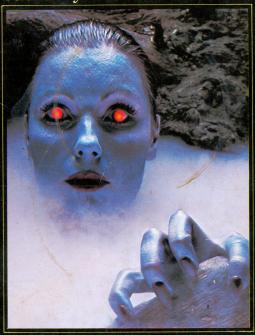
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Dulcie Gray The spectre

It was late, but Valentine didn't notice the time. He was utterly absorbed in what he was doing.

He'd had a good day. He'd caught it at last. Chequered Skippers were rare, especially in his locality. They might be protected by the law soon. All rare butterflies might be protected soon, if the public conscience was aroused forcefully enough, but today, in spite of the difficulties, his collection was nearly complete. It had taken him years to get this far; ever since he was seven, in fact. Sixty-three out of the sixty-nine British species were nearly set out in the shallow shelves of his collecting cabinet. Males and females, two of each, so that the upper and undersides of each species were displayed, and today he'd caught a female Chequered Skipper, and it was a perfect specimen. Flawless.

He was setting it. Carefully. The butterfly's body was slotted into the groove of the white setting board, pinned in position through the thorax. He'd arranged the right side already. (He used the method he'd been taught as a child.) The upper and lower wings were pinned diagonally across with the narrow strips of paper he'd cut especially for the purpose, and he was just about to give the left side the same treatment, when he thought he saw the body twitch.

Impossible!

The creature must be dead! Terrible if in his excitement he'd left it for too little time in the killing bottle! If it weren't dead, and had really begun to come to, it might make the rest of the setting impractical.

He watched it intently. Nothing further happened until he

was poised with the setting paper over the left upper wing, then it fluttered.

Damn! He always found Skippers a peculiarly difficult species to set, as they held their wings differently from other butterflies.

He waited again, and again there was no movement until he held the paper in the air, then again the wing moved.

What should he do?

He thought for a moment, and decided to play safe. He fetched a small saw, cut the setting board short enough to put into the killing bottle with the butterfly impaled on it, screwed down the lid. and fetched himself a stiff drink.

Sweat had broken out on his forehead, and his hands were shaky. Most unpleasant.

He'd give the damned thing another whole hour, then there could be no mistake, but how to while away the time?

Music. Classical music. Wagner. Wagner always soothed him.

He sat, tapping the rhythm with his fingers on the arm of his chair, and drinking. Ta-ta-te tum tum, ta-ta-te Tam. Wonderful! The Ride of the Valkyries! The stereo boomed out the music from all sides of the room. Ta-ta-te-Tum-Tum, and the next record he was putting on for laughs. A jeu d'esprit. Puccini. Guess what? You're right. Madame Butterfly. Ha! Ha! Not subtle, but highly amusing! Then more Wagner ... to soothe again ... then a little Brahms. All very calm and civilized.

The Valkyries came to an end, the next record dropped into place, the needle-arm swayed outwards and back, and Madame Butterfly began.

Was it his imagination, or did he see something at the window? A face? There was certainly a noise; a soft sort of whirring combined with tapping. He put on his glasses, which he had taken off when he was listening to the music, and looked towards the window from which the sound had come.

A moth was hurling itself against the upper window-pane opposite him, trying to get to the light. Its wings were flapping with extreme rapidity, and it was rising and descending against the glass, in its frantic efforts to get into the room.

Valentine laughed. 'No good, old fellow,' he said. 'You're no use to me. I don't collect moths!'

He went over to the window to pull the curtains across, noticed that the moth was a Silver Y, and returned to his seat.

Curiously enough the incident had given him a sharp but momentary sense of fear. He could have sworn that what he had first seen had been a human face ... someone staring in ... which had vanished as he had put on his glasses, leaving way for the moth. Obviously he had been mistaken.

He lived alone in the cottage, which was the last house of a long, small village street. He liked it because he had a sense of privacy, while yet feeling himself very much a part of the community. Not isolated. But tonight, quite suddenly, he rather wished his cottage wasn't set so far back from the road. Still, an intruder would be seen by someone, no doubt! Late as it was, there might well be someone abroad, poking his or her nose into matters which didn't concern them. The thought, which often in the past had irritated him, now comforted him.

He wasn't quite so keen on listening to the music, though. He'd rather hear if there was anything moving outside. Apart from the moth. He turned off the hi-fi.

No alien sound.

Nothing.

He took another drink, and leaned back in his armchair, closing his eyes. He thought about his butterfly collection.

It was his major passion in life. He was not only a born collector, but he actually enjoyed the killing. Sometimes as a boy, when he had already caught more than enough specimens for his own need, he'd go on catching and killing for the sheer hell of it, and he wouldn't bother to use the killing bottle. He'd net the butterflies, and then squeeze their heads between his finger and thumb, until the creatures stopped struggling, and they were dead. Highly satisfactory.

There! There was another sound. But this time it seemed to come from within the cottage itself. A door opening softly?

He was a coward and he knew it. He didn't dare go and investigate. If it was a burglar he'd far rather let him get on with it than ask for trouble by disturbing him. Besides, his collection was in this room, and that was the thing he valued most. He'd put the window catches across, and lock the door, with himself inside the room.

He did both, and felt a great sense of relief.

Well, he'd better get on with setting the Chequered Skipper, and then, if there were no more noises, he'd risk rushing up the stairs to his room, because he'd better get some sleep, as tomorrow he had a busy day. Besides, although his butterfly collection was in here, the telephone wasn't. He'd had the downstairs one installed in the hall, where he couldn't reach it to dial 999 if he was in real trouble.

He looked at his watch. Two o'clock, Good. The Skipper had had exactly one hour in the bottle. It must be dead by now.

He went over to the desk, unscrewed the bottle, and drew out the setting board. The butterfly was absolutely rigid. He watched it closely for quite a time, but there was no movement, so he started setting the left side. This time there was no difficulty. Excellent. He looked down at his handiwork exultantly. He had done all that there was to be done for the moment. Tomorrow he'd remove the paper strips, and the setting would be complete. A perfect job.

Suddenly all the lights went out.

My God! What had happened? A fuse? A main fuse?

Where were the candles? Thank heavens he smoked sometimes and so had matches in his pocket! He felt for them, found them, struck one, and it spluttered then flared into flame. He found a candle, and lit it, almost gasping at the grotesque shadow of himself that it threw against the wall.

He made his way over to the drinks cupboard and poured himself another drink. That was better. He needed that. What was that noise? A floor board? Listen! Listen!

Was someone really in the house, or were his nerves playing him up? He'd been a bit nervy lately. Run down, probably. Retirement didn't suit him. He'd enjoyed his job at the office. It had had its tediums, but it was preferable to being without an identity; an identity which somehow his job as a moderately successful accountant had given him.

He'd been sleeping badly, and sometimes he had terrible nightmares. Today, though, had been a wonderful day. Exciting. Satisfying. And sunny. A glorious day. Until now.

Until night-fall.

Night-fall. A frightening word.

He took a mouthful of his third whisky, and, encouraged by the utter silence, he unlocked the door and crept into the hall, holding both his candle and the drink. Here he could almost swear that he could hear a faint sound. What was it? Something? Someone? Someone breathing?

Nothing, Of course nothing, Imagination,

He went quickly up the stairs and reached his bedroom. He flung the door open wide, and looked cautiously in. No one was there, so he locked the door behind him and took another swig of whisky. Now he tentatively tried the light switches. Nothing happened. So it was a main fuse! Damn! It meant that he couldn't turn on the electric blanket, and he was suddenly feeling chilly.

Yet it was high summer.

Dawn would be breaking in another couple of hours. Good. He'd leave the curtains open. Only two hours of disquiet, and once the day broke, these silly fears of his would vanish. He'd always been childishly afraid of the dark.

Butterflies were creatures of the sun. Several species could only mate when the sun shone. Moths belonged to the dark. That's why he wasn't drawn to moths.

He got into bed, leaving the candle burning. No more sounds. Silence reigned.

Reigned. Funny word. Why reigned? Silence reigned.

He allowed himself to shut his eyes, but he determined not to allow himself to go to sleep. Not until day-break.

Day-break.

Day. Break.

Night-fall. Night. Fall. Silence reigned. Reigned.

In his mind's eve, he began seeing butterflies, Miraculously lifelike. A Red Admiral, velvet-winged, was sitting on a purple buddleia, its delicate antennae silhouetted against the flower head and its wings outstretched in the sun. Now it shut them, and moved on its thin black legs. Now it opened them, Black and red, with splashes of white. Lyrically beautiful underside when they were shut, then black and red again, as it basked in the sun. Inappropriately, since it was now high summer, and so out of season, a Brimstone came to join it. Then several Peacocks, a Comma or two, Small Coppers, Large Whites, an Orange Tip, a Pearl Bordered Fritillary, two Swallowtails, Blues of all sorts, Small Heaths, and a Purple Emperor, They all crowded on to the buddleia, although for many of them it was an incorrect feeding plant. They danced and fluttered, they sunned themselves, they probed avidly for nectar, they darted and swooped and crawled and sat ... kaleidoscopically beautiful ... delicate and sinister. He'd never seen anything like it!

For a few minutes he enjoyed it, then he got tired of it and tried to rid his mind of them. But he couldn't. He shut his eyes tighter, opened them, turned on one side, then on the other, and then pulled the bedclothes over his head. Still the butterflies remained. It was almost like an invasion. An invasion of his mind. Absurd. Butterflies on the brain.

He'd think of nothing. Nothing.

But he saw butterflies.

He'd read.

But he hadn't brought a book up with him, nor his reading glasses, which meant going downstairs again. Did he dare? Why not? Anything was better than this. Was it? Yes, it was foolish to let his imagination run away with him, either about the fact that he was hearing strange noises, or that he was being bedevilled by butterflies. The butterflies he had caught

and persecuted all his life. At least since he was seven.

Bedevilled.

He tried again to banish the creatures from his mind, but with no success. The butterflies remained clear, and three-dimensional, and obstinate. Every single species that he had killed was there. None of the ones that were missing from his collection, though. Hang on a minute! Was there a female Chequered Skipper? Yes. There she was. She was moving fast towards him, and becoming larger and larger as she flew, until momentarily she blotted out all the rest. She settled at last with her back to him, and her wings outspread, looking enormous. Positively enormous. Twenty times her normal size.

A sleeping pill. Must have a sleeping pill. But if there was someone in the house, he'd be stupid to drug himself. Too much of a risk if someone was here to do him harm. Who would want to do him harm? Was he going mad?

No. He was overtired. Overtired from doing nothing. Nervy. Restless. Bored. And frightened.

Only action would do anything to banish the fear.

He got out of bed determinedly, put on his dressing gown and slippers, unlocked the door, and holding the candle high he marched down the stairs.

Again as he crossed the landing at the foot of the stairs he felt an alien presence. He looked round him carefully. The candle cast unnerving shadows, but it revealed no one,

He opened the drawing-room door, and a gust of wind blew out the candle. Odd, since the windows were tightly shut. He gave a cry of dismay, and for a moment was literally paralysed with fright.

No way of relighting the candle, as his matches were upstairs in the pocket of the suit he had thrown over the chair in his bedroom.

Did he remember where he had left his reading glasses? Yes. On the table where he had been setting the Chequered Skipper. He believed he could find his way to them, since his eyes ought to be more used to the darkness now. He began

walking, and almost immediately became disorientated. He wandered helplessly round the room, feeling for the table and the glasses, and, incidentally, the chair on which he had left his book. His heart was pounding heavily, and he found difficulty in breathing. He couldn't remember feeling so scared in all his life before, although he had been scared many times. It was one of the penalties of being a coward. Those tiresome words of his least favourite author came into his head. 'A coward dies a thousand deaths. A brave man dies but one.' Something like that.

Oh, thank God! Thank God! Here was the table, and here were his glasses. He wouldn't bother about his book. Just get back to the safety of his bedroom, and the comfort of his bed. Besides, he suddenly realized that the butterflies had left his brain now, so he might be able to sleep at last. Magically he was free of them.

He stumbled towards the door. It was shut. Strange. He could have sworn that he had left it open. He hadn't heard it close, either, and it hadn't swung to in the gust of wind that had blown out the candle. Anyway he'd got this far, and he had only to reach his room, which shouldn't be too difficult, as the stair rail would guide him up the stairs quite easily.

Yes. It was easy. Now just a few steps and he would be in the bedroom, and there, since the curtains weren't drawn, he would be able to see more clearly. Besides, his matches were in there. Ah, here he was! Safe! Now to find the matches... The chair. The suit. The pocket. The matches... Excellent. He struck one, and relit the candle.

Normality seemed to return. He'd spent a considerable time blundering about the drawing-room, so daylight would be that much nearer. Not long now until dawn. Slippers off. Dressing gown off. Glasses on the table. Matches beside the candlestick. Bed. Bed. Bliss.

And now to sleep.

But as his head touched the pillow, the butterflies returned. And stayed.

He twisted and turned. He shut his eyes and opened them.

Finally, groaning aloud, he resigned himself to this nightmare until the dawn.

Crack!

There was someone outside the door! No doubt about it. He sat up. 'Who's there?' he asked anxiously. He could hardly recognize his voice, which had become a kind of croak.

Slowly, very slowly, he felt rather than saw, the handle being turned. Was it really turning, or was it a trick of the candle-light? His reading glasses wouldn't help him.

How carefully the handle was being moved, if indeed it was moving at all! There was a long pause while Valentine held his breath. He could feel that wretched heart of his hammering away again.

Nothing was happening. Nothing, He'd been mistaken.

Ah!

Now the door was opening. Inch by inch.

He knew he should get out of bed and hide behind it with some makeshift weapon, so that at least he had a chance of dealing with the intruder, but mesmerized, coward that he was, he stayed where he was. Should he dial 999? Or wait? He waited.

Slowly. Slowly. Slowly. Now another pause, and then to his horror, two long thin objects, for all the world like a gigantic butterfly's antennae, probed their way into the room. A black head with two protruding eyes followed, and then a black thorax, and two colossal wings. Valentine opened his mouth to scream, and the creature leapt at him. He fought back desperately, scratching, cursing and kicking. In the fight the candle overturned, and he felt himself being smothered in giant wings.

The creature on top of him seemed demented. It was tremendously strong, and in spite of Valentine's struggles it managed to pull him off the bed on to the floor, and turn him over on his back. Suddenly there was a flash of what looked like steel, and Valentine felt a searing pain go through his chest. To his horror he felt himself pinioned to the floor. Almost forgetting his opponent in his terror, he tried to free

himself, but the pain was nearly unbearable. His right arm was now forced upwards and outwards, and with another flash, his right hand was skewered, and then his right leg. His grunts and curses turned to screams that were so muffled by the creature's wings that they seemed only feeble wails. He tried to wriggle his left arm away from his captor, and he kicked frantically with his left leg, but the agony he was enduring seemed to be weakening him. With a pang of dismay he remembered the struggles of the Chequered Skipper on the setting board.

Relentlessly his attacker proceeded with his grisly work, and when it was finished it reared back and looked down at Valentine, who was still conscious and still attempting to struggle. It lifted its thin front legs high in the air, and with a strange little noise that sounded like a cough or a hoarse cackle of laughter it brought them savagely down, one on each side of Valentine's head, and with a grip of steel began to squeeze him. Squeeze. Squeeze his head. Squeeze his head. Until it cracked.

Then the creature walked away.

As Valentine's life began rapidly to ebb, all the butterflies he'd ever seen began to swarm into his brain. They crawled into every part of it, probing with their long probosces, and moving swiftly on their bent black legs.

Chris Morgan Eric and I

I don't remember ever asking why Eric was confined to a wheelchair. Presumably he was a victim of infantile paralysis, as it was still called in those pre-vaccine days of the early fifties, but to my twelve-year-old mind it was sufficient that he was a cripple. Every day he sat in the same place outside the gate of the corner house, smiling at the cars which passed along the main road. His head was large and usually it lolled onto his shoulder. This made him appear all loose and floopy like a Guy Fawkes dummy, or a giant garden slug. One of his eyes had a cast, but I could never recall which, so couldn't tell whether or not he was looking at me. His face was round with fat - it stayed white and puffy however much he sat in the sun - and he had tousled black hair. Although a green tartan blanket always covered his legs from mid-thigh downwards it was easy to see that they were very thin and undeveloped. Only his hands were normal - a labourer's hands, very broad and coarse with thick, stubby fingers though on him they seemed wrong. He was about twenty-one or twenty-two years old.

Every Saturday morning I used to run errands to the local shops for my grandmother, and I made a point of stopping on the corner for a few words with Eric. That's how I first met him. And on Sundays – both morning and evening – my grandparents and I would nod and smile at Eric as we walked to the parish church. During the Christmas and Easter holidays I began to seek out Eric's company even more frequently. He was always there. At that time I was in my second year as a weekly boarder at a preparatory school just a few miles from Oxford, spending weekends at my grandparents' small

pre-war semi in Victoria Street, in Oxford's Ash Hill suburb. I only travelled back out to Southern Rhodesia to be with my parents and younger sister during the long summer holiday. My father considered the educational standards out there to be inadequate, so the prep school was the first stage in a chain which would include a good public school and university.

Why did I bother with somebody as peculiar and unlike myself as Eric? Certainly he was not a brilliant conversationalist; even to me he seemed a little slow-witted, though his parents insisted that it was due to his having missed a proper schooling. Nor did I speak to him out of compassion, for such a feeling was not part of my twelve-year-old mentality. No, the reason - I can see now - was that we both were set apart from the world, he by his disability and I by my colonial background and schizophrenic existence. At school I was too much of an outsider to make friends; a colonial was expected to be as tough as old boots and a great sportsman; instead, I was a thin and clumsy boy, useless at games and distinguished only by a funny accent and a disconcerting ability to come top of the class in the humanities without really trying. At Ash Hill I was just a visitor and, having nothing in common with most of the local lads, had managed to make only one friend - a boy of about my own age named Adrian, who lived across the street from my grandparents. But that had been during my first year in England, and on my return from a summer spent in Southern Rhodesia Adrian had been missing. with neither his parents nor my grandparents willing to say a word about him.

So I had come to seek out the only other outsider of the neighbourhood and make a friend of him, wheelchair and all. My attitude towards Eric was an ambivalent one. Technically he was an adult, and I had been brought up to show respect to adults — so long as they were white — by addressing them as 'sir' or 'Mr'. But Eric never talked or behaved like other adults that I knew, and this, combined with being able to look down upon him physically, enabled me to class him as a quasi-boy and to call him 'Eric' (as everybody else did) with-

out feeling that I had in any way breached the code of rules by which I tried to live.

I don't remember many of the details of my conversations with Eric, though I do recall that I did most of the talking, I expect I told him of my doings at school and at home on the farm near Bulawayo - probably with much repetition and exaggeration. Mostly he would simply listen, I think, but now and then he tried to convey to me some of the important elements of his existence. While I was too impatient to suffer for long his rambling accounts of the day's excitements - of how Mrs Adams had walked by without speaking or of the car with a Danish country plate which had gone past that morning in the direction of Henley - there was one reference he sometimes made which I found strange. He would mention his 'monthly sickness', saving that it was due, or that it had just finished. But when I asked him to explain he would just look at me with a foxy expression and smile. I knew that my mother suffered with a 'monthly sickness', which she wouldn't explain to me either, though it generally kept her in bed for a couple of days, whereas Eric was never missing from his roadside spot for a single day to my knowledge - even when it rained - and his slug-like appearance never altered. This was all rather confusing to me in my naïveté, but I accepted it.

My friendship with Eric seemed to please his parents. I felt sometimes that their pleasure was streaked with concern, and more than once I caught Eric's father looking at me strangely. But (as I had been led to believe) that was only to be expected from foreigners. For they had escaped from Poland before the war, with Eric only a toddler, had come to settle in Oxford and changed their name to Jenks. It was a tale that might have come out of a book by Anthony Hope or G. A. Henty, but I found it hard to prise information out of either of his parents (for Eric, clearly, knew little about it) and was forced to invent the details for myself. I imagined them to be exiled aristocracy — perhaps even royalty. The jagged scar on Mrs Jenks' cheek I managed to incorporate as a bullet wound

from the volley of shots fired at them by palace guards as they (in the words of all good story books) made good their escape. (Mr Jenks had scars, too. I noticed them all over his forearms – like bolts of lightning – one day as he worked in the garden, and I said, 'Gosh, did you get all those marks in Poland?' He shook his head quickly, saying, 'No . . . it is at work. The sparks from the welding guns.' He worked on the line at a local car factory, so it was a plausible explanation, but as soon as my back was turned he rolled down his sleeves, and I never saw his arms bare again.) And, of course, Eric sat outside their house every day as a sentry, watching for Polish spies. I'm sure I didn't believe any of that, but it was something to keep my mind occupied during the more boring lessons at school.

But that spring and early summer after my twelfth birthday my mind began to be occupied by a new subject – sex. Except to point out that information on it was very difficult to come by in those days, I'll spare you the details of my youthful hopes, fears and misunderstandings. I've introduced the topic merely to account for my interest in the fourth member of the Ienks household.

That was Margaret – I don't think I ever knew her surname – a red-haired Irish girl who rented a room there. She was a nurse at – ironically enough – a mental hospital, no more than a mile from where the Jenkses lived. I suppose she was about the same age as Eric, small, rather thin and on the plain side of pretty, but she became the object of my first infatuation. I remember well the incident which sparked off that feeling in me. It was a week-day in April, during my Easter holidays. Just after lunch I was talking to Eric when Margaret arrived home after an early shift. She jumped off her bicycle, said 'Hello', and gave us both the warmest of smiles. In a moment she was through the gate and wheeling her bike towards the shed at the side of the house, but it was enough; my heart was lost to her.

By skilful questioning of Eric I discovered that Margaret worked a complicated system of long and short day-shifts at the hospital. While I couldn't be on hand when she left the Jenks' before eight in the morning or returned a little after eight at night, I contrived to be with Eric on the occasions she started or finished at two in the afternoon. Over the following ten days – which included Easter – I saw her four times and basked in the summer of her smile. I didn't speak to her, of course, but stood blushing and staring as she passed.

Nice as these brief encounters were, they were too short and infrequent to satisfy me. Besides, they were teaching me nothing of the mysteries of girls or sex. Out of this mood of unfocused frustration my great plan was born. I would creep out of my grandparents' house late one night, enter the Jenks' garden and watch Margaret getting ready for bed, through a gap in the curtains of her room: that way I was bound to learn something about female anatomy and behaviour.

Now, as then, the blunt outline of my plan seems altogether absurd - a flight of fancy from a child's comic. In detail, though, it was less colander-like than might have been thought. I knew already that it was possible to climb out of the house at night, for I'd done so a couple of times almost a year before to meet my friend Adrian and play in the vacant lot which lav alongside his parents' house. And at the other side of that vacant lot was the bottom of the Tenkses' garden. easily entered through a gap in the hedge (though the side of their property which abutted Victoria Street, and its frontage along the Henley road, were well guarded by high brick walls). Not only was the Jenks' garden screened from the street, but it contained several mature trees which must have been older than the house - which was detached - including a lime situated no more than fifteen feet from the window of Margaret's room. None of the obvious drawbacks seemed to occur to me, and I was determined to press ahead and carry out my plan as soon as possible.

By then the Easter holidays were almost at an end: that was a Thursday and I had to return to school on the Sunday evening. But on Thursday night my plan was defeated by bodily frailty — I went to bed as usual at nine, fell asleep and

only woke with the dawn chorus. On Friday I purposely spent most of my time resting. Then at tea-time it began to rain, not torrentially but with a depressing steadiness which would soon have soaked my clothes and myself, giving rise to awkward questions. So I lay in bed that night listening for hours to the tappings and splashings from outside. Saturday was fine and very breezy, with puddles drying up before my eyes. That night was my last chance for a while – and I took it.

I lay awake until I heard the church clock strike ten and, shortly afterwards, my grandparents climb the stairs to bed. (My bedroom door was always left ajar, and one or other of them used to look in to make sure I was okay.) Then the creak of bedsprings came from their room. I waited for a while more, before leaping out of bed and getting dressed. Quietly I opened the window and eased myself out onto the sill. From there I could step down onto the low tiled roof which covered the kitchen and outside toilet, then transfer to a shed roof, to the top of the coal bunker and to the ground. It was as simple as anything. The wind was still gusty enough – swishing through the trees and hooting down chimneys – to cover any noise I made. There was no moon.

Trotting around the side of the house, I stopped at the front gate. Victoria Street was a cul-de-sac, quiet enough even by day, but I was taking no chances. Up behind me to the left, my grandparents' room was dark. Along the street just a few houses showed lights – some downstairs, some up. There were occasional cars passing along the main road, but Victoria Street was deserted. I squirmed over the wooden gates – because their hinges creaked – and, after another glance both ways, darted diagonally across the street and into the welcoming darkness of the vacant lot. (I was never frightened of the dark as a child.)

With a certain amount of blundering I found the gap in the hedge and emerged into the Jenks' garden. I could see Margaret's window, lit up and with a considerable gap between the curtains, through which the light fixture was clearly visible. No other lights showed at the back of the

house. I reached the lime tree and began climbing, unhurriedly and without problems, using low-sprouting shoots as footholds, and with the new leaves hiding me from the window's glare. Suddenly realizing that I was on a level with the window, I stopped climbing up and felt about for a firm vantage point from which I could peer between the leaves. From a position slightly to the right of the window I looked into the room. There was Margaret, sitting in bed, reading.

I gazed in wonderment at her. I don't know for how long I looked in through her window; it might have been more than half an hour, though I was too absorbed to hear the church clock.

Then, with a suddenness which startled me, Margaret put her book on a bedside table, flattened her pillow and switched off the light. I must have sat there for another minute or two before, feeling a little foolish but still greatly elated, I decided to climb down. My hands and legs were numb, and it was a difficult scramble to the ground. I ran back to my grandparents' and across the tiles to my bedroom. Not until I was in bed and trying to recall the details of the view through her window, did I realize that I hadn't really seen anything. At least, not the bare flesh I'd hoped for. Margaret's arms and neck had been bare, it was true, but she'd been wearing a nightdress; I'd been too late to watch her undressing. Next time, I told myself, next time. My plan had been so much of a success that there had to be a next time. I knew that I was as well hooked as any fish on a line, and would go there again.

But I returned to school the following evening for the summer term, and, because Margaret went to spend a weekend with relatives in London, a fortnight elapsed before I had another chance to peep in at her window. During this time I had the greatest difficulty in keeping the details of my night-time excursion to myself. Especially when talking to Eric, the urge to boast about it was very strong. Somehow I managed to keep silence, though the fortnight took an age to pass and my secret seemed big enough to make my head burst if I didn't release the pressure by telling somebody.

Eventually the second weekend arrived. The Friday evening was dry, and I was determined to make the most of the opportunity. This time, in order not to miss seeing Margaret's preparations for bed, I didn't undress, but lay in bed fully clothed until the creaking of springs came from my grand-parents' room. Then I got out of the window and followed my route as before. The only difference was that there was a moon this time, just risen, bright and round. It cast long shadows as I scrambled across Victoria Street and through the thick weeds towards the gap in the hedge. But new spring growth had almost blocked the gap; I had to tear my way through into the Jenks' garden, and there I became a little uneasy.

I saw at once that Margaret's window was dark, while lights were still on below. That was good, for it meant that she still had to get to bed. Taking care that I made no noise, and keeping to the shadows, I made my way from tree to tree until I reached the lime. But I needn't have bothered, because I heard noises coming from inside the house – from the lighted ground-floor room to my right, which I knew to be Eric's (though I'd never been inside it). They were low, rumbling, roaring sounds, as of heavy furniture being moved or perhaps a wild animal calling out in anger. And they must have been loud, too, because the windows were closed.

I tried to imagine their source. Did Eric keep an animal in his room? As far as I knew they had no pets in the house. The sounds stopped only to begin anew after a few seconds; they were louder, and my heart beat faster, for they were unsettling, bloodcurdling sounds. Somehow they created an aura of menace which hung about the house like black treacle. My uneasiness grew to the point of panic. It demonstrates my strength of purpose – undoubtedly buoyed by the relative success of a fortnight before – that I was able to hold my fear in check and pull myself up into the tree.

The old adage of 'ignore it and it'll go away' seemed to work: by the time I had reached the level of the upper windows I could hear nothing from below. The air seemed clearer, and I was already beginning to wonder whether I'd been mistaken. My climb was made easier than before by the moonlight, which reflected off the leaves, painting me green. I was still trying to discover a comfortable spot to sit, amongst the branches, when the light came on. Instinctively I shrank away, but I needn't have worried. With her face set into a firm, unsmilling expression, Margaret came straight across to the window, drew the curtains most of the way across—leaving the same twelve-inch gap as the time before—and began to undress.

Now that I'm going on for forty I can think of her objectively: a thin girl with small breasts and spotty shoulders—nothing special. To me at the age of twelve she was the most marvellous, most fascinating sight in the world. She made no special attempt to conceal her body, nor did she flaunt it; as far as she was aware nobody else could see her. What still intrigues me, though, after about two and a half decades of reasonably frequent nocturnal window-watching, is the gap between the curtains. Many young women living alone deliberately leave such a gap night after night. Is it a subconscious come-on to peeping-toms, is it to let in the dawn, or does it simply denote poorly fitting curtains? Having always been on the receiving end—so to speak—I've never been able to ask.

I'd been absorbed by my first sight of Margaret in bed, but this time I was totally entranced – caught in a sticky web of lace frills and auburn pubic hair. Again I stayed until she turned out her light, then scrambled down with a chill numbness in my limbs but ecstasy in my heart.

By the morning only the numbness had gone; the ecstasy and the chill remained, but I managed to avoid shivering or coughing over breakfast. Even so, my grandmother caught hold of my shoulders and looked into my face (I was already as tall as she), saying, 'You're looking very peaky today, Michael.' I managed to mumble something acceptable and then, as soon as her back was turned, I slipped out of the house and went off to talk to Eric.

Though it was before nine o'clock on a cool Saturday

morning, Eric was already in his accustomed place. I think I would very probably have told him about the beauty of Margaret's body had he not said, directly after our normal opening remarks about the weather and the passing cars, 'Had me sickness last night. But'm alright now.'

'Yes?' I was slow to add two and two that morning.

Eric must have sensed scepticism. 'Don't believe me, then. I'll show yer.' And with a foolish grin splitting his moon-face he pulled back a sleeve of the sloppy green cardigan he always wore.

His wrist was blood-red. With that animal roar from his room flowing through my mind again, I jumped a yard. It was only mercurochrome, though. I'd had it applied to enough scratches and grazes of my own not to be scared by it. But under the antiseptic Eric's wrist was badly grazed – raw for much of its circumference. And around the fresh wounds were older marks suggestive of extensive scarring.

'And t'other,' he said, briefly displaying a similar situation on his other massive wrist before pulling down the cuffs again.

'That happens during your sickness?'

'Ar,' was all he would say in reply, turning his face slightly away and looking sideways at me. Nothing else of relevance emerged from our conversation that morning.

By lunchtime I was feeling hot and feverish, and could not disguise the fact. My grandmother sent me straight to bed, not letting me up until Tuesday, with the result that I didn't get back to school until the Wednesday evening. And by then my memories of Margaret's slim pinkness had retreated sufficiently to keep me from blabbing about my experience.

The two days of school sped by as if winged. But my hopes of a Friday evening excursion were foiled by my grand-mother, who noticed that I was still troubled by a hacking cough. She dosed me with a foul brown linctus and sent me to bed early, disturbing me again in the late evening for another spoonful. I didn't dare leave the house that night for fear that she would look in later. And after a Saturday of intermittent drizzle, when she wouldn't let me step outside

the house in case my chest should be affected, I was sentenced to another early night with more linctus.

So it was another week – one that crawled and dragged its feet – before I could climb the friendly lime tree and spy on Margaret again. Yet my waiting was well rewarded, because on both the Friday and Saturday nights she undressed for me. On neither occasion did I hear any noise from Eric's room or experience any fear whatsoever. Being unable to satisfactorily explain, or even connect up, the noise, Eric's 'sickness' and the damage to his wrists, I quickly came to regard these as adult mysteries, and dismissed them from my mind. Eric, for his part, made no more references to his sickness, or to anything else unusual, and our conversations became as unmemorable as before.

The following weekend was wet - the month of May was damp and dismal that year. It was foolish of me to go out on the Friday evening, and my foolishness very nearly led to discovery. Though I wore my mackintosh I got very wet while watching Margaret. Then I slipped while descending from the lime and skinned my knee. Finally, I almost bumped into a man who was walking along the pavement as I dashed out of the vacant lot. I kept running, though I glanced back at him. He had stopped and was looking after me, but he didn't speak or follow, even when I scrambled over my grandparents' gate and disappeared from his view. I didn't recognize him, and nothing came of the incident. But what if he had been a close neighbour or a policeman? In the morning I succeeded in washing the dried blood from my knee. Fortune somehow prevented my grandmother from noticing the injury, or the fact that my mack and shoes were still wet.

On Saturday night I was not so foolish; I stayed in bed.

It continued wet for most of the week and over the next weekend. Not that it mattered, for that weekend my cousin Jonathan came up to stay, from his public school in Surrey. Except for occupying the spare bed in my room for that weekend, preventing any nocturnal adventures, he plays no part in this story, so apart from mentioning that he was – and is – two years my senior and a hateful snob, I'll ignore him in the same way that he tries to ignore me.

Another week passed, towing in its wake another weekend. This one was different. It was Whitsun and half-term, and the school released us at lunchtime on Friday, not requiring our return until the Tuesday morning (or, for weekly boarders like me, the Monday evening).

The long weekend began very well. After a late lunch with my grandparents I was just in time to join Eric on the corner before Margaret returned from a short shift. As she smiled sweetly at us both I remembered the slender curves that her green uniform covered so completely and I knew so well, and I barely succeeded in suppressing a snigger. Hardly had she disappeared into the house than Eric was telling me something about going down to Bournemouth for three days.

'I hope you have a nice time,' I said.

'No. Just me mam and dad. Leaving s'afternoon and coming back on Monday. Margaret's going to see to me meals and things.'

To me this seemed an excellent turn of events. I recognized the fact that I was glad to have Mr and Mrs Jenks absent for the weekend, because subconsciously I had always feared being caught in the act of peeping by Mr Jenks. Even to be discovered in his garden after dark would give rise to questions which I didn't want to answer, so his absence would be welcome. For a moment I wondered whether I should be more adventurous than just looking through the window. With Eric's help I could actually get inside the house and ... But the objections came to me immediately. One was that I didn't want to tell him about my peeping; we had never discussed girls and I wasn't sure of either his response or his ability to keep a secret. A second was that, from inside the house, I would see no more of Margaret's body and might put her on her guard. No, I would follow my normal routine.

But I managed to miss that Friday evening's viewing by falling asleep. When I woke it was still dark, but before I could dress I heard midnight strike. I was very annoved with myself, but Margaret would undoubtedly be asleep by then, so there was nothing to be done except wait for Saturday night.

I avoided making the same mistake two nights running, and had no troublé on the Saturday until I got into the Jenks' garden. There, despite the brightness of the moonlight, I felt the dark aura which had frightened me once before. It flooded the space between the trees, oozing in slow, viscous ripples, redolent with evil. This re-awoke the panic inside me. I came close to rushing back through the hedge, but the strength of my desire to watch Margaret was enough to sustain me.

The only light visible was in the kitchen, where a shadow flitted across the roller blind as I watched. I walked boldly towards the lime tree – to prove to myself that I wasn't really afraid, and confident that nobody was in a position to see me. As I stepped into the lime's heavy shadow there came a single deep, roaring bellow like thunder, which made me clutch at the smooth bark in terror. Dark shapes seemed to float across my field of vision. The air pressed in heavily against me, squeezing, and I smelt the sickly miasma of decay.

Close to screaming, I tore at the branches overhead, heaving myself up the tree. I stood on the lowest branch. The male-volent pressure was more than I could bear. With it constricting my throat I could scarcely breathe. I opened my mouth wide and it filled with the taste of evil. In terror I climbed higher, higher. As before, the heaviness diminished with height. I began to slow down and breathe easily. Then another animal roar came from below, from Eric's room.

I climbed further than before. Instead of sitting on a branch which was just below window-sill level I was two or three feet higher and several feet closer to the glass, lying flat. The view, I thought, should be even better than before.

Margaret entered, switching on the light. She was wearing a flower-patterned summer dress, for it had been a hot day. Even as she was shutting the door her fingers were busy loosening the fashionably wide belt of her dress. (I can see now that she wasn't busty enough for the style to suit her.) She bent to unbuckle her sandals, then kicked them off. Undoing the buttons of her dress, she wandered across to the window. She reached up a hand to each curtain, allowing the dress to fall open at the front, and then she saw me.

She screamed. She spun away from the window and rushed out of the room. While her dressing-gown was still swinging to and fro on the back of the half-open door, I worked out the reason for her reaction. Lying along the branch, with only my head beyond the shadow of the leaves, I was a Cheshire Cat with a silvery-green face.

Allowing myself to be seen like that was my mistake. Mea culpa. But Margaret compounded it by running down to Bric's room. Why she did so I'll never understand. Under the circumstances – and only half-dressed – it was the worst move she could possibly have made. Provocation is the mother of intention.

I saw the light flash on in Eric's room – the curtains in there were, as always, drawn right across – and I heard the succession of terrible roars which shook the window-frame. Even then I couldn't believe a human throat capable of such sounds. Yet Eric and Margaret were the only ones in that house.

Margaret screamed again. There came a clatter and a bang from downstairs. After a short pause Margaret re-appeared in her room. She slammed the door and locked it, then flung herself onto the bed, sobbing hysterically. I couldn't move; I just lay there watching and listening.

After a while Margaret suddenly sat up on the bed, listening. I could hear nothing. Then I saw the door handle dip as somebody tried it from outside. Margaret saw that too. Jumping to her feet, the dress flapping around her, she tried to drag the bed towards the door. A leg of it caught on a rug. She struggled to free it. Before she could, the door-jamb splintered and the door flew open.

There was Eric; a different Eric. Darkness flowed from his eyes, and evil cloaked him. Fear and terror were his outriders.

With his hands he pulled himself into the room. Around each bloodstained wrist was an iron manacle and a short length of chain culminating in a broken link. He was dressed in the remnants of blue-striped pyjamas. His legs trailed uselessly behind him.

Margaret stepped up onto the bed. As he closed she leapt over him, for the doorway. Eric's arm moved impossibly fast. A massive hand caught her ankle, and she fell on top of him, writhing to free herself. She was screaming again, trying to scramble towards the window.

Eric drew her to him and bit a large chunk out of her leg. He tore at her arm. His teeth closed on her neck.

I saw scarred forearms, a scarred cheek . . . I saw Adrian . . . I saw Margaret mauled to death by wild evil.

I screamed ... and screamed.

Questing fingers of syrupy blackness seared my eyes and stuck in my gagging throat. My mind was on fire. Leafy branches spun around me.

Eventually I picked myself up off the Jenks' back lawn, with moonlight in my eyes. I'm not sure how I got back to bed. My crying woke up my grandparents, but I couldn't tell them what was the matter — not that night or at all. What Pd seen was too terrible to impart.

In the morning I went with my grandparents to church. I was scared to walk past the Jenks' house (though not half as scared as I would have been to stay alone in the house while they went off to church). In any case, I felt that I had been instrumental in causing Margaret's death by allowing her to see me through the window, and I hoped that attendance at church might help to absolve me of the guilt.

Neither going nor returning did we see any sign of Eric. My Grandfather commented on this, looking to me, as Eric's friend, for an explanation.

'Perhaps he went off to Bournemouth with his parents,' I said.

This was accepted as a reasonable hypothesis, and my grandparents said no more. Certainly the Jenks' house appeared to be empty. It remained so on Sunday and most of Monday. But in the middle of Monday afternoon, as I was helping my grandfather on his allotment – off Latimer Road, the next turning to Victoria Street – we heard the clanging bell of an emergency vehicle approaching from the centre of Oxford and stopping somewhere very close. Then, as we walked back to the house, we saw an ambulance and two shiny black saloons – one with a policeman in the driving seat – beside the Jenkses' place. I wasn't surprised, and my grandfather was the sort of person who never wanted to appear nosey, so we passed by without a word.

Within a couple of hours I was on my way back to school by bus, and I never heard a word about the terrible events at the Jenkses' house. If you find that difficult to believe, remember that my prep school was not unlike a prison. We boarders saw no newspapers, watched no television (though my grandparents had one they were an exception in those days) and had no access to a radio (not yet portable). We didn't mix much with the school's minority of day-boys, and it was unusual for any boarder to go outside the grounds during the week. Yet at the time we never imagined ourselves to be oppressed, while our teachers probably felt they were doing us a kindness by insulating us from the wickedness of the world.

My grandparents shared that attitude: they never once mentioned the Jenkses' house or any of its inhabitants. Indeed, I never saw Mrs Jenks again after that Whitsun weekend, and I only glimpsed Mr Jenks a couple of times, working in his front garden. (They left the area during the summer. When I returned from Southern Rhodesia another family had moved in, and a house was being built on the vacant lot.)

As for Eric, it was more than twenty-five years before I discovered whether he was alive or dead. Then, just seven weeks ago, he was transferred to the psychiatric hospital where I work – right onto my ward.

It's peculiar how circumstances work themselves out. My father always expected me to go on to public school and

university, where I would study something useful like tropical agriculture before joining him on the farm. But my public school and I parted company with mutual relief after only three years, so I never went on to university. I tried and failed at almost a dozen jobs over eleven years or so before I ever thought of psychiatric nursing. And here I am, after more than ten years, a charge-nurse. I'm not at the hospital where Margaret once worked, though I'm in the same area, near Oxford, at a tall, red-brick Edwardian hospital with a couple of newer wings. They think a lot of me here, and I'm married now, with three youngsters. Although my grandparents both died back in the sixties I feel settled in the Thames Valley. Especially since my parents were killed last year by terrorists, on the farm.

Eric had fared less well over the quarter-century. I wasn't able to discover all the details, but he'd spent nineteen years at Broadmoor before being classified as harmless and shunted around from one psychiatric hospital to another. Somewhere along the line he'd been extensively mutilated. His right hand had been severed at the wrist, his left hand retained only the thumb and little finger, and his face was a patchwork of scars. But the lolling head, the cast in one eye, the white roundness of his face, the sideways look – all these were still present.

Though I recognized him at once, he didn't know me. Nor did I rush to make myself know; he hadn't featured in my nightmares for almost two decades, and I'd learned to feel compassion for those who couldn't control their actions. I no longer blamed him — or myself — for Margaret's death. I didn't want to remind him of something he would obviously rather forget, or might never have comprehended.

So I didn't let on that I'd known him before, but I talked to him. Right from the day of his admission I was curious enough to talk to him. He was an obvious choice for conversation, anyway: he didn't sleep much and I always like to spend the night talking. There's rarely much work on nights, and most nurses read or sleep, but I prefer to talk — usually to one of the patients. Of course, a lot of them don't sleep much,

but it isn't against the rules not to give barbiturates to one of them. Besides, it's additional therapy - it's good for them.

The first night after Eric arrived he was put on his own in a two-bedded side-ward so that we could assess him and find out, in particular, why so many other hospitals didn't want him. (They mentioned that he was a potential suicide and that he often upset other patients; they hinted – between the lines – at more.) I sat by his bed that night – we must have chatted for three or four hours – and was amazed at his lucidity. If anything his mind had sharpened over the years.

After that he was in the main ward and we developed a routine for the four nights a week that I was on duty. An hour or so after the patients had been dosed and settled I would lift him into his chair and push him along the main corridor to the smallest of the day-rooms. There we were able to talk without disturbing anyone, though I could still reach the phone in my office within four rings. In one sense Eric hadn't wasted his time in psychiatric hospitals. He'd seen and heard thousands of incidents – comic and tragic – which he could relate and comment on without repeating himself. But, despite my leading questions, he wouldn't talk about things which had puzzled me for over twenty-five years.

Wouldn't, that is, until one night about a month ago. He looked at me sideways then, and said, 'Me monthly sickness is due. Mick.'

'Tell me about your monthly sickness.'

'Ar, I don't tell anybody 'bout that. But they finds out.'

'Have you had it a long time, Eric?'

'A long time.' He stared at me. 'You knows about it. You can't fool Eric. You knows me - from before.'

'That's right, Eric. We were friends a long time ago. Do you remember the house at Ash Hill?' I received a blank look. 'On the corner of Victoria Street and the Henley road. You used to watch the cars.'

'Ohh, the cars! On the Henley road.' He paused. 'You was a little boy, then. You was the one who come and talked to me. I used to call you Michael.'

'You had your monthly sickness even then. It made you do things. Tell me about the things it made you do, Eric.'

It took him a long time to answer. He said, 'You knows very well what it makes me do, Michael. It's a lot older than what I am. They cut off me hands to stop it doing what it wants. And now it just wants to get free. It knows you, Michael.'

I wanted to be indignant. I wanted to say, What do you mean? Who knows me, Bric? What are you talking about? But I couldn't, because I remembered the thick, black, stifling pressure of evil, and I knew. I wheeled him back to his bed and sedated him.

In my night's report I recommended that Eric be transferred to a special observation room – which would mean to one of the other wards, downstairs, because we don't have any on the top floor – just for a single night, I was sure his 'It just wants to get free' remark implied another suicide attempt. And I reinforced my warning to the day-shift chargenurse when she came on at eight.

'Goodness gracious, Mick!' she said. 'You know what it is tonight? We can't lock 'em all up separately.'

'Okay, Rita. Okay. Do your best to get him shifted. If you can't, will you see the nursing officer and ask if I can have a second nurse to help me tonight?'

'I'll tell her what you've said. But Jenks hasn't tried anything in the three weeks he's been here, has he?'

Tonight's the night, Rita.'

She said she'd do her best to arrange something, but when I came on duty again that evening I found Eric still on the ward. I had been assigned another nurse, though — a trainee named Trevor Manners. That was in addition to Jacqueline de Villon, the Mauritian girl who was normally on with me.

The shift began with an admission, so I got Jackie to handle medication for the ward — including a barbiturate for Eric — while Trevor helped me get the newcomer booked in and settled. I noticed an uneasiness among the patients. More than usual were rowdy, and even after lights-out there was little

reduction in the noise level. A couple of patients were arguing at the tops of their voices, then another woke up screaming from a nightmare. I took a peep at Eric, but he seemed to be sleening quietly - one of the few who was.

But only about half an hour later there was a terrible commotion. The old man from the bed next to Eric had his hands around Eric's neck and was trying to strangle him. I pulled the attacker off and told Trevor to get Eric out of the ward, fast. I knew what had caused it. I could sense the power within Eric – the power that was begging release from the crippled, maimed husk of a body in which it was trapped. I managed to get the old man back into his bed and settled, then I went along to see how Eric was.

I found him in the largest of the day-tooms, with blood running from his nose, being lifted back into his chair by Jackie and Trevor.

Jackie said, 'He tried to jump through the window. I think he's determined to die tonight. I can feel something in him ...'

'I know,' I told her. 'That's why old Maurice tried to throttle him. How's his throat?'

'No damage,' said Trevor, in his rich Jamaican accent.

I decided to keep Eric in that day-room overnight, with two of us watching him at a time. I knew he'd upset the ward if I put him back in there; his mute appeal for death was very strong and all three of us could feel it. In addition, I could sense the evil in him, very near to the surface, waiting.

Jackie went back to the office while Trevor and I sat with Bric. He wouldn't talk. He just glared. An hour passed without incident and the tension began to ebb. We weren't going to be overcome by Eric's death-wish. I wouldn't let a silly childhood fear influence my judgement of the situation.

A few minutes before midnight I sent Trevor off to the ward's kitchenette to make some coffee. No sooner was he out of sight than Eric said, 'Toilet.' I wheeled him out of the day-room, along the corridor and into the toilets, just inside the main ward. I started to go in with him, but he said, ''M okay,' so I let him go in alone. I knew that there was no

way for him to kill or injure himself in there, and also that he was surprisingly adept at moving himself around in the wheelchair, despite his missing fingers.

When he emerged I was standing just opposite, in the office doorway, sipping at a steaming cup of coffee. I indicated with a wave of my hand that we were going back into the day-room, and Eric manoeuvred himself through the doorway into the corridor. But as he did I felt a touch of blackness, a cold finger in my mind. I took another sip. Eric couldn't come to any harm in the corridor. There was no way ... Yes there was!

The lift! Its doors could be opened when the lift wasn't there - if one knew the trick.

I dropped my coffee and ran after Eric. There he was by the lift, using his thumb and little finger to press the Call and Stop buttons simultaneously. The blackness swirled against me. My legs were slowed down. It was like running underwater.

Eric pushed back the inner and outer doors. I leaned forward, arms outstretched. Eric squirmed round to smile at me as my fingers touched his chair and pushed it into the shaft.

The lift cage was at the ground floor, and he seemed to take a long time to hit the roof of it and die. Then, as Jackie and Trevor came to help me to my feet, the creature of blackness and evil came up the shaft – released. The others didn't see it, feel its pressure, taste the stench of it; but I did. I knew it and it knew me. It remembered me from years before, and also I had killed its useless host. I was fit and strong ...

The hospital held an inquiry, which exonerated me – as did the coroner's inquest. I was soon back on duty and the tragedy was forgotten. Four weeks is long enough to forget in this job.

Anyway, I'm off duty tonight. I'll be at home with Kathy and the kids.

I can hardly wait for the full moon to rise.

David Case Neighbours

Iulia Harvey was stirring the contents of a bubbling pot when the doorbell sounded. It was one of those doorbells that play chimes. Julia knew it was not yet time for her husband to be home, although she had no idea what time it was. She glanced at the clock on the wall. It was an oval clock surrounded by a gilded sunburst and Julia frowned slightly, as if to absorb knowledge of chronology by sheer concentration. But it did not work. The stationary markers and the revolving hands meant nothing to Julia. It was so difficult to understand the measurement of time, when one had only the vaguest concept of time itself. After a moment she shrugged and her dark brow smoothed. The pot was steaming and beads of perspiration punctuated her hairline. The chimes tinkled again and Julia placed the dripping ladle aside and moved through to the hall. She walked with long strides and her face was impassive, showing neither pleasure nor annoyance at the unexpected interruption.

She opened the door.

Mrs Jennings stood solidly on the doorstep, her wide jaw thrust resolutely forwards. There was a black rubber welcome mat under her feet, and her five-year-old son peered out from behind the dark wedge of her skirt. The child looked very much like his mother. Already his jaw was belligerent and his face pinched. He held his mother's skirt clenched in one little fist.

'Good afternoon, Mrs Harvey.'

'Good afternoon.'

'Say good afternoon to Mrs Harvey, Johnny.'

Johnny said nothing.

Julia stood waiting. Mrs Jennings lived in the house next door. It was a house exactly like Julia's house. Every house on that street was like every other house, and separated by absolutely uniform hedges. It was a very neat little suburban street, very neat indeed. Julia had lived there for several months, but Mrs Jennings had never called before. They had never spoken. They had, on the odd occasion, nodded en passant on the street or in the corner shop. The woman who owned the corner shop had never spoken to Julia, either, although she accepted her money. She accepted it gingerly, but she accepted it.

'Well,' said Mrs Jennings.

'Yes?' Julia asked.

'I hope I'm not troubling you?'

'Not at all, Mrs Jennings.'

'I wanted to ask if you've seen Bitsy Blue Eyes?'

Julia looked blank. She had white teeth and white eyes and when she looked blank she resembled a domino.

'My little darling. Surely you know Bitsy? Everyone knows my little dear.'

'I'm sorry. I'm not sure . . .'

'My little doggy woggy, of course.'

'Oh. Of course. I didn't know the name.'

Mrs Jennings sighed.

'He seems to have wandered off. It's most unusual. The little dear is so affectionate and dependent that he seldom leaves my side. Except to do his duty, ha ha, I do hope ... I wondered if you'd seen him today?'

'I'm afraid not. Not today. He was digging in our garden last week'

'He is a little devil, isn't he? He does so love to dig up gardens. But so intelligent! He never digs up our garden, and that's a fact. He never even does his duty in our garden. Just other gardens. I expect that's because he's so intelligent. Of course, some people can be cranky about it. I'm not one to mention names, but that nasty Alice Smyth had the nerve to

complain about it. Can you imagine? A sweet little doggy woggy like Bitsy, and her garden all nasty old weeds anyhow. Of course, Mister Smyth is only a clerk. I gave her a piece of my mind, I'll tell you. Told her just what I thought. But you wouldn't know Alice Smyth?

'I'm afraid not.'

Mrs Jennings squinted.

I don't expect you know many of the neighbours?'

No, I don't.'

It just goes to show you,' said Mrs Jennings, and her narrowed eyes shifted. She looked past Julia, peering into the house. Then she looked at Julia again. Her nose wrinkled. Her nose was always wrinkled, but now it wrinkled more.

'Of course, if a neighbour did call, one would expect you'd ask them in ...'

It took Julia a moment to understand this. Then she stepped aside.

'I'm sorry. I didn't think. Won't you come in?'

Well ...

'I have some tea.'

'Well, if it's no trouble, then.'

Mrs Jennings launched herself from the welcome mat and moved past Julia. Johnny followed directly in her wake, like a dinghy tied to the stern of a barge, swept along on the cumbersome waves of her dominance.

'I do like a cup of tea,' said Mrs Jennings. Her eyes were shifting about the hallway. There was a wooden coat rack and a plastic umbrella stand and a hat rack fashioned from the antlers of a deer. 'If it's made properly, that is. I don't expect you drink much tea where you come from?'

'In the cities.'

'Oh, of course. Were you from a large city, then?'

No. I lived in a village.'

'So I'd heard. So I'd heard. Of course, one never pays much attention to the things one hears. A person simply has to find out for herself. Just like you, I imagine. It must be quite an experience for you, moving to civilization so suddenly and all.

I give you credit, Mrs Harvey. I really do. You must be very brave. All the strange things you have to learn, those things that a normal ... I mean a city person, of course ... grows up with. Like making tea, for instance. And inviting your neighbours in when they come to call, instead of leaving them, ha ha, standing on the doorstep ...'

'Forgive me. I didn't think ...'

'Oh, I perfectly understand. I do indeed. After all, without a proper background, it's a marvel you can manage at all. A proper marvel. I certainly understand. If there's one thing I am, it's tolerant. Tolerant to a fault.'

And Mrs Jennings turned her tolerant little eyes on Julia and smiled sweetly.

Julia ushered Mrs Jennings down the hall and into the sittingroom. Mrs Jennings' head swivelled about as she turned her perception around the house. Johnny marched behind her, still clutching her skirt, as if he was trying to launch his mother like a kite. Mrs Jennings moved to the centre of the room and perceived. There was a glass-topped coffee table and an overstuffed couch and a non-functional fireplace covered with simulated marble paper. It looked pretty much like marble, at that.

Please sit down. I'll prepare the tea.'

'I must say, you speak English very well. Considering. There's the accent, of course, but that's to be expected. All foreigners have accents. But I can understand every word you say, and that's a fact.'

'Thank you, Mrs Jennings.'

Mrs Jennings grunted and nodded and sat on the couch. Johnny positioned himself beside her. Mrs Jennings was heavy and her son was already quite heavy and they sank well down into the cushions. Julia excused herself and went into the kitchen. She put tea in the pot and water on the burner and she paused to inspect the stew. The steam rose from the pot and fresh globules of perspiration squeezed out at her hair-line and on her heavy upper lip. She moved the ladle through

the thick stew a few times. There was no expression on her face. There was nothing but patience as she waited for the water to boil.

Julia brought the tea things in on a lacquer tray. The tray was very bright and colourful and had Chinese peacocks on the surface. She placed it on the coffee table and prepared to pour. Mrs Jennings leaned forward and observed the cups very carefully. The cups were clean. She sighed and helped herself to five lumps of sugar. Julia took a seat opposite, her long tapered legs curling gracefully beneath her. She waited for Mrs Jennings to speak. Mrs Jennings held her cup with her little finger rigid and looked at it and seemed to be pondering.

'Where's my tea?' Johnny asked.

'Hush, dearest.'

'I want some tea.'

'When we get home.'

'I'm hungry, too.'

'Hush now.'

Johnny pushed his lip out. It was a very truculent lip.

'Don't do that,' said Mrs Jennings. 'It makes you look like a ... a bad boy.'

I have some food, if your little boy ...' Julia said.

'No, no,' Mrs Jennings said quickly.

I'm hungry,' said Johnny.

'He can wait. He has a delicate stomach, you know. I like to know exactly what he eats. You can't be too careful with a child's diet, can you? I'm sure your food would agree with him, of course. I don't mean that. But a child his age will eat anything. Sweets! My lord, the sweets the child eats. The neighbours all worship Johnny, of course, and they are always giving him sweeties. Why, sometimes he disappears for hours, and I find he's been at one of the neighbours' homes, stuffing his little tummy full of sweets. Why, I do believe a total stranger could lure him away by offering a bag of sweeties...'

'I'm afraid I have no sweets.'

'Oh, that's all right.'

'I always have tea at Mrs Smyth's and Mrs Turnbull's and Mrs White's...' said Johnny. His lip was still out. His mother turned a black scowl upon him and Johnny clamped his mouth shut and peered at her.

'I'll purchase some sweets, Johnny,' Julia said. 'Then you can call on me again.'

'Okay,' said Johnny.

Mrs Jennings braved the tea. She took a small sip.

'Is the tea all right?' Julia asked.

'Oh, it's quite all right. Quite. A trifle weak, perhaps. But then you wouldn't know. You'll learn, no doubt. It takes time. It's a marvel how well you've managed already. It really is. Why, your house is as clean – well, I daresay it's as clean as my own. To think that you grew up in a jungle, in some horrid little ... I expect it was a cabin, or a hur?'

'A bamboo house. It was on poles over the water. It was a very nice house.'

'Oh, no doubt,'

Bven in Guinea, one recognizes the need for cleanliness, Mrs Jennings.'

'Oh, the need. Yes, there's that. Sanitation and such. Especially when one doesn't have modern plumbing. But there is a social obligation, as well. I don't expect you would have known about that. Cleanliness is more than a practical thing, yes indeed.'

'It certainly is a wonderful thing,' said Mrs Jennings.

Mrs Jennings took another sip, small but noisy.

Johnny was staring at Julia. He had been staring since she had offered to buy sweets.

'Why is that lady black, Momma?' he asked.

'Hush, dear,'

'But she is. She's black.'

'You mustn't mind Johnny, Mrs Harvey. He's so intelligent, you see. So observant. It's not every child of his age that would notice such things. He notices everything.'

'He's a lovely child,' said Julia, and she smiled at Johnny. Her teeth were ivory geometrics.

You do have the most attractive teeth, Mrs Harvey. I've always maintained that you people had lovely teeth. Some people can't understand these things, they simply refuse to understand, but I always see things objectively. I've never for a moment thought that black people were particularly ugly. Not for an instant. Just different, is all.'

'You're most kind.'

Mrs Jennings nodded agreement.

I really am so pleased that we've met at last,' she said. 'Of course, I've known Mister Harvey since he was a child. He was such a quiet lad. Everyone said he was moody, you know. But not me. I always said he was just different, that he had his own ideas about things. Nothing warped about that, is there? I mean, it takes all kinds to make the world, as they say. And one must practice tolerance, even if there are some things one doesn't really understand. Of course, it was certainly a surprise to hear that Mister Harvey was bringing a foreign woman home. At first I wouldn't believe it. Positively refused. I thought it was just some nasty gossip. It certainly was nasty, too, I'll tell you. And then when it turned out to be true, why, you could have knocked me over with a feather. Even though I'd always known Mister Harvey was different, I never for a moment ...'

Mrs Jennings shrugged.

'More tea, Mrs Jennings?'

'No, thank you. But you really must call me Martha. After all, we are neighbours. And I shall call you Julia. I'd never realized that Julia was a common name in other societies. Just because you're a foreigner, that's no reason why we can't be friends. I always say that. Be friends with your neighbours and never mind what other people want to think. Never mind the gossips. Mind you, it's not easy. The way the women in this street talk! My heavens, you'd never believe the things I've heard said ...'

'Perhaps I might.'

Well. I'm certainly not one to repeat it. Such gossip! Bigots and hypocrites, that's what they are, That's just what they are. I never realized how prejudiced they were until ... well. I've always been one to speak my mind. Mrs Harvey, and the fact is that when they heard Mister Harvey was coming back with a black ... a foreign ... wife, to our own neighbourhood, well, what they didn't say is nobody's business. Why, Mrs Smyth and Mrs Turnbull were actually going to take up a petition about it. Can you imagine? They wanted to get all the residents to sign this petition to keep you from moving in. Mrs Smyth actually had the nerve to ask me to sign! You can imagine what I told her. I always speak my mind, you know. and I told her just what I thought of intolerance, I said, "Just on account of she's black and lived in a jungle is no reason to look down on her." That's just what I told her. Told her we were all God's children and that you were every bit as good as she was. Got all huffy about it, she did. Simply couldn't understand my principles. Not at all, didn't even try. And her husband no more than a clerk in an office, as well! Why, the way they carried on, one would think you were a cannibal or something.'

Mrs Jennings shook her head and clicked her tongue.

"They've scarcely spoken to me since, you know," she said. 'Since I defended you. Why, today I stopped at Mrs Turnbull's to inquire if she'd seen Bitsy Blue Eyes, and she wouldn't even come to the door. I knew she was at home, too. I can see into her kitchen from my bathroom, you see. Not that I deliberately look or anything, but sometimes one can't help but glance through the window. So I knew she was home, but she pretended to be out. How do you like that? The price one pays for having principles. It's enough to make you cry. As if I hadn't enough worries, what with Bitsy Blue Eyes missing and all. Mrs White's little dog disappeared last week, too. Of course, that was a wretched little beast. A horrid dog. It was a mongrel, too, although Mrs White wouldn't admit it. Of course, Mrs White had a Jewish grandmother, and she doesn't like to admit that, either. It's good riddance to her

little cur, I should say. The nasty little creature snapped – actually snapped – at Johnny a few weeks ago. Just because he was playing with it ...'

I just wanted to tie a can to its tail,' said Johnny.

'Just harmless play, and it actually snapped! Still, it does make me worry even more about Bitsy.'

Her eyes widened, her mouth narrowed.

'Why, it wouldn't surprise me if one of the neighbours had taken Bitsy. Or even done something dreadful. Poisoned the trusting little darling, even. Just out of spite. Just because I wouldn't sign that petition.'

'I sincerely hope not.'

'Of course, it isn't your fault. I don't blame you. After all, how could you know that you wouldn't be wanted here? I mean, a young girl who'd had so little contact with civilization, suddenly meeting a nice white man... Mister Harvey may not be all that handsome, but still ... You must have been swept off your feet. And the envy! Your... tribe, would you call it?'

'My village.'

'Ah yes. The envy of your village ...'

'It wasn't quite that way.'

Mrs Jennings peered at Julia.

'Actually, my people couldn't understand why I wanted to leave a peaceful life, to go away from my home ...'

'Is that a fact? Who'd have thought it? Still, I suppose they just didn't know, that they'd been kept in ignorance. I must say I'm fascinated by such things. Someday we must have a nice long chat and you can tell me all about your people and what it's like to live in a jungle and then meet a white man and come to civilization. You really must.'

'I'm afraid ... it would be difficult to make you understand, Mrs Jennings.'

'Nonsense. I understand every word you say. I'm rather good with accents.'

Julia started to speak, then paused. Mrs Jennings smiled at her. Julia uncoiled her lithe body from the chair.

'You must excuse me for a moment. I have to stir the stew.'

Mrs Jennings nodded. She watched Julia leave the room, her eyes turning. She noticed, with satisfaction, that Julia did not walk properly; that her hips did not move as a woman's were expected to. She walked more like a man, straight and square-shouldered and placing one foot directly before the other. Mrs Jennings surmised that this was a habit acquired from treading narrow jungle trails upon which unspeakable things waited for the unwary foot. Mrs Jennings also noticed that Julia had a fine body, but took less satisfaction in this. She ran a tentative finger around the rim of her cup. She had drunk only a small portion.

'What smells funny?' Johnny asked.

Be quiet, dear. That's just Mrs Harvey's stew.'

'It smells funny.'

'Yes, dear.'

'I bet it tastes funny, too.'

Mrs Jennings shuddered.

'Do black ladies eat the same things we do, Momma?'

'I shouldn't like to say, dear.'

'The black lady's going to buy sweets.'

'I don't think ...'

'She is so. She said so.'

'You must remember, Johnny. Only take sweets that are wrapped. You must never eat something that another person has handled.'

Whv?'

'Germs, dear.'

Johnny looked doubtful. Julia returned, moving with that peculiar rhythm.

'Are you learning to cook, then?' asked Mrs Jennings.

Julia paused beside the couch.

'Why, I've always known how to cook. I cooked for my family.'

'Of course, But I meant proper cooking, Proper food. Are you getting accustomed to proper food?'

Julia stared at Mrs Jennings for a moment, then returned to her chair, curling gracefully into the seat. 'Proper food ...' she repeated.

It must have been difficult for poor Mister Harvey. I don't imagine he ever got used to all those foreign foods.' She paused, waiting for an answer. Julia said nothing. Mrs Jennings sniffed and said, 'Well, don't fret. You'll learn, in time. If you stay ...'

'If I stay?'

I mean ... well, you must feel so lonely and out of place here. We ... I was wondering if you mightn't be thinking of going back where you belong ... I mean, of course, where you were born. Or if Mister Harvey might ... It can't be easy for him, you know. Knowing that people are always pointing him out and whispering behind his back ... Well, I thought maybe he might decide to go back where you came from. I suppose he liked it there?'

Julia stared.

"Tell me, Mrs Harvey. Did Mister Harvey like the foreign food and things?"

'Yes, he did.'

The reason I ask — well, you know how gossips are. And that evil-minded Peggy Klein who lives on the corner ... she said that where you came from that the people eat ... actually eat ... monkeys ...'

Mrs Jennings stared hard at Julia.

'We ate many things in Guinea.'

Mrs Jennings grimaced. Johnny turned his face back and forth between the two women, trying to follow the conversation. He thought his mother looked sick.

'I suppose, if one is brought up to it,' Mrs Jennings said. If you didn't know any better ... still, I can't deny that it gives me goose pimples to think of eating monkeys. Ugh! I expect that, now that you know better, it must make you feel squeamish too, thinking of all that nasty monkey meat you are?'

Julia regarded her with steady eyes.

'Anyway, I told all those gossips that you'd soon learn better - told them you probably never really liked monkey flesh anyway, that you just didn't know better. I stood up for you right from the start. Anyway, you can't buy monkeys here, so I don't see why they had to talk about it. You can't buy monkeys, can you?'

'I haven't tried.'

'Of course. Told them you wouldn't. That's why they have it in for me now. But I don't care. I'll stick to my principles through thick and thin, and that's all there is to it.'

Johnny tugged at her sleeve.

'Let's go, Momma.'

'Yes, dear.'

'I don't like it in this house.'

'Don't be naughty, Johnny. We really must be off now, Mrs Harvey.'

'Must vou?'

I have to find Bitsy Blue Byes before dark. I'm half frantic with worry over the poor little sweetykins.'

'Yes, of course. I'm sure you'll find him.'

Mrs Jennings placed her cup on the table. It was nearly full. She gathered herself for the effort of rising. Her bulk was deeply embedded in the cushions and the couch sucked at her as she surged upwards. Julia rose and walked them to the door. Mrs Jennings turned on the welcome mat.

'You must call on me some time,' she said, but she didn't say when.

'When you going to have sweets?' Johnny asked.

'Soon, Johnny. Soon.'

'Okay,' he said.

'Goodbye, Mrs Jennings. Goodbye, Johnny.'

Julia closed the door and stood in the hall for a moment. Then she walked back to the kitchen. She knew it was almost time for her husband to come home now, although she did not know what time it was. She looked into the pot. There was a window over the stove, and she could see Mrs Jennings and Johnny moving down the footpath. She took up the ladle and began stirring the contents of the pot. The stew was thick and greasy. Bubbles rose and burst at the surface and the ladle

turned lumps of fatty flesh ponderously over through the heavy liquid. Julia sniffed the aroma. Her husband was very fond of this particular stew. They did not have it often, for it took a certain amount of preparation, and Julia knew her husband would be very pleased when she placed it on the table. She heard Mrs Jennings calling.

'Bitsy Blue Eyes! Bitsy Blue Eyes! Where are you, you naughty little boy? Come to momma, Bitsy dear.'

fughty little boy? Come to momma, Bitsy dear.

Iulia looked out of the window.

Mrs Jennings was walking slowly, looking from side to side and calling. She called and she called, but her dog did not come. Johnny followed at her heels. Johnny liked sweets. He was a plump little boy. Bitsy Blue Eyes had been a plump little dog. Julia continued to stir the contents of the pot as she looked out of the window, and the greasy, tender meat moved sluggishly through the stew. Very slowly, Julia smiled.

James Hallums

A trip off the map

The big car gleamed its way, soundless except for the swish of displaced air, along the highway which led to the border. The shiny chrome fittings and large expanse of cobalt blue coachwork bounced images of early afternoon sunshine and speeding pine trees which lined the sides of the road.

There was very little traffic on this road, and the car moved at a steady and comfortable eighty-five miles per hour. The driver was fifty-fivish, short – five-four in bare feet – stocky, and wearing a face which seemed to say I know a thing or two about the world. I've been around, buster, so don't try to tell me, Murray Finebaum, where it's at.' A retired, self-made businessman. A man with no wife or children, who had made his million or so dollars and who wasn't about to spend the rest of his life making more. A man who was going to enjoy his money while he was able.

A man and his car doing his world trip thing.

The car was equipped with every conceivable luxury, including a television and cocktail cabinet in the back seat, and Murray was singing along with the cassetted voice of Frank Sinatra. 'April in Paris ... Chestnuts in blossom ... Holiday tables under the treeeeeees,' he sang, very much out of tune, thinking that it had been almost three months since he had left the city of that song. Three months which had taken him all over Europe and then eventually further east and through Russia, down through Asia and into Mongolia whence he was about to depart on this day. Hassles with papers and visas, hassles with exchange rates, with directions, with police, with mere people; but, he reflected, he was Murray Finebaum, he

had influence, didn't he? So far it had been a worthwhile and rewarding trip.

The car rounded a bend and there up ahead was the small cluster of buildings and barriers and uniformed men which indicated the finish of this country and start of the little-visited principality to the east. Murray eased his crocodile-skin-covered foot gently onto the brake pedal and the car came to an effortless stop at the barrier.

Very few vehicles passed through that particular customs point and those that did were mostly ancient trucks belonging to citizens of one country or the other who used them to trade in and kept them alive by inexplicable miracles. The immaculate 1977 American convertible excited the usual amount of curiosity that it did in all remote places and the five customs officers surrounded it, talking animatedly amongst each other and pointing in turn to the various features of the car, examining them closely. Murray, good-natured fellow that he was, was well used to that sort of thing and it amused him greatly to show off the car.

He undid a safety clasp, pressed a button and the soft-top slid smoothly back, the mechanism softly whirring. The men stepped nervously away and Murray, chortling, coaxed them back with the offer of American cigarettes which they accepted greedily and made a great show of lighting.

Ten minutes later, Murray having demonstrated some of the more flamboyant tricks of the car, he crossed the onehundred-yard strip of no-man's-land between the countries, leaving the five craggy faced men all smiling and waving behind him.

He arrived at a single hut and a rough, unpainted wooden barrier which stretched untidily across the road. He could see that there was no highway on the other side of the border, just a narrow, two-lane, bumpy and rutted road. Murray waited patiently for a few moments then, when no one appeared, he honked his horn. Thirty seconds more went by, the door of the hut creaked slowly open and out stepped a man wearing a faded green uniform which hung on him like an old overcoat on scarecrow poles. He stood near the door and surveyed the car, one end to the other, with baleful eye, all the time sipping from a cup of coffee which was wrapped in two gnarled, filthy hands. His features were similar to those of the men on the other side of no-man's-land, except that they were more inclined to those of the ape family with low brow, thick neck and wide, flaring nostrils.

Eventually he held out a hand, saying nothing, and Murray, taking the cue, handed over his papers. The man, after carefully placing his mug of coffee on the ground, leafed through the papers, his stubby dark brown fingers aggravatingly slow. He came to the passport, realized for the first time from the photograph that he had everything upside down, casually turned the papers around and bent down to the open window of the car so that his breath, heavy with garlic, scorched at Murray's face. Satisfied, he grunted, turned on his heel and disappeared into the hut.

Another five minutes went by before he returned with the passport stamped and handed back Murray's papers together with a grubby piece of card which bore the flag of the country printed at its head and below that some paragraphs in several different languages. The section in English – incredibly bad English – after the usual piece about what one was allowed to bring in and how long one's stay would be limited to, read: 'You are welkom. It is advized that you stay to the mane rods and visit only the city. You may go werever you lik without interfearance but you are advized that the poeples of the vilages are primitif and not used to stranjers. Haf a good stay!'

Murray glanced through the card and shrugged mentally. So he had been warned already that these were primitive people, hadn't he? And he was out to see the world, how people really lived, wasn't he? So he should stick to the main roads! He, Murray Finebaum, graduate of the University of Life, World Traveller, Three Wise Monkeys, see-all, hearall, be-all, know-all, he-who-could-look-after-himself-Murray Finebaum would go where the hell he pleased thank-you-very-much-who-is-putting-up-the-bread-around-here-ch?-Eh?

He handed back the card and waited while the customs man hoisted the wooden barrier onto his thick shoulder and moved it laboriously out of the way. Murray grinned good-naturedly and waved a departing hand as he moved off into the new country; the face of the man remained impassive, he failed to acknowledge the wave.

The road was rough but the super-sprung car glided along just as smoothly as before. Within a mile, dark mountains closed in on either side, the road became narrower and the clustering pine trees blocked out the light, throwing gloomy shadows over the car. The route became so narrow that Murray was frequently forced to reduce the car's speed to a crawl as foliage brushed against the paintwork on either side. Murray, reflecting on the difficulties ahead should he meet traffic from the other direction, remained his cheerful self. Driving through terrain which may well have depressed many an intrepid traveller, he continued to play his tapes and to sing boisterously along with Frank Sinatra and Dean Martin and the rest of his favourites. After fourteen miles more of the same scenery, during which time not a house nor a person nor another vehicle came into view, the car rounded a bend, the pine trees stopped, and Murray found himself suddenly, unexpectedly, turning onto a road which, even if its surface quality was little better than the other, at least boasted two lanes; a hand-painted wooden sign indicated that the city was a further twenty-seven miles along this road.

At last there were the occasional vehicles. Ancient lorries spewing out clouds of filthy exhaust gases, the odd, battered old car and, most frequent of all, horse-drawn carts. The mountains on either side soon levelled out and the land before Murray became a flat, featureless plain. Clouds slipped across the sun and the same gloom which had oppressed the mountain road settled over the land like the wing of some giant, carnivorous bird. Here and there a house sat dejectedly amidst the brown-black fields, drab as the lands around it. The houses were all the same – square, with maybe two tiny windows, one narrow door and a pointed, grey tiled roof, and each stood an

unneighbourly distance from the next. The inhabitants of these houses could be seen out in the fields, each working alone and tending an insipid, green, stunted and indefinable crop.

And Murray – well, Murray had his car and his comfort and his music and Murray didn't give a damn about the lousy scenery, he'd been through much worse, hadn't he? 'Cer-ry me a river, cer-ry me a river, I've cer-ried a river ovah yew.' He decided to drive into the city, check into the best available hotel and spend what remained of the afternoon exploring the city, reserving the following day for taking trips further afield.

The best hotel in the so-called city stood four stories high and there was no building in the whole dreary place which stood higher; it wasn't simply the best hotel – it was the only one. Murray's room was tiny and devoid of all form of decoration and the only furniture was a bed and a wardrobe. At least the bed linen was fresh and clean and the room was dry. There was also a small cracked sink, but the water which groaned out from the hot tap would freeze the fingers of an Eskimo.

In the evening it began to rain. A misty drizzle of the kind which didn't seem to be much but would soak through to your skin within ten minutes. Murray had driven all around the city finding no trouble in parking wherever he wished since there was a marked absence of traffic of any kind. His car had excited even more than the usual share of attention and at one time, after he had left it parked for half an hour, he had to fight his way through the crowd which had gathered around it.

He found nothing even remotely interesting in the place and encountered nobody who spoke a word of English, so he went early to bed.

He was awakened pleasantly enough by sunlight which shone in through the window and draped itself over his bed. There was no room service, and he was alone at his breakfast of strong black coffee, a roll and a small glass of cognac. At the hotel desk he bought a map and was once again shown a printed notice warning him against straying from the city or the main roads. He grinned his jovial, well-meaning grin at the desk clerk.

'Don't worry, buster. This here cookie,' he dug himself between the ribs with his thumb, 'knows how to take care of numero uno. Yes sirree!' The clerk's face remained as impassive as a lump of the granite hills,

'Jesus, these guys would be sensational in a zoo,' muttered Murray as he walked from the hotel to where his car was parked at the back.

He was soon out of the city and headed in the opposite direction from that in which he had entered it. The same nondescript landscape stretched for miles before him, but in the distance there were mountains, some of which were snow-capped. There, reasoned Murray, was where he might find something worth seeing.

Forty-five minutes later he came to the foothills and the road began to wind gently upwards, following the bank of a small river. The sun shone brightly, flowers were in bloom and for the first time the country seemed habitable. Murray pulled the car over onto a grass verge and opened the map. He saw that if he continued on the road for another twenty-five miles or so he would come to the border with the next country. However, two miles further along there was a turn-off which went at right angles to the main road and led to some sort of village. Well, he'd had the city – you could keep it – and up to now he hadn't come across a village.

It could hardly be called a road. A cart-track, perhaps, but firm enough, carved out as it was in rocky mountain soil. It wound its way gently around the base of one mountain, through a pass, then continued around the back side of the next, where the pine trees closed in and there was gloom as the sun was shaded out. Murray crawled along at fifteen miles per hour as rock chips became more frequent and were thrown up against the underside of the car. He remained his usual happy, optimistic self; 'So whadderyer mean stick to the main drag?—There sure ain't no bandits here.' Frank Sinatra was on form, leaving his heart in San Francisco, the world was

beautiful and Murray was smug-safe living the life of Riley on the interest from his invested million dollars.

The village turned out to be little more than a motley collection of rock-built houses and as he drove through he saw very few people. He travelled very slowly, the top of his car down, and he smiled cheerfully at anyone he passed. The smiles were not returned. The faces registered expression, all right. Welcome, no. Astonishment, awe, bewilderment — yes. Fear even. At one stage an old woman, clad entirely in black, ran in terror as the car approached her, screaming and waving her arms in the air. She dived into a doorway and as Murray passed he caught a glimpse of the whites of her frightened eyes peering out at him.

Primitive indeed,' he observed to himself as the crude houses thinned out and he found himself back amongst looming pine trees. He stopped the car and consulted the map. Nothing. According to the map that village was the end of the road. There should be nothing further. Yet here was Murray on a track much the same as the one which had brought him to the village; then it must surely be very short, would soon peter out. Well, anyway, he would continue and find out. He chuckled to himself as he changed over the tapes. 'Murray Finebaum, intrepid explorer, presses on into the unknown!'. he said aloud as a reincarnated Nat King Cole filled the car with song.

The track did not peter out. It went on and on for mile after mile after mile. It came out of the pine forest and twisted and turned itself ever higher. Vegetation disappeared and on all sides bare granite frowned at Murray and his car. On the left side of the track was a sheer drop, getting more impressive by the minute, and on the right the unfriendly slope soared up to a snowy peak. There was no way he could turn around. He realized that if he met another vehicle — which seemed highly unlikely — and if he were the one who was forced to back up. it would be for many miles.

He began to wish he hadn't come beyond the village.

He rounded a bend in the road and it took him some seconds

to realize that what he was staring at was more than just mountain. Blending in chameleon-like with the rocks, spawling untidily down a slope and looking as if it had been put together by the mountain itself, there was a village. Murray brought the car to a halt and consulted the map once again. According to it, the place didn't exist. No road, no village, no nothing. He shrugged. So they were lousy map-makers, these people. He would point it out at the hotel when he got back. He grinned. A new road opened up, a civilization discovered! Maybe they would name the place after him. Finebaumstown!

As he approached the village he realized that he was hungry. Well, friendly or unfriendly natives, he was damn well gonna stop and fill his complaining gut. He passed by the first house, the top of his car long since up to shield him against the bite of the mountain air.

Here, even the dogs ran away, tails between their legs. He saw not a living soul. He came to what he took to be the centre of the village where there was a small square covered in granite chips, what looked like some sort of a church (he never bothered to ascertain the religion of these people) and a section of a half-dozen stone troughs with a gully running beneath them – a communal wash-place.

He parked, swung the door wide and stepped out onto the granite. Nobody around. Not a dog, not a cat, not even a bird. Around him, all closed doorways. Finally he spotted a door which was half open, just a few yards to his right, and as he tried to make his eyes penetrate the gloomy interior he began to realize that other eyes were peering out at him from the depths of the darkness. Then this was most probably some sort of a bar.

The leather soles of Murray's crocodile shoes scrunched against the gravel as he took the few paces to the door. He pushed it wide open and strode unhesitatingly in, then paused in the threshold to allow his eyes to adjust to the gloom. He saw that there were several people, all standing in a tight group, and as his eyes got used to the dark he realized that they were all men, and all seemed to be afraid of him.

Murray advanced, palms forward, fingers spread wide apart. It's okay folks. Friend. See – no gun. Friend – amigo. Americano. Savvy?' he boomed at them. They looked uncertainly at him, but seemed to relax a little. He lifted one hand to his lips and tilted back an imaginary glass. With the thick index finger of the other he made a circular motion, encompassing them. 'Drink? Have a drink with me? Amigos?' He brought a handful of paper money from his pocket and gestured with it towards a man who was standing behind a crude-looking bar. 'Drinks all round!' he bellowed. 'Drinks all round! Amigos, eh? Ha ha. I'll say. Amigos!

Murray was understood. As it turned out there was little for sale beyond red and white wine and a rough form of cognac, but everybody had a drink, Murray managed to convey the fact that he was hungry and was presented with some black bread and strong cheese. Conversation was, of course, impossible, but neither did the men converse with each other. They drank their drinks and stared at Murray in fascinated awe. More and more of them were arriving and soon the bar was crowded with the squat, ape-like men. All gazing at Murray, the star attraction. He began to feel uncomfortable, for him a rarity indeed. Finishing off the bread and cheese, he pushed his way out into the square and walked to his car, the bar emptying as the crowd of men followed. He would show off his car, that's what he would do! That would keep them happy. It never failed.

He slid behind the wheel and the crowd moved hesitantly around, keeping three paces away but surrounding the car. Murray undid a clip and pressed a button. The top slid open and a loud gasp came from the crowd. They shifted back a pace. He went through all the tricks. He played a tape at full volume, he blew the horn, he switched lights on and off and winked indicators. He pressed buttons to make the windows open, more buttons to make them close, he showed how to light a cigarette; the only thing which didn't work was the television. Finally, he tore open packets and threw handfuls of cigarettes out at the crowd.

One, more intrepid than the rest, stepped forward and, reaching, out a hesitant hand, gingerly touched the bonnet of the car. When he found that nothing alarming happened, he walked all around it, letting his stubby fingers trail lightly on the paintwork. Soon others were clustered tightly around, touching and stroking and peering down at the beaming Murray. He honked the horn and everyone jumped. He roared with laughter. One or two of those hard faces actually started to grin. Success! They'd done it again, he and his car.

A man, taller than the rest, arrived and the fast-growing crowd parted to let him through to the front. He looked the car slowly up and down then stared at the balding head of Murray, who was still too busy playing with buttons to notice the newcomer.

'And what, may I ask, brings an American so far out into the wilderness?' The man's voice was cultured, the accent British.

Murray looked up, startled. 'Jesus H. Christ! You mean that someone around this here one-horse town speaks English!'

The man bowed slightly from the waist. 'Amongst eleven other tongues. Let me introduce myself. I am mayor of this aptly described one-horse town. The, er, chief of the tribe, so to speak. You seem to be attracting a great deal of attention with your motor car.'

The crowd had fallen silent, all ears straining to catch the strange sounds of the conversation.

Murray nodded, 'Sure. Never fails to keep 'em happy. Say, what's a guy like you ...' He wasn't given the opportunity to finish his question.

'You realize they've never seen one? A car, I mean. Not one of them has ever been to the city. All they know about are horses and carts.'

'Gee,' said Murray, impressed. 'Now ain't that sump'n'. Real primitive, uh? Never seen a car, eh? Wow, jus' wait till I write home about this!'

The man's nostrils wrinkled in distaste, but Murray failed

to notice. 'No doubt your fellow Americans will find it ratherquaint,' said the mayor.

'Quaint. Yeah, that's the word for it buddy. Say, how come you speak all those lingos. I mean, you are one of them, ain't you?'

'I am indeed.' He looked around at the silent crowd. 'I think it would be better if you came to my house. Can I invite you for a drink?'

Murray leaned across the seats and opened the passenger door. 'Sure. Be glad to, Jump in, friend.'

The mayor shook his head. 'It's very close, just off the square. Follow me if you don't want to leave your car here.' He turned on his heel and the crowd immediately opened up a way through for him. Murray started the engine and the people drew hurriedly away as the big car slid through their ranks, following the mayor. For the first time Murray noticed that there were but a few children in the crowd, and that there was little besides shape to differentiate between the men and the women; the women's faces were as simian as those of their men and both men and women were dressed in the same undecorated black smocks.

Fifty yards off the square the mayor stopped at the door of a small house and Murray parked and got out. The crowd closed up and completely encircled the car again.

Through the door there was one smallish room with a fireplace, some primitive cooking equipment in one corner, a wooden table and some rough-hewn chairs; there were no rugs on the uneven surface of the floor. Murray helped himself to a chair and, miraculously, a bottle of whisky appeared.

'No ice, I'm afraid. No power, you see.' The mayor poured two generous measures and sat down across the table from Murray.

'That's okay. Say - where are all the kids in the village? At school?'

'School? No, such children as there are I give classes to myself. We have a somewhat low survival rate Mr, er ...?'

'Finebaum, Murray Finebaum,'

'Mr Finebaum. Freezing winters and lack of adequate medical supplies don't help. But then, you are surely a man of the world. You must know what goes on in isolated, extremely poor communities?' If there was a hint of sarcasm it was lost on Murray.

'Sure, sure. Say - how come this place ain't on the map?'

The mayor's eyes glinted as he answered with a question of his own. 'How come you are off the map, Mr Finebaum? Surely you were warned to keep to the main roads and the city?'

Yeah, yeah. That stuff. Listen, I can take care of myself. So nothing's happened so far, has it? No hold-ups or anything.

The mayor sighed. 'So far, apparently not. But don't be too confident. The government doesn't print warnings for nothing.'

'Bullshit! I'm a citizen of the United States of America. The greatest goddamn country in the world. Ain't nothing going to happen to me.' Murray threw back his whisky.

'I don't think that's so much of a recommendation around here. I think this is one part of the world which has been overlooked by your so-called aid. Not that it means anything one way or another in this village, since nobody but me has ever heard of America. If they had done, if they knew what I know, I doubt if they would take too kindly to one of its citizens invading their privacy.'

'Now see here ...' Murray began to protest, but was cut short.

'Just a personal opinion, Mr Finebaum. I suppose I am somewhat anti-American. But then I'm anti many things. You remarked on my linguistic ability. I happen to come from one of the only two wealthy families in this country. I was educated in England and then spent fifteen years travelling around the world. Everything I saw and learned finally led to one conclusion. My life was back here, with my own people. By your standards I am a hermit, a recluse. I am here, I suppose, for much the same reasons as monks are in monasteries. To my people I am more than mayor. I am also the law, Mr

Finebaum.' He paused 'Fifteen years of travelling the world and in all that time I don't believe that I met an American I really liked or whose opinions I much respected.'

'You're a funny guy.' Murray helped himself to another shot

of whisky.

'Perhaps I am. You really should take more notice of printed government warnings, you know. Most un-American of you, that attitude!'

'What exactly do you mean by that? Are you threatening me, buster?'

'Most certainly not. Just warning you, that's all. These really are a very primitive people. And I am rather concerned that your appearance here may not have an altogether, shall we say, healthy effect on them.'

'Now, just a minute. I bought them drinks didn't I? I gave them cigarettes. Jeez, I even made them laugh! So what's so bad about that?'

'Nothing, in itself. We shall have to wait and see.'

Murray got to his feet. 'I'm not so sure I'm sticking around here any longer. Can't say I like your attitude. You're some sort of a nut, mister.'

The mayor placed a restraining hand on Murray's arm. 'Wait.' The voice was commanding, the gun-metal grey eyes expressionless, the grip strong enough to cut off the blood supply to Murray's forearm.

'Take your goddamn hands off me!' Murray shouted, trying

in vain to free his trapped arm.

'Listen! Just as I thought. Listen a minute, will you?'

Murray quietened down. He heard a soft wailing sound, many voices in unison, felt himself being pulled over to the window.

The mayor was becoming excited. 'Look! Look at what they're doing. That's what I mean by your appearance having an unhealthy effect on them! You do understand what they're doine?'

Murray looked. He saw that a big garland of flowers, hastily and clumsily entwined, but nevertheless a garland, was hanging over the radiator grill of his car. One man, dressed in startling white with a hood over his head, stood in front of the garland, both hands raised high in the air, and was leading the wailing. The rest of the people — men, women and a few children — were lying in the dust, flat on their faces, heads cradled in folded arms. There were at least a hundred of them and they blocked the street in front of the car for seventy yards. The wailing grew louder. Murray stared, astonished, momentarily at a loss for words.

'You do see what it is they're doing, don't you?' said the mayor, soft-voiced, at last releasing his grip on Murray's arm.

Murray spluttered. 'Jesus Christ! The dumb, stupid bastards. Will you look at that. It's only a goddamned motor car!'

'To you, yes. But to those dumb, stupid bastards, as you so charmingly describe them, it's a miracle. They're worshipping it, Mr Murray Finebaum, and they're going to worship you. And then you're going to go away. You know what will happen? Surely you don't, but I'm going to tell you. Your apparently miraculous appearance will become a part of their religion. A damned American and his damned motor car — a visiting god in his carriage! I'm not sure that I like that, you know, Mr Finebaum.'

'But, but - that's preposterous.'

I agree, but just look at them! There you have the evidence of your own eyes. Why couldn't you have stuck to the main roads, as you were advised, and leave people like this alone?'

'Listen. I'll tell you exactly what I'm gonna do. I'm walking outta here right now, jumping in my car heading straight back to the city. Okay?'

The mayor shook his head. 'Most definitely not. At least, not until the damage is undone.'

'Oh yeah? So how do you propose to do that? What are you gonna do about it?'

'Very simple. We go out together, you sit in your car ...'

'And away I go.'

No. Away you do not go.'

'So who's gonna stop me? I'm supposed to be some sort of god, ain't I?'

'And I am the mayor and the law. Also, I happen to speak the language. Let's go.'

Murray's face was flushed an excited crimson. 'Okay buster, we'll see,' he muttered.

The driver's side door was one pace from the front door of the house. Murray climbed in, took out a bunch of keys and began to slide one into the ignition lock. As he did so, the mayor leaned across him and snatched the keys away.

Hey! Give those here! What the hell are you doing? Murray jumped out of the car as the mayor climbed up onto the bonnet and kicked the garlanded flowers down into the dust. Get down from there. You'll scratch the paint, you goddamn heathen! What are you doing? Annoyed as he was, Murray didn't try to pull the mayor down; he had already felt the strength of the man. Uncertain what to do, he sat back in the car.

'Doing? I'm going to put the situation in order, Mr Finebaum. I'm afraid it's not going to be too healthy for you, however.'

The mayor shouted out in his own language, speaking very fast. Gradually the wailing came to a stop and heads raised themselves one by one; people started to climb to their knees, then to their feet. Murray stared at the sea of listening, expressionless faces, watched as the mayor spoke on, flinched at the gesticulating arm of the mayor as it frequently pointed at him through the windscreen. The wailing was replaced by a low, angry muttering as the crowd began to press in tight around the car and finally the mayor stopped speaking and jumped down from his perch. Murray suddenly became aware of the menace which gleamed at him out of dozens of pairs of pig-like eyes. He felt unbearably sick.

'What the hell did you tell them?' He screamed at the mayor.

I simply pointed out their mistake. I told them that you

are not a god at all but rather, well, from the other side as it were. Well, in effect you are, aren't you?' The mayor grinned, without humour.

Murray struggled to climb out of his car, inadvertently pressing the starter button of his cassette as he did so.

I wanta be loved by you ... Just you and nobody else will do ...' sang the voice of Ella Fitzgerald as the first rock shattered the windscreen and the first strong, hairy hand smashed across the bridge of Murray's nose, breaking it.

Norman Kaufman

Lady on display

And so from hour to hour we ripe and ripe, And then from hour to hour we rot and rot, And thereby hangs a tale.

William Shakespears, As You Like It II vii, 26

'It is,' Wendy remarked, 'unusual.'

'To say the least,' assented Mr Quill, mine host of the Lifeless Lass, a Public House on the Yeominster Road.

Together they gazed meditatively at the girl behind the bar, who wore nothing else but a thick hempen rope about her beautiful throat. The other end of the rope was secured to a stout beam which stretched between the walls of the recess. The girl's feet hung twenty inches from the floorboards.

'Pretty,' observed Wendy cynically.

'Sorry ...?'

'She must have been. Once.'

Edgar Quill bared virgin-white outrageously expensive teeth. 'Once ... yes. Her name was Wilhelmina.' The young woman sipped thoughtfully at her lager.

'That's one hell of a name.' She paused. 'You are going to tell me about her – aren't you, mister?'

'You could ask any of the locals, missie. They'd be only too glad to talk to you: lovely lady like yourself.' Wendy smiled, but did not blush.

Td rather hear it from you, Mr Q. Full details. I mean, look, you do own this establishment, right?' The publican nodded. I could give you a nice write-up...'

Again the man's teeth: gleaming like some snowy Stonehenge amidst the folds of fat that constituted the Quill features. 'So. You are a reporter. I wasn't a hundred per cent positive, but ...' He jabbed a thick forefinger towards her. The smile widened until it seemed as if his face must split in two. 'Should've guessed it: an attractive female, knocking on the side door of a pub at four in the afternoon, disturbing my hard-earned rest—' Quill chuckled softly, admiringly. 'Making out she's just curious about how this place comes by its name ...' He paused. 'Well, kid, I've never been able to resist the wiles of womankind.'

The journalist's grin was a tribute to loving dental care; and Quill gazed at her almost in longing. 'If I,' he declared, 'was thirty years younger - twenty years, mebbe—' He sighed; a vast sigh that shook the whole of his corpulent frame, and more than adequately completed the sentence he had begun.

'But,' Wendy pressed, 'you're not throwing me out.'

Not I, fair maid.'

'Well, then. About what's-she-called. Wilhelmina.' The fat inn-keeper considered.

What can I tell you: she's been here ever since I bought the place, or near enough. If you must be spot-on, then ... let's see ... I'd been here about five months, nearly six, when the little lady arrived.' He hesitated. Tell you what, though, missie: business was only so-so when this place was The Dog and Ducking-Stool, back in '56. Previous owner was on his beam-ends; and I could see that unless I did something drastic, like, then the place would always stay – well, how should I put it? Mediocre? Know what I mean?'

The girl nodded gravely. 'So what did you do then: murder Wilhelmina and shove her behind the bar?' Quill blinked at her for a moment, and then joined in as she burst out laughing.

'You caught me there for a minute, lady.'

'I'm sorry,' Wendy said unrepentantly. 'I wish I could keep a straight face when I make these horrid cracks ... But you were saying—'

The big man pulled a face. 'Fact is, she was already dead when she—' He snickered humourlessly. 'When she joined the staff. Bloke called Ivan did it. Around twenty-one, same as her. Usual motives: jealousy, pride, you name it.' Quill pointed. 'The boy strangled her. And then confessed. So what did they do but string him up ... This is going back a bit, you understand, perhaps about the time you were in nappies ... begging your pardon, lovey.'

Wendy drained her glass. 'But surely the body-'

I know what you're going to say; but the answer's no, I didn't dig up the corpse. Not directly, anyhow. What I did do was to approach the dead girl's family ... ask them if they'd care to sell her to me – oh yes,' he stressed firmly, as the reporter recoiled, 'they were a poor family, and I had a few bob put by, and I had this nose for business too; and it seemed to me that – what with all the public interest in the case – I had a ready-made audience, a sort of captive clientèle for the pub...' Quill stared. I always used to think that all reporters were tough.'

Wendy shrugged, forced a pale smile. They are. And I am. But ... Quill took her glass and dexterously refilled it with lager.

'On the house, missie,' he beamed, pushing the proffered coins back across the bar.

'Oh ... Thanks ...' She frowned. 'What was I - oh yes: I was thinking that some folk might - just might - find something distasteful about it.'

One eyebrow climbed above the other. 'Distasteful?'

'Offensive, then. Unsavoury. Any word you like.'

Quill laughed. 'You're the swot with words, lady, not me. But I see what you're driving at. That dense I'm not. Although, no, I can't say I ever had any trouble here like that.' Wendy brooded, swallowed some lager.

'But surely - if she's been up there for donkey's years, as you say, then how is it she doesn't--'

'Disintegrate?' Edgar Quill hoisted a smile once again. Smiles seemed to come easily to his cheery, rubbery-fat face. Because, lady, he went on, with the air of a conjuror involved in a rabbit-production ceremony, 'because she's been suitably stuffed.'

Wendy peered narrowly at him. 'Sorry ... I didn't—'
'Stuffed. As in taxidermist.' He laughed out loud at the expression on her pert and pretty face.

'You're joking,' she said, 'You've got to be joking.'

Quill shook his head, and she watched the cheeks and jowls and chins ripple across his visage. 'Nary a joke. I don't kid around when I'm discussing business, which after all is what she represents ... Imagine it, lady: the blokes who come in here – to see a gorgeous woman, stark naked, totally agcless—1'

'Ageless,' she repeated mechanically.

'Although,' he amended, 'that isn't altogether true. I mean, I admit I did think she was going on forever, like; but lately I've spotted signs of - of--'

'Disintegration?'

He shook his head and frowned, then his brow cleared.

'Deterioration, missie ...' She peered foggily at him; and he nodded and sighed his big sigh. 'Another month ... Maybe two. And then - she'll have to go. The evidence will be too noticeable, see, Flesh getting mottled, Skin peeling away, Hair dropping out, Eyes ... Well, I was having a peep at them the other day, and believe me, they're ready to drop out at the next puff of wind.' Ouill frowned momentarily. 'The last thing I want is for customers to be put off their beer at the sight of a pair of brown gooey jellies sliding down this dame's cheeks ... Not upsetting you, missie?' She shook her head. She would not speak. Could not speak, 'Anyway, when Wilhelming goes, then you can bet the profits'll start to slide too. I'm not kidding myself that folk'd come here just for the beer. or to see my fat mug.' His smile was wistful. I mean, for starters, that sign outside: that'd have to come down, now wouldn't it ... because - commonsense - it wouldn't be The Lifeless Lass any more, right?' He hesitated, 'Unless.'

'Unless?' she tried to say. But no sound came out,

'Unless I can make it work with you up there in her place. 'Course, I'll have to do my own amateur taxidermy, which means basically that I'd need to take the organs out of your body, and fill the space with bits of sacking, some straw,

perhaps, that kind of thing ...' Quill gazed at her. 'And obviously I'd have to drain the blood from that lovely figure of yours – ah!' He smiled a little sadly. 'Don't bother trying to move, little lady: I shoved something in your drink.' He waddled from behind the bar and stood over her rigid, paralysed body.

"Tell you what, though: I'm not going to kill you. No ma'am. Mebbe I've taken a bit of a fancy to you...' Quill eyed her. I'm going to leave your brain intact. So that you can hang there, missie, for years and years to come, watching the people who come here to look at you.' He patted her cheek, and reached inside a drawer for a jar of colourless liquid.

'But first things first. Just in case anybody comes here as might recognize you... I'd better burn off your face.'

Guy Delaway Wild bees, golden honey

As the first rays of the sun came up over the dried brown hills they glinted on the broken windows of the church of Our Lady of Guadaloupe. The cracked bell had already been tolling for some time — slow, mournful notes like a funeral bell. It was a funeral. The funeral of the church itself. The church was old, very old. Its walls were cracked and unpainted; its once beautiful stained glass window above the gilded altar was broken; a large part of the tiled roof was missing and grass grew in the nave and down the aisle.

In front of the church door stood a mule and a donkey. They were tied with coarse hemp rope and some rough packs were slung across the mule's back. It pawed the dusty ground impatiently and from time to time the donkey brayed, showing its long yellow teeth and flaring its wide cracked nostrils. The bell stopped tolling.

Then, creaking and whining on its rusty hinges, the great carved door opened and the black cassocked figure of a young priest came out carrying some netted earthenware jars and a coloured blanket. He placed them on the ground, closed the heavy door and locked it with a huge rusty key. The jars four of them in all – he placed across the back of the mule so that they hung down each side to balance the weight. The coloured blanket he doubled into four and put it on the donkey's back to be used as a saddle. The task completed, the young priest stood looking at the closed door of his church as if he saw written on the worm-eaten wood the whole story of the years he had spent there – futile, wasted years during which his little congregation had dwindled to nothing in a fast-emptying, dying village.

Francisco dos Anjos was in his late twenties and after being ordained in Mexico-City he had been sent to the little village of Rosalita to replace the old priest who had suddenly died there one day in the pulpit. The villagers thought it an omen and did not go to church for a long time. When the new priest arrived they felt sorry for him; so young, so new, and with a strange ethereal beauty, that they started to come back. But although he was a good priest, keen to please, religious, even pious, he was never their friend and comforter. To them he seemed aloof, even cold, and they did not like that.

Francisco was of medium height, slim, with an aesthetic face and long curling golden hair, sad grey eyes and a wispy little golden beard he grew to try to give himself some appearance of worldliness and knowledge because he feared the villagers thought him too young to know anything. His only recreation was keeping bees. Wild bees!

Sometimes he gave the honey away to the aged and sick, but most of it he ate himself. To him the saddest part of going away was leaving his bees ... and all he had left of them were the four earthenware iars filled with their golden honey.

The village of Rosalita had been dving for some time: the young despised the backwardness and gradually drifted away. Then the war and the soldiers and later the maurauding bandits had finally caused the remaining inhabitants to pack up and join their sons in the larger towns and cities. The church, lacking funds, had fallen into decay and ruin but Francisco staved on, patiently waiting and tending his wild bees until Mexico City ordered the church closed and Francisco to take up his priesthood in the town of Guadalahara. In a way Francisco was pleased as his only sister, Maria, lived there. She was the only family he had and for some time now he had worried about her. He had heard that she had drifted away from the church and there were rumours she was a dancer in a cabaret frequented first by the soldiers of Juarez and later by disreputable characters and even, from time to time, by the bandits who followed in the wake of the war. Now, even if he had not his bees to look after, he could look after her. And this thought eased the pain of leaving Rosalita and brought a faint smile to his thin lips as he set out on his long journey across the hills and valleys and parched desert which lay between Rosalita and Guadalahara.

He picked up the long rope and nudged the donkey forward, which in turn pulled the mule, and they started walking down the dusty hill and through the silent white-washed streets, his sandals flip-flopping and sending up little whirls of dust.

The young priest continued walking until he was outside the village, then he mounted the donkey and set off towards the hills. The vegetation was sparse until the ground started to rise and then Francisco had to dismount and lead the donkey and mule up the narrow path into the hills. As he got higher, firs and pines began to appear and the air was fresh and cool. At the top he rested, sitting on a small boulder, and looked down at Rosalita for the last time – a small cluster of whitewashed houses leaning against each other with the one road winding up to where his church was. From the distance he could not see it was ruined and it gleamed white and beautiful in the sun and the sight of it tugged at his heart – Church of Our Lady of Guadaloupe – his first church, and it was dying there all alone on the deserted hilltop.

He turned away to hide the confusion in his heart, mounted the donkey again and they started down into the valley below.

The valley was a desert — a wilderness of scorched rocks, sand and cactus. The sky was burning like a sheet of pure molten blue glass — but he could see tiny black cracks in it. The black cracks moved and he knew they were buzzards and vultures. He put on his black priest's hat to shade his head and eyes from the fierce oven-heat and moved slowly forward. Sometimes he stopped and picked the cactus pears. They were good and full of moisture to quench his thirst and moisten his parched lips. The donkey and the mule liked them too. He knew there would be no fresh water until they had crossed the valley floor and reached the first rises of the distant Sierras.

and there he knew a place where a fresh spring gushed out of the rocks, where stood the little shrine to Our Lady of the Pilgrims. Travellers always stopped there to refresh and revitalize after the hell of the desert.

It was just as they were leaving the desert, the rocks forming huge oven-hot gullies, that the three horsemen appeared high above him on the ridge. Francisco did not see them; but they had seen him.

The horsemen were well-mounted on fine horses; high-stepping thoroughbreds, beautifully caparisoned and tinkling with silver coins as they moved along the top of the ridge between the trees. They had stopped suddenly to look down at the desert valley they were to cross when the leader saw the tiny figure of the priest leading the donkey and the mule. They stood there watching him, then turned and grinned at each other. The leader was taller than the other two, sitting well astride a jet-black horse. He was a young man and extremely handsome with dark curly hair, laughing green long-lashed eyes, perfect white teeth and thin black moustaches that curled down the sides of his full mouth. But his clothes were not as rich as the horse he rode – they were ill-fitting, dirty and only his black sombrero decorated with tinkling silver coins befitted his princely bearing.

Of the other two – one was also young, dark-eyed, slim but had an ill-tempered appearance; the other was considerably older, short, fat and unshaven. Their clothes were also poor, making a striking contrast to the fine horses they rode. Across their chests were banderillos of cartridges and slung either side of their hips an odd collection of pistols. They were bandits.

'Look!' said the leader, whom they called 'El Guapo' because he was so handsome. What do we have here? A priest on a journey!' The other two nodded and grinned — gashes of white in the dark, dusty faces.

'You know, amigos,' said El Guapo, 'priests only travel for two reasons – a pilgrimage or to carry gold and jewels to another church. Isn't that so?' The younger of his two companions, who was called 'El Bruto' because he was always bad-tempered, grunted in agreement.

'What do you say to a little sport with the Father?' asked the leader with a beautiful smile lighting up his handsome face.

'Do you suppose it's worth while?' El Bruto said sourly. Priests are always poor but, you know something, I don't like them. Now where do you suppose he's going — our little Father?'

'Ach!' grumbled El Grueso, the Fat One, 'It's not worth the trouble. Surely he's only going to the spring for water and to pay his tribute to Our Lady of the Pilgrims – like us.'

The leader looked at him steadily, his green eyes flickering angrily but a smile playing on his lips. Everything is too much trouble for you, that's why you're so fat. You wouldn't have that fine horse if I'd listened to you – remember? There you were hesitating and afraid to attack three officers of Maximilian's army. These three fine Austrian horses were worth it, weren't they?' He smiled again showing his even white teeth. 'Anyway, we need water too before we cross that damn desert. As you said, we are also going to the spring. Perhaps we'll meet him there and then we shall see, amigos. Who knows, he may have stolen the altar cross – solid gold and studded with jewels. Now, amigos, we can't let priests do that, can we? Vamos – let's move off, follow him and ... we shall see.'

They wheeled their horses and continued to move slowly along the ridge between the trees where they could still see the little trio below.

After a while their path started to drop down at the same time as the priest's path began to rise. The path he was following was full of stones and rocks and to one side the rocks rose up high and were fiercely hot but he knew that at the end of it, it would get cooler and the trees would appear again and then the spring would be there and as he thought of the fresh, cold water he was filled with a burst of energy and he spurred the reluctant, tired beasts on.

It was then that Francisco sensed rather than saw the three horsemen on the ridge above. The mule had become restless and there seemed to be more buzzards overhead vet the deathly silence was filled with sounds that were almost inaudible; sounds which a man in the desert senses rather than hears. Perhaps the faintest clopping and neighing of their horses; an occasional cough or even their whispering voices but he knew someone was there and whichever way he went he felt they went too. He looked up uneasily many times but saw nothing; he looked back but there was nothing there either. He kept looking, too, at the four earthenware jars slung across the mule - the jars filled with golden honey. He was worried that the nets might break and his precious honey be wasted. He was carrying it for his sister Maria - the last of his honey. A present for her because she loved the honey of his wild bees. He had often sent her some - but that was a long time ago now. He had to stop sending it when the stage stopped passing through Rosalita.

He kept thinking about his honey and his wild bees because there was nothing else to think about — or nothing he wanted to think about at that moment between the searing heat of the scorched rocks. And it helped to calm the fears and the wild beating of his heart as he sensed that he was being followed.

The three horsemen continued to keep pace with him and to keep him in view, yet skilfully remained invisible between the shadows of the pine trees.

The sun was setting like a giant bloodshot eye of a wine-sodden Cyclops – lonely and furious. Now the rocks were casting long shadows across his path and the priest knew that he was out of the desert at last. His path was going up and small stunted trees were beginning to appear and cool whiffs of pines burst across his hot, sweating, dusty face at ever-increasing intervals. But still he sensed he was being followed.

The three horsemen, who were now just above the glade where the spring was, had stopped, tied up their horses and were squatting on the ground smoking long, thin, black cheroots. They were not resting, they were watching him through the cool branches of the pines.

Let him get there first,' said El Guapo. 'He'll want to freshen up, drink some water, pay homage and then ...' he paused long enough to grin, '... lie down and rest. It'll soon be dark and I'm sure our little Father won't try to climb through the Sierras at night. Don't you agree?' His two companions nodded.

It was blue evening when the priest stumbled into the glade and fell down to plunge his face in the icy-cold water and gulp it down and splash it over himself. The donkey and the mule were there too, at his side drinking deeply. Then, refreshed, he tethered the two beasts, took some packs off the mule's back and spread the coloured blanket on the ground. After a little while he heard far off the whinny of a horse and it sent a chill through him. Then he went to pray at the little shrine cut into the rocks and afterwards he felt better and dismissed his fears. After all, he told himself, many travellers use this road and this spring – but he could not help wondering why they had not shown themselves and greeted him. After all he was only a priest and not to be feared.

Then he took off his cassock and shook the dust from it and spread it over a rock. He suddenly felt very tired and dirty and he looked at the clear water of the little brook and took off his long underwear and plunged in. It felt icy cold and he gasped for breath but it revived him and he felt clean again, He lay back and floated a little and then scrambled onto the bank; dried and wrapped in the blanket, he sat down to eat the food he had brought with him for the journey. When he had finished eating he went to the brook again and bent down, cupped the water in his hands and drank. He sat there for a moment watching the ripples he had made on the water subside. He saw his own reflection dancing and wavering and becoming clearer and clearer and then he gasped. There was the reflection of another person standing behind him. He jumped up startled, and the blanker fell off and he grabbed it in confusion to hide his nakedness.

'What ... what!' he stammered as he gazed up into the smiling green eyes and handsome face of El Guapo the bandit.

'Did I startle you, little Father? I am indeed sorry. We,' and he motioned his hand to where the other two were standing, 'We saw someone and we came to give our greetings and wishes for a safe journey. Where are you travelling to!'

Francisco was at once alert and he asked, 'How do you know I am a priest since I stand here wrapped in a blanket?'

El Guapo laughed. 'Ah-ha! so we have a clever priest here. That's unusual. But it matters not to tell. We saw you some hours ago crossing the desert and making for this place as we, who are travelling in the opposite direction, are also making. Now here we are – four weary travellers met to pass a pleasant time – I hope, part and go our own ways. Now, little Father, have you supped? Ah! Pity, it would have been my pleasure. But come, you must share our wine. Priests like a little wine, eh!' And he smiled pleasantly.

The fears which had clutched at Francisco began to subside. He knew from the dress and the arms that these three men were bandits but he felt he had nothing to fear from them; after all he was a priest and many bandits were known to be deeply religious and would never harm a priest – if not out of respect then out of fear for the afterlife. And this man who stood before him seemed gentle-mannered and was certainly very handsome; with kind eyes and a smile that immediately inspired confidence. And so Francisco smiled back at the bandit. Thank you, senhor, you are indeed kind.

The other two sauntered over and they all sat on the ground and El Guapo opened the large flask he carried and handed it to Francisco. 'Drink, little Father, and be with God!'

After Francisco, the others drank in turns. They were all silent but they were watching the priest. Francisco felt that El Grueso, the Fat One, was a stupid but harmless man, but he did not care for the manner and expression of El Bruto whom, he felt, was well named; as were the other two.

Then, on the orders of El Guapo, the other two lit a fire. It was already night and chilly enough. More so for Francisco, who wanted desperately to put on his clothes but did not want to do so in front of these three men, whom, he was sure, had been watching him all the time he had been bathing naked. He hoped that soon they would want to sleep or perhaps even to go and then he could get dressed. But the wine had warmed him and with the fire he felt relaxed and found that he could not help his gaze wandering towards the face of the bandit, finding pleasure in the perfect beauty of it.

El Guapo was looking intently at the priest, too. Then he smiled – the beautiful smile which lit up his face and the flames of the fire flickered and sparkled on his even white teeth.

'So, little Father, that's better, isn't it? Now we are all comfortable and at peace, tell us where you come from and where you are going?'

'I am coming from Rosalita ...'

'Rosalita!' exclaimed El Guapo. 'Now there's a strange thing. We are just going there to rest and ... eh ... to enjoy ourselves.'

'There's nothing for you in Rosalita,' said Francisco sadly. 'It's dead now. The army was there and then ... eh ... shall we say ... some renegades came and the young went away and then the old followed them. You see the village is empty and Mexico City ordered me to close the church and go to Guadalahara.'

El Guapo stopped smiling. Well, this is indeed a lucky meeting. You have saved us a long and terrible journey across that blasted — excuse me—desert for nothing. So ...' he turned to the other two. 'Carrrambal' We don't go to Rosalita, eh? Now we must think where to go. Yes, too many soldiers about. That's no good. What about Guadalahara, little Father? Would there be many soldiers there now?'

'I don't know really but I heard they had moved south. It is rumoured that Juarez is south now.'

'Yes, I heard that too. Good. So ...' he started to smile again, '... we go to Guadalahara – all together, eh?'

Francisco did not answer and he did not like the idea. He wanted them to go so that he could sleep.

El Guapo jerked his head towards the mule. 'And what are you carrying with you, little Father? Did you steal the crucifix – all gold and jewels?'

Francisco flushed and his grey eyes clouded. 'I do not steal,' he said angrily. 'And there was no gold crucifix in my poor little church. It was made of wood. It had no treasures. It was a poor church in a very poor village.'

'Yes, I know, little Father. I have been to Rosalita many times. But, still, you are carrying something. What? Money from the collection boxes; parting gifts from the congregation ... somethine?'

'Nothing but my clothes, my bible and ... and some honey ...'

'Honeyl' El Guapo burst out laughing. 'Honey, of all things, Now why would a priest carry honey?'

'It's simple. I used to keep bees - wild bees - and collect the honey and I'm taking the last of it with me to Guadalahara for my sister.'

'Honey for your sister! Hmmmm!' El Guapo made a sound of disbelief. Then he turned to the others. 'Well, there's nothing for us, so what about getting some sleep and we can start early tomorrow. Do you agree?'

El Bruto grunted, and El Grueso, who was already half asleep, got up from the fire and went over to the rocks, spread their sarapees on the ground and curled up like obedient dogs. They lay on their backs with their sombreros over their eyes, hands on their pistols, and after a few minutes Francisco could hear the snores of the Fat One.

El Guapo too heard the snores and turned to Francisco, smiling, 'So you kept wild bees! Did they ever sting you? Bees sting, you know, especially wild ones – they sting badly. Weren't you ever stung by anyone, little Father?'

Francisco started. He was puzzled and was not sure what the man meant by 'anyone'. 'Stung!' he exclaimed. 'How do you mean "Stung"!'

'Well you see...' El Guapo got up and moved around the fire and sat down beside the priest. 'Ah! that's better. Now, about this stinging business. You see, bees sting, as you know, but a man can sting you too. Take me, for instance, I'd like to sting you right now. I've got a big stinger, too. It's been a long time, Father. No one for company, you see. No girls to sting and ... not even a boy.' He laughed, and it was not disagreeable to hear him.

Francisco started to tremble.

'Come now, little Father, we're good friends already – companions of the road. You, as a priest, know about these things and you sit there trembling, eyes filled with fear as if it was the worst thing in the world. Don't tell me that in all your life you never did anything. Women?'

Francisco shook his head but he was too ashamed to speak. The moon came up and turned the shadows blue and danced on the water of the little brook. Somewhere in the pine forest above them an owl hooted and then a nightingale started to sing.

El Guapo looked at him and laughed softly. You know who you look like sitting there in the moonlight with your golden hair curling down and your innocent grey eyes and that tiniest of tiny beards?' And he put out his hand and stroked the beard. 'You look like Christ. Yes, just like Christ. And I'll tell you something else. I've always had a perverse desire to nik Christ and perhaps that's why I want to nik you – right here in the moonlight.'

'You mustn't say such things. It's a sin!' Francisco said with obvious anger.

'Oh, I don't know. D'you know what they told me in Mexico City when I was a boy? They told me that Christ was a queer. How do you like that? Yes, and that's why he never touched a woman and went all over with his group of men. Look how they followed him – like dogs after a bitch on heat.

But, let's face it, it doesn't matter. He was a good man. That's all that matters. You are a good man, I can tell that. I can tell these things. I'm not. I'm a bandit. But that is something else again. It's a sin you say? Tell me, then, why so many priests do these things. Oh, don't turn away from me. Surely you know. I know. Look at them how they choose the pretty choir boys and how they fumble about under their surplices. I bet you were a choir boy once and know all about it.'

'You shouldn't talk like that. It isn't right to talk like that. It's blasphemous!' Francisco hesitated and bit his lip. 'Alright! I know all about it. These are weaknesses of the flesh and we have to try and overcome them and be strong. It is a sin to succumb to these temptations.'

'Tell me, then, little Father, is it a sin to comfort a traveller on the road?'

'No, not a sin but a virtue — indeed, a true Christian virtue.'
The bandit leaned forward and put his hand on the bare shoulder of the priest where the blanket had slipped down. 'Then, little Father, comfort me for I am indeed a traveller on the road and sorely in need of comfort. See how soft and white your shoulder is and my blood pounds to find the rest of you so. Comfort me and go in peace on your journey.'

'Such a thing is not possible,' whispered Francisco.

'Not possible!' echoed El Guapo. 'Do you mean morally or physically?'

Both.

"Well now, I must correct you there. Morally rests with you. Physically there is no problem. Didn't you ever hear the saying "A rabbit without ears can enter any hole." My rabbit is a fine strong rabbit; but a gentle rabbit ... unless he gets angry. Now he is a little angry because he needs to rest and he can only rest in a hole. You see what a difficult situation it is? Now, if I get too angry I might make a noise and my amigos would surely wake up and when they see why I'm angry they might just get the same ideas I have and then there would be three big rabbits after you and that wouldn't be nice — especially as two would have to hold you down and then

they'd see it all and then it would be their turn and the others would see and so on. Think of the shame for you. Whereas, just us two alone with no one to watch could be quite another thing, th? Just a little fayour between amigos of the road.'

Francisco was not listening properly. He was remembering when he was a young boy and how it had been then. He was only seven or eight years old when three boys more than twice his age had, one evening, dragged him into a disused sugarcane worker's hut. They had held him down on the hard, dusty floor, pulled off his clothes and, in turns, had raped him. Then he was frightened and shocked but later he started to look at boys in a different way - and to want them. He had haunted the parks at night; he had gone into the woods with boys and men, he had even picked them up in the bars. But it had happened so many times that one day he had been disgusted with his life and he went to Mexico City to become a priest and to fight the animal lusts with ardent prayer. Even then there were other priests and pretty young choir boys he had 'initiated' behind the altar. Yes, it was true what the bandit had said - but when they sent him to Rosalita it was different. There was no one, and he felt he had at last overcome the sinful desires of youth; and now, suddenly, he was not sure. The bandit beside him was so handsome and softspoken he had stirred in him again those feelings he had sought to hide - but more than that he was afraid of the other two. Like that he could not do it. And in the end they might hurt him or even kill him.

The hand of El Guapo the bandit moved down the shoulder of the priest, and Francisco did not resist, and the blanket fell away and the bandit pushed Francisco down very, very gently, pulling away the rest of the blanket as he did so, and then he bent forward and kissed his soft, white breasts and his slender arched neck and then full on the lips and Francisco could hear the wild beating of his heart and his pulsating blood mounting higher and higher and the strange hot, surging running throughout his body and to his loins and he was already hard and throbbing when the hand of El Guapo

sought and found it and started gently to caress it. Francisco let his head fall back on the shoulder of the bandit and squirmed and arched his body as the exquisite sensations mounted higher and higher under the caressing, all-feeling, all-searching strong long fingers. And in the warmth and comfort of the strong arms of El Guapo, Francisco decided not to resist him any more.

The new moon was dying, a slender wisp of a thing, when Francisco woke up. He felt calm, relaxed, his body still throbbing and sore from the frantic love that the bandit had thrust upon him – but he also felt worried. He glanced at the sleeping figure beside him – gently breathing, handsome, vigorous – the muscles of his shoulders lifting and falling slightly. He wanted to put out his hand and touch him and he wanted to tell him he loved him but he could not. He knew he must get away. It would be dangerous for him to travel with them. He got up quietly and started to pull on his clothes. When he had finished he looked once more at El Guapo and tiptoed away towards where his mule and donkey were.

He felt the jars of honey to make sure they were still there, patted the beasts on their noses to quiet them and then led them away.

The sun was just coming up as Francisco was descending the other side of the hills where he had spent the night. Here there was a little patch of sandy, rocky ground before the trail began which led to the Sierras. It was still cool and pink with dawn and rounding an outcrop of smooth boulders, Francisco stopped and sat down to eat his meagre breakfast.

He was thinking too much about El Guapo and his passionate, lusty love-making the night before to be properly alert and they were upon him before he realized it. They reined in their horses and El Guapo flashed a beautiful smile at him, took off his black sombrero that jingled with the little silver coins, and made a mock bow in the saddle.

'Buenos Dias, little Father. I hope you slept well. You

know, I was surprised and hurt to find you gone from my side. Did I not please you?'

His two companions were grinning broadly and Francisco felt sick with shame and a pink flush coloured his pale face. They knew then. He had told them after all; betrayed him in spite of his word and it had all been for nothing.

'Now, you see, it is difficult for me to save you. My good amigos also have need of you.'

Francisco jumped to his feet. 'No! No, it is not possible any more...'

El Guapo dismounted and laid his hand on his shoulder. 'Little Father, you are a priest and you must comfort the weary travellers. Did I not tell you this last night? Travellers can be weary in more ways than one. Come now, it will be more pleasant while it is still cool. When the sun is up it could be an ordeal.'

Francisco pushed his hand down; his face flushed with anger. I am going now,' he said calmly but with determination. I am going to mount my donkey and lead my mule over the Sierras. You may travel as you wish but not with me.'

The other two dismounted and came each side of Francisco. El Guapo smiled his beautiful smile and started to undo the cassock. Francisco began to struggle but the other two held him tightly and as they struggled they fell on the sandy ground and then they tore the clothes from the priest and pushed him face down and as the Fat One held him one side and El Guapo the other, El Bruto started to take off his trousers.

They all slept a little after that and then Francisco, who was crying and moaning with pain, said, 'Let me go now. Please, let me go now. You have had your pleasure. I have comforted you all as you wished. I have nothing else to give you.'

El Guapo smiled at him. 'And you gave well, little Father. But the first time was best. Funny, the first time is always best. So ... alright, you shall go. You want to travel alone or with us? We are as brothers now; blood brothers you might say. eh?'

'Alone,' Francisco hissed through his teeth. 'Alone, alone, alone. I want to be always alone now. I don't want people or friends or even a congregation . . . just to be alone.'

'Alright, alright. No need to be hysterical about a little thing like this. We meant you no harm. Go then, go alone. And go with God, ch!' and he laughed.

Francisco moved quickly away and took up the rope of the donkey and moved forward but the mule stood fast and would not move. Francisco pulled and pulled and El Guapo and the others stood and watched and laughed.

'You have no strength this morning, little Father. What were you doing last night?' And the others laughed and Francisco blushed with shame and broke a piece of stick from a dead tree. He hit the mule across the rump with demoniac force and the beast reared and then galloped forward. As it did so the nets holding the jars of honey caught in the branches and swung back and there was a cracking sound as one jar struck the trunk. Francisco stood paralysed. The bandits followed his gaze and El Guapo whistled through his teeth.

'Now that's a funny thing,' he said, smiling. 'There you stand looking at your precious honey jars and don't go after the mule which is already galloping away. I would say a mule is more valuable than honey. Or ... do you have something else in those jars? Something you are hiding from your amigos?'

'No. No, nothing,' stammered Francisco. 'It was just I didn't want to lose it, you see. It's for my sister.' And he went over and took the nets and the jars carefully from the branches to examine them. El Guapo came over and took the cracked jar from Francisco. The honey had started to ooze out. 'See there!' said El Guapo. 'It really is honey.' He ran his finger along the crack, then put it in his mouth. 'Mmm! That is really sweet.' He turned to Francisco, smiling. 'You know

it's funny, those wild bees making such sweet honey. Like us, eh? Wild bandits and we made such sweet honey with you, little Father. There you see? You were the flower. Bees need flowers to make honey just like we bandits need the flower of a young priest to make our honey. And he threw back his dark, curly head and laughed and laughed and the jar, sticky with the golden honey, slipped from his fingers onto the rocky ground and broke open with a dull cracking sound.

Francisco gasped and turned deathly pale.

He stood staring at the broken earthenware jar and the golden liquid pouring out, transfixed, his eyes staring with something more than fright.

'Francisco! Francisco! My own special little Father, what is the matter with you? I'm sorry that happened but it's only honey and you look as if you've just lost your virginity or something.' And they all laughed.

Then El Guapo knelt and tried to put the two sides of the jar together. He stopped suddenly. The air whistled through his even white teeth and he turned, lifting his dark, curly head and looking straight at Francisco with his dark-lashed green eyes that were now narrow slits. 'This looks like something more than golden honey,' he said and his long, brown fingers delved into the sticky mess. The others craned forward. Francisco gave a low moan of inner pain and terror.

When the long, brown fingers withdrew from the honey they held up something solid. El Guapo stood looking at it for some time, but he was no longer smiling. A dark shadow passed across his green eyes. Then he laughed and lifted the object to his lips and started to lick off the honey. When he had finished the object gleamed the special dull but thrilling gleam of pure gold.

El Guapo turned to Francisco. 'So, little Father, you are a special kind of priest, eh? A queer, a liar and a thief!'

'No, no!' moaned Francisco, unable to check the tears which ran down his face. 'It isn't mine. It belongs to the church. They ordered me to close the church and take the gold to Guadalahara.'

But, little Father, you lied to me when I asked you if you had anything. That wasn't nice, especially to me. I loved you, little Father, you know that. Didn't I prove it last night and again this morning. I wanted us to travel together and be together in Guadalahara — be together always like last night. I don't understand how my sweet little priest, my lover, could deny me the knowledge of this wealth. Didn't you trust me? After all that, you didn't trust me — was that it?

'I told you,' Francisco retorted angrily through his tears,
'It isn't mine to tell or to give or to do anything with except
deliver it to the church.'

'How does the church have such gold as this?' asked El Bruto.

'Good question, amigo,' smiled back El Guapo. 'Look, the poor priest of a poor church of a poor village and he has gold. You know, amigos, I don't think this is church gold. I think it's priest's gold. I think he lied to us. I think that's why he ran away in the dark and didn't kiss us goodbye. That's what a thief does, isn't it, amigos?' They both grinned and nodded. 'And now we need to know what is in the other jars, don't you agree?'

Francisco started to speak but stopped. He knew it was useless. There was just not a thing he could do now except hope they would let him go.

'Well, my little Christ of the Holy Nik, how about a Christian answer to a Christian question? What is in the other jars?'

'The same,' Francisco murmured. 'There were four bars of gold and I was afraid so I put them in the jars and filled them with honey. I hoped that I could fulfil my mission safely and escape bandits like you.'

'Bandits!' El Guapo laughed. 'He calls us bandits. And this, this is not banditry?' His smile disappeared as suddenly as it came and swiftly his hand came up and struck Francisco across the face. Francisco stumbled back and almost fell. When he lifted his head a trickle of blood came from his lips. 'Look,' he gasped. 'You've found the gold. It isn't mine but take it

and go. Just leave me now. You've done enough. Enough. Alright?'

El Bruto and El Grueso shook their heads. 'Chief, if we let him go he'll call the soldiers. We can't trust him now. Let's not lose all this gold. Look, four bars! That's one and a third each ...'

'Pigs!' snapped Ei Guapo, 'That's nothing. That's one each for you two and two for me because I'm the chief and I found them, didn't I?'

'Alright, chief, but let's get rid of this queer priest and get out of here. We're wasting time and it's getting hot already.'

An icy finger of fear crept down Francisco's spine and he started to back away from them but they lunged out and caught him. El Guapo looked around him and then he saw the tree. The dead tree whose finger-like branches had been responsible for revealing the gold. Then he saw something else. On the ground at his feet lay the broken jar with the golden honey running out — and it was already turning black. Black with the ants that had come out of the ground when they smelt the honey. Large, black, soldier ants — voracious, sweet-crazy ants.

'Carrambal' shouted El Guapo. 'I've got an idea. Look how those ants are crazy for the sweet honey just like I was crazy for the sweet priest. God, how I was crazy for you, little Father, and I could have eaten you like the ants are eating all this sweetness.' Then he went to the tree and broke off the dead branches and the trunk was left with two arms standing out and it looked like a cross — a dead cross. He nodded to his companions and they dragged the priest to it and pulled his arms up and El Guapo took some rope from the back of his horse and cut off some pieces. Then they tied the priest to the tree as if it was a crucifix.

'Then what do we do?' asked El Grueso, the Fat One, a look of stupid surprise on his face.

'What do we do?' laughed El Guapo. 'I'll tell you what we do. It's all very easy. Look, it's like this. We all niked the sweet priest and now the ants are niking the sweet honey...

so-o, why don't we just let them all nik each other? You know what I mean, little Father? It's like what you call retribution, isn't it?'

Francisco did not answer because he was praying and fingering the black cross with its little silver Christ that his sister had given him. He lifted his grey tear-filled eyes to the sky so that he would not see the handsome face of the man he had lain with all night and murmured prayers so that he would not hear what they were saying.

El Guapo turned away and opened up the honey jars. He gave one to each of his companions. Pour it over him,' he snapped. 'Pour all the honey over him.'

The others stared at El Guapo. Francisco was still murmuring his prayers. The sun was well up now and the bandits were already sweating. But, chief ...' the Fat One started to say.

'Idiots! Are you going to plead for a queer priest? Pour the honey over him — the ants will do the rest. Look, like this ...!' And he opened his jar and went to the priest and poured the honey over his head. Francisco stopped praying and gasped as the sticky mess ran over his golden hair and down his face and he blinked as it got into his eyes.

'There's your honey, little Father,' smiled El Guapo. 'All for you. The honey for you, the gold for us.' And the other two came over and did the same and the golden honey was running down his body and his arms and it gave off a sickly sweet smell in the hot sun. What are they doing, Francisco thought wildly? What are they doing? Have they gone mad? Why are they wasting the honey like this? What in God's name is happening? He looked up to the burning blue of the sky. It seemed to be getting dark. The sun was black. A great ball of black. Or was it an eye? The eye of God watching me? Forgive me, Father, please forgive me. I meant no wrong. I was afraid and I succumbed to temptation. But please take this nightmare away from me. Give me your hand that I may feel strength in front of these madmen.' And there was a stillness as if it was night and nothing moved. The bandits stood

like statues. No wind or breeze moved the trees. There was no sound. There was only the stickiness that covered him and he longed to be free of it and to plunge into the cold, fresh water and cleanse himself of everything forever. Then he saw them. Thousands of black insects advancing towards him; climbing up his legs, his body, his arms. When they reached his face and he could not brush them away he knew what they were and what they wanted ... and he started to scream.

The bandits broke the empty jars and took out the gold bars and went over to their horses. They each put a gold bar in their packs and El Guapo two into his. They mounted, and the horses whinnied and reared. Then the three turned and El Guapo looked at the young priest spread-eagled on the dead-tree cross running with honey that glinted golden in the sunlight. Francisco was squirming and writhing desperately to free himself. El Guapo looked at him and for a brief moment the faintest flicker of compassion touched his face ... and disappeared as quickly as it had come. He looked extraordinarily handsome under his wide black sombrero – his fine, long-lashed eves screne.

"Vamos!" he cried and they wheeled their horses and galloped away. They were not yet out of earshot when Francisco started to scream the terrible, agonized, frightening screams as the thousands of ants swarming over his twisting honey-covered body, started to bite into his living flesh.

When El Guapo rode into the outskirts of Guadalahara he was alone. His two companions were no longer with him. He rubbed a dirty hand across his bearded, sweaty face and smiled secretly to himself. It had all been wonderfully easy. His saddle-bag now contained not two but all four bars of solid gold. He was a rich man at last and, he told himself, done with banditry. In the distance, behind a line of tall, dusty poplars, he could see the hacienda which used to belong to Don Maximilian de Vaquez. After he had died the hacienda was sold and turned into an inn for weary travellers — with a good restaurant and cabaret. It was to this hacienda that

El Guapo had decided to go and refresh himself and order new clothes before entering Guadalahara and starting a new life. He had cash enough — money from the sale of his companions' horses — to cover these expenses, and then later he would sell the gold and deposit the money in a bank until he had decided his future. America, perhaps! New Orleans, or even Paris!

As he rode down the long, hot, dusty avenue towards the gleaming white walls of the *hacienda*, he amused himself with the events of the past days and his easy victory.

The Fat One had been as greedy as he was stupid and had fallen for El Guapo's idea to play cards for his gold bar against El Guapo's two. They had ridden into a small village and stopped at a Cantina for the night. The village was in fiesta. There were women for the taking, wine, whisky and the infernal noise of the fireworks. The Cantina had been almost empty while the peons were dancing and letting off fireworks in the streets. The Fat One knew well enough how to play cards but it was his greediness which betrayed him. He had tried to cheat El Guapo and El Guapo, whose eye was as sharp as it was beautiful, had caught him. He did not say a word but just took out his pistol and shot him. The Fat One fell over backwards, his weight breaking the chair he was sitting on. There was a neat red hole between his eyes — he had died instantly.

El Guapo pocketed the gold bar and El Bruto watched it all, stunned and without a word, and afterwards a little afraid.

When the two continued their journey an air of mistrust and suspicion had grown into an invisible wall between them. Deep one dark moonless night a slight movement of an animal in the bush had awoken El Guapo who, when he fired at the movement, seemed to have deliberately miscalculated so that the bullet struck the sleeping El Bruto and not the invisible animal. El Bruto never awoke from that sleep and El Guapo muttered something to himself about El Bruto wanting to steal his gold; he pocketed the remaining gold bar, dug a deep hole for his last companion, and set off with El Bruto's fine

horse. He had little difficulty in selling the two fine Austrian beasts, and by the time El Guapo reached the *hacienda* he had quite forgotten Francisco, the young priest whom he had left to die crucified on a dead-tree cross.

Inside, the *hacienda* was cool and as soon as he had ordered a tailor to bring him some ready-made clothes, he plunged into a bath and lay there soaking himself and humming and dreaming of his splendid future.

It was early evening when El Guapo entered the patio to watch the cabaret. He was immaculately dressed in tobacco-brown and gold; clean-shaven and perfumed. All eyes turned towards the slender, handsome figure – a stranger but obviously a gentleman of noble breeding. None could have guessed by looking at him of the events of the past few days.

The patio was wide, marble-floored and lined with magnolia trees between whose glossy leaves great creamy white blooms hung like lanterns. Scarlet and yellow hibiscus, white gardenias and pink and red geraniums splashed their coloured heads down the sides of giant earthenware jars. In the centre was a marble fountain whose cool sound echoed around the white walls. He sat at a table under the veranda just as the band started to play. The air was intoxicating with the scent of gardenias. El Guapo reached for a cheroot and a match and was just about to light it when the girl entered.

She was dressed in white with a white lace mantilla over her long dark hair. Her slender hands held twin castanets and with the first click! click! she started to dance slowly and sinuously down the wide, white marble staircase. El Guapo cursed as the match burnt his fingers but his eyes stayed on the girl.

Now a man, also dressed in white, joined her and together they danced; whirling and twisting and floating white.

In the corner of the patio two white doves - billing and cooing - started a mating dance too, as if they understood the rhythm of the music.

When the girl danced near to his table, El Guapo was spellbound by her beauty. She was like a camellia - soft petal-white - her large eyes grey and dark-lashed; a faint flush on her cheeks. What a sweet, gentle flower, thought El Guapo, full of nectar for a wild bee like me. What sweet honey we could make together! Then his beautiful green eyes narrowed at her partner. Her lover? If so he had already decided to kill him. He had already decided this flower was his. It was only a question of a little time and patience.

As she danced away his gaze fell on the mating dance of the white doves – he was amused at their rhythm, as if they had been trained to dance together. The music pulsated through his veins as if his very heartbeats were governed by it. When it stops, he felt, my heart too will stop.

But when the music did finally stop and the pair ran out of the patio a flutter of white, and the two doves took flight and flew over the patio wall, El Guapo's heart beat even faster as he amused himself with thoughts of the coming night.

He planned calmly and carefully. First he found out her name; then that her room above the patio was across from his and that her dancing partner was effeminate and no danger at all to him. He ordered flowers – white gardenias like her – and sent them with a servant inviting her to dine with him. He did not really expect her to come, but she did. She did because she had seen him sitting alone and so handsome and thought that perhaps, at last, there was someone to take her away from the hacienda and the cabaret life.

They dined by flickering candles on the cool terrace and her laugh had sounded like the tinkling of the patio fountain when El Guapo said to her, 'Maria, you are like a soft-petalled flower full of nectar and I like a wild bee. Wild bees sting, you know, and I must sting you. You are a woman already and must not be offended by my words. They are meant as a compliment.'

But she had not been offended and later when the moon had gone and the night was like black scented velvet, he slipped silently across the terrace and through her open window. For the first time in his life El Guapo was in love and the days and nights they spent together – billing and cooing like the two white doves in the patio – seemed too wonderful to last. In fact El Guapo knew they could not. The money he had from the sale of his late friends' horses would soon be gone and he needed to leave Guadalahara and he needed to sell the gold. The best place he knew was Mexico City, but it was far and the thought of being separated from Maria was too terrible-to contemplate.

But when at last he had the courage to tell Maria, he was more than surprised that she said she wanted to go with him. And why not? His happiness was boundless – until she told him that it would take a little time.

"Time for what?' he asked impatiently. "There is no problem for money. We can go on the stage. What is there to keep you?'

'Nothing – that is, nothing except ... except my brother.'
'Your brother! I didn't know you had any family.'

'I have only my brother – whom I love very much – but you see he hasn't come yet. He was in Rosalita and should have been here already and I am getting anxious about him.'

'In Rosalita!' exclaimed El Guapo. 'But there is no one now in Rosalita. It's empty, deserted, finished ...'

'I know, I know,' Maria said patiently. 'That's why my brother left. But he should have been here days ago. He's not very strong and it is a fair journey since there is no stage any more.'

El Guapo grunted and started to trace his finger through the dust on the table top as if he was making a solitary track through a wasted desert. Suddenly he stopped. The track stopped too.

'Look! If your brother means so much I could go out and look for him. I know the road ...'

'Would you?' Maria exclaimed excitedly, clasping his long brown hand in her soft, white fingers. 'Would you really do that for me?'

Well, we cannot sit here forever. Besides, I told you I

haven't much money with me. It's all in Mexico City in the bank, and I need to go there.'

'But then, why don't I come with you? After all, you don't know my brother and you can't wander around asking strangers if they've seen him who you don't know.'

'You're right. But it's not a pleasant journey. Still ...' He sighed. 'It's better than waiting here and better than being separated for perhaps four or five days. Carrambal We'll do it, my little dove. I'll get you a horse and we'll pack our things and leave in the morning. Do you agree?'

'I agree,' she said with a tinkling laugh, and she leaned across and kissed him on the tip of his nose. 'You have such a fine nose,' she said laughing. 'You know I think I am quite in love with your nose.'

They left early next morning before the hot sun was up, and rode back towards Rosalita. Maria had put on a man's clothes and combed her long dark hair up and tied it in a knot – over which she put a black sombrero. She had washed the rouge and powder off her face and it was clean and shining and flushed with excitement.

They rode along quietly and from time to time glanced at each other and smiled. Suddenly El Guapo looked at her sideways and his heart missed a momentary beat because, dressed like that, she reminded him of a youth he had once known. She looks just like a boy, he thought, with her hair swept up under the sombrero which cast a shadow over her camellian complexion. Who was the boy he had once known with grey eyes and long black lashes and an oval aesthetic face?

'What do they call you?' she suddenly interrupted his thoughts. 'Imagine, we are lovers and riding off like this and I never thought to ask your name – other than El Guapo, which can't be a real name.'

'Well ...' he said slowly and a little hesitantly. '... of course El Guapo isn't my real name – it's just a nickname. I am called Ramon.'

'Ramon! Ramon! That's a beautiful name. But Ramon what? There must be more.'

"There is but it's a very long, old aristocratic name and I shall tell you later. At this moment I am too worried about the desert we have to cross. Are you sure you wish to make the journey? It isn't too late to turn back and stay at the hacienda until I return."

'No, Ramon, I shall go with you. I have crossed the desert before. Where you go, I too shall go.'

Until they reached the spring and the little shrine to Our Lady of the Pilgrims, they did not speak again. At the spring they refreshed themselves and watered the horses. It was as they were mounting that Ramon suddenly saw the spot where the grass was flattened near the boulder and he remembered the night with Francisco, the little priest. He had until that moment forgotten about him completely. Now, he realized, they were near the spot where he had left Francisco to die on the dead-tree cross. He had no wish for Maria to see what was left after the voracious ants had done their deadly work. But he realized, too, that the only pathway out towards the desert passed near that vale of the priest's crucifixion. There was no other way.

As they rounded the boulder and passed the clump of pines he cast a quick sidelong glance and saw the tattered scarecrow hanging on the dead tree and at that moment he tried to draw Maria's attention away.

'Look, Maria,' he said. 'Over there across the desert you can see the mountains from here. We have to climb them and down the other side to the valley and across the desert to Rosalita...'

But it was too late. Maria's horse had reared suddenly and whinnied in alarm. It had sensed rather than seen that Death lurked in that little vale.

Maria reined her horse to a stop and tried to calm it and Ramon leaned forward and caught the reins and tried also to calm the frightened animal – but it was too late.

'God!' she cried out in alarm. 'What in the name of God is that?'

Nervously trying to draw her gaze away and putting-him-

self between her and the crucified priest, Ramon stammered, "That ... that ... figure? Oh, don't worry, that's only a scare-crow to keep the crows and buzzards away ...! Come along, we have no time to waste. We must cross the desert vet.'

'But why would anyone want to put a scarecrow here where no one lives and nothing grows but pine and cactus?'

'Oh... oh, it was put there by people who used to live here or just put by a passing traveller. Perhaps it was just a joke or something like that. The soldiers of Maximilian and Juarez passed here – who knows! Come along, Maria, you know we must cross the desert before it gets too hot.'

'It's funny,' Maria said slowly and seriously. 'It looks just like the cassock of a priest. How could that be?' And before he could stop her she had spurred her horse and galloped towards the thing hanging limp with its tattered black cassock flapping in the wind like the wings of a giant black crow. She jumped off her horse and ran to the figure. She stood there staring at it; staring transfixed with horror and then she screamed. It was a terrible, heart-rending scream that echoed around the rocks and trees and her horse started, reared, whinnied with fear and, with nostrils flaring, suddenly shot forward and galloped headlong down the trail towards the desert.

As Ramon came abreast of her he saw her eyes wide with horror as she stared at the thing dangling there. It was the skeleton of a man beneath the black cassock, and it was crawling with large black ants who were still busy scurrying in and out of the empty eye-sockets and the gaping nostrils and between the ghastly grinning teeth. Parts of a wispy beard still clung to the skull but they were matted with dried blood. The hair, which had once been golden, was almost black and clotted with sun-dried, dust-covered, matted blood. There were still a few pieces of putrid flesh hanging on the bones and maggots – sickly white and nauseous – were squirming and fighting the black ants for the last remains of the little priest, Francisco dos Anjos.

Ramon dismounted quickly and grabbed hold of her. 'You

mustn't look, Maria. Something bad has happened here. You mustn't look.' He tried to pull her away and to cover her eyes so she could not see the ghastly remains, but she not only resisted but slowly and deliberately walked forward. He saw that something mesmerized her. Her eyes were fixed on a black wooden cross with a tiny silver Christ that dangled on the ant-swarmed chest. Slowly with almost jerky, hesitant movements she put out her soft white hand to catch hold of it. She turned it over slowly and read the words inscribed on the back as a child would read – a child just learning to read. 'FRAN... CIS... CO MY LIT... TLE BRO... THER.

LOVE. MA ... RI ... A.'

She stood staring at it; burbling unintelligibly while Ramon watched her, his beautiful green eyes wide and dark with fear. Even before she started screaming 'It's my brother Francisco. My dearest little brother!' - Ramon knew. This, Francisco the little priest, was the brother Maria had been waiting for; that he, Ramon the Beautiful, had come to help her to find. And he was too paralysed with shock to try to stop her as she beat frantically at the ghastly remains as if to try and resurrect some small part from the famished jaws of the insatiable black ants.

The ants and the squirming white maggots fell off the skeleton onto the ground, but she went on beating and beating and screaming until the bones started to fall apart and drop onto the ground. Then she stopped.

She was shivering violently, but had the courage to undo the black wooden cross she had once given him. 'Ramon!' Ramon!' she screamed in anguish. 'Help me! For the love of God, help me!'

Ramon pulled her away and suddenly slapped her face, and as she started to cry he encircled her in his strong arms. It shall bury him, Maria. There is nothing else to do now. It is finished.

After a while she calmed herself a little and lay sobbing in his arms. 'Who ... who could have done this? He was so kind and gentle. He was a priest! They had no right to do such a

thing to a priest. What had he done to deserve such an awful and ignoble end?'

'It is better to try to forget. Come, sit here in the shade where you cannot see and I will dig a grave for him and then we may kneel and pray together for his poor soul and for those who did this. Do you agree?'

She nodded.

He sat with her, his arms around her shoulders.

'You know,' he said slowly. 'Your horse has gone. You frightened him. But never mind. You shall ride mine and I'll walk. Do you agree?'

She nodded again but said nothing; just staring with her grey eyes still wide at the horror she had seen; staring at the ground and seeing only the image of the remains of her brother, the little priest Francisco, and wondering who could have done such a thing to him — and why.

Ramon, otherwise known as El Guapo the Beautiful, dug and scraped at the hard, sandy soil with a piece of wood he had sharpened with his knife. He made the hole beneath the rough wooden cross and when it was ready he cut the rough ropes that bound the figure ... the ropes he had helped to tie up the little priest with. As he severed the last one, the gruesome figure fell down into the hole with a dull plomp and lay there huddled, ignoble and in disorder. Ramon straightened out the figure as best he could and then started to scrape the soil back in. He worked quickly and frantically to rid his sight of this ghastly thing and all the while cursing and swearing his luck.

'Christ Almighty!' he muttered angrily to himself. 'Of all the queer priests I had to choose why did it have to be this one – the brother of Maria?'

When he had quite finished, he washed himself in the brook and drank from the stream and then went back to where Maria was still sitting, staring vacantly at the ground.

'Come,' he said gently. 'It is done now. He is at rest. We pray for him together. Do you agree?'

He helped her up and to walk to the mound of soil and

rocks which lay in front of the dead tree he had himself fashioned into a cross that day. He tried desperately to remember a prayer and only managed to mumble a mixture of 'Our Father' and 'In My Father's House'. If Maria heard she showed no sign; neither did she say any word of prayer. She was still numb with shock and disbelief. She just fingered the wooden cross with the little silver Christ on it; turning it over and over in her soft, white hands.

It was now late and the sun high in the burning blue vault of the sky and they went back to the grove of pines behind the boulder and sat on the sarapee Ramon had spread on the ground. It think it is better we stay here until it gets dark or even until morning. Now it is too hot to cross the desert. I have food and wine. Let us eat and drink and perhaps you can sleep a little. After, if you feel better, we can talk. It is always better to talk than to lock these sad thoughts away. Do you agree?' She nodded listlessly.

He made her eat, feeding her like a child, and then forced her to drink the dark, red wine. The wine and the heat of the afternoon made her drowsy and after a little she had fallen askeep in his arms. They slept curled up on the sarapee under the shade of the fresh fragrance of the pines for hours. It was dark when they awoke and a solitary owl was hooting high in a tall pine far up the sloping side of the hill above them.

Suddenly she started to kiss him; frantically, passionately, desperately and then they were making love. She seemed insatiable – wanting him again and again as if their violent love-making would compensate for the loss of her brother. Finally, he had to pull away from her.

'Maria, my little dove, enough! I cannot do it again. There is a limit even for me. Sleep now and in the morning we shall talk of what to do.'

And they slept again until a pale pink flush spread across the brook and stabbed fingers of light through the branches of the pines.

After they had bathed in the brook, Maria looked better and more alive and Ramon smiled at her. 'You slept well. It is good to sleep. It is the best cure for all things. Now we shall breakfast and then finish our journey ...' He stopped. 'You know, Maria, I just realized we were making this journey to find your brother. Now there is no need to continue to Rosalita because ... because he is ... here.'

'No,' she said firmly, 'I still want to go to Rosalita. I shall take his cross to the church and place it on the altar.'

'But the church is closed now.'

'And the villagers must know what happened. Perhaps they can tell me something. I must know what happened. Who did this terrible thing.'

'Maria, Maria, there are no villagers. They have all gone. The church is closed. There will be nothing there and it will only bring back memories that are best forgotten.'

. 'No, I must go,' she said emphatically. 'I must know.'

Ramon sighed. It was certainly the soldiers. They do these things.

'Soldiers! What soldiers?'

'The soldiers of Juarez or the soldiers of Maximilian. Who knows? They had been fighting around here. Soldiers become crazy and they do terrible things. Perhaps they robbed him and then killed him so that he wouldn't talk. They wanted gold ...'

'What gold?' She jerked her head violently and stared at him.

'Eh! ... Eh! Priests often carry gold, especially when they close a church and go to another.'

'Francisco wouldn't carry gold, at least not openly so that soldiers or bandits could see it.'

'True, but he could have hidden it and they could have found it.'

'Where could he possibly have hidden it?'

'Oh! He could have hidden it under his cassock or ... or ...' Ramon was becoming angry and impatient with her questions, '... or in the jars of honey he was bringing you ...' He cut short his words and bit his lip.

'Jars of honey he ... he was bringing ... ME!' she ex-

claimed. 'How did you know Francisco was bringing me honey? Even I didn't know he was bringing me honey. He used to send me honey but he stopped when the stage stopped passing through Rosalita.'

'You told me, didn't you?' Ramon shouted violently. 'Didn't you tell me your brother was coming and you were worried he hadn't arrived and we came to look for him.'

'Yes, but I never told you he was bringing me honey. How could I if I didn't know myself? And I don't remember I told you Francisco was a priest. I never told anyone my brother was a priest because I was ashamed that he was a priest and I a dancer in a cabaret.'

'You didn't have to tell me. I just buried him in what was left of a priest's cassock and you took the cross from his neck. And I think I saw some broken jars on the ground around here; sticky and covered with ants. I suppose I just guessed ... Look! Look! Ramon was searching desperately for words. Had he said too much already? 'Let's look around here and perhaps we shall find something to show us.'

He started forward, almost stumbling, and began running back and forth, looking on the ground and then he suddenly shouted. 'Look! Come here and see this.'

There lay the broken jars covered with ants still searching for some final taste of the sweet, golden honey.

Maria stared at the jars.

'I told you, didn't I! Don't you see these jars were full of honey and he could have put the gold inside and they could have fallen – you see they are broken – and the soldiers would have seen and it would have been enough.'

Maria listened to what he said and nodded, but she went on looking around the sandy soil. There were still the marks of the horses' hoofs – but not many.

'If they were soldiers there were only three. Only three horses have been here. These ... these are mule and donkey tracks. They are different. It seems strange only three soldiers. Soldiers are usually in large groups. Most probably they were handirs.'

'Probably. Probably. Or if they were soldiers they could have been deserters turned renegades. But anyway we shall never know.'

And then she was at the spot by the boulder where the grass had been flattened that night Ramon had made love to Francisco.

'Someone was sleeping here,' Maria said.

'Probably your brother. Perhaps he was sleeping when they found him.'

'No! It isn't the marks of one man sleeping, but more than one. Two ... or maybe three.'

The sun was well up now and a long shaft of light broke through the pines and touched, like an accusing finger, a small round object that glittered silver. She bent and picked it up. It was a small silver coin. It had a small hole bored in the top. She turned it over and over in her hand.

'Not soldiers. No, not soldiers. Bandits!' Her voice sounded small and lost like a child that had discovered something incomprehensible. Ramon's hand was trembling as he lifted it instinctively to his black sombrero and ran his long, brown fingers along the row of dangling silver coins. There was a space just above his ear. One was missing.

Maria looked up at him, her gaze steady but inscrutable. She looked deeply at the handsome face; the perfect features; the large, soft, bright green beautiful eyes, and as she looked she saw that under the burnished skin a sickly green colour was infusing it and the beautiful eyes she had loved were sinking backwards and the whites, which had had the faintest hint of blue, were turning yellow. Her gaze moved slowly upwards to the noble brow and the finely etched line of his dark eyebrows and saw the black curls of his hair damp with sweat. And above the curls on the black sombrero dangled the row of small silver coins which had always jangled so pleasantly when he walked. She looked long and deeply at them. So slowly, so very slowly because she was afraid of what she would find ... that one of them was missing.

'You see, Maria ... it must ... it must have been when I

was searching for things with you or before when you were sleeping. It must have fallen off ...'

'You look so strange suddenly, and sound so guilty,' she said, very softly. 'I haven't accused you of anything. But... there were little things. Yes, lots of little things which weren't explained. You seemed to know so much about Francisco.' She stopped, shaking her head in disbelief. He stared at her and began to tremble like a man stricken with ague.

'It was you, wasn't it?' she said in a strangely hollow voice. 'It was you who lay there on the grass with my brother and then found he had gold and robbed him and killed him. It was you! IT WAS YOU!' And her voice, which had started so softly, reached a piercing scream that started the wild wood pigeons nesting in the pines. They flew off with frightened squawks and angry beating wings.

The sound they made seemed to calm her, to bring her back to reality, and she turned away from him and walked over to his horse.

"There was something else which had slightly puzzled me. Why your saddle-bags were so heavy.' As she was speaking she opened the pouches one by one, extracting as she did so the bars of gold. She looked at them carefully. "This is church gold,' she said, as she replaced them and fastened the flaps. 'Church gold always has a cross stamped on it.'

She took off her sombrero and flung it on the ground, and then untied her long, dark hair. It tumbled freely onto her shoulders. Then she slipped her foot into the stirrup and swung her leg over freely.

'Alright, Maria,' Ramon gasped. 'You can take my horse and go to Rosalita. You can perhaps find the truth there and know you have wronged me. Don't ... don't worry about me. I can walk back to the hacienda and wait for you ...'

'L-I-A-R!'

The word cut like a savage whiplash and he shrank back as if physically struck.

'You wouldn't go back to anywhere or wait for anyone. You'd run as bandits always run. 'Only ...' she paused as her

hand slipped gently, quietly down to curl her fingers around the butt of the pistol he had left in its holster slung across the horse's back. '... only this time you are going to find it not so easy to walk let alone run.'

With a sudden movement, his green eyes narrowed to slits, Ramon leapt forward to grab the reins of the horse but she was too quick and before either of them realized it, she had pulled out the pistol and fired at his feet. Once ... twice ... the two bullets struck home and he screamed with the searing pain that shot up through his legs and caused his heart to thunder against his ribs. He sank moaning onto the dusty ground. She turned the horse and kicked hard into its flanks. It snorted and reared and then plunged forward like a beast of the devil himself. She galloped headlong down the path and out into the open desert; her hair billowing out like the dark wings of a dozen black ravens in flight.

Groaning, Ramon lifted himself onto his elbows and saw the figure of the girl and the horse moving rapidly away – diminishing second by second into the distance; carrying with them a cloud of dust that made them seem like spectral shadows in a nightmare.

The pain in his feet was terrible and the blood was pouring onto the ground. He knew he would not be able to walk, at least not for some time. The only thing he could do was drag himself to the brook, soak them, bandage them tightly and make some crutches from branches and by tomorrow, with luck, he could hobble back to the hacienda.

Hobble back! Good God, what is that drinking on the other side of the brook? Was it his imagination — his already bleared vision? No, surely to God it was indeed Francisco's mule over there. It had come back, no doubt out of thirst. He had only to get across the brook... But the pain was too much and after dragging himself a little way, clawing at the sunbaked earth, he collapsed groaning into a dead faint.

It was something more than the shooting pains from his shattered feet which finally roused him. It was something he had, until then, forgotten. The ants!

The sweet smell of the warm, rich blood had brought them out of their holes. They poured out in their countless thousands and swarmed over him like a seething black cloud. They were already in his eyes when he regained consciousness and he screamed and started to frantically brush them away. As fast as he knocked them off, others took their place. He knew he must get to the brook and only in the water could he free himself of this voracious harde of destruction. He clawed and dragged and tried to stagger and fell and tried to rise again. And the thick trail of blood he left behind turned black in an instant. His screams were shrill and pierced the rocks and the trees and echoed and re-echoed around the little grove. But no one heard him. Even the birds had gone. Everything had gone - except the ants which never stopped coming - pouring and tumbling over each other out of their nests as they made their deadly way towards the writhing figure on the ground.

Ramon the Beautiful never reached the brook. The ants did their work too rapidly and after a little while there was a last piercing agonized scream and the little grove was silent again.

Ants do not make a noise when they are eating.

Maria dos Anjos did not stop or look back. She kept on riding, impervious to the heat of the desert. She did not notice that her clothes were saturated with sweat or that her hair, which had been billowing in the breeze of the hills, was now hanging matted and dust-covered about her neck. She did not look back or to either side. She looked only in front. She thought she had heard far away the sounds of screams, but she shut her ears to it. She felt no pity for Ramon, only disgust and dirtiness for herself who had given so freely her love to the man who had not only lain with her brother, but had murdered him so remorselessly and terribly. The beautiful mask of the face of El Guapo had hidden so well the

vileness of his true self - his self and not his soul for she knew he had no soul.

Finally, tired, dust-covered and with tears furrowing the film of dust which covered her face, she rode into Rosalita. There was no sound in the deserted streets save the clip-clopping of the tired hooves of the horse. But she had reached her goal. She lifted her head and rode straight up the hill to the little church that had once been her brother's. At the door she dismounted. She lifted the heavy saddle-packs off the back of the tired beast and stumbled up the worn steps to the door. It was locked. With her last remaining strength she gave a ferocious lunge against the carved wooden door. The rusted lock and the rotted, worm-eaten wood parted and with a final, desperate kick, the huge door fell open.

Inside the church she saw the ruin. The weed-choked aisle and the stained-glass window the soldiers had shot at and broken. There was a strange buzzing sound and in the dim light that filtered through the broken window she saw the bees her brother Francisco had so carefully tended, winging around aimlessly. She stifled back a sob. Oh God, she thought, they miss him too. All these poor bees with no one to tend them any more.

She walked down the aisle between the pews of rotted and broken wood to the altar. It was a shambles. Desperately she tried to clean it, to straighten the religious relics and to blow futilely at the dust which had settled there. At last, exhausted because of her efforts, she stopped and placed the four gold bars on the altar and then took out the wooden cross she had once given him, kissed it and placed it in the centre. She knelt and prayed for the first time since she had seen the gruesome corpse of Francisco. When she had finished she walked to the tower at the back and found the bell rope. She started tugging at it until at last the cracked bell began to move and toll mournfully out across the village of Rosalita where there was no one to hear it. It had the dull sound of a funeral bell. She continued tugging at the dusty rope for as

long as she had strength, and then she let it go. For a while the bell continued tolling and while it was doing so she searched around the bell tower until she found what she wanted – a wooden footstool. She dragged it forward until it was under the rope, and then she stood on it. When she caught hold of the swaying rope the bell stopped tolling. Then she slowly and deliberately tied the rope about her long, slender, white throat. She hastily muttered a prayer, crossed herself and then with a vicious kick knocked the stool from under her feet.

The weight of her body acted as a pendulum and the cracked bell started tolling again. The slow, mournful notes of the bell went on and on and on - echoing around the walls of the bell tower; reverberating nervously through the ruined church, and sounding out across the hills and valleys and the deserted streets full of dead houses in the little town of Rosalita.

Outside the broken door of the church, the fine Austrian horse which had once belonged to Ramon - El Guapo, The Beautiful - nervously pawed the dusty, sun-baked ground waiting ... waiting ...

Edwin Brown

The brother

It was near the end of the evening meal that her husband spoke at last of the subject which was hammering in the forefront of her mind and of which she dared not speak. Quite carelessly he said. 'By the way, I nearly forgot to tell you. I spoke to Peter at the kennels this afternoon. He won't be coming after all.'

She gave no sign on her face that she guessed Charles was lying, that she'd been anticipating such a lie, or that all day, while she had been alone, she had been on edge, knowing that he would spring some unpleasant deceit on her when he arrived home. Spitefully, he had waited until now. She said, 'Never mind.' And then, because she was straining every nerve to appear unconcerned, she heard herself say, 'Why not?' And that was a mistake.

Looking straight at her, Charles repeated, 'Why not?' He smiled. It was a smile she knew too well. 'Does it matter?'

She avoided an immediate reply by reaching across the dining-room table for Charles' empty plate. She put it together with her own, stood up and went to the door. Her stomach was taut with apprehension. 'Of course it doesn't matter.' She went into the kitchen. She knew he was baiting her and wanted only half a chance to start another scene, make another false accusation. He got up from the table and stood in the doorway behind her. She could sense him watching her, feel him trying to probe her mind. There was a long silence, then he moved restlessly. T'm going to bed.'

'It's only half past seven.'

'Come to bed,' he said. And she knew she couldn't refuse.

He made love ferociously to her that evening as though she

was likely to be snatched from him at any moment. Later, when he was sleeping next to her like a child, she contemplated the relaxed, spoilt face, relived the series of disastrous events which had brought her to this extremity.

She had met Charles Ralston two months earlier while on holiday in Italy. He was just thirty with a boyish aspect and an outwardly engaging personality, but his true nature swung in an unpredictable arc between sweet amiability and a petulant malignancy that revealed itself sometimes in violent outbursts of rage, sometimes in a cold, unyielding spitefulness. None of the ugly side of his character had shown at first. She was completely overwhelmed by his charm and physical attractiveness and in a month they had married. But within a few days of the wedding she had come to realize that he was possessive and suspicious to the point of paranoia. Then the nightmare began.

Charles' father and mother lived in the country near Eastbourne where his father ran a successful dog-breeding business with his son's help. The parents bought them a flat in a nearby town as a wedding present and they moved in almost at once, Charles driving to and from the kennels most days of the week, leaving Stella with little else to do but shop, cook, and set the flat to rights.

Almost from the first day Charles took to arriving home unexpectedly at odd hours, demanding explanations for any temporary absence so that, bewildered and angry, she soon began to do her shopping by phone. Sly questioning about her daily activities and vague threats of violence brought her rapidly to a state of nervous exhaustion. There were open threats of suicide, even murder. If I catch you with another man I'll kill you both.' Sometimes he would retreat into some dark sulking world of his own, not speaking to her for several days, and once, during one of those periods of moody silence, she had lost her temper and slammed out of the front door. Returning an hour later with shopping. she had found him lying across the bed, apparently unconscious. Next to him was a tumbler containing the dregs of what had been thick

white liquid. By the tumbler was an empty aspirin bottle. Frightened, she had tried to shake him into life. He did not respond and, panic-stricken, she ran into the hall to phone for an ambulance; but before she could speak he had appeared at the door of the bedroom with a gloating smile on his face. It was a cruel deception and she felt the beginnings of hatred stirring within her. There had been several such unpleasant tricks, all intended to shock, to punish, to terrify.

Then, a week ago in a restaurant he had almost attacked a young Italian waiter who had been too solicitous towards her. There was an unpleasant scene, she had caught the expression in his eyes and knew, beyond doubt now, that she was married to an unstable, probably dangerous, psychopath with strong sado-masochistic leanings.

She lay staring at the ceiling. Before long she would have to leave him. She could go home to her mother in Cumberland or she could go back to London where she was living and working before all this happened.

Charles shifted feverishly in his sleep and flung a flailing arm across her body. The arm lay across her, pinning her to the bed, restraining, poignantly analogous to their life together. She did not move at once for fear of waking him. If that happened she would have to risk his mood.

She wondered what strange inner sense of attachment was holding her to Charles. She couldn't feel love any more. Duty? She was at the point where duty was about to be consumed by terror.

Only yesterday evening, another menace had appeared.

Charles arrived home at dusk in a black mood. Stella remained quiet, waiting for the explosion. But no explosion came. Silently she poured drinks for them both. He took the glass and went to the window, gazing moodily out at the gathering darkness. Suddenly he said, 'Don't you care what's worrying me?'

Her brain raced for the right answer. I didn't like to ask.'
There was a long pause. I have a brother.'

But—'

Twe never spoken of him. He cut himself off from the family some years ago. Broke mother's heart. Well, he's home again. Wants to stay for a week or two then go on for a holiday, I think. He got here this afternoon. The atmosphere at home is a bit – well, strained. He doesn't get on too well with father'.

She chose her words carefully. 'Why suddenly come home?'

Charles turned savagely. 'How the hell would I know?' He stared at her. 'Mother wants you to meet him.' He spoke as if there was no alternative.

She said 'Well - yes. Alright.'

Still staring at her, Charles emptied his glass and placed it carefully on the table. His face was expressionless. A shiver ran down her spine. He was playing his terrible cat and mouse game. He said, 'Where would you suggest we meet? At the house — or here?'

'Here might be easier. In view of the atmosphere there. Yes, here.'

Charles did not take his eyes from her. His voice was insinuating, malevolent. 'You'd like that, would you? You're anxious to meet my brother?'

She shrugged. It's not a question of like or not like. Whatever you think.'

'I'll ask him tomorrow,' he said.

And Peter, of course, hadn't come. It was all part of the game. Charles' own brother was just as much a threat to him as any stranger. And yet she knew that to satisfy Charles' peculiar needs she would eventually be brought face to face with Peter. She felt trapped and frightened. How could she avoid the meeting in the next week or two? She dare not express either willingness or unwillingness, must remain neutral and let Charles make the decisions.

She slept at last, restlessly, fearfully.

The telephone rang next morning at ten o'clock. She heard Mrs Ralston's loud, clear voice. 'We rather hoped to see you last night but I've just spoken to Charles and he tells me you went to bed early. Can you come for drinks this evening?'
What does Charles say?'

'Charles is agreeable. And Peter can't wait to see you. Eight o'clock?' It was almost a command.

Stella replaced the receiver, suddenly sharply conscious of the wide gulf between Mrs Ralston's apparent normality and her own bizarre situation. But was Mrs Ralston behaving normally? Neither she nor Charles' father had so far given her any sign that they knew of Charles' illness yet it was not possible that they would be unaware of such a serious aberration in their son. Were they trying to protect him and fool her?

She would have to be very careful - very careful indeed.

Peter was taller than Charles, slimmer, finer, and with almost identically weak features; but the charm was there and when he smiled he was like Charles at his best. Nevertheles, there was a strangeness about him which gave her a vague feeling of uneasiness. He appeared to be quite naive, like a gauche teenager full of disorientated energy. He laughed a lot and a little too loudly. But behind his apparent simplicity lay something more alarming – something abnormal and frightening.

And he stared at her almost non-stop.

Mr Ralston, in his fifties, stockily built, cropped, greying hair, tweedy, hearty, rather like an overgrown boy scout, with an embarrassingly heavy line in puns; Mrs Ralston, slightly younger, tall, direct in manner with a voice that carried, a born organizer – stock characters from any pre-war play. Observing them, Stella wondered as she had done on previous occasions, if they were consciously playing parts. There was an artificiality about them and she felt ill at ease in their company.

On the short drive from the flat Charles had been quiet and withdrawn. Now he was almost unnaturally cordial and inside half an hour drank several large whiskies. If he noticed Peter gazing at Stella he gave no indication. He and his father drank heavily, subtly ignoring Peter who sat listening to his father's jokes — and staring at Stella. She deliberately turned her head away from him, talking trivialities with Mrs Ralston, smiling,

trying to appear unstrained but as time went by becoming more and more aware of the unreality of the situation. The conversation was slowing down and the atmosphere growing palpably tense. Then, quite suddenly and incongruously, conversation ceased altogether. She looked at Charles and his father, Charles was staring ahead as if no one else was present. Mr Ralston was slumped in his armchair like a run-down clockwork toy. His face was ashen and his mouth slack. He was very drunk.

In the quietness Peter giggled. Mrs Ralston stood up. 'Come along, Ben.' Her voice was authoritative. It was as though she'd seen all this before. She put a hand on Ralston's arm. With unexpected savagery he knocked her away, muttered something incoherent and stumbled out of the room.

Mrs Ralston said, 'I do apologize.' Stella saw her face twitch. 'My husband - drinks - you know. Excuse me.' She left the room hurriedly. Peter giggled again. Nobody spoke. She looked at Charles. He was still sitting, his eyes fixed, apparently unseeingly, but now his whole body was shaking and he was breathing heavily. Instinctively she moved towards him. As she did so he threw up his hand, palm towards her, in a gesture of rejection. Peter was laughing now, uncontrollably, holding himself between the legs like an incontinent schoolboy. She stood helpless, her heart pounding. Mrs Ralston came into the room. Simultaneously, Charles blundered to his feet and pushed past Stella so fiercely that she almost fell. He screamed into Peter's face. 'Leave my wife alone!' and struck him an open-handed blow across the head. Mrs Ralston called out, ran forward and got between them. She spoke abruptly to Charles. 'Pull yourself together! Think what you're doing!' Charles fell back, panting,

Mrs Ralston took Peter's hand in hers, pulled him to his feet and led him to the door. He was crying like a baby. 'You go straight to bed now, Peter. I'll bring you a hot drink soon.' She closed the door. She said, 'I'm sorry, Stella.' To Charles she said, 'You should be ashamed of yourself.' Charles did not answer. He stood like a reprimanded juvenile, sullenly

turned away from his mother, gazing at the floor. I think you'd better wait in the car. I want to talk to Stella.' She seemed to be in complete control of the situation.

There was a pause, then Charles, without a word or a glance at Stella, went out of the room. Mrs Ralston said, 'You don't have to tell me what he's like; I know. Perhaps it was wrong not to warn you but I thought – well, you seem to be strong. I thought you'd be good for him. He's just a little boy really.' Surprisingly there were tears in her eyes.

'And my other son.' Mrs Ralston was not looking at her. 'We wanted to keep it from you if possible, but then I thought you'll have to know sooner or later.' She paused for a moment, then said, 'Peter is not quite – not quite normal. He's spent the last four years in – well, in a special hospital. He was always crazy after the girls. Too crazy. It got him into trouble with the police more than once. Eventually it happened. He was arrested on a charge of rape with violence. Now they seem to think he's much better and have let him come home for a week or two.' Her face was anguished. 'But I'm not sure – not sure.'

She turned and looked directly at Stella. 'Now you know.'
She made an effort to recover her composure. 'You'd better go
now before Charles does something stupid. I'll come and see
you tomorrow if I may.'

The car stood in darkness in the front drive, Charles seated behind the wheel. Mrs Ralston pressed Stella's hand. 'See you tomorrow.' The door closed.

She climbed into the car without looking at Charles. She knew he wouldn't speak until he was good and ready. She waited for the switch-on of the ignition. None came. She glanced sideways. Charles sat unnoving, staring through the windscreen, probably smiling in the darkness. The silence inside the car beat on her eardrums. Dogs whimpered in the kennels nearby. Now there was something about the immobile figure beside her which was terrifying. She said, tremblingly 'Charles?' No answer. She stretched shaking fingers and switched on the roof light. She nearly vomited. Charles' shirt front and his hands in his lap were dark and sticky with blood.

She saw then, her stomach heaving with revulsion, that his throat had been cut and she knew, in a moment of sheer horror, that someone was in the back of the car. There was a slight movement and a knife gleamed dully a few inches from her face. The hand that held it was streaked with crimson. She heard Peter's whisper. 'Stella, let's make love. Come on. Let's make love.'

The light went out.

Dorothy K. Haynes Zelma, my sister-in-law

The fair came to the village on pay day, and Michael and I met up with a crowd of the lads and set off to make a night of it. We had a few beers, some crazy driving on the dodgems, and a whirl or two on the waltzer, with the girls screaming as the cars whipped them round. Then, after winning a coconut and a plaster dog, we bought some chips at a stall, and eating them, salty and hot from the bag, we strolled round to look at the sideshows.

Outside one of them, a barker was shouting, with a grating rattle in his voice. 'Ladeez'n'-gen'l'men! Come and see Madame Zelma, the headless wonder! A lady alive only through the miracles of modern science! For only fifty pence, ladeez'n'-gen'l'men...!'

The crowd shifted and craned, eager to hear more but not ready to part with their money. Michael and I pushed forward a little, as the barker filled us in on her personal history.

"... a plucky young lady who has made the decision to exhibit herself so that you, the great British public, can appreciate the way that science is keeping her alive. Remember, Madame Zelma cannot see; she has no eyes. She can neither hear, nor speak. Because she has no mouth, she cannot eat as a normal person does. All her nourishment comes from tubes, conveying to her all the elements the body needs. But ...' his voiced dropped, almost coyly, 'though Madame Zelma might be called a freak, ladeez'n-gen'l'men, she has the feelings of a normal, sensitive woman.'

The crowd stood, silent and somewhat embarrassed, and the barker gave another sudden roar, and began shouting again.

'Come along then, everyone! Fifty pence only, and money

gladly refunded if not satisfied. Walk up, now! Come and see the marvellous Madame Zelma—'

One or two of the boys pushed forward. 'Coming?' said Michael to me.

'I dunno,' I said. 'I don't fancy it much.'

'Oh, come on. Just for the laugh.'

I didn't think it would make me laugh. To be honest, I felt almost scared. Of course, it would be a fake. It couldn't be anything else. But—

'Come on,' said the boys again, and I went forward with all the rest, and put down my money.

Inside it was gloomy, with a few low-wattage electric bulbs slung on sagging cables. An empty, black-draped stage stood in the half-light, and we found ourselves shuffling about impatiently, waiting for something to happen. Madame Zelma, evidently, was not going to appear until the booth was full, and by full she meant crammed till nobody could move. What with the heat, and the beer, and the smell of chips and vinegar, I was desperate to get out again, but I had to stand squashed and sweating, waiting for the show I had no stomach to watch.

When she came on, the hanging lights were not bright enough to let me see clearly, but they were low enough to dazzle. And yet I saw more than I wanted. On to the bare stage came Madame Zelma, walking slowly, step by step, like a robot, in high-heeled shoes and a peagreen leotard, which showed off a very normal, feminine figure and plump, seductive thighs. I had a good long look at her thighs; I didn't want to see the rest of her.

But I had to look up. I couldn't help it. She was carrying a case, a shabby little attaché case with ZELMA painted across it. From holes in the top protruded two glass tubes, one full of a vile-looking yellowish liquid, like curdled egg; and – my eyes followed them with fascinated reluctance – they went up to about where her mouth should have been, then bent over in a right angle, and down again into the stump of her neck.

Slowly, in a kind of seductive trudge, she reached the centre of the stage, turned, faced us, swivelled round to show her shapely bottom, and smooched off again. We all stood in horrified fascination. As she got going after her ghastly pirouette a woman in front of me said, 'Ugh, it's disgusting!' and there was an immediate, shamed 'Shh-shh!' from the audience. Both reactions were understandable. Madame Zelma was both repulsive and pathetic.

We seemed to have been in the booth for a long time, but in fact the show had only taken about sixty seconds. Blinking as we came out, we began to argue, noisily, about how it was done.

T've got it all worked out,' said Hector Mair. 'The stage is in black, see? Black curtains, dim light. Well, this girl comes on, with her head held back, and tubes fixed so, as if they were coming out of her neck. Then there's another black curtain hanging in front of the first one. She keeps her head behind it, and the tubes in front. Optical illusion! You think she's no head.'

'That's right! That's why she walked so slowly. She didn't want to ruffle the curtains.'

'Go and ask for your money back, Hector.'

'No, no. Fair's fair. It was a good try. What's up with you, George?'

T just feel a bit squeamish, that's all,' I said. 'I think I'll get off home. Are you coming, Michael?'

'Eh?' My brother started and blinked. 'No, I'll hang on a bit longer, if you don't mind. Will you be okay? I'll come home with you if you like.'

'No, I'll be fine,' I said. I didn't want to spoil my brother's fun. He's the kind of chap who would do anything for anybody.

I was half asleep when Michael came in. He sat on my bed and cleared his throat, and became very brother-to-brother.

'Look, George, I want you to break it to Mum. I want to bring a girl round to tea.'

'Oh? What girl?'

He went red, and began to untie his shoes, so that I couldn't see his face. 'Madame Zelma,' he mumbled.

'Madame Zelma! You can't! She's not - she's not-'

He laughed slyly. 'Oh yes she is! There's nothing wrong with her!'

'But how did you find out? How did you get to meet her?'
He winked at me. 'Easy. I nipped round the back after her
last performance, and saw which caravan was hers. Then I
knocked her up.'

'Just like that?'

"Well, no, it was sort of difficult. Her father played hell when he saw me chatting her up. He's the barker on the show."

'You mean she isn't allowed out?'

"Well ... only incognito. It wouldn't do, you see ... now he's scared I know too much about it. I had to swear secrecy.' He hammed it up, his hand on his heart.

'Michael - what's she like? Really?'

'Oh, she's a smasher. Dark, gypsyish sort of style. You'll like her. So will Mum, when she gets used to the idea. Just . . . don't say anything about her act . . . yet. I'll tell her myself, later.'

I could see his point. Zelma's act had made a peculiarly sickening impression on me, and I almost dreaded meeting her. After I had briefed Mum about it, she quizzed Michael, all tears and delight - she's got this thing about wanting to see us both 'settled' since Dad died - and Michael told her that he had met her at the fairground, but that she was more than an ordinary, run-of-the-mill coconut-shy minder. Her father, he said, had an act that was internationally famous. Well, his spiel did say that she had delighted audiences in Europe, Australia, and the United States of America.

The visit was fixed for a Sunday, the only day that Zelma was free, and, the fair having moved on, Michael motored fifty miles to fetch her. My stomach, which had been turning over all morning, settled when she arrived. She was bright and pretty, and if she didn't say much, she made a good impression, drying the tea things, and generally getting Mum on her side.

By the end of the visit I had begun to forget that she was supposed to be headless. I remember thinking that it might be better if Mother never saw her with her tubes and suitcase. It was enough to put anybody off — unless, of course he was a

susceptible young man with an eye for a tempting figure ... I watched her walking away with Michael, smart and swinging in her dark green slacks, and she looked altogether slimmer and taller than in that skimpy green leotard. And then I realized why. She had a good head on her shoulders.

Sooner or later it had to come. Michael wanted to marry her.

For the first time, Mother began to be dubious. By now she knew that Zelma was herself the internationally known act. She knew that it involved some kind of deception but the nature of the show itself had never been made clear to her. What worried her was the thought of Michael throwing up a career in the bank.

Michael was stubborn, though. He'd made up his mind about it. There were strings attached to the wedding – her father didn't want to give up a lucrative possession, and Zelma herself was adamant about staying with her own people. Michael seemed to have no choice in the matter, and he said he'd never been all that keen on the bank anyway.

So the plans went ahead. It would be a quiet wedding, in Zelma's caravan, with only the two families present, and there would be no announcement in the press. It wouldn't do to have reporters snooping around. After the wedding there would be a small private reception, and that would be that.

It was at this point that I felt sorry we didn't have a sister. A girl would have helped my mother through the bewildering business of preparing for a wedding to which she couldn't invite anyone. As it was, she had to go off on her own to buy a new outfit, without telling anyone why she wanted it; and what could she give for a wedding present? There was so little one needed in a caravan. It was such a different way of life...

It was a long train journey to where the fair was situated – far away from anyone who knew anything about us. We arrived in the early afternoon. The fair was not due to open till night, and all the sideshows had their tawdry delights muffled in canvas. A few children played in the dust, and dogs mooched

around the steps of the caravans.

'I thought they might have had the music playing,' said my mother wistfully.

But there was no music. The coloured figures on the roundabouts stood with hands uplifted, eyes fixed, the bronze horns and silver pipes mute. The petrified steeds were frozen in a wild gallop, the barley-sugar brass poles glinted. I think she had hoped for a riotous blast from the calliope, a splendid bray of steam organ exultation; but there was none.

Seeing us walking together, our lost and low-key bridal party, one of the men in overalls pointed out Madame Zelma's caravan, a little apart from the others. A curtain moved, the door opened, and we were drawn in.

It was very clean, very cosy. In the tiny kitchen part there were signs of some kind of buffet, sandwiches and cakes and bottles, and in the main room there were a lot of flowers in vases obviously borrowed from the bingo stall.

A local minister, rather ill at ease, was waiting to conduct the ceremony. He shook hands with us, placed us in position, and we all sat back to wait for the bride.

But her father nipped in first, confidential and serious, and said a few words to the minister. Straining, we listened to hear what he was saying.

"... press his hand when she means 'Yes' ...

He nipped out again, and came back, officially, a few minutes later. This time he had Zelma in tow. She walked slowly, her long train going creep, creep behind her, and for the first time I was reminded of that seductive, robot-like trudge across the stage – probably because of the pace at which she was walking. I had no idea it would take so long to walk the length of a caravan.

I had hoped that she might smile as she went past, but she didn't. She couldn't. Her head was enveloped in what looked like a sphere of rice paper, and the veil was gathered on top, in a sort of crown. Surely – oh God, surely she wasn't going to be married in character? One hand lay on her father's arm, the other, hidden under the enveloping veil, held, not a bou-

quet, but a small white attaché case. It angered me terribly, that case. Surely she didn't have to carry the charade that far!

It wasn't too conspicuous, though, and she camouflaged it well. I don't think my mother noticed it. She was too intent on watching Michael.

The wedding went off efficiently in spite of the minister being so nervous he could hardly get the words out. Mum dabbed her eyes and sniffed, while I looked sideways to see what Zelma's mother was doing. But Zelma didn't seem to have a mother present. Come to think of it, Michael had never mentioned her.

It was over at last. The minister got off his mark as quickly as possible – 'No, no thank you very much,' I heard him saying – and there was a general shaking of hands and a movement towards the buffet area. Then, as our glasses were charged to toast the happy couple, Michael took hold of his wife's veil and folded it back from her face.

'Come on, love,' he said. 'The joke's over. Get this rubbish off and give us a kiss.'

I can't remember now who removed the paper globe. All I know is that there was a solid, shocked silence in the caravan before all bedlam broke loose. My mother fainted; I nearly tripped over her trying to land a punch on the old man's jaw—well, who else could have been responsible for a trick like that? — Michael stood still, making horrible gasping noises, and Zelma began that awful seductive trudge towards him, looking like a predatory Winchester bottle. Michael backed away; and at that moment his girl friend, the girl who had visited our house, burst in and took command of things. In no time, she had me pushed out of the way, my mother laid flat and sprinkled with water, and the awful object with the tubes seated where she could come to no harm. It was left to Michael and the old man to have it out together.

I didn't see the end of the fracas. I had to take my mother home. The girl we had thought was Zelma came with us to the station, which I thought was an awful nerve, but I don't know what I'd have done without her, especially as, in spite of everything, my mother seemed to cling to her as the stable and sane person that Michael had loved.

But why didn't you marry him, dear?' she kept saying. 'I thought you were the one he wanted.'

We sat on a station seat, waiting for the train, and dust and papers blew along the track, as my mother twisted her wet hankie and tried to make some sense of it all.

The girl had the grace to look ashamed. Well, you see, that night ... he wanted to see Zelma, and when I came out he took it for granted that I was her. He thought Zelma was a fake. And of course, she isn't.'

'No, I see that now,' I said bitterly.

'My name's Coral,' she went on quickly, as if she wanted to get the confession over. 'Zelma's my sister.'

'But how-?'

'What chance has she ever had?' said Coral, addressing herself angrily to me. 'She's a freak, she's a monster, and she knows it. I know she knows it. My mother died having her, without ever seeing her. I think now it might have been better to have let her die too, but the doctors were fascinated, and they found ways to keep her alive.'

'It's horrible,' mumbled my mother.

I agreed. What kind of life was that for anybody? What could they do with her, except shut her up in an institution – unless, of course, she was born into a fairground?

'You can't blame Dad,' said Coral, reading my thoughts. 'Maybe you think he was exploiting her, but at least he kept her with him. And what she makes, he keeps for her, so that ...'

'But why did you pretend ...?' My mother broke down again.

Coral spoke softly, with her head down.

'I didn't mean to carry it that far. It was just to keep him from prying about Zelma. And then Dad thought ... well, he won't be here forever, and if he could get someone to be good to her ...?

'But that was a trick!' I shouted. 'It was you he wanted to marry.'

Her head went lower. 'I'm married already,' she said.

'And do you think that was fair to Michael?'

She looked up. 'No,' she said. 'But he was such a good sort of guy, I thought ...'

But you can't call that a marriage,' I argued. 'He'll get out of it without any trouble. It's not as if—'

'Zelma knows,' said her sister. 'She knows she's married to him.'

'How can she ...?'

'She just knows. I can tell.'

We could hear wires humming, and bells tinging along the track. Soon the train would be here. It was then that I realized that perhaps we shouldn't have rushed away so quickly. This was a problem that we would have to share as a family. But not yet. Not yet, I decided, as the train came curving along the line. Tomorrow, when Mother was feeling better. After all, the first sight of Zelma hadn't done me any good either.

You get used to her, you know. After all, she's a human being - maybe not like the rest of us, but born to perfectly normal parents.

She lives with us now. It was all arranged the day after the wedding. Michael came to talk things over with us. He looked about ten years older, not like my brother at all, but he told us that he'd made up his mind.

'Well, I've married her,' he said, 'and that's that. No, don't argue. Whatever I thought, she married me in good faith. But ... I'm not going to have her exposing herself in that booth any longer. I've made that clear to her father. I don't know if it's fair to ask you, Mum, but ... do you think we could stay on here for a bit? You'd have to look after her while I was at work ...'

And Mother, bless her, took a deep breath with a sob in it, and agreed. 'I don't know what I'm letting myself in for, son, but I'll try.'

It wasn't easy. Before she came, we had to take the doctor into our confidence, and he had to get the complete medical file on Zelma, so that he would know what was required. We had to — we still have to — take steps to keep the neighbours from knowing about her. It's a family matter, a situation that could easily be misunderstood. It means, too, that my mother's freedom is curtailed. She can't have people in, she can't, or won't, go out and leave Zelma on her own. She never complains; but sometimes I wonder, how long can things go on like this? Suppose, for example, I get a girl friend? Sooner or later she'd have to know.

Michael is kind to her; as Coral said, he's a good and decent guy; but he stays out longer, goes away more often. Sometimes I wonder if he has his eye on someone else — and who could blame him? Who would honestly say that there was any just cause or impediment to prevent him marrying again, without Zelma knowing?

Zelma, my sister-in-law, seems quite content with her life. Deaf, blind, she still has a certain awareness of what goes on around her. The doctor explained that she has some sort of sensory organ, a kind of vestigial brain somewhere behind her right collar bone. (I may have got this wrong, but biology isn't my subject, and Zelma's isn't an ordinary body anyway.) This organ gives her just enough perception to get by. She could go on for ever, I suppose, so long as her case is correctly packed, and her tubes don't get snarled up.

Mother knows what to do for her, and seems to have grown quite fond of her. When Michael is out she sits with her, and talks to her, and you'd think that Zelma understood.

She seems to know about me too. I stare at her sometimes, those plump legs now decorously skirted, that shapely figure, that voluptuous walk. Does she walk like that because she can't see, because she daren't jolt her tubes and chemicals, or because she knows that someone is watching her? I don't know. I'm very curious about her, very fascinated. Sometimes I can almost understand why Michael . . . and then, looking up, I see those tubes leading in and out of the headless stump, and I think, Oh Zelma, Zelma, my sister-in-law, if only you had a good head on your shoulders!

Rosemary Timperley The power cut

The murderer waited for darkness, not only to obscure his movements, but to fit in with his state of mind. Which was darkness utter. A darkness of the soul which is impervious to any kind of light – such as kindness, laughter. He could not remember when he had last been kind. Nor when he had last laughed. That sort of nonsense belonged to another world entirely.

So he set out into the moonless night.

He knew where she was and how he was going to do it. His determination was knife-strong. The knife, symbol of his purpose, was in his pocket. But it was no mere symbol. It was to be used.

He still had the front door key of her flat. All he had to do was let himself in, find her, stab her to death, and come home again. No one would be able to track him down. He would touch nothing, leave no prints, except on his knife, which he would withdraw from her when he had done it, and carry home again with him. Murder was very simple, really, as long as you knew exactly what you were doing and kept calm.

Keeping calm was no trouble now, he thought to himself as he walked purposefully through the dark. Before he had decided on murder, he had been distraught. Mad with indecision. But once a decision is made, it is wonderful. No more trouble. One just does what is necessary – straight away.

That was the key to the secret: it must be straight away. Before another mood could take over...

He had always been at the mercy of violent mood-swings. At last he was learning to 'go along with the swing'.

And what if, after you've done it, your mood swings back

the other way and you wish you hadn't? A silent voice in his head asked him.

If it does, it does, he answered equally silently. But it won't matter, will it? It'll be done by then.

Now, here was the block of flats. He put his hand in his pocket and felt the key. Clutching it, he walked up the three flights of stairs – too risky to take the lift – and reached her front door. He drew out the key, fitted it into the lock . . .

And then remembered other times when he'd done just that, so eagerly, full of love, longing to be with her - hold her - kiss her - and she - her coldness - her contempt ...

His hatred burned up like flaming ice.

He let himself in.

He stood and listened in the small hallway.

Not a sound. And all was dark. Was she out? Or in bed asleep? If she was out, he'd go away and come back another night. He knew the routine now, even after only one journey. But if she was in bed, asleep – how convenient...

To kill her as she slept would be ideal.

Even more ideal if she were having an evil dream in the moment of her killedness and that dream going on for ever and ever into all her afterlife eternity – as a punishment...

Hold on to yourself, he told himself. Never mind about imagining her diabolical afterlife. You've got to do it first. Don't go drifting off into happy daydreams of her hell...

He crept into her bedroom. Where they had once made love. Where he had been so very happy for such a very little time.

She was there. He saw her golden hair on the pillow. Only it looked pale grey-ghostly in the dark, with only the merest gleam of vellow in it.

And as he approached her with the knife, he loved her again, and couldn't do it. He paused, himself, although he couldn't see it himself, forming a monstrous silhouette against the uncurtained window. A massive shadow of doom. Yet full of love. He couldn't do it. He loved her still.

He put the knife back into his pocket. He drew back towards the door. Suddenly she woke. 'Who's there?' she said. Her voice was sharp with nightmare, as if she'd been having an evil dream which had suddenly turned into reality—like those nightmares from which one thinks one has awakened, but one has not—it's only another nightmare piling itself on top of the original one.

'Who's there?' she called again.

He saw her thin white arm stretch out, like a blanched shadow, towards the switch of the bed-lamp. And, in sheer self-defence – for she mustn't see him now he'd decided not to do it! – he grabbed his knife from his pocket again and struck hard at that arm.

There was a cry. He saw the arm drop of, as if it were the limb of a white-branched tree, and fall to the floor with a small, sickening thud. He saw wet redness flow from it; and from the shoulder of – of the creature now gasping and moaning in the bed. Did she still think she was dreaming? He hoped so. He fled. He had never run faster in his life. He ran through the dark streets, like a dark flood running through channels. He ran, ran, ran, black water flowing, until he was home.

Home. The attic room in the crowded lodging-house. All the sounds and smells ended up in his home. All the radio and TV programmes, all the odours of curry and onions, from the Indians in the basement and the Spaniards on the ground floor. His room was a world of smell and sound when he reached it. But it was still private and his. He locked the door.

He considered what he had done.

And he couldn't believe it.

Surely it had all been a dream,

'Someone is living my life. I wonder what he is like.' He remembered some writer saying that once. He considered it now. Yes, what was the man who was leading his life, like? How could any man set out to murder a lost mistress and chop off her arm instead? Not himself certainly. Who had been leading his life tonight? As far as he, himself, was concerned, it had not happened ...

But he cleaned the knife, meticulously, and stuffed it into

the mattress on his bed, and sewed up the tear with black cotton, rather the way he mended his socks. He always meant to buy some wool but ended up with black cotton, which 'did' for everything.

And then he lay on the knife-filled mattress with the blackcotton-patched tear, and unslept. Unsleeping is different from merely not sleeping. Unsleeping is – different.

You lie there, but you are still dashing about, doing things, He relived his actions of the night over and over again, each time more vividly. Far from fading with repetition, every sight, sound and sensation was heightened and intensified. By morning he had cut off her arm at least a dozen times, and on the final occasion it was so real that he saw it on the floor at his feet and bent down to touch it. He felt nothing, but his fingers turned red, slashed across by the red light of dawn. He turned on the radio. He was so shattered that even the steady voice of the newsreader sounded jerky and half-foreign - then one item of news came over loudly and perfectly articulated: 'A woman was found dead in her flat in the early hours of this morning. She had been attacked with a knife and her right arm had been severed. Police are looking for a man to help them with their inquiries. Today's weather will be cold but bright, the temperature rising to only-'

He switched off. He felt cold as ice but his mind was bright again. The confusion had dispersed. Everything was clearcut. He had set out to kill her. He had cut off her arm instead, so that she would not switch on the light. She must have died of fright and loss of blood. He had committed manslaughter, not murder. Trust him to end up in a halfway house, neither one thing nor the other, halfway in the middle of a moodswing. Police are looking for a man... Not for him, he thought. For one of her more recent lovers, more likely. All the same, he must be careful how he behaved today. Calm, quiet, normal. That was the ticket. It was quite a challenge. It was practical too. The need to behave exactly as usual would absorb his thoughts and keep the dark at bay. Until nightfall. But that was hours away. Get through the day first. Start – now.

He cleaned his dentures, washed, shaved, drank coffee and ate a couple of biscuits, then set off to work. He caught his usual bus, paid the usual fare, said the usual 'Good morning, dear,' to the bus conductress, arrived at the warehouse, clocked on, and went into his little glass box where he would sit all day checking on goods going in and out.

This glass box was his home from home. It was cosier than his attic and more private, in a way. The world bustled in a muffled way on the other side of the glass. His glass box gave him an illusion of security.

He kept exactly to his usual routine, concentrating hard on doing it instead of just letting it happen naturally. He carried the day rather than the day's carrying him. It was as if he were outside himself, and directing himself, like a man directing a car, or a robot — yes, a robot. One pressed this button or that and it did this or that. He managed very well. Until winter darkness began to fall, gradually, shadowily, beautifying the brash world outside the box, yet making it more sinister at the same time.

Now the working day was over. Time to clock off. He must take himself along to the clocking-off machine, as usual, and catch the same bus back. He must ... behave as usual ... Go on ... Hurry up! He was urging the robot to perform its routine actions – but it was not obeying. He was still sitting in the glass box. Why couldn't he move? What had happened? His mind told his body to get out of here – and his body stayed stuck there.

Well, the last thing he must do was attract attention to himself. Yet how could he avoid it? Soon someone would notice him and come to ask why he was staying late. Why couldn't he move? A stroke? No, he'd have felt something — an indigestion pain, they said, was what you felt before you had a stroke. A heart attack? Surely not. The robot was fit as a fiddle. It was just that it wouldn't respond to its instructions any more. He couldn't get through to it. There it was, stuck in the glass box ... Was it afraid to go out into the dark and back to its attic room? Was that it? Well, it didn't have to go

back to its attic straight away. It could go for a walk. He told it this and tried to persuade it to function.

It stayed motionless as an electrical machine in a power cut.

The glass of the box had turned black with the night outside. He was surrounded by black mirrors now. He wished he could turn off the light in the box. He told his body to do this, but it still wouldn't move. His mind and his will fluttered hectically round it like a moth round a lightbulb. Move, move, you must move...

But it sat there, reflected by the black mirrors. It had his face. Such a still-lipped, unblinking face. Then the face moved. The mouth dropped open. The false teeth slipped ludicrously into a kind of grin.

Then the manager of the warehouse came hurrying in, looking scared. He had seen 'it' through the glass. It looked like a corpse, sitting there.

But something had happened to him. He was drawing away from it. He was moving out into the dark streets. He began to run. Then he stopped. To run was not normal for him. He must behave normally. He slowed his pace, then looked back. Other people had gone into the brightly-lit box, and they were surrounding the robot, but not touching it, as if they were afraid to. Amazing that so many people could fit into that little space. One of them was using the telephone. His telephone. They thought it was him in there. They thought he was ill. Perhaps they even thought he was dead. It looked dead. Well, it was its own fault. It should have come with him when he'd told it to. It could stay there and stew in its own juice now, the disobedient machine-man. Let them do what they liked with it. They couldn't touch him. He was free. No one knew where he was. He felt safe.

He might as well go home. Yes, he'd only be a little late arriving at the lodging-house. That could be explained away by a hold-up on the buses. No, no need for that. He had walked instead of taking the bus. Good exercise for him.

How quickly he got home! His feet hardly seemed to touch

the pavement. He half-flew up the stairs, which usually made him puff and pant.

He went into the attic – and found the light on – and policemen in the room. They seemed to be cutting his bedding to bits, looking for something. And now they found it – the knife. One of them was holding it up triumphantly.

Luckily, they didn't see him in the doorway. He fled, swift as the night, a shadow without footsteps — and as he moved along he saw another shadow beside him. This other seemed to have a kind of magnetic power. It dragged and directed him, as he himself had directed the robot, until the thing had had its power cut. So this was how the robot had felt. No wonder it had rebelled and decided to stay still. How could he switch off this power that was pulling him? If the robot had been able to do that to him, then surely he, a man, could do it to this — this what? This shape — shadow — force — shape — shape—

It was taking on a distinct shape, like a giant body without substance. Huge and horrible it was. Not a giant, a giantess, packed with a power of black hate. And it had him in its grip now – was holding him in a huge hand – a massive left hand.

Like an insect in the palm of a hand, he gazed up at the woman-shaped shadow, big as a mountain.

And he saw why She was holding him in her left hand. She had no right arm.

'He's coming round,' said the doctor. It's some sort of fit or seizure. Did he have any emotional shock, do you know?'

No, the puzzled men in the glass box knew nothing. The chap who worked there had been secretive and solitary.

'The ambulance is here,' said one of them.

The patient, half-conscious now, was helped along by two ambulance men, but he was still aware of being in the grip of *Her* huge left hand. He could still see Her enormous outline, towering above the surrounding buildings.

'What is it?' he gasped. 'What is it?' Although he knew

what 'it' was. It was Her, after him, seeking revenge. Had he dreamed that he returned to his room and saw the police there? What was real and what was not? Would he stay for ever in this halfway stage, shadowed and held by the enormous one-armed woman, but at the same time having to cope with everyday things – like climbing into the ambulance – thanking the men for their help – thanking the doctor – saying that yes, he felt a bit better, and he didn't know why he had passed out.

At the hospital a form had to be filled in. No use pretending he was someone else as the warehouse people knew his name and address. So if the police had really been there and found the knife...

Next morning, before official visiting hour, he had a visitor. The man was in plain clothes but he was a policeman. He asked questions, but his voice seemed tinny and remote, and his figure small and harsh against the black mountain shaped like a one-armed woman. Still sitting in the palm of the huge hand, the patient, too weary and bewildered to think up lies, told the truth.

'I saw you find the knife,' he said, 'so I might as well confess. I cut off her arm to stop her from switching on the light,' and he gave a detailed account of what had happened. 'It's only manslaughter, isn't it?' he concluded.

The policeman made no comment, but took him along to the station, now he was fit enough to leave the hospital. The woman-shadow came too, and She kept squeezing him with Her great fingers, giving him pains in various parts of the body. He felt bruised, inside and out. He repeated his statement, then heard a policeman being instructed: "Go along to his room and see if there is a knife in the mattress. He just might be a nut, telling the tale for effect..."

So that part of it had been a dream. He had confessed for nothing! The policeman at the hospital had been questioning him merely because he'd known her – a routine check on all her boyfriends – and maybe his strange fainting-fit had made him look a bit guilty – but that was all ...

He felt the great hand quiver as the woman-mountain chuckled. She was in control. There was no doubt about that. They kept him in custody, pending further inquiries.

That night, in the cell at the police station, She loosened Her grip on him a little, stretched Her fingers so that they touched the cell walls. He paced up and down the palm of Her hand. Its lines were pathways: the Head line was firm and deep, almost a long ditch; the Heart line was feathery and shallow; the Life line was long, curving, but with a break in it, forming a pit. He stumbled into this pit and had to climb out again. Up hill and down dale he went, in the palm of Her hand. Symbolic really, he thought. How strange that a symbol should have become a reality. Or am I mad? No. Mad people have delusions. This is no delusion. It is here. A man cannot pace up and down on a delusion.

Then the fingers bent, enclosed him, stopped his wanderings. He sat still while She squeezed him, like a sponge. His blood pumped fiercely at the pressure. He began to gasp for breath.

A constable peered at him through a gap between Her fingers.

'What's up, mate?' he asked, not unkindly.

'She's squeezing me to death!'

Who is?'

'The woman whose fingers you're looking through. The giantess,'

The other shook his head and retreated, relocking the cell door, but his voice could be heard saying: 'If you ask me he should be in a bin, not the nick.'

'They found the knife,' said another voice. It's gone to the lab.'

The hand shook as a wave of laughter passed through Her. Somehow he had to cut off Her power. But he had tried to do that before, when She was alive, and look where it had landed him! He had cut off her life, but Her power enveloped him. But surely this Her, this spirit-giant, couldn't be her

really. She'd been a tiny, slender bit of a thing. A sort of blonde Twiggie. And yet a little thin thing can make a big shadow in certain lights. But the light of her life had gone out, so what light was making the shadow? And what was the power of the shadow-giant? It was not material. He could not feel it with his hands, only be aware of its pressure on him. She must be in some afterlife, safe and sound, and somehow, by using a kind of light unknown in this world, casting her shadow — so that it was Her shadow — full of enormous power which nothing human could resist because no one can fight off a shadow.

Once again he thought and thought: what could he do to cut off Her power?

All this absorbed him so completely that he wasn't much worried about being caught and put in a cell. The cell was nothing. Dead ordinary. Just a room. It was the hand that was the real cell.

If he could cut off the hand. She would have nothing to hold him in. Where was the wrist? Well, even if he could get to it, he couldn't cut it because he hadn't got his knife. But even if he had, a knife couldn't cut a shadow...

Every avenue he explored was a cul-de-sac.

In a blind alley, he slept at last.

Next day they came for him, said he was to be transferred to prison to await trial. They had found a spot of blood on the handle of the knife, blood lurking secretly, malevolently in a crack between handle and blade. It was her blood group, quite a rare one. He didn't care. A real-life prison meant nothing to him. One could even feel free in such a place. It was the hand that imprisoned him every second of the time, and he knew it was no use telling anyone, for what could they do?

As he left the police station, left hand handcuffed to an escort, Her hand gripped him fiercely and gave him a violent shove forward. He stumbled, tipped right over, fell sprawling before the wheels of a passing vehicle, and stretched out his right arm to break his fall; while his escort was trying to save

him by dragging him back. But the two of them ended up in the roadway. The escort was unhurt. Nor had the car struck himself in the body. But his arm. His right arm. Christ – his right arm...

The courtroom was very still as everyone stared at the man in the dock. His trial had been delayed for a long time because of his accident. Now he stood there, at their mercy, shrivelled and flattened. His left hand held the edge of the box. His right sleeve hung empty. He looked like a shabby little crow that had lost a wing, and been in a rainstorm too, and obviously had nothing to live for, so why should he be there? Going on being. These creatures that went on being, hopelessly, point-lessly — what were they for?

And yet: There but for the grace of God ...

Many men in the courtroom felt this, as they looked at the pathetic creature. What had he done after all? By all accounts, set out to knife his unfaithful girlfriend, and succeeded only in cutting off her arm – and then she had died of it. And now, by some ironical quirk of fate, he too had lost his right arm. It was an interesting story. Made you remember the More things in heaven and earth bit – someone said that to someone called 'Horatio'. Who was he, anyway? But it made you think ...

What they didn't know was that this accused man before them didn't care a pin what happened here. He felt fine, although he didn't look it. For, from the moment when his arm had been squashed to unholy smithereens by that car, and then had to be neatly cut off and the stump sewn up afterwards, he had been released from Her hand. He had been driving himself silly, trying to think of how to achieve a power cut – and a careless driver, a perfect stranger (only strangers are perfect!) had done it for him. Solved his problem. Set him free. The giantess had vanished.

Now he looked with secret amusement at all these busy, funny self-important little people fussing about the court, some in comic opera robes – Gilbert and Sullivan hadn't been joking! It was for real! Some in police uniform. Some dressed up like people in a crowd scene, saying 'Rhubarb, rhubarb'. But none of them smiled. 'Say "Cheese",' he addressed them suddenly.

'Order in Court!' called a voice of doom.

But a few half-cheeses had appeared on the upturned faces, and a nervous girl with red hair even gave a high-pitched giggle. He smiled at her, toothlessly. Something had happened to his dentures during his stay in hospital, and he hadn't bothered to inquire about them. They'd never fitted properly, and had been a nuisance to clean. Anyway, when you'd lost your right arm, you didn't bother about little things like teeth. How had he eaten? He hadn't, much. He'd slopped and sucked. He'd lost weight. It didn't matter. He was free. Nothing that anyone here did to him mattered, because it was all 'real' and understandable — which was more than could be said for Her. A man who has been released from a supernatural power has nothing to fear in this world. It's all the same.

He had pleaded 'Guilty' to the manslaughter of his exmistress. Now he said his piece, describing what had happened. As he finished he said suddenly, 'Do you realize that "manslaughter" is "man's laughter"?' and he roared with gummy laughter.

Many in the court took up the laughter, hysterically, until hammer blows from somewhere and that doomful voice: 'Silence!' quenched the unholy mirth.

In the ensuing silence, he said softly: 'An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth – an arm for an arm. If ever you do evil, try to see to it that the same evil is done to you, then the Giantess with the Huge Hand will loosen Her grip.'

Then his Defence barrister got up and began to talk, and later he was taken back to the cells under the court, to await the verdict.

And suddenly everything in that underground world turned inky black. 'Christ,' said one of his gaolers, 'a bloody power cut.'

And, in the utter dark, he felt ... Her hand.

She squeezed and squeezed and squeezed. She filled him with pain, as if he were the victim of some instrument of torture of bygone days. He felt himself being crushed, flattened, extinguished by Her black power. So his theories about Her had been wrong after all. 'An arm for an arm' had not been enough for Her. She'd been biding Her time, letting him go through the nastiness of the trial before She came in for the kill. He knew, with certainty, that this was the kill. It was 'A life for a life'.

Groaning, his limbs contorted with pain, he fell in a twisted muddle of flesh, bone and muscle to the cell floor.

At the same moment, the lights came on again. The brief power cut was over. Police bent over the body of the man whose fate had now been decided before the court had decided it.

And what an extraordinary position he was lying in, this killed killer. Twisted over on to his side, he looked at a glance like a big, deformed right hand: his head a stubby thumb; his left arm the first finger; the empty sleeve the thin, flat second finger; the scraggy legs the fourth and fifth fingers; his emaciated bottom the 'wrist' from which the 'fingers' sprang.

'What was that he said about the Huge Hand?' muttered one of the court officials,

'He was barmy,' someone else said briskly. 'Come on, boys. Let's get him out of here.'

They lifted him up. He remained in this twisted, distorted shape. And the shadow which he cast on the floor, the shadow of a big huge hand, remained for several seconds after he had been carried away.

Diana Forster

Give a dog a bone

He had been turning the idea over in his mind for years. At first it had been merely a fleeting wish, then a growing desire, and finally a driving obsession — how to commit a perfect crime and, incidentally, to be rid of this complaining, whining woman who was his wife. The problem did not seem to be in the actual killing, but in the much more involved process of getting rid of the body. This had been the undoing of most murders. The act itself, over in an instant, is rarely discovered, but it is the many pitfalls and traces left afterwards which lead to discovery; and most of these, naturally, centre round the corpse.

To him, the secret of the perfect crime lay in somehow disposing of the body leaving the minimum traces. He well knew how many methods had been tried. He read histories of past murders voraciously, noting where they had slipped up and why they had been discovered. The problem of destroying the body had been tackled in various ways. Burial had been the most popular - presumably because of the speed with which the crime was covered - but it was also the most inefficient. For many years the remains were there, waiting to be found, identifiable and providing numerous clues leading to the murderer. Then there are many physical difficulties with burial, the sheer grind of manoeuvring nine to ten stones of dead weight to a likely spot, digging a big enough hole in suitable (or unsuitable) soil and covering it effectively. No wonder so many graves are shallow and so easily discovered. Then there is the acid bath; but how to get sufficient quantities of suitably concentrated acid without arousing suspicion, and what is really left at the end still to be destroyed?

The same applies to incineration; bones don't burn. Of course, bodies are also plastered up in walls or placed under floor-boards, but what if the house is sold, and what of the smell?

It took him many years to work out his plan, but finally his ideas crystallized, his wife became more and more unbearable, and his resolution hardened. His plan seemed to him almost foolproof. How can one get rid of bones, or at least a high percentage of them? The answer – dogs. Dogs eat bones and big dogs eat big bones. In this way they are transformed forever into completely unidentifiable, totally different matter. Not only that, but dogs enjoy flesh, intestines and brains too; he wondered that no one had thought of it before, it was absolutely perfect. The only worry was whether dogs like human flesh, but as they eat practically any other kind he felt that this would not really be a problem, though he was obviously unable to experiment.

He set about things methodically and took his time. A year more or less would not make much difference as long as he achieved a successful outcome. First he instilled into his wife the idea of moving into the country. She was not averse to the idea as she was constantly complaining about their present suburban house, the local shops and the neighbours; and he, being an imaginative man, as we have seen, gradually persuaded her into the idea of a country house with roses, farm produce and home-grown vegetables. During their house-hunting he left the choice largely to her for the sake of peace—only insisting that the house should be at least half a mile away from any other habitation and that there should be a suitable outbuilding for the guard dogs which he said were necessary in such a situation.

They moved after six months to what had been a rather large farm cottage situated almost half a mile from the main farm buildings and three miles from the nearest village. It was an ideal spot with roses in the front garden and vegetables at the back, and a few rather neglected sheds beyond that. When they moved he presented his wife with a large freezer 'to go with the vegetables', he explained. His wife seemed

almost happy for the first time in years and had many plans for decorating and furnishing the place. Predictably, within a few days, however, her shrill voice was raised again in complaint about the distance it was to the shops, the mud, the cockroaches and the damp. He, however, was concentrating on the sheds, repairing them and building a secure run around them, strong enough to house a tiger.

When the sheds were completed to his satisfaction, he looked around for the dogs. Again, he had made a thorough study of the various breeds and the attributes of each of them. Finally he had decided upon Dobermann Pinschers. This breed is noted for its intelligence, strength and fearlessness, an ideal guard dog, but with a reputation for viciousness which would suit his purpose well. He looked for two older, fully grown dogs, preferably already trained for guard duties. Finally, after much searching, he obtained two half-trained Dobermanns from an army camp some miles away, the handlers finding them too highly strung and nervous for their purposes. Highly satisfied, he brought them home and had no difficulty in persuading his wife not to go near them for fear of being attacked. He then embarked on the final phase of the plan, the sooner the better, he felt, now the stage was set.

For some days he kept the dogs short of food and what little he gave them varied greatly – acclimatizing them, through hunger, to eat practically anything – offal, sheep's brains, tripe, fat, and scraps of any kind. He deliberately did not exercise them, for dogs, especially if of a highly nervous disposition, will eventually turn vicious if kept confined. After a few days he was thankful that, half trained as they were they responded well to the commands 'Down' and 'Stay'.

After two weeks he began the final countdown as he thought of it, and reduced their rations to a starvation level and in two days the dogs were ravenous, evil-tempered and ready to attack and devour anything thrown to them. Now was the time.

In the house his wife was in the middle of one of her endless tirades, coincidentally about the dogs this time, when he came up behind her, slipped a nylon stocking around her neck, tied it quickly, thrusting in a short stick and twisting it round in the manner of a tourniquet. She was cut off in midsentence and he couldn't help a small glow of satisfaction at the appropriateness of her death. It was only a matter of moments before he had stripped off her clothes and curled her limp body into the deep-freeze before rigor mortis had set in. A wonderful feeling of relief came over him and there was peace in the house; he felt relaxed and confident.

As evening drew in several hours later a different sort of whining penetrated the house; the insistent, starved veloing of the dogs. They would have to miss their supper entirely tonight, he had other work to do. Towards midnight he brought out the now frozen body and, with an axe especially honed to razor sharpness, he chopped it into four quarters and cut off the head. The head and three of the quarters he returned to the freezer but kept the fourth quarter, the left leg, and again dissected it into smaller portions. Most of these were returned to the freezer but he kept two thigh pieces, the most appetizing-looking, he thought, to thaw out till morning. The whole process had not worried him unduly, on the contrary he had taken some pleasure in attacking the remains of the person who, like a dripping tap, had, with her voice, worn away over the years any human feeling he had had for her. However, that night he could not sleep; the constant noise of the famished dogs got on his nerves and he worried about their reactions the next morning. Suppose, just suppose they refused to eat, his whole scheme would collapse and he would be thrown back to conventional methods of disposal which he had rejected so many times in his mind.

Dawn broke, he dressed and went downstairs to collect the portions of thigh. The two portions lying on a large serving dish, did not look unlike beef, he thought, and he prayed that the dogs would think so too. He walked down the garden and, approaching the run, was greeted by a frantic barking and growling as the dogs leaped at the fence, seeing food in his hands. 'Down,' he commanded and reluctantly they crouched.

slavering and whining. He unlocked the gate and, with his heart in his mouth, he threw the 'meat' into the run.

He need not have worried. The dogs leapt to their portions and without a pause began tearing it apart, gulping and swallowing it in huge chunks. He watched fascinated and exultant - it had worked! They would make short work of that and probably, in their hungry state, would eat a good deal of the big thigh bone as well. He must now be careful to continue to take his time, and not feed them too much at once he wanted nothing left. He calculated that it should take approximately a month for them to consume the entire body. and if he kept them slightly hungry by giving them small portions, a great proportion of the bone would be eaten as well. The splinters and odd pieces would be easy to get rid of. It would be just a matter of burying the larger pieces here and there - miles apart, of course, or throwing them in a river, and merely placing the smaller fragments in a paper bag and putting them in various public litter bins. Most of them would be quite indistinguishable from a beef bone to the average eve if anyone chanced to come across one, but as long as the pieces were well chewed, small and scattered far and wide it was highly unlikely they would ever be detected, and obviously they could never be put together to form anything remotely resembling a skeleton.

The dogs had soon finished the flesh and were hard at work cracking and gnawing on the bones as he walked back to the house well pleased and with a sense of complete freedom. After the dogs had eaten the body and he had disposed of the last fragments of bone he would sell the house and the dogs, and travel far from the place to begin an entirely new life. There would be nothing for anyone to find, no remains to worry about.

Over the next month all went according to plan. The dogs ate ravenously and all that was left were small bone portions, some small enough to carry easily in his pocket, to slip into a dustbin here and a litter-bin there. The larger shafts of the long bones or the central portions of the pelvic bones he took away into the country and either flung them into a reservoir or river where they quickly sank, or buried them with comparative ease in holes quickly dug and easily disguised.

At last only the head remained. This had caused him some misgivings, being the most identifiable part of the corpse. Hehad come to the conclusion that he must chop it into small pieces and make sure the dogs were especially hungry so they would eat the maximum. He started by shaving off the hair and burning it, then he split the skull down lengthwise, and then into another eight pieces. He blessed the fact that his wife had conveniently worn dentures so there would not even be any human teeth waiting to be identified. He was lucky, the dogs never baulked at the head, but attacked it with all the enthusiasm they had shown for the rest of the body, even managing to consume more of the bone as there was less flesh to satisfy them.

It was finished. On a fine Tuesday morning he set off on his last journey to hide the few pieces of jawbone and skull remaining. He had a most pleasant walk through the woods and fields and found some very peaceful, secluded places in which to leave his scraps. Finally, methodical as always, he wended his way slowly through the village to stop at the butcher's shop to purchase, among other things, some dog meat for the next day. He would not feed them that evening, he decided, to make sure that all remaining scraps were completely finished.

He slept well that night, his plan accomplished more successfully than he had dared to think was possible. He dreamt of his future life of freedom, and slept with the contentment of a man who has achieved his ambition. The next morning he woke to the sound of hungry whines coming from the bottom of the garden so after breakfast he took the meat from the butcher down to feed the dogs. They were very hungry and barked and leapt when they saw him coming. He unlocked the gate and flung in the meat and they made their usual dash to grab it. Then they stopped; after one mouthful they dropped the meat and left it lying in the middle

of the run. Looking in from the outside he could not understand it, and they, regarding him reproachfully, whined, but would not touch it. In the evening, when he went down again, the meat was still there and the dogs were looking sullen and evil. He shrugged and supposed there might be something wrong with it, possibly it was going 'off'. That night the air was filled with the whining and yelping of the hungry beasts which kept him restlessly awake and extremely irritable. The following day, Thursday, he went down to the village again to buy half a dozen tins of assorted dog food, and having arrived home he piled three of them onto a large dish and took it down the garden.

The dogs saw him coming; they rushed to the fence and hurled themselves against it, saliva dripping from their mouths as they barked furiously. Unlocking the gate he entered to put the dish down in the middle of the run and the dogs rushed towards it - one sniff, and again they turned away, but not completely this time - one dog turned back and began to advance slowly towards him, its hackles rising and growling deep in its throat. He did not like the look of it, 'Down,' he commanded, but, to his consternation, the dog took no notice and continued to advance. He turned towards the gate, only to find, with a surge of fear, that the other dog was now crouched between him and the only way out. As he moved towards the gate, the second dog snarled and laid back his ears. Panic began to take hold of him, 'Down, you brutes,' he velled, but in that instant he realized that they no longer regarded him as their master, they now scented their habitual food and would stop at nothing to get it. He began to rush blindly to get out before they attacked, but it was too late: trained to jump for the throat, the dog in his path leaped, and sank his teeth into that most vulnerable spot. The second seized his ankle, bringing him down with a crash, then both dogs were on top of him, tearing and ripping and gulping his flesh

Philip Dell Creed The sinister nursemaid

Rajputana is probably one of the most colourful states in India. The land of the Rajputs: cities of pink buildings that glow in the sun; Maharajas, beggars, rubies and dust – searing hot in the summer but cool and fresh in the winter months.

It was wintertime when Jonathan Jenkins — ex-Major His Majesty's Royal Artillery, DSO — went to visit an old friend in Jodhpur. The village where his Indian friend Hira Lal lived is outside the city of Jodhpur; a place so small and insignificant that it is not marked on any map. They call it Gungpur.

Hira Lal was in his mid-thirties; just on six feet of light coppery muscle that veritably rippled as he walked with his peculiar silent glide. His face was quite handsome but its perfection was marred by two large teeth which protruded like fangs from the centre of his mouth and hung down over his lower lip. It gave the impression he was perpetually on the verge of smiling.

Hira Lal was dutifully waiting when Jonathan Jenkins arrived; tired, dusty and a little warm after the journey from Delhi. Jenkins had been a military man on service in India and had stayed on afterwards as many such men did. Now, just turned fifty, he still retained his military bearing, which compensated for his lack of height; with close-cropped hair and a stiff waxed moustache – both iron grey. But despite his appearance he was not a proud man, indeed a very simple one and ever interested in the folklore and customs of Mother India. He was never averse to squat cross-legged on a grass mat with Indians, smoke a hookah pipe or to eat like them, with his fingers.

Major Jenkins particularly liked Gungpur. The sun was

warm but a cool breeze made it pleasant and he viewed with delight the cluster of thatched houses set out clean and orderly on the hard-baked red earth. The bright green of the tall sugar-canes and the yellow grasses and fluffy-headed bamboos that surrounded the village on three sides, with the jungle just beginning there, made him feel very peaceful and contented.

There was nothing in that tranquil scene to hint at what lay ahead.

He spent the night at the home of Hira Lal, as he had done on previous occasions, and they had a grand feast of the hottest curry Jenkins had ever tasted. It was just after they had finished eating that the thing began.

Rama, the dainty wife of Hira Lal, excused herself and went into the dim-lit corner of the hut and Jenkins noticed how quiet they both were as she bent about some seemingly mysterious task. Jenkins supposed it was a religious rite she was performing; one from their complicated Hindu religion about which Jenkins still understood very little. But when he saw it was a small earthernware saucer of milk she was preparing, he did begin to wonder. The baby had been fed and was sleeping in another corner. For whom then was this tiny saucer of milk?

There was dead silence whilst Rama carried the saucer across the hut and placed it near a fairly large hole in the corner. Then they began to chant some prayers. Hira Lal, seeing the look of astonishment on Jenkins' face said softly:

'It's for Rakheval.' As if that explained everything.

'Who the devil is that?' Jenkins asked.

'Rakheval is the cobra, Major!'

Jenkins must have jumped visibly because Hira Lal put a firm hand on his shoulder.

'Don't be alarmed,' he said. 'The cobra hurts no one who is his friend but ...'

Jenkins did not like the 'but' or the unfinished sentence and he did not like snakes – especially cobras. In fact he had a horror of them. But worst of all he was wondering how one shows one is a friend of a cobra. But Hira Lal sensed the unasked question because he said immediately:

'Major, we believe the cobra guards us from evils and he only desires one thing in return.'

'What's that?' Jenkins whispered, watching the hole through which he expected Death to glide at any moment.

'Milk!' his Indian friend answered simply. 'We give him milk every day and he knows we are his friends. It is an age-old custom in the villages of Raiputana.'

But what about the child?' Jenkins cried as he realized suddenly that she always slept inside the hut while the adults slept outside under the old banyan tree.

Oh! laughed Hira Lal. 'That's the whole idea. We always leave the child in the care of Rakheval the Cobra. He is like a nursemaid to her, as you would use a dog in England. And tonight we are giving him extra milk because you and I are going hunting and my wife is going to the city and won't be back before nightfall. Rakheval will guard the child until we return.'

It was an incredible statement but spoken with such sincerity that Jenkins protested no further. One can never argue against old traditions of India. But that night he did not sleep. He lay there on his *charpoy* staring towards the hut in the dim light of the stars, wondering when the screams would come.

The sudden cry of a wild peacock startled him out of a slumber that could only have been a bare five minutes, and he was greatly relieved to see the sky beyond the banyan tree was lightening a little. The scene before him was one of absolute peace. It appeared his immediate fears of the cobra's intentions were unwarranted. But later that day, when they were ready to leave, he could not suppress the cold fear that dug at the pit of his stomach — leaving a child at the mercy of a deadly cobra. He even tried to put off the shikar, but Hira Lal would not hear of it.

The shikar was not really a success and when they returned to the village, Jenkins had quite forgotten his fears of Rakheval

the Cobra. He was not in any case prepared for the shock which awaited them. Nor was Hira Lal.

Hira Lal entered the hut first to light the kerosene lamp and Jenkins followed him but stopped immediately on the threshold. He felt an overwhelming desire to turn and run because a strange pricking sensation was running down his spine and the hairs at the back of his neck were literally bristling on end – a sixth sense warning him that something was there in the room which should not have been.

Hira Lal whispered almost inaudibly. 'Don't move!' Jenkins stayed quite still and even held his breath and at the same moment heard a slight, dry rustling and hissing that made him clench his hands so tightly that the nails cut into his flesh. He knew it was the cobra that he had, until then, forgotten.

They stood staring into the room as black as pitch, knowing that something in there was very wrong and that an enormous and deadly cobra was watching them framed in the blue night-glow of the doorway. Then Hira Lal started to hum softly. It was a strange, weird tune and the effect was most uncanny as the rustling stopped almost immediately but the hissing continued as Hira Lal slowly increased the volume of his humming.

Then he moved away from Jenkins and, still humming, slowly edged into the dark void of the hut. The hissing sounded less violent now but Jenkins was sweating profusely although he was so cold he was shivering.

After a few scraping and rattling sounds, a match spluttered feebly and then the lamp burst into light. Jenkins really did not know what he expected to see but he was certainly not prepared for the shock which followed.

On the hard earth floor, amidst a litter of fallen brass cooking utensils, lay sprawled the figure of a man who, from his contorted attitude and bulging, bloodshot, fear-staring eyes, was very obviously dead. The brown skin of the man was swollen and puffy and turning a blue-black colour in mottled blotches. His open mouth was contorted into what must have

been his last agonized scream that still seemed to linger silently around the dim corners of the hut. And swaying majestically over the body of the stranger was the sinister, shadowy form of Rakheval the Cobra. Its brown and yellow speckled scales glistened as it moved; its tiny forked tongue darted fiercely from the small vicious head and its unblinking, bead-like eyes seemed to glow like tiny hot coals in the lamplight – smouldering with anger. Its large hood was fully extended and a distinctive octave mark showed clearly against the brown-yellow scales. It was close on twenty feet long, a King Cobra – one of the deadliest snakes in existence. Within a couple of minutes a man would die a most agonizing death from its bite.

The only sound in the room was the chattering of Major Jenkins' teeth, who, in all his war years as a soldier had never felt such fear and horror.

'Who is this man? What's he doing here?' stuttered Hira Lal, himself badly shaken.

Jenkins could not tell him and it was not until they looked for the baby and found its cot empty and then discovered that the box of valuables Hira Lal always hid under the floor had been dug up, that the whole incident became clear. Then Hira Lal found the note in the child's cot. It was obvious now that dacoits had broken into his home and had kidnapped the child and were holding it for ransom — and had also stolen their valuables for good measure.

It was not unusual in these parts, where a large number of dacoits still roam, to kidnap children and so extort money from desperate parents. But what was most unusual was the defence that Rakheval the Cobra had put up by stinging to death one of the intruders. His accomplices had escaped the deadly fangs of the snake but without doubt the cobra knew who the owners of the hut were, who were its friends and the child it knew was to be protected – just as Hira Lal had said. To Major Jenkins it was the most incredible incident he had ever encountered.

The note left by the dacoits stated that the ransom must be

taken to a spot in the jungle some miles north of the village. But the amount was more than Hira Lal could possibly find — all his wealth lay in the gold ornaments the dacoits had already stolen. He had to face a terrible problem for which Jenkins could see no solution other than to offer monetary help but which, anyway, could only be arranged with a delay which might prove fatal to the child.

But with a suddenness that was as startling as it was clever, Hira Lal had an idea. It was fantastic, but in view of what had already happened, Major Jenkins was ready to believe in anything.

Hira Lal had to keep the appointment alone and without weapons. He was permitted to carry only a sack containing the money. Jenkins watched his friend set out bravely towards the jungle and on his shoulder, hanging from a stick, was a cloth sack containing none other than Rakheval the Cobra; together with some pieces of the dead dacoit's clothing.

After he had entered the jungle a little way he came to a small clearing which seemed to be the one mentioned in the note. Here, as instructed, he imitated the call of the Brain-Fever bird. The voice of a man shouted back from the thick forest ordering Hira Lal to put his hands over his head and walk a furlong into a thicket of tall bamboos. Hira Lal judged from the voice the direction where the dacoit was hidden; took the cobra from the sack, made it scent the dacoit's clothing and then released it.

Immediately the cobra shot through the bright grasses and Hira Lal moved slowly forward as he had been told. But before he had covered the prescribed furlong, the silent jungle was rent with terrible shrieks. The sounds startled the wild parrots nesting in the trees and they at once began screaming and shrieking like the human voices below them. The screams and shrieks echoed and re-echoed through the tall, silent trees as if all the invisible denizens of Hell had come to shatter the quiet peace of the jungle glade. Then the parrots took fright and flew off in a multi-coloured cloud.

Hira Lal ran swiftly to the spot from which the shrieks

came and he was not too surprised to find there the figure of an armed man writhing in his death-throes and another moaning beside him. But a third man had had sufficient time to flee, and Hira Lal caught only the merest glimpse of him as he crashed terror-stricken through the tall green bamboos.

The child was crying but unhurt and swaying angrily but proudly over this grotesque trio was Rakheval the Cobra.

Hira Lal picked up the child and wept with joy. His plan, he knew, had been a success. Then he carefully picked up his cobra, stroked its head and placed it in the sack and set off for home smiling contentedly.

Major Jenkins was stunned. The bandits had paid the heavy price of three dead men for their theft of the gold ornaments and the kidnapping of the child. Jenkins felt sure that no dacoit would ever go near the home of Hira Lal again. But he was wrong.

Jonathan Jenkins took leave of his hosts for a few days to visit Jodhpur and buy some supplies for another shikar. Hira Lal was jubilant over his victory and promised Jenkins a shikar he would never forget. Major Jenkins, too, felt happy. He felt he no longer had any fears about Rakheval and, in fact, changed his opinion about snakes.

He spent as little time as possible in Jodhpur and then drove back cheerfully to Gungpur. As Hira Lal knew when he would return, Jenkins felt some surprise and disappointment that his friend was not there to greet him and felt very uneasy when he saw a group of Indians standing silently around and avoiding his gaze. As he went towards the hut of Hira Lal they watched him, but when he turned they looked away. A smaller group stood, heads bowed, in front of the hut and Jenkins had to part them to pass through. Something, he knew, was wrong. Very wrong.

One of the Indians, a scrawny, spindle-legged old man in a soiled *dhoti*, tried to stop him at the doorway.

'No, Major Sahib! You no enter.'

But Major Jenkins ignored him and brushed his arm aside.

Inside there was a deathly silence. It was dim and it took a few moments for him to accustom his eyes to it after the blinding brightness outside. The hut was once again in disorder. Everything had been thrown about as if a fight had taken place. And in the shadowy light amidst a profusion of broken furniture and littered pots he saw a ghastly sight.

Hardly recognizable now — distorted, bloated and black and blue, lay what had once been the handsome body of his friend Hira Lal. His eyes were bulging out of a horribly swollen blue-black face that was hardly recognizable except for two fang-like teeth which protruded from his gaping mouth in a ghastly death-leer. Near him the once dainty figure of his wife Rama now resembled a bizarre statuette that had been moulded by a perverse artisan. A twisted, bloated, deformed yet still strangely human figure.

And then, worst of all because of its frailty and innocence, what looked like a blue-black balloon which had been badly made to resemble a child; a balloon for a Black Humour party. So swollen and bloated that it almost appeared to float above the chaos Death had wrought in the home of Hira Lal.

Major Jenkins stood staring, horrified at the ghastly scene. He knew almost at once that it was the diabolical vengeance of the remaining dacoit.

As often happens, a brilliant and original idea like Hira Lal's may backfire. It is something people seldom think about that when they release an idea that the other side can at once understand, they may then use it themselves – even with some extra embellishments of their own. Just such a backfire – Jenkins realized – had indeed happened with tragic results which had not occurred to him as he had neared the silent doorway of Hira Lal's home.

Then, suddenly, as the booming of the blood in his ears started to subside, he heard another sound. It was a retching, gulping, slithering, disgusting sound and as he turned towards its direction he stood paralysed with fear at what he saw in the dim-lit corner of the but.

In front of the hole where Rakheval had lived, loomed a

gigantic cobra, wreathing and twisting as it tried desperately, greedily, furiously to swallow another snake almost its own size. Its mouth was extended beyond its normal limits; its tiny bead-like eyes glowering with fury and harred; its sinewy, brown and yellow scaled body convulsing and retracting as, inch by inch, it absorbed rather than swallowed the other snake whose head had already disappeared down its diabolical gullet.

Despite the horror of the sight he was witnessing, Jenkins felt a slight elation that the faithful, albeit sinister 'nursemaid' had come to the rescue of its master, although unfortunately too late, and was now devouring the deadly murderer who had been caught in the act. Rakheval, he thought, had probably been sleeping when the dacoit had released its own cobra from a sack to do its deadly work, silently and swiftly. But now it was paying the price and although already half swallowed was not yet dead as the violent threshing of its rail showed.

Mesmerized, sweating and cold with fear, Jenkins just crouched in the corner and watched the last of the intruder disappear down the vile gullet of the cobra. There was a revolting guttural sound from the yawning cavern of the snake's throat, then it gave a sudden last sinewy squirm and Jenkins watched fascinated as the huge bulge inside the cobra's stomach started to noticeably diminish as its strong stomach acids dissolved the enemy. Then it was still.

But not for long. It suddenly sensed someone was in the room and its hood started to extend and its glowering eyes turned and then riveted on Jenkins, crouching, watching, paralysed with fear.

Jenkins remembered the incantations of Hira Lal and Rama, and he remembered, too, the milk. But as the ghastly thing started slithering nearer and nearer he found with numbing horror that no sound came from his contracted throat, nor could his dimming eyes see any milk near at hand.

He realized with growing hopelessness that the snake did

as he had supposed but the cobra of the dacoit — and it was between him and the door. He had walked into a deadly trap. How many times, he recalled in a vivid flash of memory, had he been in seemingly inextricable military situations; yet he had always come through. But then the enemy he knew — this one he did not.

The cobra stopped, lifted itself until it seemed to tower up like a prehistoric monster, and then with a dry rustling and slithering sound it began to move slowly and relentlessly across the hard earth floor.

It slithered straight towards Jenkins who had slumped onto the floor and then reared and towered over him staring down its nose at him with its cold, unblinking, hypnotic, strangely glowing eyes like pieces of burning yellow sulphur. In the flickering, shadowy silence of the funereal hut the thing swayed there like something inordinately evil from the very depths of an atavistic primeval life. Then it opened its jaws wide and Jenkins saw the two long, white, glistening and deadly fangs; the pink mouth, the green slime-coated tongue – and then the revolting thing belched. As he smelt the disgusting stink of the thing's fetid breath, he fainted.

The cobra hesitated for a second, poised above the inert body, and then with a swift, vicious lunge it sank its venomous fangs deep into the unconscious neck of Jonathan Jenkins, ex-Major His Majesty's Royal Artillery, DSO.

Guy Delaway

The boy who was afraid to die

The heat was so intense that it pressed a blanket of silence down over the entire Jammu Valley. The only sound was the monotonous coo-cooing of the wild wood pigeons nesting high in the shade of the great Chinar tree, and the occasional sharp cry of a Hoopee bird.

The boy lay on his stomach under the tree with his chin resting on his crooked arm. He peered between a cleft in the sun-baked rock and, screwing his eyes against the fierce glare, he scanned with the precision of a hawk the valley that stretched below. The river was now only a thin line of molten brown and the sides of the valley were scorched and dry and there was no sign of vegetation. It was high summer and the Jammu Valley, pressed between high ground, felt none of the fresh winds that cooled the Vale of Kashmir. It was like an oven reflecting the heat back from the mountains on either side

Kishor was a boy of extraordinary beauty. He was fairer of skin than most of the people in the country, but his hair, thick and curly, was black almost to the point of blueness. His eyes, wide and clear, were grey and fringed with lashes so incredibly long that they cast a fine dark shadow across the glow of his cheek. He was a boy of quiet disposition and would sit for hours dreaming; he had few friends and spent most of his time alone. He was well liked in the village because he was amiable and polite and yet was set apart from all the others because of his beauty. They called him 'Beloved of the Gods', and treated him with respect.

Whatever had been Kishor's particular dream this late summer, it was shattered and his world thrown into confusion by the sudden invasion of the Pathan tribesmen from the far frontier of West Pakistan. Without warning the Moslems had swept into Kashmir and the troops of the Maharajah, never a formidable fighting force, were powerless against these tall, hawk-eyed, handsome men who were born fighters. Delhi had promised aid and asked the Kashmiri Hindus to hold out as long as possible — even to fight in small, scattered guerrilla groups.

Kishor had not wanted any part in the fighting, but his family and neighbours knew his fame for keen eyesight and he was given the task of watching from behind the hot rocks for any sign of movement in the valley below. There was now only a small band left and they had been warned the Pathans would come down the valley along the Jammu river road.

The valley danced and shimmered in the sun as if the great rocks had turned to water and many times Kishor thought he saw great vehicles and ships and palaces swaying there – but they were only heat mirages. Then suddenly Kishor gasped and gripped the hot rock tightly. Behind an outcrop of rocks far to the other side of the river, Kishor saw a thin spiral of dust whirling like a dervish. It danced and twisted and grew larger and larger and then the armoured cars burst suddenly into view. So far away they looked like harmless toys but Kishor knew the Pathans had come.

They were still far enough away yet and they had to cross the bridge over the river and even then the long snaking road would delay them sufficiently.

Kishor jumped up and scrambled down from the pile of rocks. The sudden noise startled the wild wood pigeons and the Hoopee bird and they fled from the shade of the Chinar tree and flew towards the village. The boy ran quickly across the hot dusty ground after them, towards the group of people who squatted under the shade of a tree. He stopped before them panting. Sticky beads of sweat ran down his face and his black hair hung in damp curls across his forehead. Yet it did nothing to mar his impeccable beauty.

'They come,' he said.

The group of people sighed, their eyes fixed on the boy. They come,' they echoed simply, 'They come at last.'

They looked towards their chief, waiting for him to speak. The boy sat down with them and mopped the sweat from his brow. For a long time the group of villagers had expected the Pathans and now the boy had actually seen the big armoured cars coming swiftly in a great cloud of dust. They were still far enough away that the villagers could make a run for it; or they could stay and fight at least for a little and so delay them. It was for the chief to decide.

Most of them wanted to stay simply because it was their home but the boy was too young for that and he wanted to run; to fly even, like the Hoopee bird ... away ... away ... away!

Kishor looked intently at their chief. The old man sat with bent head and troubled brow.

'Well?' the boy asked impatiently, glad to be gone. 'What we do?'

'Nothing,' growled the old chief. 'We are finished. Delhi hasn't sent a single soldier yet, you see, and these Pathan are well armed. We have hardly any ammunition; only old rifles. We could perhaps delay them a little but they are cruel and would punish us terribly. We could run but where? They travel fast in those things, you see. We had better stay and surrender – and pray that they will have mercy.'

The others nodded. Kishor hung his head and said nothing. He did not want the others to know he was afraid.

Under the rocks just below them, the first of the armoured cars pulled up and the tall, fierce, hawk-eyed Pathans jumped out, their rifles held threateningly in their sweaty hands. There were twelve of them and an officer. They were all tall and swarthy, yet they were handsome. The officer had large dark eyes and a fine long nose and his mouth was full and redlipped. He swiftly scanned the hot dusty plain and the sunscorched rocks. Overhead the virgin sky was an intense burning blue in which a few wheeling kittyhawks were the only imperfection. He shielded his dark eyes from the intense glare,

studying the rocks where he had spotted the boy through his binoculars. He turned and motioned to the soldiers just as the second armoured car pulled up.

The Pathan officer found the group of villagers still sitting under the great tree. Of course they did not try to fight. They are soft, he thought, all these Hindus are soft. And he spat on the ground.

'You know why we come?' the officer asked sharply.

The chief nodded. The others just watched; the men hostile; the women unbelieving that it had happened - but Kishor with fear in his large grey eyes.

The Pathan studied each face carefully. He noted the tired, wrinkled, worn expression of the old chief and the resignation of the others. He passed them over with a sneer on his lips. But when he came to the boy he stopped and looked at him searchingly until Kishor coloured and looked away. The officer said nothing to him directly as he spoke to the whole group but all the while he watched the boy.

'You know,' he said with deliberate and cruel slowness, 'that we come to liberate Kashmir. At the moment we need this village because of its strategic position. It commands a wide view of the whole valley. It is not possible for us to release you to warn the others we are here; it is not possible for us to keep you as we are hard-pressed to keep ourselves. There is no alternative but,' he smiled as if enjoying the whole thing, 'to execute you all.'

The men remained unmoved; stony, silent. The women winced and with desperate gestures of femininity, smoothed back their dusty hair. The boy's head fell forward and he clenched his sweating hands.

'Right!' snapped the officer. 'Good! You understand. It is unfortunate, but,' he sighed expressively, 'it is the fortune of war.'

He motioned to a Pathan, spoke quickly to him and the man ran back to the armoured car. Then he turned to the group, looking closely at the boy. What do they call you, beautiful one?' he asked in a quiet, kind voice.

The boy lifted his grey, long-lashed eyes slowly. "They call me Kishor,' he said softly.

The officer smiled, showing perfect white teeth that gleamed in his dark, dusty face.

By then the soldier had returned carrying a metal-bound box. He placed it on the ground at the officer's feet. The group peered closely to see what the box contained. What deadly, lethal weapon. The officer stooped quickly, opened it and picked up some small objects. They looked like small, harmless spools of grey thread.

These are high explosives,' he said. They will be set to a time. When the time is nigh – poof! – all your troubles will be over.' He grinned again, showing his perfect white teeth; a grin of sadistic cruelty. He gave them to his men and then turned to the tall Pathan soldier. Take them all to that large hut. Tie their hands behind their backs. There's one little present for each. You know what to do.'

Then he turned to Kishor. You, beautiful one, come with me.'

Kishor did not look at the others as he slowly followed the officer across the dusty ground, he was too ashamed, but out of the corner of his eye he saw the tall Pathan soldier grinning at him and he was afraid.

When they came to the old chief's hut, the officer pushed open the door, 'Go in there and wait,' he said gently.

Inside the cool dark of the hut Kishor heard the door close and locked behind him. He was puzzled. Why should the officer be so kind to him? Then he thought of his friends and neighbours. They were preparing to die bravely and while he was being spared he was more afraid than they — sweating profusely and terribly afraid.

It was so intensely quiet now and he could hear the wind whispering desperately through tiny cracks and he could smell the dry heat and dust from outside. He knew how it looked there – dried and brown and ugly with few trees to break the monotony of the landscape but it was freedom and it was life. He wanted that desperately. Perhaps he could escape through the small window and he suddenly ran to it and climbed onto the bamboo table and looked through. At that moment the ground beneath him shook, sending up whirls of choking dust over him and a flash of blue-white light seared the rocks and dusty plain for a moment and then there was only a cloud of black dust and acrid ashes over the place where the large hut had been. He knew his friends had all gone and he slipped from the table and fell onto the hard earth floor and pressed his cheek against it and started to cry.

After the sun had gone down, Kishor got up from the floor and washed himself and shook all the dust off his white dhots. Then he smoothed back the covers of the old chief's bed and lay down wanting to sleep and forget this terrible day. He lay there with his eyes closed but not sleeping and then he heard the door open and felt the cool evening breeze enter the hut and then the door closed and the Pathan officer was standing beside the bed. Kishor opened his eves and looked at the man. He was bending forward, smiling with his perfect white teeth. He lifted his hand and stroked the boy's cheek with his long, dark fingers. Then he placed his arm behind the boy's shoulders and lifted him gently as he bent down, down until his lips were touching the boy's mouth. So that was it, then, thought Kishor. The price for his life and freedom yet to be paid in the arms of a lusty Pathan. Kishor struggled to free himself but the Pathan's arm was strong and he held Kishor in a vice-like grip and his hot mouth tore into the boy's, lavishing passionate kisses all over his face, his neck, his hair, his eyes. Then, with the free hand he ripped the filmy white dhoti from the boy and gazed at the smooth whiteness of his body.

Kishor was weakening now; weakening as he was filled with a surging hotness he had never before known and as he felt the lips of the man travelling down his breast and across his belly, he caught the Pathan's head in his hands and pushed it down until it was there where the hotness was almost unbearable; where he was rising bigger and bigger. The Pathan released him and pulled off his own clothes and then fell back on the bed naked and clasped the boy's soft hand and pulled it down and the boy gasped with surprise as he felt the huge throbbing hotness of it. Then the Pathan pushed himself against the boy's mouth and started to rock back and forth making soft slopping as it penetrated the boy's parted lips and ever-widening mouth.

But Kishor was becoming afraid and said to himself: I can't do it! Then he remembered the explosion and the fear of dying gripped his entrails and he knew he would have to submit to the Pathan and later, when it was dark, he could escape and go by the secret goats' path and run all night and perhaps tomorrow he would reach Srinagar and the soldiers from Delhi would be there and he would be safe.

The Pathan sensed his reluctance and withdrew from the boy's mouth, caught him roughly in his arms and turned him over.

'We Pathans have a proverb,' he whispered. 'A woman for duty; a boy for pleasure.'

Kishor cried out as the Pathan pushed himself forcibly into him; using him as if he were a woman. A hot pain seared up through him and he struggled and gasped and cried and the Pathan caught him across the mouth with his large dark hand; sobbing with exquisite pleasure.

'Don't struggle, beautiful one, give yourself to me. I love you. I love you. I love you.'

But Kishor did not hear him and the more he struggled the tighter was the Pathan's grip across his mouth to stop the screams. And then the large hand with its long, dark fingers slipped from the mouth when he knew he was in and curled around his slender throat, and the perfect white teeth of the Pathan bit into the soft back of the boy as he jerked deeper and deeper, faster and faster and he heard only the soft groans of the boy and saw only the sudden shooting lights in the velvety, enveloping, singing darkness and the blessed relief that finally came.

After a while there was only the sound of the heavy, spent breathing of the Pathan in the silent room as his dark body lay across the whiteness of the boy. Then he withdrew from the boy, slipped off the bed and pulled on his clothes.

When he was ready he stood and looked down at the soft,

ravished figure of the boy.

'Hey! Beautiful one!' he called. 'It's over. Get dressed. You can stay with me if you want. You'll be my special private boy. Even if you don't like it you'll get used to it in time. Anyway it's better than dying isn't it?'

But Kishor did not answer and when the Pathan bent and touched him his head rolled back and the Pathan saw that he was dead and the dark finger marks showed blackly against

the white throat of the boy.

The Pathan looked down at Kishor for a moment and then, gathering up all the spittle in his mouth, he spat on him and the saliva lay white and glistening on the body of the boy who was afraid to die.

Simon Walsh

The inquisitor

Is it day? Is it night? Who knows? In the dungeons of the Inquisition there is only darkness. Those who see beauty and radiance in the city of Toledo, those who revel in its scented gardens, its architecture, know little or nothing of its dark and terrible secrets. For in this city, indeed, across Spain itself, the Inquisition reigns supreme. In its domain there is pain and suffering, there is misery and despair. It is said, no, whispered, that the dungeons are the very gateway to Hell. Only those incarcerated in these slime-filled caverns know the terrible truth.

I have attempted to keep track of time, but it is difficult when there is only darkness. In the outer world one sleeps with the setting sun and rises at the dawning of a new day, but in this world sleep is fitful. What appears to be many long hours may only be minutes.

The Inquisitors are cruel beyond belief. They play tricks on the mind. It may please them to give their victim six meals a day. Thus, the victim believes six days have passed. Then perhaps only one meal in three days. It is impossible to say which is more cruel: the physical torture or the mental torture. Both give the Inquisitors equal pleasure.

My thoughts drift back into the distant past as I lie here in my cell. They can drift in no other direction, for there is no future here. No hope.

In the early hours of one morning, I was dragged from my bed by soldiers of the Inquisition, bound and then gagged. My protests of innocence were useless. I knew the charges against me would be those of heresy, for the Inquisition exists solely to conquer it. In truth, the guilty were only guilty of an error, a misdemeanour, perhaps nothing at all, but fire and the rack can extract the most damning of confessions.

For six months I lay chained in the dungeons without word from anyone, without trial, without reason. Many times I was awakened by the cries of the suffering, seemingly emanating from the very depths of Hell itself. How could I even pray for these miserable wretches when I knew that their greatest suffering was yet to come in the terrible purging flames of the Inquisitional stake? I shuddered with horror, for I realized that this would be my ultimate fate, so I saved such prayer for myself, praying to Him that in his infinite compassion He would deliver me from the hands of my enemies.

But there was no place for selfishness. At the end of my despair was a solitary light which steadily grew into a shimmering image of Donna Isabella Medina D'Cruz. I prayed that the evil of her husband, the Grand Inquisitor, Don Eduardo, would not stain her innocence. I prayed for the moment when I could once again taste the sweetness of her lips, the gossamer silkiness of her olive skin. I prayed that once again I could cast my eyes upon her radiant beauty.

Then despair would overcome me once again, for those who even dared to whisper of the horrors of the Inquisition said that the victims never again saw the light of day, save for the terrifying walk to the stake.

I was again awakened. A long, solitary scream, filled with awful pain, echoed through the long, dark corridors. Another sound. A key turned in a lock. The door to my cell opened and two guards entered. They shed me of my chains and dragged me out, for I was so weak with hunger and from breathing the foul air that my legs bore no strength to carry me.

It seemed to take an eternity to pass through the winding corridors and several times the guards lost their footing on the slime-covered steps as we moved ever upwards.

Then the guards came to a halt outside a cell. I thought they would take me inside, but they merely stood by the huge rusted iron door. They looked down upon me and a look of gloating spread across their evil faces. I did not understand, but the reason became suddenly apparent as I once again heard that pitiful wailing. It rose to a scream and finally an agonised, pain-ridden, unending screech that would even tear a heart of stone asunder. The screaming was that of a woman. It did not surprise me, for I knew that the Inquisition did not discriminate where 'heretics' were concerned.

We continued past the cell, the wretch inside suffering horribly and through her cries begging her tormentors for death.

Whether it was the unbearable stench of the air, the sickly sweet smell of burning flesh or my despair which made me lose consciousness, I do not know, but when I again opened my eyes I thought that sanctuary had at last come to me.

I was in a chamber, not large, but not small. Its floor was embraced by the finest of Persian carpets and from the walls hung scarlet drapes of soft velvet. There were no windows, but then I looked towards the ceiling and perceived the light coming from a crystal chandelier. The chamber was devoid of furniture, save for a long marble table behind which stood a huge cushioned chair.

As my vision began to slowly return, I thought I saw a figure sitting upon the chair. I strained my eyes to see further and the figure became clearer, but I could see no face. It sat with folded arms, dressed in deepest black, a hood pulled over the head, obscuring the face from view.

The figure rose from the chair and approached, taking something shiny from the table. I attempted to rise from my knees, but I was still too weak. The figure stood before me and held out a hand. In the hand was a gold chalice filled to the brim with wine.

'Drink the wine, Don Sancho,' a voice said.

I took the chalice and tasted the wine, longing to quench my insatiable thirst.

'As sweet as honey? As sweet as the lips of Donna Isabella?'
There was a faint recognition of the voice, but the long months of confinement had dimmed my memory.

'The wine is sweet, is it not, Don Sancho?'

The chalice slipped from my grasp as my hands began to tremble. That voice! That mocking sound! It was he, the most dreaded of men, the monstrous Grand Inquisitor, Don Eduardo Medina D'Cruz!

Now the reason for my confinement became suddenly clear. Don Eduardo had discovered the adulturers. But why take such revenge? Yes, I had taken his place in the marriage bed, taken his wife. But it was not out of lust, but love. Yes, I loved this innocent and frightened woman. Yes, she was afraid of him and his vile work. Had she not found such love in me, her stark fear of him would have destroyed her.

Don Eduardo swung his hand and struck me twice.

Profligate heretic! he seethed. 'Did you believe that no one is loyal to me? Did you think for one moment that your adultery would go undiscovered for all time? You were a fool, Don Sancho. Even a strutting peacock such as you must one day lose his vanity. I, Don Eduardo Medina D'Cruz, Grand Inquisitor, shall destroy the peacock.'

I shall not deny my guilt, Don Eduardo, but Donna Isabella, she is innocent of any crime. Punish me if you must, but do not, I beg of you, punish her too.'

'But the guilty must be punished. The way of the adulteress is the way of Satan. His seed is within her and there is only one path for the heretic to follow.'

I froze with horror at what he was saying. Could it be possible he would perpetrate such a vile and wicked crime? No, it could not be. He is clearly mad. His words are those of a madman.

'And you, Don Sancho, led her down the path. Your fate is scaled, but others must have followed you. You will give me those names, you will confess all your crimes of heresy.'

'I know nothing of such things!' I protested.

It is as I thought. You are not eager to confess. Very well, Don Sancho, we must find a way to loosen your tongue. Guards!' he called.

The two soldiers who had delivered me to the chamber re-

turned and took a firm hold of me

Take him to the courtvard and let the fate of his minion loosen his tongue. Away with him!'

I knew of no such minion. His accusations of heresy were fabrications. Above all, Donna Isabella was innocent of such foul crimes. And then a single thought struck me like a thunderbolt. Did he intend to accuse Donna Isabella of heresy? No. it cannot be. I prayed from the very depths of my soul that this could not be.

I was dragged into the courtvard, a huge frontage to the dungeons, and the sunlight blinded me as I emerged. There was a great noise, a continuous mumbling, and as my eyes became used to the light I saw a huge crowd gathered. They were milling around something which I could not see. Then the crowd parted and my eyes fell upon the object of their interest. My heart gave a tremendous thud as I gazed with disbelief on what used to be the beautiful Donna Isabella Medina D'Cruz

Her torturers had destroyed her beauty, yet she was still alive, bound in chains to the Inquisitional stake. They had scourged the flesh from her and burned her with branding irons. The blood and scorching had cruelly scarred her once smooth alive skin.

'For the love of God she is innocent!' I cried out in anguish. 'Innocent?' said Don Eduardo. He turned to the crowd. Even now do I have in my hand her confession. A confession which admits to vile practices of witchcraft, of heresy, of foul sacrilege, of taking the seed of Satan so that she may bring forth more evil into this world. And this, her master, cries out her innocence. There can only be one fate for the followers of Satan '

The crowd roared their hatred.

'Burn the heretic! Burn the heretic! Burn the heretic!' And then the nightmare began.

At a signal from Don Eduardo, the executioner put his torch to the pyre. Within seconds, the flames were crackling around her feet. She struggled hopelessly against her bonds, cried out her innocence, begged Don Eduardo, her husband, to have pity. But who more than he nourished a stone heart within his breast?

My wrists were bound tightly and I could not cover my ears from the horrific screeching that came within the searing flames, As if by a Divine hand, the flames parted, and the last I saw of Donna Isabella was her blackened, writhing body, burning like a fireball, wrenching and twisting violently to free itself.

I overcame the strength of my two guards and sank to my knees.

'For pity's sake, for the love of God, enough! Enough! She is innocent! Kill her, Don Eduardo, kill her! Someone have pity and put her out of her misery!'

But my voice was drowned by the excited roar of the crowd. And even above that horrendous sound came not the screams of a witch, not the blood-chilling ravings of a heretic, but the agonized and pitiful screeching of a woman in the most awful pain.

I thank God I heard no more, for darkness suddenly overcame me. I must have swooned, for the next thing I knew I was being carried back to the dungeons. There was the familiar stench of dank air and rancid slime, a far distant cry of some unfortunate suffering at the hands of his tormentors, the clanking of chains. But once again, I lost consciousness.

How long I was in this state I cannot tell, but when I once again opened my eyes the familiar darkness was gone. Instead, there was a dull, red glow, the smell of burning coals and iron. I became aware of an aching in my shoulders and arms. I looked upwards and saw that my wrists were manacled to a great stone pillar which reached high into the roof.

Then there were voices, a sudden stab of pain at my back, a loud cracking noise. I cried out, for the pain was unexpected and unbearable.

This night, Don Sancho, you shall utter many such cries.'
It was Don Eduardo who had spoken and there was an evil gloating in his voice.

'She lived for a long time in the flames,' he whispered. 'Even I closed my ears from the sound of her screams.'

'Damn your black soul, she was innocent and well you know it,' I said through gritted teeth. 'She was innocent and you murdered her for your own lustful pleasure. May God forgive you, for I shall not.'

I do not need the forgiveness of an adulterer. Yes, she was once innocent, but even she could not return from the path of eternal damnation. You led her down the path and you shall suffer for it. You shall give me the names of your followers before you die at the stake.

'I know nothing of your accusations. I am innocent. Innocent I tell you!'

Don Eduardo laughed.

'I hear that from all heretics, but they all confess in the end.'

'A confession which is forced upon them by brutal and inhuman torture. They have no choice but to confess.'

'But they do have a choice. If they admit to their crimes death comes more quickly. The executioner garrottes them before he lights the fire. But there are those who believe that their master will save them from the purging fire. They are the fools, Don Sancho, for torture breaks the most sacrilegeous of men and women.'

Again Don Eduardo wielded his lash and struck me twice. I strained on the chains which bound me, for the pain was so intense.

'Which do you choose, Don Sancho? Confess now and it will be easier for you. Refuse and I promise you that you shall suffer agony so great that Hell shall hold no surprises for you.'

'I have nothing to tell you. I am innocent, damn you, innocent!'

'So be it. It is your own choice.'

He turned to the torturers in the chamber, three monks. The hoods of their habits were drawn over their faces, making them look sinister in the eerie glow of the burning coals. They dared to call themselves men of God, yet they perpetrated such vile practices on their helpless victims.

'He must confess at all costs,' Don Eduardo told them. 'Do what you will, but extract a confession.'

He looked at me once more before he left the chamber. Such a leer of gloating and hatred told me he knew I was innocent of the charges brought against me, that Donna Isabella was also innocent. I knew then that the only thing he sought was revenge.

Don Eduardo left and his henchmen wasted no time in carrying out his orders.

How long I suffered, I shall never know, for I lost consciousness many times because of the excruciating pain inflicted by my tormentors. They tore the skin from my back with lashes and glowing pincers; burned my flesh with branding irons; stretched my bones on the rack. They laid me on an iron grid which was heated by burning coals; they broke the bones in my arms and legs in order to make the rack more painful than the human mind could possibly imagine.

It was useless to swear my innocence, for they only wanted me to say what they wanted to hear.

'Confess, heretic,' they demanded. 'It is better that you confess than die in the flames unrepentant.'

'How can I confess lies?' I protested. 'For pity's sake, I am telling you the truth! I swear it! For the love of God, you have murdered an innocent woman! Will you murder another innocent?'

'You lie, Don Sancho. Confess, damn you, confess!'

The wheel on the rack was turned even further and I screamed with the terrible pain. Surely they must stop now, I thought. But no. There was one more abomination they committed which finally broke me.

The evil monks took a white-hot branding iron and held it in front of my eyes.

We can go on and on, Don Sancho, but how long can you continue to bear this? Speak now and it will be easier for you.'

The pain of the rack stretching my already smashed bones was so frightful that I found it impossible to speak. The monk lowered the branding iron and all of a sudden a tremendous shock tore through my head. My back arched and stretched to breaking point and I strained convulsively at my bonds as the fiery metal burned into my eyes. I screamed uncontrollably as the pain exploded in my head, as I felt the blood spurt over my face in huge gouts.

Above my wild animal cries I heard the monks demanding, 'Confess! Confess! Confess!

'Enough!' I begged them. 'Enough! For the love of God, no more!'

'Then confess, Don Sancho, and it will be at an end.'

Through my agony, I had a solitary thought, an idea. No, it was an oath of revenge. The flesh had been torn from my back, I had suffered fire and the rack and my eyes had been burned out. But the most painful of my sufferings had been to witness Donna Isabella burn alive and die in the most dreadful agony. I conceded I had nothing more to lose.

'A bargain!' I demanded. 'I will make a bargain with you.'
'We do not bargain with heretics.'

"Then do what you will with me, but I swear that you will never get your precious confession unless you agree to a bargain."

'Very well, Don Sancho, what do you desire?'

I desire life. Save me from the stake and I shall give you that which you demand.'

They babbled among themselves for a few moments, then turned to me once more.

'Very well, we agree. Your life for a confession. Now speak. Who is your master in evil? Who are your followers?'

'There are no followers, but there is only one above me.'

'Speak his name or burn at the stake.'

It is Don Eduardo Medina D'Cruz. He is my master. It is he whom I serve.'

'It is a lie! You dare to speak such an abomination? The truth, damn your soul, the truth!'

'It is the truth, I swear it! Why else do you think Don Eduardo has condemned me? He has no further use for me. He wishes to silence me so that he may carry on his evil work.' 'This is sacrilege. How can you expect us to believe this?'

'Ask him. Demand the truth of him. Donna Isabella was innocent. She discovered what he really was and threatened to expose him, so he silenced her by sending her to the stake. Demand the truth of him. Demand of him that he confess his guilt!'

'We murdered her. We did those dreadful things to her, yet she was telling the truth. May God forgive us.'

Even if there was light of day in this place, I could not see it for, remember, they burned my eyes out. But my jailer tells me I have languished in this dungeon for more than thirty years.

You ask why I chose this living death, this unending confinement, instead of dying at the stake? There are two reasons. The first is the least important, but worthy of mention. What man, no matter how much iron courage is within him, would be willing to burn alive at the stake? Such a man is no coward to choose life instead.

But the second reason is of prime importance. I chose life so that I may continue to taste that dish of cold revenge. To savour the thought that I and my precious Isabella did not suffer alone. To feel the hatred of the thronging crowd, to hear them cry out above the dreadful screams of Don Eduardo as he burned alive at the Inquisitional stake.

'For pity's sake, Don Sancho, tell them it is a mistake!' he begged me.

And the more he screamed and twisted and writhed in the roaring flames, the more the crowd cried out, 'Burn the heretic! Burn the heretic! Burn the heretic!

I shall die a satisfied man.

Robert Holdstock The quiet girl

These were peaceful times in Methwick, although by Aberdeen standards the tiny village had never known more than a murmur of excitement. Cobbled streets and rows of silent houses made the town seem dead, which it certainly wasn't. The life, on any night, was concentrated by the river wharf (where the Piper's Arms was still a place to get moonshine at ten pence a shot) or at the other end of the high street, where the Conservative Club attracted the card-players and the heavy smokers. The noise of voices would guide tourists to these high-spots of community life, but there were never tourists in Methwick. Few people came to live here, either, although the occasional new arrival added blood to the town. James Gray, for example, who had moved into the old Malbraith house just seven weeks before, and who had already settled nicely into the community.

In the silent street, beneath one of the few electric lamps, John Taggard felt the stillness of Methwick, and loved it. A peaceful town meant peaceful minds, and peaceful minds meant peaceful bodies; as the doctor in the town he appreciated a healthy community. Peaceful minds also meant peaceful souls, although that was the Reverend Crocker's department, and though Taggard himself was a man of the cloth, he had had no parish in his life, and merely contributed to the local religious community when Crocker was ill, or away, or when it was a time of special feasting.

Walking down the hill, across the painfully obtrusive cobbles, Taggard listened to the droning of a distant car; he stopped and waited for the vehicle to charge past. So still was the atmosphere that the noise of an engine could be heard over two or three miles

It was a truck, when it came, and it wobbled and bumped through Methwick with the solemn-faced driver fighting the wheel to keep his vehicle steady. Taggard smiled as the truck braked at the bottom of the hill, and then vanished, but after a moment he realized that it had vanished into the old Malbraith house ... Had that ashen-faced man in the driver's seat been James Gray? And since when had he owned a truck?

Puzzled, Taggard increased his pace down the hill. Gray had asked him to call just this evening; he had known the doctor would have been on his way, so wouldn't it have been a simple courtesy to have stopped as he passed? He had surely seen Taggard.

Although Gray had not indicated the problem when he had called, Taggard – professional to a fault – had brought his small medical bag in case. He was glad, now, that he had. Gray looked ill, very ill, and the call had certainly not been a social invitation, as Taggard had half expected.

He pushed through the gate, noticing as he entered the house's small grounds that the truck was parked, half visible, around the side of the building. Knocking at the door he waited, but took the opportunity of the pause to peer through the window of the dining room, which Gray, for some reason, had converted into a study. Gray was leaving the room to answer the door, and Taggard glanced quickly around the well-lit premises; a large desk had been pushed into one corner, with various book-cases leaning precariously forward all about. There was a suite in the middle of the room. A girl sat in an arm-chair, her eyes fixed on the glowing fire in the hearth. She looked very young, very pale; she hardly moved.

Taggard understood now. A relative, a niece, perhaps, who had taken ill.

Grav opened the door.

'Glad to see you, doctor,' he said, taking Taggard's arm and ushering him into the hallway.

Gray was small in stature, and of middle age, perhaps forty-five, perhaps a little more. He was smartly dressed in tweed (who wasn't these days?) but the tweed was muddy, and Gray wiped his hands as if compulsively, glancing down at the palms occasionally. His normal complacency of expression had been replaced by a haunted look, his eyes rimmed with dark (a sign of sleepless nights), his mouth open and tense.

Taggard hung up his coat. 'You look terrible, James.'

'I'm sure I do. I sleep very badly. You might like to prescribe something.'

Taggard paused. 'You called me here for sleeping pills?'
Grav laughed. 'No, no, I have a guest, a young girl—'

'I saw her. Through the window,' in answer to Gray's

querying expression. 'She looks very quiet.'

Painfully quiet, John. She hasn't spoken a word, doesn't move, doesn't eat ... Look, come and see her, and I'll tell you about her. I'm worried, though. Since Jeanette died ...' he glanced at Taggard. 'Well, you know ...'

Taggard didn't know, though he thought he could guess. He followed Gray through into the study, glancing as he went at the colour portrait of Gray's wife, Elspeth, that hung in the hallway. She had been a beautiful woman, well worth the modern expense of having her portrait painted. But the picture that Gray held closest to his heart was of Jeanette, his only daughter, who had died in the same accident (a car crash) that had taken the life of his wife. No doubt Gray felt the need for company and had sent for one of his relations' daughters to come and visit.

'This is Elizabeth,' said Gray, walking round in front of the

seated girl.

'Hello, Elizabeth,' Taggard smiled and stared down at the child. Elizabeth didn't move, or flinch, but remained staring into the fire. Taggard watched her, repeated her name, then glanced at Gray. Gray was shaking his head. 'This is why I called you, John. She seems completely withdrawn, and, what's worse, she doesn't eat, or drink.'

'For how long?'

"Three days now. Elizabeth isn't her real name, that's just the name I gave her. I've asked her many times, tried to get her to speak, but she just stares at me, then gradually looks off to the left, gazing at anything or nothing, but usually the fire.'

Taggard sat in the arm-chair facing the girl. He studied her closely, and as he watched her so her head turned and her eyes fixed upon him. He felt a cold chill run down his spine as her gaze rested on him, seeming to look right through him.

'She's very pale, James. Was she like this when you brought her here?'

Gray nodded. 'She is no relation of mine. Perhaps I shouldn't have bothered, but I couldn't just let her sit there, by the roadside.'

'You found her on the road? A waif?'

'That's about the size of it. Wouldn't go down too well round here, I know, so I want to keep it quiet. But now I've taken the responsibility, John, I want to get her better and give her ... I don't know ... something, anything. A direction, money, a foster family? What can one give a parentless child who doesn't say a bloody word to you?'

Taggard watched the girl. After a while he rose and knelt before her; her green eyes followed his at all times. He took her pulse, which was weak and slow, and her skin felt cold, almost clammy. He rubbed her left hand to try and get some circulation into it, but it remained cool.

'Have you washed her since you found her?'

Gray shook his head. 'Haven't liked to. The smell, you mean ... it's very strong, I know, but I didn't realize how helpless she would be. It seems strange, but she doesn't ... you know ... pass things from her.'

'She needs a good wash, a good meal, and two or three days' observation in a hospital; but you know, James, she isn't obviously ill at all. She has the expression and bearing of a catatonic ... but she isn't anything like that – she looks around, she's taking things in. The way she's looking at me is creepy. But kids are creepy.' He laughed, took the girl's hand

again. 'Elizabeth ... Elizabeth, you're in good hands ... can you say something? Anything? Is Elizabeth your real name?'

Her stare withdrew and her head turned back to the left, regarding the flickering wood fire in silence.

Taggard sighed and leaned back on his haunches; he noticed her clothes for the first time. Shredded, torn, dirty, the skirt she wore was a hand-woven woollen garment, styleless, designless, a functional body covering, not particularly warm. It was all she wore.

He and Gray picked her up and carried her upstairs to the bath, where Taggard, alone, stripped her and scrubbed her. She lay passive in the water, unafraid, regarding Taggard with an emotionless stare. He guessed her to be perhaps sixteen or seventeen years old; she was built very small; her body was almost encrusted with fiith, and beneath the fiith were scars and sores that he treated and covered. As she stood on the bath mat and he dried her he noticed the pattern of moles on her back, a square of black skin markings, two of them with hideous wounds in them. He dried her hair and the brown tresses seemed more alive than they had before; as he combed it back, slowly and carefully, he noticed the bruising on her neck; had someone tried to kill her, he wondered?

He dressed her in one of Gray's pyjama tops that came down to her knees.

'I'll bring you proper clothes in the morning.'

She walked with him down the stairs and into the study. She curled up in the chair again and watched the fire.

'Where did you find her?' asked Taggard after a while. 'And how did you get into that filthy state?' He sipped brandy from a glass that shook because his hands were shaking. Gray, without a drink, obviously still very anxious, looked down at the mud on his trousers.

'I don't know, to be honest. I've been doing a lot of strange things lately, but I guess that's just my insomnia. I black out quite a lot. Where did I find her? Tarston; quite a long way from here. I use the truck to take metal fencing to customers scattered about; I've only borrowed it for a few days. I was

driving back at dusk a couple of days ago and she was just outside Tarston, walking along the road and waving me down. I offered her a lift and she just climbed into the truck without a word; she didn't offer to get down anywhere, but followed me into the house when I parked outside. That's how it's been... and that's how she's been.

'Tarston,' murmured Taggard thoughtfully. 'Tarston ...'
He shook his head after a moment. 'I read about Tarston a
few weeks ago. Can't think where or why; it's a small town,
isn't it?'

'Bigger than Methwick, but just as quiet. You think she might belong to someone there? A runaway?'

'It's possible. Anything's possible. If it would be of any help I can contact the police for you at Tarston ... you don't have a phone yet, do you?'

Gray shook his head, 'Still using the call box. Very inconvenient.'

'Well, look after her, James, and I'll call back tomorrow. We'll try and feed her something, otherwise I think she'd best go straight into hospital.'

'Yes, Okay, John, Many thanks for coming round,'

If Taggard had felt uneasy in the house, then as he walked up the hill, away from the strange girl, he became almost obsessed with suspicion. There was no denying that these were superstitious parts of the world, that there was an ingrained fear of ghosts and evil in the local people, but it was a fear held by the young and by the old, and not by the sensible middle-aged. People joked about the Beyond, and made mocking assertions as to the inherent supernatural forces in the countryside, but it was not a serious fear ... not serious enough, he hoped, he believed, to lead to the torture of a young girl, the defiling of her body because she was quiet, withdrawn ... and had strange marks on her body!

The wounds on those two moles on her back were frightening Taggard. The more he thought of them the more they assumed significance. Like a knife being pushed a quarter of an inch into her flesh, probing the devil's stigma to see if she squealed – testing for a witch! Had it happened to her in Tarston? Had she been abused in the name of some ancient and irrational fear by a small group of 'believers'?

It had often happened before, and it would happen again. But Taggard hoped with all his heart that it wouldn't happen in his district. He was a man of peace, and the fear of darkness was something that led people to unexpected heights of violence.

The good were always to be feared more than the wicked. It had been that way through the ages of man.

He stopped and looked back at the Malbraith house, at the light in the window. As he watched so he saw Gray leave the house and begin to unload the truck; there was a clang as of metal on concrete, and Gray cursed in loud undertones. Taggard smiled.

He slept fitfully, uneasily, the girl's pale face haunting him in his quietest moments. Some time early in the morning the sound of the truck outside roused him into wakefulness. He listened to its engine straining on the hill, and finally fading away as it passed the church and moved out of earshot. Later he slept.

He woke at seven in the morning, abruptly, alertly. Jumping out of bed, he splashed his face with cold water and dressed without concern for appearance. At the bottom of the stairs he realized what he was doing, and paused; something was motivating him, an inner anxiety, a nagging tension; he was going to Tarston. He sat down for a moment and collected his wits. Yes, Tarston might yield some clue as to the girl's identity, and the local police might have information on any local practices that did not exactly conform to Christian thinking (though they might to Christian tradition).

What an effect the girl had had upon him! To cause him to move from sleep to wake with a single objective: to find out about her.

He chuckled, crept back upstairs and found his wife still

sleeping despite his energetic departure from the bed. He left a note, and placed a cancellation notice on his surgery door. Rolling his car out of the drive as quietly as he could, he drove up the hill and over.

It was a dull day, heavily overcast, and with a promise of rain. That might keep the good souls of Methwick at home, and not knocking on his surgery door, he thought. He drove past the church on the hill and noticed, with amusement, that three cows had again broken into the grounds and were happily cropping the grass of the lawn that bordered the gravel pathway.

Something white was flapping in the early morning breeze, out in the cemetery. Puzzled, Taggard slowed the car and stopped. A piece of cloth, like a gown...

He went cold, turned off the engine and climbed out. He could recognize what he saw from this distance, but he kept his eyes to the ground as he walked across the cemetery until he stood a few feet away, and stopped.

It was the body of an old woman who had died just five days before, and had been buried the day before yesterday. Her body was sprawled across the pile of earth that had been excavated from the grave, one leg dangling naked into the pit, her shroud blown up across her body to obscure her face, but not her wrinkled, grey breast. There were gaping knife cuts in her chest, above her heart, and when Taggard pulled the shroud down from the corpse's head he saw hideous excavations across her neck, deep cuts that exposed the bone and teeth on one side of the dead woman's face.

Taggard stood slowly and looked around him. He saw no sign of a living soul, and he left the cemetery at a run, sat in his car for a long while, watching the fluttering white robe and thinking of what he had observed.

He would have to tell the police; he would have to tell Crocker, if Crocker, who was an early service man himself, had not already seen the horrifying spectacle. Somewhere in the vicinity would be a clue as to who had done the defiling of the grave, and Taggard was very much afraid that he knew to

whom that evidence would point. If he had heard Gray's truck, then so would many other people in the street; and somewhere there would be tyre-prints, and in Gray's house there would be dirt, a fragment of the shroud perhaps ...

There could be no hiding the deed if Gray were responsible; but why should a man like Gray do such a thing? Taggard had known him a mere seven weeks, but he had come to know him well in that time, and if he was still a man distraught and depressed at the loss of his wife and daughter, some months before, he was not, so Taggard believed, a man made irrational and insane by his loss.

No, it was not Gray as Gray had been! Taggard, unconscious of passing time, found himself obsessed with the idea that Gray was no longer his own man, that something recent had upset him, unbalanced him, and made him act in a truly despicable way. And the more he thought about it, the more he came to believe that the upsetting force was the girl, Elizabeth.

If that was the case, he wondered, who was she? What was she? What was her hold over Gray, an adult and mature man. How could a child of sixteen dominate him?

Thirty minutes of jumping to conclusions passed, and Taggard made a decision. He would go straight to Tarston, and not back into town. He started up the car and drove on, slowly at first, but picking up speed as he distanced himself from the church and from Methwick.

Inspector William Kurland was a warm and friendly man, red-haired, clean-shaven, and he seemed glad of the visit. They sat on opposite sides of Kurland's paper-littered desk and sipped coffee.

Crime on paper,' said Kurland with a smile, tapping the sheets before him. There's not much on the streets, it all happens in tight little lines of print. What a way to keep order.' Taggard smiled. Kurland, more seriously, said, 'Now, Dr Taggard. What may I do for you?'

Taggard placed his cup on the table and composed his

thoughts. 'I have a patient, Inspector ... an amnesiac. I think, in fact I'm sure, that the key to her memory lies in Tarston.'

'Oh, well, that should be easy enough. We have few missing persons filed here \ldots

'Inspector ... before you do anything, I'd like to ask you something.'

'Ask away ...'

'Where ... or rather why ... why have I read of Tarston recently?'

'In the newspapers, you mean?'

'The nationals, yes.'

Kurland seemed surprised. 'The nationals, eh? I don't read the papers myself; I'm surprised the stories reached them. I know we had good coverage in the local papers, and the Aberdeen papers.'

'What was the problem?'

Kurland leaned back, became pensive. We had a series of grave-robberies; mostly ancient graves, scattered bones and a lot of trouble for the keepers; but there were two genuine cases of body-snatching that weren't so pleasant...'

Now Taggard remembered; he should have remembered when he had seen the woman's corpse earlier in the morning. He said, 'Yes, that's right. The Burkers return to Tarston... that was how most papers ran the story. I remember.'

Kurland laughed. 'The Burkers. Yes. They're a wide-spread superstition, well, you know that. But here in Tarston they're just a little more important than most other places. The Burkers are our local bogey men ... send the kids scuttling to bed with tales of the body-snatchers. Very good medicine. The end of last century, though, the Burkers were much more in the news than now. Tarston suffered an appalling raid by Burkers ... probably students, or a mixture of students and locals, earning themselves some blood money. They came in the night and carried off twenty women and children, cut their throats in the coach they used, and the next morning the streets were just running with blood. Some said it was tinkers, taking revenge for locals of Tarston having

raided tinker camps for the same grisly purpose. It was all the same to the medical schools. They say you can still hear the hearse rattling down the street on that night of every year, and if you touch the ground you can feel the warmth of blood running across the cobbles.' He paused, savouring the imagery he was invoking.

Taggard said, 'That was a hundred years ago. What about these more recent cases?'

'A young lad,' said Kurland, straightening up. 'Very strange case. Just a lad, perhaps eighteen, nineteen — a local boy, from a farm a few miles away. He robbed one grave and was hauling the fresh body out of a second a few nights later when we surprised him.'

'And he died, right?'

Kurland nodded, looked slightly crestfallen. 'He fell into the open grave and split his skull on the metal edge of the casket. Died about a week ago.'

Taggard thought hard. It was difficult to tell if things were falling into place or not. 'Did the lad have a sister?'

The police inspector thought about the question, and finally said, no. 'He had a brother, though. Older than himself. And he had a girl friend, strange little thing, very miserable, very cold. Not a local girl, probably a gypsy's girl left behind for whatever reason gypsy's leave their extra children scattered across the country.'

Taggard described Elizabeth. The description matched. Now things were falling into place; but he was still confused as to the reason for body-snatching.

That would take some very careful thought.

'The girl vanished,' said Kurland, 'Probably because your man ... Gray you said? Probably because he picked her up.'

'And you have no idea where she might have come from?'

'Out of nowhere, out of the dead. That's what the local people say when a stranger turns up. A very superstitious lot.' Kurland chuckled. 'We have more ghosts in Tarston than you've ever dreamed of. I've seen one myself, too, so it's not all fairy story.'

Taggard smiled. An unbeliever himself, he was surprised that the local police chief should take the supernatural so matter-of-factly for granted.

Kurland expanded, seeing Taggard's interest: 'A Burker called William Lyon, who lived locally and would drop the nod to the diggers when someone was buried fresh. He might have got away with it for many years, but one night they dug in the wrong grave and dug up a witch who had been buried two hundred years before.

'A witch? On Holy Ground?'

'The story goes that she was really no witch at all, and after being hanged her parents fought for years to get the body interred in the churchyard; they finally succeeded. The Burker, Lyon – so the story goes – found her body intact and she killed him on the spot, cutting his throat open with her nails and covering herself with his blood. His ghost walks the southern road between the churchyard and the signal point he would use. I've seen him. A miscrable-looking fellow.'

Taggard laughed. 'Yes, well, thanks very much for your help, but my problem deals more with the living.'

It was the girl; that much was obvious. Possessed or diseased, she was in some way able to affect the minds of men, and drive them to do her wishes; why grave-robbing, it was difficult to understand, but it led to another frightening thought: when did the stealing of the dead, for whatever reason, lead to the stealing of the living?

At the door of Kurland's office Taggard stopped, looked back. 'The body that your youth did steal ... was it ever recovered?'

'It was found back in the grave, yes.'

'Was it mutilated?'

'Why, yes. The heart and throat had been stabbed. Don't ask me why. Some sort of ritual sadism was the official verdict.'

Yes, thought Taggard. And no. Not ritual sadism. The heart and the throat. Where blood would flow the fastest, and

the easiest ... if there was blood to flow!

Walking back to the car he thought over what Kurland had told him, thought of the girl, of her hidden power. Children had a way with adults, and they had strong minds, and often frightening minds. It was not beyond belief that Elizabeth, whatever her real name, was exerting her will in the way of, say, a hypnotist, making her sympathetic companions do what she wanted, sending them on her insane missions of defilement...

A witch indeed!

And a thought struck him, an unpleasant thought, and one which he might have pushed from his mind at any other time. He was a man who did not believe in things supernatural, despite his being a man of God; religious manifestation, yes, but ghosts and ghouls, no. He believed that there were perfectly reasonable explanations for many things that had been thought unnatural, and frightening.

But the thought welled up in his mind now, and he could not deny it, could not push it aside. It would answer the strange behaviour of the body-snatchers, it would explain much ...

Uncomfortably, but with resolve, he sought out the church, and the historical records of the town.

Taggard ran through the gate of the Malbraith house, hammered on the door and shouted for Gray.

He ran to the window, peered into the darkness. The fire was burning low, throwing a dull red light through the darkened room. He saw the girl sitting in her arm-chair. She was watching him.

Glancing at his watch (ten o'clock) Taggard wondered where Gray would be so late at night. Not at the cemetery; he had already checked there.

He banged on the door again.

'James - for God's sake let me in!'

James Gray opened the door. In the dim light from the street lamp at the bottom of his short driveway, his face was ashen grey, his eyes deep pools of blackness. He blocked the entrance.

'You can't help me, John. Go away. Don't risk yourself ...'

'Let me in, James. You don't know what you've got in there ...!'

'I know what I've got, John. Go away. Don't interfere! I know what I've done, and what I will do again until I die. I'm helpless, John. I'm helpless. No one can help me.' He closed the door. Taggard leapt forward and flung it open, slamming it shut behind him.

'Get out, you fool!' screamed Gray. 'She's realized how to get what she wants ...!'

Recklessly, terribly afraid, Taggard led the way into the study. He turned on the lights; the girl made a slight moaning sound, but otherwise didn't move.

Glancing at Gray, Taggard confirmed what he had suspected. The man was in a shocking condition, gaunt, dishevelled, and covered with dirt from a second excavation, perhaps. He watched Taggard through black-rimmed eyes, and there was something in his expression ... a mixture of hopelessness and cunning. It frightened Taggard, but after a moment Gray's features relaxed and he looked at the motionless girl, still wearing his pyjama top, still deathly white and silent.

'I found out who she is,' said Taggard. As he spoke her head moved and her eyes fixed him with their stare.

'I don't care who she is,' said Gray. 'It no longer matters...'
'Her name is Matilda Reid...' the girl tensed, began to shake. 'Yes, Matilda, you know your name. Matilda Reid, born Tarston in 1623, and hanged as a witch in the same town in 1639...' A thin stream of saliva began to run from each corner of her mouth; her skin remained white, but a new life seemed to pump into her frail body. A whining sound escaped her lips.

Gray looked aghast. 'What are you saying?'

Taggard smiled. I went to Tarston today. Something that the police there told me made me doubt my commonsense viewpoint for a moment and I went through the early records that are kept in the church. It had a listing, like most churches do, of the witch trials from before 1500. Matilda Reid was a silent child, never spoke, and when examined by a suspicious parish council was found to have a square of devil's marks on her back. Two were probed and though they emitted blood they did not cause her to scream. She was hanged, despite her parents' protesting, but after some years her body, which had been kept on the parents' own land, was allowed to be buried on consecrated ground in the light of evidence suggesting she had not been a witch at all. The grave was kept, and the story forgotten in substance, until an unfortunate body-snatcher released the girl by accident ...?

'And you're saying that this ... this is the living body of Matilda Reid?'

"The living-dead body, yes ..."

Standing firm, Taggard watched the wild distortions on the girl's face, the eyes bulging, the lips drawn back into a hideous snarl, listened to the animal sounds she emitted. Her hands clasped and unclasped the arms of the chair, her body strained, slowly moving upright. Taggard stood his ground, reaching into his pocket for what he had brought with him.

'And since her release,' gasped Gray, backing away from the slowly rising figure, 'she has been like ... like a vampire, using people to bring her bodies to feed upon ...'

'Sometimes hiding, perhaps; at other times using sympathetic people to help her with her desperate quest...'

'My God, she is truly the work of the devil!'

'NO!' cried Taggard, losing his concentration for just a moment. 'Not the devil! She was buried on holy ground, James. Don't you understand? They believed, after her death, that she had not been a witch, and she was buried there, on God's ground. But she was a witch! She had been baptized with the blood of a witch, during a devil's mass. And when she was buried there, in holy ground, it was defilement! It was defilement until such a time as she was baptized in the HOLY way... She has been seeking such a baptism since...

She is GOD'S work, James, not Satan's. She is a force of evil, acting for GOOD.'

A scream, and Taggard could not react as the body of the girl flung towards him. He had noticed the way her hand had scrabbled in the cushion of the chair, and now he saw the dulled blade descending towards him . . .

He threw up his arm to protect himself, but the girl's body hit him, the insane face shricking just inches from his own, the knife burying deeply into his body, above the heart.

'I have holy water ...' screamed Taggard as he fell, the girl on top of him. 'James ... James, help me ... James, I have water to baptize her ... JAMES ...'

'It has to be blood,' cried Gray, backing further from the room. 'I'm sorry ... I tried to warn you ... it has to be the blood of a man of God ... she only just realized the fact ...' 'HELP ME!'

But Grav just stood and watched.

As Matilda Reid soaked her face and her hair in the pumping blood from Taggard's fatal wound ...

Christian blood, the blood of a man of the cloth. The blood of God, that relinquished her from her terrible predicament.

She rolled quietly from Taggard's body, and the life went out of them both together.



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