurist,' Hubert Weldon said.

The doctor agreed. 'But first talk to the personal maid; she will have to make some sort of lace cuffs to finish off the effect.'

It was easy to talk to Maude Barrett because she was fully aware of the situation. She promised to produce the lace cuffs in two hours.

It was a different story with Jane Emery, the manicurist. She was a small, squirrel-like creature, with fast-moving eyes, a mop of short reddish hair and a pinkish complexion. As usual, Dr Forbes consoled himself with a glass of brandy.

Hubert Weldon asked Miss Emery to sit down. Close at his elbow was a cheque book.

'How long were you with my sister?' he asked.

'Almost forty years, sir.'

'Since her departure from us you must have felt that your service in this house has ended.'

'Yes, sir,' the tiny woman said.

The doctor took another gulp from his brandy glass. Hubert grasped the cheque book.

'There is one more thing, Miss Emery, you can do for my sister. The most important service of all.'

'I'll be obliged,' the woman squirrel said.

'You know how Miss Melissa loved her hands. For months she knew that she was dying. She resented the thought that her hands would die with her.'

Miss Emery wriggled in her armchair.

'On her wish,' the doctor said, 'her hands were to be preserved and will remain in this house as long as Mr Weldon lives.'

The tiny woman wriggled more, but the doctor preferred the sharp treatment.

'Her hands were severed and embalmed, Miss Emery. Now we need your help to make the hands up as you used to for her photographic sessions, and to varnish the nails. Mr Weldon is, of course, aware that this is a very special service and he is offering you . . .' the doctor looked at Hubert, 'two thousand pounds,' Hubert said.

Through Miss Emery's head flashed the image of the thatched cottage in Devon she had once seen on a Christmas card and was dreaming about ever since. 'When am I expected to do it?' she asked.

'Right now. Please go and get your working case.'

When she returned a few minutes later, Melissa's hands, wrapped in pure linen towels were laid on the table. Jane Emery opened her case and carefully put out the jars of creams, the bottles of herbal essences, the assorted powders, cotton wool, small sponges and nail lacquers.

'Would you rather be left alone?' asked Hubert Weldon.

'Oh no, please, no!' Miss Emery said. Silently Dr Forbes poured two glass of brandy and handed one to Hubert.

Miss Emery had to try twice to unwrap the hands from the linen towels before she finally succeeded.

For a few minutes she tried to remember the years when she was a freelance manicurist in London. She had a vast clientele, ranging from duchesses to well-to-do butchers' wives and call-girls. Two of the old clients died and she was called to treat their hands for the 'last dance'. The only difference was that those hands were attached to the rest of the body, whereas these were cut off. She almost fainted when she touched the ice-cold hands, but remembered swiftly the thatched cottage, the Tropicana Roses and the cushions of daffodils which Hubert Weldon's cheque would buy – and went on with her job.

The finished hands were as exquisite in death as they were in life. Hubert Weldon opened the jewellery box and took out

the six rings and six bracelets which Melissa had selected. According to her precise written instructions, he and the doctor placed the large emerald ring in a cluster of diamonds, the wreath of rubies and the oval sapphire on the right hand. The gold dress ring with diamond snowdrops, the garnet and pearl cluster and a single, enormous diamond called Orion, on her left hand. Three matching bracelets were put on each wrist. Maude Barrett entered the room carrying a pair of white lace cuffs. When she saw her mistress's hands laid on the table she almost dropped to her knees. She recovered with the help of the doctor and placed the cuffs above the bracelets. Dr Forbes moistened the cushion with surgical glue and asked Hubert to select the pose from Melissa's pictures in which he would like her hands to be placed in the glass case. For a while Hubert went from one picture to another and then took one off the wall. Observing it carefully, Miss Emery put the hands on the cushion, holding them firmly down until the glue hardened. Dr Forbes placed the lid on the case and inserted a thin glass tube in the small hole in one corner. He sealed the lid all round and then sucked the air out and with Hubert's help sealed the small hole. For a long while the four people looked silently at the beautifully preserved hands, almost alive, warm in colour and so very much a grand occasion with the superb jewellery. Without a word, Hubert Weldon lifted the glass case and followed by the doctor, the manicurist and the maid, walked slowly through the corridor and down the heavily carved staircase to the Blue Drawing Room. He put the glass case on the Rococo table.

'Miss Barrett, I wish to have white roses put on this table three times a week.'

Miss Barrett and Miss Emery left the Blue Drawing Room and Hubert Weldon and Dr Forbes stood close to the Rococo table.

'The most difficult thing which remains is to tell the rest of the staff,' the doctor said.

'The only way you can do it, Hubert, is to be bold and mat-

ter-of-fact about it. Do not be sheepish, ashamed or shy. Just tell them!’

Next morning in the galleried hall the line of servants stood still. Jane Emery, the manicurist, had left shortly after dawn. Hubert Weldon entered the hall with Dr Forbes behind him. Slowly, he walked past the line of servants and went to the high-backed chair at the head of the vast room. ‘You all know that my departed sister Melissa loved her beautiful hands very much. So did my parents and I. Perhaps that was the reason for her wish, expressed in her last Will. She asked the family physician to sever her hands, embalm them and, adorned with her best jewellery, put them in a glass case to be kept on the Rococo table in the Blue Drawing Room. She has expressed her wish that the hands are to be buried with me when I finally leave this house for ever.’

True to the rules of his profession the butler’s face did not register any emotion. The housekeeper’s chin dropped a little, the personal maid’s face was stone cold. The cook, the housemaids and the kitchen maid apparently did not understand fully the meaning of it all.

‘Will you please follow me,’ said Hubert Weldon and started to cross the hall towards the Blue Drawing Room. Dr Forbes and the staff followed. All the lights were on in the large, tapestried room. The glass case rested on the Rococo table, surrounded by enormous white roses. Melissa’s hands appeared alive, the effect of the rings and bracelets intensified by the unusually strong December sun.

‘I expect all of you to carry on with your duties as if my sister were still with us. It should be a great help to you to see the beautiful hands as often as you wish to. I have already doubled your wages, because the service is rather unusual. Added to that, you will all have a bonus of one hundred pounds every Christmas. And I will make provision in my Will for those who are in my service until I die.’

The silence that followed was as deep as the Dead Sea. Without a word the butler led the staff from the room.

Next morning the housekeeper, Mrs Norah Healey, telephoned her son at his office in the City.

'Graham, do come tomorrow morning to take me home. Do not ask any questions, just come.'

Of course Graham Healey asked questions. It was eight years since his father died, leaving his affairs in a great muddle.

His independent mother cashed a small insurance and took the job of housekeeper at Fernhill Manor. He was not a devoted son and most certainly did not cherish the obvious prospect of his mother joining his wife and three children in his cosy house in Wimbledon.

'Are you going on holiday?' Graham Healey asked with a faint hope.

'I am leaving here for good. The reason is too awful to tell you. You may not even believe it.'

Graham Healey was determined to prevent any hasty, maybe hysterical actions by his mother. 'Now listen, mother. Do not do anything silly. Do not tell anyone that you want to leave until you see me tomorrow. I will arrive about eleven o'clock in the morning as a surprise visit. We will talk it over. All right, Mum?'

'You will agree with me when you know the horrible story,' Mrs Healey said.

Next day Graham Healey arrived in a flashy two-tone Citroen. His strong frame carried well the slightly loud tweed suit and a matching tie. His donkey brown hair was cut short and brushed in a sleek helmet. His face was permanently cheerful. He was a copy-writer with a well known Anglo-American advertising combine and was responsible for jingles and sketches from cauliflower pest killers to a Saragossa eel dinner on a chartered yacht.

Mrs Healey waited for her son in her apartment with dry sherry and scampi canapés. Graham Healey remained silent for a long while after his mother concluded her story.

'Who knows about this outside the house?' he asked.

'Nobody yet,' Mrs Healey told him. 'The staff was introduced to The Hands only last night.'

Graham Healey finished the glass of sherry and poured himself another. 'Mother, you must stay here for another week or ten days. Under no circumstances must you let anyone know that you are planning to leave. Luckily your apartment is in the West Wing and there is a back door to it from the vegetable garden. I will be back the day after tomorrow and nobody will know that I am here.'

Mrs Healey was alarmed. 'Graham, what are proposing to do?'

'I am just being practical, Mother. This is the story of the decade, maybe the century. You will need a home to go to when you leave here and I have a large mortgage still to pay on my house. Miss Weldon's hands will give that to us.'

Mrs Healey did not understand fully what her son wanted to do. But she sensed that money was involved. 'Perhaps I owe it to you, Graham. Your father did not leave you anything and you have been very generous about that. I will stay for the time you have asked me to.'

*

Back in London Graham Healey acted swiftly. He told his boss that he wanted to spend a few days with his mother in the country because she was not well. He spent a whole afternoon in a photographic equipment shop getting everything necessary for his camera to take pictures day and night. He telephoned his great friend, Deane Rayner, the reporter on a scandal-trading paper, the *Daily Zodiac*, to stand by for one of the biggest scoops of the century.

He told his wife the same sad story about his ailing mother and left her in the architect-designed Wimbledon house with the three children vomiting in chorus, after drinking carpet shampoo just for fun.

He arrived at Fernhill Manor shortly after ten o'clock. The full moon was throwing down sheets of silver and, after parking his car under the branches of weeping trees, Graham Healey threaded his way to the vegetable garden and the back door to his mother's apartment.

Mrs Healey was sitting in a semi-darkened room, not know-

ing when her son would arrive.

'There's no time to waste, Mother. When does Mr Weldon go to bed?'

'Twelve o'clock. He sits in the library until eleven and then goes to the Blue Drawing Room to spend an hour with The Hands. He reaches his bedroom exactly at twelve o'clock.'

'And the servants?' Graham asked.

'They are in bed by ten, even sooner.'

At 12.20 Graham Healey assembled his camera and all the other equipment, switched on a tiny torch and asked his mother to take him to the Blue Drawing Room. It was a long way from the West Wing, through twisting corridors and a few steps up and down; finally they reached the hall and Mrs Healey opened the door of the tapestried room. Even Graham was taken aback by the vastness and the beauty of the four walls and the stuccoed ceiling. In the centre, the Rococo table stood in all its magnificence. From a bed of white roses, the glass case containing Melissa's hands rose up like a fairy-tale miniature castle. The rings and the bracelets shone like red, blue, green and white fires in the torchlight. A hard-boiled chestnut, he was. Graham Healey was silent for a moment, but he recovered quickly, assessing the tremendous value of this scene and the story behind it. In a few moments he set up his camera and the lights and took pictures from every angle, many times.

'Tomorrow morning I will take a few shots of the house and the gardens. After that, Mother, we'll not need to worry.'

Next morning Graham Healey was up early taking pictures of the semi-wild gardens, the weeping trees, the house itself from the angle of the scenic Topiary.

'Don't do anything, say anything, until you hear from me,' he told his mother before roaring off in his two-tone Citroen.

In London he telephoned Deane Rayner. They met at the modest Horse and Groom Inn in Kensington. Deane Rayner agreed that Graham Healey's story was a huge scoop.

'What about Hubert Weldon?' Graham Healey asked. 'After all, I've taken all the photographs without his permission.'

'We are prepared,' Deane Rayner assured him. 'We have a large kitty for court cases.'

'I want twenty thousand pounds for the story and the photographs - I know you'll have it syndicated around the world; you'll make a fortune,' Graham Healey said.

Deane Rayner started to write the cheque.

'Make it cash and come with me to the bank tomorrow morning,' Graham Healey suggested. 'That way I'll get the money and you'll get the photographs and the story.'

In the evening he telephoned his mother and told her to leave Fernhill Manor right away. 'I've booked you into a cosy hotel close to our house for the time being,' he told her.

On 12 December 1970, the *Daily Zodiac* carried a front page story, headlined *Miss Melissa's Hands*, endorsed with the pictures of the glass case and the jewelled hands and Fernhill Manor taken over the scenic Topiary. The impact was tremendous. Within hours the grounds of Fernhill Manor were crowded with reporters and photographers. Hubert Weldon refused to meet them. Cars started to arrive filled with families and gaping children. The butler advised Hubert Weldon to have the grounds cleared by the police. That was done and by the evening the place was quiet and normal.

Next day the *Daily Zodiac* carried another front page story, with the full details of the rings and bracelets on Melissa's hands and the price quoted as three hundred thousand pounds. Dr Forbes called just before lunch and over the usual glass of brandy told Hubert Weldon to realize the situation.

'Now that the world knows that in this remote house a dead woman's hands are endorsed with jewellery worth three hundred thousand pounds, you must immediately insure The Hands. And secure the windows and the doors.' Hubert telephoned his solicitors and within three weeks everything necessary was done. Fernhill Manor had almost become an electronic fortress. Suddenly Hubert Weldon remembered the only full portrait of Melissa by Henry Eyewetts. In that portrait he did not let her float away into a misty background. Ruthlessly, with

his brush, he registered her face, long and thin, her nose almost like a beak and her icy blue eyes small and round, her shoulders visibly hunched. Dressed in clouds of white chiffon, seated in a dark blue velvet armchair, her exquisite hands folded in her lap, that was the true Melissa Weldon. Melissa threw violent tantrums about the portrait and it was covered in an old sheet and locked in an attic room.

The butler was asked to bring the lifesize portrait to Hubert's study. Dr Forbes was summoned and requested to perform yet another service to Melissa.

'I am rather clumsy,' Hubert Weldon said. 'Could you please, with your orthopaedic saw, cut out the precise silhouette of Melissa from the picture?'

'Whatever for?' the doctor asked.

'That way she can be with me all the time, sitting at the dinner table or in the Blue Drawing Room.'

Loneliness, the old doctor thought. Terrible, bottomless loneliness.

He agreed to cut Melissa out of the picture and suggested a small adjustment to make it possible to let her sit in an armchair.

Hubert was delighted. 'You have made my Christmas,' he told the doctor.

Next Hubert Weldon consulted Maude Barrett.

'As a personal maid of my sister's for many years, you know, of course, all about sewing and padding?' he asked.

'Of course, sir,' Miss Barrett answered.

'Then there is a special task for you to do,' Hubert said, and led Miss Barrett to the corner of his study.

Miss Barrett fainted when she saw her dead mistress sitting quite easily in an armchair. She recovered after a splash of brandy was thrown in her face by Hubert.

'It's just a portrait of my sister cut out. Could you please put some padding on the back of this silhouette and cover it with anything you think right. That way you will be able to dress her for all occasions.'

Miss Barrett was on the point of fainting again but remem-

bered the double wages and the hundred pounds for a Christmas bonus so near, and said: 'Yes, sir.'

Two days later Melissa appeared, quite firm and solid, and Hubert progressed with his Christmas plans. He ordered the two gardeners to decorate the whole house with holly and mistletoe and masses of tinsel. He told the butler to set the Christmas Day table with the Georgian silver and the Sèvres china. He asked Miss Barrett to fill Melissa's bedroom and boudoir with dozens of white roses.

In the absolute privacy of his study Hubert Weldon admitted to himself that his obsession with his sister had reached abnormal proportions. The dreams of women he had never had came to life in a bizarre cluster of sensual visions, centred on Melissa's profile and her hands.

For forty years she had dominated his life. The cult of her hands took over, her ugliness took over. He knew it all through the years and he knew it now. But it was too late to emerge from the depth of total isolation into the living world. The Christmas dinner was macabre. He had asked Maude Barrett to dress the silhouette of Melissa in an evening gown, with a tiara and the white mink wrap. The food was superb with all the traditional courses. The butler offered all the dishes to Melissa's silhouette first. After coffee and brandy Hubert asked the butler to call in the staff. From a silver basket he took out elaborate Christmas envelopes with one hundred pounds in crisp, new notes for every member of the household, marked with Best Christmas Wishes from Melissa Weldon. The servants bowed first to the silhouette of Melissa and then to Hubert.

'Merry Christmas,' he said.

The rest of the Yuletide passed quietly. Maude Barrett dressed the silhouette of her dead mistress in appropriate attire from morning till evening. On the last day of December 1970 the staff of Fernhill Manor left the house. Only the butler, Alfred Stubbs, remained. He was almost seventy years old with fifty years of service with the Weldon family. He was not disturbed by The Hands or the silhouette. In fact he rather liked the ghostly presence of the 'Young Miss Weldon'. Hubert de-

signed a complete detachment of Fernhill Manor from the outer world. He had a shelter outside the gates for the tradesmen to leave their deliveries in. The electronic devices in the house were switched on day and night.

Hubert moved into Melissa's bedroom, with the adjoining bathroom and boudoir, and ordered Stubbs to close all the rooms but the Blue Drawing Room on the ground floor. His time was completely taken up by his macabre obsession with his dead sister. He dressed and undressed Melissa several times a day, finally putting a transparent chiffon nightdress on the silhouette. Due to Dr Forbes's clever device, the figure, cut out from hard canvas, was able to sit or to be stretched out. In the deathly white bedroom with the white chiffon roses floating in the air, Hubert lay, painfully awake, in the quilted satin bed, with Melissa's silhouette next to him. Desperately, he was fighting the final scene of degradation. But he was losing – and in the deepest end of his frustrated heart he was glad of that.

It was early March 1971. The evening was misty, the air filled with the sickly scent of early grass. As a last barrier, Hubert Weldon tried to remember his sister lying in her white coffin, her arms tucked in a mink muff. He tried to remember her face, so much uglier in death than in life. But it did not help. She owed him a lot, he thought. Almost his whole life. The time had come for her to make it up to him – lavishly. That night he sprayed Melissa's perfume, the White Roses Noon, all over the silhouette and let the nightgown slip to the floor. He had warmed the bed with a number of hot water bottles and the canvas image was warm to the touch. Violently, Hubert Weldon masturbated for more than an hour. He was not ashamed in the morning. Not happy, either. Just obsessed with red, burning desire. There was a fantastic advantage in the ghostly association with Melissa's silhouette. She was always willing . . .

As weeks passed by Hubert remained more and more in the bedroom suite.

Alfred Stubbs, who by now was everything from butler to cook, a daily help and gardener, was worried.

On a warm May Sunday, when Hubert did not come down

to lunch by two o'clock in the afternoon, the old man went up to the bedroom to call him. His knock on the door was not answered, and he entered, only to see his master in the final throes of ecstasy. Obviously nothing was said about it, but the old servant was sick right through his entire system. More frequently he went down to the cellar and carried up bottles of whisky to his room behind the kitchen. More and more he was sinking into an alcoholic oblivion. He was unable to collect the tradesmen's deliveries from the shelter; consequently, there was no food in the house. When he remembered, he would bring in the supplies accumulated for days and cook something smelly and disgusting, but the hungry Hubert Weldon ate it eagerly.

In the early autumn Dr Forbes called on Hubert Weldon to tell him that he was retiring from his general practice and was going to spend his remaining years with his brother in Jersey. A young man was taking over and Dr Forbes was sure that he would look after Hubert well. He was appalled at the sight of Hubert – unshaven, wearing a pair of dirty pyjamas, sour smelling, sitting on the edge of Melissa's bed with the silhouette of the dead woman tucked under the coverlet. His eyes were sunken in a silvery mist, like that of a dead fish, and the right corner of his mouth was full of saliva.

The old doctor looked closely at Hubert Weldon.

'Whatever you are doing, stop it – stop it now while there is still time,' he said, and left the room.

From his surgery he telephoned Hubert's solicitor and asked him to go to see his client right away.

The lawyer went and had a long talk with Hubert in the Blue Drawing Room.

'There is the question of Mr Weldon's Will now that he has inherited the considerable fortune of his sister,' he said.

Hubert told him that he would deal with it later. The most important thing was that he did not want to be disturbed by the necessities of daily life. He had standing orders with the local shopkeepers and wanted the solicitor to arrange with them to send the bills to the village branch of his bank for payment. He wished to be completely isolated from the outside world.

The solicitor accepted the stipulation. He had been used to peculiar clients. The routine of his office would go on and every six months there would be a check on Mr Weldon, should he not contact them earlier.

Hubert Weldon sank into his very deep personal life. During the day he sat in the Blue Drawing Room watching Melissa's exquisite hands, lying so serenely, yet opulent, in the glass case. Her silhouette was sitting opposite him, dressed in the silk and lace he had chosen for her in the morning.

When Stubbs woke up from his ever-deepening alcoholic comas, he would bring up a tray of dark brown eggs and half-warmed vegetable soup. The tension grew between the two old men. Alfred Stubbs knew of the macabre sensations going on in Miss Melissa's bedroom. The deep, inner sickness had built up in him for weeks. One morning when Hubert was having one of his rare baths, Stubbs went to the white bedroom and lifted the silhouette from the bed. He carried it downstairs and into the grounds and hung it on a topiary eagle and set it alight.

From his bathroom Hubert caught the glow of the shimmering flames, weaving through the wintry morning. Pressing close to the window pane, he saw Melissa's face hanging from the beak of the overgrown privet bird. The rest of the silhouette had fallen off and was burning fiercely on the ground.

Wrapped in a bath-towel, Hubert raced down the stairs and out to the Topiary. He had almost caught Alfred Stubbs by his butler's tails, but stumbled over a tree-trunk. The old butler ran across the frosty grass and through the hall and corridors towards the wine cellar. Luckily he had left the heavy door open when he carried out some whisky earlier in the day – and he flew through, slamming the door behind him. Hubert tried to open it but it was impossible. Obviously the electronic mechanism had failed somewhere. Perhaps one of the fuses had blown. Hubert returned to the bathroom and dressed in the old flannel slacks and a heavy cardigan which he had been wearing for months. Now only The Hands were left.

He decided that Melissa's bedroom must remain her shrine

and his memories of the macabre, carnal, yet unbelievably enchanting and tender hours spent there. He locked the door and threw the key out of the window. It was swallowed by a heap of rusty, frozen leaves.

Then he went to the Blue Drawing Room and sat close to the glass case. On the white cushion The Hands seemed warmed up by the glow of the magnificent jewels.

'From now on, we will live in this room only. Just the three of us,' Hubert told The Hands.

Down in the wine cellar Alfred Stubbs considered the situation. He was fully aware of his master's wrath and decided to stay out of the way until the evening and then try to get to his quarters. He hoped that the next day might bring some solution. It was just after noon and the old man opened a bottle of whisky. The cellar was vast and cold and Alfred Stubbs began to worry about what would happen to him if the next day did not bring the hoped-for solution. By four o'clock he opened another bottle of whisky. He tried to switch on the light but the place remained in darkness. He knew every part of the cellar and despite the intake of alcohol in the past few hours he found his way between the shelves and boxes and baskets and grasped the banister of the staircase. He inched his way up and tried to open the door. After a while he realized that the door would not open. The damn machinery, he thought, sobering up through fear.

He forgot Hubert Weldon's wrath and called and banged on the door. Then he screamed and kicked the heavy frame and knocked with his elbows in a frantic staccato.

He had dropped to his knees and wept the humiliating tears of drunkenness and panic. The only consolation was his luminous wrist-watch. The golden light of the dial shone up to the old man's face with a positive friendliness. He got up and staggered down the stairs, and with his hands felt the narrow path among all the booze. He found the old armchair in the middle of the cellar and grabbed the nearest bottle. It was brandy and, an experienced butler, he could tell its age by just one sniff. It took the jammed door to get hold of this brandy, he laughed

and sobbed in his heart. He took the watch off his wrist and held it close to his face, as the only thing left to cling to. He dropped it during a spasm of violent coughing. He almost finished the bottle of brandy and slid down to the floor to look for the watch. On all fours, like an old, clumsy retriever, he moved round and back and forwards. Finally, very close, he saw the numbers of the dial like a cluster of shining fireflies. He had always remembered fireflies, because his mother wore them in her hair for the barn dances in the hot summer nights of his childhood. He reached out and fell hard on his face. As he tried to pull himself up, a deep wave of nausea surged through him. He caught the last glimpse of the fireflies before he died, inhaling his vomit.

Hubert Weldon remembered his butler in the afternoon of the next day. Simply because he was hungry. The old fool is late, Hubert observed sourly, and went to the kitchen. There were a few parsnips on the table and some opened, half-full tins of fish and fruit. The old-fashioned Aga stove, which was always beaming steady heat, was dark and cold. The cellar, Hubert recalled. As he progressed through the corridor, the profound stillness of the house intensified. He tried to open the door leading to the cellar. But it was firmly shut.

'Stubbs,' he called. 'Stubbs, come out. I forgive you.'

Hubert realized that the electronic system had failed. There was no way to contact anybody about it. Some weeks ago, when he had decided on complete isolation from the world, he had the telephone disconnected. It was out of the question that he should go to the village. He would not know whom to look for and what to say. Alfred Stubbs would have to stay where he was. He returned to the kitchen and ate cold fish from a tin and carried another one with fruit to the Blue Drawing Room.

By the end of November Fernhill Manor was intensely cold. The central heating went off. Hubert did not know what to do about it. He had centred his life completely on the Blue Drawing Room. Once a week he carried the supplies there from the shelter. It was increasingly difficult, because his toe-nails grew and curled inwards like claws. His hair and beard met in the

middle of his face. His bones were weak and feeble because of the cold. He threw all his clothes and the blankets he had found on the floor and huddled there, with his arms tightly round the case with The Hands.

Half-opened tins accumulated around him. The smell of his unwashed body thickened to vile proportions. Three days before Christmas the first rat appeared in the Blue Drawing Room.

An old tramp living in a shack close to the Weldon estate, had discovered the deliveries at the Fernhill shelter. He watched for the tradesmen and took the supplies away. Christmas passed with the overgrown and by now monstrous topiary figures showered in snow crystals. Hubert had found the shelter empty and for a few days lived on the scraps of the tins. By the middle of January he was too weak to move from the filthy nest of old clothing and blankets. He laid there with his arms tightly wound round the Glass Case. The Blue Drawing Room was thick with the stench of urine, rotting meat and excrement.

By the end of January 1972 Hubert Weldon's solicitor noticed in his diary that the six-months check on his client was due. When he arrived, Fernhill Manor stood silent and forbidding, in a cluster of weeping trees and mirrors of tiny, frozen lakes.

Hubert was almost dead, with his arms wreathed firmly round the case with The Hands. The doctor was called. He suggested that Hubert Weldon be removed at once to a nursing home, Willow Retreat, in Sussex. But as the ambulance men tried to free the glass case from Hubert's embrace, he woke up from his semi-coma. He refused to let the case go - wherever he was taken The Hands were to go with him. Finally, the glass case was covered in a blanket and put into the ambulance. The solicitor closed up the house and took the keys with him. Down in the wine cellar Alfred Stubbs was dead, alone and forgotten.

At the Willow Retreat, an exclusive nursing home, a large room was prepared for Hubert Weldon. The doctor had alerted the matron, Miss Theresa Evans, about the rich recluse coming under her wing.

She was forty-five years old, heavy-boned, her frame covered with tough flesh. Her face was oval and her eyes dark and moist and she had a thick mane of dusty blonde hair. Her feet were small and her legs slim and she moved with a surprising ease and lightness. Before the Willow Retreat she was a sister at a second-rate maternity clinic in the suburbs of London. At that time abortions were strictly illegal but Miss Evans was rather flexible with regard to the law. With the help of Nurse Valerie Ambrose, she had established a flourishing abortion practice at her old Victorian house in Ealing. The monthly accounts from her bank grew longer, listing cash, shares and investments. She was reading the statements with a special eagerness. As a young nurse she was working aboard a sumptuous liner, cruising the Caribbean. She promised herself when the time came, to retire on one of the aquamarine islands. When the abortions became legal, the harvest at the Ealing house ended. The Caribbean seemed lost for ever. Her many gynaecological friends from the past were eager to settle her in a legitimate job. The matronship of the Willow Retreat fell easily into her lap.

On his arrival Hubert Weldon was a mess. From the stretcher he had watched anxiously the two men carrying the large, blanket covered case. He wanted it to be put next to his bed. The first few hours were absorbed by shaving, hair and nail cutting and a prolonged stay in the bath, with vibrant scrubbing. Finally, in neat pyjamas and smelling of a deodorant soap he was met by the wide smile of Matron Theresa Evans.

'Welcome, Mr Weldon. You will be looked after well here, just tell us what you want and we'll do the rest.'

The first evening at Willow Retreat Hubert was sent off into a deep, soothing sleep by a large dose of sedatives. After midnight Matron Evans entered his room. She was not worried about the new patient. She knew that he was beyond reach just then. She wanted to know what was under that dark cover close to his bed. Theresa Evans knelt beside the oblong structure and pulled off the cover. She gasped and almost fainted. On a gleaming white cushion lay a pair of exquisite hands,

with pearl-white varnished nails and clusters of rings and bracelets. For a few minutes the Matron was stunned. Then she remembered the front-page story in the *Daily Zodiac* about a year ago. Of course, she said to herself. The famous hands of Melissa Weldon. From that minute of recognition, Theresa Evans had designed her course of action.

She visited Hubert Weldon for one hour every afternoon. She suggested doing some shopping for him, to boost his morale.

She bought him three pairs of silk pyjamas and a Japanese dressing gown and an exotic after-shave lotion. She baked special cakes for his teas. At the end of the fourth week at Willow Retreat, Hubert Weldon seemed back to normal. He took his tea regularly with the Matron and, feeling well and easy, he went back to his early youth and told her about his expedition to Lapland.

'Perhaps one day you will go there again,' the Matron said. 'And I would like to go there with you.'

With every afternoon tea Hubert's attachment to Theresa Evans deepened. By the end of March he had removed the last barrier between them. When the Matron entered his room, he unwrapped the Glass Case and introduced her to The Hands. As she drank her tea, Theresa Evans was certain that The Hands were staring at her. She fixed her eyes on the jewels and remembered the quoted price - three hundred thousand pounds.

They were married at the end of April 1972. Of course Theresa Evans did not jump blindly into wedlock. She had employed a private detective soon after Hubert's entrance into the nursing home and had all the facts and figures tidy in her notebook. From Hubert's medical history she was fully aware of the macabre state of Fernhill Manor. She had employed the help of her former abortion associate, Nurse Valarie Ambrose, now married to a building contractor Charles Moore. He moved in, while Theresa, Hubert and The Hands were on honeymoon in Jersey. He cleaned the kitchen and the Blue Drawing Room and employed a day-gardener to shape the monstrous topiary

to its proper pattern. When the Weldons came back, the big house was 'limping on its wings'. There was no staff. No central heating. No electric stove. The new Mrs Weldon saw to all that. Within a few days the newest all-purpose electric stove was installed and the central heating was switched on. As Hubert had refused to open Melissa's suite or rooms – and he could not anyhow, as the key was buried in the heap of leaves – Theresa turned a reception room into her bedroom and the Blue Drawing Room was equipped with a bed for Hubert. The Hands were settled again on the Rococo table. Theresa had the telephone reconnected and put her orders through with the local tradesmen. She had studied carefully the handbook about the electronic devices installed in the house, and inspected every button and every fuse connected with it. Finally, she had arrived at the door leading to the wine cellar. She had tried hard to open it, but without success.

'The door to the wine-cellar is jammed,' she told Hubert.

'It has been for a long time,' her husband told her. 'And, by the way, there is a dead man down there.'

For a dreadful moment Theresa Weldon thought that Hubert's senses were leaving him. For her plans she needed him sane for at least another four weeks.

'A dead man? In the cellar?'

'Yes, my dear. He was my butler and in the last few months he became an alcoholic. He went down to the cellar frequently – and one day the door slammed after him. Something had happened to the electronic system.'

'Didn't you do anything about it?' Theresa asked.

'There was no way. The telephone was cut off and I could not go to the village.'

'Didn't anybody miss him?' Mrs Weldon asked.

'He had nobody. He was seventy years old and the only person he had, his sister, died some years ago.'

'All right, Hubert. It won't do any good to the dead man or to us to stir up the story just now. Let us settle in first – and let the sleeping butler lie.'

Theresa Weldon called in the building contractor, Charles

Moore, again. The dining room was reopened and made very cosy. The small study next to the Blue Drawing Room was turned into a bathroom.

'The rest of the house will stay closed at the moment,' Theresa told Charles Moore. 'But I will be in touch with you again. I have plans, which involve you and Valerie.'

In the evening, Theresa came into the Blue Drawing Room. She wore a lacy, pink nightdress, her breasts, rather small and firm, nestling in the low-cut frills.

'Come to my bedroom, Hubert. But don't bring The Hands,' she said and glided through the door.

For a moment Hubert hesitated. The Hands, always present, uncovered, in the Jersey honeymoon suite, were the reason that Theresa did not let him touch her. He was rather grateful for that. His only sexual experience was the bizarre sensations with Melissa's silhouette. He did not know how to approach a live woman. For a moment he looked at The Hands. To his surprise he did not feel any emotion, attachment, fear or regret. He left the room, switching the lights off and went straight to Theresa's bed. His wife was very understanding and skilful. She guided him through the shyness, clumsiness and sweats to the final culmination. Next day at the breakfast table Hubert was touchingly humble.

'Oh, Theresa, my wife,' he said.

It was easy for Mrs Weldon to suggest that his solicitor should be asked to come to Fernhill Manor.

'It is always wise to have a proper Will,' she said. 'As you have nobody you know of, and should you go before me, it would take a long time to settle the whole estate.'

Hubert agreed and the solicitor arrived in the first week of June 1972.

The Will of Hubert Weldon was short and explicit. Everything was left to his wife, Theresa Weldon. His bank accounts, his shares, the large chest of silver deposited at the bank, the Fernhill Manor and its entire contents. The solicitor mentioned The Hands and the jewellery on them. He reminded Hubert Weldon that, according to Melissa's codicil, The Hands

with the jewellery were to be buried with him. Theresa Weldon jerked in her chair but recovered quickly. 'If I am here at that sad moment, I will of course carry out my dead sister-in-law's wish.'

Without delay Theresa Weldon progressed with her plans. Due to the sudden tremendous publicity for the Seychelles Islands in the papers and the travel agents' advertisements, she had switched her dreams from the Caribbean to the Seychelles. The islands of fragrant spices, cinnamon thatched bungalows, sleeping tortoises and sheets of multi-coloured birds rising from the sea. With her tidy fortune in her bank and Hubert's entire estate, she would be able to live in the Seychelles for the rest of her life in a well-cushioned luxury. She was determined to dispatch her husband as soon as possible to join his parents and Melissa in the white marble tomb in the village church. Not by murder, but by a much more pleasant and legal means. Hubert was sixty-seven and not very strong. An overdose of the good things of life should do the trick, Mrs Weldon hoped. Because the wine-cellar was locked, with its dead secret within its walls, she had ordered cases of wines and spirits and stored them in the pantry next to the kitchen. From a prominent London store she selected tins of pâté-de-foie-gras, partridges in port wine, lobsters in pink mayonnaise and boxes of chocolates and candied fruit. Every lunch and dinner was a feast. Every night Hubert was smothered with kisses and embraces and taught new tricks of the bedroom. While he slept late in the morning, Theresa was touring the house, taking notes and inventory of every item. She forced open the door to Melissa's apartment and was delighted at the unique furniture there. She summoned Charles and Valerie Moore and discussed her plans with them. She was going to sell all the contents of Fernhill Manor. Charles Moore and Valerie would be entrusted to dispose of it in the antique shops in the county. Theresa would put a precise price on all the items. The Moores would have a generous commission. If they should reach a sum above the limit, it would be theirs. Charles Moore assigned his largest lorry and

two of his most skilful men to the Fernhill Manor project.

In the first days of August the furniture, carpets, curtains, china, linen, pictures and garden equipment were sold. Only the kitchen and the rooms occupied by the Weldons were left intact. Theresa Weldon bought a large iron case and put all the cash received from the sales in it. She unlocked the case every night and listened in ecstasy to the rustle of the accumulating bank notes. For weeks Hubert was unaware of the goings on at the house. He had put on a huge amount of weight and his blood pressure shot up to an alarming degree, due to the steady consumption of port and brandy. His love-making became increasingly breathless and he would fall asleep in the middle of it, but Theresa woke him up and persuaded him to another performance. She hated every minute of it, but it was essential to Hubert's fast slide to his grave. By the end of August Theresa Weldon went to London for a day to see the agents dealing with properties at the Seychelles. Hubert, still in a haze from the previous night, heavy with food and drink and Theresa's almost savage attacks in bed, did not wake up until noon. He called his wife but there was no answer.

He wrapped his dressing-gown around him and left the Blue Drawing Room for the first time in weeks. As he entered the hall he was enveloped by silent emptiness. There was no furniture, and through the large, curtain-less windows the sun poured in like golden rings. He went up the carved staircase and his steps sounded heavily on the wood. There was no carpet. The landing was also bare and the open doors of the rooms yawned like old, toothless mouths. The rooms were empty. He turned the door knob of Melissa's apartment - and it opened and he went into the bedroom. Only the white chiffon roses were left, limp and dusty, floating close to the ceiling, the sumptuous built-in wardrobes were empty. In the boudoir a large hat with a cluster of white roses lay in a corner, almost like a wreath. In the bathroom all the shelves and mirrors were taken out. Even the massage board, on which Melissa had lain while her hands were being severed, was gone. In his old bed-

room a heap of papers and a few dirty shirts intensified the atmosphere of absolute desolation. On the top of the heap was the Cambridge University magazine, with his story, 'The Remains of Reindeer,' publicized on the cover. Hubert sat on the floor and slowly turned the pages. The remains of reindeer, he thought.

Theresa is like the two old Lapp women, dismembering the reindeer. Nothing will be wasted, even before the reindeer is dead. Now he understood the reason for Theresa marrying him. And the subsequent fierce sexual feasts and the floods of heavy food and alcohol. Theresa's very own design for his death. He had returned to the Blue Drawing Room and stood closely to the glass case with The Hands.

'I am sorry, Melissa,' he said aloud. 'But your jewels will not be buried with your hands and me. When you made the codicil, we did not have Theresa.'

Mrs Weldon came back from London late in the evening. In her bedroom she deposited the bundle of Seychelles brochures she had brought with her. Hubert decided not to tell his wife that he had seen the empty house. For a few days he had hoped that he would be able to resist the food and the drinks and the bedroom ecstasies. But he had to admit to himself that he was 'too far gone'. And he plunged still deeper into Theresa's gastronomic and sexual lure. Early in October he suffered a mild heart attack, a chance Theresa Weldon was not going to waste. That evening she produced duck in brandy sauce, stuffed with *pâté-de-foie-gras* and followed by Stilton cheese, soaked in port. She almost carried him to his bed and, with the Seychelles scenes racing behind her closed eyelids, flung herself on the flabby heap which was Hubert. He had a major stroke close to midnight and was dead in the early hours of the morning. Theresa progressed according to her long prepared schedule. She called the doctor and the death certificate stated without any doubt that Hubert Weldon had died of a major heart attack. Next she telephoned the local police and asked the Chief Superintendent to come to see her on a matter of urgency. Within an hour the Chief arrived with his senior officer.

'Some hours before my husband died last night,' Mrs Weldon said, 'he told me that his old butler who was with the family for fifty years, lies dead in the wine cellar. The house is equipped with electronic devices and apparently something went wrong with the door of the cellar.'

The Chief Superintendent wanted to know when that happened.

'About a year ago. At that time my husband was living the life of a recluse with no telephone and nobody calling on him. In his condition he had simply forgotten about the old man in the cellar.'

The team of the electronic service company was called and the door of the wine cellar was opened. The police found Alfred Stubbs, lying with his face down, his right hand almost touching a wristwatch, embossed in a pool of dried up vomit.

An ambulance man put the watch on the dead man's wrist and the butler, in his black tails, left the house in a canvas coffin. It was an official exit, with the approval of doctor and police, timed and designed by Mrs Weldon with her usual perfection. Hubert Weldon was laid out in a massive oak coffin with heavy bronze handles and placed in the middle of the empty hall. The undertakers provided a black velvet covered stand, because there was nothing at all to put the coffin on. Without knowing it Theresa Weldon had surpassed the old Lapp women and their reindeer. The funeral was three days later and Theresa moved fast to accomplish the most important task. She went to the Blue Drawing Room with Hubert's bed unmade and his pyjamas on the floor. She was certain that from the glass case Melissa's hands were staring at her. It did not disturb her.

With a hammer she shattered the top of the case. She took hold of the hands and pulled them out, still firmly glued to the white satin cushion. The distinct smell of death mixed with the faint scent of the cosmetics used on the hands. The cold October sun extracted shimmering rainbows from the magnificent jewellery. Theresa removed the lace cuffs and the six bracelets came off the wrists quite easily. But the rings were firmly

attached to the stiff fingers. She tried to break them but the hands were hard like marble. She remembered the basket of garden tools in the greenhouse and went to fetch them. There was the small saw used for pruning roses; it was ideal for the operation. With a strong pull Theresa Weldon separated the hands from the cushion and placed them on the window-sill. She started with the left hand and with steady movements severed the four fingers. She removed the rings and placed them on her fingers and proceeded to cut off the fingers on the right hand. It seemed that the huge sapphire refused to leave Melissa's hand. Theresa Weldon had to struggle for a long while before the ring finally fell to the floor. She removed the swans-down from the cushion and put the hands with the thumbs still in the graceful position and the fragments of the fingers inside. Just before the funeral, she placed the cushion close to Hubert's face.

'Something to do with his sister's last wish,' she told the funeral manager before he closed the lid.

Hubert was almost unknown in the village and it was only Theresa, Charles and Valerie Moore, and the undertakers who saw him enter the family tomb. The Moores returned with the widow to Fernhill Manor. Over coffee, thickly laced with brandy, Theresa asked Charles Moore to find a buyer for the house.

'You have one,' he said. 'I'll buy it. I've always wanted a grand old house.'

'I shall be in the Seychelles by Christmas,' Theresa said. 'If the Will is not probated before I go, you will have to complete the purchase of the house with my agents. I'm going to buy a small island in the Seychelles and build one of those low, wide houses, with enormous rooms and a cinnamon thatched roof.'

Theresa Weldon took the iron case containing the proceeds from the sales of the contents of Fernhill Manor to her bank to be transferred to the Seychelles on her demand. The remains of reindeer, as Hubert would have called it, amounted to fifty thousand pounds. She brought the iron case back home and locked it in with Melissa's jewels, the six bracelets and six rings,

wrapped in cotton wool and tissue paper. She put the case on the Rococo table in the Blue Drawing Room, where Melissa's hands used to rest. She had booked her flight to the Seychelles for the middle of December 1972.

*

The last day of October 1972 the passenger liner *Amaryllis* was one day out from Tilbury. She was a fairly new boat, glittering with white paint, picked out in yellow and blue.

Henry Eyewetts was having a pre-lunch drink in the Barbarossa Bar. He drank his very own combination of red rum, Grand Marnier and sparkling rosé wine. The sea was calm like a wash-basin painted blue. The faint rattle of the ice cubes in the glass provided the perfect backdrop to his mental wanderings over the past twenty-three years since he left Fernhill Manor and the Weldons. There were times of restless pursuits from one country to another – and times of long tranquil hours of painting in mountains and fields and Easter forests. And weeks and months of portraying Texas oil heiresses, Broadway call-girls and dipsomaniac widows and divorcees alone and lost in monumental mansions, for large sums of money spent as fast as he made it.

Some months ago he had arrived at the dreaded moment, the awareness of which every artist carries deep in his mind: he realized that he could not paint any more. He had developed an acute aversion to travel, hotels, suitcases, noisy motels and other people's houses. He wanted to go home, and home was Fernhill Manor. If Melissa and Hubert were still there, he was sure that they would let him stay. And perhaps, mellow as he was now, he might even marry Melissa. With great speed he had sold the few pictures he had to a small gallery in Sydney and gave his easels, brushes and paints and canvases to a robust blonde who was staying at the same motel and who claimed to be a painter. He got the last cabin on the *Amaryllis* and sailed for England in the brilliant sunshine of a Sydney morning.

The first day out to sea he went to the ship's library. He asked for the English newspapers dating a few years back. He wanted to know what was happening in the old country in his

absence. The *Daily Zodiac* of December 1970 hit him hard with the front page story, headlined *Miss Melissa's Hands* and the picture of the hands he knew so well, endorsed with fabulous rings and bracelets. A subsequent story next day estimated the price of the jewels at three hundred thousand pounds. And quoted Melissa's last wish expressed in her Will, that the hands with the jewellery should be finally buried with her brother Hubert.

Henry Eyewetts went through the rest of the back numbers of the *Daily Zodiac* page by page. Obviously the reporters followed the events at Fernhill Manor all through the years. A February issue of 1972 described fully the rich recluse of the Fernhill Manor being brought in a rotting heap to the Willow Retreat nursing home. His marriage to the Matron Theresa Evans was reported in April 1972. The October issue of the *Zodiac* carried a brief notice of Hubert Weldon's death, but a fully blown front page about the dead butler found in the wine cellar of Fernhill Manor. It was an accident due to the failure of the massive electronic devices installed at the house.

That evening, over a large number of his red-rum combinations, Henry Eyewetts dissected the situation. Obviously there was a widow at Fernhill Manor who had inherited everything. He wondered if she had buried Melissa's hands with the jewels with Hubert Weldon. He was determined to find out.

The *Amaryllis* docked at Tilbury early in the morning on the first day of November 1972.

Henry Eyewetts looked good in the line of passengers at customs. The passing years had chiselled his face to the right degree of leanness. His auburn hair was spangled with silver streaks and his tall frame carried well a dark brown tweed suit and a heavy camelhair coat. His set of suitcases, given to him by a prominent Broadway call-girl in addition to the cheque for her portrait, proclaimed the extravagance of the green crocodile skins.

Later that evening he arrived in Hollybrook, the neighbouring village to Fernhill Manor. He booked a room at the local

inn called The Red Chimneys, and by nine o'clock was seated on the corner stool at the bar. He knew that he could not ask for his red-rum combination and had ordered a large Scotch on the rocks. The landlord was asked to have one as well and the conversation unrolled easily.

'Yes,' Henry Eyewetts told him, 'I have just arrived from Australia.'

Almost twenty-three years ago he had lived at Fernhill Manor. Lost touch – and come to see if Miss Melissa and Mr Hubert Weldon were still living there. The landlord told him all Henry knew already from the back numbers of the *Zodiac*. But he progressed to describe the widow.

'Mrs Weldon is a strong woman in body and in mind,' the landlord said. 'She had Mr Hubert right under her heel. He left her everything and even during his lifetime she had sold most of the furniture from the house. No wonder he was in the family tomb just six months after the wedding.'

Henry wanted to know how old was Mrs Weldon.

'About forty-six or so. Some old village matrons are sure that she was too much in bed for poor Hubert. If that was the case, at least he died happy.'

'Was there a big funeral?' asked Henry Eyewetts.

'No. Hubert Weldon lived like a hermit with his sister and after she died he went to pieces. Only about three people were there, and the undertakers.'

Henry asked if Mrs Weldon came to the village.

'She does. Mostly to the bank. She drives a blue Cortina and wears trousers and a sheepskin coat.'

Next morning Henry Eyewetts went out early. He walked through the narrow streets with tiny shops resembling old engravings from Victorian times. He went round the village green and threw a handful of pennies to a cluster of children playing there. He asked the way to the undertakers and a small boy took him to the doorstep. The manager, Mr Roberts, was very helpful.

'Yes, my firm did provide the last service for Mr Hubert

Weldon. He had lived such a quiet life. The first time I ever set my eyes on him was when I had to close the lid of his coffin.'

'I would be extremely grateful if you could answer a question, Mr Roberts. You see, a long time ago I lived with the Weldons at Fernhill Manor. When I heard of Hubert's death, I asked my solicitor to go to the funeral and put a Bible into his coffin. Unfortunately he is abroad now and I could not ask him. Do you know if he was at the service, and most of all, did he put the Bible in the coffin?'

Mr Roberts was sure that he was not at the funeral. There was only the widow and her friends, Mr and Mrs Moore, himself and his men. The only person who put something in the coffin at the last moment was Mrs Weldon. It was a white satin cushion.

Next day Henry went to the bank, changed some travellers cheques and sat at the writing desk sorting out some papers. Close to noon Theresa Weldon entered the bank. He knew her immediately from the description given by the landlord of The Red Chimneys. From behind a newspaper he watched Hubert's widow, tilting her head with immaculate dusty blonde hair like a chrysanthemum in the wind, while talking to the cashier. Her voice was solid and melodic. As she left the bank, Henry Eyewetts caught a full view of her face and eyes. From that moment he was certain that she had not buried Melissa's jewels with her husband. The remaining question was whether she had some agreement with the solicitor, who thus stayed away from the funeral and his duty to see Melissa's wish carried out.

He decided to take a gambler's chance. He telephoned Mrs Weldon and asked her if he could come to see her. Obviously she refused, not knowing him.

'It concerns Miss Melissa Weldon's jewels,' Henry told her bluntly. 'To avoid a big trouble and a scandal, Mrs Weldon, I suggest that you should see me as soon as possible.'

In the early afternoon Theresa Weldon received Henry Eyewetts in the empty hall of Fernhill Manor. She was not prepared for someone as handsome and civilized as Henry Eye-

wetts. For a fleeting moment she considered that it might be wise to form some sort of association, even marriage with this old friend of Hubert. But it would mean sharing her money and everything, she reminded herself soberly, and asked her visitor into the Blue Drawing Room. Before his arrival she had removed the iron case from the Rococo table and put it deep in the window seat.

'This room is one of three still furnished,' Mrs Weldon told Henry. 'The rest of the furniture was sold. I am going to the Seychelles to live shortly.'

'So there is not much time left for us to complete our business,' said Henry.

'I am puzzled, Mr Eyewetts. What business are you referring to?' Mrs Weldon asked.

Henry braced himself, like a gambler throwing in the final dice.

'The six bracelets and the six rings, which you did not bury with your husband according to the last wish and Will of his sister Melissa. You have buried her hands, apparently very damaged, tucked in a white satin cushion, but that is all. You prevented the solicitor from being present.'

'How do you know all this?' asked Theresa Weldon, breathless.

Henry Eyewetts knew that he was gaining ground. 'Obviously I've made a point of knowing. I suggest that we should share fifty-fifty - three rings and three bracelets each.'

'You are insane,' Theresa told him.

'On the contrary, very sane. This way you will retain half the loot. Should you refuse to share with me, the Weldons' tomb will be opened and the solicitor and you will go to court. He will lose his licence and you will lose all the jewellery because the court will see to it that Melissa's wish is at last carried out.'

Theresa Weldon observed him calmly. She thought, he doesn't know that the house is fully equipped with electronic devices. As he means business, I must move fast.

'You don't give me much choice, do you, Mr Eyewetts? I am used to facing any situation and make quick decisions if the

situation demands it. Of course you would have to confirm to me in your own handwriting that you have received half of the jewellery. That way our guilt will be shared and we will both be safe. The jewels are in an iron box in the cellar. It is the safest place in the house. Shall we go there and you can make your choice?’

The thought of the dead butler in the Fernhill Manor cellar flashed through Henry’s brain. He knew that in the next few moments it would be either him or Theresa Weldon. She had the advantage of knowing where all the electronic buttons were, but he was always extremely perceptive and quick in action.

Theresa led the-way across the empty hall; their footsteps sounded like hammer blows. At the door to the cellar Theresa stopped.

‘This is an automatic door. It takes some moments to open it.’

She pressed two buttons on the frame and the metal door started slowly to slide to one side. Henry Eyewetts was standing a short step behind Theresa. When the door stopped she turned to him.

‘Let’s go. Your treasure is within your grasp.’

For a fleeting moment Henry looked close into her eyes – and she knew, with her heart pounding like a ship’s bell in a storm, that she had met her match.

Henry Eyewetts closed his left arm tightly around her waist and with his right hand pressed the electronic buttons. The metal door started to slide forward. Theresa’s screams rang through the house, but there was nobody to hear. She fought with her nails and teeth, but the lean frame of Henry had the qualities of steel. With a precise timing he pressed Theresa’s body to the frame and in a fraction of a dangerous moment let the thick metal sheet pin her to it. The high-power operated door did not stop at the obstacle. It went right through it. Because she was pinned to the frame facing the cellar, the half of her body with her face fell inside, the other, with the back of her head dropped to Henry’s feet. Her brain spattered on his shoes. Her shattered arms shot up and down in macabre

spasms. Her blood ran in the corridor in a dark, sickly smelling stream. Henry knew that he must act quickly. Thanks to the old butler, Theresa Weldon's death would also seem an electronic accident. He stepped over her body, through blood. In the hall he took off his shoes and went to the Blue Drawing Room. He was sure that the jewels were there. He opened drawers and cabinets and finally lifted up the window seat. Inside was the iron case. The last task was to find the key. He looked around, trying to guess where a woman would hide an important item.

At this moment a man entered the room. He was about forty years old, short and stocky, with short, wiry reddish hair, dressed in a loud checked tweed suit.

'Hello, I am Charles Moore,' he said.

Startled, Henry Eyewetts formally told him his name.

'I've had the same idea about the cellar door, a ghastly accident,' Charles Moore told Henry. 'It seems that you have done that very unpleasant job for me. I know where the keys are. Shall we share fifty-fifty – three rings and three bracelets each?'

Harry Turner

The hypnotist

For those of my friends who need to earn their daily bread in a fixed environment, as stockbrokers, or bankers, or GPs I entertain a most compassionate concern.

We have but one life and its essence must surely be variety. In this respect I am the most fortunate of men because I have earned a substantial living for the best part of twenty years simply by being myself.

My taste is for travel and I am inclined towards inquisitiveness. These two qualities, which might prove disastrous in other men, have served me handsomely. The name of Stew McAlpine is known worldwide to millions of newspaper readers who have an appetite for the bizarre and the unusual.

My column is syndicated in twenty countries and in spite of the sneers of the intellectuals I give the public what they really hunger for – adventure, and a touch of spice.

No sub-editor worth his salt would dare to cut as much as a semi-colon from my copy and I've even had editors themselves fly out to my villa in Cannes just to negotiate fees for one of my world exclusives.

It was at one such meeting that I first heard about Count Vladimir Von Beck. The editor of a mass circulation daily, whose own success was due in no small measure to my own association with his paper, asked me to interview the Count at his Chateau in Montreux, near Lake Geneva.

Now, interviews in general, and with obscure European aristocrats in particular, are not the stuff of which my column is made. I favour the searing exposé, the stomach churning *flagrante delicto* type of story that sets the adrenalin howling

through the veins of your average suburban newspaper reader.

'So what's special about this Beck fellow,' I inquired, offering the editor a nine inch Monte Cristo and a balloon of cognac.

'He's the world's greatest hypnotist,' replied the editor with a wry smile. 'Or at least so the story goes.'

I nodded and drew hard on my own cigar. 'Probably gossip,' I opined, affecting disinterested langour.

The editor grew nervous and fidgeted with his drink.

'Listen Stew,' he pleaded, 'this chap is, by all accounts, a prize weirdo. He claims to be able to put a whole herd of cows to sleep with just one simple word of command. So far only the local Swiss papers have mentioned him – he *never* gives interviews – and its alleged he's also something of a satyr with the girls – now the way I figure it is this –'

I stopped him with a wave of my hand. I hate *pleading* in a man – it's so undignified.

'I know exactly what you want,' I said, with just the right degree of reproof in my voice. 'You want "Sex Mad Trance King Tells All in Alpine Lust Den" do you not?' The editor nodded sheepishly. I can be merciless at times. 'Very well,' I continued, exhaling cigar smoke in twin jets from my finely arched nostrils. 'I shall call on the Count and make his name a household word. I shall invite him to show me his tricks and I shall even offer to let him hypnotize me – a task I might add, which will be quite beyond his as yet unproven powers.'

'Thanks Stew,' he cried, leaping to his feet, 'you're the only man who can do it – and make it sparkle.'

'I know,' I said. 'More cognac?'

I spent the next few days deeply researching my subject. My contacts in Switzerland were most helpful and soon I had pieced together a whole variety of disparate threads that, taken as a whole, presented a comprehensive portrait of the exotic Count Von Beck.

He was Austrian by birth, the son of noble parents whose forebears had served in the court of the Hapsburgs at the end of that illustrious dynasty. After being educated at an exclusive academy in Vienna he had broken with his family and earned

his living in a bewildering variety of ways. Racing driver, stock-broker, gambler, banker and night-club pianist. At the age of thirty he was persuaded into the diplomatic service by appeals to his patriotism and rapidly became a brilliant figure in the Austrian Embassies of Cairo, Moscow, Washington and London. At the end of the Second World War he mysteriously disappeared and was believed to be studying the occult in China and the Far East.

Re-emerging in the sixties he sold his estates in Austria and set up an elaborate clinic in Switzerland from which his reputation as a brilliant illusionist and hypnotist was soon to spread. Attempts to telephone him were abortive, the reason being, quite simply, that no telephones were permitted in his chateau, and no television or radio either by all accounts.

My appetite was truly whetted by now and I resolved to contact him with my traditional flourish and in a way that could only result in his extending an invitation to visit him in the Chateau Napoule with its high walls and lavish, ornamental grounds. I arranged for a dozen crates of French champagne to be delivered to the Chateau by my chauffeur in my Rolls-Royce Silver Cloud. With the gift was a handwritten note to 'The Doubtful Count Von Beck from Stew McAlpine, the World's Greatest Living Journalist'. The note was brief, verging on the brutal. I challenged his authenticity as a hypnotist and suggested that twenty-five million readers in the English speaking world would like to see some proof of his powers – which, I added provocatively, I myself regarded with the utmost reservation.

For nearly a month there was silence. My chauffeur's visit had been uneventful. A negro butler of outstanding ugliness had received the champagne and the note without comment and then slammed the door in my man's face.

It was the morning of the fourth week when things began to stir. I had breakfasted on the terrace and was putting the finishing touches to my piece on the Frenzied Sex-Practices of Lithuanian Goatherds for a Mexican newspaper which, among other things, paid me a retainer of ten thousand a year, when

my manservant announced that a visitor had arrived. To my surprise it was the Count's African butler clad incongruously in Scottish tweeds and sporting a brown derby of indeterminate age. He was certainly a large man, and ugly too, but his manner was courteous, if a trifle wooden.

The Count, it seemed, was ready to receive me, and his negro had been dispatched to escort me the several hundred miles to the Chateau. A private aeroplane, chartered for the purpose was standing ready at Nice airport and all that remained for me to do was sharpen my pencil, so to speak, and set forth. I dressed unhurriedly in a lightweight silk suit of palest lavender, two-tone shoes and completed the ensemble with a white fedora that I positioned on my head at the traditional rakish angle. Every newspaper that published my column always published a photograph of me similarly clad, and it had become something of a trademark.

I lit a thin cigar and prepared to depart. Stew McAlpine was hot on the trail of yet another story. Just what kind of a story I had no inkling – perhaps I would have hesitated if I had known what I know now – but I digress.

At Nice Airport there was the usual bustle of wealthy and not-quite-so-wealthy visitors. The negro led me through customs with surprising deftness and soon we were seated in a smart little Aztec, with a uniformed pilot who was positioning the plane for take-off. I enjoy flying in light aircraft, especially on a clear day, and it was a particular delight as the Aztec soared over the lower slopes of the Alpes Maritimes and inland towards Switzerland.

We began our descent as Lake Geneva came into view over the lip of the horizon and the little plane was buffeted by side-currents as we nosed towards the private airstrip on the outskirts of Montreux. I made no attempt to conceal my surprise when a horse-drawn carriage of old-fashioned construction drew up alongside the aeroplane as soon as we had landed.

The coachman, also a negro, was every bit as inscrutable as the butler and I settled into the leather upholstery of the carriage for the final stage of the journey. This proved to be a good

deal less delightful than the flight, as we progressed over rough ground and boulder-strewn paths towards a dense forest of pines that sloped away into the flanks of the mountain. Eventually, to the relief of my bones, we came to a metal road that led to the gates of the Chateau. The coachman cracked his whip and we sprang forward as the horse broke into a spirited canter. The gates opened automatically and we were in a long, gravelled drive that curved sharply towards the hulking silhouette of the Chateau.

It was an immense building of grey stone with narrow, church-like windows. An apron of immaculately barbered lawn was spread out in front of it and the whole estate completely ringed by giant poplars.

Gratefully, I climbed down from the carriage and walked towards the Chateau. The negro butler hurried ahead and opened the ornate, carved door. The entrance hall was flagged, and vast. Tapestry covered the high walls and from the domed ceiling hung a gigantic Venetian chandelier. I was led across the hall to some white-painted double doors; they were flung open, and I found myself in a pleasantly furnished library. It contained sofas and colourful rugs and of course walls of expensively bound books. In a large buttoned chair by the tall, empty fireplace, and quietly reading *The Times* sat Count Vladimir Von Beck.

Now, up until this moment, I had quietly relished the opening phrase I would employ when writing my article about the Count. It was to have referred to his cruel, penetrating and hypnotic eyes and set the scene for the rest of the piece.

The man who sat comfortably reading *The Times* however had soft blue eyes, and a smiling countenance. Nothing about him even remotely suggested cruelty, penetration or hypnosis.

He rose from his chair and extended a hand in greeting.

'Mr McAlpine - this is a pleasure.' The voice was suave and cultivated, with only a hint of a German accent.

He was a man of medium height but trim and athletic. I put his age at the middle fifties. He wore an elegant pinstripe suit

with a scarlet carnation in his buttonhole and I observed a monocle hanging on a slender black thread around his neck. My journalistic instinct made me at once try to categorize him. He could have passed as Douglas Fairbanks Junior quite easily in fact – right down to the neat moustache and handsome smile. I shook his hand and it was dry and firm – a positive personality.

A servant appeared with a tray, and I was offered an excellent dry Martini. The Count waved me to a chair and we both sat, facing each other across the empty fireplace.

‘I trust you had a comfortable journey?’ he said politely, dismissing the servant with a nod. It was a brief, patrician gesture and told me much about the man.

I settled into my chair with unhurried confidence. The secret of good interview technique is to exude an almost priest-like sense of confidentiality – it brings out the best, and the worst, in people. The Count produced my letter from his inside pocket and studied it for a few seconds.

‘Your method of contact Mr McAlpine,’ he said, smiling, ‘is unorthodox to say the least. By the way, the champagne is proving quite excellent. I am obliged to you.’

I inclined my body forward a fraction and looked hard at the Count. ‘Count Von Beck,’ I said evenly, ‘shall we abandon the formalities?’

His smile spread into a silent laugh and he nodded. ‘A most sensible suggestion. Do proceed. Luncheon will be served in half an hour, we may continue our discussion while we eat.’

‘May I start – ’ I said, ‘by asking you first whether you are in fact a hypnotist at all?’

The Count’s face was expressionless and he drew gently on his cigarette. ‘Oh yes, I am a hypnotist Mr McAlpine, of that you must be certain. I learnt my craft from ancient masters in China and Peru and Haiti. I shall be pleased to offer you a few simple demonstrations later.’

I nodded. ‘Thank you, I should like that. Now, are the stories about your powers exaggerated, or do they have a ring of truth?’

The Count sighed and shrugged his shoulders. 'I cannot answer that unless you furnish me with precise details of these – alleged stories.'

'It is said,' I replied, 'that you can send man or beast, in any combination of numbers great or small, to sleep with a single command.'

'That is so,' said the Count, without emotion, almost languorously.

'To what purpose do you employ these powers?' I continued.

The Count smiled again. 'To improve the lot of mankind,' he said, 'and to bring a semblance of order into this insane, unwholesome world.'

'Very noble,' I said, allowing an edge of sarcasm to glint on the surface of my voice.

'Thank you,' said the Count, 'but nobility can be tedious, particularly in large doses. I rather fear that my words sound empty without supporting proof. Allow me the self-indulgence of a brief demonstration – an appetizer – nothing more – to dispel your perfectly reasonable scepticism.'

He snapped his fingers twice, and the sound was as sharp as a pistol shot. The door opened instantly and the negro butler appeared. 'Fetch Saladin,' said the Count, and the servant bowed stiffly.

Seconds later he led a huge Great Dane into the room, restrained on a short, plaited thong. The beast was the size of a young donkey but sleek and bony and well groomed.

'Are you squeamish Mr McAlpine?' said the Count suddenly.

I shook my head. 'No, why?' The Count stood up and walked towards the dog. The creature gazed up at him with liquid eyes, its great tongue lolling out.

'Sleep,' said the Count in a clear sharp voice. Instantly the dog's legs crumpled and it collapsed in a heap on the floor. The butler released the lead and stood back.

The Count glanced at me and then drew hard on his cigarette until the end glowed red. He knelt by the Great Dane and with his left hand pushed open the creature's left eye. Then, to

my horror and revulsion, he pressed the burning tip of his cigarette into the exposed eyeball. There was a hiss, then an awful popping sound and the eye collapsed, blood spilling from the socket and running in a trickle over the animal's snout.

The Count stood up and handed the bloody cigarette end to his servant. 'The trance into which I have thrown this animal,' he said, 'is so deep that even major surgery could be performed without waking it. Are you impressed Mr McAlpine?'

I swallowed hard and fumbled with my drink. 'What a vile exhibition,' I said, my voice trembling.

'Nonsense,' said the Count, 'the beast is a pampered domestic pet. It has no use for both its eyes. When it recovers it will live out the rest of its life in luxurious indolence, and it will never feel as much as a twinge of pain.'

Before I could utter another word the butler had gathered the inert carcase of the dog into his arms and walked slowly from the room.

'Surgery under hypnosis Mr McAlpine: just one of the many boons I offer to mankind. Come, follow me, I will show you another little trick before lunch, one I assure you that will restore your appetite to its proper proportions.'

The Count led me out of the library and across the hall. He unlocked a small door under the stairs and we stepped into a circular, brightly-lit room panelled with mirrors. On a drum-shaped stool was a steel dish containing a pile of raw, red meat. The Count pressed a control behind the door and one of the mirrors slid away revealing another cell-like room. To my immense surprise a fully grown lion emerged from the aperture and loped into the circular chamber. It was, however, hideously emaciated, its ribs standing out on its dun-coloured flanks.

The Count snapped his fingers and the lion stopped in its tracks – like a statue.

'This beast,' said the Count, 'hasn't eaten for several weeks. It is under deep hypnosis of course and is quite safe. I have placed the meat here in order to conduct a small experiment. Up until now I have eliminated all traces of appetite – and if I

choose to let it – the beast will starve itself to death. I propose now to restore its *desire* for food – but at the same time instruct it *not* to eat. Watch closely.’

The Count moved a pace towards the motionless great cat and fixed it with a brief stare, then snapped his fingers again. The lion moved to the dish and its nostrils quivered above the mound of raw meat. Saliva poured from its jaws but it made no attempt to touch the food. It was a strangely pitiful sight and I touched the Count’s arm.

‘Let him eat,’ I said. The Count smiled and uttered a low, incomprehensible command. Immediately the lion snatched up the meat and began to gobble it ravenously.

‘Come,’ said the Count, ‘our luncheon will be ready now.’

The dining-room of the Chateau was a long, high-ceilinged chamber decorated with rococo mirrors and heavy velvet drapes. Over the carved fireplace was a curious oriental painting executed in fiery, extravagant colours. At first I thought it was an abstract – but closer inspection revealed it to be a work of immense detail. It depicted a crowd scene along the lines of Bruegel or Hieronymus Bosch. Dozens of exquisitely painted figures, their limbs entwined in erotic positions were sprawled in a park-like setting. Fountains sprayed them with silver arcs of water and in the foreground, half-screened by grotesque shrubs, was a scene of bloody carnage.

Mandarins in silken robes were beheading and garrotting groups of kneeling peasants. Blood stained the geometric lawns and mutilated corpses were piled high under the lemon trees. One particular characteristic impressed me more than the violence – all of the victims were smiling ecstatically. The artist had captured in each tiny face an expression of incandescent joy. The effect was ghoulish, even obscene. When I turned away the Count was standing patiently by the table. A cold lunch had been prepared and the general excellence of its appearance made me momentarily forget the painting.

A large glazed ham was set on a dish of brown rice and surrounded by mixed salad and various chopped vegetables. A silver ice bucket held two gleaming bottles of hock and on a

sideboard was a range of mouth-watering cakes, pastries and crystallized fruit. We sat, and a servant began to pile our plates with thick slices of ham. The Count opened the first bottle of wine and filled our goblets.

'Do you like my painting Mr McAlpine? It is very old and almost priceless. I refused a million pounds sterling for it less than a year ago.'

'It's technically a superb painting,' I said, 'but I find the violence a trifle too stark.'

The Count wolfed down a forkful of ham and took a long draught of wine.

'Most people ask why the victims are laughing,' he said, 'and I always tell them a lie. I say it is because they are religious fanatics who welcome death as a means of meeting their God. The explanation usually satisfies. For you, however, Mr McAlpine, I think the truth might be preferable.'

'I only deal in truth,' I said, with magisterial aplomb. The count shovelled more food in his mouth and I was reminded of the poor lion.

'That painting was done during the Ming Dynasty by a most celebrated artist, a favourite of the Emperor. It shows, with graphic precision, his impression of the Rites of Ackosando which were performed in the gardens of heaven beneath the very shadow of the royal palace. The Orientals were then, and had been for centuries, masters of the hypnotic process. The painting depicts Chinese citizens who have been entranced into accepting pain, mutilation and even death without protest. The *absolute* and *irrefutable* proof of supreme mastery of the power of hypnosis.'

I phrased my next question carefully, mindful of the dreadful incident with the Great Dane earlier.

'Are you familiar with the phenomenon of mass hypnosis?'

The Count nodded and refilled our goblets. 'Numbers, Mr McAlpine, *quantities*, present no problem to the master hypnotist. In Haiti, I saw a thousand men fall as rigid as concrete to the ground under the power of one Voodoo magician. In Peru I saw a herd of mountain sheep fling themselves into a ravine

under the influence of a similar power. Hypnosis, after all, is imposing one will on another. The possibilities are legion. It is to this end that I have set up, at immense cost, this experimental clinic here in Switzerland. I am in pursuit of the *ultimate*.'

I put down my fork and looked hard at the Count. His features were relaxed and displayed no hint of fanaticism. He smiled and raised his goblet.

'No, I'm not mad Mr McAlpine. I apologize if I fail to fit the classic mould of the raving scientist so beloved by readers of the mass media.'

I accepted this rebuke with good grace as I had no wish to see our conversation deflected into a dialogue about the shortcomings of modern journalism.

'Count Von Beck,' I said, 'what *exactly* do you mean by the ultimate?'

He considered this for a moment, and sipped his wine.

'Anyone - ' he said, 'who is in pursuit of excellence must *never* be satisfied. At least until his most cherished goals have been achieved.'

I decided to turn the screw, as I have done in countless interviews before.

'With respect,' I said, 'you are evading the question. I asked you what you meant by the ultimate?'

He smiled and pushed away his plate. 'I hope the meat was to your liking Mr McAlpine; the beast was slaughtered under hypnosis on my farm, which is part of this estate. Here, let me recharge your goblet.'

I adopted a stony silence while he poured the wine.

'Since you arrived,' he went on, 'you have seen two examples of animal hypnosis which, in my humble opinion, are ample proof of my powers. However, as a reasonable man I'm sure you would not expect me to condense my life's ambitions into a short monologue over the luncheon table. What I do suggest is that you let me show you some of the work I am engaged upon in the clinic. Stay on for dinner, spend the night here, wander freely about the house and grounds - see for yourself.'

The offer seemed genuine enough and I accepted.

'A word of warning though,' said Count Von Beck, raising his hand, 'you will see things in the surgical unit which may shock you – under no circumstances must you attempt to stop – or interfere with what is going on. May I have your promise please?'

I nodded. 'I am here as a journalist,' I said, 'not as judge nor jury.'

The Count seemed pleased with this reply and stood up.

'Excellent,' he said, 'would you care for some crystallized fruit?'

We ate in silence for another quarter of an hour or so and after some splendid Turkish coffee the Count suggested I might like to begin my tour of the clinic.

All the servants seemed to have disappeared and the great hall was empty. The Count led me to a door on the far side, unlocked it, and pushed it open.

'The clinic occupies the entire east wing,' he said. 'Please go wherever you please, the medical staff are used to visitors. Tea will be served in the library at four-thirty – I have some papers to attend to meanwhile, so if you'll excuse me –' he clicked his heels and made a little bow.

' – until four-thirty.'

I watched his trim figure retreating across the hall, and then, with a curious sense of anticipation, I entered the clinic. In contrast to the medieval splendour of the Count's private apartments, the east wing of the Chateau was modern, pristine, and gleaming white. I continued along a tiled corridor at the end of which were a pair of double swing doors. Even through their thickness I could hear the rise and fall of muffled voices. Cautiously I pushed open the doors and peered inside. The scene that greeted me was one of great human activity. The huge rectangular room was lined on either side with hospital beds, each one containing a patient, while all around white-coated orderlies bustled with trays and swabs and stethoscopes. It was only when I took a more detailed look at the minutiae of what was actually going on in that room that my heart missed a beat.

The patients, men and women, lay naked on the beds laugh-

ing and joking with each other while the medical staff performed the most gruesome surgery on their defenceless bodies. One elderly man was having a leg amputated while chatting amiably to his next door neighbour whose abdomen was laid open revealing coils of intestine, purple and glistening. A young woman, with intense blue eyes was having the top of her head systematically sawn through, presumably in preparation for some sort of brain surgery. She lay there smiling while blood dripped on to a rubber blanket that covered the bed. The young surgeon, a negro, perspired as he sawed through the hard, bony skull.

A feeling of nausea engulfed me and I thought for a moment that I was going to faint. I steadied myself against the door and tried to think rationally, coolly, like a professional journalist. My God though, but it was difficult. I was conscious of somebody standing at my side and I turned my head. It was another negro, white-coated, handsome, smiling.

'You are a guest of Count Von Beck?' he said.

I nodded, still speechless from the awful spectacle that was unfolding before my eyes.

'Surgery under hypnosis,' he continued, in an even conversational tone. 'All the patients are volunteers of course. Fascinating isn't it?' I took a deep breath and bottled down the terror that was rising in my throat.

The negro took my arm, gently, but those fingers had a hint of steel about them. 'Don't be ashamed of your reactions,' he said, leading me along between the beds. 'They are perfectly natural.'

We passed a man whose side had just been sliced open by a scalpel, he plunged his own hand into the gaping, slippery wound and gouged around.

'Self-help,' explained my doctor companion. 'He's trying to locate his own diseased kidney.'

'Do they feel nothing?' I said at last, conscious that my voice was thin and trembling.

'Not a thing,' said the doctor. 'Except joy.' And it was true enough, all the patients seemed intensely happy. Some were

laughing with a harshness that fell only a fraction short of hysteria. I was reminded of the Count's painting in the dining room and shuddered.

It was a blessed relief when the young doctor led me through a door at the top end of the ward and into a panelled office. 'Perhaps you'd like to sit down for a moment,' he said, waving to a chair. Gratefully I sank into it and fumbled for my cigarettes.

'Does Count Von Beck conduct *all* the hypnosis in the clinic?' I asked, striking a match and plunging my cigarette into the flame.

'Oh yes,' said the doctor, 'all of it. He is the master.'

Something about the young man's tone made me uneasy, but I put it down to the delayed shock from which I was suffering. He went over to the window and looked out, then turned and faced me. The smile was as broad as ever, and it suddenly occurred to me that he hadn't stopped smiling since he brought me here.

'If you would care to come over here,' he said, pointing to the window, 'you will see something a little less disturbing – but I think you'll agree, no less fantastic than what you have seen in the surgical unit.'

I took a lungful of cigarette smoke and went over to the window. It overlooked a large field surrounded by trim hedges. In the centre of the field were several dozen sheep. They were motionless like stone figures, their woolly bodies pressed close together in regimental precision, their black, innocent faces tilted towards the sky.

'Remarkable,' I said, for it was just that. This pleased the doctor and he gave a tinkling laugh.

'Like a three-dimensional painting is it not?' he said, and I agreed.

'Now perhaps,' he continued, 'you would like to see the gymnasium?'

'The gymnasium?' I repeated. 'Is it part of the clinic?'

'Oh yes,' he said, his smile growing broader still. 'And it is something of a showpiece. Come, let me take you.'

Quite frankly, after the scalp-tingling horrors of the surgical unit I couldn't believe that anything else would be other than an anti-climax. None the less I followed the doctor into yet another corridor and through several pairs of heavy swing doors. The gymnasium was a large, high-ceilinged room that looked as if it had once been the orangery of the Chateau. Tall curved windows let in the bright afternoon sunlight which was reflected in the gleaming hardwood floor. There were vaulting horses and judo mats and various other pieces of equipment. In the centre of the gymnasium stood a naked dwarf with an ancient wrinkled face. His tiny arms were extended above his head and to my utter incredulity I saw that he was supporting a fully grown man on the palm of each hand. They sat there in white coats, clipboards on their laps, making solemn notes. They looked up when we entered, both negroes, biggish men, the pair of them. I put them at about two hundred pounds each. The ancient dwarf, who was a white Caucasian, couldn't have weighed more than eighty or ninety pounds!

I saw his tiny arms flex, and without any noticeable effort he began to press the two negroes up and down like a pair of human dumbbells.

My doctor companion clapped his hands in obvious delight. 'Magnificent,' he said. 'The Count is experimenting with an entirely new concept. He believes that the true limits of human physical strength can only be realized under the deepest, most profound hypnosis.'

After a few moments the manikin lowered his human burden and stood there grinning vacantly. His breathing was shallow and he displayed no signs of fatigue.

The two orderlies examined him closely, checking his pulse rate and making further notes on their graph paper.

When they were satisfied they helped him into a child's bathrobe, embroidered with a Donald Duck motif, and he sat cross-legged on the floor of the gymnasium.

My companion introduced me to the two orderlies. Their smiles were radiant and they shook hands politely. The dwarf meanwhile rocked to and fro on his heels, crooning softly.

Perhaps it was the nervous state I was in but behind his old man's eyes I fancied I saw a glimmer of some awful emotion – like terror.

'Tomorrow,' said the doctor suddenly, 'we plan to increase the tempo of our experiment with Niko,' he pointed to the dwarf – and tomorrow he will run a measured mile carrying ten times his own weight. You may come and watch if you wish.'

I mumbled an excuse about needing an early start in the morning and turned to go. The atmosphere in the gymnasium, with its smell of floor polish and human sweat had caused me to feel suddenly quite ill.

Back in the doctor's office I smoked another cigarette while he chatted amiably about what we had seen, eulogising about the great social value of his work in the clinic. I listened politely until half-past four, and then excused myself, telling him that I was to take tea with Count Von Beck in the library. It was with a sense of profound relief that I re-entered the residential wing of the Chateau and closed the door of the clinic behind me.

It has long been my practice as a journalist to make notes of events immediately after they have happened in order to keep them fresh in my mind. I knew that on this occasion notes would be superfluous. The scenes I had just witnessed would remain imprinted on my mind forever.

A fire had been lit in the library when I arrived and the Count was waiting for me, looking as benign as ever.

'I thought I should make you feel more at home,' he said, 'so I ordered an English tea.'

I glanced at the laden table and saw thinly sliced cucumber sandwiches, toasted muffins, jam and a large fruit cake.

'I hope your tour of the clinic was illuminating,' said the Count, pouring tea into delicate china cups.

'It was certainly that,' I replied, sitting opposite him, 'but I'll be frank with you, Count Von Beck. I found a great deal of what I saw quite disgusting, I would go so far as to say that the experiments in the clinic are morally indefensible.'

Count Von Beck picked up a sugar knob with a pair of tongs and let it drop into my teacup. He smiled, as one does to an over-impulsive child.

'All the patients, Mr McAlpine, are volunteers. Each of them has given me authority in writing to treat them in the clinic.'

'That's as may be,' I replied, 'but I still find the whole business thoroughly unpleasant. I'm afraid I shall have to say so, quite specifically, in my column. I shall call on the authorities to exercise more control over your clinical work – and believe me Count, when I call on the authorities through the medium of my newspaper articles, they usually listen!' The Count stirred his tea thoughtfully and selected a cucumber sandwich.

'I have no reason to doubt the influence you exercise Mr McAlpine; indeed you are something of a celebrity in the journalistic world. But let me ask you this, did you see one person who looked unhappy in my clinic? Come now, give me a straight answer.'

'No, I didn't,' I said, 'and I found that disturbing in itself.'

The Count shrugged good naturedly. 'I'm sorry that is the case,' he said. 'What more can I say? You are a journalist in pursuit of facts, I have shown you the work in my clinic without let or hindrance. You have observed that my patients are actually *happy* under hypnosis. *Facts*, Mr McAlpine, unvarnished *facts*.'

I took a sip of tea and sat back in the chair. Looking at the Count, meekly chewing on his cucumber sandwich, made it difficult to associate him with the stomach-churning spectacle I had witnessed in that awful surgical unit. I decided to soft-pedal for a while, there was a great deal more I needed to know about Count Vladimir Von Beck, and if I offended him he might be less forthcoming.

'I didn't mean to be personal, Count,' I said, 'I was speaking professionally.'

The Count nodded and took another sandwich. 'You will stay tonight I hope? The sky is heavy and I fear a storm is brewing.'

'Thank you,' I said, 'you are very kind. But I should warn

you that I never stop asking questions.'

The Count laughed at this and his eyes positively glittered with delight. 'What else would you like to know?'

I thought for a while and then put down my cup. 'Could you hypnotize me?' I said. The Count nodded firmly.

'Yes. But I have no intention of doing so, not even to make a splendid newspaper story. I am a serious scientist Mr McAlpine, I'm sure you understand that.'

I tried another angle, trying to get under that elegant, mannered guard of his.

'Are you practised in auto-suggestive hypnosis?'

The Count made an approving face. 'You *have* done your homework,' he said. 'Yes, I am an expert in the field. I can exercise control over a subject by a predetermined auto-signal even if he or she is on the other side of the world, thousands of miles away.'

'A potent gift I should have thought,' I said, and the Count smiled.

'That is so,' he replied. 'Would you care for some fruit cake?'

As he spoke the sky outside darkened and a peal of distant thunder broke over the mountains.

'The local storms can be very spectacular,' he said. 'Well worth sitting up for. Your room faces the valley, so you should get a splendid view. Nature in all its raw fury, Mr McAlpine, it's a sight to stir the blood.'

The cake was excellent and when we had finished the Count rang a small handbell for the plates to be cleared. To my surprise, instead of the negro butler I had expected, the call was answered by an extremely pretty maid. She was Asian, possibly half-Chinese, with light, honey-coloured skin, jet black hair and full negroid lips. She was dressed in the traditional black with a white apron and cap. As she cleared the plates her hand accidentally struck the teapot, spilling its contents over her fingers. Calmly, with unhurried movements she mopped up the debris and finished stacking the plates. Then, moving with sinuous grace she carried the tray over to the door, turned and backed out into the corridor.

I felt the Count looking at me and realized that I must have been ogling the girl rather blatantly.

'You like Sheeba?' he said, lighting a thin cheroot.

I grinned, a shade foolishly, and made a non-committal gesture with my hand.

'These girls of mixed blood,' I said, 'chigros I think they're called, they have a certain feline charm.'

The Count fixed me with a cool stare. 'They have all the uninhibited sensuality of a wild animal,' he said, and blew a plume of cigar smoke towards the ceiling.

Further discussion on the topic was prevented by a violent clap of thunder; then the storm broke. Seldom have I seen such fury, even at sea. The sky was vivid purple and a great wind had sprung up, rain beat in a frenzy against the window panes and outside in the gardens the trees bent like bowstrings in the teeth of the gale.

The Count stood up and walked across to the window. 'As we have just taken tea,' he said, 'dinner will not be served until nine-thirty. I have as usual, a multitude of scientific papers to attend to. May I suggest therefore Mr McAlpine that you allow me to show you your room. Perhaps you would like a bath after your long journey from Nice.'

He led me through the great hall and up a splendid Gothic staircase that wouldn't have looked out of place in an old Hollywood movie. My room was at the end of a long, carpeted corridor and after unlocking the door, the Count bowed and left me.

The room was enormous with a beamed and vaulted ceiling. The furniture was big, dark and old-fashioned, likewise the bed with its carved headpost and tapestry coverlet. The walls were bare save for a few faded prints, mostly of hunting scenes and views of the chateau. One of them, larger than the rest, was an architect's drawing of the floor plan. It revealed above all, that the chateau was a maze of rooms, corridors and passages all linked, like the tentacles of an octopus, to the great hall on the ground floor.

I investigated the bathroom and found to my delight that it had been fully modernized. I decided upon a leisurely soak and a few moments later I was up to my neck in hot, perfumed water watching the wisps of steam rise and mist the surfaces of the big mirrored walls.

I must have dozed in the bath for about half an hour and was stirred from this sensual torpor by the distant striking of a clock. I found myself one of the Count's enormous, monogrammed towels, (there was a wicker box crammed with them) and strolled back into the bedroom. To my surprise a fire had been lit in the stone hearth and now a log blazed merrily, giving the room an altogether more cheerful appearance. Swathed in six feet of towelling, I sat on the bed and tried to piece together the sharp fragments of experience I had been subjected to since my arrival at the Chateau.

The bath, and the short nap, had relaxed me and I began to think in cool, analytical sequences.

The Count was no phoney, that much was certain. Neither was he mad, in the conventional sense at least. He was clever, charming and probably dangerous.

I knew already that my article about the Count would have to be condemnatory. I had seen enough to make me determined to crusade for the closure of his ghastly clinic with its pitiful, pliant inmates and smiling orderlies. Why, I suddenly asked myself, were all his staff negroes? What special significance should I attach to this?

As I have done a thousand times before I went over to my battered suitcase and took from it the small portable Olivetti. A sheet of clean paper followed and I began to tap out the first draft of my story.

I had scarcely completed a dozen sentences when the hair on the nape of my neck began to rise. Some primeval sixth sense was telling me that I was not alone in the room. I spun around, flinging the typewriter from my lap, and found myself staring into the big chestnut eyes of Sheeba, the Asian maid-servant. She was kneeling with her back to the fireplace,

wearing what appeared to be a kind of cotton shift. Her oval face was upturned, and the full, purple lips were parted in a curiously mirthless smile.

I felt my initial shock subsiding and I drew the towel firmly around my shoulders. 'What the devil are you doing here?' I demanded, mustering all the authority that my outraged dignity would allow.

For answer she crossed her arms over her body and pulled the shift up over her head. Then, without taking her eyes from mine, she threw the flimsy garment to one side. Slowly, like a cat, she stood up, her nakedness gleaming in the firelight.

Now I have travelled the world and known many women, and I'm certainly no stranger to sex, but there was something about this girl that seemed to transcend mere sensuality. She exuded what I can only describe as erotic menace. I was her prey, and she was stalking me.

I felt those velvet arms encircle my neck, those wobbling, hard tipped breasts spread against my chest, and a hot, savage mouth close over mine.

The effect of her touch was a trigger that set off a chain of instinctive, feverish responses. I pulled her down on to the ancient bed and covered her with my body. Our tongues wrestled and I felt myself rushing towards that precipice from which there is no return – and then I saw her eyes – wide, staring, dead. Instantly I pushed myself away, forcing her body to arms length. She lay there like a stranded fish, breathing harshly. I passed my hand in front of those eyes but they were sightless.

On a sudden impulse I reached out and picked up my cigarette lighter which lay on the bedside table. Then, with great deliberation I snapped up the flame and held it under her upturned chin. She didn't move, not so much as a flicker passed over her face. When I removed the lighter I saw a dark triangle of burnt skin where the flame had been. My first reaction was to find the Count and express my outrage at this vile trick. Did he really believe he could soften me into writing a eulogy to his talents by sending me a hypnotized concubine?

I looked down at the naked girl and this time my only emo-

tion was compassion. I picked up the shift she had discarded and covered her body. 'Sit up,' I said softly, and she obeyed. 'Listen to me Sheeba. I want you to understand what I am saying to you. Nod if you understand me.'

Her big eyes were still unblinking but she nodded slowly. 'I want you to tell me where you come from. I want to know where you were born. Can you tell me that?' She made no response, but my thoughts were racing ahead.

'It was Haiti, wasn't it?' I said, 'you were born in Haiti.' She nodded, and I saw a tear escape from the corner of her eye where it hung like a translucent jewel.

So I was right. The jigsaw in my mind that had been no more than a jumble of unconnected pieces was at last beginning to take shape.

Count Von Beck's entire staff, medical and menial were negroes, and, I was now willing to bet, all Haitians too. Haiti, the black republic in the Caribbean, notorious for its addiction to voodoo and primitive superstition. Such a place would be a perfect recruiting ground for a man like Von Beck. The natives, brought up in a tradition of fear and magic, would be ideal subjects for his brilliant hypnotism.

Sheeba, who was clearly more than an innocent savage, was in a permanent, walking trance. I had suspected this during tea, when she had spilled the scalding contents of the teapot over her hand without flinching.

I paced the bedroom, thinking hard. The Count's defence of his clinic had been based on the willing cooperation of his victims and that seemed genuine enough. But how could one be sure? I found myself standing by the door, gazing at the framed prints on the wall. The architect's drawing caught my eye again and I examined it closely.

Next to the floor plan of the Chateau was a small inset that showed a long corridor with a series of square rooms on either side. I squinted at the faded print and its elaborate Gothic lettering. Of course! The small inset showed the layout of the cellars.

I went across to Sheeba and took her gently by the shoulders.

'Sheeba,' I said, 'I want you to help me. How can I get to the cellars?'

The huge eyes swivelled and I felt her flesh quiver like an animal.

'Can I reach the cellars from the great hall?' I asked. 'Nod if I can.'

Her whole body had started trembling violently and her teeth were chattering. 'You must help me,' I repeated. 'I am a friend.' She nodded, but it was a supreme effort and I saw beads of sweat forming a crescent over her upper lip.

'You must return to your quarters,' I said, easing her to her feet. 'I shall see that no harm comes to you.'

This suggestion seemed to galvanize her and clutching the flimsy shift in both hands she ran to the door, opened it, and vanished into the corridor.

I wasted no time and dressed hurriedly. Outside the storm had reached its peak and the wind was fairly screaming around the turrets of the Chateau.

I extinguished the lights in my room and after a final glance at the architect's drawing I stepped into the corridor. Minutes later I was easing open the massive studded door that led directly from the great hall to the cellar. Stone steps, illuminated by flaming braziers led steeply into the bowels of the Chateau.

Treading softly I made my way downwards until I reached a long narrow corridor. The doors which flanked it were metal and cell-like and I stopped at the first and peered in through the grille. It was lit by a weak oil lantern and I could make out a bed, a table, a chair and a wash basin. A figure stirred on the bed and I held my breath. As my eyes became accustomed to the light I could see that the figure on the bed was that of a man. But what a man! He must have weighed thirty stones at least. His monstrous bulk half overlapped the wooden sides of the bed and his mountain of a stomach rose and fell like a sleeping hippopotamus.

My gaze moved to the table and I saw that it was piled high

with dishes and bowls. Some were empty but most were heaped with what looked like cold porridge.

Puzzled, I moved to the next cell and looked through the grille. It was hung with cobwebs and filth and in the corner sat an old dishevelled man. He was awake, and when he saw my face at the door he sprang up and ran towards me. His body was a mass of sores and tiny wounds, and his face was grey and glistening.

'Who *are* you?' he cried, but it was not the voice of madness. 'What are you doing here?'

As I opened my mouth to speak I was startled by the shrill ringing of a bell. The old man's face immediately lost all expression, in fact it 'died' and the eyes took on that now familiar glazed stare. He scampered back to his corner and lit a cigarette with amazing swiftness. Then, to my disgust, began to burn his flesh by pressing the tip along his forearm, shoulder and neck. When the cigarette went out he re-lit it and continued the process.

From the first cell came a groan and a crash and I stepped back to see what was happening. The fat man had dragged himself off the bed and was seated at the table. To say that he was eating would have been inaccurate. He was gorging himself on the porridge like a starving animal. When a bowl was empty he pushed it aside and plunged into another. I noticed a small serving hatch from which I imagined further supplies might emerge. His consumption was prodigious, he must have consumed seven or eight pounds of the porridge in less than sixty seconds.

The bell rang again, sharply, and he stopped eating and at once rolled on to the floor. It was a painful sight to see him dragging his gigantic carcase back towards the bed. Back in the second cell the old man had extinguished his cigarette and was sitting in the corner again, his arm wet with fresh blood.

His eyes met mine and they were 'alive' again. 'Who the devil are you?' he said. 'Nobody's allowed down here.' Then he grimaced in pain and clutched his arm.

'I am a friend,' I said, through the grille. 'A journalist. I should like to help you.'

The old man shrugged an emaciated shoulder. 'Help me?' he said, 'you are mad monsieur.'

'No listen,' I insisted, 'I have influence - don't despair -'

The old man threw back his head and laughed and his neck stretched like a stringy chicken.

'D'yer hear that Gaston,' he cried aloud, 'this fellow wants to help us.' From the adjoining cell came a throaty, belching laugh. It rose to a crescendo and then transformed itself into a ferocious bout of coughing. I moved back to the fat man's cell and saw him sitting on the bed with his head in his hands. His face was as round and as red as a polished apple and the great pouches of flesh under his eyes had reduced them to grotesque slits.

Angrily I banged on the grille with my fist. 'What's the matter with you?' I shouted, 'don't you want to be helped?'

My reply was another gale of laughter, punctuated with coughing and spitting and the banging of furniture. Totally baffled now I turned away and began to walk towards the steps that led from the cellar. My heart faltered in its rhythm when I saw Count Von Beck standing there, cool and elegant in a dinner suit, a glass of champagne in his right hand.

'Ungrateful wretches aren't they?' said the Count, smiling. 'But then the world is an ungrateful place is it not Mr McAlpine?'

I took a step towards him, trying to contain my anger. 'What in hell's name are you up to Von Beck?' I demanded.

'I might ask the same of you,' he replied, 'I don't recall inviting you to wander freely in my cellars.'

'I'll bet you don't,' I said, 'and I can see why. Are these two poor devils volunteers as well?'

The Count drained his glass and tossed it theatrically over his shoulder where it smashed against the stone wall. 'No, not volunteers exactly, Mr McAlpine. Volunteers are very hard to find for the Pavlovian section.'

'The what?' I said frowning.

'Oh come, come, Mr McAlpine. You recall Pavlov's experiments with dogs – every time he fed them he rang a bell – eventually the bell became so linked in their minds with food that when they heard it ring they began to salivate. Here, however, we are experimenting with auto-suggestion – my two patients are not *permanently* hypnotized – like the others upstairs, they just cannot help *obeying* the bell when it rings. If I had it ring too many times in a day Gaston would *die* of gluttony and Henri would kill himself. A fascinating study are they not?'

'But they are prisoners,' I cried. 'This is monstrous.'

The Count shook his head. 'Not prisoners, Mr McAlpine, fugitives! Both of them. They are both wanted by the police for a series of crimes that could result in life imprisonment. They are desperate men – but in return for their cooperation I offer them freedom in – say – a year from now. I have contacts in Tangiers, forged passports, they can begin a new life.'

'If they live that long,' I said, horrified.

The Count shrugged, 'A hazard I grant you, but then any one of us might be run down by a tram – life is a game of chance.'

I turned back and looked into the fat man's cell, he had crawled on to his wooden bed and lay there like a stranded whale.

'Count Von Beck,' I said, facing him. 'I have seen enough. No further purpose could be served by my staying in your house a moment longer. Please instruct your butler to bring my bags down, I shall be leaving immediately.'

The Count stopped smiling and an expression of the utmost malevolence clouded his features. For the first time since I had met him, I felt the force of his eyes boring into mine. The effect was almost physical, like hot splinters being driven against the back of my skull. Almost as quickly as it had vanished, his smile reappeared and the hideous moment passed.

'I find moral outrage extremely boring Mr McAlpine – but this is a free country, you are entitled to indulge in it if you wish. As for leaving, that is up to you of course. I would only

point out that reaching the village in this storm would be subjecting yourself to unnecessary discomfort. At best you would have to take overnight lodgings and proceed in the morning.'

'Then that is exactly what I shall do,' I replied. 'My bags if you please Count, my mind is made up.'

He turned and walked towards the stairs. 'You are an impulsive fellow Mr McAlpine and, dare I say it, not a little foolish. However that is your affair. My coachman will be ready to drive you to the village in five minutes. Goodbye Mr McAlpine.' And he was gone, vanishing up the stairs with surprising swiftness. I followed but when I reached the great hall he was nowhere to be seen.

The butler brought my two valises downstairs and dropped them, rather pointedly, at my feet. Then with a baleful glance he strode away across the flagstones and disappeared through one of the doors.

My anger had cooled a little now, and I waited hoping to catch another glimpse of Sheeba. Whatever else transpired I was determined to bring hope to the unfortunate wretches who had, perhaps unwittingly, fallen under the influence of Count Von Beck.

The story that I would tell the world was already half formed in my mind – indeed I resolved to speak with my editor in London as soon as I could locate a telephone and ask him to prepare the front page for a Stew McAlpine exclusive.

The crunch of gravel outside announced the arrival of the carriage, and, with a last long look at the deserted great hall I opened the door and stepped outside into the driving rain.

The journey through the appalling storm was exceedingly uncomfortable but otherwise without incident.

I was deposited, an hour later, in a small village at the foot of the mountain where the fury of the elements was not so intense. I found lodgings quite easily and after a simple but tasty supper I inquired about a telephone. Alas, the proprietor of the inn explained, the storm had brought down the cables and repair was impossible until morning. Vaguely disgruntled I went to bed and fell into a dreamless sleep.

The next morning was fresh and clear, but the prospect of telephoning London still seemed hopelessly bleak. It was apparent that my story would have to wait until I reached my home in France.

Several hours later, after a motor coach journey from Montreux to Geneva and a scheduled flight from Geneva to the South of France I was seated in front of my Olivetti with a clean sheet of paper, a large whisky and freshly lit cigar.

The story of Chateau Napoule was about to commence.

I flexed my fingers and placed them on the keyboard, and then a very curious thing happened. I found that I simply could not type a word. My hands lay on that typewriter like dead fish – and I could not even muster the strength to depress one key. It was an unpleasant sensation and I stood up quickly, knocking over my drink. Suddenly, I knew I must phone London and speak to my editor. The story would have to be ghosted, if necessary, over my byline, but the paper must get the awful truth and they must get it immediately. As I moved my hands away from the typewriter life returned to them, and almost crying out with relief I seized the telephone. Instead of obeying my impulse to lift the receiver to my ear however, my hands gripped the instrument like a truncheon and began to systematically smash it against the wall. I tried to shout for help but no sound would come. All the while my hands thrashed the telephone until it was a pile of fragments and uprooted wires on my desk. I was very frightened by now and my whole body was trembling.

My servant was in the garden and I knew that if he saw me in this condition he would send for a doctor immediately. I clung to this thought, tenaciously, like a drowning man. I started to walk towards the window so that I might attract his attention – but my legs took me in the opposite direction and I found myself in the bathroom.

My hands reached up to the small cabinet and opened it. Then, with great precision, they selected a cut-throat razor from my leather case. What happened next was nightmarish and terrifying – I systematically cut both my wrists in turn, right down to the bone.

It was very lucky indeed that my servant found me when he did. They say I was within an ace of death. They brought me here to this pleasant, gentle place, and they have treated me so well for the past few weeks, or is it months?

My wrists have healed and now only show a pair of neat, whitish scars.

I am allowed a typewriter here too, and they seem genuinely amused by what I write. Take this piece for example -- they keep telling me I'm to be moved to another place, in Switzerland, for some very special treatment. The man in charge at this place is supposed to be quite remarkable. I've forgotten his name now but when they told me what it was, it did sound vaguely familiar.

Elleston Trevor

They're making a mistake

They're making a mistake. I keep telling them, but they just look at me and nod their heads and say yes, we know we're making a mistake.

Like I had to be humoured or something.

Damn their eyes, they won't listen, won't believe me, *damn* their eyes.

So now I'll be going to see Beresford again.

Beresford is the big man with the good handshake who sees them in and sees them out, like he saw *me* in and saw *me* out. I wasn't in there three months but they cured me. I know. And Beresford knew. I remember the way he shook my fist that day.

That day. What day? Yesterday. Hell, it seems a year ago. But I remember the way he shook my fist; he looked at me straight, man to man. Because I was a man again, not the wreck who'd gone in, three months before.

Well, Beresford said, so you're leaving us. How does that feel? he said.

I said I felt – but I couldn't think of the right word.

A million dollars I felt like. Or I felt like I was God. But these expressions didn't really express it and one was blasphemous anyway. At last I got the right word for Beresford and I looked him back in the eyes and my chest was sticking out a mile and there was air under my feet.

I feel *myself* again, I said. He nodded. He knew what I meant. He'd seen my type before. He knew I'd got *back*. Found myself.

These were my eyes and they could look straight and square into his. These were my hands and they were steady, they were

strong. This was my heart and it was light. This was my mind and it was clear.

This man was myself.

So there isn't any doubt they cured me. You don't get *that* feeling unless you're You again.

I left Beresford's office with a swing to my step and a glow in my mind. Standing outside, looking at the street for the first time in months, I was so filled with the glory of my sanity that I just stood there and looked.

It was evening. The sun had been down an hour, but up there were stars, way up there, so many and so bright that they were a mist of white. I could have cried out to see them up there, pure and clean and silent.

Their reflection was down here in the street. The stars down here were neon and some of them were spelling out advertisements: but they were pretty and they were all the glories of a rainbow. The street-cars were going by as I stood there looking, and they were taking people home or out or just about. People, me. I was one of *them* again.

I said to myself I'd walk home.

I had a room overlooking a side-street where a hot-dog stand was lit up every evening. For three months the room had been empty but now I was going back. There was a bed and a window and an armchair. Heaven was hellishly simple to me as I walked under the lamps.

And as I strolled so fancy-free, my head in the air, my eyes on the sky, I felt I must do something. This ecstasy was too much, I must do something to pay a little of it back, somehow. Must help somebody who needed help. Find a man who was looking for a hand, and give him a grip.

I must do this before I got home. I couldn't sit in that armchair with a book, couldn't lean from the window to watch the up-town lights, couldn't feel the cool benison of the sheets of that bed, until I'd done this thing.

It wasn't easy. Wasn't easy, walking like the Lord looking for a blind man to make him see.

Last night, that must have been.

Last night I walked through the town. I must have walked for hours. I didn't stop off anywhere to eat. I wasn't hungry. My feet didn't get tired because I was walking on air. My mind didn't get tired because I was looking for something and looking forward to something, to this thing I was going to do.

In a place this size, I thought, there must be someone. Well, I thought, I'll find them, if I walk all night. I almost did, too.

It was past midnight when I saw him. But he wasn't a man; she was a girl.

Like a ghost she came out of a late open café and walked down the street, looking sometimes at the cars that went by, their motors echoing among the bleak buildings.

I was following her now. Because I'd caught a glimpse of her face as she'd come out of the bright café-lights: and there was something in her face that told me I'd found the one I needed.

Her face had been pale under the lamps; and though her eyes were dry I felt there was something she needed, some sort of help. She was lovely too.

I was following her now.

When there was a distance between us I could see her white swagger-coat as she walked. Its brightness leapt under the lamps, died in the shadows.

When we were close, and once I was so close I could have talked to her, I heard she was humming a slow tune; and this told me how sad she was, humming a slow tune so sadly.

Once or twice I made up my mind to level up with her. I knew how I'd begin. I'd just say pardon me, but I think you're in some kind of trouble aren't you?

She'd turn and look at me then and her eyes would widen, surprised.

'How did you know?' she'd ask me. I'd smile. Tonight I was God and God knew everything.

Then she'd tell me the trouble. About the jam she was in. Money. Or her boy run out on her, or something like that. Whatever it was, I'd work like blazes to square it up.

Once or twice, then, I nearly made up my mind to draw up

on her and really go to work. But there was a queer curiosity within me and I held back, to see where she would go. Maybe, if I knew where she was heading, I'd realize what kind of spot she was in. Then I wouldn't even have to ask her.

Down the main street she walked, I walked, we walked, with a ceiling of stars and a breeze in the trees – when she turned up the avenue that led to the river.

And again, as she turned the corner, I heard that slow, sad snatch of a tune from her lips; and I knew a warm thrill within me, because of all the people in this great city, I was the one who could help this lonely kid, and bring a gay tune to her lips.

The avenue was an arcade of whispers, as the leaves moved and delicately touched when the breeze played from the river. And when the trees were gone, there was the bridge, a double chain of lights curving upward across the water.

A patrolman nodded to her, to my girl, as she passed him. He was standing there, his hand behind him, and I heard the faint words, goodnight Miss.

Goodnight Officer, I heard her call as she went on her way to the bridge. There was courage in that voice; I heard it there. She wasn't wearing her misery on her sleeve. She was alone, but she could get by. Goodnight Officer she'd said, with courage in her voice.

He looked at me when I came abreast.

I wondered if he'd say –

Sure he did. Goodnight, he said.

Goodnight Officer I said; my words echoed the girl's, and my footsteps were the echoes of hers. The sidewalk rose now, gently, crossing the water.

She was on the brow, the middle, now. I saw the flash of her coat as she walked, the swing of her dark brown hair.

And now I saw her stop.

So now I knew.

And must hurry.

My steps quickened. I felt I was running, fleet along the airy path, winged for a while. But in reality I was just walking quick, catching up with her.

She was standing, her hands in the pockets of her coat. Gazing over the low balustrade, her eyes on the stars in the river.

The slow, sad tune was on her lips; but it broke as I came close. God was in me now. I felt his guidance. He had led me here; this was the thing I could do. Now was the chance to give a little back to God, after what he'd done for me.

I knew I smiled when I spoke to her.

I said: no, don't do it, kid. You haven't lost everything. I can help you. That's why I'm here.

But she drew back, staring at me, at my eyes, and I felt a panic lick along my veins: even now I might fail, might be too late. Even now she might escape me and do the thing she sought, down there where the river's dark hair waved in sinuous and star-clipped tresses, weaving a deep-woven web.

So I put out my hand and held her arm, gently.

No, I said, that isn't the way, child –

Let me go! she said, frightened.

I thought: Poor kid.

I held her as she struggled. God's strength was in my hands and he was helping me.

She was crying out, now: *Let me go!*

She was strong, the poor kid. She struggled hard; but I had the strength of two. Of ten. Because of God. Of a million, then.

That was why she was so powerless.

As we struggled she screamed and I heard a shout from the distance down the bridge. The patrolman had heard, and I felt relief, because she was fighting me so hard now, leaning her back against the low balustrade, that I was afraid I'd lose her at the last minute if the patrolman didn't come to help me.

Her cry was low, now; she sobbed agony from her heart, *let me go, for God's sake have pity, let me go.*

But even as I heard the running steps of the policeman she began struggling again, and with a violent wrench she seemed to lift herself on to the balustrade.

I made a last effort, my mind dulled by despair.

But there was the flash of her white swagger-coat as she went down. I heard the splash, after a moment's terrible silence.

She fell as a white flower, turning, a single bloom descending from the midnight bough of the bridge to the river's sleeping lake. All heaven swirled in the petalled splendour of her small white blossom for a timeless breath.

But I had failed.

Even as I realized I had failed, I had a blackout, sudden.

The next thing I can remember was lying on a bench in the police office where they took me, with a great pain that swelled like a scarlet sunburst on my head.

They told me the patrolman had used his night-stick on me before he'd dived over the balustrade. He'd brought the girl out and she was all right, they told me. So the patrolman had done a swell job. I could have helped him. Another half-minute and I should have been diving over there, too, to save her.

But they say he clubbed me because he'd seen me throw her over, down into the river. That's why he used his night-stick, they say. Being alone, you see, and thinking I'd tried to kill the poor child, he'd had to look after both of us. So he knocked me cold so I couldn't make a getaway, while he saved the girl.

And though of course he was wrong about me, I appreciate he did the only thing he could have done, thinking the things he did.

I asked them if I could go to see the girl, when I'd got the senses back in my head where this big crimson pain blazed. But they said no, you stay right where you are, pal. You lie easy now, they said.

There's a patrol-car coming to pick me up. I know that because I heard them on the phone.

I believe they still imagine I was trying to kill that poor kid, instead of trying to save her like I was.

But they're making a mistake. I keep telling them, but they just look at me and nod their heads and say yes, we know we're making a mistake.

Like I had to be humoured, or something.

Barbara J. Eyre

Poor Rosie

When Ralph went away they all said I wouldn't be able to cope. But I have. Else how would I have ended up at this smart hotel where I don't have to do anything for myself? They wanted me to go back to Hilda's house but I wouldn't. I'd finished with that life. I was grown-up now and could look after myself.

That was the trouble with Hilda. She would never let me grow up. Not since Mother went away and there was all that trouble. But it wasn't my fault. And I had loved my mother, whatever the others might have said. And they fetched that doctor, but I don't know why. I wasn't ill. In fact, I don't think he was a doctor at all. All he did was talk.

About Mother, and Hilda, and my other little sister who had gone away when she was only three. I had been playing with her. I remember it distinctly. We were in the bedroom and she had opened the window and was looking out to the concrete yard below. And she wouldn't let me have that Dutch doll I liked so much. One minute she was there, the next she was not, and I heard an awful scream that sounded like Mother. I looked out of the window and Mother was just standing there in the yard, looking up at me.

They took little Rosie away, but she never came back again. So I had her Dutch doll and I soon forgot her. That is, until that doctor came after Mother's accident, and made me remember it. They'd all said Rosie couldn't reach the window catch, they said I must have done it because I was three years older and taller. And they wouldn't believe me when I told them she'd climbed on a chair.

Then, when I was fourteen, my mother had lost her footing on the landing and had fallen downstairs. That wasn't too bad, but she hit her head on Hilda's sewing machine, and fractured her skull. So it was Hilda's fault really. I don't know what made her lose her balance, we were only talking about me going to the fair, and she suddenly seemed to trip. I hadn't really meant her any harm, I did love her really, although she loved Hilda and Rosie lots more than me, but she did say I was too young to go to the fair with Peter Brindley, and I had every intention of going. If I didn't he would take that girl from the fish-and-chip shop.

They took Mother to the hospital, but she didn't come home. And then they brought that funny doctor to see me. But he asked such silly questions. So I started to give him silly answers and he seemed to like that until he found out I was making fun of him. Eventually he stopped coming, and they let me go back to school again.

Mother needn't have gone away. Peter Brindley took the fish-and-chip shop girl to the fair anyway.

After that, I was very popular with the other girls at school. I had been in the newspapers. But school was boring. There was no excitement at all and I was glad when I left and started work at the button factory. But that became boring, too. Although we did have a bit of excitement when my best friend Beryl put her hand under a machine and lost two fingers. It was nothing really terrible, but she kept saying I had done it. And I was her best friend! Anyway, a few days later they asked me to leave. I thought it was a bit mean of them, but I was glad anyway. And I hoped they'd all put their hands under the machines.

So I took a job as a clerk in an office, and that was better. There were more prospects, and I could see myself as a secretary like Madge Hawkins. And when she fell down the cellar steps, going to the basement for something, and broke her thigh, I felt sure they would give me her job. But they gave it to one of the shorthand-typists instead, and I was still the filing clerk. What made it worse, she told everyone she had been

pushed. But who would push her? She was such a nice girl. I couldn't understand her saying that.

Then Ralph came. They said he was the son of the managing director or something, and wouldn't be interested in a mere filing clerk. But I had made up my mind. And I got him all right, and it was no time at all before we were making arrangements for the wedding.

Hilda didn't seem at all happy. She couldn't get it into her head that I was grown-up. I was eighteen and capable of marrying and having a family. When I told her this she was most upset. There was no need for jealousy, I told her. She was still young enough to have children herself. She was only twenty-five. And I was her sister, not her daughter. But that upset her more than ever.

Ralph and I honeymooned in Paris. Oh, it was so romantic! And then we came back to England, to the little flat Ralph had rented. I didn't go back to work but stayed at home. I used to go to the park, and the library, and shopping expeditions to get nice things for the flat. I like vases so I bought lots and lots of pretty ones, and put them everywhere in the flat. Mind you, Ralph didn't always agree with what I did. He said I was obsessed with vases and spent all his money on them – but that wasn't true. So we started to have rows because he could never see my point of view.

Then I found I was having a baby, so I stayed in bed a lot. Ralph said I ought to get up and do some housework, but I told him it was too risky. So we had another row, which was mean of him with me being in my condition, but he eventually saw sense and made himself a meal out of a tin.

Then one day he said he was going out. Going out! Leaving me alone in the flat when it was dark! Anything could happen. Well, he did go out, and he didn't come back and I was alone in my bed all night. I rang Hilda the next morning, just to tell her, and she burst into tears. But she came round to see me, and fetched the doctor to me again. I told her I wasn't ill, but the baby was due in three months. Perhaps she was worried about that.

I don't know where Ralph went but he never wrote to me. The doctor talked about hospital care, but I wouldn't go. I kept telling them I wasn't ill. He gave me some tablets but I didn't take them. Why should I?

Then the baby arrived. I wouldn't want to go through that again. I shall never forget that horrible Sister who kept shouting at me when I was only doing my best. I had to pull her hair to make her shut up. The baby was a girl. And she looked so much like little Rosie that I had to call her Rosie. I thought Hilda would like that, but she got really upset and left without tasting the nice grapes she'd brought me.

The Sister on the ward wanted me to spend a few days with Hilda when I left the hospital but I wouldn't. And I got very annoyed with her and called her a rude name. It was her own fault. They just won't let me grow up. So I took a taxi back to my flat, and for the rest of the day I just sat and looked at Rosie. She was so pretty, just like a doll I had years ago.

But she cried such a lot, and wouldn't shut up when I told her to, so in the end I made up a bottle of milk just as they'd shown me in the hospital, and that kept her quiet for a bit. Then I changed her nappy because she smelled, and put her nice and comfy in her carrycot by the fire.

Hilda came round the next day and started bossing me about and shouting at me because the flat was in a mess. But I told her I hadn't noticed. And Rosie was crying again so I gave Hilda the bottle to feed her while I moved all the magazines off the sofa. I hadn't realized there were so many, and I couldn't remember reading them.

And I told Hilda how naughty Rosie had been, waking me up in the middle of the night. But Hilda didn't seem to be listening. She was hugging Rosie and crooning to her. She *was* jealous! I could see it now! So I grabbed Rosie, and told Hilda she'd better go and she needn't come back. I could manage Rosie all right myself. I didn't need her around.

I had to smack Rosie that night when she woke me up at three o'clock. I need my sleep, I told her, but she just wouldn't

shut up. I wish she was as well-behaved as my doll, Jennifer. Well, she'll just have to learn, won't she?

The next day I couldn't find any clean nappies anywhere, so I had to scold Rosie for dirtying them all. They were in a big pile in the corner of the bathroom, making an awful smell. I supposed I ought to throw them out, but I couldn't bring myself to touch them. And all those flies crawling over them. Ugh!

So I wrapped Rosie up, put her in her pram, and went down to the chemists. The girl was very helpful, and sold me some paper things called 'disposables'. I wouldn't have to wash them. I thought that was a very good idea, and I told the girl I was teaching Rosie not to use nappies. She gave me such a funny look. Perhaps she wasn't such a nice girl after all.

The day after that a tall, thin lady came to see me. I didn't want to let her in. I was sure Hilda had sent her to take Rosie away. But she said she was a health something or other and had to see all the new babies so I let her in and she sat on the sofa and asked all sorts of funny questions. Then she asked if she could see Rosie, but I said no. She had just gone to sleep, I said. I didn't want her disturbed.

She gave me a funny look and said she'd come again next week. I said that was all right, she didn't have to put herself out. But she said it was her job, and she'd come anyway.

That night I had a most peculiar dream. I dreamed I got out of bed and gave Rosie her bottle because she was crying. I wish she'd learn to behave like Jennifer. But she sicked some of it up again so I smacked her. That was not nice, I told her. And I put her back in her cot, on that lovely soft pillow off my bed. And I put her on her tummy. She likes to sleep on her tummy. And then I got back into bed. Wasn't it a strange dream? I do have a lot of odd dreams.

Next morning when I woke up she was still asleep, so I made a cup of coffee. Then I took her cot into the lounge by the fire and I made her a bottle. And when I picked her up I found she'd been sick on that lovely soft pillow, and that made me

angry. But she didn't cry at all, even when I smacked her, and she just let the milk dribble out of her mouth. I thought perhaps she was going to be ill, because she was very white, but she wasn't crying or coughing or anything. So I turned the pillow over and put her back in the cot.

She wouldn't have her bottle at all that day, so I stopped making them. And even though her cot was next to the fire, she was icy cold. But she didn't cry at all, and I thought, isn't she clever? She's being as good as Jennifer now. And not one wet nappy all day. I was very pleased with her.

I couldn't stand the smell in the bathroom so I kept the door shut all the time. And Rosie was so good, not a sound out of her. A few days later I thought the flat was smelling rather stuffy, and I decided we'd go to the shops. So I put Rosie in her best pink bonnet and wrapped her up in lots of blankets because she was so cold, and covered her up in her pram.

I'd heard such a lot about baby-snatching, so I wouldn't leave the pram outside. I took it inside the supermarket with me. I got some funny looks but I didn't care. No one was going to take my Rosie. When I got to the check-out there was a queue. Then the other women started turning round and sniffing and saying, What a funny smell! I don't know why they kept looking at me, Rosie didn't have dirty nappies any more, she was so good. And she hadn't been sick since that morning after the dream. I could see the women were trying to peep inside the pram but I pulled up the covers. And it was true, there was a strange, sickly-sweet smell coming from somewhere. One lady said, What a pretty bonnet. Is it a girl? But they were still sniffing and looking at each other. I was glad to get outside.

That afternoon the thin lady came back. I told her I was all right, but she pushed straight past me and went into the lounge. I told her how good Rosie was, how she never cried now, not even at night. She asked if she could have a quick look, and I saw her wrinkling her nose. I assured her Rosie didn't have a dirty nappy, but she just went ahead over to the cot, so I had to let her.

She pulled back the covers and let out the most awful cry. So cold, she was saying, over and over again. Oh, my God, and things like that. I tried to explain how I always wrapped Rosie up to make her warm, but she sort of staggered over to the telephone and rang someone, and her voice, well, she could hardly speak, I don't know why. Rosie was very cold so I covered her up again. Then lots of people came to the flat, and the thin lady was crying, and they told me Rosie had to go away because she was so cold. I told them she wasn't ill, but they wouldn't listen.

I quite like this hotel they brought me to, and the other guests are very nice but a bit strange sometimes. The food is good, and the beds are comfortable, but I wish they'd hurry up and send Rosie back to me. She must be pining. Poor Rosie.

Alex White

To Fatima

The first time he'd seen something being killed, was when he was three years old, and even then it had given him a kick.

His mother had opened the linen cupboard, slammed it shut with a curse, and called out, 'Charlie! Charlie, come here! That damned cat of Susan's has had kittens again. They're in the linen cupboard. For God's sake drown the lot of them.'

Susan, heartbroken, had beseeched her parents to spare the kittens' lives, but Charlie had agreed to his wife's command, and for good measure had told Susan that if he heard one more whimper from her, Agatha, the cat, would be drowned too. So, sobbing silently, Susan had hidden herself in her room, and Charlie and James had marched down to the water butt, at the end of the garden; Charlie swinging a plastic yellow rubbish bucket, which contained the five wretched kittens.

One by one they were dropped into the butt. They were mewling and crawling perkily over one another in the bucket. In the water they died almost at once. Charlie gave them a threefold ducking, then chucked the dead bodies back into the bucket, and walked to the incinerator, where he threw them into the ever-glowing fire, which immediately hissed furiously as it received the sodden corpses. Charlie showed no emotion, James jumped up and down in ecstasy, hugging himself, and crowing with delight.

The next time, it was James who did the killing – squashing flies on the kitchen window, catapulting sparrows and neighbouring cats, catching butterflies and squeezing their heads to kill them, and later the more sophisticated heights of baiting traps for mice, catching squirrels and setting their tails alight,

putting down rat poison, and finally wringing the necks of chickens, shooting stray dogs, trapping and shooting rabbits, and shooting a marauding fox. His parents were proud of him. He was a help on the farm.

His activities were sadly curtailed at school, though he managed to collect specimens for nature class at the village school, and for biology lessons at his Grammar School. In the holidays he learned how to kill the farm pigs.

His ambition was to work at the nearby slaughter-house when he grew up, but he was a clever boy, and his work earned him a place at Sussex University, where his talents were guided exclusively into intellectual channels. He enjoyed being a student though he joined no political party and became rather a loner. He worked hard and his tutors were pleased with him.

His first murder happened almost by accident. He'd been spending the weekend in London with a friend and, returning by himself to the friend's flat from a party, he'd travelled by underground where, for the first time in his life, he'd witnessed a mugging. For some reason this made him blazingly angry. He had a pronounced colour prejudice, and perhaps it was the fact that the two youths who did the mugging were Jamaican, that aroused his wrath to such a pitch. At any rate he decided on personal revenge, although he had never met the victim, an old man, obviously from the middle classes (not usually a recommendation from James's point of view) who had suffered a severe beating, and had to be taken from the scene by ambulance.

The two Jamaicans innocently watched the rescue, exclaiming their horror like everyone else, and were never for a moment suspected by anyone except James, who had clearly seen the whole affair, and immediately planned an unpleasant retribution.

The train which had carried the youths, James, and the old man, finally drew out of the station for its next destination. The ambulancemen, the police, and the gaping crowds all departed, and the station became deserted except for a couple of porters, a man and a woman, in conversation at the far end of the plat-

form, the two Jamaicans and James. This suited James perfectly.

He had no idea why he hadn't told the police what he had seen, and so achieved instant justice (at least of a kind) except that he had an inbred distaste for the police. But also the thought of what he had decided to attempt gave him an anticipatory pleasure that was so great, that once everyone had gone, he found the excitement was interfering with his breathing. He was gasping for air, and had an agonising constriction of the throat. With enormous effort he controlled himself. He forced himself to stop trembling, inhaled carefully and deeply, and just as carefully exhaled, then took his wallet out of his pocket, and took out six one pound notes. At once he could feel the eyes of the youths upon him. He walked slowly towards them, counting the notes with apparent absorption, though he could see out of the corner of his eye that the porters were still engrossed. Then, when he was within a couple of yards of the youths, and exactly beside the exit, he let one of the notes fall to the ground, near the edge of the platform. The youths closed in on him, and one of them put his foot on the money. Both had taken out flick-knives.

'See heah man,' drawled the taller of the two, 'Ah musta dropped mah money. Ain't Ah the luckiest fellah? An you jest picked up de rest from the flooah, din't you man? Well give. Hand that stuff raight over.'

James looked frightened. 'Don't be absurd,' he blustered. 'The money is mine. You know it is.'

'Give,' repeated the Jamaican, flatly.

'Christ!' gasped James. He looked beyond them, his face alive with terror, and neither of them could prevent themselves from turning round for a moment.

James hit the boy nearest to him, hard below the belt. The boy keeled over with a groan, and before he could straighten up, James shouldered him savagely on to the line. As he screamed out in terror, the second boy, seeing what had happened, also let out a yell. The porters began running towards them, but James dashed through the exit, bounded up the

moving staircase, and was out of their sight in a matter of moments. On the other side of the ticket barrier, he said, 'My God! You'll never believe what I've just seen! Two Jamaicans have just had a row with flick-knives, and one bastard has sent the other on to the electric line. Get the police. Quick!' He looked round to see if anyone had followed him, but no one was in sight, so in spite of the ticket collector's demands that he should stay, he dashed up the shallow steps, out into the street, and down the nearest turning. When he was certain he wasn't being pursued, he slowed down to a walk, and walked the entire way back to the friend's flat.

He felt marvellous! A sense of exhilaration and power possessed him. He sang with pure joy, and when he wasn't singing he was laughing out loud.

He fitted the key into the lock. The place was in darkness. Obviously his friend had gone to bed. He helped himself to a glass of milk from the fridge, then went to bed himself.

What a day! What a day! What a bloody wonderful day! At the party he'd met the prettiest girl he'd ever seen in his life, and had obtained her telephone number; and then, later, he'd killed a bloody black, and he knew he wouldn't get caught. Life had never been so perfect.

During the next few months he saw Monica often. She was the daughter of the branch manager of a huge chemical concern. She fell in love with him, and because she was very rich, and her father offered him a job in the firm when he'd finished at university, he married her. Also during those few months, the Jamaican came to trial for the murder of his friend, and was put away for a long stretch. All very satisfactory!

The honeymoon in the Caribbean was a great success, and when the happy couple returned, they bought a pleasant house in the Yorkshire countryside, and James commuted daily to Leeds.

To his surprise Monica's friends seemed to like him, and his life became comfortable and trouble-free. Two children, a boy and a girl were born within the next three years, and James joined a nearby shoot, which for the time being satisfied his

lust for killing. Monica was both sexy and a good housekeeper, which won his respect, and she also looked after the children extremely well. James had a few discreet love affairs, which pandered to his vanity, and he was so good at his job that he earned himself promotion.

Then came the shock of his life.

Monica left him.

There were no rows, no scenes; in fact there was no preparation for it at all, from James's point of view. Monica simply departed with the children, leaving a note on the drinks table in the drawing room. 'Please forgive me, darling,' she wrote. 'You must have seen what it's been like between me and Geoff. I've tried to fight it, but it's no good. Take care of yourself. I'll give you your divorce. Monica.' Just like that! But he hadn't seen what it was like between her and Geoff. He'd hardly even registered Geoff; in fact he even had difficulty in remembering Geoff's face.

His friends were kind, but they evidently weren't surprised, and this made him turn against them. He felt a fool and despised himself. Monica wrote once or twice and offered to bring the children to see him, which he refused. She also rang him from time to time, but he was too hurt and bewildered to wish to have any contact with her. 'Can't we be friends?' she asked.

'You have to trust friends,' he replied, and he put down the receiver.

The neighbourhood was slightly shocked at such an old-fashioned attitude, and he began to get fewer and fewer invitations to the local social functions. Even his cronies on the shoot began to act more coolly.

For the second time in his life he became a loner, though he didn't give up his girlfriends.

His father-in-law came to see him and suggested that perhaps another job might be good for him. He'd noticed a falling off in the standard of his work, he said, and suggested a change of scene. London, perhaps? Not with the same firm of course, but a job could be arranged at the same level of pay, and there would be a golden handshake, naturally. James accepted both.

London depressed him. He felt trapped and desperate. His one time flatmate had emigrated to Australia. His office colleagues were pleasant, but not particularly forthcoming, and he found that he now distrusted women to such an extent that he had a kind of paranoia about them. Except tarts. And tarts, though he used them, he hated even more than the rest.

He lived in a sort of limbo. He worked fanatically hard, and very successfully, and at night he either went straight home to his comfortable but featureless service flat near Knightsbridge, or frequented strip clubs and call girls.

He strangled the first of his victims six months after his arrival in London. She was a small dark-haired tart, with a white skin. She was very young and reminded him vaguely of Monica when he had first met her. He asked her why she had become a tart and she said quite simply that she liked the life. She also said that she was married and was conning her husband. He offered to drive her back home; took her on a detour via the Chelsea Embankment, strangled her in the car, and threw her body into the river. It was during the early hours of the morning, and though he had heard that the river police were always on guard, no one as far as he knew, saw the crime. He returned home, pleased and excited with what he had done. For several weeks afterwards he was on the alert, but no one seemed to connect him with the girl's death, and he more or less forgot about it.

The second girl he chose carefully. He had been so bored for some time that he almost felt that he was the victim of some obscure disease. He suddenly recalled his pleasure at the previous killing and decided to murder again. He thought that perhaps it might give him a momentary interest. It did more. The planning of the crime utterly absorbed him. He chose another very young tart, who also reminded him of Monica, and as she conveniently had no relatives or close friends, she was an ideal subject. He took longer over this killing, raped her afterwards in the back of the car, and actually watched the body as it sank out of sight in the water.

After that he committed murder with increasing frequency,

and life became a joy. The act of strangulation was to him, entirely satisfactory. He looked forward to the moment of death with intense excitement, and when it was accomplished he had a feeling of utter love for the girl he had killed. It was then that he preferred intercourse. When the time came for the disposal of the body however, all emotions except for his desire for self-preservation, left him, and he managed to find several interesting variants.

He met his fate at a business dinner.

It was a stag party, arranged by his boss, and he was placed between an Arab salesman and a Scottish bank manager. The bank manager was portly, middle-aged and boring. The Arab was extremely good-looking, well-educated and amusing. In spite of his colour prejudice, James liked the Arab, and when he was invited to his home for a night-cap, he accepted.

The Arab lived near Hyde Park, in an enormous, and sumptuously decorated penthouse. The woman, whom he introduced simply as Fatima, was the most beautiful creature James had ever set eyes on. Monica had been radiantly pretty. This girl was beautiful. She was also white-skinned, and dark-haired. Her eyes were immense, and a remarkable shade of green. Her figure was perfect, with a minute waist. Her hands were tiny, and her mouth was sensual. She swung her hips as she walked and James couldn't keep his eyes off her. She seemed equally attracted to him. It transpired that she was Ali's sister, and Ali seemed delighted that they got on so well.

Fatima agreed to go out with James the following evening, and for the first time James fell headlong in love. Nothing in his previous experience had prepared him for such overwhelming feelings; for such lust and hunger for her love-making, or for such misery in separation. She was all that he had ever dreamed of. Her sexual appetite was as insatiable as his, and for several weeks they lived on cloud nine. Then one day she told him that she wouldn't be seeing him again, as she was getting married in a month's time to the man her family had arranged for her.

In vain he begged and pleaded. She was adamant.

It was at this moment that he had a letter from Susan to say that his mother had died and that he was expected to attend the funeral.

He went home to the farm. After so many years' absence he found it squalid and unreal. Everything was unchanged in fact, but it was all quite different from how he had remembered it. The water butt where his father had drowned the kittens still stood at the end of the garden. The bushes and trees where he had catapulted the sparrows and squirrels, the kitchen where he had trapped the mice, the fields where he had baited the traps for rabbits, and had shot the fox, were all almost exactly as he had left them, and on the way there, he had passed the slaughterhouse, which had once been the zenith of his ambition.

His father was old, now; an unsmiling giant of a man, with yellow teeth. Susan was fat and complacent, and her husband and children were thin and nervous. His mother, laid out in the coffin and dressed in a white shroud, looked totally unlike the woman he remembered. Her white hair was long and surrounded a waxen sunken mask. Her eyelids had sunk, too, and the expression on her apparently elongated face was disapproving. Even so, James had a sudden feeling of lust for her. It was so urgent that he turned away licking his dry lips, and his father and brother-in-law nailed down the coffin lid.

All through the funeral service James worked out plans for revenging himself on Fatima, and by the time he returned to London he felt ready to put them into action. He telephoned her and asked her to come for one last meeting. 'I can't,' she said, 'I'm engaged to be married.'

'Meet me at Harrods, where you can pretend that you are going to do some shopping for the wedding, and I'll take you to a tiny pub I know in an enchanting picture postcard village. If the weather is fine, we'll go for a stroll in the bluebell woods nearby. You can't imagine how beautiful they are. You'll love the pub. The food is first class. After this I'll never pester you again, I swear it, and I promise I won't be a nuisance this time. Please Fatima. Just this once.'

She hesitated, then agreed, adding, 'I mustn't be seen, or it will be more than my life is worth.'

'And mine,' he thought, but he only said, 'I swear to that too.'

They met on a brilliant Spring morning. The trees were in early leaf. Dandelions starred the hedgerows and the new grass was emerald. Birds sang, the sun shone from a cloudless sky, and the air was soft and fragrant. Fatima, in an exquisite white mink coat over a figure-hugging silk frock, had never looked more ravishing.

They drove straight to the bluebell wood, and when she demurred, he laughed and said, 'Come on, town girl. It'll do you good. Your shoes haven't got high heels and we'll work up an appetite for lunch.'

They strolled hand in hand to a clearing, and the bluebells stretched out on all sides of them, as far as the eye could see. James put down the rug he was carrying and spread it out on the ground. 'Sit down for a moment,' he said. 'I've brought us a drink each. Orange juice for a good little Muslim girl, and gin for me.' She sat reluctantly and he could see that she was bored. He handed her a silver flask.

The cyanide worked at once.

When she was dead, he raped her, then battered her face with a log. He threw her body into a nearby thicket, hurling her handbag after it, and after trying to clear away all signs of their visit he returned to his car, and to London.

Ali rang him two days later to tell him that Fatima was missing. 'Have you seen her lately?' he asked.

'How could I have seen her?' demanded James. 'You know she refused to have anything more to do with me.'

Ali rang off.

There was no further development until another three weeks had gone by, when Ali rang again.

'They've found her.'

'Who!'

'The police.'

James's heart gave a jerk. 'You mean Fatima has been found?' His mouth was stiff.

'Yes.' Ali sounded impatient.

'Had she run away?'

'She was murdered.'

'My god! By whom?'

'They don't know. Yet.'

'How terrible!'

'Yes. May I come and see you?'

'What for?'

'I must talk to you about her.'

'There's nothing to say, Ali. I'm terribly sorry. You must be frightfully shocked, but Fatima left me flat when she decided to get engaged.'

'We've been friends. I must talk to her friends about her. I'm going out of my mind.'

James hesitated fractionally, then he said, 'OK. If that's the way of it. When?'

'Tonight? For a drink?'

'I'm busy tonight.' He wasn't. 'Say Friday.'

'Fine.'

The days dragged.

An instinct warned James that all was not well, but he could see no way of escape. Even if he eluded Ali this time he couldn't put him off for ever. Better get it over with. Chance his arm.

Punctually at six o'clock on Friday, the front door bell rang. Ali was outside with three other men.

'What goes on?' asked James. 'Who have we here?'

'Friends of mine,' replied Ali. 'May we come in? They don't drink, so we won't be abusing your hospitality.'

James didn't like it, but he had no option but to admit them all.

Ali made the introductions. 'Feisal, Saud, and Rhassa,' he said. 'Feisal, as you know, was Fatima's fiancé.'

For a horrifying moment, James found that his tongue was paralysed, but he recovered and said, 'We've never met, Mr

Feisal. Please accept my sincere sympathy.'

The Arabs were impeccably dressed in beautifully cut dark suits, and James felt clumsy and shabby beside them. Also increasingly nervous. They prowled round his drawing-room, examining everything wordlessly, before disposing themselves on the sofas and chairs. They reminded him of panthers.

'My friends drink orange juice, if you have some,' said Ali. 'I'll have whisky.' He spoke softly and, it seemed to James, menacingly.

'Yes, I have orange juice,' answered James, and he reached for the bottle from which he had mixed Fatima's last drink. He tried to stop his hands from shaking as he poured out the liquid.

To his dismay, he found that he had run out of gin for his own drink. He would have to join Ali in a whisky. He didn't like drinking whisky because it was the one drink that ever went to his head, and he had a feeling that tonight he would need to have all his wits about him. When everyone was supplied, he raised his glass, and said feebly, 'Cheers.'

'To Fatima,' replied the others, gravely, then they relapsed into silence.

There was a pause, which seemed to James to last a lifetime. Then Ali said calmly, 'You know that the police suspected you, don't you?' James's heart gave another lurch.

'Of what?' he asked, trying to sound equally calm.

'Of Fatima's murder.'

'Me - Why me?'

'Because she left you flat.'

'She had to.' He flicked a glance at Feisal.

'They questioned your secretary, but she gave you an unshakeable alibi.'

Good old Marjorie. She was in love with him. Just shows you what love can do! 'I told you, I haven't seen Fatima since she told me she was engaged to Feisal, here.'

'I called on Susan,' continued Ali, quietly.

'Susan?'

'Your sister.'

'Whatever for?'

'She told me that you'd been a sadistic little boy, which I found interesting. She said you used to pull the wings off flies, kill cats, set fire to squirrels' tails, and cut off frogs' legs, while the frogs were still alive. She said you enjoyed it.'

'Susan is a fool. We never got on.'

'I'm a sadist, too,' said Ali. 'I enjoy hurting people.'

James's head was beginning to reel and he realized that he had drunk too much. 'I must go,' he said, and he could hear that his speech was slurred. 'Got an appointment.'

'No, you won't go,' said Ali. 'Your appointment is with us.'

They stayed on in his flat for another hour, by which time James had thrown all caution to the winds, and was stupid with drink. They more or less carried him to the car, and back to Ali's penthouse. He was scared but all the fight had gone out of him. He wasn't prepared for the syringe. Three of them held him down while Feisal injected him.

He woke with a splitting headache to a nightmare world. He was boxed in a sort of crate, and all round him there was noise and movement. There were other crates, too, and in the semi-darkness he saw frightened eyes staring back at him. Where the devil was he?

With a pang of fear he realized that he was in the luggage hold of an aircraft. Where were they taking him?

His shoulders and legs crawled with cramp. His wrists, which were tied together, were brutally chafed, and he had a raging thirst. He called out, but no one heard him. He was sick. No one came near. After a few hours he lost consciousness again, and when he came to a second time, he was still cramped in the crate, but now he was sweating like a pig, and the stench from his vomit was almost insupportable. All motion had stopped, and he seemed to be in some sort of cellar. My God, it was hot. He felt suffocated, and called out again. Presently a door opened and Ali and Feisal came in. They held cologned handkerchiefs to their noses, and they were followed by two servants. One carried a whip. Ali gave orders in Arabic, and the servants opened the crate and manhandled James roughly to his feet.

'Where am I?' he demanded. He tried to sound belligerent, but his voice was a croak, and he could scarcely stand.

'In my country, in the basement of my house,' said Ali. 'And here I am a despotic ruler.'

'Why am I here? What do you want with me?'

'Revenge,' replied Ali. 'For Fatima. You will stay in this cellar for the rest of your life. You will be tied to that post there, and whenever I feel in the mood, I shall wreak my vengeance.'

'But I never did anything to Fatima!' protested James.

'You lie,' said Ali, coldly. He said something to the servant who was holding the whip, and the man gave it to him. The servant then stripped James and Ali brought the whip down over his shoulders. James cried out as he fell, and Ali kicked him savagely. 'Get up you bastard,' he said. 'No need to cry so soon. That was only the beginning. You will have plenty to cry about later. Some days you will starve. Some days you will be forcibly gorged. Some days you will be parched with thirst, and some days you will be forced to drink all day. You will be branded with hot irons. You will be packed in ice. You will be flogged whenever it amuses either Feisal or me, or any of our friends. We shall cut out your tongue, we shall cut off your toes. I myself will be happy when we make you suffer daily and hourly to the limit of your endurance, and beyond. You will live here as a thing, as a living monstrous sore, as an idiot if need be, and as nearly destroyed as a human being can be, while yet retaining your senses. People will come to stare at you in your degradation and misery. You will hardly ever sleep, and if it pleases them, these people too may torment you. Meanwhile we have excellent doctors who will see to it that you live out your appointed lifespan. You will be a memorial and a testimony to your murder of my sister. And now, no word of lying protest, or we shall find even more exquisite ways to revenge ourselves.' He turned to Feisal. 'To Fatima,' he said.

And they went out of the room.

James is there still. He has no hair, no fingers, two toes, a

broken nose and no teeth. His flesh is covered in weals and open sores. He has no possibility of escape, and he knows it. What's more his suffering has only begun.

And every evening, punctually at six, Ali and Feisal come to call. They are dressed immaculately, and they each have a glass of whisky in their hands. And every evening they raise their glasses in a toast.

'To Fatima,' they say.

Jack Shackleford

Thy intention turn . . .

'How long have you been with me now, Miss German? Almost a year, isn't it?'

Alexandra German smiled up at her employer, nodding her blonde head. 'Eleven months,' she said, 'almost to the very day. I started on July the seventh, last year.'

'Yes.' He stood beside her desk, his head on one side, looking down at her thoughtfully. His face was grave and she thought: 'He surely isn't going to give me the push? He couldn't be . . .'

'I know it's nearly time you were off,' he said, apologetically. 'But, I wondered if you could spare me a few minutes? There's something I want to discuss with you.'

'Of course, Mr Selby.' She rose at once and he beamed at her; her mind at rest – his manner hadn't been that of a man who was about to give his secretary a month's notice – she followed him into his room, notebook and pencil in hand. She had long ago ceased to think of this room as an 'office' – it was large, and comfortable almost to the point of being luxurious, a combination of drawing-room, study, library and museum. There was a long, deep couch (she smiled to herself as she recalled her initial misgivings about this, the first time she'd seen it), two massive, high-backed armchairs, a low, highly-polished coffee-table, and a modern, comprehensively-stocked drinks-cabinet. Deeply carpeted, the room also contained a big, heavy table with bulging, massive legs, which served as a desk or work-table, numerous glass-topped and glass-fronted show-cases containing countless small statues in every conceivable

stone or metal, and – everywhere, on shelves, in piles on the floor and on every flat surface – books.

‘It’s after five o’clock,’ he said. ‘I think we might have a drink, don’t you? Gin-and-tonic, isn’t it?’

Smiling her acceptance, she settled herself in the armchair which faced his work-table, and watched him as he prepared their drinks.

As she had remarked to her flatmate only the week before, Damon Selby was certainly the best – and the nicest, least unreasonable – person she had ever worked for; his ‘Girl Friday’, she was absolute mistress of the old-fashioned suite which overlooked Jermyn Street, and virtually her own boss – she could arrive when she liked, take her coffee and lunch breaks as and when she chose, and leave when she wanted to. As long as the work he gave her to do was properly done, he didn’t seem to mind at all how she organized herself. She typed his letters and his manuscripts and his notes, protected him against unexpected or importunate callers, and kept his files and diaries in order; occasionally he would ask her to work late, always giving her at least a full day’s notice, and there would usually be flowers, or chocolates, for her, on the morning following these infrequent occasions. As she had told her flatmate, a little smugly, working for Damon Selby was far more absorbing than the mindless routine of the typing pool in some oversized business office.

He wasn’t young, of course, but he was undeniably attractive, with his close-trimmed beard and his mane of white hair, which made him an interesting person to be seen with, on the occasions when he asked her out to lunch with him. He paid her well, he was unfailingly polite, he was – interesting.

‘I don’t know how you stand it,’ her flatmate, Dorothy, had said to her one evening, after Alexandra had described to her the contents of a lengthy passage she had been typing that afternoon. ‘All that stuff about naked rites, whipping, and all that – obscenity. It’s not natural, Alex. You shouldn’t be expected to –’

'It's folklore, that's all.'

'I think it's disgusting,' said Dorothy, who worked in a bank. 'He sounds a horrible old man. Philip would never let me work for someone who wrote about things like that.'

Damon Selby brought her drink to her, and seated himself, rather stiffly, in the other deep chair. She opened her notebook, but he shook his head at her, smiling, and she put it down.

'I've never asked you before – how do you like working for me?' He smiled again, leaning back. 'What an awful question to ask one's secretary . . . What I really mean is, are you happy here?'

'Oh, yes,' she said, without hesitation. 'You're – you've been very good to me.'

'Not in the least. *You've* been very good to *me*. You've looked after my small affairs quite splendidly. I can't tell you how much I've appreciated your efforts . . .'

At twenty-four, Alexandra considered herself sophisticated and quite worldly; she was embarrassed to realize that she was blushing. Damon Selby continued:

'So, I'm delighted that you're happy. One should be able to be happy in what one does, works at . . .' His voice tailed off, leaving the sentence incomplete; Alex realized that he was ill-at-ease, and thought, with sudden anxiety: 'Oh, my-God, suppose he wants to ask me to marry him . . .'

'You're a – a sensible girl,' her employer continued, not looking at her. With some alarm, she noticed that, while he usually drank only a little whisky with a great deal of soda or ginger-ale, he had made for himself what looked like a very large, neat whisky. 'I want to ask you a question. How much, exactly, do you know about my work? And what do you think of it?' Before she could answer, he went on: 'I must tell you this – before you came, I had another girl, a young woman of about your age, who came to me as a replacement for poor old Miss Hicks, who'd been with me for ages and ages . . . I gave her one of my – manuscripts, to type, and she made a start on it. Then, all of a sudden, she stormed in here, all red in the face, held my notes out at arm's length, over my head, and – tore them into little

pieces, while she informed me, quite quietly and in a very well-brought-up voice, that I was a "dirty old man", and a pervert, and that I had an unhealthy mind and should be locked up.' He shuddered, looking at Alex quizzically. 'Another one - she was younger, I believe, and came to me from one of those staff agencies - suggested that I should be ashamed of myself, giving a girl things "like that" to type, and that if I thought she was excited by them - "turned on", was the phrase, I believe - then I was madder than she thought, and - *and* that she would be telling the agency people not to send anyone else . . . I tried to explain, of course, but -' He shrugged, expressively. 'So much, I thought, for the permissive society. The point I'm trying to make is, you've never complained, or told me that I'm either deranged or perverted, so you must be different. And, believe me, I'm grateful for that . . .'

'You explained to me, about your work,' Alex said. 'When I applied for the job.'

'Yes,' Selby said slowly, 'I expect I did . . . Self-preservation, you see.' Abruptly, he leaned forward in his chair. 'I'll try to get to the point. Do you, by any chance, recall an article I wrote about two months ago, an article for the *Occult Survey*?'

'Was that the one about the work of a man called Starling? That's the only one I remember.'

'You've a very good memory. Yes, that's the one. You'll remember, I expect, that it wasn't exactly complimentary, shall we say?'

She smiled. 'You said, among other things, that he was an exhibitionist, a charlatan, and a cheap fraud who chased publicity. At all costs. Yes, I remember.'

Damon Selby took a deep breath. He said:

'It seems that I - underestimated Mr Starling.'

'You mean he isn't a - he's not all those things you said he was?'

'He may very well be all those things, and many more besides. But - it seems that I was much mistaken in one assumption that I made, the assumption that he possesses no real knowledge, no *real* power. Apparently, he is as powerful as he thinks

he is. As I am learning . . .’ Seeing Alexandra’s puzzled expression, he added: ‘Let me try to explain. Robert Starling started out, some years ago, as a quite ordinary witch.’ He smiled, nodding his head. ‘Oh, yes, there really *are* witches, as you must know from some of my letters and other writings. As a matter of fact, you yourself have met several, in your capacity as my – receptionist. Most of them are quite ordinary, actually. Many of them do remarkable things, have remarkable powers. The great majority of them do good, you understand – don’t fall into the trap of confusing the white witch with the black magician, there are superficial similarities but their intentions and their methods are very different. Some merely play at it, of course, and playing can sometimes be dangerous – even if only to themselves. All this is just “background information”, let’s say . . . Harmless or powerful, adepts or novices, however it may be, most of them are reticent about themselves and their activities – that is the nature of their belief, the most basic requirement of their calling. There is a man who will perform rites – for a suitable fee – in other people’s homes, as a sort of cabaret act for parties, or even on the stages of local cinemas and theatres – but one would never take such a man seriously. He is, at best, a harmless pretender, at worst a fool. But, this man Starling – he is a very different kettle of fish. He chose to reveal the deepest secrets, to – to popularize his craft, to make a vulgar show of his power. He chose to – *alter* some of the rituals, to apply them in ways that were wrong, terribly wrong. Others chose to ignore him, but I –’ He shook his head. ‘When he stated that he was the new Aleister Crowley, the new Ipsissimus, the modern “Great Beast” . . . It was too much. I expressed my disgust – as you saw, in my article. He took my expressions of revulsion, it seems, as a challenge. And, now, he has taken – certain steps.’

‘Do you mean that he’s threatened you? What can he do?’

‘That is what I asked myself – “what can he do?” I did not believe, for one moment, that he possessed the sort of power to – to harm me. He has, however, promised to kill me.’ Seeing her shocked and incredulous expression, he went on, quickly:

'Not by any means that the law would recognize or accept. Of course not. He means to kill me by witchcraft – or, to be rather more accurate, by Black Magic.'

'Oh! But, that's ridiculous! Isn't it?'

'Unfortunately, it is far from being ridiculous. It has – it has begun, in fact.' He rose, having drained his glass, and went to the drinks cabinet, pouring himself another large whisky. Turning back, he said: 'I'll explain further. Do you know that I have a mistress?'

The question startled her. Mutely, not knowing what to say, she shook her head.

'Well, I have. A young woman – a girl – not very much older than you, in fact. I have always enjoyed unusually excellent sexual health. I hope I'm not shocking you . . . He came here, you know. He sat there, in that chair you're sitting in now, and told me that he had hidden something, here, in these rooms, and that I would be unable to – to make love, unless I found this talisman.' He groaned. 'I should have known better than to leave him alone. But I thought I knew more than he, that I had more power . . . He told me that, you see, quite matter-of-factly. And it has come about. Since that time, I have been incapable. He then told me that I would become ill – that my bones would ache, my eyes grow blind, that I would be unable to sleep, and that I would – finally – die. I ache all over,' he said, in a flat voice, without inflexion. 'I am finding it difficult to read even my own notes, my own handwriting, and I cannot sleep. You will, no doubt, tell me that it's all quite impossible, that I am the victim of my own over-fertile imagination. I assure you that that is not the case.'

At a complete loss, she said: 'But – Mr Selby, what could he have hidden here? Haven't you tried to find it? Do you know what it is?'

'Oh, yes, I know what it is. It's – it must be – simply a short piece of cord or rough twine, with a knot about halfway along it's length. That's all. Just a little piece of string. Perhaps, if I searched properly, I could – It's the rest of it, you see. I have no way of knowing what he has done, what rite he used, what

powers he has employed – and, without that knowledge, I am helpless . . .’

*

‘We must *do* something! There must be a way?’

Alexandra stared at her employer unbelievably. She noticed, now, that there were lines on his face which were new, lines of weariness and strain, that he looked older, drawn and tense, burdened with an intolerable weight of anxiety and apprehension. She realized, with slight surprise, that she did not doubt the truth of what he had told her, only that she could not believe there was nothing he could do, that he was admitting to her that he was unable to help himself. She said, more calmly:

‘Surely there is something you can do?’

‘My dear, don’t you think I’ve tried? There are rituals one can use, to protect oneself against this sort of thing. Believe me, I’ve done everything I can . . .’

His face was a pallid mask of despair.

‘You – you mustn’t give up,’ Alex said. ‘I don’t know much about these things, of course, only the little I’ve learned from your writing, from typing out your notes and articles, but there has to be a way you – we – can do *something*.’ She was surprised at the firmness of her tone. Brightening, she continued: ‘The first thing *I’m* going to do is to turn this place upside-down until I find that cord.’

Jumping up, she began to turn over the piles of books and papers on the coffee-table nearby. Damon Selby watched her for a few moments with a slight, rueful smile. He said:

‘You astonish me, Miss German. Not once have you so much as suggested I might be insane. I expected – oh, I don’t know *what* I expected, but – disbelief, at any rate.’

Quoting a phrase he had used himself, in one of his recent articles, she said:

‘I’ve “suspended my unbelief”.’ Briskly, she went on sorting through books, holding each one up by its outer cover and shaking it so that anything concealed between its leaves must fall out; papers fluttered to the floor as she searched. ‘You must think,’ she said. ‘Think of what can be done. What I can do – if

anything. Mr Selby – please believe me, I'll help you in any way I can, if you'll tell me how.'

For a few minutes longer, he continued to sit slumped in his chair, watching her. Then he gulped down the last of his whisky and began to help her. 'You're an activist, Miss German,' he said, and she turned to smile at him.

'Please, call me Alexandra,' she said. 'Or Alex, if you like. You know, once, when I was about seventeen, I wanted to be an actress – or an exotic dancer, I wasn't quite sure which. I used to spell my first name with a "j" and my surname the French way. "Alejandra Germaine", you see. Perhaps I've always had a fascination for the unusual . . . What will you do, if we find the cord?'

'I will simply – take away its power to harm me. That, of course, will be done, partly, by merely finding it. The real power is only present as long as it remains concealed.'

It was almost seven o'clock when Alexandra, with a little cry of triumph, turned from one of the several cupboards in the room, holding aloft a piece of coarse twine, about four inches long and knotted neatly in the middle. It was smeared, around the knot, with some dark, slightly sticky substance. Damon Selby took it from her, in silence, and carried it to the littered table, where he took, from a drawer which he unlocked, a shallow bowl which gleamed in the evening sunlight slanting through the windows, and a broad-bladed, twelve-inch knife with a white handle. Alexandra saw several symbols on the handle, others on the shining blade itself. She watched, intently, as he placed the cord in the bowl, held the knife above it, the blade pointing downwards, while he recited what sounded like a lengthy list of names in a low voice. After this, came several murmured sentences in Latin, and one, spoken more loudly, in English: 'Thy Intention turn, thy power dispel, thy will make as nothing, thy charge dismiss.' He picked up the cord with his right hand, touched it once above the knot, and once below, with the tip of the knife-blade, then laid the knife aside, before carefully untying the knot itself. 'It's done,' he said. 'What I hold in my hand is now a very commonplace piece of household

string, with no power to hurt or harm or affect anything – or anyone.’ He threw the string, almost contemptuously, on to the floor, and turned to face the girl who stood watching.

‘That’s what it is, now,’ he said. ‘Just a little while ago, it was – something else. And now, my dear, you have seen witchcraft at work. “By seed and root, by bud and stem, by leaf and flower and fruit, by life and by love do I invoke thee . . .”’

‘That’s beautiful,’ she said. ‘What is that?’

‘An Invocation,’ he answered, smiling. ‘For the power and the spirit of the Great Mother to enter the body of her priestess . . . The words of the craft *are* beautiful. There is a serenity about them, a *sureness* . . .’

Uncertainly, she stared at him. He seemed to have grown taller and less frail, and he was no longer tense. She asked:

‘Have you decided what to do about – about the rest of it?’

‘There is nothing I *can* do, Alexandra . . . Black Magic is not witchcraft, there are no easy solutions, no prescribed ways to protect oneself. You have done all you can do, my dear – all that anyone could do. Without knowing precisely what Starling has done, I am, truly, powerless.’ He smiled, calm and resigned. ‘I thank you, most sincerely, for your help –’

‘I’ve done nothing!’

‘ – for being, as I said, an activist. At least your example forced me to take this one small action. If you hadn’t been here I might not have done even this.’

‘But you can’t just give up! If this man means to kill you –’

‘Oh, I’m quite sure of his intention to do that. The man has no sense of humour, none whatever. I insulted him. That’s all there is to it . . .’ All at once he seemed very tired again, tired and defeated. She realized that whatever strength he had somehow drawn from the performance of his brief ritual with the cord had been fleeting and limited. Crossing the room she poured him a drink and handed it to him; he took the glass without looking at her and went to sit in the leather-padded swivel chair he used at the work-table.

‘Please, go home, Alexandra. I’ll see you in the morning. Perhaps, by then, I may have thought of a way to . . .’

She started to protest. Before she could say anything, however, he said, in a dull, flat voice: 'I can try to summon it. I can try to call up the demon . . . Then, I would know, I could find out how this has been worked.'

'The - demon?'

He looked up, as though surprised to find her still there.

'The elemental, yes . . . In Black Magic, all evil is worked through the agency of an elemental - a demon. There are several hundred demons . . .'

'If there is a way - '

'I would need help. And I cannot ask anyone to aid me in this. It is dangerous, evil work. Sick, evil and utterly repellent. No, I - '

'Could I help you? Or must it be someone who knows a lot about these things?'

'You?' He stared at her, incredulously. 'Why should you?'

'I will,' she said, astonished at her own determination. 'If it's possible, I'll help you.'

Angrily, he snapped at her: 'You know nothing of what you would have to do, what you might have to see! Nothing! You say so easily that you will help - a girl, I would be performing one of the Seven Great Rites. I would perform this rite at an altar on which you lay naked, I would summon my demon through you by using your body in a way I would not care to describe to you, I would abuse your womanhood and torture your stupid, unthinking mind! And, at the end, there would be no horror you had not seen and felt and heard - don't speak so lightly of what you can't know!'

'I - meant what I said.'

'No. You *think* you know, you *guess* a little, from what I've been foolish enough to tell you, you're a brave, romantic, stupid child.' Suddenly he was on his feet and had advanced round the table to stand over her, his pale face set in hard, vicious lines, his eyes blazing. 'Very well, Alexandra German! Come with me!'

Seizing her by one hand, he half-led, half-dragged her across the room, to a door she had noticed, but which she had never

seen opened. Holding her with his right hand, he fumbled a key into the lock with his left, and flung the door open, pulling her with him across the threshold.

'This is where the rite will be done. Look round, look at this room! Look at it, and use what imagination you've got . . .'

*

The room was quite large, and square, with a high, domed ceiling. The four walls were hung with thick, heavy black drapes, on which were embroidered many strange signs and symbols in silver and gold. The bare, smooth, wooden floor was black; against this, a circle, ten feet in diameter and enclosing a five-pointed star which itself contained a second, smaller circle, stood out in silvery-white; more symbols – among these a star with eight points, a crescent, a Cross of Lorraine, and a sign that the breathless, trembling girl recognized as an Ankh, the ancient Egyptian mark of protection – appeared on the floor, at various intervals within the outer circle, within the pentacle. At the centre of the smaller circle was a small table, on which lay a great glinting sword with a jewelled handle, a golden bowl, a whip, a bell . . . A high, massive altar, richly draped in scarlet and gold, dominated the whole of the room; it stood on a dais at the farthest end, and behind it, against the black wall, a stark, pale cross of natural wood seemed to tower over everything – from it hung, in the position of the crucifixion, the figure of a handsome, slender youth with a red-lipped, smiling mouth and an obscenely-huge, erect phallus. 'Now look at the ceiling,' Damon Selby grated, and she looked up, obediently, and saw that the dome was decorated with pictures, pictures of inspired skill which graphically illustrated every possible perversion that man – or woman – could drag up from the most incredible depths of depravity and mental sickness. Alexandra shuddered, forcing herself to be calm. If her employer had raged at her, then, in that place of insidious horror, she might well have fled; instead, Selby said, quietly:

'This is where the rites are performed. You see? Do you begin to understand?'

'It's – it's over-powering,' she said. She took a deep breath

and steadied herself; slowly and deliberately, she made herself look round – at the terrible cross, the altar, the sword, the arcane, suggestive symbols. ‘I meant what I said,’ she whispered. ‘I’ll help you, if I can, if you’ll let me.’

At once, he was angry again.

‘All right! You won’t be *told*, will you. You won’t use your mind . . . You – *you*, Alexandra German, will lie naked on that altar . . . You will be the medium, the agency, the ritual *play-thing*, do you understand *that*? You say – you keep on saying, over and over: “I’ll help you.”’ His voice dropped, to a harsh near-whisper. ‘Take off your clothes.’

For a long, timeless moment, she stood, looking him in the eyes. A slow flush crept up her cheeks and she was glad that there was little light. Still looking at him she kicked off her shoes, and began to unfasten the buttons of her dress; slipping this off, she dropped it beside her, and stood there in only her tiny bra and brief, flimsy panties. Impossibly, she was glad she had dressed in as little as possible that morning, the early June day being unusually hot and sunny. Unhooking her bra, she let that drop also, then slipped the skimpy briefs down over her slim, smooth thighs; she stepped out of them, feeling graceless and clumsy. Naked, her hands at her sides, she watched him, frowning slightly.

‘Well?’ she said, husky-voiced. ‘Have I convinced you? Will you let me help?’

‘I don’t understand you, Alexandra.’ Damon Selby made a gesture of defeat, shaking his head. ‘Perhaps I shouldn’t try to, I just don’t know. You’d do this for me – go through all this . . . ? Put your things on. Come back to my room.’

‘You’ll let me help you?’ she persisted.

‘You shall help . . . Yes.’

*

Damon Selby’s instructions lingered in her mind as she settled herself in the armchair in his room, drink in hand, to wait for him. He had talked to her for an hour or more, and it was now approaching nine o’clock; he had gone into the inner room, the Temple, to make his preparations, leaving her alone, ‘to rest’, as

he said. Before leaving her, he had given her a goblet of sweet, curiously thick, red wine, wine which left a warm, tingling taste, the very first sip both relaxing and stimulating at once. Curled up in the big, deep chair, she felt a little drowsy, languorous and untroubled; the feeling of gracelessness she had experienced earlier, when she had taken off her clothes, had quite left her – she understood herself to be tall, slender and beautiful. Excitement and pleasurable anticipation trembled within her, and she pressed her legs tightly together, enjoying the sensations the pressure gave her. When Selby returned to tell her it was time to take her bath she was half-asleep; in the bath – a deep, old-fashioned tub in a cosy bathroom she hadn't known was part of the suite – she lay in the warm, fragrant water, caressing herself sensuously, her hands slipping down over her flat, taut belly to linger in the most pleasurable places, repeating, with small sounds of delight, movements and actions she had only rarely made since adolescence – and then only with feelings of guilt and impatience. Now, there was no guilt, and no self-disgust, no impatience, only sensual enjoyment; when Selby brought her the robe she was to wear, the thin silver ankle-chain and the heavy silver necklace, she was on the very brink of orgasm and disappointed at being interrupted. She almost cheated, when he left her alone again to dry herself on the soft towel and to dress, but she understood that it would be better to wait . . . The robe, a transparent, gossamer-light gown which had no fastenings of any kind other than a narrow tie-belt of gold-coloured silk, was white, and reached to her ankles; she arranged the skirt so that it was almost completely open at the front, exposing her long, lovely legs.

He was waiting for her in his room.

'I'm ready,' she murmured, and he led her into the Temple.

Candles, red and black, now burned in shallow bowls at five points around the circle in the centre of the floor – at each of the points where the pentacle met the circle; others stood on the table and others in tall holders as high as a man's shoulder, on the dais by the altar. There was no other light. The air was heavy with the cloying, heavy muskiness of incense. She had

expected Selby to be naked, or, at least, dramatically and richly clad. Instead, he wore a simple, black robe of some coarse, rough cloth, belted with a rope – also black – that was slightly frayed at one end. He looked, she thought, like a shabby monk; only the jewels which studded the blade of the dagger he carried were vivid. Her bare feet whispering on the smooth, polished floor, she followed him into the circle, delightedly aware of the contrast of her white figure in that place where so much was black, conscious of the way her legs thrust forward through the opening of the gown, the soft brush of its feathery lightness against her breasts, her stiffly erect nipples.

She remembered to look for the triangle drawn in white, on the floor just outside the circle, in the East. 'You must remember exactly where the Triangle of Art is placed. You must not – not at any time – look towards it, once the ritual has begun. Remember that, whatever else you may forget . . . ' It was there, as he had said, the names of Power were written – What were they: Tetragrammaton, Primemmaton, Anhexaton? – the Guardians . . . She stood where he indicated to her that she should stand, waiting – without patience – while he moved around the perimeter of the circle, pointing his dagger, tracing what seemed to be a star in the air, East, West, South and North, chanting words she could not understand.

She wanted the surge of pleasure she had nearly allowed herself in the bathroom. That was her role, the part she had to play, and she wanted it badly. Her eyes on the altar in front of her, she lifted one hand, surreptitiously squeezing the nipple of her left breast, pressing her thighs together. She wanted it – soon, at once; not this dreary, monotonous chanting, these meaningless ritual movements.

At one point – facing East, towards the Triangle of Art – Selby made a series of threatening passes with the jewelled dagger; she caught the words:

'Monstrum e locis emissum summis abi nunc ex oculis meis.'
And – 'Veni, vay, advens . . . '

'Veni . . . come.' She smiled, slyly, to herself. 'That's what I want to do,' she thought. 'That's right. Oh, I want that.'

Presently, he came to her, led her by both hands, to the altar. He was not a big man, but he lifted her effortlessly, after loosening her gown and slipping it from her shoulders, so that she stood naked except for the heavy necklace and the chain around her ankle.

She lay on her back, dreaming. Waiting.

His voice droned on, a jumble of words she had no knowledge of. What had he said – ‘He will come to you. But you – must – not – look . . .’ Impatiently, she squirmed her hips, panting a little.

Suddenly, there seemed to be two voices – Selby’s, quavering slightly, and, speaking the words of the rite with him, another, deeper, steadier, younger and more musical. She wanted, so very badly, to look round, to turn her head . . .

Then she felt it begin – the gentle touch of knowing fingers on her body, fingers which understood what she wanted. She melted, groaning with delight. She mounted, rising upon a swelling peak of pleasure, spreading her legs apart and lifting her hips – there was no weight upon her, but she was entered, filled, *reached*, and she knew that it was time. Her cry, as the climax thrust through her body, as she shuddered and writhed there, on the altar, was absorbed and deadened by the thick drapes which covered the walls of the Temple. She came once, then again, screaming with the ecstasy of it, and still the touching, the painless thrusting, went on; she called out with the miracle as she felt it beginning again – ‘I’m coming again, again! Oh, go on, go *on!*’ – and heard her own throbbing cry. It was over.

Drained, forgetful, she turned her head.

She saw Damon Selby, kneeling within the circle, his head bowed, his back to the Triangle of Art – the Triangle, in which stood, smiling towards her, the most beautiful young man she had ever seen.

For a moment, only. For an instant he was there. Then there was only the shapeless, sickening, malevolent horror, the demon, the Beast, where Beauty had stood. It was small, twisted and utterly appallingly Evil, a loathsome monstrosity from

beyond Space, and Time, and the nauseous dreams on the borders of madness. It *wanted*, and what it sought, it took. She saw, in that instant beyond hope, herself, lying, quite alone, on the altar; she saw Selby turn his head, and heard his gasp of terror – saw the Demon, Damon Selby's Demon, step – or slide, or grope, or *push itself*, forward, out of the Triangle, towards the kneeling man, who tried to rise, but could never, if he had been thirty years younger, and with all the speed of youth and blind terror, have been quick enough.

She remembered, mercifully, nothing of what followed. She stumbled into Jermyn Street at some time after midnight, naked and utterly incoherent; she was never able to tell her story, and lived only a few more years, never responding to the efforts of the experts who tried to mend her destroyed mind. She had lived through her own personal abyss of depthless horror, her own time of the demon, and she had nothing left to give. Normally passive and easily-managed, it was found that two things, only, could excite in her a terror that left her exhausted and entirely unmanageable – the carelessly phrased words, 'I'm coming', overheard by her in any normal, everyday context, and the flicker of candle-light.

Maureen O'Hara

Nobody's child

That my father should show greater love and affection for his mongol son than he should show for me I could understand. That this man, my father, should burn so intensely with hatred for me, that he should manifest his hatred in every possible way, was beyond the bounds of my comprehension. That he had loved me once yet now despised me gave me cause to wonder what I'd done to create within his soul this perpetual desire to abuse me. But though I delved constantly into my conscience for reasons and for answers I could find none.

If he were a man inclined not towards loving but only towards hatred and barbarity, as some men are, then perhaps I could have learned, or at least have tried to learn, to accept his cruel treatment of me. But as I constantly observed his very obvious affection for my simple-minded brother, Simon, I became frustrated, confused, and violent headaches began to torment me. Headaches that were not of pain, but tension, an overwhelming tension that filled my head and obstructed the normal cycle of my brain, so that my thoughts and reasoning became blurred and sluggish.

A headache such as this was at this moment tormenting me. I can only blame my feeling unwell for my error in allowing the knife to slip as I sliced the bread for tea; its sharp blade plunged too quickly through a loaf that was slightly over-fresh and came down on Simon's finger, causing a small but ugly gash to appear. He whimpered loudly and gasped the only word he could master, 'Daah!'

My father flung aside his newspaper and hurried to Simon, hugging him, reassuring him, gently wiping away the blood.

Tears plunged down Simon's face and he continued to whimper and moan, pointing at his bloody finger, then pointing at me, his mouth gasping for words, his eyes crying out for an understanding of why I should hurt him in this way.

I stood pale-faced, my head pounding with a greater intensity than before, as my father turned upon me, his bulging eyes filled with a demonic rage, and hit me to the floor with his heavy fist.

'It was an accident, Father! I have another of my headaches and I don't feel at all well. Please may I have a doctor, Father, please!' Begging was the only way I knew of communicating with my father, yet even my pathetic pleading did not bring sympathy.

'You don't need a doctor, Jenny. I'll cure your headache.' No sooner had he spoken than he plunged his boot several times into my face and head. Slowly and painfully I sank into unconsciousness . . .

My consciousness has returned and I am aware of lying upon the kitchen floor where he laid me with his blow. I am alone and it is dark except for the moonlight streaming through the window. I can hear Simon whimpering in his bedroom and soft masculine words of comfort from a loving father as he tucks the mongol into bed.

My head is throbbing and swollen in several places but the tension has subsided. If he would allow me to see a doctor I could have treatment for my headaches. If I had enough food to eat perhaps the headaches would not occur. If only he would let me go back to school. If only he would let me live . . .

I rose and went quietly to my bedroom, my heart pounding within my half-starved body, afraid that he might strike again. I knew that I couldn't go on living like this with my father. And yet, though I thought and thought again for means of escape I could find none. At fourteen I was too young to venture alone into the outside world and get a job. I had no money of my own, no clothes but for those I wore every day, no relations of whom I could seek refuge. I was aware that the simplest solution to my problem would be to take my own life, but I

would not do that, not as yet, for inside my broken heart there was still a smattering of hope. The hope that I would be reunited with my mother, that dear woman who had never shown me anything except kindness and love. It was indeed strange that she had never contacted me, never wrote a few lines to ask how I was. She had simply disappeared on the day of my twelfth birthday without saying goodbye, without leaving behind her even a note.

My father had told me that she had given her heart to another man and had left our home so that she could be with her lover. The mention of her name had since then been forbidden and though I longed to beg him to take me to her I was unable to bring myself to speak her name in his presence for fear that he might kill me.

As I tumbled my problems round and round within my head that part of my body became once more suffused with pounding tension until I could only wish my father dead and in hell. Desperately I desired to cry in the hope that with my tears my tensions would flow away from my body but, hardened and embittered, I could not will myself to soften into tears. I turned my face into the pillow and prayed to God for sleep.

The alarm clock failed to wake me and I slept late into the following morning. I was still in the depths of slumber when he pushed me from my bed on to the hard cement floor and flung my dress at me. I hurried into the tattered garment, simultaneously mumbling frightened apologies as he pushed me towards the kitchen to attend to my morning chores.

Before he departed for his day's work upon the neighbouring farm he hugged Simon and pressed a bag of sweets into his hand, then approached me and handled me roughly in a manner that I knew to be indecent. I watched him walk away from the house and my heart filled with a new terror. No, this man who was my father could not possibly have in his mind the intention of sexually interfering with me. And yet it was only too clear that I was now in greater danger than ever before.

'Mother! Mother!' I screamed her name in a moment of blind terror and was brought back to my senses instantaneously

by the frightened, pitiful whimpering of Simon. I fought to regain my former calm and went to Simon, placing my arms about him reassuringly. I looked into his face and he stared back at me with mis-shaped, empty eyes, eyes that had the expression of a one-year-old child. Simon was three years older than me and I had always felt great sympathy for him. Yet of late I had been disquieted to find that my pity was turning to jealousy and bitterness, even mild hatred. My brother was no longer commanding my sympathy but rather my scorn. In a sudden desire to abuse him I raised my hand to strike. He screamed and fled to the corner of the room where he curled up against the wall in terror.

My sanity returned and I stood in a state of shock and wondered what evil influence had taken hold of me. Unable to reason with myself or begin to understand my lapse I drew a blank across my mind and began to clear the breakfast table.

In an effort to keep control of the terror of my father's return in the evening I went about my household duties with more than the usual ardour and as the day wore on I began to feel more settled, more confident, more certain of what I must do.

He returned at six, just as the winter dusk was falling. I placed his meal before him on the table and sat opposite him, staring silently at his great bulky head and shoulders. He ate like a pig, using neither knife nor fork, the gravy from the meat dribbling from his mouth and fingers like muddy water.

If I did not speak now I would never again find the courage. 'Where is my mother?' My own voice sounded unreal to me as I said the words, though this time I did not shake with fright but sat calmly and awaited his reply.

'Jenny, did I hear you speak?' His eyes blazed.

'Yes, Father, you heard me.'

He rose from his seat, approached me menacingly and looked upon me with hatred and disgust. 'Jenny, if you should ever again disobey any command of mine you will suffer at my hands as no human has suffered before. What you said just now you must never repeat.'

I spoke quietly. 'Why do you hate me as you do? I am your daughter and you once loved me. What have I done to turn you into the monster that you are?'

He seemed slightly taken aback by my cool words. He stood, red-faced and silent, glaring at me through eyes filled with contempt. Then he guffawed loudly. 'You call yourself my daughter! You stupid little child, you are not my daughter. You belong to the milkman!' He continued to guffaw but there was no mirth, only malice, in his loud laughter.

I was bewildered. 'What do you mean? What is this about the milkman? I don't understand.'

'The milkman was your mother's lover and you are the milkman's child. That is why I treat you like a bastard, Jenny. You *are* one!'

I began to tremble violently within myself. 'If you are not my father then I am under no obligation to you. I shall leave you and go in search of my mother and my real father. You must tell me where to find them - I don't know and can't even guess where they might be.'

'Do you sincerely wish to be with your mother and father, Jenny?' His voice sounded suddenly kind.

'Yes, I do! I do!' I cried and crumpled up, sobbing like a baby and pleading with him to inform me of their whereabouts.

'They are not far away.' He spoke softly and I was amazed at his sudden humanity. 'I have treated you wrongly, Jenny, but you must understand how I felt when I discovered that my wife - your mother - was having an affair and that the daughter I so dearly loved was not my own.'

I wiped the tears from my face. 'Now that you have told me this I think I begin to understand why you hate me so dreadfully. But please stop torturing me, for I am an innocent party, and let me be taken to my parents.'

He looked at me thoughtfully for a moment, then said, 'I'll take you to them myself. If you will allow me to attend to some pressing work outside first I will then be ready to escort you.'

I nodded and he left the house. I sat quietly for some time staring dazedly at his unfinished meal. Then I rose slowly,

cleared the table and began to wash up. I now felt sorry for this man who I had believed to be my father. After the wrong my mother had done him he was within his emotional rights to feel bitter, to feel hatred towards me.

An hour went by and he returned. 'I will get into my coat now, Jenny, and you do the same for it is a bitterly cold night outside. Then I will take you to your parents. I hope that with them you will know just as much happiness and peace as you have known misery with me.'

'You are not really evil,' I told him with genuine kindness. 'Your mind has merely been made sick by the infidelity of my mother. When I see her I shall speak to her of the bitterness she has caused you.'

He nodded and smiled. I suddenly remembered that in my state of excited anticipation I had forgotten to pack my rather humble toiletries. 'I will get together my few belongings. I will not be more than a moment.' I began to leave the room but he stopped me with a gesture of impatience.

'Don't worry about your things. You can return and collect them any time.'

'Yes, I can,' I agreed, hurrying into my coat.

'Shall we go now, Jenny?'

'Yes! Yes!' I cried, and bubbled with an exuberance of joy.

He took a gentle hold of my arm and we went outside, leaving Simon asleep upon the couch. It was very dark, with no moon and only a smattering of stars, and I could not see very well. I clung tightly to him, fearful that I might stumble in the darkness. And then, without warning, he pushed me to the ground and lay astride my body. I could feel his hot stale breath upon my face as he whispered hoarsely in my ear, 'Jenny, it was not until today that I observed your budding femininity. Before today I saw you only as a source of irritation; now I see you as a source of great pleasure. I need to be pleased by you, Jenny, otherwise there will be no reunion with your mother.'

'I will do anything to be reunited with my mother,' I replied and allowed him to remove my clothing and fulfil his needs.

When he had quite finished with my body, he pulled me to

my feet and we began to search our way through the darkness once more. We had walked but a mere thirty yards when he brought me to a halt. 'You are now on the threshold of your mother's home, Jenny. Be glad, my child, for it is what you have yearned for.'

A simple joke, I thought and laughed, but inside I was beginning to feel uneasy. He fumbled in his pocket and extracted a torch. When he had switched it on I could see that we were in the field at the rear of the house. 'I don't understand,' I said, my body trembling with fear of something now unknown but soon to be revealed.

'You will soon understand.' He sounded gleeful. 'Come forward a little.' Holding my arm very tightly he led me forward a few paces until we were standing by a gaping hole in the ground. He shone his torch into the pit. 'Now look down, Jenny.'

I looked. At the bottom of the pit there lay two skeletons and a broken milk bottle. Some rotting flesh still clung to the bones and the eyes were intact in their sockets, staring up at me, expressionless. Terror surged through my veins and my head pounded with unbearable tension. A weird, unspeakable feeling infused my brain, causing it to stretch and grow within my head. And then a shot rang out within my mind and the terror and tension abated.

His husky voice came to my ears as if from a far distance. 'Well, Jenny, here is your mother and father. I promised I would unite you with them and I have fulfilled my promise. You must of your own accord step over the threshold into their home, for I do not wish to send you into your mother's arms by force.'

So engrossed was he in his own words that he failed to notice my hand reach for the heavy garden spade standing upright in the soil beside the grave. I acted in an instant, raising the spade into the air and bringing its sharp edge down forcibly on his head. Bright red blood tore from a vicious gash upon his forehead. The torch fell from his hand and we were plunged into darkness. I lunged the spade once more in the direction of his

scream. He emitted a yell of incredible agony and then became silent. I heard the thud of his fat body hit the ground and I smiled inwardly. I fumbled among the freshly dug soil until I found the torch, then made my way back to the house.

Simon was still sleeping. I hurriedly roused him and attempted to explain that there was work he must help me to complete. He showed a vague understanding and followed me back to my parents' grave. With his fumbling, awkward assistance I managed to remove my mother from her place of unrest, lower Simon's still living father into the grave and refill it with soil. Then, still aided by the whimpering Simon, I carried my mother back to the house and sat her gently upon the armchair in my bedroom.

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I now live alone with my mother in this isolated house in the heart of the English countryside. Simon is no longer with us. His perpetual mongol noises irritated me to such a degree that I could no longer tolerate his presence and found it necessary, for my own happiness, to reopen the grave where his father and the milkman rested and to dispatch him gently but firmly into that great pit of death.

I have no one now except my mother and she is truly the only one I need. I take good care of her, polishing her ribs with furniture wax until they gleam in the sunlight, brushing her teeth until they sparkle with whiteness.

And at night when tension tortures me and I cannot sleep I go to her and place her dangling arms about my shoulders and from her unbreathing, lipless mouth I wait for silent soothing words of comfort to tranquillise me until, finally, I fall asleep.

Myc Harrison

Needle and thread

'Rantz!'

The single, sharp command rang out, piercing the bare walls, threading its way through the darkened corridors of the house and seeping through the woodwork to where the tailor sat, engrossed in his work while his wife busied herself beside him. Her hands fluttered to her throat suddenly and then she gripped the tailor by his shoulder. Her eyes had widened and her mouth moved but no sound came out. The tailor tried to smile to hide his nervousness and the side of his mouth began to pulsate. He clamped his hand to it and worked the palm of his hand against the side of his mouth but the tic grew steadily worse.

'Suppose he finds out . . . ' the tailor's wife asked, leaving the question to find its own conclusion.

'Be still,' the tailor told her. 'He will not suspect. And when he does it will be too late.'

'Rantz!'

There was impatience and a gash of violence in the voice which seemed to swell from the bottom of the house and gather strength as it spread like cancer through the tiny rooms. The tailor moved his work aside hurriedly, covering it over as he pushed it firmly to the bottom of his workbasket. He stood up and shuffled slowly to the door.

'We are here,' he called down the staircase, his voice quiet and frail with age. 'Upstairs in the back room.'

His wife moved quietly behind him, resting her hand on his thin shoulder. She leant forward and kissed his half-turned face with all the shyness of a young girl. He knew she was

afraid and that the kiss was a gesture of that fear. He guided her back into the room and even as he did so they could hear the crashing footfalls on the steps below as their visitor lunged headlong up the staircase.

There was no politeness, no formality, as the man came heavily into the room. He filled the doorway with his huge frame and stepped forward, reeking of cheap wine and stale tobacco. He almost tripped but caught himself, his hand thumping the vastness of his chest as he coughed and wheezed in a strangled gesture of suffering. The cuffs and pockets of his overcoat were frayed and greasy and the buttons had long since disappeared. His eyes were red stains on a grey landscape and his breath disclosed the decayed and unhealthy state of his teeth and his innards. The fingers were thick and heavily stained and he lifted his arm slowly, pointing accusingly at the tailor. He swayed slightly and rubbed his eyes with his free hand.

'Well?' he demanded. 'Where is it, Rantz?'

Before the tailor had time to answer, the man lunged forward and beat his clenched fist down hard on the table. The noise filled the room and vibrated in the air for long seconds.

'Well?' he screamed. 'Tell me, Rantz! Tell me where it is!' He leant forward, his arms resting on the table, his voice barely above a whisper. 'Where is it, Rantz? Where is my suit?'

The tailor wrung his hands together and tried to smile. 'It is almost finished,' he said in a pleased voice, implying that he'd worked much harder to have the suit ready than he would normally have worked.

'Almost?' the other queried. 'Almost? You knew I wanted it today. You knew that.' He was quiet for a moment, brooding. 'You wouldn't be trying to cheat me, would you, Rantz?' he asked slyly.

'My husband has never cheated anyone in his life,' the tailor's wife spoke swiftly. 'And how can he cheat you? You aren't even paying for your suit,' she hissed, the truth of her feelings spilling out. Rantz tried to quieten her but she would not be stilled. 'You are nothing,' she said, quietly. 'Nothing.'

'Ha!' The man tossed his head back. 'Never cheated anyone, never taken anything which wasn't his? You people, you make me laugh. You surely haven't forgotten the War so swiftly?'

'That was different,' she answered. 'Everyone had to make a living the best way they knew how.'

'And I have to make a living now,' the man answered. The room went very quiet and Rantz shook his head slowly, trying to warn his wife to keep silent.

'The suit will be ready this evening,' Rantz said. 'An hour before midnight.'

'My boat sails at midnight. I must have the suit by then,' he told the tailor.

'You will,' Rantz replied. He needed all the cunning he was able to find to ask his next question. 'You will, of course, wear it right away?'

The man paused to consider the question and Rantz felt his face grow hot under the other's steady gaze. He was on the point of turning away when the man nodded. It was such a slight movement that Rantz could not be sure he'd actually seen it.

'Yes,' the man said. 'I'm going to Holland to see my brother. It's been six years since we've seen one another. Six years.' He turned away from Rantz. 'I'll be back later. Have it ready.'

As he walked away and reached the door, he slowed, turning to face the couple across the room. 'Or else,' he said simply and drew a thick black fingernail swiftly across his open throat.

There was a sudden flare, an intense hatred which mushroomed up within the tailor's chest and reflected like white heat in his eyes. A pure, savage, animal hatred which left no room for pity or remorse, fear or conscience. The feeling burned deeply long after the man had gone and Rantz was surprised to find the backs of his hands had turned white and the knuckles were standing out sharply against his pale skin, speckled brown with old age.

His wife came and stood before him. 'He's gone but he'll be back,' she whispered. 'We must hurry. There's so little time.'

Rantz nodded. There was little doubt that the man would

allow neither of them to live if he found out what they planned to do to him. 'Yes,' the tailor said. 'What we do is right,' and the conviction lay deep within his heart.

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The tailor's shop and the cramped living quarters above lay back from the narrow side street with its badly cobbled road and ill-lit pavement. There was a basement to the small building and light briefly flooded out from the basement window on to the uneven paving slabs. Rantz hurried across the cellar room and covered the window with a heavy blanket. He shivered, rubbing his hands briskly along his arms. The basement was his workroom, though he didn't often use it in the evenings because of the cold. He turned from the window and surveyed the room which was soon to become a man's prison and his tomb.

In the left-hand corner of the basement a flight of wooden steps, open between the treads, led up into the back of the tailor's shop. Some of the steps were damp and the wood needed replacing. Beneath the stairwell and lining the left-hand wall were the racks of cloth which Rantz used to make his suits and coats. He kept the bales covered tightly to keep the damp from spoiling the cloth. Behind him, covered with the thick blanket, stood the only window in the room. Beneath the blanket the glass was dirty and thick with cobwebs. A green moss had begun to grow along the edge of the window-sill.

The right-hand wall of the basement was taken up with Rantz's work-bench. It was made of solid oak and measured over eight feet long and almost four and a half feet wide. He'd bought it many years earlier and rumour had it that it once belonged to the sovereigns of Spain. Beneath the heavy, protective cover, the wood bore the quality and strength of the finest oak. Rantz had laid many thicknesses of cloth over the table to protect its fine surface, holding it all in place with a stout canvas cover which he'd firmly tacked to the underside of the table top. In all its years of use, the canvas cover was still as strong as the day he'd fitted it.

Alongside the table was the mirror, a full-length sheet of

glass standing on castors which he wheeled around his clients as they admired his handiwork and smiled shyly at their reflection. The mirror was standing close to the far end of the workbench and behind it, firmly cemented into the concrete floor, lay a length of heavy duty chain.

'Karl, can you help me, please,' the tailor's wife called to him from the shop above.

'Coming,' he said, and moved across the room, satisfied with what he'd achieved.

'Here,' she passed him the workbasket containing the man's new suit. 'I will stay up here and keep watch in case he comes back early.'

'Good. I have phoned Robert. He will be waiting where I told him to wait. He said he wanted more money but I told him no. After all,' he looked up at his wife, 'his is the easiest part, yes? I told him I would go with him as far as the boat. I think he wants me to wait for him and help him from the river but,' he shrugged, 'we'll see.'

He carried the workbasket across the cellar and emptied it across his workbench. There was a good hour's work left to do and he sat, cross-legged, on top of the table and began putting the finishing touches to the man's new suit. He began to hum quietly to himself, almost forgetting the grim task which lay before him.

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The evening sky had darkened and the stars hid behind heavy black clouds of rain. In the distance, the man could hear the calls of the dockers loading and unloading the precious cargo. He turned his collar to the fine spray of rain which swept across the unlit street and walked across to the shop door. He'd been drinking heavily for much of the evening and he stood for a time, braced against the door, before knocking. When he did knock it wasn't with his former strength for he was tired and the drink made him slightly dizzy. Rantz heard the quiet tapping and almost ignored it for he hardly believed the man could possess such gentleness.

'Karl,' his wife stirred him. 'It's him. He's here.'

Rantz went into the shop and turned on the light. He drew back the bolts and stepped aside quickly, expecting a trick, expecting the shop door to swing inwards violently. He waited a few moments and peered round the doorway. The man was still braced against the door frame.

'The suit is ready,' he said. He stepped outside and felt the sharpness of the wind and the spiteful bite of rain against his flesh. 'It is finished,' he said, urging the man inside.

The man raised his head slowly. 'Help me in,' he said, his mouth slack and wet from spittle.

Rantz took the man's arm and laid it across his own thin shoulders, acting as a crutch for him to support himself by. They swayed back and forth across the shop floor as Rantz guided him across the room to the head of the stairs leading down to the basement. His wife closed and bolted the shop door behind them.

The wooden steps stretched out beneath them into the dimly-lit cellar below and Rantz wondered if he had the strength to push the man headlong down the stairs. He did not really doubt his strength for his was the strength of vengeance. However, he'd made a promise to his wife, albeit a promise he intended breaking, and that was not to kill the man for she wanted no murder on their hands. She will never find out, Rantz told himself. Nor will anyone ever know the truth.

'Where's my suit,' the man muttered. 'My boat leaves in another three hours, I want my suit.'

Rantz helped the man carefully down the steps, his wife following close behind. As the man stood up in the basement, he knocked the overhead light and their shadows raced around the walls and exploded across the floor like black reflections with a life of their own. The man stood beside the work-bench and hitched himself on to it, breathing heavily as he did so. The jiggling light made him dizzy.

'You will have to take off your coat,' Rantz said. 'You cannot try the suit on with your coat on.'

Obediently, he began to unbutton his overcoat, tugging the sleeves down over his arms. As he did so Rantz picked up the

suit and held it up for the man to look at. He asked nothing of the man save that he try it on for size. It wasn't important that he liked it or not, for its purpose was far more sinister than decorative.

Slowly, the man struggled out of his damp clothes, lifting himself up from the bench to tug the overcoat from beneath himself. Rantz's wife turned quickly away as the man began to remove his old trousers. Finally he stood down from the bench, shivering slightly in his filthy underwear. Rantz handed him the trousers first. He watched as the man struggled into them then handed him the shirt he'd just taken off. The man shrugged it on and tucked it roughly down the waistband of his new suit trousers.

'They are very thick,' he said, feeling the material between his fingers. 'Why are they so thick, Rantz, eh?'

'Because it is getting near winter and I have lined the suit for you,' he said, holding the jacket open so the man had to turn away from him to thrust his arms into the sleeves. Rantz helped him into the jacket quickly and came round the front in order to do the buttons up. He buttoned the jacket up to the neck and stepped back to check the fit. The man raised an arm, his face reddening with fury.

'Look at this arm,' he cried. 'Look how long you have made it,' he held his arm up and the sleeve covered his hand entirely. 'And here, too,' he cried as he realized both sleeves were many inches too long.

'One moment,' Rantz held his hand up. 'It will only take a few moments to readjust them. Put your hands behind you like this,' Rantz said. He held his own hands behind his back to demonstrate. The man did as he was told. 'Good,' Rantz said. 'Don't move.'

Even as he spoke, his wife scooped up the heavy duty chain from behind the mirror and threaded the padlock through the metal rings which Rantz had sewn into each of the cuffs of the man's new suit. He'd made the arms long deliberately, in order to trick the man. His wife snapped the padlock through the metal rings concealed in the suit cuffs and attached the lock to

the chain as quickly as she could. It was some moments before the man had time to think, had time to realize his predicament.

'What's going on,' he demanded. He tried to move forward but the chain tightened and stopped him. He looked over his shoulder, unable to comprehend what had happened. He jerked forward, only to find himself a prisoner. 'Rantz? What is that chain for?'

Rantz smiled. 'It is to hold you here as a prisoner. We are going away,' he said. 'Somewhere that you will not find us, to live our life free of your bullying and your blackmail. You cannot escape, though you will doubtless try. You see, the suit you are wearing, the suit which you wanted me to make, is very special. The seams and buttons are stitched with fine wire thread that even you could not break. The same wire thread holds the metal rings in place around the sleeve cuffs and the chain is set deeply into the concrete floor. The suit is fully lined in this material, 'he touched the strong canvas cover of his work-bench, 'I doubt that you will escape in a hurry.'

'Rantz!' The man gave a low, guttural cry which ended as a high-pitched threat as he threw himself forward, straining savagely against the heavy chain. 'I'll kill you for this, Rantz!'

'I doubt you will get the chance,' Rantz told him. He turned away and walked across to the racks where he kept his bales of cloth. He took hold of an iron bar which he used to hold the bales in place on the frame, hefting it between his hands. He turned to face his wife. 'You may go, now,' he told her kindly. 'I'll be along in a few moments. Is everything packed?'

She nodded, not trusting herself to say a word. The tension was in her like a tightly-wound spring and she craved her husband's arms around her, longed for them to be away from all this, once and for all. She rushed up the stairs blindly and covered her ears in order not to hear the soft crack of iron against skull as Rantz hit the man cleanly across the side of his head. The chain rattled as the prisoner fell to the floor, the side of his head bleeding slightly where the iron bar had split the skin. Rantz gagged the man tightly and roped his arms and legs together. He was taking no chances, nor could he afford to, for

too much was at stake now. He checked over the knots and double checked the padlock before he was satisfied. He stood back and viewed the man before him, the hatred rising up like black fire from his soul. He turned and walked over to the man's old clothes, emptying the pockets, collecting the boat ticket, passport, receipts and loose change. He put the old clothes into a paper bag and tucked the various items he'd taken from the pockets down the side of the bag. Finally, he took a last look round before switching off the light.

'I'll be back,' he whispered into the darkness. 'To kill you,' and then he was gone.

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Rantz and his wife moved silently through the narrow streets, keeping closely to the shadows wherever possible. The tailor carried the paper bag beneath his arm and held their only suitcase beneath the other. It contained their entire belongings and held their hopes and fears of a new life in a different part of the world. They hurried on through the night and arrived, breathless, at the house of an old friend.

'Robert,' Rantz whispered softly, tapping the door knocker as he did so. 'It's Rantz, Robert. We have little time, we must hurry.'

The door opened quietly and a shadowy figure stepped out. Rantz turned and kissed his wife on the cheek. 'Go inside. I will be back later. You must not worry, it is all over now.'

The shadow pushed the door further open and helped Rantz's wife inside, while Rantz gave her the case.

'Thank you, Robert,' she said.

'Quickly now.' Robert hurried her inside. 'Eva is down in the kitchen. Go and stay with her. There is food for you if you are hungry.' He turned to face Rantz. 'Well?' he asked.

'Not here,' Rantz said. 'We will talk on the way to the docks. It will be safer.'

The two men hurried through the dark town talking in whispers for fear of being overheard. Rantz told his friend how he had caught the man and chained him to the floor. He opened the

paper bag when they were close to the docks and handed Robert the tickets and the man's passport.

'Are you sure they won't check the passport before I'm aboard,' Robert asked.

'No. They only collect them up and give you a seat ticket. It has a number on it like so,' he drew the outline of it in his hand. 'You find your seat then the customs man will check everyone's passport once the boat has cleared the harbour. When the boat finally gets across to Holland, the customs man stays with it and repeats the whole thing with the people coming the other way. They have to do it like that because they are short of men, you see.'

Robert nodded, feeling a little better. 'Will you wait for me by the riverbank?' he asked.

Rantz checked the time. 'It will be hours before the boat leaves and clears the harbour,' he said. 'What am I to do?' he asked, though he knew exactly what he had planned to do with his time.

'Please, Karl?' Robert implored him.

'Very well,' Rantz agreed. 'I will come back here in two hours or so. When the boat reaches the mouth of the harbour you must leave this coat,' he held up the man's old coat, 'and the papers I gave you, beside the forward rail. It must appear that a man has jumped over the side, as indeed you shall. That way, no one will bother to find the man in the town and it will be several days before they find him in my shop. That way it gives me time to get far away with my wife. Do you understand, yes?'

Robert nodded.

'Then good luck to you, my friend. I shall return when I hear the boat's hooter as you pass through the harbour mouth. Now hurry.' He gave his friend a push and slapped him warmly across his shoulders. 'Good luck,' he said again.

Rantz watched as his friend was swallowed up in the darkness. He waited until he saw him once again, striding up the long gangway, having passed through the ticket gate without trouble. Robert paused and turned back at the very top of the

walk, giving Rantz a final wave before stepping aboard the passenger boat and into darkness. Rantz turned and walked briskly away.

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The familiar smell of damp rose to meet him, filling his nostrils as he tiptoed silently back down the staircase into the total blackness of the basement. He could see nothing but resisted the temptation to turn on the overhead light.

He settled himself carefully on the bottom step and listened to the man he held prisoner. He could hear the man breathing harshly, almost snoring, and he wondered if he were still unconscious. He extended his foot across the floor and scuffed it against the floor. The man's breathing stopped for a long moment and Rantz felt pleased that he'd not been heard coming down the steps for he now knew the man was conscious. He waited a few more minutes until he could hear the man breathing again before he scuffed his shoe, louder this time. The result was even better. The man began making noises, as if he were afraid but unable to shout out for the gag was still tight across his mouth. Rantz knew that the man thought the noise had been made by rats but he gave nothing away. He scuffed his shoe once more and then tiptoed blindly across the workroom, coming to a halt close to the man who lay bound and gagged on the floor.

He was so close he could almost feel the heat from the man's body. He began to put his hand out, gently feeling his way across the gap until he knew he was almost touching the other man's face. He could feel the air from the man's nostrils warm against his palm. Without warning, Rantz slammed his open fist across the man's face, leaping back in alarm as he did so. The man was so utterly shocked and terrified by the blow that he lifted himself bodily off the floor. His body jerked violently and Rantz scrabbled away to safety. There was no pretence left for the man now knew that Rantz was in the cellar with him.

'I told you I was coming back, didn't I?' Rantz said, in a whisper. 'I told you I was coming back to kill you and here I am.' He paused but the man made no sound. 'I have two hours

in which to kill you, you see. Two whole hours' – he made it sound like a lifetime. 'And it will be the slowest death that any man has ever had to undergo,' Rantz promised.

The prisoner was curled in a ball, half under the work-bench, when Rantz flicked the light on.

'Afraid, are you,' Rantz said, though he knew the man well enough not to believe all he saw. The man was not to be trusted for he would turn on Rantz at the first opportunity. 'Well let me tell you something,' there was a trace of hysteria in Rantz's voice and he fought to control it. 'Let me tell you that you deserve to die. You deserve all the pain and humiliation that you get for all those years of taking, all those years of blackmail and violence. Well,' Rantz wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, 'now you must die.'

The man on the floor kept his eyes on Rantz the whole time. He'd tried to break free since he regained consciousness but knew it was impossible. The ropes were too tight and the suit too strong. His drunkenness had passed though his head still ached from the blow by the iron bar. The blood had hardened and was now a dark brown stain on the side of his head. He watched as the tailor walked across towards him. He saw him reach into his pocket and saw the gleam of scissors in his hand. His muscles tightened, as though expecting the tailor to stab him.

'No,' Rantz shook his head. 'That would be much too easy.'

The tailor stood at the foot of the work-bench and leant forward as far as he could. He raised the scissors and slashed them down in an arc, ripping through the canvas cloth which covered the oak table. He pulled the layers of cloth beneath the cover and stood back to inspect the rip. Satisfied, he walked back across the basement and reached down behind the rack of cloth bales. He straightened up and held a petrol can in his hand.

'Just a little preparation,' Rantz explained. 'A little insurance, you might say.' He held the can of petrol away from himself as he recrossed the room.

The man watched his every move.

Carefully, without spilling a drop, Rantz climbed on to the

work-bench and began to pour the fuel into the slit he'd made in the canvas cover. The layers of cloth beneath the cover soon soaked up the petrol and Rantz continued pouring until the whole can had been absorbed. The vapour was heavy and his head throbbed as he climbed down and put back the empty can. As he returned he caught the first real signs of fear in his prisoner's eyes.

He took a needle and thread from the workbasket and carefully stitched up the ripped canvas. He worked swiftly and neatly, snipping the excess thread cleanly with the scissors. He discarded the needle and cotton and turned his attention to the prisoner on the floor.

'Can you stand up?' he asked.

The man made no reply, merely watched every move the tailor made.

'I said, "Can you stand up", or did you not hear me?' He waited a few moments to satisfy himself that the other man did not intend to try. 'Oh, well,' he shrugged. 'It really makes little difference either way.' He walked away and found the iron bar he'd used earlier. He picked it up and went back across the cellar. He gave the man no option this time and he struck with frightening swiftness. The bar caught the man heavily just above the previous wound and he could feel the blackness of unconsciousness closing in around him instantly. The pain of the blow would follow later, that he knew.

Rantz hit him twice, for he was unsure if the first blow would serve its purpose for long enough. Next he began to untie the ropes which bound the man hand and foot. It was not an easy task for the man weighed several hundred pounds. Finally, Rantz had the man untied. He unlocked the padlock which had secured the man to the chain in the floor and paused.

He was at his most vulnerable yet he dared not risk losing everything through haste. Carefully, using what little strength he had left, he began to lift the man off the floor on to the work-bench. It was not simply a matter of brute strength for there was a knack in lifting anything heavy. He'd learned that long ago from lifting heavy bales of cloth around the shop. Gradu-

ally, inch by painful inch, he managed to lift the unconscious man; he lay him flat down on his back and spreadeagled his arms and legs. Quickly, he picked up the rope from the floor and began to lash his feet to the table legs at opposite corners of the far end. He could still smell the heady fuel vapour and held his breath as he tightened the ropes.

The prisoner opened his eyes suddenly, seeing the ceiling of the basement room much closer than he remembered it. The smell of petrol was strong and unpleasant and he lifted his head in time to see the tailor bend down and pick up a length of rope. As Rantz moved past him and began to wind the rope around his wrist, he lunged upwards and caught the little tailor in a vice-like grip. Startled, Rantz leapt away but the man kept hold of him tightly. He tried to swing his legs off the table top but something was wrong, he was unable to move them at all. Rantz was pulling furiously against his grip and he lifted his other arm but found that, too, was tied down, though not quite as tightly.

He began to pull Rantz around the side of the bench where he could increase his hold on the old tailor. Slowly, his arm shaking from the effort, he began to haul Rantz around to the side of him with one hand. He pulled him into the circle of his arm and was about to move his grip to the tailor's throat when he felt a fierce, angry pain shooting up through his arm. He jerked against the ropes that held him captive and released the tailor immediately. Rantz stepped back and dropped the long, sharp darning needle he'd used to stab the prisoner's arm.

The smear of blood on his arm looked unreal in the dim light of the damp cellar. Rantz had little trouble securing the arm firmly to the last leg of the oak bench. He had the man lashed down at four corners, spread wide across the canvas workbench top. The gag was still in place and Rantz stood beside his prisoner, waiting for his breath to return. He double checked every knot and then he found the scissors once again.

'If you move I may cut you,' he told the man. 'It's up to you. Keep still and you will not be hurt.'

Despite the threat, the prisoner found it hard not to squirm

as Rantz began to cut away his clothes, cutting away the suit he'd made for him. The scissors often grated against the wire thread before snipping through it and the man could feel the cold steel blades against his bare flesh.

Rantz worked swiftly, tearing away the man's clothes until he had stripped him bare. He'd jerked the man's shoes off without untying the laces and moved back into the shadows while he caught his breath.

The man was quietly terrified. He tried to move but the ropes held him too firmly. His nakedness ashamed him and already he could smell the scent of fear above the smell of petrol. He was deeply frightened as to what his fate would be. He could see the tailor in the shadows and was firmly convinced the old man had gone completely mad. His conviction was possibly justified, if madness could be measured in terms of inflictible horror. Rantz's next move was wholly barbaric.

He first roped the man's chest and torso firmly to the canvas, then continued to bind his arms and legs down as flat as he could. When he'd satisfied himself that further movement was impossible, he began to sew the man's naked flesh to the canvas cover of the work-bench.

He used the same wire thread he'd used to make the suit, starting with the loose flesh around the man's upper arm. He thrust the needle deeply into the flesh before passing it down through the canvas and back up through the flesh once again. He followed the contour of the man's arm, stitching flesh and canvas firmly together.

By working slowly and pausing often to admire his craft, Rantz was able to prolong his victim's agony for almost an hour. The man's body had twitched savagely with every insert of the needle and his flesh was washed red with blood which flowed from every needle point and stained the canvas sheet. The wire thread bit deeply and Rantz cast an expert eye over the body. There wasn't a single piece of flesh left unstitched from the top of the left shoulder around the outline of the body and back up to the right shoulder. Even the fingers had been spread apart and each was agonizingly but neatly sewn down.

The man had lost consciousness many times and each time Rantz had slapped his face to bring him round again. Oblivion was not part of Rantz's reckoning. The cries had long ceased to become a low bubble of agony from the back of the man's throat. He had continually rolled his head from side to side and Rantz decided against stitching his head down, preferring the pain which each roll of the head seemed to suggest. There was one more precaution which Rantz had to take and he quickly removed the shredded remains of the gag from the man's mouth. It had been torn apart whilst the prisoner had ground his teeth down in terrible and frightful pain. Rantz forced the mouth open once more and pushed a fresh piece of cloth into the opening. He pressed it firmly into the man's cheeks and then, with a nonchalance born of hatred but bordering on insanity, he carefully stitched the man's top and bottom lips together. Once again he used the wire thread and neatly snipped the loose ends close to the knot.

The man on the work-bench knew that he would die soon. His death would come swiftly for he could not conceive that he could live much longer and endure such terrible, overwhelming agony. Every nerve in his body screamed out for release, every cell was charged with high voltage pain that discharged into the very depths of his tortured brain. He could see Rantz standing over him, blurred like a scar against the white ceiling.

'It is nearly over for you,' Rantz said. 'I have nearly had my revenge. I think you will agree that the end is every bit as painful as the beginning of the end.'

He turned away and crossed the room and when he returned he held one hand behind his back, holding something out of sight, something heavy and chillingly cold.

'I have to destroy the evidence,' he said. 'No one must know you were here.'

He brought his arm from behind his back and the man on the table caught a glimpse of something gleaming like steel then he felt it touch his stomach and a heavy, ice-cold pressure flooded through him. The intense coldness of it swept through him and

he regained his consciousness swiftly. The clarity of what was about to happen and the reality of what it was that pressed down on his stomach chilled him to the very marrow of his soul. Rantz held a plug in his left hand, the flex snaked down across the man's body.

'I've taken the control unit out,' he said. 'It will just get hotter until it's red hot. You see, it will set the petrol alight.'

The truth began to dawn and the man on the work-bench felt the first wave of gentle heat pass through him as Rantz plugged the heavy iron in. He knew the feeling of real fear and pain as the iron began to heat up. He knew it would catch the petrol-soaked cloth alight. But it would need to pass through his body before that could happen.

Rantz reached the foot of the steps and turned for one last look before he turned the light off. A thin puff of blue smoke curled around the edge of the heavy iron. The man threw his head back and his lips split apart in a silent scream and Rantz heard the mournful bellow of a ship's hooter as it cleared the mouth of the harbour.

He switched off the light and darkness enveloped the basement like thick, heavy smoke. Rantz went up the steps and out through the shop without looking back.

Dawn Muscillo

Sister Coxall's revenge

Sister Coxall had been in Violet Ward for many years. Her pride and joy was her own little office, scrupulously clean, its walls glistening with fresh white paint. A bowl of crisp daffodils stood on the middle of her desk exactly an inch away from the leather bound blotter. The arrangement of pens behind the blotter gave the impression of rigor mortis soldiers all in a row, their black caps tightly screwed on.

Sister Coxall sat at her desk, her eyes unseeing. She pondered deeply. Who was this new doctor, anyway? Some silly youth fresh from medical school? What right had he to interfere in the running of her ward? Her small hand tightened into a fist. What right had he to even voice an opinion?

She had met him yesterday. He had driven into the hospital grounds and almost driven over her. There were plenty of 'Go Slow' notices within sight. Besides, almost everybody who worked at the hospital knew she walked through the grounds at that time of day.

'Are you all right?' he had said, scrambling from his car. 'I really wasn't concentrating.'

His sombre eyes, glowing with concern, rested on her uniform. He seemed embarrassed. 'Er, Sister, I'm frightfully sorry.'

She couldn't help smiling. 'That's all right, Mr - ' she paused politely.

'Doctor - Doctor Green. I've just arrived, as you can see,' he grinned. 'I'm to take over the running of D Block.'

Sister Coxall noticeably stiffened. 'D Block?' she echoed.

'Look, get into my car and I'll drive you to the Nurses' Home. I take it you do live in?'

They sat in silence and soon were mounting the dingy staircase leading to Sister Coxall's neat room. Once inside, she took off her cape and carefully folded it into straight pleats.

'Sit down, Doctor, I'll make some tea.'

Sitting drinking the sweet tea, Doctor Green explained how he had always been interested in the work amongst mentally disturbed people and how, when he had finished his studies, he had applied for this post in one of the country's largest psychiatric hospitals. He little thought he would be accepted, but he had, and without an interview. It seemed his references and commendations were sufficient.

He told her of the great changes and new ideas he hoped to introduce on his own block. 'For instance,' he said, 'the sister on Violet Ward has been in the same ward for ten years without ever circulating around the other wards and buildings. She surely must have lost her identity to some extent, nurse and patients fusing into one large family. Her patients are growing old with her; they must be more like children to her than sick people.' He leaned forward. 'You know, Sister, a person working with the mentally ill for any length of time without a change, is in great danger of illness herself. Tomorrow, when I begin my work, I intend to move that sister to a different ward. She may not realize it at the time, but the change will do her good.'

Sister Coxall listened, a faint pink flush tinged her ears. Reality bloomed in the shape of the lawn outside the window, her eyes taking in the neatness of its razor trimmed edges.

The day had arrived. She looked around her office. She was to be removed from this, her home, and cast among strangers.

'No,' she screamed, and her fist came heavily down upon the blotter, scattering the pens into sudden life.

Sister Coxall's mind began to work. Now it raced. Nobody knows he is here except me. He said he was staying at an hotel last night and would be coming straight to the ward this morn-

ing, before reporting to the General Office. He had no white coat or identity badge yet.

A diabolical smile drew back the corners of her thin straight mouth. 'There is only one thing to do,' she muttered, and rose and went to the door.

'Nurse,' she shrilled, 'a new patient is expected this morning, a Mr Green. When he arrives, bring him straight to my office.' She looked down at an empty report paper she held in her hand. 'It says here that he is paranoid and greatly deluded; he thinks he is a doctor. Humour him, Nurse. I'll prepare a strong sedative.'

Going to the cupboard, Sister Coxall took down a syringe and filled it with a cool amber liquid. She then took an empty file from a cabinet and began to prepare a written report on Mr Green.

She sighed. The ward was full of sedated men, all deluded, all insisting in their nightmare ravings that they were doctors. No one would ever take her ward and office away from her. No one.

Later that day in the General Office, the Hospital Secretary was speaking into the phone.

'It seems odd, Matron, this is the tenth doctor who has failed to report for duty in ten years. I must say though, that Sister Coxall manages admirably, a true devotee to her work. A doctor would find very little to do on her ward, anyway.'

Jonathan Cruise

The Claygo worm

The other day, thumbing through an old copy of a country magazine, I saw a name which struck me like a blow to the stomach, a name I had long since pushed down deep into my subconscious, repressing it as I once repressed the horror of a floating corpse I found while swimming as a child, or the sickening mutilations I met on the battlefields of the Second World War.

Yet the drowned man I can now recapture in my mind's eye, and feel only sadness that one so young should have taken his own life. The war dead I see as an ominous and ugly reminder of man's inhumanity to man. These things no longer haunt my dreams. But from the memory of Claygo Hall, I still recoil in terror, knowing that the evil there was beyond my comprehension. I ran from it in fear, and even today, old as I am, with much on my conscience I would like to put to rest before I meet my Maker, I dare not go back to that place.

Between the Mendip Hills and Bridgewater Bay, lies a region not much visited by strangers, and in the times I am speaking of, the early 1930s, as remote as any part of southern England. To be sure, holidaymakers came to the little coastal towns, with their muddy beaches and bracing air, but the hinterland of north Somerset, the flat, waterlogged peat moors, was an inhospitable place. Sour soil, stunted withy trees and acres of sedge. The inhabitants tended to keep very much to themselves, cutting turf, raising a few pigs or bullocks where the ground was not too sodden. Small, dark men, whose children went barefoot, whose homes were poor and damp.

My first appointment after I was ordained was as curate in

the village of Stumber, a charming place built on soft blue lias amidst the apple orchards and buttercup pastures of the Polden Hills. Once it had been a market town of considerable importance. King Alfred, having defeated the Danes, signed a treaty with them there, and established the town as an administrative centre. In the Middle Ages it gradually reverted to village status, but not before an imposing church had been built, whose tower dominated the countryside for miles around.

The parish was large, and stretched far out into the sedge moors north of Stumber, right out in fact to the hamlet of Claygo. From the porch of Stumber church, the rooftops of Claygo were just visible on a clear day. More clearly visible, on a low rise no more than ten feet above the surrounding marshes, but dominant because of the uniform flatness of the terrain, was Claygo Hall, ancestral home of the Gondercrest family.

It sounds rather grand, and indeed, from a distance of three miles the Hall, fenced with dark poplars, the columns of the portico gleaming whitely beyond, looked quite dignified. The frontage, added in Georgian times, was, however, more imposing than the rest of the building, a rambling structure of weathered stone. Moss clung to the sagging roof, green slime stained the sandstone pillars, and the stucco was peeling from the façade.

Claygo also had a church, a small, stark building without warmth or beauty, lacking completely the homely charm one usually finds in even the least pretentious country churches. I shuddered the first time I walked into it – and yet for me, the young curate, this was to be my testing ground, my opportunity to come to grips with the task of preaching the word of God, to meet and cater to the spiritual needs of a real congregation. I should have been excited, and yet I was afraid. I shook myself angrily and walked out into the churchyard.

It was unkempt, except for a few graves near the porch, the graves of those villagers who had died recently. The rest of the burial ground presented a forlorn appearance, rank grass and thistles, thickets of bramble and honeysuckle, dry leaves

and whiskered seed-heads tossing in the autumn wind. Amidst this desolation stood a number of granite monoliths, which, where the mouldering inscriptions could be deciphered, proved to be the tombs of the Gondercrest family.

From this area of the graveyard, a path wound its way towards a dark yew hedge, beyond which the bulk of Claygo Hall could be discerned. I followed the path and came to an iron gate on rusty hinges; it groaned dismally as it swung open.

Though I felt oppressed by the atmosphere of neglect and decay, I decided to call on the owner of the Hall and introduce myself. The pathway suggested that one or more of the Gondercrest family attended the Church. Indeed, its proximity to the house, and the numerous references both within and without the walls to the family name, indicated that once it may have been the chapel of Claygo Hall rather than the villagers' place of worship.

The pathway led between thickets of unkempt laurel to the front of the house. There was an old-fashioned bell-pull beside the door, and I tugged it gently, afraid it might come away in my hands.

Just as I was about to leave, thinking no one was at home, the door swung open a little way, and I found myself peering into two eyes, which, though set in the same face, might have belonged to different people. One, I realized, after the initial shock, was glass, and had perhaps been fitted when the woman was young. It was the eye of a dark and lustrous beauty. The other, the seeing eye, was rheumy and clouded, veiled to a narrow slit by wrinkled lids.

'Yes?' said the hag abruptly, in a voice like the cawing of a rook. Then she saw my collar and softened her manner, opening the door a little wider. 'It's the Vicar, is it? You'd best come in.'

'The curate,' I corrected. 'I am new to the parish. My name is Trescott.'

She cackled mockingly.

'Thought it couldn't be the Vicar. He don't come to Claygo

often. Allus sends his curates.'

'Is Mr Gondercrest in?' I inquired, cutting her short. 'Or Mrs Gondercrest?'

'There ain't no Missus. Master be home. I'll tell 'un you'm 'ere.'

A minute later she returned and beckoned me to follow her. I did so, and was shown through a tall, panelled door into a library. Standing before the fireplace where a few blocks of peat were smouldering, was the Master of Claygo Hall. I introduced myself and he offered his hand. It was smooth, like the skin of a snake.

'Aigur Gondercrest,' he said, in a voice that was resonant, yet had no warmth – a cold, even sinister voice.

I tried to estimate his age, but everything about his features seemed contradictory. His hair was thick and fair, almost golden in colour, with no hint of greyness, yet the skin of his face was that of an old man, like crinkled parchment, and his eyes were set deep in their sockets. His mouth was thin and wide, turned down at the corners, like a shark. It was essentially a cruel face, but an intriguing one. He was of average height, but there was a hint of power in the set of his shoulders, and though I guessed his age to be between fifty and sixty, he moved with the ease and grace of a much younger man.

'New curate, eh?' he remarked sardonically. 'I shall be coming to hear you preach. I'm concerned about my soul. Are you?'

I blushed at what I took to be a mockery.

'Of course,' I replied. 'It's my job to be concerned.'

'Your Vicar has given me up. In fact we haven't seen him around Claygo for a long time. This is a God-forsaken place in more senses than one.'

'No place is forsaken by God,' I declared warmly. 'If the squire talks that way, what sort of example is he setting the humbler folk of the village?'

'Most of them have minds like the slime they live in,' answered Gondercrest. 'Come, you are a man of education, I'll

pour you a glass of port, and tell you what you have let yourself in for.'

I felt I should tell the man his manners were execrable, and gossip was not my concern, but I didn't. The port seemed a good idea because I was cold and depressed by what I had seen of my new parish. As to gossip, well, I am as curious as the next man, and I thought that my station and my training would enable me to reject that which should not be believed. Not least in my thoughts was to ask this peculiar man the truth behind the tales I had heard in Stumber, the legend of the Claygo worm.

Gondercrest motioned me to a chair beside the fireplace, and threw on to the glowing peat a couple of apple logs, which soon gave off a cheering flame. He sat in an armchair opposite cupping in his hands the port glass which winked cherry red through his fingers.

The conversation which ensued was very one-sided. My host exercised his vituperative wit at the expense of the village folk. He described them as the crudest of peasants, little more civilized than the beasts they reared. I began to realize that a deep animosity must exist between Gondercrest and his tenants, yet he constantly reiterated that the rents he charged were a pittance, and the families he spoke of had lived in Claygo for centuries.

I broke into his monologue to ask him about the legend.

'People in Stumber talk about the "Claygo Worm". It was, I suppose, a dragon of some sort.'

'I thought you would ask about the Worm.' Gondercrest's eyes had suddenly brightened, his face in the flickering light became more alert, almost strained. He leaned forward and gazed at me, a penetrating, unwinking gaze.

'The Worm is not a dragon, it is a worm. We do not regard it as a myth, something to be scoffed at, or used as a tale to frighten naughty children. People believe in it. It is real.'

He rose to his feet and from the shadows above the mantelshelf brought down a plaque from the wall. It was of rosewood,

with a beaten silver heraldic device upon it. The shield itself was unremarkable – a trio of lions rampant feebly waved their paws in the air. Supporting the shield, however, were two most curious creatures. At first I thought they were snakes. The base of the shield rested upon the coils of their bodies, the heads reared on either side. But the bodies were segmented, with bristly excrescences, and the heads, loathsome, eyeless heads, were armed with ugly pincers. It was quite revolting, the badge of chivalry supported by creatures of slime and corruption in this way.

‘Very unusual,’ I remarked. Gondercrest smiled, and smiling, his face reminded one even more of a shark.

“Gondercrest” is a Norman French corruption of our family name. We were here long before the Conquest. Twelve, thirteen hundred years ago, this land was a salt water marsh. People could live only on little hillocks and rises such as this one. Even then, they had sometimes to drive wooden piles into the ground to build their houses above flood level. God knows why they bothered. Perhaps it was because they were outcasts from the richer, stronger communities living in the hills. Some say that they were the original Celtic inhabitants of the land.

‘We Gondercrests were a different kettle of fish. We were the survivors of a Danish raiding party which lost its ships in a storm, and was then almost destroyed by King Alfred’s men. We were few, but we were strong, and we settled here. When the worms came we slew them. For this, the marsh people were grateful, and never betrayed us. But we didn’t slay all the worms, for then we might no longer be welcome.’

Gondercrest sat back in his chair and chuckled, a chilling, grating, mockery of laughter.

‘Where were they supposed to come from, these worms?’ I asked.

‘From the sea, where else? Poke about among the mud and stones along the Channel coast at low tide, and you might uncover a small one. Pick him up, and he’ll writhe and twist like a snake, but take care, or he’ll nip you with his pincers. He looks

like those fellows on my crest, but they measure in yards where he measures in inches.'

'Why do you speak of these horrors in the present tense?' I exclaimed, for the obvious attempt to curdle my blood annoyed me.

'Why not? Your parishioners believe the Worm lives. Furthermore, they believe it lives because I want it to.' He cackled at the thought in a manner that made me doubt his sanity. 'Why should I discourage that belief? It ensures they treat me with proper respect!'

I shook myself from his hypnotic gaze, and spoke with anger.

'There are a thousand legends of the sea serpent, which your worm seems to resemble. All of them are false, or foolish. I think your family has been guilty of preying on the superstitious beliefs of simple folk. You are doing the same today. I find it distasteful.'

I stood up to go, suddenly feeling rather guilty of criticizing so bluntly a man who had offered me his hospitality. Gondercrest regarded me quite blandly.

'You are entitled to your opinions as I am to mine, but you are much too inexperienced to understand the ways of a primitive place like this, so I will not take offence. Just remember this always. I am the Master of Claygo. Thus it will be until you bury me in the churchyard there. Then you can change what you will.'

'I take it then, you have no heir,' I replied, shortly.

'I have fathered two children. Both died young. My family are prone to tubercular disease, and the climate here is extremely uncongenial.'

'Your wife . . . ?' I began.

'I only said I fathered children. I have never married.'

On this note I left him. As he saw me to the door, I noticed a young woman with a pleasant countenance polishing the oak furniture in the hall.

I walked in the gathering dusk to where I had left my bicycle propped against the wall of the church. I saw not a soul as I

pedalled the long slow miles to Stumber. Strange wraiths of mist oozed across the road in front of me, and I was glad to reach the gentle slopes of the Polden Hills, and see the solid tower of Stumber church before me. As I stopped to open the vicarage gates (for I was lodging with the Reverend Stacey and his wife) I looked back. Cold and bleak in the moonlight lay the shroud of fog across the moors. Here and there a rank of withy trees poked through. Far away, like a whale stranded upon a desolate shore was the mound of Claygo, with the mist, like a rising tide, beginning to engulf it.

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Twice each month I held a Sunday morning service in Claygo church. Gondercrest was always there, sitting aloof in a family pew, tucked away next to the choir stalls. The congregation was small, but regular, and one face I recognized immediately was the girl with long black hair I had glimpsed fleetingly at the Hall.

Her name was Alice Choate. Tom Choate, her father, was churchwarden. He was a man of rather more intelligence and personality than most of the villagers, who were, on the whole, much as Gondercrest had described them, bucolic to a degree. Choate rented a few acres of pasture and a peat digging from the Master of Claygo, but had a tidy and well-roofed cottage a hundred yards from the church.

I liked Alice. She was a buxom, healthy young woman, with a sweet voice that enhanced the hymn singing. The colour of youth freshened her cheeks, and her eyes were usually merry and alert. Except, I noticed, when she glanced towards the Gondercrest pew, and met the Squire's gaze. Then her voice would falter, and her eyelids drop. For his part, he spent much of the service staring at her, in a manner I felt was blatantly rude and unseemly.

Time passed. Autumn gave way to winter. The mists became fogs, dank and chilling. Rain seemed to fall for weeks on end, so that the flat, grey land, and the flat, grey sky merged imperceptibly. Then came a few days of sharp frost. Ice glistened on the rhines and ditches, the mud on the roads hardened to ridges

and boulders, and I arrived at Claygo church one Sunday morning, stiff with cold, and bruised where the slippery conditions had twice fetched me off my machine.

Alice Choate was there as usual, but I did not hear her voice in the congregation when we sang our first hymn. Her face was bowed over her hymnbook, and though her lips moved, the clear soprano notes were not forthcoming. I looked towards the Gondercrest pew, thinking she might be finding his attentions more embarrassing than usual, but he was not there. Strange, I thought, for he had never missed a service before.

As I stood at the door of the church, to bid the congregation goodbye, I held Alice's hand a little longer than usual and asked after her health. To my astonishment she pulled herself away and ran down the churchyard path, sobbing as she went.

'Oh dear,' I gasped to her father. 'Whatever have I done? What is the matter with the poor child?'

'It's nothing you've to blame yourself for, curate,' said Tom, following his daughter's departure with sad eyes. 'I think mebbe you should know about it though. Perhaps you could give us advice.'

'Of course,' I agreed, anxious for the girl, but glad the problem had nothing to do with me, for a young curate, as I had learned already, can excite emotions of which he is quite oblivious in his flock.

'Can I speak to thee in private, then? Will you come down to the house for a moment?'

Ten minutes later I was in the front room of Tom Choate's cottage. Moist-eyed, his daughter sat near the fireplace, in profile to us, as Tom, in halting words, told me what had happened.

'She's been working up at the Hall to make herself a bit of money, for I can't bless her with much of a dowry. I curse myself now for having agreed to it, but I thought the Squire's getting on a bit now, and she's a good, sensible girl. Anyhow, to cut a long story short, he took her, took her against her will, and now she's with child.'

I was aghast. The thought of that odious creature forcing

his attentions on a girl barely out of her teens sickened me.

'Against her will? This is dreadful. Should you not visit the police?'

Choate fixed me with the dull, hopeless stare of a sick animal.

'I did. Constable Mathias has spoken to Gondercrest - he's afraid of him like most around here, so I don't expect he said much. Gondercrest claims that what happened was with my daughter's consent, and that furthermore, he will marry her.'

I turned to the girl.

'Is it true? Would you marry him? Has he asked you?'

She lifted a haggard, tear-stained face.

'Never!' she whispered. 'I'll never marry him. I hate him, and I fear him more than I fear Satan or the fires of Hell.'

'How did it happen?' I asked, trying to make my voice compassionate.

She burst into sobs, great gulping sobs of despair.

'I don't know,' she choked. 'He came in as I was cleaning the bedrooms one day. He held me and made me look into his eyes. I lost all my strength, I couldn't pull myself away. He told me things, horrible, evil things that would happen to me if I didn't give in to him. Then he pushed me on to the bed . . .'

Her voice died and a vacant look came into her eyes, as if she were trying both to remember, and to forget.

'Pardon me if I ask,' I broke in, 'but if you accuse him, it may have some bearing upon the issue. Were you a virgin then?'

'No sir,' she said, and the tears welled up again. 'But I only ever did it once before, with Ben Tippet last haymaking time. We were careful, honest, and he's promised to wed me when we've saved up a bit, like.'

It is difficult for a young man, scarcely out of his own adolescence, to make a judgement on the frailties of others, and I could only try to be rational.

'Look, Alice,' I said, 'there is little you can do against Mr Gondercrest's word. You have sinned by your own admission but our Lord will forgive you if you try to make amends in the

future. Your father is a good man. Bring your child into the world under this roof, and cherish it. I will speak to Gondercrest, and tell him to trouble you no more.'

Her father nodded and took her hand, but she would not be consoled.

'You don't understand,' she wailed. 'It is not me that he wants. It is the child! He wants an heir of his own flesh. I am so frightened.'

I tried again.

'Mr Choate,' I said firmly, 'I think that you and I should go together and see this man. Bring Alice if you like. Let the matter be settled before a witness. I will be the witness. Furthermore, if he says, or attempts to do, anything which might upset your daughter, I will remind him of his duties and obligations as a Christian.'

Tom Choate licked his lips nervously.

'If you think that is the best way then, for my child's sake, I will. I won't deny I fear the man a little – always that family has had strange powers, and we ordinary folk reckon it be best to stay away from them. Still, if you come, I'll face him.'

I called for a pen and paper and wrote to Gondercrest, asking him to receive us on the following Wednesday afternoon.

'Send this up to the Hall,' I told Tom Choate. 'I shall be here at three o'clock. Then we shall see if the man will listen to reason.'

Mrs Choate, a small, frail woman with mousy hair, brought in a cup of tea, and after a few minutes of desultory conversation, I took my leave. I mentioned the matter to my Vicar that evening, hoping for some paternal advice, though not practical help, for much as he loved the ceremony of the Church, he avoided as far as possible involvement with the earthier elements of parish life.

'Dear boy,' he cried in alarm when I spoke the name of Gondercrest, 'have nothing to do with that dreadful fellow. He'll see you off, mark my words. One of my curates actually left the Ministry after a row with the man, he was so distressed and confused.'

That was all the advice I got, but I resolved, none the less to help the Choates if I could, and set off on my bicycle the following Wednesday. The frost had given way to a period of sleet, and then steady, cold rain, but now the clouds had lifted a little. Away to the east, however, snow lay on the brooding scarp of Mendip.

I passed the church on its tiny hummock, and the gateway to Claygo Hall, and coasted along the lane to the cottage. This lane was really a causeway, for on each side was a wide ditch, or rhine, brimful at this time of year, and spreading out into the surrounding fields. Beyond the cottage, the lane became a drove, unsurfaced, and deeply scarred with water-filled cart ruts.

Tom Choate was in conversation with an old man by the gate at the head of the drove.

'Oi sid 'er lying ther,' the old man was saying, 'she'm too young to be out in the vields this toime o' year. Her bea goner, oi reckon.'

Tom looked up and saw me approaching.

'Old Josh here tells me my calf is sick - or worse. I'd best go down and take a look, if you don't mind.'

'No,' I said, 'I'll come along if it is not too far.'

'Josh is right,' he told me in a weary voice, as we trudged along through the mud. 'But I'm short of fodder, and with the weather breaking, I thought she could go out for a day or two.'

We turned off the drove and crossed a small stone bridge into a field. Reeds mingled with the grass, and water squeezed up over our boots as we walked towards what looked like a small bundle of black and white rags, casually thrown down. As though expecting something unpleasant, Tom Choate approached it cautiously, and rolled back the head with his stick. On either side of the neck was a wound, small, but judging from the congealed blood on the carcase, deep. In the centre of the throat was an uglier mutilation, where a piece of the hide appeared to have been removed, exposing raw flesh.

We stood in silence for a few moments looking down on the remains of the poor creature.

'Like a pitchfork was driven into its neck,' muttered Choate.

'Aye,' croaked the old man. 'But that don't account for the throat. I seen it before. I know what done it, but I ain't saying, and I ain't saying neither.'

With these words he made for the gate at a shambling trot and I was left alone with Tom.

'What does he mean?' I asked.

Instead of answering, Tom Choate pointed at a small water-filled depression, a few feet from the calf's body. It was no more than twelve inches wide, hardly distinguishable from a multitude of places where water stood on the surface of the ground. Choate tore up a clod of earth and lobbed it into the puddle. It sank from sight, which surprised me, as I thought the water could be no more than a couple of inches deep.

Curious, I picked up a long, crooked stick that lay nearby and went to poke it into the hole. Tom had backed away a pace or two.

'Take care,' he said, a note of alarm in his voice.

I pushed the stick into the water-filled depression, and it went down easily, two feet, four feet, finally six feet at least, so that I was bent over, holding on to the last few inches which protruded from the water. It was uncanny.

'Look!' I called to Tom. 'It goes straight down, six feet or more. Whatever can have made such a thing?'

'Come away curate,' cried the farmer, and I could see he was really afraid now.

Suddenly the stick was agitated violently from side to side. I gave an involuntary yell. Then it was dragged from my hand by a powerful unseen force and disappeared abruptly and soundlessly into the earth. I was pulled to my knees in the mud, and before my eyes, the puddle of water gurgled away into the beginnings of a smooth tunnel leading down into the black soil. Then it swirled back, and in a moment was still again, reflecting the sombre clouds overhead, and the bare branches of the withy trees bordering the nearby ditch.

'The Worm!' gasped Choate, and together we ran, mindless

of the mud and water, through the gate and up the drove to his cottage.

In the yard we stopped to collect ourselves. Choate was in a very distressed condition, muttering incoherently about Gondercrest's power over 'evil things'. For my part, I was calming down, having got over the unpleasant shock of feeling the stick pulled from my hands, and searching my mind for a rational explanation. I laid my hand on my companion's arm.

'Pull yourself together Mr Choate,' I told him, in as firm a voice as I could command. 'As likely as not, there was some suction in the bottom of that hole, like quicksand, that pulled the stick down. As for your calf, maybe a hungry fox, or a rogue dog killed it – perhaps even a man with a grudge against you.'

He shook his head stubbornly.

'Animals don't kill like that, and I've no enemies hereabouts – leastways . . .'

He let his words hang in the air and I cut in.

'Let's make no accusations then, or guesses for that matter. Come, we'll get our business at the Hall done with, and then I suggest you speak to the constable about your calf. Meantime, I think you should not distress your daughter by telling her what we have seen.'

We walked in silence, the three of us, towards the big house. The day itself was silent. Already the gloom of a winter's evening was settling over the land. I carried in my hand a pocket Bible – why I do not know. Choate had brought a billhook with him, but I made him leave it by the gateway.

Gondercrest received us in his library – the same room I had visited before. Though the darkness was closing in, no lamps were burning. Only a fitful flicker from the fireplace and the dull grey slabs of the windows illuminated our gathering. He was wearing a short dressing gown of crimson silk, with ornamentations in gold thread embroidered upon it, snake-like things that writhed up the lapels. It looked very old and wrinkled, as though it had lain for a long time in a trunk. Choate's mouth sagged in disbelief as he stared at it. Alice saw nothing,

for her eyes remained downcast and the deathly pallor of her face revealed her emotional distress.

'Please be seated Miss Choate – and you too, gentlemen,' said Gondercrest, and even when he spoke those simple words, his deep, well-modulated tones held a hint of menace. 'I must apologize, Mr Choate, for not having called upon you. I wish now to observe the formalities and ask for your daughter's hand in marriage.'

'It – it is not her wish, sir,' stuttered Tom, swallowing nervously.

'Indeed?' Gondercrest tilted his time-ravaged, but still brutally handsome head, and surveyed each of us in turn, fixing his gaze finally upon Alice. In a voice that was soft yet scornful, he continued. 'My dear child, you have bestowed your favours upon me, and I, on an impulse which' – here he gave me a contrite glance – 'as a mature man I should perhaps have resisted, found my will turned to water, and my emotions beyond control. Let us join our hearts in marriage, and bring your child into the world a Gondercrest, and heir to all I possess!'

Alice's answer was a muffled sob. I spoke up on her behalf.

'No doubt, sir, your proposal is made out of kindness and chivalry and with the most honourable intentions. Nevertheless, the girl has made it plain to all of us that she does not wish to become your wife. She will bear your son and cherish it, but she will not marry you. She only wishes to be left alone.'

'Cannot Miss Choate speak for herself?' snapped Gondercrest angrily. 'Alice, my loved one, look at this house! With a womanly touch it could be elegant again. Out there is a thousand acres of land. It is mine, yours when I am gone! One day it shall belong to our son.' His voice rose to a near hysterical pitch. 'I don't ask you to love me, not yet, just take what I am offering. No man will ever offer you so much again!'

'You raped me!' Alice hissed, and the venom in her voice was beyond belief. 'You raped me, and I never want to see or speak to you again.'

Two dark spots appeared on Gondercrest's cheeks. He thrust

forward his chin and surveyed Tom Choate and me with eyes that were bright with rage.

'So be it then. But when her time is near she must come to the Hall and bear her child within these walls. I will hire a nurse, and a woman to foster the infant. It will take my name and I will raise it.'

'Never!' cried Alice.

'It must be done this way,' continued Gondercrest, as though he had not heard her. 'In return, you, Thomas Choate shall have the freehold of your farm, and I will give the girl one hundred pounds towards her dowry.'

Choate rose, a little unsteadily, to his feet. The simple dignity of a peasant farmer welled up in him.

'That's not the way my daughter wants it, Mr Gondercrest, and that's not the way it will be. I'm not so afeared of you that I'll bargain with my own flesh and blood as though I was selling a bullock in Stumber market. Alice and I will leave now.'

Gondercrest darted to bar their way to the door, the gold thread on his gown glinting in the firelight so that he seemed enveloped in writhing shapes. All reason had gone out of his voice.

'Fools!' he shouted hoarsely. 'The child is mine! You will suffer the fate of those, your wretched kinsmen, who dared to defy the Gondercrests ten centuries ago!' His voice sank to an evil whisper. 'Do you think I don't know about your calf, Thomas Choate? Do you think I don't know how it died? You will come back. You will come back, and grovel on your knees . . .'

'Stop!' I cried, interrupting his foul threats and thrusting the Bible I carried into his face. 'Satan is speaking with your tongue, Gondercrest; look upon this book, and remember your humanity and your faith!'

Gondercrest looked at me and for a moment I thought reason would assert itself. Then, with a flailing sweep of his arm, he dashed the Bible to the floor, and turning, ran through the door behind him and up the wide staircase. Peal after peal of man-

iacal laughter echoed through the house as we scurried to the front door and set off in haste for the cottage.

It was dark now, but the rainclouds had parted in the east, and a wan moon shone down through the rift, illuminating eerily the wraiths of vapour that rose from the stagnant waters of the moor. Tom Choate kept glancing back nervously, and his knuckles gleamed white on the handle of his billhook he had picked up as we left the Hall. His other arm was placed protectively over the girl's shoulders. I felt none too brave myself, and my throat went dry as we passed the graveyard, for I thought I heard the creak of the iron gate which led from the Manor house to the church.

'Go home quickly,' I whispered. 'If that is Gondercrest, I'll see he doesn't interfere with you.'

The two figures set off across the causeway, picking a path through the shining puddles. I paused by the churchyard wall, my heart pounding, my ears strained for the sound of movement, but I heard none. Then, suddenly, there came a scream of mortal terror from the dark drove down which the father and his daughter had vanished. Dimly, in the moonlight, I saw a flurry of movement and a figure slump to the ground. Tom Choate's voice reached me in a cry for help, anguished and distorted by fear. I ran down the track, stumbling over ruts, splashing through potholes.

Before I reached the scene of the incident, Choate came lurching toward me, the limp form of his daughter in his arms. He was almost incoherent with emotion.

'To the church!' he cried. 'Run to the church!'

Blindly I obeyed, rushing in front of him up the path, fumbling for the key, and at last opening the door and scrambling inside, never once looking back for fear of what I might see.

I lit two of the altar candles and brought them to where Choate had laid his daughter in the aisle. She was unconscious but intermittent spasms shook her body.

'What happened?' I asked.

Choate, who was kneeling beside his daughter, looked up at me, and his eyes were glazed with a kind of incredulous horror.

He spoke rapidly, his voice high pitched, and shaking with emotion.

'We went down the drove a few yards. Then Alice stopped and pointed – she didn't speak. The water in the ditch was moving, like there was a big water-rat or an otter swimming just under the surface towards us. The ripples reached the bank, then up come the most dreadful thing you ever saw, like a huge thick snake, though it had no eyes, and down each side of the body were sort of frills, wriggling and waving. Alice screamed then, and fell down. The beast reared up towards me and the flesh in the front of its head rolled back, so there was a great rubbery mouth, with black horns on each side. Like pincers, they were, horrible! It lunged at me, very quick, but somehow I got in first with the billhook. The blade bit in, and blood came out, black frothy stuff that smelled awful. I must've hurt it bad, for it went back in the ditch like a coiled spring. Then I picked up Alice and ran.'

My scalp prickled as his faltering description ended. I recalled Gondercrest's words: 'People believe in it, it is real!' Alice moaned.

'The girl is in a bad way,' I muttered. 'We must do something. We must get help.'

Choate's response was to run to the bellrope, hanging stiffly down from the tower. He seized it and the solemn reverberations boomed through the still night air. I took off my coat and laid the girl's head on it. Then I cautiously opened the big oak door and waited for someone to come. They came soon enough, half a dozen men and three women who lived nearby, anxious to know who might be tolling the bell on a winter's night, and why. More than one of the men had brought a shotgun with him, and in the candlelight the tines of a pitchfork gleamed in the hands of another.

The women gathered in a huddle around Alice, while the men listened open-mouthed to Tom's description of what he had seen. Then one of the women, I learned later she was the village midwife, called Choate by name.

'Is your daughter with child, Thomas?' she cried.

He nodded.

'She's going to lose 'un, then. You must get her to the doctor at Stumber quick.'

Sam Godwin, a man of gypsy origin, who owned a van from which he sold paraffin and household goods around the moorland farms, took Tom Choate's arm.

'Come over to my place, Tommy. We'll get out the van, and lay a mattress on the floor. I'll have you and the girl to Stumber in ten minutes.'

Murmuring his thanks, Tom followed him out of the church.

When the van had rattled away, taking Alice and her father to Stumber, the night seemed to wrap itself around the little church like a black shroud. One of the men broke the stillness with a nervous cough.

'If you'm going along to Tom's cottage, curate, we'd best kip 'ee company.'

'Aye, Jacob,' said another, 'I don't believe in them worms meself, but by Gor, it's a right queer business.'

'This Gondercrest has a deal to answer for, Oi reckon,' said the man with the shotgun. 'If Oi sid 'un tnight, Oi'd settle 'is 'ash for once and for all!'

'Big talk,' said Jacob, as we snuffed the candles and left the church. 'He'd settle your hash in the morning if he heard you now.'

The women and four of the men, including a taciturn young fellow carrying a pitchfork who had not spoken a word, shuffled off into the night, leaving three of us to cross the causeway to Choate's cottage. We carried a lantern which cast a dim pool of light around our feet. Three pairs of eyes scanned the still, black waters of the ditches beside the path. I think we would all have run in panic if a water-rat had shown its nose.

Half-way along the light glinted on the blade of a billhook. There, half submerged in a puddle, was Tom Choate's weapon. I picked it up, and my hand shook as I did so. We scurried the last fifty yards, and knocked on the door of the cottage. Mrs Choate let us in.

'What's up?' she cried, seeing the three of us, guns and all.

'Why has the bell been ringing? Where's Tom and Alice?'

We calmed her as best we could, and I explained that her daughter was in danger of a miscarriage, and had been taken with her father to Stumber.

'That's not all, is it?' she replied, her nostrils twitching like a rabbit sensing danger. 'There's something worse than what you've told me. You're afear'd o' summat, I can tell. What is it?'

'Your husband and daughter were frightened by something they saw, or thought they saw, back along the drove,' I told her. 'That's why the men are here with their guns. If you like, I'll stay until your husband returns.'

The woman turned pale.

'Thomas doesn't scare easily,' she muttered. 'Gondercrest must be behind this. He's evil, that man, evil! You, curate, you're all fine words, and well meaning no doubt, but he rapes our children, and flaunts your God, and you can do nothing. As for you,' she turned scornfully upon my companions, 'you would drop your pitchforks and your guns if he so much as shook his fist at you.'

The men left. I spent a restless night on an old sofa in the front room of the cottage. I rose at dawn. Mrs Choate, obviously worried about her daughter, made me a cup of tea, and I promised to go to Stumber at once and find out if all was well.

My bicycle stood against the fence at the garden gate, where I had left it. Beside it was Tom's billhook. I examined the blade, curious to see if there was any evidence to support his story. There was no sign of the black, evil-smelling blood he claimed to have drawn from the monster, but then, the weapon was lying in water when we found it.

I pushed my machine along the drove to the church. A fitful breeze ruffled the water in the ditches, and sighed through the bare branches of the withy trees. The horror and menace of the previous night seemed unreal, like a half-remembered nightmare. I thought I would check to see in what sort of disorder we had left the church and walked up to the porch. Something caught my eye among the gravestones, something dark

and red, lying on the ground. I strode towards it, and suddenly my heart became a cold stone inside my body as my mind registered what I was seeing. A dead man lay crumpled at the foot of the nearest Gondercrest tomb. A dead man wrapped in a crimson robe, the head thrown back to reveal a hideous wound in the throat. Congealed blood darkened the flaxen hair and the grass all around. The sightless eyes were stamped with the indelible mark of terror.

One more thing my gaze took in before I turned and ran. Emerging from the lank and matted grass to one side of the corpse was a kind of tunnel, perhaps made by rats or rabbits . . . perhaps not . . .

As I pedalled madly along the road to Stumber, my mind whirled with theories. That Gondercrest had been done to death violently was beyond argument. Had one of the vile creatures of legend really emerged from the earth to slay him as he stood there amongst the graves? Had some grievously wronged villager, Alice's sweetheart perhaps, seen the opportunity to settle the score once and for all? I staggered, exhausted, into the police station at Stumber, and told them where to go, and what to expect, but more than that was beyond me.

Of course I gave evidence at the inquest. The pathologist described Gondercrest's wounds as being more or less consistent with an attack by a powerful man, armed with a pitchfork, so a verdict of murder by a person, or persons unknown was returned. The police, headed by a determined young inspector from Bristol, made exhaustive enquiries, and examined every pitchfork in Claygo, but to no avail. I was present when poor Choate tried to describe to them the events of the evening preceding the crime, but the inspector had him led gently away, and asked me if it would not be a kindness to have him certified.

I buried Gondercrest. The only mourner was his peculiar housekeeper, who wept copiously from her good eye. The pallbearers, hired by the undertaker, disappeared more quickly than was decent when they had lowered the coffin into the grave, and my knees shook as I intoned the last words of the

burial service and cast a handful of the black earth of Claygo on to the polished wood.

I never set foot there again, and never will. That there was evil in that place, I have no doubt. Whether there were creatures surviving from an age of darkness and mystery I am not sure. Maybe the evil was in Aigur Gondercrest alone, a strange hypnotic power that died when he died and was buried in that desolate churchyard.

Yet if the worms did not exist, a murderer surely does, together with a poor demented girl whose father is a broken man, afraid of the hoot of an owl, or the scurry of a moorhen along the rhines. Is Claygo Hall a mouldering ruin, now that the last of the Gondercrests has been gone these many years? As I said at the beginning, I have neither the desire to know, nor the courage to go and find out.

Myc Harrison

The abscess

The comparison between a dentist and a detective is not one that, under normal circumstances, I'd have felt the need to consider. There are numerous comparisons one could draw between similar professions, had one the time and the inclination to do so. Unfortunately, my father had an excess of both.

'You see, Robert, dentistry is not simply a matter of extracting teeth any more.' He wagged his finger at me to emphasize the point. 'I doubt if it ever was,' he added.

His glass was almost empty and I leaned forward and filled it for him. The glass decanter was quite heavy and I held it firmly around the neck, hearing the mellow gulp of sherry as it flowed out. He hardly noticed and I sat back in the Chesterfield, feeling the leather creak beneath me. The familiar comforts of home had wrapped themselves around me and the heat from the open fire made me feel drowsy, though it was still only early in the evening. I let my eyes close and listened to my father talking about his work. I suspected that he resented my decision to take up law rather than follow the family profession, though he'd never voiced his resentment in so many words. I almost envied my mother her night at the opera.

'In certain respects it's similar to a detective's work,' he continued. 'Though not as arduous, I'd imagine.' He seemed pleased with the comparison and expanded it further. 'For instance, one cannot simply extract a tooth as they did in the old days. One must examine the evidence, so to speak. Seek out the facts before arriving at any hard and fast conclusion. I say, are you asleep?'

He nudged my foot and I jumped slightly. 'No, not at all.

Just resting,' I said. 'I'm not sure I agree with what you just said, though,' I added, by way of proof. 'I mean, what sort of evidence is there for a dentist to examine anyway?'

He considered my question. 'Well,' he began, 'there are X-rays to start with. Then there is the examination and charting and the general state of the gums. It all helps to pinpoint the treatment that may be required.'

I grunted and he took it to be agreement. He elaborated further and gave me a case history as final proof.

'You were away at university at the time,' he said. 'It was a girl patient of mine; she had been with me since she was so high,' he held his hand a few feet from the floor. 'She came in with a toothache and we X-rayed her, examined her teeth and double-checked every filling. We could not find the troublesome tooth. I refilled several teeth which could have caused the trouble but to no avail. Finally, I had to test every tooth with a piece of hot wax.'

'What ever for?' I asked.

'Because the toothache came and went of its own accord.'

'I'm afraid you've lost me, Father. Why would you need to put hot wax on her teeth?'

'Well, because her toothache seemed to affect her at different times. Like many people, she found it hard to locate the exact place where the pain was coming from.'

I nodded at that. I had experienced toothache on two occasions and at neither time had I been able to pinpoint the exact tooth. In fact, the second time I even had difficulty locating which side the pain came from.

'In order to isolate the guilty tooth, I pressed hot wax against every tooth because heat can often trigger off the nerve. As it happened the girl had a hairline crack in one of her fillings. A crack so thin it didn't show up on the X-ray. The hot wax triggered off the nerve and I was able to treat the toothache for her. So you see, there is a certain amount of detective work involved in dentistry, Robert. You look very tired, is there anything wrong?'

I smiled at his concern. 'No Father. I'm just a little tired. I

think the sherry is making me fall asleep. I've had a long drive down here from Yorkshire, you know.'

'Quite, quite,' he nodded. 'Your bed's all made if you feel like turning in,' he said. He didn't try very hard to keep the disappointment from his voice and I didn't let him down.

'Lord, no. It's much too early.' I stood up and stretched myself. 'How about a game of chess?' I knew he loved the game and I doubted he'd played much since I moved up to Yorkshire. I was back for the Christmas holidays and I was determined to spend as much time with my parents as possible.

We set the board up on one of the nest of tables and carried it over towards the fireplace. Father turned off all the lights in the room and left just one burning, an anglepoise lamp which shone down on the board like a miniature sun. The chess pieces were cold, made of heavy marble. They had once belonged to my grandfather. Each piece had a different expression, even the pawns. As a child, though I wasn't allowed to play with the pieces, I used to stare at those tiny faces and listen while my grandfather invented stories about each and every one of them.

We played a cautious opening game and I eased off my shoes, not expecting any interruption. I'd refilled our glasses and added another log to the fire when the room was lit up from the sweep of a car's headlights as it turned into the drive.

'Who can that be?' my father asked, sounding mildly irritated.

'Maybe it's Mother?' I guessed.

'No,' he looked at his watch. 'It's only just past nine o'clock.'

We waited for the bell in the hall to ring but nothing happened. The lights had dimmed and the car engine had been switched off yet I'd heard no other sound, no slamming of the car's door. We held up the game for maybe two or three minutes, waiting.

'Perhaps I'd better go and see who it is,' I suggested. I found my shoes and made my way to the front door.

The first thing I noticed was how bitterly cold it was. It took my breath away as I swung open the front door and peered

across the front garden. The car was parked at an angle to the house and the driver's door stood open. A man was leaning heavily against the open door, his breath white against the dark sky. He hadn't heard me opening the door for he didn't look up.

'Can I help you?' I called out to him. He still didn't move. 'I say, are you all right? Can I help you?'

I was reluctant to venture out into the cold but the man simply hadn't heard me. Or if he had he showed no signs of acknowledging me. He remained exactly as he was, his arms spread out across the top of the door and the roof of the car, his head lowered against his chest. Curiosity finally got the better of me and I started out across the drive.

'Listen, if there's anything I can . . .' I called to him. 'Are you OK?'

He lifted his head to face me and at that second my father switched on the powerful outside spotlight from within the house. The brilliant white glow washed over us and I recoiled in horror.

The man's face was swollen grotesquely on his left side. The line of his jaw fused with the thinness of his neck and throat and his entire face looked lopsided. His bottom lip was dragged downwards and I caught a glint of his teeth in his open mouth. His left eye was badly misshapen and the flesh beneath it was pulled down so tightly I could see the soft, moist membrane beneath his eye. The swelling had even affected his other eye and it was almost closed. His pupil darted back and forth like an animal trapped behind a terrible thin crack. The swelling was monstrous, both in its size and in its shocking effect on the man's face. He must have seen my horror for he put his hand out and held my arm.

'I need help,' he said, in barely a whisper.

'My God,' I said, 'My God, come with me.'

I helped him up the drive and into the hall. My father was coming down the hall to meet us, his sherry glass still in his hand. I could see his impatience drain from him as he caught sight of the man's hideously enlarged face. He put his glass

down quickly and guided the man into the living-room. I turned on the lights and my father helped him on to the Chesterfield.

'Have you had an accident?' he asked. My father's concern now far outweighed his earlier irritation.

The man shook his head. It was an almost imperceptible movement for the swelling.

'That's surely not just toothache, is it?' I asked him, somewhat naively.

'Yes,' he muttered. 'I think it is.'

My father remained silent for a few moments, snapping his fingers, and frowning at the man's face. 'I believe I know you,' he spoke finally. 'Aren't you one of my patients?'

Once again he nodded. 'I'm Brian Taylor. I was here last week.'

'Weren't you going on holiday?'

'I was on holiday,' he said. 'Then this started,' he almost touched his face. 'The place where I was wouldn't do anything. Said I should see you as you're my own dentist. I think it's an abscess.'

There was a longer silence then, as my father considered what to do. Brian Taylor began to apologize for calling so late but my father passed it over. 'Don't be silly,' he said. 'You've done the right thing.' Then he said to me, 'Robert, would you mind helping Mr Taylor along to my surgery? Thank you.'

It was one of the most practical things my father had ever done, having his surgery built in his own house. He didn't drive nor did he intend to learn and my mother drove him everywhere he needed to go. He'd supervised the entire building programme and had employed a first-rate carpenter to fit built-in units along three of the four walls. Were it not for the huge black and chrome chair in the centre of the surgery, one could be forgiven for thinking it was a study. The wood was deeply polished and there was a feeling of great character and warmth in the place, a most unusual atmosphere for a surgery. It had a very relaxing effect on the patients and to this end, my father was well pleased with the fruits of his labours.

The reception room was similarly furnished and the walls and ceiling were covered with dark-stained wooden beams. An aquarium of tropical fish glowed warmly from the far side of the room as we crossed its length and entered the surgery proper. I helped Mr Taylor into the chair and stood to one side. My father had already donned his white coat and was washing his hands in the basin.

'How long has it been like this?' he asked over his shoulder.

'This is the third day,' Taylor said. 'It just gets worse all the time. It's much bigger now than it was this morning.'

My father stood beside him and addressed me across the surgery. 'I may need some help, Robert.'

I nodded and shrugged my shoulders. I wasn't trained in this sort of thing but realized the difficulty of recalling father's dental nurse who lived in the next town.

'I'll do my best,' I assured him.

I washed my hands while my father gathered together the tools of his profession. He swung the overhead arc light round and seated himself on his mobile stool.

'Can you open your mouth, please,' he instructed the patient. 'A little more. That's right.'

He angled the overhead light down and moved his probe and mirror around inside Taylor's mouth. I found his other stool and sat opposite. I caught sight of Taylor's mouth and saw for myself how much the swelling had affected his gums. It seemed to stem from the bottom left-hand side of his mouth and the gum walls were terribly swollen and bright red as though he'd been eating blackcurrants and they'd stained his flesh. I could also see the black remains of a rotted tooth. The tooth itself was missing and all that remained was a black stump surrounded by angry red flesh.

'Robert, can you get Mr Taylor's record card out for me. You should find it under the T's in the filing cabinet out in the reception room. It's a brown envelope file about so big,' he held his hands apart to demonstrate.

There was an air of cool authority about my father when he was working in the surgery. It was one of the finest qualities

he possessed and he was utterly professional in his approach. Yet he never lost sight of the patient's need for reassurance and gentle comfort. I heard him soothing Taylor with expert ease as I hurriedly found the right file. He took it without haste and slid the contents on to his lap. He first held up a chart, divided into boxes. I could see various markings on the chart and I knew that he was looking at a blueprint of Taylor's teeth. Like fingerprints, a dental chart is unique and gives the complete picture of a patient's dentistry, assuming one is able to read the chart in the first place. As my father read it, I saw the first flickerings of anxiety crease his brow.

'You were here last Friday?' Father asked. 'For a checkup, I believe?'

Taylor nodded. He was obviously in great pain and had no wish for conversation.

'And we made a new appointment, I believe?' Father continued.

Again, Taylor nodded. 'Next week,' he managed to say.

Father was silent for a while. I could see that something was disturbing him. He frowned down at the chart in his hand and I watched as he chewed at his bottom lip. I caught his eye and nodded to the opposite side of the surgery. He followed me and, once out of earshot, I asked him what was wrong.

'I wish I knew,' he confessed. 'Five days ago I examined Taylor and the only treatment he needed was a small filling for a minor occlusal cavity on the lower left seven. Now, there's no sign of the tooth, it's decayed away right down to the root.'

He spoke of occlusal cavities and lower left sevens as though I understood them, which I didn't. I asked him for a translation.

'I'm sorry, Robert. Professional slang, I'm afraid. What I meant was, Taylor had a touch of decay on the bottom tooth at the left hand side. The big molar up alongside the wisdom tooth, you know?'

I nodded, running my tongue over the tooth known as a lower left seven. I counted back down to one and found I'd arrived in the middle of the bottom row.

'Now,' he shrugged. 'Now, there's no tooth left to put a filling in.'

He turned and walked back across the room and I followed him, at a loss.

Taylor began moaning; a low, childlike whine that communicated his pain to me like a hot needle in my brain. He'd closed his mouth and his head was rolling slowly back and forth. My father steadied his head and gently persuaded Taylor to open his mouth once again.

The curiousness of it all made me lean forward, to peer into the soft pink opening of Taylor's mouth to reaffirm my first sighting. It was a strange experience. I had never seriously studied the inside of a person's mouth before. I found it rather frightening, that expanse of moist, firm flesh with the white teeth set so firmly, so strongly, into the line of the gum. Taylor's teeth were good, both strong and white, and I shuddered at the thought of that powerful jaw closing while my father's fingers gently explored the inflamed swelling far back in his patient's mouth. The tooth that he'd referred to was completely decayed away and the stump, or the root, was all that remained. The gum beneath had mushroomed out and the lump inside Taylor's mouth was almost the size of half a golfball. The other half of the lump protruded outwards, into his cheek and it was this pressure that had caused the grotesque effect on the rest of his face.

Taylor's breathing was laboured and it was obvious that the swelling was pushing his tongue sideways, cutting off the supply of air to his lungs. Whatever my father decided to do, it would have to be soon. Taylor's eyes looked swollen and his skin felt rather clammy. Father withdrew his fingers and Taylor gratefully closed his jaw.

The X-rays taken five days earlier had shown no sign of an abscess on the rotted tooth and I helped to seat Taylor back into the X-ray chair while Father placed the small X-ray negative, rather like a white plaster, inside Taylor's mouth, close up against the back of the swelling. He stood aside, swinging the black conical X-ray cell into position. There was a series

of clicks and it was over. We retrieved the X-ray negative and returned Taylor to the surgery chair, and waited for the negative to be processed.

It wasn't a long wait and my father sat quietly on his stool, deep in thought. When he finally picked up the negative, now installed on a chrome clip holder, he turned to me and smiled briefly. 'Like I said, Robert. There's a certain amount of detective work in just being a dentist.' He held up the negative and stared at it without comment.

'Well, what's the verdict?' I asked him.

He turned, his face completely blank. 'I haven't the vaguest idea. I've never seen anything like it before in my life.'

*

An abscess usually shows itself as a small white blob on the X-ray film, commonly sited at the root of the tooth. The usual treatment is a course of penicillin. In Taylor's case he'd been taking the penicillin, prescribed for him while he was on holiday, for three days now. My father asked to see the bottle and satisfied himself that Taylor had been taking the correct medicine.

'There are people who are immune to certain drugs, such as penicillin,' he said. 'I think you may be one of those unfortunate people, Mr Taylor. Yet it still doesn't answer the problem of how you can lose almost a complete tooth in five days. It's just not possible.'

'It's only been three days,' Taylor managed to speak. 'It didn't start until three days ago.'

'How quickly can decay destroy a tooth, Father?' I asked, though the question was purely academic.

'Well, it depends. Some acids, especially sugar-based ones, can attack tooth enamel within sixty seconds. But it would take an awful lot more than three days to completely destroy a tooth.'

I nodded and moved away once more. 'Wouldn't he be better off in hospital?' I whispered as Father joined me.

He shrugged. 'Not really. It's a dental problem you see. If he went to hospital they would probably call out a dental sur-

geon to remove the root. I can do that far better here than in hospital, for I'm the one they'd call out, you see.' He smiled briefly. 'I'm afraid I'm going to need your help on this one, Robert.'

I wished I'd brought the sherry decanter with me, as I foolishly agreed. Or maybe something stronger. We moved back to Taylor's side.

'Well, Mr Taylor. I'm not at all sure that what you have is an abscess after all,' Father said, with honesty. 'If it is, it's the largest darned abscess I've ever seen. Anyway, the only way we are going to find out what it is will be by removing the root for you. It'll ease the pain and we'll be able to take a look underneath it.'

As my father said this I felt a cold shiver down my spine and was reminded of those slimy things which crawl out from beneath uprooted stones. I, for one, had no intention of looking beneath the rotted roots of Taylor's lower left seven, or any other lower left anything.

I winced as Father gently slid the steel needle into Taylor's gum. I watched as the needle pierced the skin in three separate places, one at the front, one behind and the final one, an infiltration injection which went in at right angles to the gum, the point of the needle almost touching the root of the tooth. Taylor moaned in pain as the novacaine entered his already swollen gums. As he worked, Father instructed me on the use of the sucker; a thin, hollow steel tube attached to a vacuum unit behind me. I traced a path with it around Taylor's mouth, sucking up the saliva which would otherwise hinder progress.

The noise of the sucker drowned out any small noises that Taylor might have made. I kept the sucker working close to the area that contained the bad tooth, hopefully trying to avoid catching Taylor's tongue or the inside of his cheek against the end of the tube. My father made a few final adjustments to the chair and seated himself behind Taylor's head in order to see more clearly as he tried to grip the root with forceps.

I could see the difficulty and guessed what would follow.

One didn't need the ability of either a dentist or a detective

to realize that the root of the tooth offered no purchase for the forceps to grip. The root was barely visible above the level of the gum and my father tried several times to slide the grips of the forceps down between the root of the tooth and the edge of the gum. Even as I watched, the gum began to bleed gently. It turned pure white as the forceps pressed against it, turning bright red the moment the pressure was released. I probed forward with the steel sucker, trying not to look as the blood slid up the steel tube. I felt the sucker grow warmer in my moist and shaking hand.

My father rested, mopping his brow from the initial effort of extraction. He shifted the stool further round until he sat side on to his patient. He tried several more times to gain a hold on the root but eventually he knew it was impossible. I had the surgical scalpel all ready. The knowledge of what he was about to do terrified me, yet there was some strange, horrific fascination which seemed to grip me, to force my eyes to stare at that cold, sharp blade as it sliced so cleanly through the pink soft tissue of Taylor's gum. The blade cut deeply, in two lines down the root of the tooth on the inside of the gum. The gum folded backwards and downwards, exposing the edge of the tooth below the gum line. It was this exposed face that my Father gripped once more with the forceps.

And still the tooth did not come out.

We rested a while and in truth I felt more in need of a rest than my father. He comforted Taylor, which was no easy task for he had been under considerable pressure while Father tried to work the tooth out. The pain must have been unbearable, in spite of the numbness from the injections. I do not know to this day how Taylor stood it for so long.

I learnt much later that my father had two alternatives at this point. Either he could perform further surgery on the opposite side of the tooth or he could drill through the bone which held the tooth in place. To do this, he would have needed his drill with a burr attached to the hand piece. The bone forms a collar around the tooth and the bone would be drilled through to release the tooth. I doubt if my stomach could have held up

to that. As it was, I came close to sickness while he cut the opposite gum, running the scalpel blade deeper this time. The gum flap peeled back like white rubber and the blood began to flow again.

The first hint of the horror which awaited us came as Father peeled back the gum flap. A slight, sharp smell of decay rose up from Taylor's mouth and I turned away quickly. It was gone in an instant, but the memory remains with me to this day. It was a scent which will stay with me for the rest of my life.

The forceps were back round Taylor's tooth and this time they had a much more solid grip, either side of the tooth. I heard the tooth begin to crack away from the bone collar, like rotting wood splintering under strain. I had to look. I had to turn my head to face the patient and watch the tooth begin to lift away from the socket. I probed forward with the sucker and the thick red blood seemed to curdle and bubble out from the sides of the tooth, filling Taylor's mouth before it sluggishly slid up the tube. The noise was revolting. The cracking noise continued and Father worked the forceps back and forth, easing the root cleanly upwards and out of the socket. As the root came free we both lurched violently backwards and I tried my utmost not to be sick.

I don't know how long I stood, braced over the sink, retching and gagging until my lungs and throat felt on fire. I could hear other sounds, gasping and coughing, and I finally turned my head to see Father leaning heavily against the far wall, a wad of cotton wool and gauze pressed against his mouth. Taylor was slouched in the chair, his head laying over to one side. I pushed myself away and walked round to my father's side. He pointed to the cotton wool in one of the drawers and I gratefully held a thick wad of it to my nose and mouth.

'Christ! The smell, I can't stand it.'

My father nodded and I wanted to run from the room, run as far away from that dreadful stench of decayed tooth and tissue as possible. I think my father knew this and he held me back, turning me to face Taylor. I realized he'd fainted, perhaps

from sheer pain, and I almost envied him his oblivion. In spite of myself, I moved back to my place and found the sucker. I rinsed it off and Father straightened Taylor's head. By the time I'd finished Taylor was coming round, his eyes, narrow slits of blackish flesh, darted back and forth between my father and I. We said nothing and I slid the sucker back into the bloodied mass. As the blood drained away the socket became visible and Father readjusted the arc light overhead. The hole looked enormous, like a deep, underground cavern with dark red and slimy walls.

It was then that I saw something move. Something brown and thin that flickered swiftly around the walls of the hole and retreated like a snake searching for prey.

I motioned Father, my eyes wide in fear and horror, not daring to trust my voice, merely pointing into the wound as though that in itself would explain everything. As we both stared down at it, the thing which was living inside Taylor's mouth, the creature, the abscess or whatever Godforsaken horror it was, moved again. The thin brown snake-like tentacle slithered gently upwards until it reached the very lip of the wound, resting there as though deciding its next move. It was like a finger which emerged from the cavernous hole and I could only shudder at the thought of what it was attached to, buried beneath the swollen mound of Taylor's face and gum. And then Taylor's jaws came together as he passed out into merciful oblivion.

'Wedge!' Father snapped. 'A wedge, in the top tray behind you! Quickly!'

I spun round so fast I almost knocked the tray over. I searched frantically without knowing what I was looking for. 'Where? What is it?' I blurted out. 'You find it,' I said, holding the tray out for him. He quickly found a couple of black cone-shaped rubber wedges which he began to force between Taylor's teeth to keep his mouth open wide.

'Keep your eye on them, Robert. He may swallow them if they work loose.'

I nodded dumbly.

The growth had moved. It had attached itself to the raw edge of the tooth alongside the wound and seemed to be feeding, rippling and undulating along its length as though passing food back along its length to the rest of its body hidden deeply beneath the pit from where it emerged. I watched in fascinated terror as Father touched it with his probe.

It recoiled as if in shock, rearing up and quickly retracting back into the hole.

'Robert.'

I looked up and saw my father's face. It was white but he was under control.

'I'm going to take that thing out. You don't have to stay here. I'll understand.'

I nodded and I appreciated his kindness. Yet my legs could not carry me from that surgery. I took a roll of tape from the drawer behind me and cut lengths of it to fasten the gauze and cotton wool firmly to my father's face. He would need both hands from now on.

We worked swiftly, setting up the clean instruments and positioning ourselves for the task in hand. I held the sucker in close, following the razor-sharp scalpel as it traced a deep red line cleanly across the entire width of the swelling, working from the inside of Taylor's gum. As the scalpel came away the flesh seemed to part in slow motion.

And a dozen brown and angry monstrous tentacles poured out through the slit.

Even through the thickness of cotton wool I could smell the fetid, decayed stench that swelled up from the fresh wound. The writhing tentacles seemed to reach up as though desperately trying to reach for Taylor's back teeth.

I saw the forceps as they plunged into the very heart of the wriggling mass. The battle was beyond description and belief. The noise, the dreadful sucking sounds that seemed to fill my head and numb my senses. The coagulated blood that moved like thick oil before my eyes. And the overpowering stench of

the horror as it came free from its hiding place, a writhing mass of decay the size of a golf ball, the forceps digging deeply into its core.

Father threw it across the surgery in horror and disgust and it fell soundlessly on the far side of the room. I felt my head spin and heard the blood rushing behind my ears. I watched as if in a trance as my father carefully stitched the savage wound. The swelling was already beginning to go down, though Taylor was still unconscious. Finally, we removed the wedges and piled the used instruments on to an empty tray.

The brown mass lay inert against the far wall.

We never did tell Brian Taylor the truth of that night. Nor did we discuss it with anyone, ever. I was very shocked by what I'd seen, as was, of course, my father. The worst part of all was picking it up off the floor and disposing of it as quickly as possible.

I sat silently, a blanket round my shoulders, warming myself before the fire, for I'd grown very cold and had begun shivering, whilst Father tried to explain what we'd witnessed. It was something that we would never know for certain, something about whose origin we could only guess. The truth, as close as we were ever likely to get, was that it had been a genetic mutation of a simple cell that had been warped beyond belief while Taylor sat calmly having an X-ray taken five days before. Through some tragic and monstrous quirk of science, the single destructive cell we know as tooth decay had suddenly grown out of all proportion, feeding hungrily on Taylor's tooth, the very tooth which gave birth to the monster in the first place.

Since that night I have slept very badly, my dreams haunted by visions of dreadful creatures that seem to swell up and fill my mouth and assail my nostrils with their stench. I was cleaning my teeth yesterday evening when I noticed a small, brown dot of decay that had appeared on one of my teeth. The one on the bottom row at the back, next to the wisdom tooth. I think my Father called it the lower left seven.

And I am afraid to go to the dentist.

Norman P. Kaufman

An opportunity in local government

'This is the place.'

Merrill Henry gestured towards a corridor that stopped just this side of infinity. Her husband shook an unkempt head. 'Is it hell as like! How many times you been here? Forgotten we've got to climb up three flights of bloody stairs? Forgotten the lift's been out of order for weeks -'

'Fool!'

He stared. 'You - *what?*'

She jerked a nicotine-finger at the notice above their heads. Its dull red lettering proclaimed *Child Welfare Officer*. The young man stared. 'Yeah . . . you're right: must be a mistake - it's on the third floor -'

'Jamie, if you *think* -' She took a breath. 'If you think I'm traipsing up three floors, just to be told to go down again . . .'

'All right -'

' . . . Think I'm training for the lousy Olympics?'

'I said *all right!*' He glared down at her and she flinched involuntarily from the red spark of his pupils. 'For Chrissake, don't nag me into a loony bin . . .' He slouched away down the passage, and her nose wrinkled with the unwashed stink of him. Shrugging mentally, she stirred, moved into his wake, aware that she probably smelled no better; aware too that she couldn't give a damn. 'Come on!' Jamie called. 'Sooner we get this over with, the better I'll like it.'

She quickened her pace: her husband's temper, uncertain at any time, was more than likely to flare under stress. She knew too, how much Jamie hated these visits . . . She watched as he checked suddenly at the sight of a glass-panelled door at the

far end of the corridor. Merrill hurried after him and they stood side by side, peering at the opaque frosted glass. Seconds ticked away; then with uncharacteristic timidity, Jamie Henry reached forward and tapped grubby knuckles on the pane – gently, almost apologetically, as if somehow overawed by the anonymity of the door and the emptiness of the passageway.

‘No one in,’ he ventured. It was more of a question, really. Merrill hunched her shoulders and frowned.

‘Maybe we’d better go,’ was her suggestion. She mulled over the idea, which seemed to brighten her a little. ‘Ring them tomorrow, eh? Arrange another appointment . . .’ She paused. ‘Does it occur to you that there’s no other rooms in this corridor – no offices but this one – no people wandering about?’

He wheeled on her. ‘Shut up, will you? You’d make a mystery out of a bloody Donald Duck picture.’

The door clicked open and a woman stood there. She was tall, as tall as Jamie himself. She was solidly-built, inclined perhaps to fat. In her mid-fifties, her hair was cheerfully pepper-and-salt, and her face bore no trace whatsoever of make-up.

‘Ah . . . Mr and Mrs Henry, isn’t it?’

They nodded dumbly, and the large woman stepped back. ‘Do come through, will you?’

Jamie stared for long moments; the woman’s smile seemed frozen to her lips, the affable bonhomie never left her eyes; but as the seconds lengthened, her bushy eyebrows lifted in polite inquiry, and Jamie moved forward in sluggish embarrassment, his wife at his heels.

The room was not big: there was a table of standard size for an office, and there were three chairs. The carpeting was worn and was faintly filmed with dust, while the one small window was scarred with cumulative grime.

‘Please sit down . . . thank you.’ She plumped her broad frame into a cushioned executive-chair on the other side of the table. Seeing them still hesitate, she flicked a plump hand towards the other two chairs. ‘Please?’ She smiled again.

The Henrys eyed the chairs askance: they were rather horrible-looking things, reminiscent in their lofty-backed heights and squat seats of the Electric Chair. Almost gingerly, they lowered themselves into the most comfortable position allowable . . .

'They're not electrified,' the woman said, uncannily. She laughed at their identical expressions. 'It's all right: I only want to take some details from you, or rather to confirm that the details we *have* in our records are correct.'

'Where's our usual woman?' Jamie blurted.

She smiled. 'I'm sorry, I should explain, of course: my name is Mrs Latimer. Who was it you usually saw, Miss . . . ?'

'Chepstow.' Merrill's voice sounded small.

'Yes, indeed, Miss Chepstow. Ill, I'm afraid. Should be back next week . . . now then . . .' There was a manilla folder on the table, and she drew the papers from it, bent her head over the small print. There was perhaps a half-minute of semi-silence, broken only by Merrill's sigh and Jamie's shuffling, and by the hooded tick of Mrs Latimer's big-dial watch.

'Right.' Merrill jumped as the word seemed to rap out. Again the big woman chuckled. 'Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you . . . I seem to be doing nothing but apologize, don't I?' She flicked at one of the papers in the file. 'Now, tell me if I go wrong: you are Mr and Mrs Henry, Christian names of Merrill and James, ages respectively twenty and twenty-two, married in March of 1974, and with a son born in December of the previous year?'

'You having a go or something?'

Jamie.

Mrs Latimer glanced up. 'Having a . . . ?'

'You mean something about us getting wed after Danny was born?'

'Dear me!' Again the laugh, as carefree and as genuine as any laugh could have been. 'Dear me no!' She shook her greying head. 'I'm here for the good of the child, Mr Henry, not to moralize on what might or should have been. Not my job. Not my line of country at all. Wouldn't want to do it anyway.'

She bent over the file again, glanced up: 'Okay so far?' They nodded listlessly. 'Well now, we come to Danny: now we have to look at poor little Danny . . .'

Merrill sat forward. 'Poor little Danny? Listen, have you got any kids, Missus?'

The older woman nodded, and essayed a wan smile. 'I had three: two of them live in Scotland, so I don't see too much of them . . . the other was killed - in Korea, believe it or not.' She hesitated. 'He'd enlisted. He felt it was a war he could do something about.' Her smile was tremulous. 'Stan would've been - what - getting on for forty now.'

'Shun't have got involved then, should he?'

The older woman stared at Merrill. The smile did not harden but remained in the eyes, while the unpainted lips firmed again. 'Perhaps you're right, my dear: but you asked me about children, and I can tell you many stories of our happy times together when they were children.'

'Look, Miss - ' Jamie checked: 'Missus, then. Just let's get to the point of all this, then mebbe we can all go home, eh?'

'Yes.' She sighed, looked from one to the other. 'You're quite right of course: it is time to get to the point.' She looked down at the file again. 'Danny has been in a lot of trouble, hasn't he? Let's see . . . Age two weeks, bruised eye. Age five weeks, broken rib. Age two months, broken rib again - no, *ribs*, plural. Age eleven weeks, ankles and wrists dislocated, shoulder out of joint, contusions around mouth, gums cut and swollen. Age five months - that is, just about last week - both eyes blackened, nose broken, eardrum of left ear pierced, chest lacerations, bruises round neck . . . Shall I go on . . . ?' Her voice bore no particular emotion, merely professional enquiry.

'We - ' Merrill hesitated. 'We can explain all that, Mrs Latimer. See, we - '

The woman waved her to silence. 'No, no, that's all right. I'm just establishing that these are the facts - that you don't deny any of the details as being true.' She checked deliberately; and first Merrill, then Jamie shook their heads from side to side.

'Good, fine, that's fine,' the woman added briskly. 'Saves time and trouble later.'

On the point of returning to the file, she wavered, and glanced at the two opposite. 'Ah,' she commented. 'That's what I've been waiting for.'

She reached under the table, crouching slightly in her chair as if to reach an awkward spot. There was a harsh 'clack', a metallic clashing of bolt and socket. Jamie and Merrill stared down stupidly at their hands, now hooked firmly to the arms of the chair by steel shutters that entrapped their wrists.

'A little old-fashioned,' murmured Mrs Latimer. 'A little melodramatic. A little bit childish, even. But - effective, none the less.' She gazed at them. They gazed back, speechless for the moment, but indignation and a curious unease welling up in their eyes.

'I think explanations are due,' she offered.

Jamie found his voice. 'Yes,' he spat. 'You bet on that. You *bet* we want to know what the bleeding hell is going on.'

The woman flinched. 'You do sound so very babyish, Mr Henry. But if you're going to use bad language, I'll really have to gag you, you know.'

He glowered at her and opened his mouth; then thought better of it and subsided. But Merrill wrenched uselessly at the tight steel bands and her voice was shrill: 'Just *what* does all this mean? Let us *go*, you *hear*? You stupid old cow, you just let us *go*.'

'Dear oh dear oh dear,' Mrs Latimer frowned. 'I see you're just as big a baby as your husband. And presumably almost as violent.' She flicked at the file on the table. 'Like I said: explanations are due.' She paused. 'You asked me if I had any kids, and I said yes, and I like to recall only the happy times we had; but I'm not a complete idiot and I know as well as you do what little villains they can be - especially boys, eh? So I fully appreciate the frustration and the fury that parents feel - woken up in the early hours to feed them and change them, or told by your neighbours that your boys have climbed the tree

again in someone else's garden, and thrown stones at the windows, and – oh but I could go on. And on and on and *on*. And . . . the boys, *my* boys, would get punished. That surprise you? I would smack them – yes, *me*, of all folk. Smacks they deserved and smacks they got, believe me.' She shook her head and sighed. 'But you – *you* – neither of you stopped at smacks, did you? Flat-handed blows on the bottom or the hand never did anyone any lasting harm . . . but you didn't use the flat of your hands, you used your fists, and you used your feet, and this is a very different proposition, I think you'll agree.'

'Look . . .' There was a faint line of perspiration on Jamie's forehead. 'If you want to yell at us, get on with it; and take these bloody ridiculous chair things off us.'

She shook her head, smiling sadly. 'It isn't as easy as that. You see, there's one or two other things you don't know yet: first of all, I engineered all this business myself – nobody else knows we're here. I rigged up that notice, knowing full well that you were due in, and knowing full well too that this part of the building is scheduled for redecoration.' She smiled again. 'At the ratepayers' expense of course.'

'You – tricked us.' Merrill's voice was barely a whisper. 'But why? Why you?'

'It appeared to me,' Mrs Latimer continued, 'that nobody was getting anywhere with you two. Brought back here some five or six times, each time you get admonished, once even sent to court, to be fined. Fined! For hitting – for butchering your son, your only child!' For the first time the mask slipped, and there was something cold in her eyes. 'But *now*, now you appear to have surpassed yourselves, don't you? His eardrum broken! Deaf for life, I should think! And all these other things – bruises, cuts, scars, breaks, you name it – God!' She grimaced: 'Is this true too?' She scanned the papers in the file, glanced up at the slatternly mother. 'You – you kicked him between the legs! *You* did that? You *did* a thing like that . . . ?'

'He was wetting his bed something chronic,' Merrill gabbled. 'I couldn't think of any way –'

'So . . . ' Mrs Latimer's voice tensed. 'You decided to punish him, is that it? You decided that the punishment must fit the crime, am I right?'

'Yes . . . yes!' Tears of panic welled up from Merrill's eyes. 'Leave me alone . . . !'

The older woman got to her feet, her exterior pose still calm and professional. 'Believe me, I don't really yearn to touch you at all, Mrs Henry. But let me tell you something else: I've been in Child Welfare for many years, more than I care to think about; and a lot of it has been a pleasure to me. But the way justice is meted out by our courts, well . . . This – *this* – is the frustration for people such as myself.'

They stared at her silently.

'Imagine how I feel – how I have felt – to hear a sentence of one, two, three years, imposed on a parent or parents who have stood and watched their child die – have *helped* him to die. All my efforts to save the child are in vain; but this is not all. The deterrent is gone, too. There is no fear any more. If you're naughty, you get slapped on the wrist. They don't hang you any more. And kids can't fight back anyway.' Her voice sounded oddly tired. 'Well, let me tell you this, Merrill and James Henry; I too believe in the punishment fitting the crime. And it seems to me that if you – if *you* – experience the same volume of suffering that Danny has undergone, then things just might be a little more square. After which – as you yourself suggested, Mr Henry – after which we can perhaps all go home.'

She moved round the table towards them; then, suddenly remembering, she moved back to the drawers at the front of the table and extracted a pair of thick leather gloves. Pulling them on, she edged round the table again to stand squarely in front of their chairs. Turning, she lifted the manilla file from the desk and balanced it open in her left hand and along her left arm.

They watched dully as her eyes snapped along the lines of type.

'First of all,' she said, her voice precise, pedantic, 'it was

necessary for me to ascertain who had inflicted which injury. The first one – when he was just a fortnight on this earth – was *your* doing, Mr Henry. One – bruised – eye.’ As she spoke the last word, her right hand swung round and the leather-encased fist caught him squarely in his left eye. His head rocked back, a yell of pain sprang from his lips, eliciting a murmur of apprehension from Merrill, an apprehension that was justified as her own body jerked in agony to the pounding of Mrs Latimer’s fist on her ribs.

‘I do hope it’s broken, my dear,’ she went on conversationally to the whimpering girl. ‘But if not, there’s another chance yet, because I see it was you who broke the same rib, plus two others, about three or four weeks later. That must have taken several blows, my dear, so I tell you what, just to be fair, I’ll just have three goes, eh? What with you being an adult and Danny being only a little ball of nothing, I think it’s more than reasonable, don’t you . . . ?’ Her hand was swinging round again even prior to the end of her sentence, and it was on the third and final blow that Merrill’s ribs – the second and the fourth – splintered and cracked. A thin pulsing scream issued from Merrill’s throat; blood appeared on her lips as she gnawed at her tongue in anguish. ‘Back to you shortly, Mrs Henry,’ went on the incredible voice.

Jamie fixed her in the sight of his one good eye and aimed a kick at her stomach. Her leap backwards did not entirely save her but prevented any really serious injury. She clutched at her stomach, biting back the threatened bile. White-faced, she tottered round to her chair and sank into it. There was sweat on her face. ‘Good job you’re shackled to the floor,’ she grimaced. They looked: it was true. The chairs were bolted to something, possibly a steel bar beneath the carpet and floorboards. Mrs Latimer rose to her feet again: a big strong woman with potential maiming in her hands. Merrill screamed. Once, twice, louder, louder. And Jamie joined in. And the big woman laughed, winced at the pain in her guts, and laughed again.

‘Shout all you like,’ she suggested. ‘There’s no one around here to hear you.’ She scooped up the file again and moved

round behind the young couple. 'You'll have to watch those clumsy feet of yours, Mr Henry . . . and as it happens, it's your turn next . . . remember Danny at eleven weeks? You threw him downstairs . . . your little boy Danny, you did that to him, while his mother stood and watched, didn't you, Mrs Henry? And Danny's wrists and ankles were dislocated, which meant an awful lot of pain; pain similar to this - ' She lashed out and cracked him on the ankle with her heavy shoe. 'And this - ' Another kick. 'And this and this, and this and this and this -' With each lash of her feet, ululating cries of horrified torment were wrung from the man's lips, until the vomit welled up into his mouth and his screams were choked, muted to keening retches.

The perspiration poured off the welfare officer, saturating her, soaking through her clothes. She grinned tightly at Danny's agonized mother. 'Contusions,' she said quietly. 'We'll forget the shoulder out of joint. Let's concentrate on what you - *you* Mrs Henry - did to his mouth and his gums. Or in your case: your teeth.' Merrill's big white beautiful teeth disintegrated under the tremendous punch that smashed into her mouth. The paralysing torture of the blow that flung her back against the chair rendered her unconscious, and as she slumped forward, Mrs Latimer turned again to Jamie.

'Turns each, eh, Mr Henry . . . ?'

'Look . . . for Chrissake, Missus -'

His hoarse voice to a squeal of pure agony as her fist pounded into his other eye, then hammered against his nose. He heard the bones splinter, he felt the blood running down his face, he heard as if from a great distance that unbelievable voice: 'Then the eardrum, was it not?' A crushing, pulverizing hand, encased in a leather glove, drove into his left ear: the pain seemed nothing to what he had already undergone, but the dull roaring in his head seemed to blot out all existence, so that the fingers that pulled at his throat, and the voice that said: 'And the neck bruises were yours, too, yes . . . ?' seemed hardly worth bothering about, even when the dim torment of tightening fingers penetrated his torpor.

'Chest lacerations,' the large woman murmured; and Jamie wondered whether his wife would ever stop screaming. Perhaps, he reasoned to himself in his twilight world of pain, perhaps she was upset at the gore that was being scratched from his chest by the fat old cow, who had apparently shed her gloves, and had apparently also grown some bloody long fingernails . . . wish she'd stop screaming, that daft bitch. Mind you, it hurts, it hurts like hell, it hurts, it . . .

'Fainted,' came Mrs Latimer's laconic voice. Merrill drew a breath that all but crippled her with agony. 'But no matter, I've done with him, haven't I? It was you, Mrs Henry, who kicked Danny between the legs . . . wasn't it?'

A faint moan issued from her white lips.

'Well, naturally, seated as you are, it just wouldn't be possible for me to inflict anything remotely like a kick. So . . . what I suggest is this - ' Mrs Latimer paused, weighed her words carefully, while the girl peered narrowly at her, her movements sluggish, her body alive with distress.

'What I'd like,' said the older woman, 'is for you to be rendered incapable of ever conceiving again. With anyone, anytime, anywhere. Just like you've probably done to your own son.'

'What . . . ' The girl's voice wheezed. Her lips were white and dry. 'What the hell!'

'I think it's my duty, dear,' Mrs Latimer expanded, 'to sterilize you.'

Merrill's eyes widened - at first in the belief that she must have mis-heard, then in doubt that such a statement, issued in so precise and unemotional a voice, could possibly be meant as serious; and then in realization that whatever this woman was, there was not and never had been, any doubt as to her earnestness and her deadly purpose . . . Hot waves of dread spewed up from her loins; the room swam; she glared wildly about her, at the woman, at the stupid man slumped at her side, at the blood that seemed to be everywhere. Her heart raced and thudded against her chest; her breasts heaved as her breathing became uncontrolled; she heard noises, sounds like the mewing of a

cat; it was herself she could hear, her pleas for clemency; it was herself she could smell, the disgusting fetid stench of her own excrement as fear ran through her body . . . Mrs Latimer watched incredulously as Merrill Henry jerked up in the chair, screamed out once, twice: then sat back and died.

The Child Welfare Officer gathered up her manilla folder and quit the room, pulling the door closed behind her. Her footsteps made tight, echoing noises down the empty corridor and it was a pleasant relief to step out into the darkening afternoon. It took a couple of minutes to locate a telephone booth; it took a further five minutes to make two calls. One was to the Children's Hospital to ascertain Daniel Henry's progress. Very slow, she was told. Very slow. But he would be well again one day. Mrs Latimer smiled.

The other call was to the police, directing them to a certain room at the Town Hall. Mrs Latimer did not give her name.

Her step was light as she moved off towards the bus station. Tomorrow she would have a lie-in. What with all that business this afternoon, and the retirement party in her honour this morning at the office . . . well, she was entitled to feel a little tired.

She climbed stiffly on to the number eleven.

She slept all the way home.

Roger F. Dunkley

The man called James

A bee blundered sleepily past a treasure trove of dahlias; doves soothed one another in the lazy, summer air; a siren whined dismally across the simmering moors; and the man called James sat back in his chair and gazed comfortably across the patio. He grinned, whether at herself or to accommodate the sun's glare, Maud wasn't sure. Feeling optimistic, she assumed the former, and warmed to him. She waved a languid, slightly wrinkled finger towards the teapot and raised an eyebrow.

'No, ta. Thank you.'

Precisely how and why the young man had first materialized in her garden was still a mystery to her, but now that he was here, young, and determined to be companionable, she saw no reason to encourage his departure. It wasn't every day that handsome young men arrived for morning tea. Especially with Gerald away in town for the day.

Behind her the dahlias shivered and yielded up a large white cat with aristocratic pretensions.

'Healthy cat you've got there, Mrs. Very nice. Healthy.'

'Haddock,' said Maud.

'Pardon?' said the visitor.

'We spoil him,' explained Maud.

The young man reached down but the cat turned disdainfully away. Maud admired the long, firm fingers. 'Gentle,' she thought. And she remembered Gerald.

'You're fond of animals too,' she said.

The grin overreached itself, broke into a laugh. 'Love 'em,' he said. 'That's the problem. I used to have all sorts of pets as a kid. When they'd let me. All sorts. Budgies, tortoises, cater-

pillars. Even had a hen once. Mrs Poot I called her. Very healthy, she was. Very healthy. At first.'

The young man screwed up his eyes and lapsed into silence. Maud helped herself to another cup of tea in an encouraging sort of way. Mechanically she shook two tablets on to her hand and swallowed them.

'Foot,' said the man. He sighed.

Maud tried to look intelligent.

'It was her foot. She had this terrible limp, see. Fox had a nip at her. Maimed.'

Maud's eyes sympathized with him from behind her cup. Compassion was so much easier when people were beautiful, she realized. The man's eyes glistened.

'It's suffering,' he said. 'I can't bear to see it. I abhor pain. Know what I mean?'

Maud knew what he meant, and was about to murmur platitudinous agreement when the stranger, his chair crashing to the floor, leapt to his feet and with an anguished cry, rushed down on to the lawn.

Maud sat, dazed, and wondered whether she ought to phone the police. Or the hospital. With some apprehension she watched the man engage in an obscure struggle with the azaleas. A screech, and the cat erupted simultaneously from the bushes; a white comet streaked up the garden and shot over the high wall.

The man walked towards her, carefully cradling his hands. His eyes were moist and glittering, his breathing laboured.

'What - ?' she began.

Then she saw the dove. One of its wings stuck out at an improbable angle. Ripped feathers were sticky with dark blood. An eye, bright with fear, blinked up at her between the sensitive fingers.

'Bloody cat,' said the man.

'It's nature,' said Maud.

'Nature!' The man gritted his teeth. 'Bloody nature. Red in tooth and bloody claw.'

'It'll live,' said Maud. 'It'll heal. A splint . . .'

She reached out her hand, laid it on the young man's arm.

'Suffering,' said the man. He pulled his arm away. 'It's suffering.' He sucked in air painfully between clenched teeth.

The dove stirred in his hands.

The man gasped, a dry sob in his throat. His cheeks had grown flushed. With a sudden, savage movement he laid the bird on his knee and wrenched the neck sideways from the body. He deposited the warm heap of feathers on the table between them and, breathing rapidly, stared wildly at it for a moment.

Maud stared at the young man. Then she stared at the feathers. Then she stared at the young man again.

He laughed.

'All over,' he said. 'That's always the worst bit. Know what I mean? You all right, Mrs?' Concern filled his dark, brown eyes; then understanding. 'Oh, sorry.'

He lifted up the dishevelled corpse and examined the tablecloth.

'It'll wash out,' he said. And flung the clump of feathers in among the dahlias.

A circling helicopter droned distantly overhead.

Maud wished uneasily that Gerald wasn't so far away.

'It would have lived,' she murmured.

'It was maimed,' he said. 'It was in pain. Now it isn't!' He leaned forward. 'You see,' he explained, 'I have this gift. They don't understand. But I can tell you. You're different. I've had it for years. It was Mrs Poot, really. She, like, showed me the light. She revealed the gift. The power.'

He folded his tanned arms and raised his face to receive the warm benediction of the summer sun.

'I stop pain,' he announced simply. 'It's my mission.'

Maud's face registered interest as skilfully as it could. Why hadn't they had a telephone extension installed nearer the patio, she thought.

'Want to hear about it? My mission.'

Maud hesitated. Where *had* the man come from? And why here?

'You sure you're all right? You look a bit pale. Don't get me wrong: I don't mean unhealthy. Just, like, pale.'

Maud assured him of her health and felt decidedly wan.

'Tell me,' she said, 'About your mission.'

The young man beamed. 'I knew you'd understand. We're the sensitive ones, you see. *We* feel it. All around us. The pain. The suffering. Sometimes – d'you know this? – sometimes I can't hardly breathe for the weight of it all, the stifling weight, as you might say, of mortality.'

Maud watched his knuckles whiten, saw an evidently familiar anguish darken in his eyes.

'Maiming, disease, deformity.' His voice trembled. 'You can't just sit back, let all that suffering go on, now, can you? Mrs Poot showed me that. I just can't let it happen any more.'

Maud felt her heart starting to pulse with unnecessary vigour. She essayed a sympathetic nod. 'Have you – stopped pain in many animals like this?' she asked, picking up a stray feather and gesturing vaguely towards the dahlias.

'Hundreds,' he said. 'Thousands. When they let me. Heart-breaking work it is. Soul-destroying. Really drains you. But then, you see, it's my mission. However,' he pushed his cup to one side and leaned confidentially across the table, 'it's nothing to what it costs bringing deliverance to the others.'

His brows creased.

Maud was bewildered; her mind resisted comprehension. The young man glanced at her, misread her confusion and offered a reassuring smile.

'The others?' whispered Maud. She focused on the crack in the teapot lid, the lean-to shed that had been threatening to surrender and lie down ever since they'd moved in, the gladioli glowing under the pelting sun, and fought back the encroaching haze of unreality.

'The others,' nodded the stranger. 'It's everywhere. The ills that flesh is heir to, as you might say. This mortality – it's not just for the animals, is it?' He chuckled. 'Mr Bonham showed me that. Lovely bloke, he was. He started me off, see, on the *real* mission.' He passed a hand over his forehead. 'So much

work to be done. So much. And they don't help. Always interfering.'

'They?'

Maud became aware of the return of the persistent helicopter, circling methodically over the empty moors. Understanding unfolded like a black flower.

'Yes, they interfere. I knew you'd understand. Did you read about Mr Bonham? Mr Sidney Bonham. Down Stanford way. It was in all the papers. They got it all wrong, of course. They always do.'

Maud remembered Sidney Bonham of Stanford. And the rest. Only with an effort could she disguise her quickened breathing. Her voice, when it emerged, seemed to have been squeezed up a semitone.

'He was - crippled, wasn't he?' she said. 'Like the others.' She stared at him, slowly shaking her head.

'I delivered them,' said the young man. Pride merged with pity in his features. 'All of them. And lots more besides.'

'It's death,' whispered Maud.

'Of course,' he said. 'Release. It's the dying - not death - that hurts. Age. Decay. Accidents. *There's* the suffering.'

'Murder,' said Maud.

The man winced. His smile subsided into grief. 'Please,' he said. 'You're not - like that. Not like them. You understand.'

Impulsively he extended a hand. Impulsively Maud thrust his arm, a teacup and the bottle of tablets noisily away from her.

'My husband,' she said breathlessly. 'Here. Any minute. Go, please.'

'I understand,' said the young man. 'Don't get up. I couldn't stay anyway. So much to do.'

He moved sadly towards the garden gate, stooping to pick up the tablets. He glanced at the label. He paused, turned, and came back towards her.

'Aspirin,' he said. 'Are you in pain?'

Maud, still seated, backed away from the table, away from

the secure, blue-check covering of the voluminous tablecloth. Her blanket slipped from her knees.

'Please. The police. I'll phone . . .'

The man stared at her.

'Your seat. You never said . . .'

His voice trembled. 'A wheel-chair!'

He came and stood over her. His brown eyes brimming with infinite compassion, he surveyed her foot, twisted with arthritis. A red stain burned in his cheeks; his nostrils flared as his breathing grew harsh, painful.

'You *are* suffering,' he said.

The young man called James put his sensitive, firm hands gently on Maud's shoulder.

'I can stop pain,' he sobbed. 'It's my mission, see?'

The demented wail of the siren scarcely stirred the drowsing, scented air as the police car crawled systematically, painstakingly towards the house . . .

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