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Selected by HERBERT VAN THAL

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edited by Herbert van Thal

The 20th Pan Book of Horror Stories

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Carolyn L. Bird

The leather ottoman

Through the tall windows of my house on the Avenue Foch I can see Paris awakening. A clutch of pigeons startled by the creak of a handcart are circling above the rooftops opposite, the cobblestones gleam with dew and on the trim hedge that surrounds my house I see a thousand tiny, glistening webs spun during the night by countless nocturnal spiders.

I have not slept again, as it is Tuesday, and Susanna will be bringing home the leather ottoman. On this occasion – today – I shall open it for myself and see at last what secret delights she has been keeping from me for all these months. The sun appears, sliding from behind a patch of cloud, and its golden shafts light up the corners of my library, making the old books shine as new. I experience a thrill of anticipation which sets my heart fluttering and I light my first slender Hoyo of the day. Outside I hear the squeak of leather and the jangle of harness, the sharp tattoo of hoofbeats and a faint crunch of gravel. It is Susanna returning from Montmartre, fresh and beautiful as ever.

I pull back the brocade curtain and look down at her as the black coachman helps her alight. She wears scarlet silk trimmed with royal blue and a pretty bonnet covered with hyacinths. Her cheeks are flushed and her lips gleaming wet, she runs her tongue quickly over their surface and I groan aloud. I would give all my four limbs to taste that mouth just once again.

Susanna has been my wife for two years now and I feel no remorse in confessing that it has been a marriage of convenience, hers by large. I am wealthy, and of a certain age whereas she is – or perhaps more correctly – *was* a poor girl, an orphan I found in Marseilles.

I was blinded with love and lust; she was seduced by my fortune and position; and so a match was made. At first she sub-

mitted to me as befitting a new bride, and I loved her with a passion so exquisite as to border on insanity. After a year she became less overawed by her new wealth and even critical of certain perceived defects in our domestic affairs. A Sèvres cup was dashed to pieces because a maid had offered it with a minuscule speck of dust on the rim. Furniture was changed, curtains torn down, carpets sold for a fraction of their value to make room for even more exquisite pieces from Persia and Hindustan. She became uninterested in my physical advances even though I had brought her to the zenith of sensual experience with my skill and impeccable devotion. It was as if she had drawn out of me all the techniques of passion and now had no use for the empty, exhausted husk that remained.

That she was unfaithful I had no proof, but her glowing flesh was treacherous witness to my gnawing fears. We slept in separate wings of my mansion – she claiming that my touch was now unpleasant to her and that she had completely put aside the pleasures of the bedchamber.

About a year previously, she had taken a sudden interest in theatrical costume, and now spent much time borrowing or buying fantastical gowns and head-dresses from the more fashionable couturiers. She also purchased many tall looking-glasses in front of which she would pose, dressed as the Queen of Sheba, Cleopatra or Jean d'Arc.

Every Tuesday she would travel to Montmartre and return an hour later with a large leather ottoman I had purchased earlier in our marriage. It was a fine piece, in a patchwork of multi-coloured hides with the sides and lid framed by closely-driven brass nails. The ottoman would be taken by a servant to her room and she would lock herself away for several hours, crooning and laughing over its contents. Whenever I asked her if I might see what it was that so occupied her attention she would react like a tigress, cursing me and screaming that I should let her alone or she would leave me, literally, for ever.

So craven had I become that the thought of losing the mere sight of her was too much to bear, and I meekly submitted to her demands for privacy, praying to heaven that she would stay and never desert me.

Her obsession with theatrical raiment heightened, and extra rooms had to be made over to accommodate racks of dresses, high-heeled silver boots, ostrich-feather boas, velvet cloaks, hat boxes, fans, long gloves, silk stockings, crates of stage jewellery, masks, and still more looking-glasses.

Every Tuesday the ritual with the ottoman took place and Paris could set its clocks by it. Her coach, loaded with the empty ottoman would leave our house at five a.m. It would return at six, the ottoman lid strapped down securely, and she would spend until noon in her room laughing and shrieking with delight until the last stroke of twelve echoed through the house.

Then the coachman would return the ottoman to Montmartre, Susanna riding next to him, whip in hand, her eyes wild, her hair flying like a mane.

They would arrive back at the house in time for luncheon, and the empty ottoman would be flung into the hall until the following Tuesday.

I suspected, indeed feared, madness in this irrational behaviour and resolved to use guile to discover the secret of the trunk. Susanna's obsessive interest had made it routine that items of clothing were brought each Tuesday to the house, enjoyed for whatever her purpose, and then returned to Montmartre...

Today, therefore,the masquerade will end. I am shivering with excitement in spite of the warm spring sunshine, and the cigar trembles in my hand. All has been prepared by Roe, my English manservant, who, I know, shares my concern with Susanna's condition.

A clever two-way mirror has been substituted in the frame of one of Susanna's tall looking-glasses: its back positioned against the wall. A panel has been removed from the wall and it is at this aperture that I now sit, tense and fearful.

Susanna's own servant, a sullen Portuguese, admits her to the satin-draped room and withdraws, leaving her alone with the ottoman.

Susanna secures the door by means of a gold chain and then double locks it with a heavy brass key. I notice that she also drapes the keyhole with a piece of linen to prevent lynx-eyed peepers.

As I re-light my cigar, Susanna undresses herself feverishly, like a bride anticipating her wedding night. Her body gleams as she kneels naked in front of the ottoman. I see the soft curve of her back, those perfect thighs, full breasts swelling, hair like a golden waterfall tumbling loose on her shoulders. She raises the lid of the ottoman and pulls out what appears to be a tunic, or frock coat. It is old and musty with fraying lace cuffs and some dull braid at the lapels. She turns the garment towards her and loops the sleeves over her shoulders, leaving the unbuttoned front hanging against her body. I see her mouth working silently and her hands clutching at the back of the tunic. Slowly she falls back until she is spread-eagled, with the garment covering her: her hips arching forward and upwards – an unmistakable pantomime that makes my senses reel.

Moments later she is on her knees again rummaging in the ottoman, her face and body lathered with perspiration. This time she draws out a frilled shirt, yellow with age, and begins to kiss it hungrily. Her tongue probes the button holes and she presses the sleeves against her breasts. Once more she falls back, hugging the garment, and her body writhes like a serpent in a second, awful, convulsion.

I have no wish to see any more of this madness and I close the panel, my eyes raw with weeping.

An hour later I am sufficiently recovered to ask Roe to serve me with a pot of mint tea and a warm croissant.

I issue him with an order that must be executed immediately. He is to follow Susanna's coach and discover the exact nature of the clothing in the ottoman – and where precisely she obtains them. He is apprehensive but I threaten him with a return to his native England – a rural slum in Gloucester with only pigs for company; his resolve to do my bidding stiffens immediately.

It is now Wednesday at two in the afternoon, and I feel calm, almost as Napoleon before a great and crucial battle. I have lunched on quail and champagne and I am sipping a second cup of thick Turkish coffee.

On the escritoire beside me is a sheet of paper torn from a

museum catalogue, and it contains the information I need to revenge myself upon Susanna for her treachery and unholy passion.

The tunic with which she so lewdly entwined herself was once the property of Casanova – that Venetian satyr – and the shirt she covered with kisses, a favourite garment of none other than the legendary Don Juan.

Roe had no difficulty in persuading the owner of the small museum in Montmartre to reveal his stock in trade, clothing associated with the great lovers of history!

Susanna's obsession with costume and her childlike make-believe had led to this shameful and degrading ritual, and I have no reason to believe that her passion will do other than increase.

The shame and hurt of being cuckolded by an empty jacket and a faded shirt is more than I can endure; to lose one's wife to the embraces of a ghost is a fate I cannot bear. But I have planned my revenge with meticulous care, no detail has been overlooked, no avenue left unexplored.

Only a week must pass before my honour is restored and my satisfaction made complete.

I ride daily in the Bois de Boulogne and dine late at Maxim's. As the days roll past I am possessed with an almost exquisite sense of destiny – as if my whole life has been a preparation for what I am about to do. On Sunday I attended mass at the Sacre Coeur and my coachman waits after the service while I stroll to the Place du Tertes and joke with the ragged artists who jostle in the tiny square. On Monday I dine early at Maxim's and drink a whole bottle of champagne, but my head remains clear, my senses razor-sharp.

Now it is Tuesday again and the sky is brassy, disgorging rain that flays the cobblestones with whiplash strokes. My room is close and stuffy and I have a pain that hammers my temples and makes my eyes swim. Roe has suggested I inhale from a bowl of hot water and eucalyptus, but I have no time for such trifles.

The panel is removed, the looking-glass in position, and I am ready – poorer it is true by five thousand francs, but that was the price the museum keeper insisted upon to do my bidding.

Well, in truth, as this is a record of actual events, the five thousand francs was partly to compensate him for the fact that Roe's method of persuasion included a sound thrashing with a coach-whip. I cannot suffer the ignominy of a long legal wrangle, and the five thousand should see that I don't have to.

Roe's brutality is a mild worry. He has offered to punish Susanna by peeling off her skin with a butcher's knife and sprinkling her raw flesh with pepper. I am not a savage and I rebuke Roe sternly. He pulls his forelock and grovels when I again threaten deportation to Gloucester.

The museum keeper, speaking with difficulty through a mouthful of broken teeth and blood, has also revealed that Susanna's craving for sensation has led her to read a number of ancient volumes about history's great lovers. It is from these vile reminiscences that she has formed her carnal association with their clothes. But I digress: the clock strikes six and, as its last note fades, I hear the familiar crunch of gravel and rattle of a harness.

I am tempted to move to the window, but force myself to remain by the spy-hole. It is now that a worm of doubt uncurls itself in my brain. What if my plan fails? My unalienable right to justice will be thwarted and I shall be a broken man. Perhaps I should let Roe deal with her after all. He is at my shoulder now, breathing harshly, licking his big purple lips and rubbing his huge hands together.

I snap my fingers and he takes a step back, a thread of saliva swinging from his jawbone.

I hear the jingle of a lock, and the door of Susanna's room opens slowly admitting her Portuguese maid. She is followed by the coachman who deposits the leather ottoman in the middle of the room. Susanna enters wearing a pale lavender dress trimmed with creamy lace – I have not seen it before. She looks enchanting and I feel a tear escape from my eye and run hotly over my cheek.

The servants withdraw and Susanna locks the door behind them. Once alone her excitement mounts like a whirlwind and soon she is naked with her knees spread wide before the ottoman. She unlocks and raises the lid, her tongue slicking over those angel lips, her body as tense as a wound spring.

She reaches into the trunk and pulls out a long, dark coat with

tarnished brass buttons. Lovingly, she holds it against her body, wrapping the black sleeves around her waist. I find myself catching my breath and my heart pounds against my ribcage like a maddened beast. Slowly, Susanna sinks on to her back, stretching her limbs with the sensuous movements of a cat. I see her face as she rolls her head to one side, the lips are parted, her eyes closed. Suddenly they snap wide open and her legs flex as if in paroxysm. A cry, almost a scream, escapes her lips and her fingers pluck at the coat in an attempt to tear it from her body. The garment, however, seems to cling to her and she writhes and bucks, her face ragged with pain. I see her eyes bulge from their sockets and a globule of crimson escape from the corner of her mouth.

Now her movements are convulsive, involuntary, agonized.

In the awful silence that follows her face turns once more towards the mirror and then vanishes beneath the dark folds of the coat. I wait, scarcely able to restrain myself from crying out, and then the awful tableau is quite still. I weep, my body shaking with silent sobs, and Roe offers me a glass of cognac which I swallow in one gulp.

Roe helps me to my feet and together we walk slowly from the room and along the corridor towards Susanna's bedroom.

He opens the door with a duplicated key and smashes the bolt from its housing with a single blow of his fist.

Inside I kneel by the corpse of my wife and pull away the black jacket. Her poor eyes stare at me and her purple tongue lolls grotesquely between swollen lips. On her alabaster throat are the deep bruise marks of strangulation. I throw the jacket into the ottoman and stand up, my tears have dried and I feel exultant.

Roe is stropping a big hunting knife on the sole of his boot and I withdraw from the room, closing the door behind me. He knows what is to be done and prefers to work alone.

I return to my study and light a Hoyo, sucking the smoke deep into my lungs. On the escritoire is a single sheet of paper torn from a printed catalogue. It reads:

Exhibit thirteen: the frock coat worn by Gaston Desgranges, the mass murderer, who, after strangling seven young women in the Paris area was guillotined in 1708. He insisted on kneeling before the basket

still wearing the coat, which was bequeathed to the museum by his mother; she claimed it had become 'imbued with evil', and refused to keep it in her house.

Now to those who take a dullard's view of life the above account might appear fanciful: a murderer's imagination embroidering the facts so as to make it seem as if Susanna took her own life by some bizarre and magical ritual. However, it must be remembered that my wife was a woman already *possessed* by the spirit of her dead lovers, Casanova and Don Juan. Her subconscious mind acted as a medium for their lost souls and they came to her, eagerly.

Although she embraced the counterfeit garment I had placed in the ottoman, her subconscious mind recognized the murderer's coat, acting as a spiritual magnet for the evil, tormented soul of Gaston Desgranges.

So intense were her feelings that her death by strangulation was the inevitable climax to that awful pantomime.

How so? Before you dismiss these words as the ravings of a jealous and wicked husband remember two things: Susanna had visited the museum in Montmartre many times, her inflamed mental condition made her especially receptive to all the stimuli she received there; her subconscious mind was indelibly imprinted with the images not just of her spiritual beaux, but also of her spiritual murderer. Both – or all of them – were real to her.

Finally, the sceptical reader may wish to remind himself of the proven phenomenon of those devout Italian nuns who so identified themselves with the crucifixion of Christ that wounds appeared on their hands and feet – and blood ran freely from their temples. At no time during these manifestations did any living person lay as much as a finger on them, but the mutilations were real enough.

So it was with Susanna – and may God find peace fot her wretched soul.

A. G. J. Rough

The materialist

Giles Parker was decidedly unhappy about the whole business, and he found it impossible to sleep. With an exasperated sigh he opened his eyes, snapped his seat back to the upright position and reached out a well-manicured hand to switch on the overhead reading lamp. The rest of the cabin was in darkness; he sat lonely and isolated in a circle of pale yellow light. He felt rather than heard the whispering vibration from the four jet engines and, as the aircraft slipped through an air pocket, he briefly experienced the uneasy floating sensation that always accompanies any sudden loss of altitude. The rest of the passengers, silent, obvious and frozen in the darkness, slept on undisturbed.

Parker took some consolation from the fact that Sheila at least was finding it possible to rest. He turned to look at his wife; even in the poor light, he could see that much of the pain had drained away from her face. She was breathing steadily, her eyes closed, her head resting on a small pillow. Although six months of agony had taken their toll, to him she still looked much the same as she had done when he had married her twelve years earlier. As he watched, a curl of blonde hair fell across her face and, as always, he thought how small and vulnerable she looked. Then he swallowed hard when he remembered just how vulnerable she actually was.

It had all happened with horrifying speed. Only a year earlier the pair of them had been enjoying the success that they had worked so hard for. The small antique shop that they had opened in Chelsea had proved to be a particularly profitable enterprise and they had been able to expand their business interests considerably. They owned two expensive cars, a flat in Belgravia and a large mock-Georgian house in Weybridge which was conveniently close to St George's Hill Country Club. They had married late

and, regretting their failure to have children, had seriously begun to consider adoption when Sheila's sudden illness had put paid to their plans.

At first it had seemed like a simple stomach upset, but with the passing days the pain had become more acute and persistent. Early tests had revealed nothing; it was only when Sheila had begun to lose weight dramatically that they had turned to a Harley Street specialist.

Parker had a good reason to remember the man in vivid detail, with his silver-grey hair and ruddy complexion. At their first meeting he had impressed them considerably with his obvious competence and his reassuring, almost jovial manner. At their second meeting the icy coldness of his professionalism had been matched only by that of his prognosis. Facing an illuminated x-ray screen he had, with a detached wave of his hand, begun to discuss a large, malignant tumour as if remarking on the state of the weather. He had further explained that other minor growths elsewhere in the body indicated that the malignancy had spread throughout the lymphatic system and would therefore prove to be terminal. He had then generously prescribed a wide selection of pain-killing drugs before sending them on their way.

They had driven down to Weybridge in shocked, stony silence, refusing to accept what they had been told. Shortly afterwards they had got blind drunk and had stayed that way for a week. Naturally, they had sought a second, third and even fourth opinion but the answer was always the same. There was absolutely no chance that an operation or any other form of treatment would improve Sheila's condition. With radio-therapy she might live for a year, without it for nine months if she was lucky.

Parker fumbled for a cigarette in the half-light and wondered for the hundredth time what was to be gained from their present journey. They had already experienced far too many disappointments: specialists in the United States and Switzerland had been unable to offer any hope, and he had finally steeled himself to the prospect of caring for the woman he loved during the last few weeks of her life, having to watch her crumble and fade before his eyes. It was a nightmare, but perhaps together they could see it

through with dignity. Meanwhile, understandably, Sheila had begun to clutch at straws . . .

She had been going through a period of severe depression when she had stumbled across an article which had appeared in a women's magazine. Her mood had improved considerably after reading the article, and it was then that she had persuaded him to embark on their present flight into madness.

Parker touched his cigarette with the flame from his solid-gold Dunhill lighter and briefly watched the grey smoke swirling in the light from the reading lamp. He reached into his inside pocket and produced a piece of paper, then slowly unfolded the paper and started to read the article for possibly the twentieth time.

Psychic Surgery . . . Fact or Fiction? There has been much controversy in recent years concerning the activities of so-called 'psychic surgeons' who claim to perform major surgery with their bare hands, entirely without the use of anaesthetics. It is maintained that their patients remain fully conscious throughout the operation and experience little or no pain. Already hundreds of statements have been taken from apparently reliable witnesses who claim to have seen operations involving the removal of large tumours and major organs, either in part or whole, from the thorax and abdomen. Witnesses also claim that, following these operations, patients are left with no visible scars. Many miraculous cures have already been attributed to the practitioners of this questionable art.

What may possibly be regarded as even more remarkable is the fact that the vast majority of the 'psychic surgeons' come from an agricultural area approximately sixty miles north of Manila on the island of Luzon in the Philippines. They are members of the Union Espiritista Cristiana de Filipinas, which is an organisation linking several small local churches. Their training involves meditative contemplation of those parts of the Holy Bible concerned with healing. However, at their own admission they have little or no medical training.

Parker briefly scanned the next few paragraphs which dealt with various arguments for and against the issue without presuming to reach any firm conclusions, before reading the last few lines:

All members of the observing group were highly qualified in the medical field. After watching operations performed by Tony Parmeo,

they all confirmed that no anaesthetics were used, that there were no indications of fraud, that no sterile precautions were taken and yet there was not one case of post-operative shock or infection.

Parker grunted, refolded the article and stuffed it back into his pocket. He still wasn't convinced. Only the previous week he had watched a television programme that had proved, to him at least, what a bunch of charlatans these characters were. The programme had revealed that blood analysed after an 'operation' had proved to be pig's blood; a growth removed from a female patient was later identified as chicken liver. In fairness, it had been suggested during the same programme that, although not of human origin, these substances may have been genuinely materialized by the surgeon in order to have the correct psychological effect on the patient. Whatever the explanation, Parker was a sceptic by nature and absolutely refused to attach any credibility to the suggestion that this type of operation might be of help where Sheila was concerned. He was sickened by the idea that, during what would probably prove to be the last few weeks of her life, his wife was prepared to allow herself to be pinched and pummelled by some greasy, oriental pig farmer. However, it was what Sheila wanted and if it held out any hope for her at all, or provided her with any sort of comfort, he was in no position to refuse. What he found most galling was the fact that he would have to prop her up yet again when, as was inevitable, the final disappointment came.

As Parker angrily stubbed out his cigarette the main cabin lights flickered into life and the pilot's voice crackled over the intercom announcing the start of the descent into Manila. The other passengers began to stretch, mumble and yawn their way back to the land of the living; Sheila stirred in the seat beside him. He watched as she opened her eyes and tried to smile at him, but the pain that immediately flooded back to her face was even more acute than his own.

As arranged, a representative of the local Spiritualist Society was waiting for them in the arrival lounge. He was a short, fat, balding man with a florid complexion who, despite the efficiency of the air-conditioning, stood nervously mopping beads of perspira-

tion from his forehead with a dirty grey handkerchief. As they approached he hastily balanced a pair of pebble-lens spectacles precariously on the end of his red nose and turned to meet them.

'Mr and Mrs Parker?' he asked uncertainly, at the same time extending a chubby hand in their general direction.

'Correct,' replied Parker, smiling as he shook the proferred hand and noting as he did so that, as he had suspected, it felt like a cold, wet mackerel.

'Simon Neville – Spiritualist Society,' explained the fat man, stammering rather badly as he did so. 'Mr Parmeo always likes a representative to meet his patients when they arrive. Hope you had a good flight.'

'Yes thank you, we did,' replied Sheila in a small voice, clinging to her husband's arm and looking deathly pale in the harsh overhead lighting. Neville nodded with satisfaction and Parker couldn't help thinking that, in his baggy, white tropical suit, the man looked rather like a grubby, diminutive and young Sidney Greenstreet.

Neville spent the time waiting for their luggage in a constant state of agitation and was visibly relieved when it finally arrived.

'Right!' he exclaimed, clapping his hands together like a fat, excited schoolboy, 'If you'd like to follow me I have a taxi waiting to take you to your hotel.'

Carrying a heavy suitcase in each hand, and with Sheila hanging heavily on his arm Parker followed the shuffling figure. As they went out through the automatic sliding doors and into the sticky and oppressive night air, he felt a certain cynical amusement.

The streets of Manila were overflowing with colour and confusion. Through the open windows of the taxi, crawling sluggishly through the traffic, came the incessant honking of a thousand car horns, a cacophonous ringing of bells and the excited jabber of the local populace. They were flanked in by brightly painted vehicles of every size and description. Occasionally a gaudy lorry or jeep, converted for the purposes of public transport, would edge past them through the traffic; its swarthy young occupants would wave, cheer and then hammer thunderously with their fists on the roof of the taxi. Although their behaviour appeared to be good natured, Parker felt that the night could explode into vio-

ence at any moment, such was the atmosphere created by the noise and confusion. Neville seemed to sense what he was feeling and, turning in his seat, volunteered some information.

'It used to be far worse than this before they introduced Martial Law,' he shouted, to make himself heard above the din. 'Four years ago almost everybody used to carry a gun and we had just about the highest murder rate in the world. One year fifty people were killed during election rioting and a local candidate got blown up in his own helicopter. It was after that happened that President Marcos started to clamp down.' Parker suddenly began to understand why Neville always seemed so nervous.

The Tower Hotel was a large, modern establishment situated in the centre of town. Once their luggage had been deposited in their room Sheila went to take a shower and Parker found himself alone with Neville down in the lobby. Neville was obviously in a hurry to leave, but not before he had discussed some unfinished business.

'Mr Parmeo will arrive here tomorrow morning at eleven if that's convenient for you Mr Parker,' the fat man informed him, at the same time shifting his considerable weight from one foot to the other. Parker, as well as being astonished, received the distinct impression that it didn't matter a damn just how convenient or inconvenient it might be: Parmeo would be coming anyway, take it or leave it.

'You don't mean that he's going to perform his wondrous feat right here in the hotel?' he asked pointedly, already having a pretty good idea what the answer would be.

'And why not?' asked Neville with nervous indignation. 'The hotel management have a separate room put aside expressly for that purpose. I'm sure you already appreciate that there has been considerable demand for Mr Parmeo's services in recent years.'

Parker said nothing. His first glimpse of Neville had already convinced him that the whole business was one enormous swindle but he carefully controlled his anger. They were only staying in Manila for forty-eight hours and, as far as he was concerned, the sooner they got the pantomime over with the better.

'Incidentally,' continued Neville, scratching his ear self-

consciously, 'I trust that you have Mr Parmeo's fee. If so, perhaps I can take it from you now.'

Parker felt quite sick. He pulled an envelope from his jacket pocket and angrily thrust it in Neville's direction.

'Take it!' he snapped, 'I'm used to throwing money down the drain.'

Neville, taken aback and not a little apprehensive following Parker's sudden outburst, managed a wry smile as he accepted the envelope and decided to offer some advice.

'You should not be so sceptical Mr Parker – after all, you are no longer in England. I have been living here for fifteen years and have seen many things that I can neither explain nor understand. Your wife has faith and that is a good thing. Perhaps you should follow her example or, at least, keep an open mind.' Feeling that he had said enough Neville turned on his heel, wobbled out of the hotel and disappeared into the night.

Sheila was sitting on the bed waiting for him when he returned to their room. He noticed that two bottles of pills and a half-empty glass of water were standing on the bedside cabinet and, relieved to see that his wife looked much better than she had done an hour earlier, he silently thanked God for modern medicine.

'How do you feel?' he asked quietly, at the same time placing both hands round her slim waist; he lifted her gently to her feet and kissed her lightly on the forehead.

'Much better now that we've finally arrived,' she replied, allowing her head to rest against his shoulder. 'But right now I'm more concerned about you. You must find this whole business a terrible strain. All you've done for months now is to take care of me and I know how much you worry about me. The last thing I want is for you to crack up.'

He laughed aloud and held her at arms length. 'Taking care of you is my pleasure,' he explained softly, 'and besides, I'm as sound as a bell. I saw old man Shaw only last week and he said that I'm good for at least another hundred years. So stop worrying about me and start worrying about things that really matter.'

'What, for instance?' she asked sleepily, pulling herself closer to him.

'Like tomorrow morning for instance. It's all arranged for eleven o'clock. Are you nervous?' He spoke lightly in order to hide his true feelings.

'Not really,' she replied. 'In fact I'm rather relieved. No! – more than that. I'm really sure that it's going to work. I really am!' She was smiling as she spoke and, as if filled with some inner radiance, looked more beautiful than he had seen her for years. He said nothing to disillusion her but held her close to prevent her from seeing the anger and despair that he felt must be reflected in his eyes.

They stood waiting for Parmeo in a small, white-painted room that was empty save for a wash basin in one corner and a large wooden table, covered with a sheet, positioned in the centre of the floor. There were no windows in the room and the light came from a single overhead bulb mounted in a plain plastic lampshade. They stood in silence but didn't have long to wait.

Parmeo and his assistant entered the room at exactly eleven o'clock and Parker's worst fears were immediately realized. Parmeo, an extremely short but stocky man with dark skin and thick black hair, was improbably dressed in a blue, short-sleeved shirt, faded jeans and basketball boots. He carried a small, green holdall which proudly displayed the name of an internationally known sports goods manufacturer printed in large gold letters. Parker estimated that the man was in his late forties and was probably of Chinese ancestry but, whatever his parentage, there was no doubt that his appearance, together with that of the gangling youth who accompanied him, did little to promote confidence in his supposedly miraculous abilities.

The youth, who was dressed in a similar style to his mentor and who was carrying a large plastic bowl, went straight across to the wash basin.

Parmeo ignored Parker completely and addressed himself directly to Sheila.

'Mrs Parker?' His voice had the rasping sound of a coarse file biting its way through hard metal. Sheila nodded but said nothing.

'We may begin whenever you are ready,' he continued. 'I can assure you that you will feel nothing. None of my patients have

ever come to any harm and therefore you have nothing to fear.' He paused for a moment and nodded to his assistant who dutifully filled the plastic bowl with water and brought it back to the table.

Parmeo continued to stare intently at Sheila with what Parker felt was considerably more than simply professional interest. The man was practically devouring her with his eyes.

'If you would like to remove your blouse and skirt,' said Parmeo in a whisper, 'I think that we are ready to begin. However, I think that it would be advisable for your husband to leave the room.' It was the first time that he had acknowledged Parker's presence but, as he spoke, his eyes remained firmly fixed on Sheila.

'I'm staying right where I am!' protested Parker. 'I'm not leaving my wife alone with a couple of total strangers. For all I know you could be the local rat-catcher. Besides, you haven't even asked what's wrong with her, for God's sake!'

Parker, shaking with indignation, watched as for the first time Parmeo turned and looked directly into his eyes. He could sense the man's fixed stare burning its way into his mind and he experienced the strange sensation that he was almost transfixed, like a mouse caught in the hypnotic gaze of a deadly reptile. The smile that split Parmeo's face was no less sinister than his staring eyes. Parker suddenly understood why Sheila had remained silent for so long. She was probably already hypnotized.

'There are some questions that do not need to be asked Mr Parker,' rasped Parmeo quietly and deliberately, taking Sheila by the arm and leading her towards the table. 'If you wish to remain in the room I must insist that you stay exactly where you are. I find your presence rather disturbing.'

For his wife's sake Parker controlled the rage that he felt. He fully understood just why Parmeo found his presence disturbing. The man was a cheap trickster who knew only too well that an observant eye allowed close to the table would be able to detect the intricacies of his deception. He was obliged to watch as Sheila, moving in an almost dream-like slow motion, obediently removed her skirt and blouse, slipped out of her shoes, and proceeded to lie down with her back on the table.

Parmeo placed his holdall on the tiled floor beneath the table, unzipped it and produced a large roll of cotton wool which he handed to his assistant. Then, standing erect, he closed his eyes, held both his arms outstretched and slowly lowered his clenched fists on to Sheila's bare flesh.

Parker looked on in silence, experiencing irrational disgust at the sight of Parmeo's dark brown hands in contact with his wife's fair skin. As he watched, the self-styled surgeon began to move his hands slowly, as if kneading the white flesh beneath his fingertips. As his movements became more rapid the assistant tore off a piece of cotton wool, dipped it briefly into the bowl of water and began gently to sponge the area immediately surrounding Parmeo's scrabbling fingers. After a few secounds a rich, red liquid began to bubble up from beneath the surgeon's hands.

Parker watched with mounting horror and confusion. Although the thick red liquid certainly appeared to be blood, Sheila was showing no sign of pain and was lying, completely relaxed with her arms by her sides, breathing steadily and staring up at the ceiling. He knew that it must be a trick because that was the only logical explanation. The assistant must have introduced some sort of chemical that reacted with water and produced the red colouration. It was obviously nothing more than a sick and obscene joke.

Meanwhile Parmeo had raised his right hand and had begun to extend the thumb and fingers of his left hand across Sheila's abdomen while his assistant frantically continued to mop away rivulets of the gory liquid which continued to ooze and bubble without showing any sign of abating.

From where he stood it was impossible for Parker to view the proceedings in any great detail. He wanted to move closer to the table but, for some indefinable reason, felt unable to do so. It was almost as if Parmeo's instructions had left him physically rooted to the spot. However, what he saw next prevented him from considering the matter further: even from his poor vantage point, he clearly witnessed exposed edges of red, raw flesh being forced wide apart by the extending fingers of Parmeo's left hand.

Parker clenched his teeth and told himself repeatedly that what he could see taking place before his eyes was impossible because

his education and the extent of his personal experience told him so. It was nothing more than an elaborate illusion, cleverly and cunningly devised to prey on the hopes and the gullibility of those in desperate need of both spiritual and physical salvation. The strength of this knowledge filled him with an intense hatred and loathing for the man Parmeo and all of his kind.

As if reading his mind, Parmeo opened his eyes and stared straight at Parker with his face once again splitting in a broad, wicked smile; then slowly lowered his right hand into the wet, scarlet chasm that had appeared in Sheila's body beneath his left hand.

Parker fought a desperate mental battle in a vain effort to dismiss the illusion. He no longer had any fear for Sheila's safety because he knew that Parmeo could ill afford to abuse the source of his income. The operation was a fake but Parmeo was trying hard to convince him otherwise and to impress him with his 'miraculous' talent. Parker refused to be impressed. He returned Parmeo's smile with as much contempt as he could muster, but the man's eyes were once again closed as his right hand apparently began to probe deep within Sheila's body.

Parker continued to watch as, only a few moments later, Parmeo slowly withdrew his blood-dripping hand which was clasping a wet mass of pink and purple flesh that appeared to be attached to the body by a long, taut glistening grey membrane. The assistant produced a small pair of scissors from his pocket, snipped through the membrane, took the excised mass from Parmeo and unceremoniously plopped it into a large specimen jar obtained from the holdall before returning to his mopping-up operation. Parmeo, meanwhile, had once again begun to knead Sheila's flesh and, at the same time, appeared to be drawing the skin together over the site of the incision. Gradually, the flow of blood was reduced to a mere trickle; after a few more seconds it stopped altogether. Parmeo slowly withdrew his hands and stepped back from the table. The assistant took one final wipe and then turned away to empty the bowl into the wash basin. Sheila's body was unmarked.

'You may get dressed now Mrs Parker,' whispered Parmeo as he opened his eyes. 'I do not think that you will experience any

more pain.' As he spoke his assistant was busy repacking the holdall and, with the plastic bowl tucked under his left arm, seemed almost ready to leave.

As Sheila began to dress herself Parmeo picked up the specimen jar, walked across the room, and thrust it into Parker's hand.

'This is for you Mr Parker,' he snapped. 'No doubt you will wish to have it examined by an expert, such is the limited extent of your understanding'. As he spoke he produced a small white card which he slipped into the breast pocket of Parker's jacket.

'You may need this Mr Parker. I am quite sure that we shall be meeting again very soon.' Then, followed closely by his familiar, he stepped out of the door and was gone. Sheila, who had just finished buttoning her blouse, murmured a quiet 'thank you' as they left.

'How do you feel?' asked Parker, crossing the room quickly and taking hold of his wife's hand.

'It's hard to say,' she replied slowly, smiling up into his face as though still in a daze. 'I'm still tingling all over but I don't think I can feel any pain.' Parker wasn't surprised. The shock of the experience she had been through was probably sufficient to have a numbing effect on her nervous system for several hours. He had no doubt that the pain would come later.

For the first time he looked down at the specimen jar cradled in his left hand and was only mildly surprised to see that it was empty. What interested him far more was the small wad of red-stained cotton wool that he had noticed lying innocently on the floor beneath the table.

Within the hour they were travelling across town in a taxi, heading for St Vincent's Hospital. Parker was deep in thought. It had been his intention to keep the truth from Sheila for as long as possible but, understandably, she was insisting on a complete medical check-up at the earliest opportunity and had telephoned the hospital herself to arrange the appointment. Remarkably enough she seemed to have considerable faith in Parmeo and was naturally eager to establish the results of his treatment.

Parker knew better. An examination of the stained cotton wool

had confirmed his suspicions; even to a layman like himself, it was obvious that the red substance was not blood. The smell, colour and texture indicated that it was either potash or some other form of cheap dye. This knowledge, together with the magical disappearance of the object in the specimen jar, had finally persuaded him that he would be fully justified in confronting Parmeo and demanding the return of his money: teaching the little man a lesson he wouldn't forget. He was mildly concerned by the fact that Parmeo had taken the trouble to provide him with an address, neatly printed on the white card that had been slipped into his pocket, as if inviting trouble. On the other hand, he knew that he was both big enough and ugly enough to take care of himself, especially if he happened to catch the little weasel on his own. His biggest problem would be managing to confront Parmeo without Sheila's knowledge.

Amazingly, the hospital provided Parker with exactly the opportunity he needed. A tall young doctor helpfully explained that it would take several hours to conduct the various tests that Sheila was to undergo and she suggested that, rather than wait for her, he should take the opportunity to look around the town; they could meet back at the hotel later. Parker didn't like the idea of Sheila being alone when the results of the tests were made known to her but, rightly or wrongly, his desire to confront Parmeo was far stronger. Accordingly, he made only a token protest. Sheila insisted that it would be pointless for him to wait and finally he agreed to leave.

Twenty minutes later he stepped out of a taxi and found himself standing in front of a shabby grey building on the outskirts of town, only a stone's throw from the waterfront. The ground floor of the building had once been a pharmacy but, with paint flaking away from the sign above the heavily padlocked door and the windows barred and shuttered, it was obviously no longer in use. Parker noticed that on one side of the building a rickety wooden staircase led up to an entrance above the store.

As he climbed the staircase Parker experienced a fleeting moment of irrational fear, an uneasy churning in the pit of his stomach. He was angry with himself, took several deep breaths

and, as he reached the top of the stairs, raised his hand to knock on the unpainted door. Before he could do so a sound reached him from within.

'Come in Mr Parker, I've been expecting you.' There was no mistaking Parmeo's voice.

Parker pushed open the door, stepped into the room and closed the door behind him. Having stepped out of bright sunlight it took his eyes a few seconds to adjust to the semi-darkness. He blinked several times and than was able to make out the details. There was only one small window in the room, facing the rear of the building, and it was heavily curtained. The room was sparsely furnished with a shabby leather couch positioned beneath the window and a large, potted rubber plant standing in the far corner. The floorboards were bare and, in several places, plaster was crumbling away from the walls. A spider had woven an intricate web between the yellowing ceiling and the dusty flex dangling an empty socket. It was obvious that, although ideal for a meeting, nobody had lived there for years.

Parmeo sat, with his legs crossed, in a rattan armchair on the far side of the room. He was dressed as he had been earlier and was staring wide-eyed at Parker over hands that were clasped together in front of his ridiculously grinning mouth. He appeared to be alone.

'Won't you please be seated, Mr Parker?' he smirked, unclasping his hands and pointing to the couch.

Parker couldn't understand what was happening to him. He had come to this place to tell Parmeo exactly what he thought of him and possibly to tear the little man to pieces. Instead, although his anger, outrage and indignation were greater than at any other time, he found himself unable to do or say anything other than to cross the room and take a seat on the couch as instructed.

'Don't concern yourself Mr Parker,' whispered Parmeo, gently rocking backwards and forwards in his chair, 'my only purpose in bringing you here was to provide you with the opportunity to learn something about yourself. You see, like all materialists you have a great difficulty in understanding or appreciating those things to which you are unable to attach a satisfactory explanation. If I were to suggest that you should

simply accept that some things are beyond your understanding you would, no doubt, feel insulted.' Parmeo's voice had increased in volume and, as he spoke, he moved his chair closer to the couch.

'I have no doubt, Mr Parker, that you attach great importance to your fine home and your large, expensive motor cars and to all the things that can so readily be purchased by those with sufficient funds. In fact, they are the only things that you can understand Mr Parker . . . things that you can touch, things with which you can measure your success.' Parmeo was shouting now and, with his face only a few inches away, Parker could feel and smell the man's hot spicy breath.

'I despise you Mr Parker! I despise you for your crippling limitations, for your lack of imagination, for your willingness to condemn those things that you cannot possibly understand!' Parmeo's tirade ended as suddenly as it had begun; and when he spoke again it was in a rattling whisper that chilled Parker's blood.

'Why don't you stretch out on the couch Mr Parker?' breathed Parmeo. Parker felt the fear beginning to bubble up inside him. He fought desperately to speak and to strike out at the poisonous little gnome who was ridiculing him, but with no success, Instead, he felt himself falling backwards on to the couch.

'You see,' continued Parmeo, leaning across and starting to unbutton Parker's shirt, 'I too am a materialist, but in a rather different sense of the word. As my patients find it reassuring to see physical evidence of my ability to cure, I often practise materialization during my operations.' Parker watched helplessly as ,having fully unbuttoned his shirt, Parmeo removed his belt and unzipped the front of his trousers.

'Of course,' Parmeo continued with deceptive mildness, 'such tricks are really not necessary because I have the ability to rearrange living tissue by a simple laying on of hands. The problems of time, distance and dimension mean nothing to me Mr Parker, and yesterday, today and tomorrow are one and the same thing. In my world illusion is as real as the truth.'

Parker could feel himself shaking with fear. Parmeo was a madman and it was impossible to say what might happen next, but

try as he might there was nothing that he could do to prevent it.

Parmeo leaned across and opened the front of Parker's shirt, exposing his bare torso. For the first time Parker noticed the gold teeth that punctuated the lunatic's smile and the short black hair that sprouted from his nostrils.

'I am fully aware of what your intentions were when you came here, my friend; for that reason I intend to demonstrate my ability . Of course, I spare my *patients* any feeling of pain, but you shall have no such luxury. You will experience every sensation and, as for the rest, it will be up to you to separate reality from the illusion.'

Parmeo rose to his feet and stood with the index finger of his right hand pointing to a spot just below Parker's rib cage. Suddenly, he moved his finger six inches through the air and Parker felt a searing pain like a red-hot poker ripping across the surface of his stomach. He cast his eyes downwards and almost choked when he saw the gaping, jagged wound that had appeared in the region of the pain. He knew that it was an illusion, but his own agony told him otherwise. He watched the thick red blood gushing from his body as it gathered in large sticky pools on the couch and began to drip steadily on the bare boards below. As the severed abdominal muscles contracted the ragged gash began to rip and widen, exposing the glistening organs within. The waves of pain hit him like blows from a sledgehammer; just as Parker was about to slide into unconsciousness, Parmeo shrieked again.

'No! It's not that easy Mr Parker. I won't allow you to faint. I will, however, allow you to scream. It will add to my pleasure and, after all, nobody will hear you.'

Even as he finished speaking Parker began to scream in agony and his piercing cries shook the building for several minutes until the pain subsided into a throbbing numbness and the scream became a choking sob. He closed his eyes and only opened them again when he heard Parmeo's insane laughter and felt the icy touch of cold hands slipping inside his body. What he saw when he opened his eyes filled him with loathing and disgust. Parmeo stood holding a long loop of slippery grey intestine which he pulled clear of the abdominal cavity. Remarkably there was no

additional pain and, although it had proved possible to scream, Parker was still unable to voice his hatred and contempt. Parmeo was able to read his tortured expression.

'The only thing you will find it possible to ask for Mr Parker is mercy,' he rasped, allowing the intestine to slip from his grasp and to drop, in an obscene loop, across Parker's chest.

'Now,' he continued, 'let me see if I can strike a little closer to home.'

Parker watched, helpless and terrified, as Parmeo's hand came clawing its way towards his right eye. He screamed horribly as he felt the strong fingers gouging deep into the socket and the searing explosion that tore through his brain as the eye was ripped from his head. He kept his other eye tightly closed and his screams were stifled when Parmeo stuffed the warm wet eyeball into his mouth, causing him to retch once, then vomit violently. With pain ripping through his body he managed to sob, 'No more!' before sliding into oblivion.

The room came swimming back into view and, as he slowly regained his senses, Parker automatically clutched at his stomach and gingerly touched his right eye only to find that there was no longer any pain and that he was completely unharmed. His eyes gradually focused on Parmeo who was standing right in front of him, sneering with contempt.

'You see Mr Parker, I was correct. You are a very limited individual. I doubt if you will ever have the necessary intellect or imagination accurately to differentiate between illusion and reality. Now perhaps you are ready to return to the dull and dreary world that you are able to understand.' As he finished speaking he nodded towards the open door.

Parker, realizing that he had freedom of movement, once again rose slowly to his feet before the rage boiling up inside him exploded. Instead of making for the door he swung round, grabbed Parmeo by the neck with both hands and lifted him bodily off the ground.

'You filthy, disgusting little bastard!' he bellowed, squeezing with all the strength that he could muster and swinging Parmeo's body around as if it weighed nothing at all. Parmeo offered no

resistance but hung limply with his arms by his sides, his brown eyes wide and staring and his face split in a grotesque smile. The eternal smile drove Parker into an ever-increasing frenzy.

'What are you smiling at you parasite?' he yelled hysterically. 'Who's got the last laugh now? What do you find so funny about dying? This is some good old-fashioned reality for you, you demented fiend!' He could hear a gurgling rattle in Parmeo's throat and watched as saliva began to dribble from the corner of his mouth; but the damnable face continued to smile and the eyes to stare. The sight turned his blood cold. He carried the body across the room and began to smash Parmeo's head repeatedly against the wall, sending lumps of plaster spinning to the floor. With each crashing blow the sound of impact lessened as the skull cracked, crumbled and finally struck the wall with a wet crunch. Bone and flesh tore asunder as blood and brains splattered up the wall and across the couch. It was only then that Parker slowly released his grip on Parmeo's throat, allowing the body to drop to the floor. He noticed with detached interest the blood dripping from his own fingers from where they had ripped into Parmeo's flesh. What bothered him much more was that, although glazed in death, Parmeo's eyes were still staring; the ghastly, malevolent smile remained. He fought back the urge to scream, turned and walked steadily out of the door.

It didn't take Parker long to discover that Philippine taxi drivers are not inclined either to make conversation or to ask too many questions and he arrived back at the hotel convinced that he had managed the journey without arousing any suspicion. Fortunately he had retained the key to his room and was therefore able to avoid any confrontation with the hotel staff. His first priority was to rid himself and his clothing of bloodstains and he had only just bathed and changed when Sheila came bursting into the room. She rushed over to him, laughing wildly as she threw herself into his arms.

'I'm cured!' she shouted gleefully, squeezing him hard as she was able. 'There's nothing wrong with me, nothing at all! All the tests were negative. It's a miracle darling, a miracle!'

Parker held her very close to him and joined in her laughter;

despite his previous experiences that day, for the first time he began to know the true meaning of fear.

As far as Parker was concerned the fact that they had managed to fly out of the Philippines without being challenged by the police was another miracle. For him, the twenty-four hours prior to their departure had been a nightmare. He knew that there was a very strong connection between himself and Parmeo on the day of the murder and he had therefore been expecting the police to come hammering on the door at any moment. He could only assume that his good fortune was due to the fact that the body had not yet been discovered.

The flight home, although tiring, was uneventful apart from the fact that he seemed to have caught a mild stomach chill. Naturally Sheila was deliriously happy and so was he. However, he couldn't entirely dismiss the guilt, fear and general disquiet that was gnawing away at the corner of his mind.

The drive down to Weybridge from Heathrow took just over half an hour and the first thing they did after stepping into the house was to crack open a bottle of champagne in celebration. It was about an hour later, when they were merrily tackling the task of unpacking, that the telephone rang and Parker went to answer it.

'Giles? This is Chris Shaw,' crackled the voice on the other end of the line. 'Hope I've not caught you at an awkward time.'

'Of course not, Doc. We've been home for quite a while. To what do we owe this unexpected pleasure?' he asked warmly, welcoming the sound of a friendly and familiar voice.

'I'd like you to come in and see me tomorrow Giles. It's rather important.' His tone sounded genuinely urgent and Parker wondered what was bothering him.

'If it's about Sheila you can stop worrying, Doc – No more problems there,' he explained, declining to leave the details until a later date.

'No, Giles, It's nothing to do with Sheila. It concerns you.' There was an awkward silence and Parker felt a sudden chill in the air.

'Come on, Doc!' he urged. 'Stop being so secretive. What's the problem?' The man on the other end of the line hesitated before replying.

'I shouldn't really tell you over the phone Giles but, as you're a friend and as it's bloody important, I suppose I can make an exception . . .' Silence.

'Come on, for God's sake!' snapped Parker. 'What the bloody hell is it?' He was angry, impatient and, although he didn't know exactly why, he was scared as well.

'It's those damn x-rays that you had taken the other week. You remember – as part of your check-up. When I looked at them originally I could have sworn that they were as clear as crystal. Not a mark in sight. The strange thing is that I just happened to look at them again yesterday and . . . Well, I'm dammed if I know how to tell you.' The voice sounded most apologetic.

Parker stood shivering and gently rubbing his stomach to ease the pain that he could feel burning deep inside him.

'Whatever it is I'm a big boy now, Doc,' he urged desperately. 'You can tell me. I want to know the exact score.'

'Well, the x-rays look completely different,' explained the voice quietly. 'I suppose it could be a fault in the processing but if it's not it's very serious . . . very serious indeed.'

'How serious?' asked Parker, the receiver trembling in his hand.

'I've already told you – very serious,' replied the voice.

'Terminal?' volunteered Parker, gritting his teeth and forcing the word out through a barrier of pain.

The voice hesitated for a full ten seconds before replying.

'Yes – I'm afraid so.'

To Parker, the voice on the other end of the line sounded a million miles away.

Only ten thousand miles away in Manila on the island of Luzon in the Philippines, Tony Parmeo was smilingly introducing himself to his first patient of the day.

Edwin Brown

Round every corner

He leaned, exhausted, in the steady downpour of rain, supporting himself with one trembling hand against a street lamp-post. The air torn from his lungs came in long, painful rasps; the thumping in his chest and throat were loud in his ears. Tom Clayton, thirty-five, junior partner in a successful engineering company, bachelor, normally healthy and *compos mentis*, until recently enjoying life to the full, now a quivering mass of nervous palpitating flesh, fleeing for his sanity. His legs turned to jelly, would not move any more. He wanted to vomit. Abject fear enveloped him in an icy cocoon of rapidly drying sweat. Panting like a trapped animal, he turned his head to stare back along the shadowy surburban street.

'Oh God, Oh God,' he said; but his voice was cracked and barely audible.

He clung to the lamp-post, trying to recover from the mad panic that had caused him to run full pelt for several hundred yards along this quiet, tree-lined road until he could run no more. The rain beat upon his uncovered head and ran in rivulets under the collar of his raincoat.

He must get on. Only another minute and he'd be there. Safe.

Safe? Would he ever be safe any more? He looked ahead. Maybe there was a chance. Only another hundred yards. He pushed his wobbling legs onward, turning his head every few seconds to glance apprehensively behind him, his eyes darting from side to side; but he could see nothing of the horror that had shocked him into flight a minute before, only a deserted avenue flanked on both sides by expensive, detached houses fronted by neat, be-shrubbed gardens.

He could see the Bradshaws' house now; large, double-fronted, with a driveway at one side leading to a garage. The front of the house was dark but for a light in a small window on the side

nearest to him, which he knew from experience was that of the bathroom. Celia was preparing for bed.

He arrived at the gateway and pushed it open. As he did so he heard – or was it imagination? – from the other side of the road, under one of the large trees along the avenue, a distinct shuffling sound that could have been the scraping of a shoe on gravel. His head jerked towards the noise. He glimpsed, or thought he glimpsed, a vague movement in the shadows beneath the low, hanging branches and he ran, his fatigue forgotten in those few seconds, to the porched front door. He pressed the bell-push hard, hearing the ringing from somewhere inside; pressed again and again, then, in desperation, kept his finger on the button until he saw lights come on behind the glass panelling. He heard Celia Bradshaw's voice, sharp, controlled, 'Who's there?'

'It's me. Tom. Let me in.'

There was a short pause, then she said, 'What do you want?'

Almost beside himself, he shouted, 'For God's sake, let me in!' He pressed the bell again.

There was an immediate sound of bolts being drawn. A key turned in a lock. The door opened. 'Tom, it's late. Nearly ten o'clock. I—'

'Let me in.' He pushed past her into the hallway.

She stood, in her dressing-gown, her face without make-up, puzzled and annoyed at this sudden intrusion. She was self-possessed as always – thirty years old, tall, attractive, hard, calculating. He took an impatient step forward and pushed the door shut behind her.

She said, 'Tom, this is too bad. I was just going to bed. What do you want?'

'Let's go in. I need a drink.'

She looked hard at him for a moment, saw the desperation in his eyes, then opened a nearby door, switched on a light. 'Help yourself.'

They went into the sitting room. He crossed straight to the drinks cabinet, poured a large scotch and began to gulp it noisily.

She said sarcastically, 'No thanks. I don't want one.' Ignoring her he leaned forward against the mantelpiece, still breathing heavily from his exertions and trembling in the aftermath of fear.

He said, 'I've been trying to phone you all evening. All I got was the engaged signal.'

'I didn't get back from my sister till eight o'clock—' she hesitated, 'and the phone's been going ever since.'

'Why didn't you 'phone *me*. You knew I'd be waiting. I haven't seen you since the funeral. Two weeks you've been away. One letter in two weeks – and then you said nothing.'

'What was there to say? I thought you'd have realized—' She did not finish the sentence.

'*Realized?*'

'It's all over, Tom, she said 'When Sam was killed a lot of things changed.'

He turned from the mantelpiece and stared at her bemused.

She continued. 'You've had affairs before. You know they don't go on for ever.'

He shook his head in disbelief. 'Is that all you can find to say?'

'What do you expect me to say? You're drunk, Tom. Tell me what you've come for and then go, please. I'm tired.'

He gripped her arm in an uprush of anger and desperation. 'You bitch! You know what I'm talking about. You must know—'

'Tom, let me go!' She pulled herself free, backing away. 'Have you gone mad or something? I don't know what you're talking about and I don't care. Just go and leave me alone. Just go.'

'But I want to talk to you. Don't you understand? After what I did. After what I did for you I must talk to you . . .'

'*Did for me?*' She stared at him, astonished . . . What did you ever do for me, Tom?'

'Murder.'

In the silence that followed she moved slowly across to a low coffee table nearby, opened a small, ornate box lying on it, took out a cigarette and lit it. She sat on the arm of the settee and regarded him coolly. 'What's it all about, Tom?' she said.

He did not answer and seemed incapable of saying any more. She nodded towards the cabinet. He took another whisky, emptying the glass almost at once. He looked at her. 'You know what it's about. Don't you? . . . Don't you?' His voice was tight with tension.

She smiled faintly. 'Tom, you must be more drunk than I thought. Go home, get a good night's sleep and ring me from the factory in the morning.'

'I'm finished with the factory. Finished with the company.'

'Finished? But that's absurd. I need you there. Without Sam I can't — '

'It's because of Sam I'm leaving,' he countered.

'Because of Sam? What the hell do you mean? You've every reason to be staying on. I'm passing more shares over to you. You'll run the factory. It doesn't make sense.'

'Lots of things don't make sense. I'm getting out – as far away as I can.'

Decisively, she stubbed out her cigarette and stood up. 'All right Tom. You're leaving. I won't argue. But you must give me time to think . . . a week or so. I'm going away on Wednesday for a few days and when I get back —'

'Going away? Again?'

'Yes.'

'Someone else?'

She did not answer.

'My God, you don't hang about, do you? Well, you'll have to cancel it. I'm leaving tomorrow.'

Startled, she said, 'Tomorrow?'

'If I'm still alive.'

'Tom —'

'If I can get through today maybe I can start again.'

'Tom, there's no point in your staying while you're like this. We've said all—'

'I'm going to die . . . maybe tonight.'

She looked at him intently, then she shook her head resignedly. 'You'd better take that wet coat off.' She took another cigarette, lit it and seated herself on the settee, watched him remove his raincoat and throw it over a chair.

'I don't know where to begin . . .'

'Begin anywhere,' she said.

'It's – it's Sam.'

'Sam?'

'I keep seeing him, Celia, and hearing him. It sounds mad but

he's right here in my head and I can't get rid of him.'

'Sam's been dead for two weeks.' Celia was gazing steadily at him.

'He can't hurt you.'

'Can't he?' He was breathing heavily again now, panic rising once more in him. 'I tell you I really see him sometimes. If I hadn't been at the funeral—'

'You're talking rubbish—'

'I'd swear he's still alive.'

Quietly she said, 'Tom, go home.'

'You don't want to know, do you?' he burst out. 'You don't give a damn—'

'If you mean you want someone to hold your hand you've come to the wrong person.'

'My God, you're a bitch. You're as much to blame as I am.'

'*Blame?*' What are you talking about?'

'Do you believe a grudge can be carried over into the grave?'

'Tom, am I going mad or is it you? I haven't the remotest idea what you're talking about: *Blame? Grudges? Sam?* . . . What are you frightened of? And what's all this about murder and dying? Are you ill?'

'I'm not ill. I'm desperately serious. Let me tell you.'

'If you must,' she said wearily. She saw his gaze go to the whisky bottle. 'No, Tom. No more whisky – yet. First tell me what you have to. And make it quick.'

'It all started at the party.' he began.

'Party?'

'About two evenings after Sam died I went over to my sister's place. It was her engagement party. I didn't feel too good and I didn't want to go but I couldn't let her down.'

'Yes.'

'There was a quite a large crowd there and a lot of drinking going on. Everyone was having a giggle with some middle-aged character who was telling fortunes or something. My sister said he was a professional medium – some friend of hers had brought him along. She took me over to be introduced. He didn't say anything at first. He just looked at me – a funny sort of look. My

sister laughed and said, "Could you tell Tom anything about himself?" And he said, "Yes, I could, but not now. I think it's something he'd prefer to hear in private," I more or less laughed at him.'

Celia said. 'A spiritualist? Don't tell me you believe in them?'

'Wait a minute. I didn't take much notice at the time, although there was something about this man that seemed – well, he seemed to look right through me. I noticed he kept looking at me all the evening and eventually he came over and sat down next to me. He said, "I'm sorry, but I must talk to you. All the evening I've been conscious of a strong encirclement of tragedy around you. Something has happened very recently involving a sharp impact, a collision of some sort – and a death—" '

Celia interrupted, 'Sam was killed by a car. He could have heard or read about it.'

'Well, I could hardly believe what I was hearing. He was so right, so right, Celia. I can remember feeling – well, a cold shiver down my back. I said, "Are you trying to be funny?" He said, "There's nothing funny about this. I'm quite serious. The person who passed over wants me to communicate with you and I must. I'm getting an initial: the letter *S*." It shook me, Celia. I said to him, "Look, who's been talking to you?" He said, "Nobody – nobody on this earth, that is." '

'Someone told him – your sister.'

'I didn't tell her Sam was dead – I didn't tell anyone.'

'He could have known from anywhere.'

'No!' his voice was raised impatiently, irritably. 'That medium knew something nobody else but me could know. He said Sam was blaming me for his death. He said, "I'm sorry to say this but I'm getting a very strong emotional feeling here – a feeling of hate. This person is saying he wants to make things even." '

Celia tapped ash from her cigarette into an ashtray. 'You believe this nonsense?'

'Have you ever walked along a dark lane and had a feeling that someone's following you and when you look round there's nobody there? That's how it's been for me since that evening – that same sort of terror.'

'Childish imaginings.'

'I wish I could believe that ... It really started the next day when I went to the factory. I suppose it had been playing on my mind – but it was uncanny. I was passing Sam's office when, quite suddenly, I felt he was in there, sitting at his desk, waiting for me to go in. All that day I sat in my own office expecting him to buzz me on the intercom; I had a scared sensation inside me like a schoolboy waiting to be called to the headmaster's study; I couldn't concentrate properly on work and I left as early as I could. And when I got home to my flat I found myself waiting again as I had during the day at the factory – waiting for Sam to call me on the phone. And now, I daren't go into his office ... It's always worse just before evening when the works closes: his office is in darkness then; nobody ever uses it.'

'Tom, you really are making an awful lot out of nothing. You're not a child – or are you?'

'All I know is I just can't take it in that Sam's dead and can't harm me.'

Impatiently she said, 'How can you be so gullible, Tom? How can you let a fake like that have such an effect.'

'So many things have happened lately. I'm scared to answer the telephone – even at the factory. And tonight – tonight the phone went at half past seven. I thought it was you.'

'I didn't ring you.'

His voice was shaking. 'I picked it up but all I could hear was the sound of breathing ... Nobody spoke ... Just heavy breathing – that's all I heard.'

'Some crank. You're letting your imagination run away with you.' Her tone was dismissive, almost contemptuous.

'Imagination? Was it imagination last night?'

'Last night? What happened?'

'I was later than I wanted to be in the office. Lately I've been leaving before dark, but last night I couldn't get away. I drove out of the gates on to the main road. There's always a lot of traffic along there – always. I'd just got into top gear – I was doing about forty miles an hour – and suddenly a man stepped out into the road right in front of me. It all happened so quickly. He just stood there in the road looking right at me. I couldn't see his face properly but, as God is my judge, I know it was Sam Bradshaw

standing there. I stepped hard on the brakes and swerved, and the next second I was on the grass verge with the car on its side and people trying to get me out. It's a miracle I wasn't killed. I wasn't even hurt.'

'What about the man?'

'Disappeared. He might never have existed.'

She leaned forward and stubbed out her cigarette. 'Tom, use your common sense. It was just a jay-walker or a drunk ... Wasn't it on this same stretch of road that Sam was knocked down?'

'About fifty yards away.'

'I think you do need to get away, Tom. Stop drinking and forget all this morbid nonsense about death and dying. Matthews can manage for a couple of weeks. He'll have to. So you've no car?'

'It's a write-off.'

'And you walked here tonight? Why didn't you come by taxi?'

'Taxi? Have you tried getting one on a wet night?'

'You didn't *have* to come.'

'I wish I hadn't; because I saw him again. I swear to God I saw him out there in the street.'

Celia casually lit another cigarette. She looked up at him. 'Is that what frightened you?'

'I was frightened before that. He won't let me alone. I feel he's round every corner, waiting. I have to keep looking to make sure he's not behind me. And on my way here I saw him. I swear I saw him.' He was trembling now, visibly.

Her tone was sharp. 'Pull yourself together, Tom. Take another drink if you want it.'

He appeared not to have heard her, continuing, 'I was just passing the shops at the end of the road. They were in darkness, most of them. And then, in one of the shop doorways, I saw it ... this ... this figure, a man, standing in a corner, against a door. His head was down and I couldn't see his face. Then, as I went by, he looked up and, in the dark – I couldn't see properly, but where his face should have been—' Clayton turned away in anguish, and when he spoke again she could barely hear the words: ' – there was nothing. No face – nothing.'

Just for a moment something unpleasant moved in her

memory and a flicker of apprehension touched her. She shook her head quickly against the thought, forced a smile of incredulity. 'A drunk. A tramp. All these things to which you attach so much importance are just a series of coincidences.' She lifted the telephone receiver and began to dial.

He stared at her. 'What are you doing?'

'You're very drunk, Tom. I'm ringing for a taxi to get you home.'

He clamped his hand down over the receiver rest, cutting her off. 'Just a minute. Why the hell are you pretending?'

'*Pretending?* I don't—'

'Pretending he didn't know about us.'

'About us? Of course he didn't know about us.'

'That's typical of you. Push the responsibility on to anyone else. Nothing matters as long as you can clear your own conscience.'

'Tom, I—'

'You just don't want to admit it, do you? You know well enough that Sam would be alive now if he hadn't found out about us.'

Celia sat perfectly still. There was a long pause, then she said in a subdued voice, 'My God.' After a moment she said, 'I swear to you I didn't know Sam had heard about us.'

'You didn't know? But he told *me*. A quarter of an hour before he went under that car he told me he'd been with you all morning and he'd shown you those letters. He said—'

'I don't know anything about any letters.'

'You must know. Otherwise it's all mad.' He reached inside his jacket, threw two letters into Celia's lap. 'Look, he must have shown you these.'

She opened them, read them quickly, looked up at him. 'I've never seen these before. If someone sent them to Sam he didn't say anything to me. Who wrote them? Who could have known? They're not signed.'

'Sam said he showed them to you.'

She shook her head, puzzled. 'You said he'd been with me all morning – but he hadn't. He left home at half past nine in the normal way and said nothing about any letters. I remember now

he was a little quieter than usual, but that's all. Why didn't you tell me about this before?'

'I thought you knew before I did.'

'But—'

'Listen!' He was staring apprehensively at the half-open door of the lounge. 'Is there someone at the front door?'

'If there was they'd ring.' She said impatiently, 'I want an explanation, Tom.'

He went quickly to the lounge door, closed it. 'I thought—'

'An explanation, Tom,' she said irritably.

He looked at her blankly, collecting his thoughts. 'The letters ... Yes ... Why didn't he ask you about the letters?'

'He wouldn't ask me about poison pen-letters. Tom, when you saw Sam last – just before – what was he like? I mean—'

'Like a madman. He was ready to kill me – I know that.'

'He can't have known what he was doing. He was upset. That's what caused him to – that's what caused the accident.'

'It wasn't an accident. I was there. I saw it.'

'Tom, I don't understand.'

He said slowly, deliberately, 'It was not an accident.'

'Are you telling me Sam killed himself deliberately because of us?'

'*He didn't kill himself.*'

She moved in her chair, restlessly, impatiently. 'What do you mean? You said it wasn't an accident. Now you're saying it wasn't suicide. What are—?'

'I killed him.'

She pinched the bridge of her nose in a weary gesture. 'Tom, I'm very tired. Can you explain? If it wasn't suicide, it must have been an accident. The car driver, the inquest ...'

'I killed him, Celia, I killed him. Do you know what that makes me? A murderer. That's unbelievable, isn't it? Murderers are people you only read about. You never meet them. They don't exist outside the crime reports. But Sam's dead, and it wasn't an accident.'

'He was knocked down by a car driven by a complete stranger. You'd better tell me exactly what you saw and stop talking dangerous nonsense.'

'That's why I came here – to tell you.'

'Go on.'

'He came into the factory late that day. I don't know where he'd been but it was nearly four o'clock when he went into his office. He called me on the intercom and said he wanted to see me when the factory was closed. He wouldn't tell me why. I thought it could only be some new business deal he wanted to discuss quietly. Well, I went into him just after half past five. He sat there at his desk looking at me. I could see he was in a terrible temper. It was frightening. He took those letters out from his desk drawer and slung them at me. He said, "What've you got to say about those?" Well, what could I say? I was dumbfounded. When I tried to speak he just shouted me down. He said he'd shown you the letters that morning and you'd confessed everything. I thought he was going to hit me. Then he said, "Get out. You're finished here – as from now. If I see you here in the morning I'll kill you." Then he left. I was so shocked I didn't know what to do. I tried to ring you but all I got was the engaged tone. I collected a few things from my office and went out to my car. I drove out of the factory gates. Then I saw him parked on the other side of the road. He got out of the car and shouted something. I pulled up. He came over to my car and stood by the window. He was still in a filthy rage. He said, "I want those letters back." I told him they were in his office. He said, "They'd better be." And then it all started to happen . . .'

Clayton dropped into an armchair and sat staring in front of him. Celia waited a moment or two then she said, 'Go on, Tom.'

'. . . He began to cross back to his car again. He got to the middle of the road and suddenly turned back to say something else. And then I saw it – a car coming fast from the opposite direction. His back was towards it and he couldn't see it. I knew what was going to happen and I could have warned him but I did nothing. He shouted out something at me, something about staying away from you or he'd kill me. And all the time I could see this car getting nearer. I could have saved him. I could have shouted but I didn't. He never had a chance: the car hit him as he stood there. I deliberately let him be killed. I murdered him . . . I didn't lift a finger, but I murdered him. And now it's his turn.'

He leaned back in the chair and closed his eyes, exhausted.

Quite calmly she said, 'And you did this for me?'

He was about to answer when the front door bell rang. He started, petrified, gripping tightly to the arms of his chair. Celia glanced briefly at him, went towards the sitting-room door. He jumped sharply to his feet. 'No!'

She turned and faced him. 'I can't think who it could be, Tom, but I've got to see who it is.'

'No!' He took a step towards her. 'No, Celia, please.'

She said, 'Tom, it's nearly half past ten. Whoever is out there must have a good reason. But don't worry!'

He went close to her, gripped her arm. His face showed fear, pleading. 'You mustn't – please . . .'

She pulled away from him. 'Nonsense, Tom.' Her tone was withering. She went out into the hall. He stared after her, heard her call out. There was a muttered reply from the other side of the front door. He heard the door being opened. There was more muttering in the hallway. Celia came into the room. 'It's your works manager, Tom.'

He managed to say the name: 'Matthews.'

Celia stood aside to allow a small, middle-aged, nondescript man to enter the room. His overcoat was soaking wet. In his hands he held a rain-sodden peaked cap. His lined face was pale, his nose reddened from cold. He stopped just inside the door. 'Good evening, Mr Clayton.'

Celia eased past him and went towards the drinks cabinet. 'Would you care for a drink, Mr Matthews?'

Matthews did not take his eyes from Clayton's face. 'No thank you, madam.' He brushed a hand over his tousled, thinning hair. There was an awkward silence.

Celia said, 'Mr Matthews wants to speak to both of us – that's why he's here. Apparently it's urgent and can't wait.'

Clayton said, 'Both of us?'

'He seemed to know you were here as well.'

Clayton glared angrily at Matthews. 'How did you know I was here?'

'I saw you come in, sir.'

Clayton said, 'How was it I didn't see you?'

'I kept out of sight, sir.'

'Were you following me?'

'Following? Certainly not, sir. I was here before you. I was standing outside for a long time trying to make up my mind to ring the bell.'

Celia broke in testily. 'What is all this mystery, Mr Matthews? What you have to say concerns my late husband – is that right?'

'Yes, madam.'

'Then what the hell has it to do with me?' said Clayton.

Matthews looked down at the cap in his hands. Rainwater dripped from it on to the carpet and he pushed the cap awkwardly into his overcoat pocket. He did not look up. 'It's not easy for me to tell you, sir. I wanted to speak to you several times lately in the factory but I just couldn't make myself. And I've tried telephoning Mrs Bradshaw but I've had no answer during the last few days.'

Celia said quietly, 'Mr Matthews, did you telephone Mr Clayton earlier this evening?'

'Yes, I did but I – I rang off without saying anything. I didn't have the nerve to speak.' Celia glanced pointedly at Clayton. Matthews stumbled on. 'Then – then when I rang you tonight, madam, and got the engaged signal I knew you were in and I made up my mind to come round and see you.'

'What is it you have to say that is so difficult?' asked Celia.

Still gazing at the floor, Matthews stood silent for a few moments, then in a low voice he said, 'I wrote those letters, madam.'

'What!' Clayton almost shouted the word.

'Just a moment, Tom.' Celia looked at Matthews. 'The letters. Which letters?'

Matthews said, 'The letters that told him about you and Mr Clayton.'

'You bastard!' Clayton grabbed the man by the throat. 'You bastard! Do you realize what you've done?'

'Let him go Tom!' Celia jumped forward and pulled Clayton away. 'Pull yourself together. Let me deal with this.'

Matthews drew back, breathing heavily. 'I wanted to tell you before, honestly I did but . . . I couldn't.'

Celia stared at him hard and said, 'Matthews, how did you

know my husband didn't just destroy the letters and say nothing to anyone?'

Matthews swallowed and rubbed his throat. 'Because I heard him and Mr Clayton rowing that evening when the works had closed.'

Clayton stepped towards him. 'You snivelling little—'

'Tom!' Celia quickly interposed herself between them, her back towards Clayton. 'If you wrote those letters, Matthews, you must have been able to prove what was in them.'

'Yes. Yes, I could.' Matthews was watching Clayton carefully. 'I've known for about three months now. I had to call here one evening to pick up some blueprints. Mr Bradshaw had left for Liverpool without returning them to me.'

'Yes, I remember,' she said.

'Well, you gave them to me, madam, and I remember thinking you were in a hurry to get rid of me. I was just leaving when I saw Mr Clayton arrive in his car. He didn't see me.'

'That was three months ago.' Celia's voice was heavy with contempt. 'Do you mean you've been spying on us ever since?'

'I didn't take much notice at the time but afterwards I realized that Mr Bradshaw was often away on business trips up north. So whenever he went away after that—' He caught Clayton's eye and his voice trailed away.

Clayton said in as controlled a manner as he could, 'Get out of here, Matthews.'

'Just a moment, Tom.' Celia stood firmly between the two men. 'Why? Why did you do this? What advantage did it give you?'

'It's been on my mind ever since Sam – Mr Bradshaw – ever since he . . . I thought when he got the letters he'd tell Mr Clayton to leave the company and perhaps I would—'

'Perhaps you'd be given a directorship?' Celia nodded her own affirmation. Her expression was one of scorn and distaste.

Matthews came to his own defence. 'I've been with Sam Bradshaw since he started on his own – way back. I worked with him through all the rough times – that's before you came in as his secretary, madam. He always used to talk about making me a director but somehow he never got round to it. Then, when he started to do well and expand, he seemed to forget all about it.

And when he brought you in from outside, Mr Clayton, I knew my chance had gone – at least while you were still with the company.' His manner was now servile, almost cringing. 'I'm sorry, madam – Mr Clayton . . .'

'*Sorry?*' Suddenly, violently, Clayton was past Celia and had Matthews by the throat again. The little man's knees buckled and he sank to the floor, choking and gasping.

Celia wrenched at Clayton's fingers, trying to force them open but his grip was too strong. She looked hurriedly around, picked up the lighter on the table, flicked it into life and put the flame to the back of Clayton's hand. He jumped away from Matthews with a shout of pain, and the man rolled on to the floor, coughing and spluttering.

'Are you mad, Tom? You could have killed him. Do you want another one on your conscience?' The words, flung at him with vicious and telling force, drained the rage from Clayton in an instant and he stood back, deflated.

Matthews climbed slowly to his feet, nursing his neck, almost crying. Without a glance at the other two he moved towards the door. Celia said sharply, 'Matthews!' He stopped and half-turned towards them.

'Listen to me, Matthews. Up to tonight I thought my husband had been accidentally knocked down and killed. I knew nothing about the letters you'd written until Mr Clayton showed them to me this evening. Now I don't know what to think. All I do know is that I want you to get as far away from me as possible – as soon as you can. I'll have some money sent to you at home. But please go.'

In little more than a whisper, Matthews said, 'I've got another job to go to, madam. I arranged it today. Goodnight.' He went out of the room. They heard the front door open and close.

Celia looked at Clayton. 'And you can go, too.'

He stood sucking at the back of his hand where the burnt skin was painful and inflamed. 'I wanted to marry you – that's why I did it.'

She stared at him. 'You damned fool! I never gave a second's thought to marrying you. Do you think you're the only man I've slept with since I married Sam? Do you think he didn't guess he

couldn't hold me? And when those letters came – he must have hated your guts.'

Clayton said, 'He still does.'

'And so do I. The sooner you go the better. You make me sick.'

'You've got a very short memory, haven't you? *Tom darling*,' he mimicked, '*if only we'd met before. If only Sam were away more often. If only Sam weren't here at all!*' His voice was raised now, he was becoming hysterical again. 'Well, he's not here any more. But he's watching us, I know he is. He's not finished with us by a long chalk. Don't think you've got away with it. He'll get you like he's going to get me. You'd better be—'

The phone rang.

Celia went to it slowly, picked up the receiver, covered the mouthpiece with her hand. 'Go, Tom. Just go.'

He did not move. She spoke into the phone. 'Hello. Oh, Yes – David. Look, I can't speak for the moment. Yes, there is but they're leaving – right now. I'll ring you back in two minutes – less. All right?' She replaced the receiver. 'Tom, unless you're out of here in one minute I shall call the police.'

Clayton stepped back away from her. His eyes were wild. 'You know he's out there, don't you? Sam's out there waiting. You can't – Celia, let me stay. Just till tomorrow.'

Without a word she walked over to the sitting-room door, opened it wide and stood waiting impassively.

'Till tomorrow. That's all I ask. I don't want to be alone.' Clayton's words came from him, tremblingly, fearfully. 'That medium – I didn't tell you this – he'd scared me and I must have been pretty nasty to him. I was very drunk and I said, "If you're so clever perhaps you know what's going to happen to me".'

Quite calmly Celia reached down, picked up Clayton's raincoat and pushed it into his arms. He faced her clutching the coat in an untidy bundle across his chest.

'Do you know what he said? He said, "All I know is that I have a date in my mind. That's the deadline. That's when something will happen to you. I don't know what it is but it will be very unpleasant – probably death." And the date he told me was the 15th – today.'

Still without speaking, Celia turned away from him and went

into the hall. She opened the front door. 'Go, Tom.'

In a dazed fashion he went past her on to the porch. Then, without a word or a glance, as if he had no will of his own, he went, zombie-like, down the path. Before he reached the gate Celia closed the door, driving home the bolts.

She leaned against the door for a few seconds, breathing deeply. Then she went back into the sitting-room. As she was about to lift the phone receiver she heard, from somewhere outside the house, the noise of car brakes applied suddenly and, simultaneously, a thump as though some pulpy object had been struck violently; not for the first time that evening, a flutter of uneasiness passed through her. She stood quite still for a long time, listening to indistinct shouts in the street outside, unwilling, unable somehow, to investigate the noise, even though she had only to look through the window. Then, sharply, the front door-bell rang. Inexplicably nervous, she went into the hall. Again the bell rang. She called out as she had done to Tom Clayton an hour before,

'Who is it?'

'Police, madam.'

She pulled at the bolts, Her hands were shaking and clumsy. She opened the door. A uniformed policeman was on the step. He wore the flat, peaked cap of the patrol-car police.

'Sorry to disturb you, madam, but a gentlemen left here a couple of minutes ago.'

'Yes.'

'Your husband, madam?'

'A friend.' She was finding it difficult to speak.

'I'm afraid you must be prepared for a shock madam.' He paused. 'The gentleman has just been knocked down by a car.' She clasped her hands tightly together in an effort to control their trembling. 'I saw it all, madam. I was parked a few doors away in my Panda. He came out of your gate then appeared to see something that frightened him. He ran into the road without looking, I'm afraid. The car hit him full on. I'm sorry. He's dead. Killed instantly.'

There was nothing she could do about the faintness that almost overcame her. She leaned with one hand against the door frame. The dizziness, the quite unaccountable sense of fear that was

taking hold of her, the sudden cold sweat on her body, were all alien to her nature. She heard the policeman speaking, heard her reply, 'I'm all right, thank you.'

'Hope you won't mind, madam, but if I may have a few details from you . . .'

Two minutes later, the details recorded in the policeman's book, she closed and bolted the door.

Identification . . . Not another! It had been bad enough when Sam had been killed: the mortuary, the formalities of horror, the knowledge that she could not look at Sam's face because of the severe injuries to his head and features, the identification of other parts of the body, the clothing and personal possessions. No, she couldn't face that. She felt herself shaking with a feeling that was close to terror, yet a part of her was asking why this should be. She wasn't normally squeamish but here she was, unable to keep from trembling. She went slowly back into the sitting-room, her mind still dwelling on that cold, grey morning at the mortuary where Sam's body had lain after the accident. The injuries to Sam's face had been mentioned quickly and euphemistically by the mortuary attendant, but she had known what he was telling her – the face had been smashed beyond recognition. She had, nevertheless, remained quite calm about it all. She had, she supposed, been fond of Sam in her cool, self-sufficient way, but no more than that; she had not been overly upset by his death, yet now she was trembling uncontrollably. Frightened. Plain frightened and she didn't know why. Or did she? Wasn't it Sam who was nagging at the edges of her mind? Sam who had, perhaps, hounded Tom Clayton to a horrible death? Ridiculous, but her normal common sense could not fight off a feeling of dread that was increasing by the minute.

She drank a large whisky, turned out the sitting-room lights and went into the hall. She touched a switch for the light on the landing. She turned out the hall light and began to climb the stairs. She had almost reached the top step when a faint, unpleasant odour touched her nostrils. She stopped abruptly, sniffing the air, her nerves taut, heart pounding, alert for worse to come – for there was a vague and repulsive familiarity about the smell which she could not for the moment identify. Perhaps, she tried to

reason, the smell was coming into the house from outside. A few more steps and she was on the landing. It was much stronger here, a malodorous stench filling the top part of the house, a fetid, repellent stink and almost at once she retched. It seemed to be coming from the half-open door of her bedroom and she moved automatically towards it, fighting down her nausea, trying to overcome her fear, telling herself that she was being stupid over nothing more than the presence of a stray cat or other animal which had somehow got into the house. She stopped outside the door of the bedroom, unable to make herself go any further. And at that moment all her courage drained from her. Someone or something was inside the room. She wanted to turn and run but now some force was willing her into the darkness beyond the door. The smell was overpowering now; her stomach was heaving with revulsion and she felt weak and faint. Then, quite suddenly, she knew: the foulness was the odour of the grave, wet upturned clay, mingled with the reek of putrefaction, the smell of death. She swayed forward and her shoulder hit the door, pushing it fully open. She flung out a hand to stop herself, hitting the switch on the wall. The light came on and in the last few seconds of consciousness and sanity she saw a figure sitting on the bed, the figure of a man dressed in a crumpled suit, filthy with caked clay and earth, the shirt-front a mass of dark, dried blood. He raised his head as if to look at her and she observed with stark and absolute horror that he had no face. From the forehead down was nothing more than crushed bone and flesh. One eye was completely missing and in its place a black gaping hole. From the other socket, hanging on short bloody tendrils, the other eye stared sightlessly at the ground.

What had once been Sam Bradshaw stood up and came towards her.

Rosemary Timperley

Hell on both sides of the Gate

Astrid Soliman set out early to climb to Hell's Gate, the island's highest village. Usually she made this journey with eager anticipation, as she'd be meeting her husband off the plane; but today was different. It would be two whole months before Cyril's next leave, and this time the plane would be bringing not him but her father.

Her father: what would he be like? What *had* he been like? She couldn't remember him at all. She'd been a baby when he was taken away and shut up for 'life' in an asylum for the criminally insane. Now his sentence was over, since 'life', of course, is not life – only a very long time: in the case of Gordon Sleigh, twenty-five years. Astrid was now twenty-six. Her father would be seventy. He'd been an 'old' father anyway and surely the prison years would have aged him even more. Would he now be a frail skeleton of a man, a half-ghost? If so, how should she treat him? Like an invalid? Oh, why did he have to come here at all?

The answer to that was simple: he had nowhere else to go and his daughter was his only living relative. Gordon Sleigh was coming home.

As she continued up the mountainous road, she brooded over that old crime of his. She hadn't been told of it until she was in her teens. When she'd asked her uncle and aunt about her parents, they'd said they'd tell her one day and meantime not to worry. But the shadow of the secret did worry her and eventually she got the truth.

It was a cruel truth, worse than the secrecy. Gordon Sleigh had married a woman twenty years younger than himself. He had tried to give her everything she wanted. She had borne him a daughter. The father had adored the child. The mother, vain, spoilt and frivolous as she was pretty, had found the little girl a

dammed nuisance, interfering with her freedom, messing up her nice clothes. Her neglect of the baby verged on cruelty. Her husband argued and protested . . . And then one day, after a fearful quarrel, when the mother had said coldly of the child, 'I can't stand the sight of it,' Gordon had gone berserk and strangled his wife.

He had then picked up his daughter in his arms, taken her to the police station of the London district where they lived, confessed his crime and said: 'Now you can do what you like with me, but please see that my daughter is conveyed to my brother and sister-in-law. They live in the West Indies, on the island of Saba. They're good people. They'll give her a good start in life.'

And so it came to pass that Astrid was taken to Saba, where she lived with her uncle and aunt, themselves childless. At the 'capital' village, called The Bottom, Astrid found her home. She had never known anything different. The little beaches were her playground, the surrounding mountains her familiars.

Because of her past and the possibility of gossip, her relatives had tended to keep her away from people, and she was a natural loner anyway. She loved wandering about by herself, secure on her island. As the years passed she stayed childishly dreamy, untouched by what is loosely called 'the world'.

Then, when she was twenty, she met Cyril Soliman on one of her mountain walks. He was an Englishman who worked as principal keeper of the British Board of Trade lighthouse at Sombrero. That rock was barren except for the lighthouse, which functioned at the northern corner of the Anegarda Passage. Hundreds of ships had been wrecked on the reefs of Anegarda, the drowned island, and, had it not been for the lighthouse and the reliability of its staff, there might have been hundreds more.

Cyril Soliman told the girl about the hazards of his work and she found it intensely romantic. He fulfilled her vague dreams; she fell in love with him rather as a teenager falls in love with a film actor. He, a restricted and lonely man, responded to her hero-worship. They had a whirlwind romance during that month of his leave and he married her, a civil ceremony, before he returned to Sombrero. To Astrid it was all rather like a fairytale – and it had come true.

They bought a cottage at The Bottom and there Astrid had lived a peaceful and unsophisticated life for six years. Her only anxiety was the danger of Cyril's work; but he was expert at it, so she tried to put that fear out of her mind.

During the years of her marriage, her uncle and aunt both died. He was drowned in a storm at sea – he'd been captain of a schooner — and his wife died soon after, of an infection. The truth was that once her man was gone, she simply had not wanted to live. Astrid was saddened, but had not missed them too much. She had her own life.

Naturally she had thought of those two as her only real relatives, had regarded her father as little more than an evil myth – until the news had arrived from England that Gordon Sleigh was about to be released and wished to come and live with his daughter. Astrid, appalled, had been prepared to refuse to have him, but Cyril said, 'No, that would be cruel.' He was her father after all, and whatever he'd done, he'd been punished. 'Let the old man come to us, Astrid. Apart from anything else, he'll be company for you when I'm offshore.'

'But I don't want any company when you're not here,' she had protested. For she still enjoyed being alone. She liked to walk and read and dream and listen to records during the two months when Cyril was away, and then she was all the more affectionate when he had his month at home. She was well suited by a husband who was away a lot, as he was suited by a wife who wasn't 'round his neck' all the time.

However, she had agreed to accept her father.

The airstrip, just below Hell's Gate, was, of course, a blessing. It meant that even during the hurricane season when Saba was isolated by sea for weeks at a time, a plane could still get through. So Cyril rarely had to waste precious days of leave. But now the airstrip showed a darker aspect to her: it made it easy for her father to arrive. Maybe he wouldn't have been so keen if he'd had to make the tortuous journey by water.

She reached Hell's Gate. No sign of the plane. She was told there'd be an hour's delay, for technical reasons, and walked on higher in an attempt to ease her mind by tiring her body. She

rambled up through the forest of tree ferns, where begonias blossomed and bananas beckoned, and when she was right at the top of the aptly named Mount Scenery, she stood and gazed at the other distant islands all around. This was one of her favourite spots. Usually it made her happy just to be here, but today she was full of nebulous fears. Even her beloved trees had an almost evil aspect, as if one day they would turn against her – allow something terrible to happen to her – but what?

An hour later she was back at the airstrip and the plane, insect-small at first, then large as a bird, and then gradually becoming large as life, zoomed towards Flat Point landing field.

Three passengers alighted. Two were a young, black couple. The third was an old, white man: so very white. A face like white paper; shoulder-length hair like blowing snow. He was wearing a white suit, wearing it awkwardly as if it were unfamiliar and too new. His luggage consisted of one small suitcase. He began to plod laboriously across the tarmac in the blazing sun – like someone exercising in a prison yard, thought Astrid and she wanted to run away screaming – she had a fleeting vision of herself, running and running – and she was in white too – not the cheap little yellow thing she was wearing today.

She controlled herself, put a smile on her face and went to meet the newcomer. 'Mr Sleigh – Father?'

'Yes. And you are Astrid. You're like your mother.'

A shiver passed through the girl despite the heat. 'I – I've come to take you home,' she said. 'A taxi will drive us to The Bottom. Let me carry your case.'

'If you wish, but it's very light.' It was indeed. His worldly goods were virtually non-existent. He was a man who had nothing but the burden of his past.

In the taxi, he stared out of the window and did not speak. Astrid guessed he was still drinking in the world about him after his long incarceration. 'Beautiful, isn't it?' she commented at last.

'It is,' he agreed, adding intensely: 'so are you, my child.' He had, she thought, the eyes of a child himself. Blue. Innocent. How could a man with such eyes have committed such a crime?

'Good and beautiful,' he continued. 'I knew you would be as long as you were given a good start in life. That's all any child

needs – a good start. I have no regrets, despite all I have suffered. It was worth it.'

He was looking down at his hands. They were exceptionally large, too large for the rest of him. The fingers were thick and long and strong. The wrists were powerful. She too was staring at those hands and thinking: but for them, my life would have been quite different, I suppose I do owe him something – but am I supposed to be grateful?

'Every man,' he said, 'must be prepared to sacrifice himself for his child.'

'Don't think about the past any more.'

'But it's all I have. What I did then was the last thing I *did*. I've done nothing since except wait. Twenty-five years of waiting for "Her Majesty's pleasure". Sometimes I thought she'd never give herself the pleasure of letting me out.' He laughed, without amusement. 'They thought I was mad to do it, you see, but it was the sanest thing I ever did. It was practical and effective. It gave you a good start in life.'

He's like a record stuck in a grove, she thought. 'We'll soon be at The Bottom now,' she informed him.

'I have come through Hell's Gate, out of Hell,' Gordon Sleigh murmured. 'So this should be Heaven. I'll make it so. Strange that the way from Hell's Gate goes downhill though, to The Bottom. Heaven should be at the top.' He paused and then went on in a more common-sense voice: 'I gathered from your letter, Astrid, that your husband is a prisoner.'

'Cyril? No! I never said that! He's keeper of the lighthouse at Sombrero – that's what I wrote to you.'

'Yes, you did, and that kind of lighthouse *is* a prison. It's a Tower Light. I read the subject up. A man who works on a Tower Light, that is, one with no dry land around it – as distinct from a Land Light, on the mainland, or a Rock Light, on an island – is imprisoned there for a series of two-month sentences interspersed with one-month paroles. He spends two-thirds of the year in prison. Any man worth his salt would have got himself a Land Light posting, then there'd be accommodation provided for you, as his wife. He must be afraid of marriage, feels safer in his prison tower. Afraid of life itself. Some of the prisoners in the bin were

like that. They preferred prison to freedom. They felt safe. They weren't real men at all.'

'My husband is a real man and a brave one,' Astrid said coldly.

'He saves lives every day by looking after the light.'

'No point in saving just any old lives,' said her father 'Some aren't worth saving, and some are so worthless that they'd be better off dead.'

'What a dreadful thing to say!'

'Only the truth, child.'

The taxi drew up outside the cottage. Tight-lipped, Astrid got out, paid the driver, then took her father indoors. The furnishing of the cottage was monastically simple.

'*This* is your home?' said Gordon Sleigh.

'Cyril's and mine.'

'Why is it as bare as a cell?'

'We like it this way. We're not materialistic. There's everything one needs, and the view of the sea through the window is decoration enough.'

'Rubbish,' said the old man. 'The sea is a kind of prison wall, hemming you in. Your husband is a mean man. He should have provided you with a beautiful home, to suit your own beauty.'

'I am not beautiful. I'm quite ordinary. I was lucky that Cyril looked twice at me. Also he is not in the least mean. It's just that we both like simplicity.'

'After six years of marriage, Astrid, why have you no children?'

'I don't know. It doesn't matter.'

'No doubt he's got something wrong with him.'

Indignantly the girl turned on the old man. 'Perhaps you don't want to stay here after all. You could fly back in a day or so.'

He gave her a stricken look. 'Back to where?' His child-eyes pleaded with her. 'I'm not being critical of *you*, child. You've been in my mind all these years and now that I'm with you, and find you so lovely, I want nothing more. But I do resent the way that your husband treats you. When I married your mother, I gave her everything a pretty woman could wish for. Men should be generous to their wives.'

'How can you talk like that, considering—' she stopped. She couldn't say it. She was wretchedly aware that she didn't even

begin to understand this stranger-father. His mind was a foreign country, the like of which she had never explored. And her nebulous fears turned into substantial ones. There was something ominously powerful about the old man. He made her feel weak as water. She wished Cyril were here. She had never felt so unprotected.

Now Gordon Sleigh said, 'I did various handyman jobs at the bin, for small payments, but they added up. I can afford to have this place turned into an ideal home. You must let me look after you, seeing that your husband is such an inadequate personality.'

'Inadequate personality? What on earth is that?' Astrid asked impatiently.

'Psychological jargon for a drip. I learned quite a bit of the terminology used by the shrinks. At first they labelled me a "paranoid schizophrenic with homicidal tendencies".'

'And what exactly does that mean?'

'Exactly nothing, and anything at all. Everything means nothing and anything at all. The only truth is that, in real life, there are no rules.'

'Well, I have a rule.' She made a fragile effort to defy him. 'It's that you're not to criticize Cyril.'

'Cyril! What a name!'

Astrid flushed. That name was the only thing about her husband that she didn't admire. It *was* soppy.

'You'd have thought he'd have changed it,' said her father.

'I expect you're hungry. I'll get us a meal. Meantime you can unpack.' She took him to the small room which was to be his.

'It will take me hours to unpack, will it not?' he said, opening his case, which contained only underclothes, pyjamas and toilet items. He placed the garments in a drawer of the chest-of-drawers and the other things on top. 'Reminds me of my small corner at the bin,' he said.

'We'll go shopping tomorrow and buy you things.'

'We will go shopping and I will buy *you* things. That frock is cheap and shabby. You should be clad like a princess, not a gipsy. I shall order clothes for you from the islands which have a tourist trade.'

Seething inwardly, Astrid left him and began to prepare a meal.

She felt as if her whole delightful life had collapsed about her ears, like a house of cards. How was she going to endure living with Gordon Sleigh? It would be hell.

That night she lay sleepless and listened to him pottering about in his room. What was he doing? In the morning he showed her what he had done. He had made a drawing of how he thought her living-room should look, with opulent soft furnishings, pictures, ornaments. 'This is how my daughter should live,' he declared. Then he showed her sketches of dresses and coats. 'And here are the sort of clothes she should wear. I've spent most of the night working on these. Your lean times are over, my child. I'm going to give you everything you want.'

'But I'm happy as I am! That is, I *was* happy—'

'Until you married Mr Inadequate Personality. Quite.'

'No, I meant—' She funked telling him what she had meant.

Gordon Sleigh went ahead with arrangements to refurnish the cottage and supply Astrid with a 'suitable' wardrobe. This at least kept him occupied and she found herself letting him have his way – not that she could have stopped him, any more than she could have halted a steam-engine.

In a way, Astrid and her father did settle down together. She let him do as he wished with the cottage and went for her usual solitary walks. She reminded herself that material things didn't matter and if it gave the old man pleasure to change the rooms, what harm did it do? The harm, of course, was that he was changing the place from the home that had been hers and Cyril's to one that was his. She began to feel like a guest there, a guest who now had to 'dress for dinner', have her hair 'done', make up her face. Her father insisted on these things and, loathing quarrels, she gave in. She had never before had to deal with anyone with such a domineering personality. It was a new experience and she didn't have the least idea how to combat it.

By the end of those first two months with her father, she only felt at home when she was outside. The fern forest was her living-room now. He never came there.

The day arrived when Cyril was due back. She set off alone to Hell's Gate to meet his plane. When she saw him alight and walk

towards her, she ran full speed into his arms, clung to him like a scared child, and burst into tears.

'Darling, what on earth's the matter?' He embraced her, but inside himself he shrank a little. He didn't like displays of hysteria. Astrid had never behaved like this before.

She told him, sobbingly, as a taxi drove them away from the airstrip, but she had to admit that when she put it into words, it didn't sound dreadful at all. Cyril said: 'The old boy's only trying to please you, by the sound of it. And let's face it, love, you and I have been rather neglectful when it comes to "gracious living".'

'So you're on his side!'

'Of course not, but you mustn't be so afraid of change. Life is all changes, like the weather. Nothing stays still.'

'It stayed still before, and I was happy—'

'Be happy now.' He kissed her and they remained in close embrace for the rest of the drive. Astrid was comforted, but only temporarily. When they reached what had once been their home, her father was waiting. He ushered them into the elaborately furnished living-room as if he were the host and they mere visitors. Cyril looked ill at ease in the new setting. They made polite conversation over a meal, and when night had fallen and Cyril and Astrid were in bed together, they found they couldn't make love.

'What's the matter with us?' Astrid whispered.

'Something in the atmosphere.'

'Yes. It's him . . . Listening.'

They lay passionless and sleepless, listening to the silent listener. The old man was so strong. His personality infiltrated the very air about them. And Astrid, although she hated to admit it, felt disappointed in her husband. Surely he had succumbed too easily to the influence of her father.

That month of Cyril's leave was something of a nightmare. The old man rarely left them alone. What had once been an idyllic holiday for them both turned into an ordeal. Astrid kept hoping that her husband would declare that Gordon Sleigh must not remain, but he said nothing. He grew quieter and quieter and was obviously longing to go back on duty. When his last day came and Astrid saw him off at the airstrip, they kissed each other with

a sad restraint; her father's first words when she returned to the cottage were: 'Thank goodness he's gone. What a wet blanket of a fellow. He'll only be happy in his prison. Now – a celebration – the special secret dress I ordered for you has arrived. Come and try it on.'

Wearily, Astrid tried on the dress. It was ankle length, tight-waisted and made of white lace. Despite herself, she appreciated its beauty. It was a fairytale dress. She said a sincere little, 'thank you, Father'.

Then the fairytale turned evil, the way such tales do. He said, 'You look like a bride. You're the image of your mother on her wedding day.' He paused, then added softly, 'Since your husband is obviously impotent, *I* could give you a child.'

Astrid could hardly believe that she had heard correctly, but she had, for he went on: 'I didn't live like a monk at that place. Some of the domestic staff, foreign girls, were willing enough. I never got out of practice. I could give you—' He was approaching her with a goatish leer on his face, and she was so shocked and frightened that she ran out of the cottage, still wearing the white lace dress. Holding up the skirt with both hands, she ran and ran until she reached her refuge, the forest of tree ferns. There she collapsed in exhaustion on a bed of greenery and lay panting, half-drowned in sweat, her heart banging like drums of war.

She stayed there all night, too distraught to know what to do next. And it was there, next day, that her father found her.

He had taken a taxi to Hell's Gate and asked people there if they had seen his daughter. He'd described her and the dress and eventually someone said that they had indeed seen a girl in a long white dress running up the hill towards the forest.

So now Gordon Sleigh came walking calmly towards her, in the place which was her home. His child-eyes looked very bright and blue, his white hair ghostly in the shade of the trees. There was something hypnotic about him. She had no will-power left.

'Hello, my Queen of Sheba,' he said. 'Here I am. I love you. I want you. There are no rules. Hold out your arms and let me in.'

And she did, and they made love on the bed of greenery, and it was Heaven – and Hell also. For she had let him into her real home. There would be no escape from him now. She was no

longer Queen of Sheba, after whom Saba was said to be named, but a kind of zombie in a powerful man's thrall.

Nothing was quite real to Astrid after that time in the forest. Her behaviour changed completely. She went on wearing her 'bridal' dress and sat about in easy chairs instead of going for walks. She stayed close to the old man all the time. Six weeks later, she found that she was pregnant.

'Wonderful!' said Gordon Sleigh. 'A dream come true.'

He looked after her tenderly, this stranger-father-lover.

When Cyril's next leave began, she did not meet him off the plane. He came alone to the cottage. She did not tell him about the child. Her father had told her not to. Cyril lingered about like a lost wayfarer. He lay by Astrid's side at night but did not touch her. He felt as if he barely knew her any more and wished only to get back to his lighthouse and the easy company of his two assistant keepers. His marriage was a real marriage no longer; had it ever been? On his last day, a taxi was ordered and Astrid and her father both came to the airstrip with him. Then the old man said he had business in Hell's Gate, and he left the couple to their final farewells.

Cyril said, 'Goodbye, Astrid. I feel it *is* goodbye. Something is going to happen: some great change.' And he shuddered. Cold-lipped, he kissed her on the forehead. She thought he had guessed about the child and stood there dumb with guilt.

But the 'change' he had mentioned turned out to be quite different. A week later news arrived that Cyril Soliman had been taken ill on duty with some mysterious viral infection. Frantic radio messages were sent for a doctor to come, and when one did, with great difficulty, climbing up the rope ladder which was the only means of access to this Tower Light, he was too late. The Principal Keeper was dead. The two assistants said that his last words, spoken in delirium and high fever, were: 'Witchcraft! Slay! Slay!'

'God knows what he meant by that,' said one of the keepers. 'Soliman was the last person in the world to slay anyone – or ask anyone else to. He was the sort to preserve life, not destroy it.'

Gordon Sleigh was jubilant. 'So it worked!' he cried. 'Astrid, remember my business at Hell's Gate the day you saw him off? Well, I went to see an old *obeah* man in the lower part of the village, the coloured quarter. He was a rare old boy, black as a coal-bucket and surrounded by the bits and pieces of his trade – bundles of coloured rags, jars of dirty water, hanks of human hair, dead frogs, cats' skulls, dogs' teeth, miniature coffins, all sorts and conditions of bones, human and animal, and some greyish muck which he proudly told me was "grave dust". I'd brought along some bits and pieces myself: Soliman's nail-clippings, hair from his pillow and his shaving-brush, scraps of skin, some mucous from a handkerchief and so on. I asked the old chap to do what he could and he promised that Soliman would be a dead man within a week as long as I was prepared to pay. Well, I'm not a mean man. I paid him handsomely and trusted him to get on with it. And he did! Damned clever, you know. These simple souls who live close to nature have supernatural powers which we westerners lost centuries ago. So the monkish lighthouse keeeper is dead and *I* am your husband now. You grow more like your mother every day, in appearance, but the difference is that when our child is born, you will be a good mother – a perfect mother!'

Astrid let the words wash over her like an evil flood. The horror of it went deep, beyond emotion, into the sphere where there are no rules. Her heart and soul were dead. But her body went on functioning like that of any other healthy young animal, and in due course her child was born; To Astrid Soliman, a daughter. She hated it on sight, this child of incestuous sin whose conception had given her glimpses of that Heaven which is the other face of Hell. The baby had blue eyes, a paper-white skin and white hair, like its father. And its hands, although tiny, were large in proportion to the tiny body.

Yes, it was an *it*, not a person, to Astrid. She refused to have anything to do with it. Her milk dried up, and so did any milk of human kindness which had once been hers. The father had to do everything for the child, wash it, dress it, fix its nappies, give it carefully warmed milk from a bottle. Astrid sat around the living-room in her pretty clothes and ignored them both.

One night the child kept crying, on and on. Gordon tore himself to pieces trying to comfort it, this little one which appeared like a miniature edition of himself. And at last he shouted at Astrid: 'My God, this can't go on! The child needs the affection of a mother – can't you see that? You're her mother! You should do your duty by her!'

Astrid said: 'I can't stand the sight of it!' The very words her mother had said of Astrid herself all those years ago. History was repeating itself. Gordon Sleigh was filled with the same red rage as before. He put out his strong, thick-fingered hands and placed them round Astrid's neck, as if they were a separate lethal instrument rather than part of his own body; he gripped her round the throat until her face turned black and her fearful jerking and struggling ceased; and he watched her die.

After that, he picked up the baby in his arms and went to the small police station at The Bottom. He confessed his crime, then said, 'Now you can do what you like with me, but please see that my daughter is conveyed to some good couple on the island who will act as foster-parents. A woman who loves little children and would sooner die than neglect them. That will give my child a good start in life. It's all a child needs – a good start in life.'

'He's a madman,' the Dutch officials whispered to each other. 'For a start, the child is his grand-daughter, not his daughter. The mother was the widow of that lighthouse keeper, Soliman. She got pregnant after his last leave, and then he died. Lord, what a mess!'

Officialdom sorted out the mess. The child was taken by seafaring folk who lived at The Bottom and eventually, after being held in custody in Saba for a while, Gordon Sleigh was escorted, heavily guarded, to the airstrip at Hell's Gate. From there he would be returned to the asylum from which he had been so mistakenly released.

His comment, as he boarded the aeroplane, was, 'So Hell is on both sides of the Gate.'

Now, a little white-haired, blue-eyed girl is growing up on the island of Saba. She has been told that her father was a lighthouse keeper who died of an illness during the course of his duty, and

that her mother died in a domestic accident. One odd characteristic is that the child has very large, strong, thick-fingered hands and exceptionally powerful wrists. They seem to fascinate her and she stares at them sometimes as if they belonged to someone else.

The other day, her pet cat was found strangled to death. Her foster-parents were appalled. Who could have done such a wicked thing to a child's playmate? But the child herself was not upset. She merely said: 'Puss neglected her kittens. *I* shall look after them now and give them a good start in life.'

John Arthur

Don't go down in the woods

He stepped off the hard, impersonal pavement into the welcoming shadow of the forest. As soon as he felt the soft path beneath his feet, he began to relax. He walked rapidly and within a few minutes the noise and the traffic were far behind him. Once among the trees the warm, still air and the kaleidoscope of natural colour formed a blanket to protect him from the world and from himself. Without slackening his pace he hastily adjusted his grip on the bulky parcel which he carried and, with his thin cotton shirt sticking to his back in cold, wet patches, he headed deep into the heart of the forest.

'Did you see that?' asked Jane, temporarily forgetting the weight of her briefcase and her uncharitable thoughts regarding school uniforms; white socks, brogue shoes and a straw boater did very little to enhance her sixteen-year-old image, poor as that image might be.

'See what?' enquired Susie without much interest, preferring her own thoughts and mildly annoyed that Jane had disturbed them. Why was it, she wondered, that most of her friends now seemed so boring, so childish?

'That man who just went off into the woods,' continued Jane excitedly. 'One minute he was walking towards us and then he suddenly dashed off into the trees, almost as if he was running away from us.'

Susie smiled quietly to herself, knowing full well that the sight of Jane was enough to send most men running for cover. She was fat, freckled and looked as if her hair had been cut with garden shears; she bit her fingernails, scratched her greasy skin and did practically everything else that a young lady shouldn't do. Bulging preposterously from her uniform she looked for all the world like a female Billy Bunter: poor, ugly cow.

'He probably went into the forest,' replied Susie calmly, resisting the urge to voice her previous thoughts, '– because he happens to live there.'

'What do you mean, he lives there?' asked Jane incredulously, 'What sort of person lives in a forest?'

'His sort of person, apparently,' continued Susie, pausing briefly to brush her long, dark hair away from her face. 'I saw him when I was out riding last Sunday. He didn't see me though. He's pitched a tent down beyond the sandpit about two hundred yards from the river.'

Jane was quietly furious. It was so typical of Susie to know everything about everything. Long-legged, sleek and sophisticated far beyond her seventeen years, the precocious bitch always had a ready answer to any question. Even so, Jane was grudgingly forced to admit that, always calm and composed, Susie had become a remarkably attractive young woman. She somehow managed to make even her school uniform look as if it had come straight from a London fashion house. If it hadn't been for the fact that spending time with Susie both improved her own chances with the boys and enabled her to bask in a certain amount of reflected glory, she would have been pea-green with envy.

'I wonder what he's doing down there?' she asked eagerly, managing to control her feelings for the chance of a deeper insight into the mystery.

'I should imagine,' snapped Susie, no longer bothering to conceal her annoyance, 'that if he's living in a tent in the middle of June then it wouldn't be totally surprising if he was on holiday!'

'I don't know,' replied Jane thoughtfully, ignoring the cutting tone in Susie's voice. 'I still think there was something pretty strange in the way that he dashed off when he saw us. I thought he looked fairly old, didn't you?'

'Not unless you happen to think that thirty is old,' said Susie curtly, silently recalling the first occasion on which she had seen him. She had watched him as he walked through the forest, heading back towards his tent, carrying a bucket of water which she presumed he had fetched from the river. If she hadn't been on horseback she would never have spotted him through the dense undergrowth; she had been intrigued as to what his reasons were

for pitching his tent so far away from the beaten track. From where she sat he had appeared to be very good-looking. He was tall, slim but well-muscled, naked from the waist up and with long, fair hair that reached down almost to his broad shoulders. The tight, faded jeans that he wore had emphasized his masculinity to the full. It was the sort of thing that Susie had long since begun to notice. His lightly perspiring torso had glistened in the sunlight filtering through the trees, and to her he had looked like a lean and hungry animal. Even as she thought about him she could feel her small, firm breasts tightening beneath her ridiculous shirt and tie and her stomach starting to churn with excitement and anticipation. Only the whining sound of Jane's voice jerked her unkindly back from her deliciously sensual reverie.

'Thirty is old!' she protested, switching her briefcase from one hand to the other as they walked on towards the school. 'After all, my father's thirty-nine. Thirty's very old, if you ask me.'

'Only to a child,' replied Susie with smiling contempt, having already decided that she could well afford to dispense with Jane's friendship.

'Anyway, I still think he seems a bit creepy,' insisted Jane, completely ignoring the pointed barb and plumping for a peaceful existence.

Susie didn't even hear her. They had almost reached the school and, as the first hour after lunch was to be devoted to the Latin study of Caesar's Gallic Wars, she was far too busy wondering how long it would take for the eagle-eyed Miss Wilson to notice that she wasn't wearing a bra.

Once back inside the tent he tore open the parcel and examined the contents. As well as a plentiful supply of canned and packeted foods there was the first newspaper that he had seen for almost two weeks, cigarettes, matches, a small bottle of brandy and four much-needed butane canisters for the lamp and the camping stove. In addition he had purchased a spool of fishing line and a packet of hooks, intending to try his luck in the nearby river. He knew that most freshwater fish were quite edible provided that one wasn't too fussy about one's diet. Now, with a certain

amount of good fortune and strict rationing, there would be no need for him to return to the village for at least two weeks. He was well aware that the less contact he had with people the better his chances were of remaining a free man.

Having neatly stacked the various cans and packages away in a corner of the tent he helped himself to a cigarette and sat back to consider his present position. He knew only too well that, in his case, ten years spent behind the high, grey brick walls of Broadheath had been nowhere near long enough: they should *never* have let him out. Maximum security and extensive psychiatric treatment had done nothing other than to kindle within him a burning desire for fresh air and freedom. In all other respects he remained completely unchanged ...

In many ways it seemed almost a lifetime ago when, in a quiet country lane over a hundred miles away, he had made warm and passionate love to Christine on the back seat of his old Rover saloon, before slowly choking her to death with her own tights. There had been absolutely no reason for it. As far as he could tell, his feelings towards Christine had been as close to love as anything that he had ever known. However, even now he knew that nothing could possibly match the exquisite feeling of power and indescribable beauty that he had experienced at the precise moment of her death. Remarkably, he had never felt any guilt or remorse; what was more to the point, he knew only too well that, under similar circumstances, he would do the same thing again. Although he fully appreciated the seriousness of his mental condition, he did not pretend to understand it. It was the Medical Board, in their infinite wisdom, who had decided that he was once again ready to take a useful place in society. He had known otherwise but, with freedom in sight, had said and done nothing to dispel their illusion.

He was a realist: once free he fully appreciated the risk that he would be running if he attempted to lead a normal life, inevitably bringing him into contact with many attractive young women. The danger came from his own illness; he knew that history would repeat itself if circumstances allowed it, and that he would once again find himself locked away behind the doors of an institution. For that very reason he had made the decision

to live in isolation, shunning contact with other people, thereby lessening the danger both to himself and to society as a whole. He estimated that he had sufficient funds to survive in this manner throughout the summer months. He preferred not to think about what would eventually happen when the money ran out and winter was finally upon him. For the moment he was content to be alive and free.

His shopping excursion into the village had proved to be far less of a problem than he had anticipated. Most of the inhabitants seemed to be of retirement age; dangerous youthful distractions had been few and far between. Only when he had spotted the two young girls up on the main road had he experienced any real panic. Even from a distance the tall, slim girl with the long brown hair had made him physically aware of his enforced abstinence, arousing other feelings which he had fought against desperately. For a few seconds he had stared at her but finally, with the blood pounding in his temples, he had torn himself away and hurried off into the forest. It was just one of many similar battles that he had been obliged to wage with himself recently.

He turned his attention to the newspaper and spent the next hour being variously amused by the state of the economy, disgusted by the gossip column, insulted by the banal humour of the strip cartoons, engrossed by the sports section and amazed at the chaotic plight of the word in general. A picture of a scantily clad female disturbed him slightly and he tore it carefully from the newspaper and placed it to one side.

A short paragraph, almost hidden away at the bottom of page five, caused him some mild concern. The body of a man, apparently stabbed to death, had been found in a field on the outskirts of Draybridge only five miles away. The last thing he wanted was to be bothered by the police, who might possibly ask him some very awkward questions. However, as his camp was well-concealed and a considerable distance from the road, he felt it extremely unlikely that the problem would arise. If it did, then he would simply have to brazen it out as he had done before. After all, as yet he had done nothing wrong.

Deciding that his position could be considerably worse he tore

the pin-up picture into a hundred pieces and cast it into the breeze.

Susie stood in the shower, allowing the hard, stinging spray of cold water to feel its way across her body, its tingling stimulation adding to the excitement that she already felt. Dinner was over; in the house below, her parents had already settled down in front of the television. Nowadays they seemed to do precious little else. The Latin translation meted out by Miss Wilson, including the three extra paragraphs that had been thrown in when the old witch had finally noticed the irregularity in her dress, had taken Susie less than an hour to complete. Now there was absolutely nothing to prevent the rest of the evening proceeding as planned.

The village, with its solitary pub and grimy hamburger bar, could hardly be described as a hive of social activity. Susie had shunned most of her own age-group and had, as the man in the forest would soon discover, become extremely adept at creating her own particular brand of entertainment.

Stepping out of the shower she paused to admire her lithe nakedness in the mirror before wrapping a towel around herself and walking through to her bedroom. The dress that she had selected earlier was neatly spread out on the bed. It was a simple one-piece denim affair, one of the few dresses that she had bought for herself. Like most things of her own choosing it was extremely practical – unlikely to be damaged during her intended woodland jaunt – yet light enough to be worn on a hot, sticky evening. It also offered the distinct advantages of a low-cut front and simple button fastenings. Her knee-length leather boots were another item that she had chosen for herself. She had already decided that underwear was neither necessary nor desirable; her youth, combined with the effect of the hot sun, reduced the need for make-up to an absolute minimum. Having vigorously towelled herself dry she discarded her shower-cap and began her final preparation. Within ten minutes, she had taken a torch and a simple shoulder bag from the bottom drawer of her dressing table, and was ready to depart.

From previous experience she knew that nothing would distract her parents while they were busy watching television; but she

still considered it advisable to inform them of her departure.

'I'm just popping round to Jane's for a couple of hours,' she called out as she descended the stairs and paused outside the lounge door. 'I've got my key.'

A brief, muffled grunt from within, scarcely audible above the noise of the machine, was the only acknowledgement that she needed or expected. Susie left the house with a clear conscience.

He sat cross-legged on the grass, overawed by the beauty of a dying day, silently staring as the molten glow of a glorious sunset slowly darkened into night. To him it was a moment of almost religious significance. He was still watching the horizon long after the last pale glow had disappeared from the sky: only hunger finally drove him back to the tent.

All in all it had been quite a good day. His trip to the village had been more or less uneventful; his first fumbling attempts at angling had provided him with two fair-sized fish. He didn't know if the fish were bream or dace but, when his taste buds began to water reassuringly as the fish smoked and crackled deliciously over the small open stove, he realized that identification was totally unnecessary. Whatever the fish were, they were about to be eaten and enjoyed.

Although slightly lacking in flavour, the fish not only turned out to be a more than adequate meal, but also served to reinforce his growing feeling of independence and self-sufficiency. He knew that the more food he could provide for himself the less he would have to rely on other people. In addition it would enable him to make the most of his limited financial resources. Quietly satisfied with the way that things were progressing, he decided to smoke what he promised himself would be his last cigarette of the day.

Half an hour later he was lying inside his sleeping-bag, reading by the light of the gas lamp, when he heard a rustling sound that seemed to come from just outside the tent. Immediately he sat bolt-upright, holding his breath as he waited for another sound while his brain feverishly considered a list of possible explanations: a small animal scurrying through the undergrowth? A thief? A bunch of teenagers on the rampage? A young couple

looking for some privacy? A tramp? The police? A sudden breeze? Or simply his imagination?

He had no time for further conjecture; as the tent flap pulled slowly open, he saw that the simple truth was infinitely worse than his wildest imaginings. Nemesis, in the shape of a young and beautiful girl, had come to tempt and to betray him, to trade upon his weakness and eventually to deprive him of his new-found freedom. She knelt before him, her long chestnut hair falling across her shoulders, wide, green eyes searching his face for a sign of welcome.

'Hello!' she whispered in a voice that was far too warm, too soft, too appealing. 'May I come in?'

He said nothing but watched, in silent fascination, as she carefully closed the tent flap before moving across to settle at his side. Her face was less than a foot from his. Her wide, bright smile contrasted vividly with her dark, even suntan. He could almost smell her youth and freshness and instinctively knew that her death would be more beautiful than the sunset. He hastily cast the dangerous picture from his mind and began to fight for his freedom.

'W-What do you want?' he croaked nervously, moving his naked body away from her within the sleeping-bag.

'I saw you when I was out riding last Sunday,' she explained, her voice as soft as velvet. 'Then I saw you again this morning, so I decided to pay you a visit. You must get terribly lonely living down here all on your own.'

He suddenly remembered the two girls that he had seen earlier in the day and the startling effect that this one had had on him. But surely the fact that she was a schoolgirl, a young, innocent child, would provide him with the moral strength that he needed to resist the physical temptation? Why did she have to look so beautiful, so unlike any other schoolgirl that he had ever seen; what was her purpose in visiting him now? As the thoughts tumbled through his mind he noticed that she had unfastened the top button of her dress and he began to suspect the terrible truth. He could already feel the fire burning inside him and his palms were wet with perspiration. Somehow he had to get rid of her before it was too late for both of them.

'You must leave!' he insisted, knowing just how much he wanted, needed her to stay. 'I prefer my own company, I like being on my own, so get out!'

'Why?' she asked coyly, taking the opportunity to moisten her full, red lips with her tongue and allowing her hair to fall across her face.

'You're too young to be down here on your own,' he answered quickly, desperately searching for any excuse. 'Why don't you go and find some of your friends?'

'My friends bore me,' she pouted, moving her fingers delicately down to the second button. 'All the boys in the village are just spotty kids. I need someone like you, someone who knows what it's all about.'

As she spoke she slowly raised her left leg, exposing her smooth brown thigh, then flicked her hair away from her face before once again dazzling him with her smile. How would she react, he wondered, if she knew that each smile was bringing her closer to death? Her intentions had become painfully, pathetically, obvious. She was a bored, beautiful and over-sexed child looking for excitement. She was his for the taking but however beguiling the prospect might seem, if he succumbed he was lost. She lived in the village, or so it seemed; if she failed to return home the resulting alarm would make his escape almost impossible. The whole thing was madness, nothing more than an impossible, tantalizing nightmare.

'You're just a child!' he snapped angrily. 'Go home!'

'I'm seventeen and I haven't been a child for more than three years,' she whispered knowingly as she fixed him with her wide, green eyes, begging him to take her as she reached down to unfasten her boots. As she leaned forward the front of her dress gaped open, revealing her firm, well-rounded breasts.

The battle was lost and he knew it. The dirty little bitch was determined to seduce him and she deserved whatever was coming to her. He would thoroughly enjoy providing her with the excitement that she sought so eagerly, so relentlessly, so desperately and then he would thoroughly enjoy wringing her pretty little neck. Perhaps that one moment of soul-shaking rapture would be worth another ten years of his life. There was even a very slim

chance that he might get away with it. With a bit of luck they might not find her body for a few days; given that much time, he could be far, far away.

He watched as, having removed her boots, she once more turned to face him. The tent wasn't large enough to allow her to stand so she continued to kneel but straightened from the waist in order to reach the remaining buttons on her dress.

'What's your name?' he asked quietly, scarcely able to speak.

'Susie,' she replied huskily as her long, slender fingers flipped open the last button.

The dress fell apart, then she shrugged it away from her shoulders and let it drop to the ground. She had good reason to be proud of her body and for a full minute she allowed his eyes to sweep over her, taking in every glorious, perfect detail. Then she leaned across and kissed him hungrily, her long hot tongue searching deep within his mouth while her left hand slid down to his groin. For the first time his hands came into contact with her cool, firm flesh. He did not need her expert stimulation, for his raging desire took control.

He placed his huge hands around her slim waist and, with her arms clasped tightly around his neck, lifted her bodily and slipped her into the sleeping-bag beside him. She pressed herself close to him and they continued the smouldering kiss as he greedily explored every inch of her body with his hands. As their mutual, angry passion mounted he transferred his mouth to her breast as once again she began to stroke his bursting manhood with her well-practised hand. As his own hand found and caressed her deepest secret she moaned sweetly and wrapped her long, suntanned legs around his waist before skilfully guiding him towards her. Suddenly he was plunging hot and deep within her, spurred on by a driving, ferocious lust, while she in turn writhed and moaned beneath him, clawing at his shoulders in wild desperation. As he began to thrust longer and deeper she started to move more urgently until, suddenly, he felt her whole body stiffen before relaxing in a shuddering spasm of fulfilment.

Now was the moment: he had controlled his own need for as long as he was able but now, as she lay warm and relaxed beneath him, he gave full rein to his roaring lust. He began to move slowly

and rhythmically, then gradually increased the tempo as he felt the heat building in his loins. He moved his hands closer to her throat. It was essential that her glorious death should coincide exactly with his own moment of ecstasy. His driving thrusts became rapid, then uncontrolled as his hands closed around her slender neck. He took little notice as her small fist began to pound upon his back. As the agonizing fire within him exploded, his fingers slowly began to tighten.

The first drops of blood spoiled everything. They dribbled thickly from his shoulder and splashed obscenely down on to the beautiful face that was smiling up at him. Despite the steadily dripping gore she began to laugh quietly and, as he released his grip on her throat, he realized that her fist was still pounding at his back, but now, with his passion satisfied, he noticed that each blow was accompanied by a sharp, stinging sensation. Still failing to understand what was happening he watched fascinated as thick rivers of blood began to flow sluggishly from his neck, arms and the sides of his chest. The small fist continued to pound, filling the air with a red mist while warm, viscous pools of blood began to form beneath the two of them, still locked together in love.

In panic he tore open the sleeping-bag and clambered to his knees. He felt himself swaying from side to side as a giant hammer pounded in his brain and for some reason he was as weak as a kitten. He screamed in terror when he realized that the blood was now steadily coursing down the length of his body and that he was kneeling in a huge, ever-widening scarlet puddle. He could hear Susie laughing aloud. He looked down at her and felt an icy chill when he saw the long, thin, deadly blade of the knife that she was holding in her right hand. Then he collapsed.

Through a swirling haze and with detached interest he saw that she was sitting astride his chest. She was smiling wickedly down at him with the gleaming blade poised in her hand. Now that he understood what was happening he found that he didn't really care. He knew exactly how she felt. He, too, appreciated the magical power and beauty of a sunset and of death. He envied her this moment. He felt and heard the knife rip through his throat before he slowly choked, then drowned in a deep, sweet river of his own blood.

Susie carefully washed her body using a bucket of water that the man had so thoughtfully fetched from the river. One of the advantages of working naked was that one didn't have to worry about bloodstained clothing.

In some ways the evening had proved to be a bit of a disappointment. Physically, the man – whatever his name was – had been quite adequate but he had accepted his death far too calmly. In some ways he had almost seemed to welcome it. The young chap over in Draybridge had screamed for absolutely ages and that had been much more fun. Still, she had the consolation of knowing that there was always the next time. For her, nothing could equal the feeling of power and indescribable beauty at the moment of her victim's death . . .

She dressed quickly and headed back towards the village in silence.

Alan Temperley

The Victorian conservatory

The fine weather continued, unseasonably warm. The skies were cloudless. By late morning the workmen in the streets were stripped to their vests, their arms and shoulders burned brown by the endless summer. Front doors and windows stood open. At lunchtime the sales assistants and office girls took their sandwiches into the parks or Botanical Gardens, laughing and giving their faces and bared necks to the sun. Young couples lay entwined on the grass; energetic boys kicked footballs about the baked pitches ... It was a real Indian summer. But the nights were cold, heavy dew fell on the grass and picked out spiders' webs on the bushes in ropes of crystal. The purple slate roofs of the houses glinted silver and copper in the light of the street lamps. Orion, newly rising for the coming winter, shone low over the rooftops to the south-east. The late harvest moon, waxing full, hung over all.

At ten o'clock on Saturday morning Colin Rowell stirred in his sleep and drifted towards consciousness. The sounds of the street rose up the old walls of the tenement flats to his bedroom window, and filtered through the curtains. The young chap from downstairs revved the engine of his old Anglia. A terrier from across the road barked continuously – probably at the cat in the basement area next door. Somewhere in the flat Barry was playing his lute ... Colin grunted contentedly and stretched his legs, then curled up once more in the hot cocoon of his bed. No more than a quarter awake, he smiled: Saturday – no lectures. He would see Bronwen. Later, after the match, they would go out somewhere – a film, maybe, or the union hop. He swallowed and made a little noise in his nose and throat, and drew his knees towards his chest. He thought of her dark sparkling face, neat, plump figure, and the cheeky way she sometimes looked at him.

His smile broadened. He remembered the summer . . . They had been away on holiday together, with her parents, in Brittany. They had taken a cottage for three weeks. Hot in his bed he imagined the sun on his back, and remembered lying with Bronwen in that little bay – no more than a fissure in the rocks, really. That first time . . . A sensuous love stirred through him, from his legs to his head. He curled his face into the pillow.

Suddenly, with a real pain, memory returned.

Bronwen was gone.

He opened his eyes. Wide awake, unmoving, the wretchedness welled over him. Not registering what he saw he stared across the bedroom to the diagonal stripe of sunlight that lit the curtains. The old sickness began to revolve and fume in his brain. What had happened – what could have happened? Almost at once, automatically, his mind slipped back into the familiar grooves. A headache began to press against the side of his brow.

She was an art student, Bronwen Lewis, from Aberystwyth, the daughter of a doctor. He had met her at the beginning of his second year at the university. After his finals, or maybe even at Christmas, they had planned to get engaged. But a fortnight earlier, ten days into the new term, she had vanished; vanished without trace between her college hall of residence and his flat. A mile of well-lit streets, and she had disappeared.

It was a Saturday evening. She had spent a good part of the day at the flat and in the tropical house at the Botanical Gardens, working on a series of paintings she was preparing for a folio on the great Victorian conservatory. He was playing rugby that afternoon, and after lunch had left her to it. She prepared a meal for when he returned shortly after five o'clock. Later, while they sat on the settee and watched television for a while, she had shown him some of the sketches she made while he was away. Then at six-thirty she had gone back to her hall of residence to have a shower and change before they went ice-skating, and then on to the Red Dragon for a few drinks with their friends. He never saw her again. She had showered; a friend had seen her leaving, her navy donkey-jacket flying open, a bag slung over her shoulder. She never arrived at the flat. After a while he had telephoned; and then later, already feeling rather anxious, telephoned

again. The Warden rang her parents at midnight. They told her to contact the police at once.

It was the following afternoon that Colin, taken through her possessions by the CID, discovered that her sketchbook was missing.

He was sure that the answer lay somewhere in that missing pad and the work she was doing in the Botanical Gardens. It was her second year project. So original, and even brilliant, had been her work, however, that she was permitted to carry it through into her third year study. In the series of paintings and sketches that lay so casually thrown into the huge cardboard folio behind the dresser in her room, Bronwen had wonderfully caught the whole atmosphere of the great hot-house – the unnatural orchids clinging to tropical branches, the weight of leaves hanging in the high dome, the moisture and the cloying heat. The work fascinated her: often she had discussed it with Colin. He had accompanied her for brief visits during spare mornings and afternoons, wandering around while she made a note or two, sensing himself something of the uneasy atmosphere which she had caught in her drawings. She had her own key, for the curator of the Botanical Gardens was a good friend of her family. It gave her a wonderful opportunity to work undisturbed when the conservatory was officially closed, and almost unlimited access..If only Colin could have satisfied himself whether or not she returned to the conservatory that evening. He was sure she must have done, for during the day she had spoken of wanting to make a sketch of the tropical house at night, lit only by the moon on the steamy glass and the little light that filtered from the road a quarter of a mile away. She had not disturbed any of the keepers, so far as he could make out, but Colin knew that she was perfectly capable of climbing the fence and having a look for herself. She was that sort of girl. The key – well, all her keys were missing, they were on the same ring. But the sketchbook – why else would that have gone?

A hundred times he had reached the same point in his reasoning, and come to a dead end. Beyond the missing sketchbook there was nothing whatever to suggest what had become of the pretty Welsh girl.

Colin turned in his bed and picked up his watch from the bed-

side table. Twenty past ten: he blinked and squinted towards the brilliant spear of sunlight that now shone through a gap in the curtains. He yawned, he would have to get up. Though he had not been late to bed he was not sleeping well, lying awake and thinking, unable to switch his brain off until the night was almost over.

He pushed back the covers of the bed and swung his feet to the floor. Pulling on a pair of underpants and rubbing his bare shoulders against the morning chill, he padded through the hallway into the kitchen.

Barry Stewart, Colin's flat-mate, sipped at a cup of coffee and turned over the pages of the *Sun*. His lute lay to one side on the table.

'Good morning.' Colin sniffed and turned on the gas under the kettle. He shook a packet of cigarettes but it was empty. He shook another, which held two. He took one, and tearing a strip of card from the top of the cereal packet, lit it from the gas. The flame burned up towards his hair, making him blink and screw his eyes up as he drew on the cigarette. He shook the flames out and dipped the blackened end of the cardboard in a saucepan of dirty water in the sink.

The kettle boiled. He made himself a cup of coffee. Colin pulled on his sweater and sat down at the table. He rubbed the heel of his hand across his eyes and stretched, yawning again, and looked out of the window.

'Did you have a good time last night?'

'All right.' Barry ruffled back several pages and turned the paper towards Colin. 'Look at that, eh! What a pair!'

Colin turned his head and looked at the slim figure critically. 'She's all right,' he said non-committally.

'She's all right, all right,' Barry said with quiet enthusiasm. 'There weren't many girls like that last night, I can tell you.'

'What time did you get back?'

'About four.'

'Was Rosie there?'

'Rosie?' Barry said. 'Who's Rosie. The only girl I knew there was Frauke Bohl.'

'What, Frauke Hausfrau?'

'You may mock! You may mock! Oh, you should have seen the sweater she was wearing. Soft white angora! Oh!' He closed his eyes in mock ecstasy.

'Oh, come on! She'd eat you alive.'

'I know.' Barry smiled reminiscently.

Colin laughed aloud and shook his head, flipping his cigarette into the overflowing ashtray.

Barry, dark haired, slight and strikingly handsome, had an endless succession of girlfriends, none of them serious. He was a music student, free and easy, light as the air. No one would have guessed he was the son of a Selkirk farmer. He kissed the breasts of the girl in the photograph and turned back to the story he was reading about a sex killer in the Isle of Man.

Colin reached for the last clean cereal bowl in the cupboard and poured himself some Rice Krispies. There was only a dribble of milk. He poured it on, added a couple of dessert-spoonsful of sugar, and mixed it all together as well as he was able. Only a few of the Krispies were damp. He raised the dry cereal to his lips.

He was a chemistry student, a Geordie, totally different from Barry: this, perhaps, was why they were such good friends. Tall and well built, he was a regular member of the university rugby team, serious and steady by nature. He was fair, with straight hair falling over his ears, plain and pleasant looking.

He took a mouthful of coffee to help the cereal down.

They arranged to meet at the chip shop for lunch. Barry washed up, then went off to rehearse a few numbers with a folk band for a university date the following night. Colin shaved and dressed, and in jeans and an open-necked shirt, a light jacket over his arm, walked down to the playing fields at the park.

A few football matches were in progress. He wandered around for a while, meeting a couple of acquaintances, watching the schoolboys and apprentices racing about the dry turf. On the touchlines other boys kicked the spare balls to one another, and middle-aged men ran heavily, laughing and easy. He strolled on by the swings and tennis courts, enjoying the sunshine, his thoughts elsewhere.

He crossed the road and entered the Botanical Gardens. The

men on the gate knew him as the missing girl's boyfriend. He had been there often. He smiled and raised a hand of greeting; uncertainly but with good nature they nodded back through the glass, aware to some extent of his feelings.

As always, the gardens were fresh and beautiful. Just within the gate two maples flamed scarlet and gold, one on either side of the pathway. A water scatterer sent skeins of cool, glittering drops across flower beds and the corner of a green lawn. The path forked; not wishing to arrive too quickly at the hot-house, Colin turned right. The leaves were falling; through thinning treetops he could see the blue October sky. Some of the shrubs were in berry and fruit – rose-red japonica, yellow clots of viburnum, fine twigs of scarlet from the Himalayas. Beneath a magnificent beech hedge the edge of the path was thick with mast.

He turned on to the grass and paused beneath a tall oak, picking two or three acorns from the fallen leaves. A grey squirrel came bouncing out of a dark, coniferous thicket towards him, and stopped three or four yards away. He watched, then quietly crouched and held an acorn towards it. The squirrel came closer, apprehensive. Suddenly it dashed forward, snatched the nut from his fingers, retreated a yard or two. Briefly it nibbled, then dropped the nut in the grass and came forward again. Colin left the acorns lying and walked on, twirling a leaf absently between his fingers. The squirrel circled to the place where he had been crouching, looked after him, bushy tail erect, paws held delicately from its chest.

He lingered on a little rustic footbridge in the rock garden, watching the trickle of clear water running down the stones into a small pool where the tiny minnows angled and darted as he tossed a pebble in.

Beyond the autumn display of asters and dahlias a young boy and girl were standing with their mother throwing bread to the swans and ducks in the pond. The little boy stepped back as a swan reached its long neck towards his bag of scraps, then boldly stepped out and flung a big crust straight at it. A willow trailed its fine twigs to the water. Colin reached out and drew the hanging curtain of branches aside to pass into its leafy den. The sun caught the thick fair hairs on the back of his hand.

He emerged from the far side of the tree. A hundred yards away, beneath a bank crowned with two magnificent beeches, stood the great conservatory. Breathing deeply and his heart beating a little more quickly, he walked towards it over the grass and along the broad footpath.

They were splendid buildings, built in the hey-day of Victorian grandeur, to house the spectacular new species just being brought home from the opening continents; there were four great halls, three linked together, and one – the tall palm-house – standing by itself: glass-domed, ornamental and splendid. The tropical house was at the near end. Through the long windows, separated by tall, scrolled pilasters, Colin could see the great feathered and rubbery leaves of the riotous plants and trees, reaching right up into the dome.

The humid warmth and stillness closed about him as he entered and the double doors swung shut behind him; the emotional atmosphere also changed: outside all was fresh and English, sweet and healthy; the trees were natural, the flowers, even though their names might be unknown, were beneficent and familiar. But the tropical house was another, alien world: the trees were strange and grotesque, like a dream, with vast waxen leaves, up to eight or nine feet in length, that reared and trailed in rubbery plains and confusion. Choking creepers coiled to the roof and hung through great chambers of air, their dark leaves slashed into holes; unnatural trumpets of unhealthy delicacy splashing their succulent fatness with white. Flowers of unnatural brilliance glowed in the green shadows and dappled sunshine. Huge phallic trumpets thrust erect from the wet branches; petals strained back from stamens, avidly baring the very heart of themselves to the sunshine, clamouring for pollen. Mottled orchids, ruined by the pressure of a finger, hung their beautiful and obscene sacs in the shade. A massive bloom of rafflesia, three feet across, sucked its nourishment from the roots of an unwilling host.

The tropical house was laid out in the form of a broad cross, fifty yards square. In the middle, beneath the dome, stood a fountain, presided over by a slim, negroid faun, eyes slanted and lips parted with laughter, looking up to a shell in his raised hand; from the shell the water ran splashing over his shoulders into the

pool at his feet. Beyond him the top arm of the cross was sunk with a large rectangular pool. Banks of tall rush and aquatic flowers garlanded the corners and brink. Within, the surface was massed with giant Amazon water-lily pads, five and six feet across, their edges raised, illuminated by glowing white flowers. In the shadowy green water beneath, eighteen-inch carp idled and stirred through the open forest of stems, their fish mouths opening and closing. At the four corners of the central square of the great hall slender iron columns reached high into the air, and from them a delicate series of supporting arches and minor columns ran backwards down the arms of the cross. Vines and clinging plants hung from them, trailing their heavy, perfumed blossoms in the air.

As he so often had done since Bronwen had vanished, Colin walked about the mosaic floor, staring up into the heavy crowns of leaves, gazing for long minutes at the carp, his thoughts turning over and over the ground he had covered so many times before. He was not imaginative, but in his mind's eye, through very familiarity, he saw her so vividly making her way along the dark paths of the gardens, and letting herself into the steamy heat with the key the curator had given her. He saw her stand just inside the door, looking around in the darkness with that assessing eye he knew so well. Once perhaps she circled the floor, collecting images, then returning, let herself out once more into the October night. She was hurrying so that she would not be late for the ice skating. She must have gone out again, for the door was locked when the keeper of the tropical house arrived the following morning. Reason told him this must be so; yet he could not get away from the feeling that here, in the conservatory, lay the answer to the mystery. Wretched and frustrated, his mind banging again and again at the same brick wall, he gripped in his hand one of the minor pillars and stared into the confusion of leaves. Suddenly he noticed that another visitor was looking at him strangely, and realized that his teeth were clenched and he was gripping the pillar so tightly that his knuckles showed white.

One or two green folding chairs were placed in strategic positions; he sat down and laid his jacket over his knee. Across the great hall the keeper of the tropical house, a quiet, middle-aged

man, went about his business. Absently Colin watched him raking up some leaves and dropping them into a small rubbish cart. He finished and left the rake and cart beside a small roller, then sat down and took a small flask of tea from his khaki rucksack.

Colin looked about the tropical house. How well Bronwen had captured the fat, over-rich, slightly evil atmosphere of the place in her drawings and paintings. He recalled the watercolour she had been engaged upon that last Saturday at the flat: an orchid, hanging from one of the metal columns, with the fountain and entrance behind just blocked in, and the October morning sunlight filtering through the leaves. The police had taken it away.

He looked back at the keeper. In the absence of any clue beyond the missing sketchbook, Colin had turned in desperation to anyone who had any knowledge whatever of Bronwen. Not for the first time he wondered if the keeper knew more than he was saying. It seemed to Colin that though he was perfectly pleasant and straightforward, there was something strange, a sort of inner quiet about this man which left him feeling a little uncertain. The keeper was sitting back in one of the green chairs, his legs spread, looking into space. The hand holding his cup rested on one knee. He was wearing a pair of green cotton work overalls, open at the neck. Beneath, Colin could see a blue shirt and the top of a navy waistcoat. His dark jacket hung over the back of the chair behind him. He looked a countryman – balding, with grizzled hair, browned by the outdoors.

Colin strolled across. They had spoken several times before. The man was pouring a second cup of tea from his flask as Colin came up.

'I'm back again,' he said ruefully.

The man smiled and inclined his head, bending to replace the flask on the floor beside his rucksack. He sat back.

'Warm weather continuing, then.' His speech was slow, with a soft west-country burr.

'Yes, it is: beautiful out there.' Colin's youthful Geordie accent was a great contrast.

Together they looked across at the sunlit windows and the rays filtering through the greenery overhead.

'Be seeing the last of the summer visitors soon. Get a good few this afternoon, though, I shouldn't wonder – and tomorrow.'

Colin nodded. 'It can't go on much longer – the good weather ... Bound to break by next weekend, I reckon.'

'November.' The keeper took a mouthful of tea and wiped his lips with the back of his hand.

'Do you like it when it's busy like this? When you get all the people coming in?'

'Yes, I like it when they come to look at the plants ... That's what it's for, isn't it?'

'I thought you might prefer it when it's quiet, when there's no one pulling at the leaves and maybe spoiling the orchids.'

'Yes, I like it then, too,' the man replied. 'I like it when there's just them and me. And you're right, they can do a lot of damage just by touching the blossoms. Lift up some of the orchids just to smell them, and they're crushed, you know.'

Colin regarded a frail orchid clinging to a branch just by the keeper's head. It was exquisite: white, shading to pink and mauve, delicately blotched with scarlets and blues – fragile and lovely, and yet sick and unhealthy.

'They're beautiful,' he said.

The keeper's bright blue eyes held his for a moment, keen and assessing.

'Yes, they are,' he said. 'Beautiful.'

'Do you have any favourites?' Colin looked around the hothouse, the blossoms vivid and burning.

The keeper followed his eyes. 'No,' he said. 'No favourites. I love them all ...' As he spoke his voice took on an indefinably wistful tone that brought Colin's eyes back to his face. 'They're all beautiful.'

Colin rested his hand against a section of iron pillar that remained uncovered by the climbing plant.

'Bronwen – you know – told me there was one orchid that catches insects and drowns them and eats them. Which one is that?'

'The pitcher plant ... Nepenthes. Over there – see, green and brown, mottled, like a sheath.'

Colin crossed and examined the dreadful flower.

'There was another one,' he said. 'If you cut it white stuff comes out, and if you get it on your tongue it will swell up until it chokes you.'

'Dieffenbachia . . . Round the corner.'

Colin looked in the direction he indicated, but the undergrowth was almost solid in that part. Pulling at his shirt beneath the arms, for the moist heat was making him sweat, he returned to the iron pillar.

'You heard no more, then?' the keeper said after a moment.

Colin shook his head, looking towards the ground.

'I don't suppose you had any ideas yourself?' he asked.

The keeper looked away and gently shook his head. 'No, nothing at all.'

Colin was silent.

The keeper looked up into his face, his eyes catching the sunlight.

'I . . . don't know what to say. I've told you all I can. I knew she had a key, like; but, well, you'd never expect an artist to come in here at night, would you? I mean, you need light for painting.'

Colin nodded dumbly.

'I've said it before, boy,' the keeper's voice was gentle. 'I think you're barking up the wrong tree here. I'm sorry.'

'Aye, well.' Colin smiled briefly with his lips and glanced up. 'Thank you anyway.'

The man was quiet.

'As I say, I'm . . .' He shrugged.

Colin drew a deep breath. 'It's all right. There's nothing you can do about it.'

He pushed himself away from the pillar. As he stepped forward his foot caught in the strap of the keeper's rucksack, toppling it from the side of his chair and skidding it two or three feet across the mosaic tiles.

'Oh, I'm sorry!'

Extricating his foot Colin bent to pick up the rucksack and replace it. But even as he took hold of the khaki flap, the keeper's brown hand was beside his own. His thermos fell to the ground with a tinkling crash, but he ignored it.

'It's all right,' he said evenly. 'I've got it.'

Surprised, Colin looked at him, and in a moment released his grip and stood back.

The keeper replaced the rucksack against the leg of his chair. Quickly, with a flash of his blue eyes, surprised in some secret, he glanced up at the student, then looked down again, keeping his head turned away to examine the flask. It was obviously smashed; a brown trickle ran from the bottom seam, and as he picked it up the glass flopped inside and drops fell to the tiles. He looked about, then crossed to his small rubbish cart and laid it on a scattering of leaves and sweepings from the floor.

'I'm very sorry,' Colin said again.

Still the man did not look at him. At length he raised his eyes, and their expression was mild and almost unnaturally easy.

'Ah, they break easy, those things,' he said. 'Don't you think about it.'

'Look, I didn't knock it over, I know, but it was my fault. Can I not get you a new inside for it?'

'Not at all. Not at all. Thank you all the same. Now you go on through the conservatory; I must get on with some work.'

'Are you sure? I mean I could easily . . .'

'Look, son, forget about it. It wasn't your fault. I'll be here till it's dark tonight; I'll nip out and buy one this afternoon – all right? Now I really must get on with some work.'

He was dismissed. Colin backed away. 'Aye, well . . . Sorry . . . Cheerio.'

'Ta ta, son.'

'I'll see you again.'

'All right.'

Colin walked away. Briefly he circled the conservatory once more, then passed through the connecting door into the desert house.

As he strolled along the paths through the dusty earth, the atmosphere so clean and dry and different from the tropical house, he was barely conscious of the weird shapes around him; the thirty foot cacti, the dry nests of thorns and sea-green urchins tipped with tiny flowers. His mind was occupied with the keeper's swift

anxiety to remove the rucksack from his grasp. Why? What could possibly be inside it that would be of interest to him? He paused beneath a tall Joshua tree, the bark shaggy with long spines, the globes of spiky leaves forming desert shapes above his head. There was something not right. The list of his suspicions was growing longer; the strangeness of the tropical house, its atmosphere, Bronwen's fascination with it, her disappearance, the missing sketchbook, the keeper's sudden action and then the cover-up: he felt sure that somewhere among those riotous jungle plants, or on the mosaic cross with its fountain and tropical pool, was the clue that must put him on the right lines. If only he could look around by himself.

A couple came through from the temperate house and walked past him, hand in hand. Through the window he saw the autumn gardens outside. He sat on a broad yellow stone surrounded by a scattering of large pebbles and rested his elbows on his knees. As he looked down he realized that a good number of the pebbles were, in fact, tiny cacti. But it was only with half his mind that he registered them, and for several minutes was lost in thought. When he rose, with a sigh and a sinking feeling in his stomach, his mind was made up.

Looking the length of the desert house he saw the keyhole in the connecting door that led to the tropical house. Almost certainly they would lock it at night. Gnawing his lip he crossed to a window beside the path and examined the catch; it appeared possible to wedge it shut, yet unsnecked, with a piece of card. Pulling the cigarette packet from his jacket pocket, he tore off the flap and folded it in two. Checking that he was unobserved, he slipped it beneath the catch; the window remained shut but opened stiffly when he pulled. He shut it again and pocketed the piece of card. Casually he strolled back beneath the giant cacti and looked through the glass door into the tropical house.

The keeper was busy at the further side. The couple who had passed him earlier had paused before the dark faun, looking up, and a group of foreign students were laughing and pointing down into the pond, either at the carp or the coins that visitors had thrown into the water. Quietly Colin passed through the door and, finding himself still unobserved, slipped out of sight among

the massive leaves of a banana tree. The cover was not complete, but he managed to flit quickly through the spaces where he would be visible from the floor of the conservatory. Sheltering behind a trailing thicket of monstera deliciosa he examined the catch of the window. It opened quite easily. Carefully he slipped the folded card beneath the sneck and pulled: the window opened. He replaced the card and wedged the window firmly shut. The huge flowers of the monstera released a heady scent of pineapple all around him. He peered through the slashed, glossy, three-foot leaves. The keeper was still occupied at the far side of the conservatory. Quietly, trying not to shake the creepers and undergrowth, he returned to the tiled floor. The soles of his shoes were damp from the earth. The foreign students were just passing through the connecting door into the desert house and saw him emerge from the greenery. He smiled ruefully, a student to students, caught breaking the rules, and passed through with them. A minute later, the soles of his shoes already dry and his footmarks evaporating from the mosaic tiles, he returned to the tropical house.

He paused at the fountain, gazing up into the wanton face of the negroid faun, a combination of classical myth and African devilry, reckless with mischief. He had not realized how appropriate the statue was; to what extent it breathed the very atmosphere of the tropical house, seemed its living persona, with the water trickling down its smooth limbs. Lilies, rock plants, rich tropical mosses and ferns formed a grotto about its feet. Colin walked around the fountain, viewing the statue from all sides: it was a miraculous piece of work.

He said so to the keeper as he paused for a moment on his way out.

The keeper raised his bushy eyebrows and looked towards the fountain. 'Yes, it's a nice statue,' he said.

As Colin reached the path outside he turned and looked back. The keeper was looking after him. Colin turned away and set off walking back through the Botanical Gardens. As he went he eased his elbows and plucked lightly at the front of his shirt to let the freshness of the October air blow about his body.

Barry and his friends were already in the chip shop when he arrived. They had finished their rehearsal early and called briefly at the pub. They were in high spirits. Colin had a rugby match in the afternoon and did not want to eat too much. He ordered a piece of fish at the counter and took it across to the crowded table; they pushed their chairs back to make room for him.

He did not feel like joining in the hilarity, and when he had finished eating, took Barry aside. He told him of his plan for the night. Barry became serious and looked at Colin with some doubt. But if he thought Colin was distressing himself beyond reasonable limits and grasping at straws, he did not say so.

'Yes, I'll come,' he said. 'Of course. But it's serious, this. If we get nicked it will be the courts.'

Colin assured him that they were not going to do any damage, and when they came away no one would ever know they had been in the tropical house.

'Yes, I realize that,' Barry said. 'But, well, when we climbed the column that was a joke. This is breaking and entering ... Well, entering, anyway.'

There was no need for him to enter at all, Colin told him. It would just be nice not to go alone.

Barry squeezed his arm. 'Of course. It'll be an adventure. Don't worry about a thing.' His dark eyes sparkled. 'I'll tell you what. We'll pick up Frauke Hausfrau later on, and go on to the pub. All right?'

Colin nodded.

The rugby match was on the university field. Afterwards the team had a meal together, and at eight o'clock Colin was ready at the flat. He had put on training shoes and a dark sweater, so that he would be less noticeable. Slim and businesslike in jeans and a black zip jacket, Barry joined him in the living room. They went out into the night.

The roads alongside the railings of the Botanical Gardens were well lighted. Looking both ways and seeing the pavement clear, Colin darted into the shadows of the shrubbery of a big house at the corner, and Barry followed. Less than five minutes later, having climbed a tree and traversed the tin roof of a big shed, they

clambered over the iron spikes and slid down the railings into the shelter of a clump of bushes.

It was dim and thick with shadows in the Botanical Gardens, but light came from the street lamps and the moon had risen, so they could see better than Colin had anticipated. This meant, however, that the keepers could see them too, so they would have to be very careful. Running swiftly from shadow to shadow across the silvery plains of turf, they gradually drew away from the road towards the rock garden and duck pond. Arriving behind a clump of bushes they disturbed a settled group of geese which honked loudly and fled down to the water with much splashing. Appalled, they sprinted to the shadows of the willow tree, disturbing there a pair of swans and some dabchicks, which also fled to the water. They froze where they were . . . The commotion subsided: no one appeared. They waited a few minutes longer, but the gardens remained silent.

A hundred yards away the great conservatory gleamed pale and romantic. Barry pointed to a clump of rhododendrons, moving his arm in an arc, indicating the most sheltered approach. Colin nodded and placed his hand on Barry's shoulder. They ran. They ran again. Soon they were in the dark border of shrubbery that grew along the edge of the tropical house.

Colin placed himself in front, crouched, and made his way towards the corner where he had wedged the window. Suddenly Barry caught his arm. 'Ssshh!' He pointed. A dark figure came down the path from the direction of the keepers' night lodge; The silver buttons on his uniform jacket glinted in the moonlight. Colin could see that he was carrying a heavy stick. The tip of his cigarette glowed orange, like a swinging star. They let him pass fifty yards away and waited for a couple of minutes. Colin led the way forward again.

By ill chance the window he had wedged lay just beyond the end of the shrubbery. Colin glanced at Barry, and with an inward prayer stepped out into the moonlight.

It was hard to tell which was the exact window. He pushed one, and then another, but they remained tightly fastened. Pinching the rim of a third between his thumb and forefinger, he pushed again; the window gave and swung in. Quickly he caught hold of

the top of the frame and lowered it to its fullest extent. The gap, about five feet from the ground, was not very big. Climbing upon the sandstone edging, Colin reached through and felt for a hold on the struts of the window above him. The heat of the tropical house flowed out over his head and shoulders. His fingers closed on a metal sill. Helped from below by Barry, he heaved and scrabbled his heels on the rim of the glass. In a moment he was up, sitting on the edge of the opened window. He was heavy, and prayed that the frame would support him – it did. With difficulty, raking his shin painfully on a metal edge, he swung his legs in, then leaned against the warm, soggy, fibrous trunk of some tree fern and dropped down into the stillness of the tropical house.

The earth inside was rather higher than the ground outside. Colin braced his arm. Barry reached through and took it, then neatly, like an eel, writhed his body through the gap; holding on to Colin, he fell through into the heat and humidity. Quickly and quietly Colin pushed the window shut behind them, and picked the scrap of card from the earth.

He had brought a small everlasting torch and a piece of cloth with him. Carefully he led the way through the undergrowth. Sitting on the floor by the locked door to the desert house, he wiped the soles of his shoes and passed the cloth to Barry.

Softly they walked to the central square and looked about them. The fountain had been switched off; the water at the feet of the statue was like a mirror.

The tropical house had seemed unnatural and even menacing by day; by moonlight it was monstrous. The heavy crowns of trees were black silhouettes against the moonlit dome. Falling creepers and huge bulbous trunks mingled with the undergrowth in impenetrable thickets. The Victorian design of springing arches and filigree wrought-iron work, the spacious grandeur of the whole, created a fairytale atmosphere, a nightmarish wonder in which all the demons of childhood might lurk.

Barry, more imaginative than Colin, stared around, frightened, but stirred into thoughts of Debussy-like composition, soaking up the atmosphere for future reference.

Colin was close beside him.

'He keeps his things over there.' Colin was whispering, but

still his voice seemed over-loud, drawing attention to itself in the stillness; it was as if they should be silent and shelter in the shadows. On the open floor they were exposed, their presence intrusive.

Together they walked slowly across the central square and down the arm of the cross to where the keeper stored his few tools. Colin switched on his torch, keeping the light shaded, moving the beam over the roller and rubbish cart and the small chest that stood by the green folding chair. The rucksack, of course, was gone.

'Nothing very sinister there,' Barry whispered.

Colin reached into the rubbish cart and turned over the few leaves and clippings and dead blooms. There was nothing else. He turned to the chest, found it unlocked. Barry raised the lid apprehensively, and Colin turned the torch inside. Nothing greeted their eyes but the green overalls, a few gardening tools, a packet of fertilizer and a ball of twine. The pockets of the overalls were empty. Barry poked about among the bits and pieces in the bottom, but there was nothing of any significance. Leaving the tools, so far as he was able, as he had found them, he stood back and Colin lowered the lid. He looked around in the dimness and shook his head.

'I don't know. There's nothing to see, but I feel sure there's something not right here. Come on, we'll have a look around.'

Moving only by moonlight they began to circle the hothouse, moving along the edges of the mosaic floor; it was hopeless, he had seen more during the day. A warm stench of vanilla enveloped them, which Colin had not noticed during his earlier visit. Half a dozen huge white blooms stared from a cluster of thin, finger-like branches. He risked the torch and turned it on a superb display of queen-of-the-night – flawless white petals ringed with a crown of delicate salmon-coloured needles. He switched off and they moved on. Barry blew the scented air from his nostrils.

'It's too much for me, a smell like that,' he said. 'It's like something rotten.'

Colin nodded and stopped. 'Look, it's no good, this,' he said. 'You go on around the floor and I'll have a look under the trees.'

He stepped through a thickness of trailing leaves into the shadow.

Keeping his voice low Barry called after him. 'Colin!'

'Yes.'

'Let's stick together, eh? I'll come along with you. We'll have a look round here after.'

'All right.'

'Where are you?'

Colin turned on the torch, and with some relief Barry joined him on the wet earth. He squeaked as a trailing creeper brushed across the back of his neck.

All the time keeping the light shaded they circled the huge house, this weird misplaced jungle. Sodden ferns and waterlogged branches struck warm and wet through their trousers and against their collars. But there was no sign to give any clue to Bronwen's disappearance.

At length they stood once more in the central square.

'One last look around here and then we'll go home,' Colin said.

They walked around the tropical pond, feeling that any moment a crocodile might slither from the undergrowth on either side and carry one of them off into unspeakable depths. But all they saw were the rushes, and beyond, the white stars of the lilies and huge moon-silvered pads carpeting the dark water.

Barry moved off and Colin walked slowly down the arm of the cross towards the mottled face of the rafflesia. He looked through the undergrowth towards a moonlit window. For a minute he was still, lost in his thoughts.

Suddenly there was a sharp, loud cry of horror from Barry, and a little splash. The cry was repeated.

He was in the middle of the central square, by the statue.

'Colin!' he cried. 'Quick, come here. Bring the light. Oh, for God's sake!'

Colin ran towards him. He was standing back from the edge of the fountain. He pointed.

'There,' he said. 'Put your torch on there. Oh, for God's sake, what is it?'

Still shading the light, Colin turned the torch to where he was

pointing. At first he saw nothing, and then the circle of light fell on a thrush lying dead on the mosaic floor.

'Further up,' Barry said, his voice shaking. 'On the rock.'

On a flat, raised stone in front of the statue were the bodies of three or four birds, a mole and a squirrel. Barry caught hold of Colin by the arm. Colin raised the torch up the naked figure of the faun. In the shadows and darkness his evil face laughed up towards the sky. By a trick of the moisture on his face his eyes seemed for a moment to turn down towards them and glitter. Both aghast they stared up, then Colin lowered the torch once more to the dead creatures on the stone.

'I stood on them,' Barry said. 'I stepped up to look at him and I stood on them! And something fell in the water.'

They moved up close and Colin turned the torch on the still surface of the fountain. A white rat lay swamped in the shallow water. Unwillingly Colin reached his hand into the fountain and picked it out by the tail. The water trickled from its fur. He held it over the fountain until the greater part had drained away, and then laid it, fat and sodden, beside the other dead creatures.

Slowly the moonlight re-composed itself on the surface of the fountain pool.

Barry reached down and picked up the body of the thrush; the brown wings straggled open from the dappled breast as he held it in the air; blue membranes were closed for ever over the eyes, showing only a thin black slit between, no longer bright. There was a dark mark beneath one wing and, gently drawing the feathers back with the tip of a finger, Barry revealed the dark, blood-matted hole of an airgun pellet. He laid it down on the stone and took up the tiny corpse of a blue-tit, its head half shot away.

'Poor little beggars,' Barry said softly.

Colin turned over the body of the squirrel, looking for a similar mark, but the fur was unscarred. He ruffled it back with his hand, but the skin was whole and clean and unmarked. The body was stiff with rigor mortis. From his biological studies he knew that in a creature of that size the rigor would pass off in less than a day. The animal had met with a violent end – presumably that same Saturday. He examined it again, and felt the break of

the vertebrae at the thin neck. Without speaking he held it towards Barry, who gently probed between the shoulders and head, then drew his fingers back and nodded.

Colin laid the squirrel back on the stone and shone his torch about the fountain. He switched off and they stared behind them and all about through the thick vegetation. They were both very frightened. Colin felt the sweat prickle at the back of his neck and trickle from his hair down the side of his brow. Keeping the light shaded he switched on his torch once more and slowly walked around the fountain. The water was still, the mosses and ferns growing from the rocks were beautiful and tranquil, but still sinister. A darkness seemed to move behind their deceptive innocence, some evil more clearly seen in the luscious beauty of the large orchids. Soon they stood once more before the raised stone.

In the darkness before the statue, in that place, the stone was like an altar. But an altar to what – to the statue? To some primitive tropical god? To Pan? To a diseased vision of nature? To the blossoming, surging life of the great hot-house itself?

'I don't know what it is,' Barry said, 'but I think we should get out of here. It gives me the horrors, this place.'

'You're right.' Colin's Geordie accent was reassuring, a sudden normality in the darkness where established orders were overthrown. 'Just one more look around, though . . . A quick one.'

Keeping close together they made a last circuit of the tropical house, checking a second time that the door to the desert house was locked, looking again through the keeper's tools, but there was nothing beyond what they had already observed.

Then Colin led the way through the undergrowth to the window and pulled it open. The drugged-pineapple stench of the monstera deliciosa was about them as Barry clambered up, and checking that the coast was clear, slipped gladly down into the chill of the October night. Colin climbed up the window frames after him, half expecting something to catch hold of him as he was unbalanced and off his guard. A hanging weight of leaves touched his shoulder and he almost screamed in fright. But a moment later he, too, was on the grass outside, shuddering with inexpressible relief. Taking the strip of folded cardboard from his

pocket, he carefully slipped it under the catch and pulled the window firmly shut behind him.

Half an hour later, drained but building themselves up with a second and third glass of beer, they sat in the first pub they had come to and sopped up the normality like sponges. But no matter how they talked over the events of the evening they made no progress: *what* had they discovered? *Who* could they tell? Someone had left half-a-dozen dead birds and animals on a stone, that was all... The rest was imagination.

Slowly the shivering in their bellies eased. Barry looked at his watch. Already he was half an hour late for meeting his friends. Not bothering to change, they made their way through the main streets and alleys of the town to the streets of the university.

They met their friends in the students' bar. The lights were yellow and orange, the music and laughter and shouting were deafening. Before closing time they were both three-quarters drunk. They went on to a dance. Barry danced with Frauke, the well-built German girl, rather taller than himself, who folded him to her splendid bosom with passionate maternity. Sometimes staring out with nervous desperation, sometimes being sumptuously drowned, Barry allowed himself to be taken over. Colin danced with several girls, and gradually the end of the evening became vague. In occasional brief clearings of the cloud that fogged his mind, he found himself standing on the broad stone steps of the university union; clapsed in the arms of a girl he did not know on the sofa of a room he did not recognize; leaning against a stone wall staring through railings at allotments and the fields of a park somewhere. The street lights above his head were concrete and orange.

'Bronwen!' he cried, filled with a blank desolation. '*Bronwen!*'

Some people, in whose company he seemed to be, stopped further along the pavement. A girl took his arm. He pushed her away violently.

'Get off. Get off!'

His feet uncertain, weaving from side to side of the broad pavement, he made off in the other direction.

'Bronwen,' he whispered. '*Bronwen.*'

A high stone wall was before him. He laid his body and cheek against it and stroked the rough stones, His heavy breathing eased; a drunken tear coursed down his face. In a while the girl came and took his arm again. He permitted himself to be led away.

By midday the thudding in his head and dreadful feeling of nausea were passing away. Pale as a sheet he lay in the ancient armchair in his flat.

At twelve-thirty Barry returned. He played the organ in church; necessity had forced him into sobriety. Immaculate in dark jacket and pale grey flannels, he entered the living room and slumped into the chair opposite.

For a while they sat silently. Then Barry changed out of his good clothes, Colin pulled on a pair of shoes and a jacket, and they went out for lunch to an Indian restaurant around the corner.

Occasionally during term-time Colin went away for a couple of days to the house of an aunt whose husband was a miner – in a small pit village twenty miles away. He felt now, with all that had happened, that he needed a few days away by himself, to think things over. As they sat with their plates of rice and bowls of meat eating with forks, talking over their discovery in the tropical house, then laughing at the events of the later evening, he told Barry that he expected to be away at his aunt's when he returned from his musical date that night.

In the middle of the afternoon the other members of the band turned up in an old van and Barry went off with them.

Left alone, Colin took some clothes and bedding across to the laundrette, returned, and he lay back in the armchair to watch the afternoon film on TV. His thoughts drifted away, returning again and again to that scene in the hot-house, the little animals laid out on the stone slab. He could not let it alone, his mind gnawed and gnawed at it. Somewhere beneath that glass dome, he knew with conviction, lay the secret of Bronwen's disappearance . . . If only he could work it out.

He did not truly admit the intention when it first formed – to return alone to the tropical house was unthinkable. But by the time the idea had restated itself several times, he knew, with a feeling close to despair, that it was inevitable and even somehow

ordained; he must return to the great conservatory that night. Hardly aware of what he was doing he pushed the coins into the tumble-drier and stood watching his clothes and sheets flopping through the heat beyond the circle of glass. But with his mind he saw only the evening ahead, the nightmarish growths and presence of the hot-house, and himself climbing once more through the narrow opening of the window.

At eight o'clock Colin stood before the long wardrobe mirror in his bedroom and stared into his own face. The brown narrow eyes gazed straight back at him. He had forgotten to shave that morning and a dark shadow was around his jaw; his rather full lips were set; the thick, fair hair, lank after the rugby bath the afternoon before, hung over his ears. He was a powerfully built young man, a real rugby forward. The denim jeans and black sweater made him seem even taller than his six foot one: despite all this, however, he looked frightened. Loosening his belt he slipped the end through the thong of a sheath knife he took camping, and tucked a bit of broken chair leg he had picked up in the basement into the waist of his jeans; if necessary he could use it as a club. Slipping the small torch, with difficulty, into a tight pocket, he was ready.

Quickly then, to avoid more thought, he switched off the lights, left the flat, pulled the door shut behind him, and ran down the four flights of stone stairs to the street.

Being Sunday night the roads were quiet. Soon he was slipping into the shrubbery against the railings of the Botanical Gardens. Fifteen minutes later he was in the shadows of the dark border that ran along the wall of the tropical house.

The moon was nearly full, swimming in a clear sky above the crown of beech trees that stood on the hill above the conservatories. The garden was peaceful and very beautiful in the moonlight.

Still, and listening intently, Colin watched for several minutes at the edge of the border. Then he rose and pressed his face to the steamy glass, peering through tracks left by drops of condensation. Within all was still, and as he remembered it the night before. Behind him, too, nothing moved in the gardens. Swiftly

and silently he flitted along the wall of the conservatory and eased the window open, gently letting it down to its widest aperture. As the evening before, the warmth and pineapple fragrance from the hanging flowers within flowed over him. He turned his back to the glass, reached up inside the conservatory and hauled himself through the gap. Praying again that the fine frame would support him, he swung his legs through and softly lowered himself to the damp earth. His heart was thudding with fear; he gripped the edge of the window, bracing himself not to climb straight back out again. He waited until his breathing and mind had calmed a little then, picking up the scrap of card from where it had fallen by his feet, he tucked it beneath the catch once more and pushed the window shut.

He moved again in the nightmare. Carefully shading his torch he picked this way through the dense undergrowth to the mosaic and wiped his feet on the piece of rag. Then, using only the moonlight that flooded through the misty panes of the long windows and high dome, he walked quietly to the fountain.

Though the raised stone was in shadow, he could see that there was something upon it. He switched on the torch: the animals of the previous night had gone. Now a little tabby cat, its neck all askew, and two rooks lay upon the stone; and also, horribly, two fat guinea pigs with their mouths and long front teeth dark with dried blood.

So shocked was he at the dreadful and grisly stone table that for a little while he did not notice a dark shape on the floor a dozen or more feet away. He turned his torch towards it and saw that it was the body of a cocker spaniel puppy. He went across and looked down at the little animal. Its long soft ears lay spread across the mosaic tiles. He bent to it and turned it over. The whole body sagged beneath his hand. He moved it again and felt it wobble like a jelly. The mosaic was damp where it had been lying. It felt as if every bone in the puppy's body was broken. Beneath the skin the ends were jagged against his hand. Sick and appalled Colin stood up and looked around him . . . All was still.

He returned to the fountain and looked once more on the stone, then turned his torch upwards over the body of the faun. Still the hand was raised with the waterless shell; the burning

young satyr laughed upwards. He switched off the torch. The moonlight gleamed on the boy's limbs, highlighting the long slim muscles and sensuous lines of the wanton young body. He stood above his beautiful grotto and the dead animals, reaching towards the moon.

Colin moved away, then stopped; he turned his hip towards the light, looked down and unbuttoned the sheath knife. He took the knife in his hand, eased the heavy stick beneath his belt.

Listening, he stood stock still for two full minutes. The tropical house was silent and without movement. He realized, suddenly, that no sounds penetrated the glass walls. Even though the road was only quarter of a mile away, no distant roar of a boy on a motor bike or bus drawing away disturbed the silence. It was as though time was frozen. The sudden 'plop' of a fish tail in the pond made him jump and stare in that direction. Quietly, not wishing to make his presence still more obvious, he walked down to the keeper's corner.

Nothing had changed. The rake, the roller, the rubbish cart with a scattering of leaves and blossoms and dead twigs – all was as he had seen it the evening before. With some trepidation slowly he raised the lid of the tin trunk, but that too was unaltered.

Quietly he made the circuit of the hot-house. The door to the desert house was again locked. Nothing beyond the strangeness of the tropical house itself was to be seen, only the dead animals by the fountain.

Looking carefully to ensure that nothing waited behind him, he sat down on the keeper's chair with the knife in one hand and the extinguished torch in the other, staring through the airy space of the great conservatory. The length of chair leg was uncomfortable in his belt. He laid it across his knees.

For a long time Colin sat there. So intense was the stillness that twice he had to pull himself awake, for it almost seemed that he was going into a trance . . . Nothing disturbed the silence.

It was only gradually that he realized he could no longer see the broken puppy. He thought nothing about it, the moon had moved. Then he wondered: had it not lain in the patch of shadow to the side of the fountain? He was sure it had – but it was there

no longer. He must have been mistaken. He must pull himself together. As he sat up there was a quick, rustling whisper of sound somewhere near the fountain, so soft as to be almost inaudible. Then all was silent. Suddenly every nerve was on edge; his skin prickled. He sat without moving. Nothing stirred. Holding his knife and club ready, he rose and walked softly, on the edge of his training shoes, to the central square.

The puppy was still there. He breathed an inward sigh of relief. But it had moved, he was sure of it. Turning on the torch for a moment he looked down at the tiles. Surely the puppy had not lain there before, it had been further across. He looked, and looked again, closely, and detected a faint damp patch on the tiles. It *had* been moved.

A blind fear rose in him. He gripped the knife and stick and forced himself to be calm. He felt he had to get out – but still he had to know, he *had* to know. Whoever – whatever it was, it had retreated when he moved. He shone the torch about the huge waxen leaves and hanging blossoms. There was nothing to see. Quietly he retreated once more to the keeper's chair and settled himself to wait. The dark shape of the puppy's rump was just visible beyond the corner of the fountain.

For a long time nothing happened. The moon moved slowly across the high panes of the conservatory beyond the silhouette of leaves. Everything was still.

Gradually he became aware of a change in the atmosphere; not of the heat and humidity, but of the emotional charge of the conservatory. Always it had been unnatural and threatening, like a dream; but now a darker quality had crept into it, an excitement, a latent physical evil. Like static electricity in the air before a thunderstorm, the charge grew until Colin felt the perspiration prickling at his head, and the first droplet of sweat ran swiftly down his face.

Then suddenly, as if the silence could bear it no more, there was a quick, scuttling rustle in the middle of the floor. Colin stared, but he could see nothing. It came again. And a third time.

He saw a tendril at the corner of the central square fall to the mosaic tiles. It lay still – and then quickly writhed and stretched out across the floor. It was small and thin. More astonished than

frightened, he stared. The tendril reached out further. Soon it was four or five feet from the edge. A second, larger coil fell from a dense thicket alongside. In a moment it too twisted and stretched out across the tiles. Leaves shaking, they crept towards the fountain.

Now from all over the conservatory came the sound of rustling. As Colin looked upwards towards the moonlit panes, the climbing parasitic plants were stirring. Little creepers moved about the high trunks of the trees. Aerial roots swayed in mid-air as though there was a wind. On the floor near the central square, from all over, thin arms and branches were creeping and stretching towards the fountain and the faun and the stone table of dead animals. Like a straggling tide they began to swallow up the open tiles.

Right at Colin's foot a slender shoot rustled from the base of an iron column and wriggled away towards the middle of the conservatory. The creeper began to uncoil; the branch moving over the mosaic grew thicker, the leaves larger. Other plants joined it, with nodding crowns and trumpets and bells of blossom. In dappled, restless moonlight the growing carpet moved away from him in rivulets and streams and shaking leaves.

The first tips of vegetation touched the fountain and began to reach up. Some paused by the dead animals, others fell into the still water and pushed through until they were at the base of the statue's pedestal. They began to climb. Colin watched, spellbound. Sensuously coiling and caressing the faun's limbs, they reached to his waist. Slender tendrils stirred about its loins, touching and smoothing the young skin; and then gently holding, they continued climbing. Achingly slowly they reached across the stomach and chest, and coiled lovingly about the back, then shoulders. The faun's entire body was covered. Tenderly two last tendrils slid up its slim, upraised arm. Only the head remained free, the dark curly hair and budding horns thrown backwards with laughter. A slim, blossomed vine moved across the back of the neck and reached up and around the brow. The statue was crowned with flowers. Three times the vine circled its head until the beautiful white garland was complete.

Colin gazed at the shrouded fountain and the beautiful statue,

shaggy with leaves. For a minute all was still, and then (and it could have been merely a trembling of the leaves) it seemed as though the statue stirred, relaxed and breathed and, easing the slim young back with a sinuous ripple, reached up afresh.

For a while Colin did not dare to move, but then, so great had been the disturbance and gradual rearrangement of the great hall, that any movement of his seemed superfluous and of slight significance. Quietly and with great apprehension none the less, he rose to his feet, clutching the torch, knife and club. Shadowy streaks of tile showed irregularly through the carpet of leaves and trailing branches. Gently and silently, walking again on the sides of his training shoes and trying to avoid touching the leaves, he made his way to the central square, a few feet from the fountain.

Only the flat stone with the dead animals on top remained uncovered. It lay now in a patch of moonlight dappled with shadow. So gentle had been the movement of the plants that he was sickened afresh by this murderer's slab. He looked at the little tabby cat, with its mouth half open showing the white teeth, and its neck at a dreadful angle. He looked across for the body of the puppy, but it had gone beneath the heavy green carpet.

It seemed almost as if his arrival had been the signal for the awful celebration that now began. A fine curling shoot quivered at the edge of the stone and, uncurling, reached forward. Gently it nuzzled at the soft fur on a guinea pig's stomach. It slid across and around the fat back. It tautened, and the guinea pig turned slowly over. Another tendril was moving through the feathers of a rook's open wing. A third curled through the cat's legs and about its soft furry neck. From all around the little shoots were stretching and touching and exploring. The animals began to stir and shift. There was the soft brushing sound of fur and scratch of feathers on the stones and sinewy shoots. Suddenly there was a wet, sucking noise. Colin looked and saw that a shoot was moving into the cat's open mouth. Disgusted he watched and saw inch after inch slide into the black cavity. Gradually the stem thickened. There must have been two feet of it inside the dead animal.

It was too much. Before he could stop himself he had switched on the torch. The fleshy green stem half-filled the open mouth.

Elsewhere other shoots had forced their way past the guinea pigs' long bloody teeth, and through the gaping stone-coloured beaks of the rooks, down their wide red throats. The stomachs of the cat and guinea pigs were moving from within. Suckers had felt through the hair and feathers and fastened themselves to the pale flesh of the birds and little animals. At the light they suddenly withdrew, the thick shoot pulling more than two feet from the innards of the dead cat, its delicate green and purple leaves shining with wetness.

One or two lingered, trailing over the bodies, reluctant to retire, but the majority scuttled back to the edge of the stone table. Uncertainly they quivered and moved one way and then the other.

Then again the atmosphere of the tropical house changed. The leaves covering the statue shivered. The air was pregnant with danger. Slowly the shivering was taken up by plants all over the conservatory. The creepers still hanging shimmered in the moonlight, the great hanging leaves swayed. The movement increased, slowly building up to a crescendo. The tropical fronds and thickets thrashed to and fro with gusts of air; from the floor to the great dome of the conservatory the hanging creepers danced and swung like heavy ropes in a storm. Mad shadows and patches of light moved over the floors.

Appalled and terrified, Colin knew that for his very life and sanity he must get out. This, he understood at last, was what Bronwen had discovered that night.

Still clutching his knife and club, trying to stand on no branches, he stepped through the coils and shivering thickets of leaves as quickly as he could. The torch threw a beam of light before his feet. He crossed the floor, avoiding a wildly swinging rope of vine, and slipped between a slender pillar and the trunk of a tree to the damp earth. His foot caught in a creeper and he nearly fell. Using his force he dragged it away and the creeper was broken. Holding against the wet, fibrous tree trunk to stop himself from falling, he pushed on, A thick black rope of leaves barred his path. He ducked beneath it and shoved through a thicket of ferns. Something was about his waist. He slashed it away with the knife. He was caught at the neck and wrenched the

thin, whip-like strands away with his hands. The window was only eight or ten feet away. He plunged forward. A yielding coil was about his knees. He fell; dragging was no use, the thin, pliable branches tightened about his legs. Wildly, crying out with horror, he slashed them away and staggered forward. The windows were just before him. He reached for the catch. The climbing branches of the monstera deliciosa spread before him and pulled him back. The torch fell and was extinguished. He screamed. The branches were about his face, a sickly sweet blossom crushed across his eyes and mouth. He tore at the clinging branches, struck at them with the stick, sliced them through with the knife. Briefly his legs were free, but he was being dragged backwards. He clung to the trunk of a palm, tearing his hands on the rough bark of a strangling creeper, but the strength of the plants was too great. Sobbing, writhing, the sweater dragged up from his waist, he hacked and fought as inexorably he was dragged from the wet earth over the verge on to the mosaic tiles.

Staring around wildly in the moonlight, his eyes fell on the locked door to the desert house. On the further side the weird shapes of cactus and spined Joshua tree pressed to the glass. With the little more freedom afforded his arms on the open floor he slashed anew at the thickest of the vines and creepers, and briefly gained his feet, then was caught again. The knife flashed in his hand. A strong creeper curled about his forearm: his body was held. A heavy branch struck down at his elbow. With a dreadful wrench and a loud snap his arm broke. In agony he screamed. The knife fell to the floor.

He went into shock. Still half-struggling, he felt the branches coil about him. The rustling shoots moved through his hair and slid up his body inside the sweater.

Then, through a mist, it seemed that the branches were moving back. The mosaic floor was becoming clearer. Dimly Colin looked around; he did not understand.

Two strong creepers curled about his legs and trunk. He felt their strength as they gripped him. Then he was being lifted. He stretched his good arm to the floor, but there was nothing to grasp. He was being raised higher. The floor began to recede.

He saw the overall pattern of the tiles. The head and raised arm of the faun were beneath him, and the intricate wrought-ironwork of the slender arches. The screams and struggles left him. Terrified, he clung to one of the vines with his good hand. Soon he was drawing near to the dome, looking across into the great feathery, hanging tops of the tropical trees. At length he was still. He hung in space, staring down with terror at the small tiled cross far below.

And then he saw that he was staring straight into the face of the faun. The slanted eyes and opened mouth laughed up at him, vibrant with life. Crowned with flowers the statue reached towards Colin an arm of salutation. Colin screamed 'No! Please! *No!*'

One of the vines slackened. He clutched at it and a leaf came off in his hand. It withdrew. The single creeper clung about his bare waist and the leg of his jeans.

It began to uncurl.

'No! No!'

He slipped and began to fall. Still the faun stared up at him. He clutched at the branch, but his hand could not hold it . . . With a loud, echoing cry Colin fell through space.

The first fall did not kill him. Dimly with some shred of consciousness, he felt the vines once more curl about his limbs. Heavy and uncaring, like in a dream, he felt himself being raised again through the air. His face expressionless, he stared at the little fountain and crossed walkway below.

After the second fall he knew no more.

A dozen times the vines raised the student's body into the dome and let it fall. After a time it began to make a different sound.

At last the work was done. The twigs and greenery rustled close. A slim shoot tentatively reached forward and felt about his soft waist. Several others followed. One, at his head, moved over his mouth and gently probed up a nostril into the warm, moist caverns of his head.

Then beneath the trees and climbing parasites several yards away the damp earth began to stir. The soil cracked and small caverns appeared as the roots drew back and very gently began to pull themselves from the earth. The fissures and dark hollows

deepened. There was the rich, foully sweet scent of decay. It rose from the warm earth. The green creeping branches slid Colin's body to the edge of the tiled floor, and curled back. Then the white and brown roots, tubular, trailing fine hairs, wrapped about his limbs and began to draw him towards the darkness. The soil was moved back further. The stench from the earth grew stronger. Gradually Colin was drawn down into the shadows where Bronwen lay waiting for him – fair head and shoulders, trailing arms, the sweater dragged back to his chest. A bare, dangling foot caught momentarily at the base of a fern, then flopped free and fell into the hole. A fine white root, impatient, slid through his lips and past his broken white teeth into the moistness of his throat.

At last Colin was united with his beloved. The soil settled about their bodies. The roots stirred and shrugged themselves into the earth.

Soon the rooks and guinea pigs and the cat were gone, too. The puppy had vanished a while before.

As the moonlight moved across the beautiful windows and dome of the great tropical house, with lingering caress, the fine tendrils and vines slipped down from the faun's body and drew back across the mosaic floor. Midnight had passed, the first hours of the new morning drew by. Soon the magnificent Victorian conservatory was still.

Outside the shadows lengthened on the silvery grass of the Botanical Gardens.

At two o'clock Barry returned to the flat. The evening had gone well. He threw his jacket on to his bed, yawned, and went through to the kitchen to make himself a cup of coffee. On the way he glanced into Colin's bedroom. Freshly laundered sheets were piled at the bottom of the bed. He was glad that Colin had taken the few days away to visit his aunt. The business of Bronwen was hitting him hard. He needed the break. Pulling Colin's door shut he went into the kitchen. While the kettle boiled he sat down at the table and taking up his lute plucked a sweet Elizabethan melody which he sang beneath his breath. He yawned again and kicked off his shoes. He was so tired! He would give the ten

o'clock lecture next morning a miss. The kettle boiled; he poured the cup of coffee and took it through to his bedroom; he was asleep before it was half finished.

At eight o'clock the keeper unlocked the tropical house and went through the double doors into the great hall. On the floor lay the slashed strands of creeper, the torn leaves and smashed blossoms. It looked as though a gale had swept through the place. By the fountain lay a striped training shoe and a man's sock. He paused, staring, the rucksack weighty on his shoulder, then quietly went and locked the outer door once more.

He laid the rucksack down and took off his coat.

'I think you've been naughty again,' he said, looking about once more. 'I think you've been very naughty.'

The orchids and tropical blooms gazed back at him, white and unnaturally beautiful, glowing softly in the green shadows and sunshine. He saw that the stone was empty.

'You've been greedy.'

Infinitesimally an orchid shivered with delight by his shoulder.

He sighed. 'Well, we must get you tidied up again, mustn't we?'

Taking his broom he swept the broken tendrils from the floor and raked the leaves and fallen petals from the moist earth. He shovelled them into his rubbish cart and pushed the training shoe and sock beneath. He would burn them shortly, as he had the girl's shoulder bag and that sketch-pad. The incinerator would reduce everything to ash in very little time. The knife and torch he slipped into his rucksack; he would find a use for them at home. Two or three broken teeth would need burying outside when he had a moment; he dropped them into the pocket of his overalls. Wheeling the little roller, then, he tilted it up over the granite edging on to the damp earth and carefully rolled the patch of disturbed soil. His feet sank a little. He trod it firm and rolled it some more. Soon the patch of ground was indistinguishable.

He laid his hand on the soft trunk of the tree which rose from the spot, and gently took the leaves of the surrounding orchids, creepers and parasitics between his fingers.

'What *will* I do with you? he said. 'You'll be getting me into trouble, one of these days.'

Slowly he shook his head, his face brown, his eyes very blue and mild in the morning sunshine.

It did not take many minutes to find and remove the strip of card from the catch of the window. With twine and tape he bound the slashes in some of the stems, and with a bucket of water and a mop washed some sticky marks and smears from the tiles a little distance from the fountain.

When he had finished, he looked up, mop and bucket in his hands, at the figure of the faun. The statue was still. When he turned away his eyes were gentle, warmed by an unspoken communion.

He poured the water away and unlocked the door. Then he sat down and reached into his rucksack for the repaired vacuum flask. It had toppled as he carried it and was half covered by the body of a young rabbit he had taken from the trap that morning, and a pair of blackbirds. He pulled them aside and untangled the elastic of a catapult from the back legs of a ginger kitten.

He sat back and poured himself a cup of tea. Resting his hands on his knees he looked about: everything was done; his beautiful house was in order. With love he gazed up at the strange misshapen crown of trees, and into the sunlit tropical thickets about him. The sun gleamed on the waxen leaves, fat with nourishment. White petals shone from moist, secret hollows. Blue and crimson stars burned in the shadows. A heavy scent of musk or over-ripe peaches was in his nostrils, filling the air about him. He looked at the great orchid from which it came, mottled, fading white to mauve. Beyond, the water splashing from his head and shoulders and glittering down his limbs, stood the figure of the faun.

At ten o'clock the first visitors of the day entered the conservatory. Hand in hand they strolled down the mosaic floor in the humid warmth, gazing at the beautiful tropical growths which hung and flowered above them.

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Harry E. Turner

The lion's cradle

Eddie was the most successful burglar in Europe. He had looted some of the best private homes in London, Paris, Rome, Venice and Monte Carlo. He was rich, with a numbered account in a Geneva bank, a Rolls Royce Corniche, a wardrobe packed with Savile Row suits, a Cartier watch for every day of the week, and an unrelenting lust for Dom Perignon, Iranian caviar, the Colombe d'Or Hotel in St Paul de Vence and twenty-year-old girls with muscular thighs and wet mouths like strawberry mousse.

But he was bored: a surfeit of conspicuous consumption and scalp-raising sex was all very well, he philosophized, but a man could only eat one meal at a time and only be in one yacht club at a time. Although it should have amounted to total satisfaction, it didn't. The only thing that did amount to total satisfaction for Eddie – both cerebral and physical – was the execution of an act of burglary: the more dangerously complicated, the better.

After such an exercise Eddie would be flying higher than a kite; he'd be keener than a razor, more sensitive than a geiger-counter and more aware of his own self and the world around him than the most erudite Guru philosopher. In short, thieving was a turn-on for Eddie – he loved it.

He re-lit his Monte Cristo cigar and inhaled deeply. The private beach of the Carlton Hotel was packed with toasting, golden-brown bodies, lined up with geometric precision on blue sunbeds with blue and white sun-umbrellas and little coffee tables on which to rest crumpled copies of *Paris Match*, the *Wall Street Journal* and the (incongruously) pink *Financial Times*.

Two yards away from where he sat a Swedish blonde rubbed sun oil into her bare breasts. The nipples hardened under her touch, reminding Eddie, in a desultory way, of giant organ-stops.

Apart from the wisp of white satin that stretched over her groin she was utterly naked. Her companion, a hippopotamus of a German steel broker, tried to slide his fat spatula-like hand into her crotch, but she deflected it with a nudge and a look of withering scorn. The German sank back into his blue sun-bed with a noise like escaping gas and immediately fell asleep.

At the water-line where the sand was packed and wet, two beautiful black children wallowed in the tepid foam, their gleaming ebony skin silently mocking the sizzling red Europeans under their patina of Ambre Solaire and Piz Bruin.

Out on the shimmering horizon a motor boat curved towards the beach; a crouched figure on water-skies sliced across its churning wake.

A plane advertising Marlboro cigarettes droned past, the manufacturers' slogan flapping behind – a trapped snake.

Eddie glanced at his companion and smiled. She was very beautiful; perhaps more important, she was still almost a stranger to him. Her name was Samantha and he'd known her less than two months. She had pale white skin lightly touched with freckles and a head of shimmering, coppery hair, The whiteness made her unique in Cannes, where the acquisition of brown flesh was a holy grail to be pursued above all other human endeavour.

She closed the book she was reading and looked at him with green inquiring eyes.

'What do you want to do, Eddie?' she asked. Even after only six weeks she could sense his changing moods.

He shrugged, clenching the fat cigar between his teeth.

'Dunno,' he said. 'How about you? Do you want to go upstairs?'

She shook her head coyly. She was a cool, clever girl, in spite of her twenty-four years. She knew sex should never be used as a cudgel to beat away boredom; Eddie had been a sensational lover, but he was at his best after a robbery, consumed with lust, boiling with adrenalin and invention. She knew he would grow tired of her some day – and she of him – but in the meantime . . . life had an electric quality about it and she basked in the reflected danger of Eddie's profession.

He rested his cigar in a small bone-chain ashtray and picked up the *International Herald Tribune*. As a boy he'd never had much

time for reading; he was a street kid from Fulham, where leisure time was spent in the billiard hall or playing pontoon at the Lewis Trust Buildings in Walham Green. Now, thirty-nine years on, he read everything he could lay his hands on: financial reports, gossip columns, novels, autobiographies, magazines.

He folded the newspaper and read the international page. A Middle Eastern peace initiative had foundered again ... The United States President was flying to Paris for talks ... Political scandals in Latin America ... In England a Labour Government was slapping a wealth tax on those few remaining unfortunates who actually had the audacity to be worth £100,000 or more ... The Leyland car company was in dispute with its work force ... Routine news, all of it. Eddie sighed. Suddenly he stiffened as his eyes skimmed over a small paragraph at the bottom of the page.

TOP SAUDI OILMEN TO BUILD TRAINING COLLEGE NEAR CANNES

the headline said. It went on:

Sheik Ahmed Hosein, Saudi Arabia's top oil technologist is setting up a costly training school in the hills behind Cannes on the French Riviera. Hosein has the backing of both French and Saudi governments and his training centre will offer crash courses on oil and petroleum technology for European technicians who have been offered contracts with the Saudi Arabian Government. The training courses will last for six months and equip the students with the latest knowledge of Saudi oil and petroleum extraction techniques before their three-year tours of duty in the desert kingdom.
Sheik Hosein, who was educated at Harvard University in the USA and Britain's Sandhurst Military Academy is reputed to be one of the wealthiest men in the world. Coming from a noble Saudi family, his worth was recently estimated by *Fortune* magazine as being of the order of twelve billion dollars, and still growing. Hosein is a brilliant linguist and art collector, with homes in Paris, New York and London. It is expected he will buy the fabulous Villa Louvigny near Cannes which he has been renting from the Rothschild family. He told our reporter that he will need a permanent base on the Riviera while the training college complex is being built.

Eddie let the newspaper fall across his lap and a big smile started spreading over his face. The Villa Louvigny! The biggest private residence in the whole of the Alpes Maritime. A fabulous palace built in the style of Louis XIV, sixty huge rooms all bulging with art treasures, porcelain, gold-plate, tapestries, Chinese carpets, medieval silver . . . He'd read about it many times in the *Connoisseur* magazine. This property was underwritten by three insurance companies, so great was its value. It stood in one hundred ornamental acres and commanded spectacular views of the coast. It had been a museum for some years before the Second World War but as the Middle East got richer in the early seventies, the Villa had become popular with visiting Arabs as a holiday home. Wasn't it there the Shah of Iran had stayed the summer before . . . ?

Despite the August sunshine Eddie felt goose pimples creep over his face and body. The Villa Louvigny! Now that would be a challenge. It would naturally be protected by the latest electronic devices, not to mention Doberman Pinschers; and there would be paid heavies with lots of lethal hardware strapped to their armpits.

Eddie pinched the end of his cigar and plunged it into the sand.

'We're leaving,' he said, standing up. 'Come on, move yourself.'

Samantha knelt up and secured her bikini at the back of her neck. She looked up at him and smiled.

'Where to Eddie?'

Eddie grinned and ruffled her hair. 'St Paul de Vence, where else?' he said.

They went up to their luxurious suite in the Carlton overlooking the Croisette and packed their belongings quickly in three huge Gucci suitcases.

Eddie enjoyed hotels, the more expensive the better, but there was only one place on earth where he could plan a really important job: the medieval walled village of St Paul de Vence, a few kilometres north of Cannes, in his favourite hotel bedroom at the hotel Columbe d'Or.

Ten minutes later they were gliding along the Autoroute in Eddie's pale-green, open-topped Rolls Royce; Radio Monte Carlo were playing 'Jumping Jack Flash' by the Rolling Stones at

full blast, and Eddie was laughing and singing along with the hard, thrusting music. Samantha's excited, slender fingers brushed his tense thigh.

A few kilometres outside Nice, Eddie swung the Rolls off the motorway and they began the picturesque ascent to St Paul. It was a perfect day, full of the scent of bougainvillaea and wild geraniums; the roofless car was bathed in sunshine. The road snaked around a series of tight bends and then quite suddenly straightened out, entering the massive walls of the village. Eddie stopped the Rolls alongside the mellow brickwork of the Columbe d'Or. A small doorway led to the inner courtyard with its smooth, shiny flagstones, lush ivy and the famous white doves.

A waiter, serving pre-luncheon drinks recognized Eddie and hurried across.

'Lunch for two, Mr Gregory?' he asked. Eddie nodded: 'And a room overlooking the courtyard.'

The man's face showed a flicker of concern. The Columbe d'Or rarely had unoccupied rooms in August. He disguised the fact with an assumed smile and hurried into the small reception area to engage the pretty blonde receptionist in earnest dialogue. Two minutes later, he re-emerged and this time the smile wasn't forced.

'It's all right, Mr Gregory. We have your usual room.' Eddie's face lit up, this was a good omen – for years now he had played a silly game with himself, *never* to book a hotel room in advance; if the hotel was full, he would abandon whatever plans he might have hatched for a professional operation.

So, the simple act of securing a room at the Columbe d'Or – his favourite room at that – would be a powerful talisman when he sat down to plan the intricacies of Operation Villa Louvigny.

Luncheon was unpretentious, but superb in every particular; a Mouton Rothschild '62 seemed the only appropriate accompaniment. During coffee Eddie lit a huge Monte Cristo and ordered a bottle of Remy Martin Fine Champagne which he intended to nurse throughout the remainder of the afternoon.

Samantha ordered twenty Gaulouises, knowing that she would, until nightfall at least, be quite superfluous.

Eddie's room in the Columbe d'Or was spacious and light, with rustic-style décor: huge knotty sideboards with uneven doors, sloping white ceilings with pockmarked beams, a gleaming tiled floor from which the pattern had been polished clean. He flung open the windows and gazed down on the courtyard. The last of the lunch guests had left and the doves were busy among the crumbs on the flagged courtyard.

Samantha was in the bathroom. Eddie pulled a chair up to the dark brown, scarred writing table and splashed a generous measure of Remy into his balloon glass.

'*The Villa Louvigny*,' he wrote in his careful, spiderish hand.

'*Reasons why it is impenetrable.*'

Four hours later he had filled eight sheets of foolscap and was more than a little drunk on brandy.

Samantha took him between the sheets and made love to him with her customary expertise. In spite of the alcohol, they managed seven orgasms between the two of them – the first two were quite stupendous.

Later, in the bath he enjoyed his third and Samantha notched up a sixth, although she was flagging.

They wrapped themselves in huge, white towelling robes and sent down for tea and sandwiches, which they greedily consumed as they lay in the warm afterglow on the king-sized bed.

Eddie frowned. So far all that had emerged from his 'think' session had been several cast-iron arguments against even contemplating a raid on the Villa Louvigny. Samantha was asleep and snoring lightly.

He switched on the radio and moved the dial until he got heavy rock music. Then he huddled down next to Samantha and immediately fell asleep.

When they awoke, two hours later, the sun had gone down and the sky was a Mediterranean purple, studded with fat, glistening stars.

Eddie showered leaving Samantha stretching luxuriously like a cat on the crumpled bed.

'Do you think chambermaids *know* if people have made love in hotel bedrooms?' she called out. Eddie appeared, naked and dripping in the doorway.

'I suppose so,' he said. 'Intuition and years of study makes them experts in the art of fornication divining.'

Samantha sat up and grabbed a pillow.

'Making love with you is like a re-run of World War Two – Just *look* at these bedclothes.'

Eddie grinned and snapped his fingers.

'That's it!' he cried. Samantha frowned.

'What is?' she asked.

Eddie disappeared into the bathroom and emerged with a towel slung over his shoulders.

'You said "bedclothes" – that's given me an idea.'

'Oh good,' said Samantha blankly.

'Bedclothes,' said Eddie. 'Crumpled sheets – lipstick on the pillow – laundry – daily deliveries!'

Samantha frowned. 'You've lost me,' she said.

Eddie took her shoulders and pushed her back across the bed.

'Never mind,' he said, sliding his thigh over her belly. 'You've just given me the front-door key to the Villa Louvigny.'

Samantha started to speak and then gasped. Eddie was being inventive again. She moaned and arched her back, her hands clawing the towel away from his shoulders.

At eleven the next morning Eddie was up a tree with a pair of Zeiss binoculars and a Monte Cristo cigar. The binoculars were clamped to his eyes and the cigar was clenched between his teeth.

He adjusted the burled disc which controlled the focus and concentrated hard. The outline of the Villa Louvigny stood out against the azure backdrop of the sky. It was more of a palace than a villa, with white castellated walls and immaculate shaven lawns.

A flag fluttered gently from a tall flagpole in front of the main entrance. Twice during the next hour vehicles drew up outside the huge wrought-iron gates to be quickly admitted to drive up the gravel path to the house.

Eddie finished his cigar and lit another, adjusting his position at the top of the wide-branched tree.

Ten minutes later he saw what he had hoped he would see, made a mental note of the time, scribbled a name on his wrist in

biro and lowered himself carefully out of the tree and into the driving seat of his Rolls.

It was one o'clock and the terrace bar of the Columbe d'Or was crowded. Eddie ordered champagne and settled back in his wicker chair.

'I'm scared,' said Samantha lighting a cigarette. 'I've never done anything like it before.' Her voice dropped to a whisper. 'Suppose I panic and blow the whole thing?'

Eddie laughed and patted her thigh. 'You won't, believe me, when the time comes you'll be as cool as ice!'

Almost as confirmation the waiter re-appeared with a big silver bucket, chink-chinking with ice and two bottles of Dom Perignon. He uncorked the first and poured a froth into Eddie's long-stemmed glass.

'To success,' said Eddie, waving the waiter away. Samantha took a sip and put her glass down.

'Should we be even talking about it *here*? I mean the Columbe d'Or is about the most public place along the Croissette.'

Eddie took a handful of shelled assorted nuts and filled his mouth.

'Rule Number One,' he said, crunching hard. 'The most public place is the one least likely to arouse suspicion. We can talk more freely here than if we were whispering in a cheap café down at the Old Harbour. Everybody listens there. Here – ' He gestured towards the bar ' – nobody listens to anything except the sound of their own voice.'

Samantha drank some more champagne and tried to relax.

'Once you're inside,' she said, 'how long will it take you?'

Eddie shrugged. 'Hard to tell. Lots of items to choose from. Nothing too heavy for obvious reasons. I shall, as always, take just one canvas bag with me and fill it with the very best pieces. I had Gucci make the bag, as a matter of fact. It gives burglary a touch of class, don't you think?'

Samantha managed a grin. Eddie was incorrigible. Eddie said 'Do you want to run through the programme again?'

Samantha shook her head. 'No. I'm OK. But I wish it was tomorrow.'

Eddie signalled for the waiter to re-fill their glasses. 'It soon will be,' he said. 'And we'll be on the way to Paris to unload the goodies. After that I rather fancy a month in Rio. It's *so* lovely out of season – and there's always a chance we'll bump into Ronald Biggs on the Cobacabana Beach. He was a very misunderstood bloke!'

The Mercedes laundry van swung on to the narrow path that led steeply to the Villa Louvigny. The driver changed to third and accelerated, the back wheels sending up a spurt of dust. It was a big vehicle and it rolled on its springs taking the first bend at thirty kilometres an hour. One kilometre further on the terrain flattened and the driver slipped into top to cruise along the gleaming tarmac that was laid like a black necklace around the perimeter of the house. Quite suddenly, and directly ahead of him, a girl appeared in the road and he braked hard, bringing the van to a skidding halt ten metres from where she stood. She was tall and slim with coppery hair that covered her shoulders. She smiled at the driver and began speaking in poor French. Angrily he stuck his head out of the van window and shouted back at her. Was she mad? He might have killed her! What the devil did she want? The girl seemed unruffled by his stream of abuse, punctuated as it was by ripe Gallic oaths. She was an English tourist, she explained, on a walking excursion in the South of France, and she'd lost her way.

The driver pushed open the door of his van and climbed down. Women! Foreigners!

The girl smiled again and, to the driver's surprise, lifted her skirt and took a folded scrap of paper from the leg of her bikini pants.

The driver swallowed hard and licked his lips. The girl had long legs and the bikini pants were little more than a 'G' string.

'I'm looking for this address,' she said, letting her skirt fall and cover her legs. 'Can you help me?' Disappointed, the driver took the piece of paper and unfolded it.

As he read it the girl looked beyond him, anxiously, as if anticipating something. The driver frowned, he had difficulty in

reading at the best of times and the words on the paper had baffled him. They read, 'Bert's Chip Shop, Hounslow High Street'.

'Well?' said the girl sweetly. The man sniffed and handed back the piece of paper.

'You're quite near,' he said gruffly. 'But you must go down the hill towards Cannes and ask again.'

The girl thanked him courteously and watched him climb back into the van, re-start the engine and accelerate away. In the rear window of the van she saw a man's face; he winked at her and gave a brief thumbs-up sign, as the van sped towards the house.

Eddie hated the smell of laundry. It reminded him too much of his childhood in London and was synonymous with school and discipline, and all the things he rebelled against. Nevertheless, his arrival inside the grounds of the Villa Louvigny was at least comfortable. The driver, having shown his plastic identity pass, was allowed to take the van to the service entrance which was situated at the north side of the villa. Here on a semi-circle of pink gravel stood several other tradesmen's vans – florist, window cleaner, swimming pool service and two unmarked Renault wagons. A servant in white livery appeared to be supervising the delivery of supplies and shouting instructions at a small black boy who was stacking boxes of fruit by the door.

Eddie waited until the driver had reversed the laundry van under the shade of a large umbrella pine and then dropped silently from the tailboard, closing the van doors carefully behind him.

For ten minutes he crouched in the sweet-scented undergrowth watching the fevered domestic activity around the service entrance. It was clear that the Villa supported a large staff, at least twenty, Eddie reckoned; some of them would be armed. He looked up at the huge palatial building with its tall windows and ornate balconies. All that stonemasons' scrollwork would provide excellent footholds for his next manoeuvre – the ascent to the second floor. He had already guessed that the main living area would be on the second floor because from the front of the house it had by far the most elaborate balcony with striped sun awnings at the windows and hanging flower baskets filled with geraniums.

Five more minutes passed and the laundryman completed his delivery. Eddie ran crouching alongside the lumbering van as it pulled away, using it as a shield until he was level with the house; then he sprang at the sheer, whitestone wall. To the uninitiated, it would have seemed impossible, but he clung to the sheer surface with his fingertips and toes, feeling expertly for cracks or bulges on which he could obtain a better purchase. Slowly, he slid the fingers of his right hand over a split in the plaster and secured a hold. Then, bracing his calf muscles he pushed his body upwards, pulling hard with his right hand. His left hand closed round the supporting scroll of the first-floor balcony and relieved the immense strain on his legs. For Eddie, scaling a wall was an art form, a blend of sheer physical strength, split-second timing and – perhaps above all – a unique sense of balance. He knew just how long his body could hang out from the sheer face of a climb before the pull of gravity was overwhelming and he would shift position, using fingers, toes, knees, elbows and, not infrequently, his chin to transfer weight and strain from one part of his body to another. Had he chosen to do so, he could have joined the ranks of the world's top mountaineers but Eddie had never climbed as much as a cliff face, because without thrill of action at the end of it it seemed a pointless activity. He also despised the use of pitons, tiny steel pins which mountaineers drove into the rock face to assist their climbing and anchor their ropes. No, cat burglars like Eddie had a ritual to observe, forged in sweat and terror supercharged by adrenalin; they had to use only their bodies against the hard, unyielding surface of man-made structures.

Within minutes Eddie was hanging directly beneath the second-floor balcony by the fingers of his left hand, his only other support being provided by a quarter of an inch of plimsoll toecap which was wedged into a gap in the brickwork, fortunately exposed by crumbling plaster.

His black silk shirt and dark cord slacks were soaked in perspiration and a few globules of blood had formed under the nails of his left hand. He sucked in a lungful of air and let his body sink down eight inches, the right leg bending to accept the strain. Then, forcing his leg straight, he catapulted his whole body outwards and upwards, twisting it sideways and flinging both hands

over his head. It was an extraordinary manoeuvre which, for a split second, seemed to defy the pull of gravity but during that split second his twisting body drew level with the balcony, his arms reached out and he vaulted silently on to the extreme corner of the parapet, well out of the sightline of the balcony window.

He crouched there motionlessly, his body folded into a foetus-like position, his lungs aching with the forced rush of oxygen. He stayed like that for several minutes until the muscles in his arms and calves had stopped their silent screaming.

Then, like a snake, he slithered flat along the tiled surface of the balcony until his face was level with the glass double doors. Beyond the inch thick plate he could see a large chandeliered room, richly carpeted and furnished with ornate Louis XIV chairs, sideboards and sofas. The room was empty. He checked it twice with his eyes, thoroughly, and then with his ears against the plate glass, listening for the slight tremble that would be caused by footsteps inside.

He knelt up and took a flat bladed knife from his belt, inserting it between the double doors. After a few seconds the lock sprang and he eased the right-hand door open two inches, waiting for a creak of hinges. Evidently they kept the doors of the Villa Louvigny well oiled because he was able to push them full open without a sound. The absence of a burglar alarm didn't surprise him, many large French houses spurned them, preferring armed guards and patrol dogs. At least *they* didn't suffer from electrical failure!

He straightened up and stepped inside the room. It was cool and in the background he could hear the faint hum of the air conditioning.

Quickly his eyes scanned the walls, his mind racing like a computer as he assessed the value of the dozen oil paintings that hung there. Two Cezannes, a Picasso, a big Rembrandt, a rather bad Pissarro. Total worth including the lesser known works, three quarters of a million pounds. But paintings were difficult to market – and bulky to carry. He switched his attention to the smaller objects that crowded the tables and desk tops.

A collection of solid gold snuff boxes, probably sixteenth-century English. A magnificent small bronze figure of Pan,

Italian Renaissance – probably worth six thousand – but on the 'hot' market only a third of that, if he was lucky.

He pulled the Gucci bag from his shirt front and loosened the tie strings. Speed was essential now, and cool judgement. He scooped the snuff boxes into the bag and settled the bronze Pan on top of them. Half-full already, and very heavy. He selected a pair of Georgian candlesticks from the mantelpiece and packed them down the sides of the bag. A gold cigarette box followed, together with a jewelled letter opener in the shape of a Moorish dagger. The rubies alone would pay for quite a lot of vintage Dom Perignon, and the gold was thick, heavy, hand-beaten. He moved silently, on the balls of his feet, his body silently bent like a sprinter's.

As he circled the room, close to the walls, the Gucci sack in his left hand, he came to a glass fronted showcase which was crammed with silver. His right hand moved towards the lock – and then froze. Reflected in one of the silver plates he could see a small wire that crossed the doors immediately behind the lock. Almost certainly a trigger that would set alarm bells ringing all over the house. He smiled grimly to himself and removed his hand. Very clever: no anti-thief devices *outside* the villa – just the occasional, cunningly placed electronic trap in most of the main rooms...

He moved past the showcase to a small escritoire with gold-leafed legs and claw feet. It supported a pile of documents held flat by a paperweight. He looked again and caught his breath – the paperweight was a magnificent, bejewelled, Fabergé egg. Czarist Russian, probably late nineteenth century, maybe earlier. Value? Enormous, a real collector's piece; Eddie knew an ex-gangster from Chicago now living in Brazil who would pay ten grand cash for a Fabergé egg. At the age of sixty he was trying to wipe out his bloodstained past by surrounding himself with glorious works of art.

Eddie reached out and picked up the egg. Immediately the room was filled with an ear-splitting jangle of bells. Eddie stood quite still, adrenalin pumping into his bloodstream like the fuel-injection system of a formula one racing car. Five seconds passed and his natural, animal impulse to run was overcome by an act of

willpower. He slipped the Fabergé egg into the Gucci bag and pulled the tie-strings. As he moved silently towards the balcony he heard the drumming of feet outside the big room. This would be a close call – but he'd had closer ones.

He stepped out on to the balcony and closed the doors behind him. It was a sheer drop of sixty feet on to gravel and Eddie knew that jumping would break his legs. He rested his belly on the stone parapet and slowly lowered himself over until he lay suspended horizontally clinging to the plaster facings with his fingers and toes.

Behind him the bells had stopped and he heard muffled, gabbled cries, a crash of furniture and then louder voices as the balcony doors were flung open.

Eddie took a deep breath and pressed his body against the stone. He could hold his position for perhaps one minute – and then gravity would pluck him away and fling him into space. He turned his face an inch and looked for the next toehold. It would necessitate a crab-like move across the walls, throwing immense strain on his arms as he swung his legs free to scrabble for the two-inch lip of granite he had chosen for the manoeuvre. He drove his aching fingers deeper into the stone and let his legs slide down towards their target. As he did so his left hand lost purchase and his full weight dangled from the four fingers of his right hand.

He felt himself going; the tendons in his wrist were as tense as violin strings and then, instead of falling, he was aware of an upward movement, strong hands grasping his belt and shirt collar – pulling, dragging him back from the void.

He landed on his knees on the balcony and looked up into the swarthy face of an immense giant of a man wearing full Arab robes. His left hand still gripped Eddie's shirt collar but the other hand held a Smith and Wesson revolver two inches from his forehead.

'Just popped in to clean the windows,' said Eddie, forcing a smile 'Somebody must have nicked my ladder!'

The Arab pressed the gleaming muzzle of the gun against Eddie's forehead and his finger curled around the trigger. 'Stand up, please!' he said in Sandhurst English. 'If you attempt to struggle

or escape I shall be obliged to send your brains flying out of the back of your head.'

Eddie stood up. 'I'm not going anywhere,' he said, 'I'm rather attached to my brains as a matter of fact.'

The Arab frisked him very quickly and expertly then indicated that he should step inside. Four men stood around the big room, dressed in Arab robes. A fifth, in European slacks and shirt, sat in a large wing chair. Eddie recognized him at once as Sheik Hosein.

To Eddie's amazement, the man was drinking tea from a Sèvres chain cup, presenting an image of quite incongruous domesticity.

'I think it would be helpful,' said Hosein urbanely, 'if you told us exactly who you are working for. The Russians or the Americans.'

In spite of his predicament, Eddie was able to muster a grin. 'Who am I *working for?*' he said. 'For *myself*. I'm a solo operator.'

Hosein took another sip of tea and placed the cup and saucer carefully on a side table.

'To what purpose?' he said.

'I'm a burglar,' said Eddie. 'I steal things and sell them. It's known as private enterprise where I come from.'

Hosein's face clouded. 'I don't think any of us are very impressed with your facile jokes Mr—?'

'Gregory,' said Eddie. 'Eddie Gregory. And it's a fair cop, as they say in the cheap detective stories – but I'm sure we can come to some civilized arrange—'

Hosein stood up, brushing the creases from his slacks.

'I suppose it would be churlish of me not to acknowledge your audacity Mr Gregory. But if an "arrangement" was what you were about to suggest, then I think we may be stumbling towards common ground. Is that your booty?' He pointed a bejewelled finger towards the Gucci bag that rested, bulging on the floor.

Eddie nodded.

'It's not damaged – none of it. I'm a lover of fine things.'

Now Hosein smiled. 'How very worthy of you. As I was saying, an arrangement between us does seem sensible – although whether you would agree to it being a "civilised" one is a matter for conjecture. You see, merely handing you over to the French police would not be satisfactory. It would advertise the fact that

the Villa Louvigny is not the secure fortress we had hoped it was. We are here as the vanguard of a major enterprise on behalf of my country and already a number of the rooms in this house have been converted to laboratories for training purposes. Oil technology, like anything else these days, attracts industrial espionage. We have no wish to lose some more precious expertise to hostile powers. No student will be enrolled here unless he has been most positively vetted.'

'So?' said Eddie, shifting his feet uncomfortably.

'So,' said Hosein, 'we intend to treat you in the traditional way we treat all common thieves in my country . . . But with a couple of sporting refinements. If you're an especially lucky person, Mr Gregory, you'll be back among your nearest and dearest by nightfall. And no further action will be taken by us. If, however, you are prone to *bad* luck – well – perhaps – I'm galloping ahead too fast. Follow me, will you please!'

Hosein turned and one of the robed men opened the door for him. Eddie, feeling faintly unreal, followed him. Hosein walked along a wide gallery and into a smaller, less opulent room. The carpets had been taken up, revealing polished parquet tiles. In the corner was a huge metal cylinder which reached almost to the ceiling. Various pipes were attached to it and led to a small control panel with dials and instruments set into a desk-like structure.

Hosein went to over to a small table and turned to face Eddie. On the table was something covered with a piece of cloth.

'In my grandfather's day, they used to chop off the right hand of every thief they caught. It did tend to keep stealing down to a socially acceptable minimum. Mind you, I would be less than honest if I pretended that the practice was no longer in use. But we aren't too keen on the publicity – our friends in the West might think us a shade barbaric.'

Eddie felt his belly turn to water as Hosein pulled the cloth away.

'This,' he said matter-of factly, 'is a relic of Old Arabia – we call it the 'Lion's Cradle'.

What Eddie saw was a wooden block with a hole just big enough to allow a man's hand to pass through and out the other side.

Mounted above the block on polished wooden runners was a guillotine blade held in place by a thick metal spring. From the spring a slim rod was attached to a metal ring which was screwed into the base of the block.

Hosein picked up a tennis ball from a side table and placed it in the hole in the block. Then he flicked the rod so that its hooked end slid clear of the metal ring and released the compressed power of the spring.

The result was astonishing; the guillotine blade was forced down by the spring but held dead centre by the wooden runners. It cut through the tennis ball as if it were a grapefruit, the severed halves falling away either side of the block.

He raised the blade with some difficulty to its original position and Eddie could see the enormous power of the spring as he struggled to secure it by hooking the rod back under the ring in the block.

'A simple, but effective piece of apparatus,' said Hosein. 'It works on the mousetrap principle: if you release the spring by touching the hook, down comes the blade with – I think you will agree – remarkable speed. Now, you see that –' he pointed to a metal platform in the middle of the hole in the block on which the tennis ball had rested; it was about the size of a pound note and was flush with the wood like a nameplate on a door – 'under that,' said Hosein, 'is another spring mechanism. If I press it down, so, with my hand – and it requires fairly strong pressure – it holds the guillotine in place even when I release the rod from the hook.'

He flicked away the rod as before with his other hand.

'Now,' he said smiling. 'If I am quick and I whip my hand out of the hole *really* fast, I release the spring and thus the blade – like so—'

And he withdrew his hand with a very fast jerk. The blade flashed down across the block missing his retreating fingers by perhaps a quarter of an inch.

Eddie swallowed hard and Hosein grinned.

'You follow me, I think?' he said. 'Once you stop applying pressure to the plate the blade comes down – but you've *got* to stop applying pressure to the plate in order to extricate your hand from the block. Thus, a sluggish movement will separate your

hand from your wrist – a most painful procedure, I assure you.

'Nevertheless, you are a man in the peak of condition – that much is clear from your daring ascent – and you must at least stand an excellent chance of escaping completely unscathed, as I have done.'

Eddie wiped his sweating palms on the sides of his trousers.

'And if I . . . survive . . . I go free? Is that the deal?'

'Oh, absolutely,' said Hosein. 'But there is one extra refinement. I think a demonstration is better than an explanation.' He snapped his fingers and Eddie was suddenly seized from behind and forced to sit in a chair. One of the Arabs tied his legs and his left arm to the frame, leaving just his right arm free. Then a blindfold was applied to his eyes and he felt himself being lifted in the chair and moved across the room.

'We are going to immerse you in a cylinder of crude oil, Mr Gregory. It should reach a level approximately four inches below your chin. Don't be alarmed, we don't intend you to *drown*.'

Eddie held his breath as he experienced the feeling of being lifted high, and then lowered. The cold and slippery oil engulfed his body and he gasped with shock. The chair legs settled on the bottom of the cylinder and he could smell the rough harshness of the raw oil.

'You bastard,' he cried, but Hosein made no answer.

A hand siezed his right arm and pulled it up from the cylinder and he knew it was being positioned inside the lion's cradle. Then Hosein spoke.

'Listen most carefully, Mr Gregory. The lion's cradle is primed and fixed to a ledge at the top of the cylinder. You must keep pressing down on the base plate to prevent the blade falling. Nod if you understand.'

Eddie nodded, his face as white as chalk.

'Now – the cylinder is honeycombed with heating elements. It will take four or five minutes before the oil begins to heat up – and then it will reach boiling point very quickly. If you don't relish that prospect you must withdraw your hand from the lion's cradle and reach up above your head for the switch. Once that is neutralized, you will be quite safe and my people will lift you

from the cylinder. If you panic *or* delay you will be in a most *unpleasant* situation. I hope our little game amuses you. Goodbye for now – I intend to swim before lunch.'

Eddie heard footsteps, a door closing and then silence. He sat motionless for a full minute and then began to feel the taste of fear rising in the back of his throat. With the slightest movement of his head, the oil, dark and silent, lapped at his chin like a dense and poisonous syrup. His right arm, deep inside the lion's cradle, pressed down on the brass plate that held the guillotine blade two inches from his wrist.

He knew that unless he could bottle down his fear all would be lost. He would panic and drag his arm awkwardly from the trap and the honed metal would hack through flesh and bone, leaving him horribly maimed for life.

He sucked in a lungful of breath and tried to think rationally. This was, after all, a kind of game they were playing with him, a grim one certainly, but a game nevertheless. He concentrated on his right arm which was beginning to ache. The thick oil would impede movement – that was inevitable – but by the same token it would probably slow down the guillotine as it fell. He moved his head and the glutinous mess licked his chin. It was growing warm now; or was it his imagination?

He shifted his body in the chair and lowered his face an inch. The oil *was* warm ... Soft ... Womb-like. Fear gnawed at his bowels and he almost cried out. *Stay calm.* No disorganized movement. *Bottle it down.*

Outside he heard the distant roar of a jet passing over the Bay of Nice and somewhere in the grounds a dog was barking.

He moved his right arm a couple of centimetres, still maintaining the downward pressure; he felt a few sluggish bubbles stir on the surface of the oil. Now his body could sense the growing warmth all around him and he knew the crucial moment was near.

He held his breath and jerked his arm backwards with every ounce of strength he could muster. The movement agitated the oil and he heard the guillotine clang dully as it hit the brass plate – but his arm was free!

Almost crying with relief he raised it from the oil and flexed his

fingers. Now for the switch. He reached up to the top of the cylinder and scrabbled along the lip. He could feel nothing. Swearing softly he tore the blindfold from his eyes and let it fall on to the surface of the oil where it lay like a discarded sail against the green slime. Then he saw the switch. A simple, domestic rectangle of plastic set in the wall about five inches from the rim of the cylinder. He reached for it, stretching his arm to its absolute limit – but his groping fingers were two inches short of the mark!

What was it that Hosein had said about the oil? It would take a few minutes for the electric element to warm it up – and then boiling point would be reached *very quickly*. Straining every muscle Eddie reached up for the switch again but it was no use – flesh and bone would not stretch that last crucial two inches.

He braced his feet on the base of the cylinder and pushed hard, the chair lifted a fraction and his clawing fingers brushed the switch.

He paused for a moment, gasping from the effort and then tried again. This time the thrust from his legs lifted the chair six inches and his right hand closed over the switch, pressing it off.

He sank back and let his arm fall with a dull splash into the warm oil. It was all over – he'd done it – he'd *won*. There was nothing else now except waiting; they'd release him soon and he'd be free. My God, what a lesson he'd learnt – never try and rob an Arab! He thought of Samantha waiting patiently at the Columbe d'Or Hotel. She'd be naked for him when he got back, hot and moist and hungry for him. He grinned and closed his eyes. Images of lust burned across his imagination – he could almost taste her just sitting there.

Then something slick and warm and harsh ran over his gums. He coughed, and drew a sickly gulp of oil into his mouth. *Oh dear God, the level of the oil was rising!* He tried to yell but already the thick filth was over his nose and he begun gagging and writhing.

Within seconds the oil had closed over his head and it continued to rise until it reached the top of the cylinder. Then it stopped, releasing a few desultory ripples on the dark, glassy surface.

Downstairs on the wide, flagged terrace, Sheik Hosein was towelling himself dry after his swim. A servant brought him a jug of iced lemonade and the Paris edition of the *International Herald*

Tribune. He settled into a comfortable chair and began reading the paper thoughtfully, occasionally sipping from the cool, refreshing drink.

Somewhere in the grounds, a dog barked again and high up in the perfect sky a jet bound for London left a small trail of white vapour against the deep, azure blue.

Francis King

School crossing

These days it seemed as if his glasses were never clean. Yearning, importunate or mischievous, the small hands would reach out, soiling and smearing; and it was as if they soiled and smeared everything at which he looked. The garden at which he had laboured for many years, the house filled with the antiques inherited from his first and now dead wife, even the youthful face of his second wife: all seemed to have lost their pristine bloom. 'Don't!' he would ward off the hands. But the twins would think this some kind of game and, laughing hysterically, twisting and lunging, they would hurl themselves upon him. Sometimes he would be rough with them, repelling them with all his force, and then a bewilderment would suddenly freeze their half-formed features and he would see the same bewilderment on the face of their mother, as though he had all at once changed into someone else. He was always wiping the glasses. On a handkerchief. On the end of his tie. On a paper tissue or a table napkin or a sheet of lavatory paper. But the imprints of those two pairs of hands perpetually renewed themselves, just as the imprint of those twin lives now perpetually marked each hour of his existence.

It must have been the glasses: the obvious explanation. The glasses and some freak of light as the late sun filtered down through a jagged line of conifers on that late autumn afternoon. It was the old drive that he knew so well, up the hill from the town. He had passed the Smugglers' Rest, with its faked creosoted beams, its plastic chairs and tables set out in the hope that some hardy travellers might be tempted to eat or drink outside, its neat hedges, neat flower-beds, neat paths; then the low line of red-brick Council houses; then the notice, glinting briefly in the setting sun, SCHOOL CROSSING. School, his school. Or what he had thought of as being his school until they had taken it from him. Teaching English part-time to foreigners now, he tried not to

think of that brutal dispossession. Never went near the school. Never wished to see any of his former colleagues, unless a little furtive, a little guilty, a little shame-faced, they themselves sought him out. Never spoke about it, not even to Clare, the young science teacher whom he had married.

SCHOOL CROSSING. The Aston Martin, which he could no longer afford to run, leaped effortlessly up the hill; and suddenly, for a moment, there they were, boys and girls straggling across the road. Faces turned at the sound of the engine. Some drew back, others scuttled over to the further side, jostling, ungainly, undignified. But why should they be out of school as early as this? School holiday? No. He had braked to a halt. And then, to his amazement, he had seen that there was no one there at all. The late sun glinted on the metalled surface; encrusting the summits of the conifers which soared up on either side of the road, with flecks of rust coloured light; somewhere far off an owl hooted. Odd... He could have sworn... But it was the glasses of course. He took them off, fumbled in his pocket for a handkerchief, found he had none and then, as so often, used the end of his tie. The tie seemed only to make them worse, leaving a halo over the left lens where before there had only been a streak. The sun sank with a strange abruptness, as though the patch of fire on the crown of the road had been doused with an invisible pail of water. Behind him a van was hooting. He looked in the mirror and saw that the driver looked like that Mason boy, son of a butcher, who had been one of the ring-leaders... But he wasn't going to think of the school again... ever.

He engaged the gears and the car leapt forward, like some beast suddenly unleashed to seize its prey.

He did not tell Clare. One of the twins, the boy, had grazed his knee in a fall; and the other twin, the girl, had somehow contrived to break a Crown Derby cup. He had to hear about both accidents and he had to pretend that he cared more about the knee than the cup. Would he have mentioned what had happened on the hill if he had come home to peace instead of turmoil? He did not know. Probably not. There was a lot that he never mentioned to Clare: a whole secret life of hurt feelings, humiliation

disappointment and resentment. She herself was so candid, telling him all her most intimate thoughts and feelings, that she could not guess at the depth of his lack of candour.

'A good day, Mark?'

'Oh, not too bad. Not too bad.'

He had picked up *The Times;* but as he was opening it, the boy twin began to scramble up on to his knees. One hand went out, crushing the paper. A shoe kicked his shin. Then the other hand was at his glasses. The child crowed with pleasure. Mark wanted to fling him from him. But instead he forced himself to laugh as he held the child's arms, one in either hand, and asked him: 'Well, how is that knee of yours?'

Again the child tried to lunge; but his father held him firm. Then the girl came up from behind and her greasy fingers . . . He looked across at Clare and he could hardly see her face. The smears seemed to be across it, not on his glasses.

'Oh, do take the child upstairs or into the kitchen or somewhere.'

She got up silently and again he fumbled for the handkerchief that he had not got and again he used the end of his tie.

Several days passed before it happened again. Now it was dark and he was returning from a farewell party given by a group of jolly, noisy students from Norway. They had kept filling his glass even though he told them, 'Look I've got to drive home. I don't want to be breathalysed, now do I?' He felt old and tired; a sour envy had invaded him, like the aftertaste of the acid Spanish wine, for the youth not merely of the students but also of his colleagues. He wondered how soon he could decently make his escape. A plump coquettish girl, with a downy moon-face and eyes of an arctic blankness and blueness – she had always sat just under his desk, arriving at class long before anyone else in order to secure that place – had swayed up to him and enquired tipsily: 'You do not dance, professor?'

'My dancing days are over,'

'But you will dance with me? A last dance?'

He shook his head. He forced himself to smile. 'Neither a last

dance nor a first dance. Not after all these years. Not even with you, my dear.'

Surprisingly she had seemed not to be angered but delighted by the rebuff. It was what she must have expected. She laughed, throwing back her head and showing large, white, even teeth. Then she told the others: 'Professor Clark says that his dancing days are over! He will not dance with me!'

'Shame!' cried one of Mark's colleagues, a spotty boy whom he particularly disliked.

'Oh, come along, Mark!' another colleague, a girl, cajoled him, taking him by an arm and attempting to drag him among the dancers. He had never asked her to call him Mark and he always tried to avoid calling her by any name, surname or Christian name. Some of the students began to clap her as she tugged and tugged at him, her face growing red under its swaying fringe of jet hair. But he would not yield. 'No, I'm not going to dance. But you can give me something more to drink.'

A Norwegian boy splashed some more of the vinegary white wine into his glass.

Well, it could have been the wine. Because he had been a little drunk as he had walked out, long before any other of the teachers, into the frosty December air. He had dropped the car-keys and he had felt uncomfortably top-heavy as he had searched over the asphalt of the yard for them, the tips of his fingers grazing themselves on its uneven surfaces. It must have been that wine and not his glasses, because as soon as he had got into the car, he took off the glasses and wiped them on a corner of a handkerchief that was still neatly folded in the trouser-pocket in which he had put it before setting out. Yes, it must have been that wine. What else could it have been?

It was misty as he drove up the hill and he passed only one car, crawling beetle-like ahead of him. He liked that surge of power as the Aston Martin devoured the little Fiat or whatever it was. It gave him a feeling of exhilaration; it never failed to do so. Which was why he had kept the car while at the same time urging on Clare a number of economies. The daily, holidays abroad, drinks before dinner, the laundry for his shirts: all must go before that

car would go. Now that his joints so often ached and were stiff with rheumatism in the mornings, now that he found himself out of breath at the top of a hill or even of the stairs, now that one set of tennis, one swim, one orgasm, was enough for him, he found a compensation in the undiminished ferocity and pounce of that engine.

He could not see the crests of the conifers because of the pervading mist; at times he could hardly see the sides of the road as it curved up to the brow of the hill. The trees seemed to have merged into huddled, opaque masses as the fierce headlights picked them out ... SCHOOL CROSSING. The cat's eyes winked at him and then died as he raced past ... Suddenly he slammed hard on the brakes, catching sight of the children's terrified faces. Some tried to run to the kerb; others froze where they stood on the crossing. The tyres screeched. The car all but went out of control, then he managed to bring it to a halt. He peered into the mist, the car-door half-open and one leg hanging through it into the icy air. He had been about to rush out and shout at them: You bloody little clots! Couldn't you hear my engine? Didn't you see my lights? And what are you all doing at an hour like this? Don't tell me that you're coming home from school! You might have got yourselves killed! ... But there was no one there, no one there at all; no target at which to direct his near-hysterical shock and rage.

He heard a *chug-chug-chug* behind him and the little beetle crawled up past the sign, slowed, all but stopped and then passed on. The driver was probably saying to himself, Odd. Why should he have stopped there? Alone too. But he seems all right. Better not to get mixed up in whatever it is. Perhaps he just wants a piss. The silence closed round the coughing of the little engine as it disappeared from view.

He raised the end of his tie; took off his glasses. But of course it had been the wine, it must have been the wine.

After that he began to dread having to pass the road-sign. But there was no other way to drive up from the town to the house: not, that is, unless he made an enormous detour. Enormous and costly too – that car devoured petrol with the same greed that it devoured the distance between itself and any other car. It was

some silly kind of optical illusion. The trees with the sun low behind them or with the headlights thrust against them. Some trick of shadow. And the fact that he was tired, the glasses, the wine. Nothing odd about it really. As a child, once waking up and seeing what seemed to be a stranger seated in the chair, a dark, humped stranger, with a white luminous face, he had screamed and screamed and screamed; but all it was (his mother rushing in) was his own clothes with the moonlight on them . . . Silly. She had said that to him. Silly, silly boy. Why it's *nothing!*

It was nothing. But still the dread remained. As the Aston Martin climbed effortlessly up the hill, he would feel his mouth go dry, his heart would start to thump and he would peer ahead wondering . . . would it happen again this time? But days passed and it did not happen and soon that tension of both his body and his brain no longer gripped him. He had still not spoken of what had happened to Clare or anyone else; and now he would not do so, since obviously it was not going to happen again.

Going into the town one Saturday to shop, they left the two children for a moment in the car while they changed their books at the library. It had been a day of nagging rain; and when they returned, they found that the seats of the car, its sides and even its roof were imprinted with the marks of small muddy feet. He could understand how, without meaning it, they might have soiled the seats by scrambling over them, or even the sides by kicking out; but to reach the roof they must have made a deliberate, malicious effort. 'Christ! What the hell have you been doing? Look at this! Look! Look!' He pointed at the marks while the twins cowered and giggled, and Clare, in an effort to placate him, her face suddenly pinched and grey with apprehension, pulled a tiny, pathetic wad of a handkerchief out of her handbag and began to make ineffectual efforts to wipe away the mess.

'You'll only smear it! Leave it! I'll see to it when I get home.'

'It'll all come out. You'll see . . .' As so often, her fear of him made her turn on the twins. 'Oh, stop that silly sniggering!'

'Why can't you control these bloody brats?'

'They're your brats too.'

But somehow, deep inside himself, he never thought of them

as his brats at all. They had come too late; and they had come unwanted.

Clare took the girl on her lap, leaving the boy in the back of the car. The boy was her favourite but it was the girl to whom she gave this kind of preferential treatment. 'Look, pet. I've got this lovely book for you. Look. That's a dog like the one that Ann has got, isn't it? A big dog, with a big bushy tail. And big teeth. But a friendly dog. Like Anna's dog. A dog with long, *long* ears.' From time to time she would glance sideways at him with wary apprehension, wondering whether he would forget about the stains all over the interior of the car or whether they would make him difficult for the whole weekend. He drove thinking, Christ, what inanities!

The car seemed even smoother and even more powerful than ever; and that began to soothe him, as he pushed it up the steeper and steeper gradient, passing one car after another. Everyone seemed to have been shopping; every car was laden with children and baskets and carrier-bags and dogs and toys ... SCHOOL CROSSING. There was a ramshackle saloon ahead of him, just beyond the road-sign; and then, as he pressed the accelerator to catch it up too and leave it in his conquering wake, suddenly, without any warning, the children began to stream across the road. In twos and threes. Shouting to each other. Laughing. One boy pushing another boy into a tall, solitary girl.

The impact of the braking threw the boy twin forward so that he struck his forehead on the seat in front. Fortunately Mark and Clare had both fastened their safety-belts, and the girl was secure in Clare's hands. The boy began to whimper, rubbing his forehead with a look of bewilderment on a face that had begun to pucker. Cars passed, the cars that they themselves had passed. Faces looked round. What a bloody silly place to stop! That's the way to cause an accident. Idiot. Someone hooted.

'Are you all right, darling?' The child began to wail. Clare touched the spot with blunt, cool fingers. 'Does it hurt?' The child wailed louder.

'He's not hurt. You know how he always makes a fuss over the smallest things.'

'He could have been hurt. Badly. What on earth did you stop like that for?'

'Didn't you see . . . ?' He broke off.

'See? See what?'

He thought quickly. 'The hedgehog.'

'Hedgehog?'

'In the middle of the road. I was afraid I'd run over it.'

'I saw nothing.'

'I saw it, Mummy! I saw it!' the girl began to shout. 'I saw it! Big, big hedgehog!'

The boy was sobbing now. Clare said to the girl: 'You'd better climb over to the back and change places.'

'Why?'

'Because he's hurt his forehead.'

'No!'

'Now, Sally do what I tell you.'

'It's my turn to sit in front!'

'You sat in front last time.'

'Didn't.'

'Did.'

Oh Christ! It was with a cold, murderous rage that he engaged the gears and once more resumed the journey home. Would they never allow him any peace? Such was his fury against his own family that he hardly thought of those phantoms suddenly emerging out into the road. It was only later that he began to worry again.

Bill Edmonds – 'Big' Bill as he was known all over the town to differentiate him from his partner, also Bill, who was small and fox-like – had once been Mark's closest friend as well as his doctor. Perhaps he still imagined that he was Mark's closest friend, since he was not particularly perceptive; but Mark had never felt the same towards Bill since that whole school business. Bill had not been loyal; or at least not loyal enough to say 'my friend, right or wrong'. His view that Mark had been partly wrong he had never concealed from him, even though he had conceded that Mark had also been partly right. 'You can't run a comprehensive as though it were a small and select grammar

school. You know exactly what you're doing and a lot of that staff of yours have no idea what they're doing at all. But that doesn't mean that you can ride roughshod over them.' Later when the affair had ruined Mark's career and smashed so much else, it had also destroyed the peculiar intimacy that had joined the two men. They went on seeing each other; Bill went on prescribing drugs for Mark's blood-pressure, his insomnia and hay-fever; Mark went on tutoring Bill's bored, backward daughter in mathematics during the vacations; the two couples went on entertaining each other to dinner and going on holidays together and playing tennis with each other. But as far as Mark at least was concerned, the friendship had ended.

Now Bill said: 'Well, I'm dammed if I can find anything wrong with you. The blood-pressure's a little lower in fact. The heart is fine.'

'I must have imagined it . . . he sounded doubtful.'

Bill shrugged. 'Some trick of the light,' he said.

'I've thought of that. But it's happened at different times of the day. I mean, if it was a trick of the light, then if the light then changed, if it was coming from a different direction or a different source . . .'

'Your guess is as good as mine.'

'I suppose one might call it an hallucination.'

'Well . . .' Bill laughed, one massive buttock perched on the edge of the desk while he scratched at the other.

Mark stared down at his linked hands and then darted an upward look. 'You don't think . . . Well, this isn't the beginning of a – a breakdown is it?'

'Christ no! I'd be much more worried if you were hallucinating all over the place at all times of the day. The fact that it's just that one particular spot and just that one particular hallucination . . . But, in any case,' he added hurriedly, 'hallucination is not really the word for something so trivial.'

'Then what is?'

Bill did not answer that. 'You've been through a difficult time. Months ago, I know. But the after-effects of that kind of traumatic experience are often delayed. I should guess that you're a bit run-down. Liable to get depressed. Tired.'

'Well, those children certainly never let me sleep after six or seven!'

'Let me give you a tranquillizer.'

When Mark's first wife had been dying, Bill had also given her a tranquillizer, since there was nothing else to give her. 'A happiness pill' he had called it to Mark; and certainly, whether because of her faith or because of that pill, she had died reasonably happy, when not in pain.

'Oh, I don't think . . .'

'Now come on! Half my patients are on tranquillizers. Nothing to it!'

Mark had the prescription made up; but when he got home he pushed the bottle into the back of a drawer and forgot about it.

The hallucination (if it was a hallucination) now came more and more frequently, until it was happening almost every day. As he stepped into the car, sometimes even during his language class, he would ask himself, I wonder if I'll see them today. They even appeared when he was giving another of the teachers, whose motorcycle had broken down, a lift up the hill. There they were ahead of him (he had purposely slowed the car, just in case), straggling out over the road with their briefcases, trailing scarves, knee-high boots and loads of books. He could hear their loud immature voices and hear their piping laughter over the purr of the engine. He stopped and watched them, oblivious of his passenger, as they crossed over from the footpath to the lane on the other side. Some of the faces he had never seen before; they had joined the school since his day. Others he recognized and these he hated.

'Anything the matter?'

'What?' The last child had gone. He attempted to pull himself together. 'I was – was looking at that owl in the tree over there. He's often there at this hour.'

'You must have the most fantastic sight. I can hardly see a thing.'

'It's as though he waited for me. Every evening.'

'Well, imagine that!'

Mark released the handbrake. Suddenly he felt the sweat icy on his forehead, on his neck and in the small of his back.

*

He and the famous ophthalmologist had been at the same Oxford college together; but there had always been a faint condescension even then from the spectacularly gifted man to the one far less gifted, and now it had grown more marked. The ophthalmologist, thin and sharply handsome, with his modish clothes and his modish haircut, might have been at least ten years younger than the part-time schoolmaster.

'Fancy deciding to start a family so late in life! I'd no idea. It's as though I'd suddenly decided to get married.'

'Well, we didn't really *decide* to start a family. It just happened.'

'Still, it must be fun.'

'Up to a point.'

'I don't really care for children myself. Or animals.'

Mark nearly said, 'Neither do I.' But some impulse of loyalty to Clare, not to the twins, restrained him from doing so.

'Which must mean that I have a shocking character,' the ophthalmologist went on, obviously not believing anything of the kind.

When he had finished his examination he said: 'Well, *I* can't find anything amiss.'

(Mark did not care for the emphasis on the pronoun. Who did he think could find anything? A psychiatrist?) 'The eyes are perfectly normal for a man of your age. In fact, I don't think I'd have even prescribed those glasses for you. You could easily do without them.'

'Then what . . . ?'

The other man shrugged. 'You might have "floaters". People with short sight often do. They're maddening things and, if you start to think about them – to become too conscious of them – they can cause you a lot of misery. I had a patient once, a woman, who even advertised in *The Times* for a cure for them. But there isn't one, of course. As I'd told her.'

'I've had floaters. I know what you mean. But they could hardly account for my seeing a number of school children and seeing them in detail . . . Could it?'

The ophthalmologist, who wanted to get home before going on to Covent Garden, sighed and shrugged. 'You might be haemorrhaging slightly from the eyes from time to time. Though I see no

evidence of it. I've often thought that that's all that Joan of Arc's visions amounted to. She never menstruated, you know. But she might have bled instead from the tissue of the eye. It's not unknown. Not at all. I had a woman patient who did precisely that.'

'You don't suggest that I'm menstruating from my eyes?'

The two men laughed; but Mark's laughter was nervous and strained.

'Good God no! And in any case, you'd have reached the menopause by now and the bleeding would be over!'

Again they both laughed.

The ophthalmologist put his arm around Mark's shoulder. It was as a patient that he thought of him now, not as a friend, and the gesture was a purely professional one. 'I should guess you need a holiday. You look rather strained. You've aged a bit since that last Gaudy. Why not go away for a holiday?'

'I might do that.'

'I should ignore the whole thing. Drive through your vision! Why not? Prove to yourself that there's nothing there at all.'

'Yes.'

The ophthalmologist realized that, so far from encouraging his patient, he had only discouraged him further.

Mark had left his car in the station car-park. When he went to reclaim it there, he found two schoolboys examining it carefully. These schoolboys were not from the comprehensive but from the smart preparatory school a few miles outside the town. Mark knew that from their caps.

'That's a lovely job you've got there.'

'Super.'

'Fantastic.'

Mark put his key in the door, smiling at them, saying nothing. He felt that somehow he must appease them.

'Must cost a fortune to run.'

'What's the fastest you've done?'

'Oh, I've no idea. But she's fast.'

'I bet she is!'

They hung around; probably they wanted him to offer them a

ride. But he did not do so. He slammed the door and thought, You're like those others . . . Just like all those others. Except that you wear those caps and you sleep in dormitories instead of at home and you have that disdainful upper-class drawl. I hate the lot of you. It was you who smashed me. Smashed me.

He drove off, not even bothering to look at them again.

It was a beautiful December afternoon and he ought to have been happy at the thought of going home after a day in a London that seemed to him, with each visit, to become more and more noisy, more and more crowded, more and more squalid. But he was not happy. He thought of that lucky ophthalmologist, who had been wise enough not to burden himself with a wife and children; who had visited the Caribbean for his last holiday and was going to visit East Africa for his next; who had been about to go to Covent Garden to see *La Traviata*. Back home, Clare would complain that the dishwasher had broken down again or that a bulb needed replacing; the children would have broken something or lost something or soiled something; the stain would still be in the centre of the sitting-room carpet; the seat of the chair on the left of the fireplace would still be sagging; he would still be able to see where Clare had stuck that Crown Derby cup inexpertly together.

The Aston Martin began to leap up the hill. Would they be there, waiting for him among the trees? In a curious way, he felt that his fragile, failing body was now somehow fused with the strong, ever-powerful one of the car. *I should ignore the whole thing. Drive through your vision, why not? Prove to yourself that there's nothing there at all . . . What's the fastest you've done in it?* Well, I'm doing over seventy now and on a gradient like this. *Lovely job. Super. Fantastic.* His heart was now the throbbing heart of the engine; his nerves trilled with each of the explosions that sent it hurtling onwards.

SCHOOL CROSSING.

I should ignore the whole thing.

The impact was terrible. The car ploughed on and on. Then at last it jolted to a stop. Staring out ahead of him, he thought, this must be what is meant by seeing red. The whole windscreen was smeared with blood.

Or were the smears only on his glasses?

Norman P. Kaufman
Contents

Revenge was all I ever wanted; revenge cold and clinical, unhampered by the influence of my civilized upbringing, my family life or indeed any other emotive backdrop. I wanted a bloody vengeance; a retribution that would exact the last sweet drop of personal satisfaction from a tragedy arising out of my lack – my *criminal* lack! – of care.

Perhaps in retrospect I should not needlessly blame myself for what took place between Pedro de los Espanitos and my daughter Julia. Perhaps I do myself an injustice in apportioning any of the guilt to myself. Perhaps, in the weeks and months following Julia's death, I should not have lain awake in a torment of self-hatred, wishing that I had been a little more introspective, a little less obsessed with my medical practice. In that case I might possibly have curtailed the budding relationship between a girl of barely eighteen – who, even in this day and age, even in this slowly decomposing society of ours, betrayed a sweetness and an innocence that collectively defied description – and a man of almost twice her age; a man so tall and so suavely, swarthily handsome that it seemed impossible for Julia to resist him, even for as long as she did . . . My Julia! My beautiful Julia!

In the days and weeks that followed their meeting, my daughter's inner loveliness took on a new glow. Immersed as I was in my medical duties, even so I could not fail to notice her almost ethereal movements about the house; in fact I remarked on it, perhaps twice, three times. To which gentle chiding she responded with a tremulous smile that told me as nothing else could that she was indeed in love with Doctor de los Espanitos. I humoured her: my questioning of her was superficial to say the least, for I had no desire to estrange myself from her by what she might have termed 'prying'. Her mother had died in childbirth; and now I worship-

ped this child as I had worshipped my wife. And if Julia was happy with her Doctor Pedro, then who was I to gainsay this contentment? Who was I to advise her to stick to boys of her own age and background?

The days and weeks slid into months. Work filled my days and much of my nights. I had neither the time nor – God forgive me! – the inclination to tune in to Julia's life. Sometimes it would occur to me that it was rather odd to see Pedro around so often, considering he was in the same line of business as myself. But he explained this away with that cheeky, boyish grin of his (that Julia found so engaging), saying that he worked with some six or eight other doctors in a Medical Centre; so that the week was split up to everybody's mutual convenience, enabling him to spend more time with his Julia.

Those were in fact his exact words: 'My Julia,' he used to say; and she would look up into his face with an adoration that was frightening. It was this proprietorial attitude of his that probably led me still further to channel my efforts into my exacting work in the surgery, and therefore further from the realities of my daughter's life. You might think this was selfish of me, and of course you may be right. But here was a man – not a callow youth of Julia's age, a man of considerable experience, with a professional background, an impeccable gentleman, with every attribute of the husband I had always envisaged for Julia. Was I wrong, therefore, to allow my vigilance to relax? Was I *that* much of a fool to think that here was a man who could, and would, care for her and cherish her and give her all the love and affection which a girl such as she genuinely deserved?

I don't know when I first noticed it: the infinitesimal loss of bloom from her smooth red cheeks, the lacklustre walk, the microscopic change in her whole appearance, the general impression that suddenly she had fallen out of love with life. And then there was the day I saw the appalling shadow of fear in her eyes; I looked at her and I knew, and she was aware that I knew. Words between us in that horrendous moment were totally superfluous. But I drew her down on my knee, just as I had done when she was a little child; and the story came tumbling out of her ashen lips, the

tears trickled down her elfin face, her body swaying to and fro in grief.

It was of course an all-too-familiar tale, and one to which I of all people should by now have been accustomed, even inured. *Pedro de los Espanitos!* A name as bogus as the man himself! A womanizer and a fortune-hunter, a man who was no more a Doctor of anything than Julia was, a man whose only link with my daughter was that neither of them was physically innocent. She had succumbed to his masculine charms. The man had been careless, negligent in fact; and the girl – what did my little Julia know of such things? There again perhaps I should shoulder the blame for her ignorance.

She had discovered the truth about him and told him; she had had to tell him. And by the following evening he had vanished. No trace, no clue to his whereabouts. His belongings had gone with him, to wherever it was that he felt he could infiltrate some young girl's affections, or bolster his bank balance at some poor fool's expense. Perhaps he would take care next time to avoid impregnating the girl of his dreams – or whatever he whispered into their ears . . . But the fact remained: Pedro de los Espanitos had gone; and with him went the reason for Julia to live.

Six weeks after the man had gone, six weeks of depression and outright despair that rendered her a pale ghost of what she had been, Julia walked out of the house, and took a bus to the nearby beach. From there, she must simply have moved across the hot sands and into the soothing balm of the sea, and kept on walking . . .

Her poor, broken, bloated body was washed up on the same beach some two or three weeks later. The police, alerted by my immediate report of a missing person, brought me down to the mortuary so that I could identify her, or rather what was left of her. For her corpse had bounced about in the waves for many days, buffeted by the various savage tides, cut by jagged rock, devoured by God-only-knows what kind of sea creatures. I remember just standing there and looking down at her, at what had once been a human face, a lovely elfin face, the face of a daughter I had cherished, a daughter whose lifeless body contained the foetus implanted by—

I stood there and looked at her, and his name seeped into my brain like the venom of a deadly snake.

'Pedro de los Espanitos . . .' I said it slowly, spoke it out loud into the oppressive silence. The mortuary attendant and the police officer gazed blankly at me, then at each other. Perhaps they thought I was rambling incoherently; or offering up some kind of prayer to whatever deities I subscribed to in my hour of grief. I cared not what they thought: I had no clue to the man's whereabouts but his name, and even that was spurious. But I would find him. I would *find* him. And I would reward him more than adequately for this moment; for making me come here to this vile place and tell the police that if it hadn't been for the sodden clothing, I would never have been able to confirm that this faceless carcass had once been my daughter Julia.

It took me three years, two months, five days and fourteen hours. I saw him through powerful field-glasses: the dark hair, the perfectly-formed eyes and nose, the permanent pout of his lips. I felt as if I could have reached out and touched him, reached out and taken him by the throat and squeezed until his complexion darkened and his eyes popped out of their sockets and his tongue lolled between the waxen lips . . . He was talking to a young woman, probably no older than Julia herself; I trained the glasses on her pert little face, watched in fascination as her glistening painted lips smiled in unstinting admiration, watched as her eyes sparkled animatedly as he spoke. I wondered fleetingly whether her father was a wealthy industrialist; or some sort of a professional: like a doctor . . .

I lowered my glasses. I had waited for twenty-four thousand hours. Another twenty-four would do me no real harm.

I had given the problem much thought in the preceding years: the fact that one day, God willing, we would come face to face. The bereaved father and – the murderer; there is no other word for it, no pretty euphemism, no journalistic bromide. This man los Espanitos destroyed my child as positively and as passionlessly as if he'd plunged a knife into her already swelling abdomen. But there were certain hard facts I had to accept: one of which was that man-to-man combat was out of the question, as I

was six inches shorter and correspondingly thinner than the counterfeit medico; the second was the Anno Domini difference of fifteen years (advantage los Espanitos). As for hiring someone to kidnap him or to – what is today's parlance? – do him over, well, I suppose I could have investigated possibilities; doubtless I would eventually have found a person or persons willing to cause the fellow permanent damage, even to finish him off altogether.

But I would not do it . . . could not do it. It had to be a *personal* reprisal. It had to be something done *by* me *to* him, and *through* Julia, through the poignant memory of one I had revered. And therefore the decision was made for me: it had to be a direct approach. What the newspapers might term a full frontal . . . And so that is what I did – walked up to him at the bar of the Orchid Hotel near the main Malaga beach, on that hot, drowsy day last summer; walked up to him and sat down beside him and simply stared into his face.

Now I'm not much given to histrionics; nor am I given to wild statements about a person's physical condition. In my profession, such an outburst would amount to heresy. So let me just say this: in that brief micro-second, as his eyes transferred their message to his brain, Pedro de los Espanitos *aged*. The blood drained from his cheeks, leaving his complexion like brown mud. The breath hissed out from between his clenched teeth: he stared . . . he could not believe that the man before him was Julia's father. I moved closer to him; close enough to see the incipient beads of sweat forming on his upper lip.

'Remember me, Pedro?'

As a superfluous question it was surely in a class of its own. He knew me all right. And the superstitious terror scrawled across his good-looking face confirmed what I already knew, that he was only too well aware of what had happened to Julia.

And then commonsense prevailed: what, after all, had he to fear from a scraggy little middle-aged fellow like me? 'Of course I remember.' His lips turned down in a semi-sneer. 'State your case, Doctor, and then you can shove off.' I gazed at him, struggling to submerge the hatred that boiled up into my throat; the palms of my hands moistened. Dear God, if I could only have allowed my instincts full reign!

'I suppose you're wondering why I'm here.' I listened to the words as they popped out of my mouth, and marvelled at the almost infantile banality of them, as if scripted into the dialogue of some God-forsaken B-movie. It was little wonder that the man laughed in my face.

'Let me suggest,' he remarked blandly. 'that there might well be something wrong with your supposer.' He leaned forward and dug a bony forefinger into my chest. 'Mister, believe me: I don't give a sod why you're here. What I do care about, though, is how long you're going to sit there mithering me, because if it's more than five seconds or so, I might just have to tell the barman to throw you out.' I shook my head meaninglessly; and true to his word, de los Espanitos glanced round and flicked his fingers at one of the waiters . . . I moistened my lips. I had to say something quickly or—

Inspiration.

'Money,' I said. His head jerked round, his eyes narrowing. 'Money.' I repeated. I tapped my breast pocket. 'There's some here for you, Pedro. Unless,' I smiled without humour, 'unless you're too proud—?' The waiter, tall, burly, had arrived at the bar; de los Espanitos dragged his gaze from me, peered at the waiter for three tense seconds.

'Two double whiskies,' he ordered; I relaxed back on my stool. He pushed his face close to mine. 'Now . . . what the hell is this money business, Doc? Or is it a delaying tactic to buy you time?'

I shook my head. 'I pride myself on being an honest man, also an honourable man. I've been looking for you ever since Julia died. She—' I hesitated, emotion clawing at me, emotion which I would not let him see. 'She left a will.' His head snapped up. 'She left you virtually every penny she'd saved, Pedro . . . Nearly two thousand pounds.'

A slow smile spread over his all-but-perfect features. 'Let's get this right, shall we, Daddy?' He laughed, and I clenched my fists inside my jacket pockets. I could wait, for just a little while longer . . . 'Am I hearing this straight?' he went on. 'Julia loved me so much that she left me all her cash, and yet she was planning to do herself in—?' I felt the pain in my heart like a physical thing; but all he saw was an impassive face and a leisurely shrug.

'I was her father,' I told him. 'I don't profess to know the workings of a female mind.'

'Nicely put.' He laughed. 'I like that. I like that a lot ... OK, let's see the greenbacks.' His smile slipped slightly as I shook my head.

'You don't think I'd carry that sort of cash around with me for three years, surely.' I forced a smile of sorts. 'You're supposed to be an intelligent fellow, Pedro de los Espanitos.' He scowled at me as the waiter brought the drinks and wandered away again behind the bar.

'So. What's the catch? What have you got hidden in your coat?' His greed was almost transparent; but I was careful not to smile.

'There's no catch.' I dug into my pocket, produced an envelope, flung it on the bar. 'That's a copy of the will. Read it. Read it and sign it and take the cheque I'll give you and then get the hell out of my life, you bastard.'

For a moment, I wondered if I had gone too far: his lips tightened and his big fists slid off the top of the bar. Then he laughed another of his hateful laughs. 'What you say can't hurt me, can it; and I don't expect paternal love from *you*.'

Nor do you expect a punishment for what you have wrought, Pedro de los Espanitos or whatever your stinking name is, I thought. But I said nothing and rose to my feet. 'I'm willing to sign,' he put in quickly. I gazed at him with a semblance of dignity and picked up the envelope from the bar.

'I have a room here. Shall we conduct this tasteless business in private?'

He shrugged, nodded acquiescence. What did it matter to him, a few extra minutes in what he probably considered as childish red tape? Perhaps he had a girl to meet later. Or two girls or ten girls ... But meanwhile, he could spare the time to pick up an easy two grand. I could read his thoughts and his boundless contempt for me as plainly as though I had lifted the top of his head and peeped inside. 'Shall we go?' I enquired stiffly. I preceded him out of the bar, down the corridor and up the stairs to the first floor. At the top of the landing I turned left, walked some twenty metres to room number eight. There I stopped, and he was right

there behind me. I fumbled the key into the lock, turned the handle and flung the door wide open, allowing him to lead me into the room. He had moved some two feet before I hit him over the head.

It was, though I say so myself, a splendidly controlled blow. I used a piece of lead piping wrapped in two or three thick woollen socks; so that, although the result would certainly be an unpleasant headache for the man called Pedro, there would be no serious effects, and unconsciousness would last no longer than four or five minutes. Ample time for binding his hands and feet with torn bed-linen, and for gagging the sensuous lips ... To be more precise, it was almost seven minutes before his eyelids flickered open, which gave me an extra minute or two of delicious anticipatory pleasure.

I waited patiently until he had blinked away the film of incomprehension that lay over his eyes, leaving only the strain and the nagging ache induced by a simple length of lead pipe ... And there was something else, something I like to believe was the birth-pangs of fear. 'Welcome back, Doctor de los Espanitos,' I said.

He gazed dumbly at me, the gag biting into his mouth. His lips worked beneath the strip of adhesive gauze, though whether from discomfort or a desire to speak, I could not ascertain. I regarded him thoughtfully.

'I call you by the name you gave my daughter,' I went on. 'Although I know for a fact it is not your real name. Nor are you a doctor.' I moved nearer to his sprawled form. 'What you are is a womanizer, a cheat and a liar. What you have committed is only just short of murder.' I squatted down so that my eyes were almost level with his own.

'And that's where I intend to stop, Pedro de los Espanitos: just this side of murder.'

Momentarily his dark eyes, heavy with hatred, clashed with mine; and gradually the animosity faded, to be replaced with an unmistakable dread. He could read it in my face: my implacable desire to be recompensed for Julia's death. And he wondered what I had in store for him. I stood over him for those long sweet

seconds and allowed his imagination to run amok within his devious mind.

Abruptly I moved away from him: there were certain preparations to make before I could begin the work proper, the labour of love. I sensed his gaze following me about the room as I made my way towards the cupboard by the door and extracted a hypodermic syringe, ready-filled with colourless liquid. I sank to my knees by the man's side; he whimpered and squirmed away, and I laughed in his face.

'You might not believe me.' I told him, 'but this is for your own good. I don't want you to die of pain. I don't want you to die *at all* . . .' I jabbed the needle into his neck. He winced with pain and writhed in the knots that held him. After twenty seconds or so, a deathly paleness spread over his cheeks, and the mouth beneath the gag moved wildly, and noises issued from it. Noises? Ha! Beautiful music! 'Yes,' I told him. 'Shout at me. Scream at me, dear Doctor. There is no one to hear you, no one but me, and my ears can still remember the sound of *Julia's* voice, telling me – telling me—' I broke off, a thickness in my throat. I stood there and waited as the paralysis crept over his strong young body. I waited ten minutes, just to make sure. And then I rolled him on to his back, took off the bonds and stripped him of all his clothing. He stared up at me; it seemed as if only his eyes lived. 'We're nearly ready, Doctor Pedro.' I moved away from him 'Nearly ready . . .'

De los Espanitos lay there and watched.

I took my time. It was no part of my plan that he should be spared any of the details of his eventual Nemesis. Rather he should witness every segment of it, however minuscule; so that he would realize that each act of mine furthered his own imminent end, or at least the end of his existence as he had known it . . . He would decipher his fate step by step, and he would die ten thousand deaths; which might – just might – go some way towards paying his long-outstanding account.

From the cupboard, I lifted out several lengths of scaffolding: these had been folded into each other, telescope fashion; and

having laid them out on the floor, I extended each span of steel to its maximum length, which was some six feet or so. Again I turned back to the cupboard, extracting a number of clamps. Next came the painstaking task of balancing each section of the hollow tube whilst affixing it to the next unit by means of the individual battens. It wasn't easy – my physique is inadequate, to say the least – and the metal cylinders were heavy and cumbersome. But I persevered. Sweat poured down my face, blinding me; it soaked through my clothes as I laboured on: but I would not rest. Finally I had rigged the tubing into a large equilateral triangle, with three further sections of metal forming a support for the main outline, so that the effect was that of an outsize three-sided photo-frame.

I sat up on the hard floor and gazed up at what to me was a rather picturesque filigree; an assembly of modern art, all the more beautiful because it had been purpose-built, lovingly custom-made, tailored to my own demanding standards. And all it needed now was a man who called himself Pedro de los Espanitos.

I got to my feet and moved over to his paralysed body. I was already tired, and the day's work was far from over. I crouched down and lifted him over my shoulders, straightened up and staggered towards the scaffolding. For just those few brief seconds, his flaccid limbs swung against my body, his head lolling on to my neck, the cold dampness of him sliding against my skin ... I shuddered, and almost let him drop; somehow I shut off my mind to his touch, lurched forward and leaned him against the support of the hollow tubing. Instantly his legs buckled and he slid downwards to huddle at my feet; and I began to wonder whether I had been wise in injecting him before I had secured him to the scaffolding.

Stooping, I slid my arms under his armpits and straightened up again heaving at his dead weight. When he was upright, I held his bulk against the piping and contrived to secure his left wrist to it whilst supporting the rest of his body with my legs and torso; all the time his eyes gazed in unquenchable hate out of the helpless ball of his skull.

Finally I followed the same procedure with his right wrist, and

with his trailing feet. I moved back, squirming from the touch of his flesh; he hung there, the sweat of nameless fear beading his nude body, his eyes bolting from his head as he continued to watch my every movement. It was for all the world as if he felt he would be safe as long he could keep me in sight. I smiled mirthlessly at the thought: it was to be a forlorn hope.

I turned away from him, back across the room to the cupboard, which had just one more function, just one more part to play, I manhandled it towards the spreadeagled de los Espanitos, positioning its mirrored doors so that he could view the full length of his own immobilized and totally anesthetized body ... He gazed at the reflection, and it seemed to me that I could *feel* the mortal terror leaking out of the man's pores, this instinctive reaction to the unknown, something hideous, something vile, but as yet an amorphous vacuum in his mind. I stepped up to him and spat in his face.

'You are worried,' I told him blandly. 'and well you might be. But to keep you in ignorance would be petty of me; and I believe that you of all people, dear charlatan, dear Doctor of Nothing, would appreciate what I propose to inflict upon you ...' He flinched at the words, and chewed incessantly on the tape that bound his lips. I leaned nearer to him, gazed up at his pale, handsome face.

'There's going to be an operation,' I went on. 'I won't bore you with tiresome detail, Pedro; so let me be entirely open with you, let me put it in layman's language, let me dispense with multisyllabled medical terms.' I paused. 'You've heard of taxidermy, yes?'

His eyes blinked once; and I paused just the right number of seconds before dropping the words into an unreal silence.

'Pedro,' I informed him. 'I'm going to *un*-stuff you.'

I took one stride backwards, keeping my eyes on his face, waiting for the sentence to settle into his brain, to touch on the nerve ends that would pass the message to his mind, there to be analysed and dissected and ingested into his ken.

His eyes dilated in sudden realization of what was to come; his lips parted in a soundless scream; the head shook from side to side, once, twice, thrice, endlessly twitching left and right in in-

congruous perpetual motion atop the benumbed body, as I walked the length of the room, selected the various instruments from the cabinet at the far end, then moved back again quickly into the fellow's range of vision.

'Watch,' I said. 'Watch yourself in this mirror. Witness the beginning of the end of your rotten bloody life—' I laid the surgical implements on the floor at my feet. I had dragged them around with me for months; these and the scaffolding tubes and the fittings and the hypodermic and the narcotic drug: in fact the whole paraphernalia had accompanied me on my travels ever since I had conceived this – let me be completely honest – utterly monstrous idea. The inconvenience of transporting all this impedimenta had been considerable, and at times virtually unbearable; but it was a labour of love. And I knew that some day, I would find de los Espanitos, and destroy him in my own special way.

I picked up a finely-honed scalpel and moved towards him. It was finally time for action. I had lived for this moment for three years, had lived for three years in anticipation of this moment... I lifted my head and looked up at him.

'And now sir,' I remarked, 'to work.'

I grasped his left ankle and made the first incision in the sole of his foot. A faint whimper issued from his lips, a noise that momentarily took me aback, for I knew beyond doubt that the drug had rendered him incapable of physical feeling below his neck; I could only conclude that some incalculable and subconscious reaction had made him aware of my touch, and of the blade that sliced into his flesh. But I was not a doctor of the mind, nor did I care much about the ramifications of my actions. All I was concerned about was here and now: the scalpel, the cut, the trickle of blood which was as yet merely an overture... 'Ah,' I said. 'Nearly forgot, didn't I?'

In the corner of the room was a large wastepaper bin; I brought it across to the scaffolding and placed it centrally between the man's legs, positioning it so that the first drops of his blood fell directly into it. I saw his eyes alight on its reflection in the cupboard mirror; I looked up at him, and I said nothing, nor,

I think, did he expect me to do so; for had it all not been said . . . ?

The initial cut had been made; I relinquished the scalpel in favour of a larger knife, and bore heavily down on the flesh. The flesh leaked copious quantities of blood into the bucket as I widened the incision and exchanged the straight-edged knife for a razor-toothed affair, with which I embarked on scraping the flesh away from the bone. This took no little time, as I was of necessity working mainly with one hand, struggling to force it deeper and deeper inside the foot, cutting at the flesh until it met the resistance of bone; at which point I picked up a small yet sturdy surgical saw, and severed the tarsals and metatarsals of the foot, and the phalanges, the bones of the toes. I then reverted to the razor-tooth knife, filing away at the loose bone until the fragments fell on to my questing fingers . . . I withdrew my hand and – after a brief respite – carried out the same procedure on the right foot.

I was then ready to begin on the man's legs, a task of some considerable magnitude. Here was a person in his late thirties, blessed with sound health and a noticeable muscular development in body and limb. It would be necessary to carry out the same programme on his legs as that already executed on his feet, entailing an assault on the mass of bone and sinew and muscle that forms the bulk of each limb.

It had to be done . . . and I did it: utilizing the kindred knives to great effect, sawing through the tibia and the fibula of his lower leg, hewing at the heavy patella in his knee, hacking at the long femur bone in his upper leg; simultaneously driving through the major musculature – the peroneus and tibialis of the shin, the soleus and gastrocnemius of the area around his knee, and the much tougher undertaking of the hamstring and quadricep of the upper leg.

Believe me, it was hard; there were times in those long minutes of burrowing inside the man's limbs when I was tempted to give up, to call it a day, to tell myself that the punishment had been harsh enough, protracted enough, permanent and harrowing . . . But these were only moments: because Pedro de los Espanitos had not suffered nearly enough to erase the memory of a young girl called Julia. And the bucket was less than a quarter full.

The next stage of my plan was to direct my operations upwards into his lower body, and more specifically his reproductive system. To achieve anything like hundred-per-cent success, I had perforce to drive my arm into the aperture in each foot, and then along the leg until reaching the heavy bone of the pelvic girdle. Initially of course there was no resistance, since nothing existed within the framework of flesh to cause hindrance: but once my questing fist, with a cumbersome serrated scalpel within its grip, reached the pelvis, the problems began. There was little leverage; I was already dog-tired; to get to his reproductive organs from the inside, so to speak, I had to saw through the cartilage between the pubic bones, and the hard coccyx bone linking this with the protective sacrum . . . Blinded with sweat yet again, I ground away at the resisting bone. Blood and bone leaked past my wrists, admixed with the yellowish watery plasma that forms more than half of the blood . . . I *forced* and suddenly I was through, tearing and slashing in some kind of unbalanced abandon, my knife biting into his penis and testicles, slicing across the scrotum, filling my fingers with a glutinous amalgam of spermatazoa and blood and what appeared to be oozing pus.

I took a good long rest then: sat there on the floor at his feet and stared up into his face, a face devoid of any normal colour. Rather there was an absence of colour, a disfiguring translucency in his cheeks that furnished the clue to his feelings. For although he could feel no pain, yet he still knew. He *knew* I had rent his body almost limb from limb; had violated the very mechanics of his continued existence. And to be aware of de los Espanitos' comprehension of his horrendous plight was more than meat and drink to me: the knowledge went a long way towards recompensing me for the loss of Julia. And strangely – or was it so strange? – I did not stop to reflect on the enormity of what I had wrought. Perhaps because to me, the immensity of this man's criminal actions had submerged any qualms of conscience or civilised thoughts that might have restricted my conduct . . .

For long minutes I did not move, but merely kept my eyes on his face, seeing the hope and vitality drained out of it. And then I rose slowly and painfully to my feet; for there was yet more work to be done.

His arms presented little problem. The carpals and metacarpals of his fingers and hands seemed to make no real resistance to the honed steel of my knife, and I could only conclude that these bones were softer than average; oddly enough, the same description applied to the muscles and tendons of his hands, the flexors and the sheets of fibrous tissue that criss-crossed the bones like some intricate skeletal jigsaw . . . I ripped and tore at the hands; then, having severed them from the wrists so that they hung from the stumps by the odd surviving sinews, I began the assault on his arms. The thicker bones of the ulna and radius in the forearm, and the humerus of the upper arm collectively repulsed the lesser of my scalpels, but the dog-toothed knives managed to subdue them, and indeed fragment them. It was a surprise to me that the bicep and tricep muscles yielded to the blade without demur.

I shook the fellow's blood from my hands and stood in thought. I was coming now to the final stages of my plan, and I was faced with a dilemma. For it had been my original idea to divest his body of every conceivable bone, muscle, sinew, organ, and ounce of blood. But I knew that if I did go to these lengths, he would die far quicker than I desired.

And yet to leave him with the innards of his body still intact: to ignore the intestines and the liver and the gall bladder, to bypass the vital organs of the spleen and the pancreas and the kidneys, to disregard the potential of the stomach! To strike upwards into the trunk of the body, to wield the knife, to feel its irresistible edge scything through strata and substrata of tissue, through the anatomical texture of a human's vitals—

'And then,' I said aloud through sudden tears, 'and then, Pedro, dear Pedro, I would reach up to your heart. Feel it throbbing ... moving, Pedro: like Julia's heart once moved ...' I honestly did not know what I was saying, nor did I care. Whatever it was, it seemed right, it seemed good, and just. 'You're supposed to be a medical man, aren't you! *Aren't* you, you bastard—' I moved nearer to him, fixing his colourless face within my blurred vision. 'You'd never feel the knife twisting into your rotten heart. You'd never know that the blood from your right and left ventricles would wash over each other as their intervening walls were ripped asunder. You'd be totally unaware of

the coronary veins and arteries being sliced into fronds of insignificant matter . . .' I reached up and took hold of the tape across his lips; I ripped it away in one swift, vicious movement. He winced slightly: the drug had not affected him above his neck, and it gratified me to witness even such a small manifestation of his pain.

I grasped his head between my hands, pulled it down so that his eyes met mine. 'Pedro,' I breathed 'Pedro, you're dying. Slowly. And I'm trying to decide whether to speed things up. I'm wondering whether you're worth any compassion at all—' I broke off; I remembered how little compassion he had shown my daughter . . . I moved aside, pointed down between his feet.

'The bucket. Look into the bucket. That's you, Doctor de los Espanitos. That's *you*.' I gestured at the full-length mirrors, at the reflection of what had been his limbs, now merely husks of skin and partial flesh. 'Did you see it all, Pedro?' I whispered. 'Did you watch? *Did* you—?' I seized his bobbing skull. 'Damn you to hell, I want an answer! I want you to *tell* me! I want you to scream, d'you hear? Scream at me,' I sobbed. 'Why don't you *cry?* Why don't you *beg?* Why—'

I stopped, because there was nothing more to say. I stopped because he was not going to scream, or even speak, or even move. Pedro de los Espanitos had cheated me after all. For he was already dead: the eyes that gazed into mine were glazed and lifeless: the heart I might have dismembered lay still and silent within the remains of his gutted body.

Exhausted, I slumped again to the floor and watched the contents of his body draining away into the bucket. And I thought of why I had done this thing, and I thought of a girl I had loved. And suddenly I was comforted.

By and by I rose and packed my suitcase and left, leaving Pedro de los Espanitos in charge of the scaffolding. Probably some cleaning-lady would find him.

She might become a little upset.

Sheryl Stuart

The Law: its administrators

'What does this mean ...?' enquired Hubert, pointing. 'Mindless?'

Dolan stretched out a hand similar in size and texture to a household shovel. 'Let's have a look, son.'

Hubert passed the newspaper across the table. He was not Dolan's son, and in fact was only a year younger than Dolan's forty. But somehow it seemed right that he should be addressed so.

'Mindless,' Dolan said. He scanned the text beneath the thick banner headlines, whilst Hubert sat patiently, his thin white face in striking contrast to the rubicund fleshiness of the other's beery visage. 'Mindless ...' He tapped the paper and grimaced. 'Not to mince words old son, the blokes who've done this must be a pack of bleeding nutters.'

Hubert shook his head unhappily. 'I still don't understand.' This in itself was not surprising: there were few facts of life that Hubert did understand. He knew about pubs, and about the ale which somehow never affected his scrawny physique, nor his capacity for prodigious quantities of the stuff; he knew about Social Security, for he was virtually unemployable, due to a habitual laziness allied to a mental age of around fourteen; and he knew too about women, in that they smelled nice and wore tight clothing and bounced their hips when they walked and pushed their breasts out at him and – totally ignored him.

'I don't get it,' he amplified superfluously. 'These blokes – these nutters – they've *got* minds, ain't they? Mean-ter-say, '*course* they 'ave. So why're the papers sayin'—'

Dolan sighed audibly. Sometimes he wondered why he bothered rooming in this squalid doss-house with such a crass cretin. But then Dolan too was out of work; thus his role was as beggar

rather than chooser. 'Well now . . .' He lay full-length across the bunk and stretched his heavy limbs. 'Let's see if I can put this over to you. Mebbe if I read it out to you, cutting out the long words, p'raps putting little ones in their place—?' Hubert nodded encouragingly: he admired Dolan. Dolan had been Educated. Dolan *knew* about things.

Then Dolan began to read, leaving most of the long words where they were:

DAILY NEWS, June 10th

INNOCENT MAN TERRORIZED BY THUGS

A man of 68 was admitted to London General Hospital last night, suffering from hotrific injuries inflicted by a group of teenagers including two girls. Pen-knives were used to carve a series of notches out of the man's flesh, in and around his stomach, upper legs and genitalia. Similarly a number of scratches were cicatriced across his cheeks in the form of some obscure yet grotesque geometrical pattern.

The full extent of the injuries is not yet known, but a spokesman for the team of physicians attending to the victim has labelled the apparently unprovoked attack as 'another mindless assault on an innocent party by some of the moronic strata of today's sick society.'

Police are still searching for the gang, said to number ten or twelve. Relatives of the injured man have been . . .

'. . . And the family's coming to cheer him up,' Dolan interpreted briskly, 'or words to that effect.' Hubert gazed at him.

'Oh,' he said.

'Christ,' his companion spat out, stung out of his soporific calm. 'Is that your sort of summing-up of the bloody situation? After I've taken the trouble to explain—' He stopped short, and shrugged: Hubert was really and truly not worth the trouble or mental sweat. The brief and one-sided conversation had served its purpose as far as Dolan was concerned: which was to wile away another few minutes of another interminable day of nothing much to do.

He closed his eyes. Sleep for an hour or so, then get up, go down the Dill Pickle for a quick jar . . . Dolan dozed.

When he awoke, Hubert had disappeared. But Dolan made no

attempt to look for him, or even to rise from his bunk. The daft sod would turn up sooner or later. Or else he wouldn't. Either way it didn't seem to matter.

Hubert had been walking for many hours. Not that he was normally an energetic person; but it had been brought home to him during his conversation with Dolan that his own intellect was sadly lacking, and he felt he needed a long walk in the open air, to give his mind a chance to function.

His mind...

That had been an odd thing Dolan had said: about those young people being *nutters*. Being *mindless*. And yet – Hubert frowned. If such was the case, why was it that *he* felt no repugnance?

He stared round in abrupt surprise: he must have walked to Hyde Park, for he recognized the environment immediately, having spent his childhood in and around this particular manor. How the hell he had managed to wander in here without noticing where he was going, and at – he glanced at his cheap watch – eleven o'clock at night –! Hubert concluded that he must have been in the park for some time; for the gates were closed against him on the south side, and therefore presumably throughout the whole park. Which in turn meant that he would have to find a wall to scale if he were to avoid sleeping rough.

Hubert turned away and began to walk along the stretch of grass that lined the wall leading from the locked south gate. And it was then he heard the noise.

It was a peculiar sound. It was like no wildlife he had ever encountered. It seemed to come from a shock of bushes some ten feet to his right... Hubert moved across, curiosity overcoming a faint sense of fear. The moon escaped from behind the clouds, for perhaps four seconds; long enough to take in the salient details of the girl who crouched there in the undergrowth.

She might have been sixteen: her hair was long and unkempt, her clothes consisted of dirty jeans and dirtier sweater, her feet were encased in tattered mules. But Hubert did not waste the brief period of illumination on the girl's wardrobe or grooming: his

instinctive reaction was to drop his gaze to the more than perceptible breasts, and to the tightness of the jeans encasing her slim legs.

'Who the hell are you?' Her voice was oddly high-pitched: it might have been her normal tone, or it might have been induced by the surge of panic as the night clouds blotted out the moon once again. She sounded – educated ... like Dolan. Suddenly Hubert felt a wave of irritation, against Dolan, against this young girl, against all who had this peculiar advantage over him, in that they had acquired knowledge denied to him, simply because he was short on brain power.

'Name's Hubert ... Wotcher doin' 'ere, lovey?'

She stared up into the shadow where his face was. 'Run away, haven't I?' Hubert leaned nearer, squatted down beside her, smelled the sweat on her, felt the heat of her fresh young body despite the incipient chill of the night.

'Wot you called?' he asked.

'M—' Her lips would not frame the word. She *was* scared. What had possessed her to come out here? 'Moira,' she finally jerked out.

'Moira,' he repeated. He reached out and touched her face. 'You're – nice.'

A white-hot spark of panic exploded in her brain: her legs lifted her clear of the bush, and she began to run. She had taken three strides and started a fourth when Hubert caught her and swung her on to the dry grass.

Afterwards, Hubert could not even begin to explain his own actions to himself. Even now, a full hour later, the emotion that had clawed at his throat during the girl's wild struggles had not completely dispersed. He felt weak, both mentally and physically. His was not a particularly strong constitution, yet the girl had proven totally inadequate in her frantic efforts to escape from him. Hubert was pleased about this: at least he had *some* power in him, at least he had the strength to subdue a young girl ... But it was the mental part that worried him. For what he had wrought upon Moira had been something totally alien to anything he had ever experienced before: and he had deliberately

blanked his mind to her pleas for clemency and her shrill whining and her apparently unbearable agony.

Or *had* it been deliberate? Hubert stopped to consider. There had been a point during his struggle with Moira when her body had strained against his, when the softness of her naked flesh had ignited in him a feeling that had transcended all logical thought ... Dolan would have called him a nutter. The newspapers would have termed it 'mindless'.

The little white-faced man shook his head. Was that it? *Was* he mindless? Some kind of moron? Someone who didn't know what he was doing? For Chrissake! It hardly seemed possible: he felt all right, he wasn't drooling or foaming at the mouth; and yet, he'd given that young kid a good seeing-to. And when she had kept on crying and moaning and hitting him in the face, he had banged her head on the ground.

Many times.

Funny how people stopped looking attractive the minute they were dead. He remembered her just lying there, not a stitch on, bleeding like a stuck pig, eyes wide open, staring at the bloody moon ... And he, Hubert, no longer a virgin-nearing-forty, couldn't bring himself to care.

He walked swiftly along the midnight streets. Better, he reflected, to wait another hour or so, so that Dolan would be most likely fast asleep. Then he, Hubert, could creep in, slide into his own bunk, and in the morning everything would be all right, and nobody would connect him with one of the many rape-cum-murders that took place somewhere in the UK pretty well every day of the—

His train of thought came to an abrupt stop as the girl hit him over the head with a broken half-brick ...

Hubert's eyes flickered open. Somebody seemed to be shoving his brain around inside his skull. The agony was only just this side of bearable He was lying on the hard concrete floor of a back entry somewhere. He moved his limbs experimentally: they were bound with some course twine which bit deep into his flesh. Hubert whimpered; he discovered that his lips were covered in some kind of sticking glue that effectively clamped his mouth tightly shut.

The sky was still dark: the faint luminance of the street barely filtered into this back street: but he could see a woman standing over him. A girl ... dressed in jeans and sweater ... Lank hair. Dread moved within his breast. It couldn't be – dear God Almighty, it could *not* be!

And then the girl knelt down beside him and it wasn't Moira; she began to whisper into his ear. She began to tell him things that his paralysed brain could hardly assimilate; as she spoke, other shadows began to move into his field of vision, until the whole entry seemed alive with vague shadows ... Still the inexorable voice mouthed into his ear, telling him about an earlier attack she and her friends had made on an elderly man, apparently innocent, but whom they knew to be responsible for at least two assaults on little girls. The man had been punished as he deserved, or rather as these self-styled vigilantes considered he deserved. And their message had been written across the fellow's face in cuneiform.

The old man had committed a sexual assault, but not murder. Hubert had committed murder. His punishment would have to be more severe.

Hubert saw the gleam of the penknives in the dull ochre light of the entry. The girl was still whispering: informing him that he would not be killed; that not only would his life be spared, but that Hubert would very soon beg them to change their minds.

They bent over him and began to cut into his body, and into his arms and his legs, and his testicles and his penis; and finally, deep into his face, gouging the flesh from the bone, the bone from the sinew ... And all the time, the soundless screams welling up from his blood-soaked throat, to be lost and muffled in the confines of the heavily-gummed lips.

DAILY NEWS, June 12th

SECOND VILE ATTACK WITHIN 48 HOURS

A man of 39 was found last night in a cul-de-sac on the border of Fulham. His injuries were extensive and heinous. This is the second such attack on an innocent victim in two days, and the police are puzzled as to why unassuming and inoffensive folk are being singled out for these horrific crimes ...

Carl Schiffman

A smell of fresh paint

George looked up from the intricacies of the electric wall-socket. 'What?' Helen's expression switched from frowning enquiry to irritation.

'I said, if you're still painting in here, will you open a window or something. The smell's giving me the most frightful headache.' George got up stiffly and waved his screwdriver at the tangle of cable on the floorboards.

'Does it look as if I'm painting? You know I finished decorating in here on Sunday night. I don't see how you can possibly still smell it now. I'm sure I can't.' He wrinkled his nose and sniffed experimentally.

Helen looked doubtful. 'It's stronger in the kitchen. You haven't done any painting in there, have you? How peculiar ... anyway come and get your coffee before it's cold.' She withdrew her head from the doorway and he heard her footsteps echoing in the hall as she marched back to the kitchen.

There *was* a distinct odour of freshly-applied paint in there; he noticed it as soon as he went in. 'Must have come through from the front room,' he said vaguely, 'and it's still hanging about.' But so strong was the smell that he involuntarily looked about him for the cause. Helen had pushed open the window over the sink, letting in the chill night air, and the stench slowly diminished.

Standing at the newspaper-covered table, he contemplated the work that would have to be done to make the kitchen as Helen wanted it. It was going to be a job and a half. He wondered for the first time if it had been such a good idea to buy the place.

His depression lifted somewhat after he returned to the rewiring job in the front room. After all, he told himself as he threaded cable behind a skirting-board, the house was amazingly cheap; they'd been able to buy it outright with the sum they'd

saved as a deposit on one of the new semi's that were being thrown up on the other side of town.

It had been Helen who'd spotted the For Sale sign as they drove past. It was toppled over and lay half-hidden in the long grass that fringed the quiet suburban road. He'd pulled up at her excited exclamation and they had hurried back. The house was concealed from the road by a tall hedge; the garden was untended and wild. 'It'll be pricey,' he observed after they had circled the house, peering in through dusty windows. 'Too pricey for us, anyway.' But Helen was outside the gate, copying the estate agent's name from the board.

The agent was polite but puzzled by their enquiry next day.

'Moorthorn Road? I don't think we have a property there.' He pulled out drawers in a filing cabinet, frowning, 'Moorthorn Road, Moorthorn – ah, here it is. Eight Moorthorn Road. Stupid of me: I'd forgotten we had it on our books, I'm afraid.'

'The board certainly looked—' began Helen, but George, sitting next to her, kicked her ankle, and she subsided. The house agent was studying the folder.

'The house is held in trust for a minor by a firm of solicitors,' he told them, looking at them over his glasses as they sat with crossed fingers. 'The previous occupant was . . . ah, committed to an institution in 1958.'

'*Committed?* You mean to an asylum?' Helen was intrigued.

'Yes, madam. As a – um – certified person, he was unable to legally hold property, you understand. The ownership passed to a cousin, who subsequently died in childbirth; her son is now in his early teens. However, there should be no difficulty in processing the sale, if you decide to buy. You will simply be expected to pay the purchase price to the solicitors concerned.'

On the principle that it is better not to examine a gift horse's mouth too closely, they had refrained from asking why the house had remained unsold for so many years.

They decided to move in immediately the transaction was completed; George would work on renovating the place in the evenings and at weekends while Helen coped with cleaning out the shabby neglected rooms. They spent hours planning and re-

planning the layout of the finished house. It was perhaps the happiest time of their marriage.

The day after she had drawn George's attention to the smell of paint in the kitchen, Helen began her onslaught on that room. A battery of cleaning tools and materials was ranged up on the table. Hot water was prepared. She tightened her lips, tied a scarf round her head, and applied her energies to the stained floorboards and grimy woodwork.

By three o'clock, as the winter dusk began to settle round the house, she had had enough. The dirt was simply ingrained. Even when she had exposed the surface, it was difficult to see any difference, for the paint on doors and cupboards, on skirting-boards and picture-rail, was a dingy brown, The colour of poverty, she thought, regarding it distastefully; a drab, hopeless colour.

A flicker of movement at the window caught her eye. Someone had gone past, but as she looked up she glimpsed only a fleeting impression of the outline of her visitor. A woman, she thought, though why she was sure the person was female she could not have said. She waited for the knock on the back door, but none came. She crossed to the window and leaned over the ancient sink, peering out into the darkening garden.

She could see the doorstep, but no one stood there. Further down the garden, though, she thought someone stood motionless. She wiped her hands on her skirt and went to the door. The figure was just visible, wearing a long coat or robe that fell almost to the ankles. Helen called out sharply: 'Yes? What do you want?' The figure was standing with its back to her, with (it seemed to Helen) its head bowed. At the sound of her voice, it looked up as though startled, and moved swiftly away into the gloom.

Helen was beginning to feel annoyed. Doubtless this was some nosy neighbour who had not known that number eight was now occupied, though why she should choose to wander about in the overgrown garden on a freezing November afternoon was beyond Helen's understanding. She hesitated on the doorstep, wondering whether to go out into the garden and confront the intruder or to leave her to her own devices. A niggling doubt as to

whether she had seen anyone entered her mind. A right fool she would look, chasing shadows. Besides, there was no other way out of the back garden except by the path that ran past the kitchen; she had only to wait here and see if anyone passed.

A soft sound from the room behind her made her jump. The plaintive 'Miaow' that followed was a surprisingly welcome noise: it was only Dandelion. The fluffy white cat was sitting in the middle of the kitchen with an expectant look on its fat bewhiskered face. Helen attended to its feeding with dutiful haste. Afterwards, it occured to her that the trespasser – if there had been one – could have slipped past the window unnoticed. She made a mental note to get George to put up a lockable gate at the side of the house, and turned to the task of preparing the evening meal.

They had moved into number eight at the end of October; by mid-December George had begun to be aware of the change in Helen. It was a slow transformation. Only when he remembered how she had been before could he look at her in slow surprise and think, 'She is different, somehow.' She had been quick-tempered; but she had been equally quick to relent. Now she was an acid-tongued nagger, with a vicious spitefulness that cut deep into him.

Entering the kitchen one evening he had surprised her with her hands locked round Dandelion's throat. The cat was struggling feebly in her grasp, eyes bulging and mouth agape. She'd dropped it at his outraged cry and turned away with a guilty sullenness. The only explanation he'd been weakly offered was that 'it had scratched her'. He found it hard to believe that this was the girl who had cried once when they'd seen a dog run over.

Doggedly he persevered with the work on the house, though now he found he was doing it for little reason; he no longer shared with Helen the pleasant anticipation they had felt when they moved in. When she did comment on his work, it was usually with a sneer, or a hurtful remark spoken with a casually contemptuous air that destroyed any sense of achievement he felt. At times they would go for days without exchanging more than a few bare words.

He had gone early to bed one night, sick and wearied by some

futile savage row, and was lying tense and wakeful. He found himself wondering how much more of this tension he could take, and was caught by the realization of how things had changed in such a short time, that he could contemplate thus the end of their marriage. It could have been so different, he reflected miserably.

He heard her footsteps on the uncarpeted landing; the steps of a stranger who happened to be his wife. She would be heading for the spare bedroom, where she had taken to sleeping after those evenings of more than usually bitter antagonism.

He raised his head from the pillow in time to see her pass the open door, her long blue dressing-gown swirling about her. If she had turned her head at that moment he might have spoken. But she did not, and he let his head fall back on the pillow. He was almost asleep when he heard her enter. He thought with drowsy resentment: 'Let her speak first, then.'

As he stumbled out of bed next morning and groped towards his clothes, his eye fell on her dressing-gown draped untidily over a chair.

'That's funny. I thought . . .' There was a muffled movement in the bed. 'What's the matter?' Helen mumbled sleepily.

'I thought you were wearing a blue dressing-gown last night.' She squinted blearily over the bedclothes: 'Never wear blue. You know that.' The garment on the chair was a rich, dark red. He reached out and touched it as though unable to trust his eyes. 'Yes, but I saw . . .' It was not worth starting another argument. He dressed and left for work, his stomach grumbling emptily. It seemed a long time ago that she had last got up to make his breakfast.

His spirits were still low when he drove home that evening and parked in front of the house. He glanced up as he got out of the car; someone had moved at the window upstairs. He glimpsed only a slim shoulder, an arm, turning away disdainfully. The setting sun flashed off the glass, obscuring detail.

'Christ, she's not even dressed yet,' he thought, 'And she *has* got a blue dressing-gown. Or if she hasn't, what she's wearing now looks damned like blue to me.' Why had she lied about it that morning?

'Just for the sake of contradicting me, I suppose,' he muttered as he fumbled with the front door key.

As he stepped into the hall Helen appeared at the kitchen door. She stood framed in the opening at the end of the passageway. He saw with a shock of surprise that she was wearing a blouse and skirt. She held a long spoon in her hand, and an aroma of cooking floated towards him.

His mind whirled. 'Who's upstairs – at the front window?' She stared at him with a closed, secretive face.

'I saw a woman. In the front room. I – I thought it was you. Who is it?'

'There's no one in the house, not a living soul; except me, of course.' She smiled, a sly, strange smile. 'Get cleaned up. Dinner's nearly ready.'

He looked in every upstairs room before splashing water on his face and clattering downstairs again. He had seen someone at the bedroom window, he was certain of it. Had she run downstairs and gone out the back door before he entered? No, that was physically impossible: the stairs ended in the short passage to the kitchen, and he would have seen her as he opened the front door. The space of time between his getting out of the car and turning the front door key was too short for anyone to have gone out that way. He gave up the conundrum and went into the dining-room.

Helen was crooning softly to herself in the kitchen. He tilted his head to hear better. He couldn't remember the last time he'd heard her sing like that; certainly it was before they came to live in the house. What she was singing sounded vaguely familiar, but he couldn't place it; he thought it had something of the Fifties about it. Perhaps she'd heard one of those old records they sometimes played on the radio.

It was unusual, too, that she should have his dinner ready for him. Perhaps – he hardly dared form the thought – perhaps things were going to be better from now on.

'That was bloody marvellous.' He pushed back his empty plate. 'Best bit of chicken I've had in ages.' Helen looked at him quizzically. She'd eaten little or nothing but had sat watching him with a smile quirking the corners of her mouth.

'You liked it?'

'God, yes. Never tasted anything like it in my life.' He was exaggerating, of course, trying to fall in with her mood. Her smile broadened.

'You've never had cat before.' Her eyes clouded with tears, while the mouth smiled and smiled. He stared at her across the table, confused. Had he misheard her? But she was going on in that unfamiliar grating voice: 'It was Dandelion. The cat, you fool. You've eaten Dandelion!' The voice rose triumphantly, and the mouth smiled, and tears streamed down her cheeks.

George sat as though frozen in his seat. He watched the tears run down to meet that dreadful smile while his mind struggled to cope with what she had said. The smile grimaced at him like some lunatic stranger. It was as though he sat opposite two women: one weeping helplessly, the other mocking him with that insane grin.

She must be lying, he thought – it is some ghastly joke. But he remembered that tonight the cat had not come to meet him at the sound of his key in the lock, as it invariably did. More like a dog than a cat, he'd often said. He licked his lips, conscious of the sweet taste that lingered still in his mouth.

As he vomited over the kitchen sink he heard Helen laughing in the other room. No, not Helen; not really Helen. The word schizophrenia floated into his stunned mind, dredged from the recollection of some half-understood article. I must get a doctor, he thought distractedly. But he stood reluctant and inert, unwilling to take the step towards betraying her. He prodded the pedal of the shining steel bin under the sink, watching his distorted reflection move in the lid as it rose. Inside, he saw the round bedraggled head, the blood-clotted whiskers, the loose skin like an empty glove. He let the lid drop back, his shoulders slumping, and made his way slowly out the door and up the road to the phone box.

Helen was still in the psychiatric unit of Valebridge Hospital at Christmas time. He visited her three times in the first week of the long holiday. The doctors held out little hope of a quick recovery; she had retreated into something they called hysteric catalepsy. To George the words were meaningless. He knew only that Helen

had vanished, and in her place was a blank-faced woman with dull eyes, who ignored him as though he did not exist. The doctors spoke with cautious optimism of various treatments, of drugs and electro-therapy. George hardly heard them.

It was bad enough to be alone in the house, the quiet empty house, over the holidays: to do nothing was intolerable. He turned once more to the work on the house. It was as well that the house stood apart from its neighbours, for he worked late into the night, with a feverish intensity, as though by altering the house he could wipe out the memory of Helen's breakdown.

He was good with his hands, and the work went smoothly and satisfyingly. The little kitchen grew bright as he removed the partition wall at the back of the room, so that the staircase ran down openly into a now well-lit passage. He finished the new banisters on the evening of the twenty-eighth of December, and began the tedious job of stripping the old encrusted wallpaper off the other walls in the kitchen.

The paper came off in great unwieldy strips and sheets, revealing the flaking plaster beneath. It felt unpleasant in his hands, sticky with steam-borne grease and caked with grime; he opened the back door and threw it out into the back garden. Tomorrow he would have a bonfire.

At one point – halfway along the wall facing the fireplace – he found the paper less easy to remove. It was more recent, differently patterned. Picking it away laboriously, he uncovered brown-painted wood. He prodded with his scraper at various spots until the blade went through without resistance. This was what he had been looking for – the join at the edge of the door. By moving the blade around, slicing into the wallpaper, he outlined the doors. It was a large cupboard, perhaps five feet high by four wide.

He inserted the blade of the scraper between the doors and tried to lever them open, but they refused to move. Evidently they were nailed shut. He selected a claw hammer from his toolbox and prised out the nails. An unwholesome stench seeped out as he worked, a sweet, sickening smell. It grew and spread and filled the little room, so that finally he was forced to back away, holding his hand to his nose and mouth. He threw open the back

door and breathed out emphatically, clearing the stink from his nose and drawing in lungfuls of clean frosty night air.

'Something must have crawled in there and died,' he muttered. He had developed over the last few weeks a habit of talking to himself in the house. 'Must have got in from the outer wall.'

He returned to the cupboard doors and prised them open with a large screwdriver. This time they swung open, and he peered inside.

'But the cupboard was bare,' he murmured softly, remembering the childhood rhyme.

But not quite: there was a heap of old rags on the dusty floor. He prodded it distastefully with the screwdriver. Then he straightened up sharply, shock tingling through him. His eyes were fixed in a rigid stare.

For old rags do not lift a bony, parchment-covered head; they do not reach out a skinny talon, groping towards the light. And what if these dusty eyelids should fly open, to let the thing regard him as he stood transfixed?

By forcing each leg to move in turn, painfully slowly, he found himself at the back door. His outstretched hand felt the rough wood of the door frame and clutched it fiercely. He paused, feeling safer now with the escape-route reached, and watched unblinking as the occupant of the cupboard crept and stooped out into the light. To his partial relief he saw that the eyes were still closed. His skin crawled as he watched it grope and clutch on the floor. He observed now that around the gaunt frame there hung the tattered remnants of a blue robe or gown, and that round its scrawny neck was a piece of cord, tight. As he recalled the figure he had seen on two occasions – a figure wearing a blue dressing-gown – he drew in his breath sharply. Instantly the crawling thing on the kitchen floor turned its withered face in his direction, and he threw himself through the doorway and down the icy path.

It was not until he was halfway down the path that he remembered that the garden was surrounded by a high wall. His legs turned to water as he ran. He knew with hopeless certainty that he would never be able to scale the barrier. He was trapped. *Why, oh why*, his mind screamed, *didn't you turn right and flee down the side of the house, and out on to the road?*

Some age-old instinct made him swerve off the pathway and he ran scrambling through the overgrown grass, which seemed dead and frozen in the pale moonlight. He flung himself down between concealing bushes and lay still; fearfully still, with the breath whispering in his throat. His heart fluttered like a trapped moth.

All was quiet and still. His muscles relaxed. He rose carefully to a crouch, looking over the bushes to the house. Nothing moved. The light from the open kitchen door splashed yellow on to the white grass.

He felt something cobweb-light touch his cheek. Perfectly still, he looked out of the corner of his eye and saw on his right a ragged blue sleeve. Beyond the two thin arms that reached out to his throat he could just make out the face. He saw that now the eyes were open, and that the dry and blackened lips were puckered into a smile. It was the smile he had last seen on Helen's lips as she sat weeping . . .

'Charles, dear, do come here a minute. There's a man lying in the new people's garden. Do you think – the police, or an ambulance or something?'

Mr Shields joined her at the window and followed the direction of her pointing finger. He blinked against the bright winter sunshine. 'Good Lord – so there is. And if I'm not mistaken it's Whatsisname – Price. Here, you phone – just dial 999. I'll go round and see—' He was already halfway down the stairs.

George was cold and stiff on the grass. It was immediately apparent to Mr Shields that their neighbour had died from some kind of fit, for his lifeless face was twisted and wild. Mr Shields only looked at the eyes once, and was seized with a sudden uncontrollable shudder. There was some blue material clutched in the stiff fingers.

'There's a curse on that house,' declared Mrs Shields dramatically when the police and ambulancemen had departed. 'You remember how Mr Simons went just the same way—'

'Not quite the same way, dear,' protested her husband. 'He just went a bit funny in the head, that was all. I mean, he didn't die there.'

Mrs Shields was not to be put off. 'You know what I mean. There's a positive curse on that place.'

They were silent, remembering how poor Mr Simons had been taken away a few months after his wife had left so suddenly. They remembered how he'd been led to the ambulance, a paint brush immovably clutched in one hand, the other pressed to his face. He had been shouting in a disturbing fashion. Just what he'd meant about 'covering up the smell' nobody quite understood, but then, he was quite insane.

Thomas Muirson

A country tale

The old man in the corner seat raised his eyes from the empty glass in front of him and regarded me speculatively. I ordered a second pint for myself and asked him if he would have one on me. He considered the idea for a few seconds, then nodded.

'Don't live round these parts, do ye?' he inquired as I returned from the bar and placed the pint on the table before him.

'No, I live about twelve miles away; moved there about two months ago.'

'Thought you didn't come from round here. I reckon I knows everyone in this village.' Satisfied with this assertion of his knowledge of the neighbourhood, he downed half the contents of his pint glass.

'You've lived here all your life, have you?' The conversation promised to be a predictable one. Over the rim of my glass I inspected the small public bar in which we sat. It was deserted except for the old man and myself, the landlord having retired to some unknown retreat.

'Allus lived here, yus,'cept for three years in the War.'

I headed him off from any possible sixty-odd-year-old reminiscences: 'Haven't you found it – well – a bit quiet? A small place like this, I would have thought it would be, you know, a bit dull.'

At this he looked thoughtful, took another draught, and licked the froth from his old soldier's moustache.

'Dull? Well, maybe. Did you come down the Graston road, on your way here?' I was puzzled by this abrupt change in subject matter. 'Yes, I did come that way. Why?'

'Did you notice a small wood about half a mile afore ye got to the village? On your right, it would be, as you came in.'

'I saw the wood you mean, I think. Dark, gloomy-looking sort of place.'

'Aye, it is that. You won't get many round here that'd be wil-

ling to go into Grenville's Copse after dark. Nor in daylight neither, come to that.'

'Oh? Why's that then?' Instead of answering, he picked up his now empty glass, studied it reflectively, replaced it on the table. I got up and approached the bar, attracted the landlord's attention by means of a small brass bell I found there, and returned to the table with the necessary lubricant. The old man's manner thawed visibly.

'Ah, thank ye. Your good health.'

'You were saying, about the wood – Grenville's Copse was it . . . ?'

'Oh aye. It's allus been there, you know. Some of the oaks in there . . . The Druid folk used it for some pagan rites or other, long ago – so they say. And it was a kind of meeting-place for witches once. They held their – what d'ye call it, convenants, coverts—'

'*Covens*, witches' covens.'

'That's it: covens. Held 'em in there, they did. Land belonged to a Squire Grenville then; there's allus been Grenvilles round here. Well, things got so bad in the end, what with babies goin' a-missing an' that, the Squire he gets up a party of men from his estate and from the village, and one night they goes into the wood and catches them all.' He raised his glass to his lips again, swallowed the beer, and returned the glass to the table, wiping his moustache with his other gnarled hand.

'The witches?'

'Every last one of 'em. What they'd been up to in there, I don't know, nor want to either. But they found bones – littluns' bones – scattered in a clearing near a sort of altar thing. And some of them were gnawed, teeth-marks on them.'

'How do you know all this?' I asked.

'Well, my father told me of it, and his father told him; his grandfather was on the raid on the Copse that night, you see.'

I did some quick mental arithmetic. The witch-hunts that had swept England had taken place in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries – say 1680. Allowing each of the old man's forebears a span of about, say, sixty-five or seventy years . . . yes, it was possible. His great great grandfather could well have been one of the villagers who had seized the deluded creatures who had thought

themselves witches. Half-crazed old spinsters and simple-minded village girls, probably, but the study of mental sickness was unknown then. Strange, though, that the tale had been handed down in this way.

The old man, becoming expansive with the beer, went on: 'Well, they didn't try them here; sent 'em to Nottingham I think it was. And there they was hanged, all of them. A slow death, hanging, in those days, I expect ...' This last he added with a certain relish, whet his whistle, and went on: 'Squire Grenville ordered the wood to be burned and the ground to be ploughed up. But it was a terrible winter, that year: snow on the ground from December to spring. After a few attempts they gave up the idea of burning it, and five men from the estate were sent in to cut it down, tree by tree.

'Well, they had cruel bad luck with the job. First day, one of them near enough took off his own leg with his axe. Said the tree had turned the blade as though the trunk had turned to iron. Then two of them went down with a fever, and one died raving. His widow turned on the Squire and accused him of murder, she did.

'After that no one could be found to take on the job, no one from round here, anyway. The Squire, he was all set to send to another town for men what'd destroy the wood, but he was took one night, sudden-like—'

'He died, you mean?'

'That's what I said, ain't it? Went to bed that night right as rain, and they found him dead next morning, dead as a doornail.

'It seemed best then to let the wood be, seemed unlucky like, to interfere with it. The Grenvilles' fortunes went all downhill from that time on, and their land was broken up and sold over the years ...

'When I was a lad, I worked for the man who owned that bit where the wood is. He is a local man, he never asked me to work that part; and I never volunteered, I can tell you. But when I was in France, in the War, the land went to another man, a southerner 'e was. Full of modern ideas, too. Got one of these new tractors and did away with all the horses for a start. Well, I was a ploughman, not a motor-driver. So I only stuck it with him a while, then got a better place with Mr Harrison.

'But this new geezer – what was his name, now? ... Black? Blake? Aye, Blain, that was it: Blain – he told the new man that replaced me to take off half the Copse; he'd got some kind of gadget that fixed on the tractor-thing at the back, what'd cut down the trees as quick as you like. So off the poor ninny goes, down to the field where the wood is, see. About seven o'clock that night, round comes his wife to my house, a-knocking at my door. He lived nearby, just past the baker's shop. I expect she thought he was here in the pub, really, but she was a quiet little thing, and she'd not be likely to go in there to find him. "Have you seen owt of my Jim?" she says. "No, says I—" Ah, thank ye kindly. Your good health' – I had just delivered him another pint, unwilling to interrupt his story – 'So, off we goes to look for him. She knew which field he'd been working in, having taken his dinner out to him, but the truth was, she was a mite nervous about going there on her own now it was getting dark.

'I made her wait at the gate, and I went across the field towards the edge of the wood; I could see his tractor standing there, and some trees lopped and gashed by the machinery. But I didn't see him, at least, not till I got there. What was left of him was on the ground just behind the tractor ...' He swallowed his beer in slow gulps, his eyes looking far back into the past.

'... I had to be at the inquest, you know, along with the doctor and the constable. And Mr Blain, he had to appear too. Turned some of the jury sick, it did, when they come to view the body. Jim's wife, she never did get over it.'

'What had killed him then; an accident?'

'That's what the coroner directed the jury to find. "Death by Misadventure" he called it. Seemed as though Jim'd got off the tractor and gone back to clear a branch that had got stuck in the machinery. Well, Jim wasn't daft, he wouldn't have tried to clear it without he'd switched off the motor, now would he? But he'd been pulled into the cutters and thrown out again. And—' He leaned forward and tapped me on the chest, 'The motor wasn't running when I got there, I can tell you that.'

'You're saying that someone switched it on as he leant into it, is that what you mean?'

'Now what reason would anyone have to do that? Never did no

harm to anyone, Jim didn't. I'm not saying anything. I'm just telling you what I found. And I'll tell you summat else –' he lowered his voice, although there was still no-one else in the bar – 'When I turned back to go for help, I heard something that made me cold with fright.'

'What did you hear?'

'As true as I sit here, I heard *laughing*, in the wood. More than one person laughing, mind you. And no one to be seen, only me and that thing on the ground. Fair made the sweat pour down me, it did. Me, as went through the War.'

Shock can do strange things to the mind, I thought, savouring the taste of the hops. Doubtless he had experienced an auditory hallucination caused by the stress of finding his neighbour's mangled body. His long-standing fears of the wood had assumed concrete form and naturally he had tied in the legend to rationalize the illusion.

'Did you mention this at the inquest?' I asked. He shook his head.

'Nah. Wouldn't have served no purpose.'

'Did the farmer try to continue the clearing of the wood?'

'He would have done, but he went bankrupt afore the year was out. Lost a lot of money on the what-you-call-it, the Stock Exchange, I heard. No one ever had any luck what owned that bit of ground. The next owner let it alone, though, I noticed. It was while he had it that Tom Bainbridge . . . he paused.

'Go on.' I prompted.

'I know you young-uns, allus scoffing. I'm saying no more.' He folded his arms and leaned back in his seat.

It must have taken me at least ten minutes and the aid of another pint to convince him anew that I was prepared to listen to the next part of his tale.

'Well, Tom Bainbridge was a rare one for lifting – that's poaching, we call it lifting round these parts. Good at it, too. I went out with him once or twice, and it was a marvel to me how he slipped through the woods like a shadow, and his dog beside him even quieter than himself.

'We were sitting in this very room one night, me and Tom. He was complaining of how things were getting worse in his game,

and how all his favourite spots were being watched by the 'keepers. It was in the Thirties, this would be, and them as was out of work with the Depression were all trying their hand at lifting, just to feed their nippers. Tom didn't like this at all. "Spoiling it for us perfessionals," he said to me. "Why don't you try Grenville's Copse?" says I, joking like. "You won't find anyone's been there before you. And you won't find no 'keepers there, either."'

'I wish to God I'd kept my mouth shut, now. "I might at that," he says, quiet like. "Don't be foolish, Tom," I tells him. "You know that place is best left alone." But he just laughed and said he wasn't scared by old women's tales.

'Tom's cottage is near the edge of the village. *Was*, rather; it was knocked down to make way for the new school some while back. But in those days I passed it every morning on my way to Mr Harrison's farm, where I worked. The day after we'd been in here, I sees his dog shivering and whining on the doorstep of his place.

'If you were working in them days you didn't turn up late, not if you wanted to keep your job you didn't. So I went on without stopping, though it seemed mighty queer about the dog. All that day I wondered off and on what had scared it. It wasn't one of your soft milk-and-water pet poodles, that'd run from a mouse. On the way home I called at Tom's cottage. The dog was still there, but quiet now. Just sitting there shivering. I couldn't get Tom to answer the door. Somehow I didn't really expect him to, not with the dog acting like that. In the end, I took it home with me, carried it when I found it couldn't hardly walk.

'Next day, Sunday, I goes round to some of the lads in the village and tells them about Tom being missing. We went first to the cottage, and Alf Willoughby climbed in a window round the back. There was no sign of him, and everything seemed in apple-pie order. Tom was a bachelor, but he did keep his place neat, considering. I told the rest about what he'd said about Grenville's Copse, and we set off there.

'Now you can think me a coward if you like; I've thought meself one many a time. But I would nary go into that wood with the rest of them. I stopped in that same field where I'd found Jim's body some fifteen years before, and I watched the others go in. I could hear them calling to each other as they moved through

it. Then one gave a shout, louder than before, and it was quiet.

'I won't tell you what fancies went through my head as I waited there. But after a bit they came out, leading Tom with them. He walked like a drunk man between two of them, his legs bending under him so that they were near enough carrying him . . .

'When they got near I saw his face, and I don't know as I want to see one like it again. His eyes were all white round the edges, and his lips were pulled back and his teeth showing. White as marble he was, and his hands were pushing at something in front of him that wasn't there. They'd found him with his back against a tree, they said, standing pushing at something he could see but they couldn't. I can still remember that face, staring and white.' The old man clasped his hands on the table. 'He never closed his eyes till he died, three weeks later.'

I cleared my throat, and asked, 'Did he ever say what he'd seen? What had frightened him, I mean?'

'Never a word. I went to visit him – he'd been taken to the big hospital in Nocton – but he was still the same as when they fetched him out of the wood.'

I glanced at my watch. 'Time I was getting back home,' I said. 'Can I give you a lift?'

He shook his head, staring at the glasses on the table in front of him.

'I'll get you a last drink then.' I said. I rang the little bell on the counter again. The landlord appeared suddenly, almost as though he had been waiting for the summons.

'Just one for the old chap in the corner, please.'

He looked at me with a certain suspicion.

'For who, sir?'

'The chap in the corner seat there,' I repeated impatiently. I pointed over my shoulder.

His face darkened. 'You trying to be funny?' he demanded. 'You've been sitting there on your own for the last hour, and it's none of my business, but I'd like to know why you've been buying two drinks every time and only drinking one. Not to mention talking off and on, and no one there.'

I turned to look at the corner table. Three or four pint pots, all full, stood on it, but the old man's seat was empty.

I caught sight of the landlord's face in a fly-speckled mirror opposite the bar. Something in his expression – a kind of sick horror – made me turn back to him suddenly. 'You've seen him yourself, haven't you?' I demanded.

'No, I – well, yes, I have, once.' I think he was glad of the opportunity to talk about it. 'When I first took this place it was. He was sitting in that corner one night after I'd closed up. Couldn't think how I'd come to miss him. Fair gave me a start, it did, when he spoke to me.'

'Did he – did he tell you about the wood? Grenville's Copse?'

'He did that. And me sitting there thinking he was—' he shuddered suddenly. 'When he'd done talking I got up to unlock the door to let him out. When I turned round he'd – well, he wasn't there any more, that's all.'

He poured two whiskies and pushed one across to me. 'Here, you'd better have this on the house. You've gone a bit pale.' His smile was ghastly.

'Have you any idea who he is – *was*, perhaps I should say?'

'Yes, I've found out since; his name was Charlie Grenville. Seems he was descended from the family that owned the wood at the time of the witch-hunt. The last of the line, according to the vicar. He showed me the gravestone in the family plot in the churchyard. He died in 1956. They found him in the field next to the wood, with a case full of high explosive in his hand – God only knows where he got it from. Enough to wipe out the wood and a bit left over, they reckon.'

'Looks as though he was on his way to finish the job his ancestor started . . . How did he die?'

'The vicar told me every bone in his body was broken – as though he'd been beaten to a pulp with clubs or pick handles or—'

'—broomsticks?'

'Could be.' He scrubbed at the counter with a cloth. 'I'd be obliged if you wouldn't put it about; that you've seen him, that is. Trade's none too good as it is.'

'I won't tell a living soul,' I assured him.

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