



THE 22nd PAN BOOK OF HORROR STORIES

Selected by HERBERT VAN THAL



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The 22nd Pan Book of Horror Stories

Herbert van Thal compiled a number of anthologies including some of the writings of James Agate, Ernest Newman and Hilaire Belloc and a volume on Victorian Travellers. He also resuscitated the works of many neglected Victorian writers. In 1971 his autobiography, *The Tops of the Mulberry Trees*, was published, as well as *The Music Lovers' Companion* (with Gervase Hughes). He also edited Thomas Adolphus Trollope's autobiography and a two-volume work on Britain's Prime Ministers. He died in 1983.

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edited by Herbert van Thal

The 22nd Pan Book of Horror Stories

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Contents

The girl with the violet eyes	Elsie Karbacz	9
Pond weed	Roger Clarke	28
Child of ice	Tony Richards	33
From the depths of the earth	Norman P. Kaufman	43
Sideshow	Fay Woolf	51
The trump card	Jane Louie	59
Incident in Cairo	Bessie Jay	76
Dante's Bistro	Carolyn L. Bird	88
The clock	Edwin Brown	96
The singer not the throng	Gregory Alexander	104
Love bites	Harry E. Turner	109
Pornography	Ian McEwan	131
Waste nothing	Ken Johns	146
A cross to bear	David Case	154

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Elsie Karbacz

The girl with the violet eyes

The air was swirling, thickening; later on it would become a heavy mist. The playing children ought to be at home. But Anna was watching them, smiling; Drew hoped they would stay awhile – it was something, a great rarity, to see Anna smile.

The children were playing an age-old traditional game, which Anna and Drew Marshall had long ago forgotten, if indeed they had ever known it. All they could grasp of the game was that it involved some energetic miming, and that the youngest of the children, a small girl, was evidently showing a great deal of acting talent. Anna continued to smile.

His thoughts meandering, Drew remembered something about a king who had never smiled again after some domestic tragedy. The details escaped him. Had he lost a daughter, as he and Anna had done? But there was something worse than her scarcity of smiles, worse even than her desperate grief and despair: this was her loss of interest, her ceasing to care any more about what she saw or heard, an almost complete abandonment of feeling. This was such an awful change in her that he felt frightened; she was becoming, not a different person, but almost no person at all, an automaton, a machine. He had reached the stage when any sign of renewed life, any upsurge of pleasure, anger, or even jealousy, was welcomed by him and cherished and fanned avidly. His interest was seldom rewarded. The signs of life grew fewer and fewer. But he went on hoping.

The game had become chaotic. The tiny girl, intoxicated by being the centre of the stage, was obviously forgetting her role and showing off. They could tell this by the rebukes of the other children.

‘She isn’t doing it right!’

‘Helen! You can’t be a wolf now!’

‘You’re supposed to be an old washerwoman!’

'She's too young to play real games.'

But all the same they collapsed into laughter at her realistic snarling wolf. Eventually Helen laughed too, someone said it was time to go home, and the game ended in general disorder as the children gathered up their coats and rushed off chattering.

Anna's eyes followed them out of sight. She was peaked and pale in the cold air and her smile was gone. But she had smiled, and he fanned the tiny flame.

'We'll come here again tomorrow, shall we?' he asked. Did he imagine a flicker of response? She only nodded her head, but did she do it more sharply and decisively, and not with her icy indifference, her mechanical reaction? The children's game had interested her. And she had smiled.

They had been married twenty-two years; the anniversary was only a few weeks past. Once she had been all smiles. How could a person change so much – become a nullity, a nothing? He also had loved and mourned Lucinda. Other people had bereavement, other people lost children – even only children. Were these thoughts disloyal and rebellious? The word madness hovered in his mind, but he dismissed it as a mediaeval concept: one spoke these days of depression, trauma, grief patterns. Medical science could help – it was, they told him, an illness, like any other. The only trouble was that Anna had been given all that medical science had to offer – pills, injections, electric-shock treatment and, he reflected bitterly, she was no better. 'In no way better, but rather worse,' floated into his mind, about someone who had tried all medical treatments. Was not this also true of Anna?

He unlocked the car, and cruised home with Anna sitting silently beside him. Did he detect a slight heightening of her consciousness, her awareness? He was becoming almost psychic, he felt ruefully, in receiving these few faint signals. But she did not speak until they entered the porch and he fumbled the key into the lock. 'Did the very little girl remind you of someone?'

This was not what he had hoped to hear, and he longed fervently for her to forget what she had said and to expect no reply. Seeing children that reminded her of Lucinda was often

a prelude to a further plumbing of the depths, when the machine would cease to function for a time and food, sleep, make-up and even speech would be abandoned. He feared that during such a time she would one day die. When he thought of this he realized that he preferred to live with the machine. His obsessive love for her had never died, he held to it still.

Sometimes she would ask the question, sigh, expecting no answer. She didn't seem to now. They went silently into their house – this quiet seaside villa where they had lived since Lucinda's death – and he poured a couple of drinks. Anna drank – this was a good sign – but she also returned to the subject – that wasn't so good. 'She reminded me of Lucinda at that age,' he felt his heart sinking, 'especially the eyes. Did you notice her eyes?'

He hadn't taken much notice of the child, beyond mild amusement at her antics. Now he thought about it he could detect no resemblance at all between the uninhibited working-class child, with her dirty face and shock of dark hair, dressed in miniature jeans and T-shirt, and his own daughter. He could recall Lucinda perfectly at every age. Running back the reel of memory she appeared to him at the time she was about the same age and size of the girl in the park. Lucinda had been a quiet child, not demonstrative 'old for her years' people said, and it was true. She had also been astonishingly intelligent and perceptive – sometimes she made him feel that he was a child and she the adult. In looks she had been fair, small featured, perfect. He felt an uncharacteristic impatience. Was Anna's eyesight failing with everything else? However, he had to admit that he hadn't observed the child's eyes, and he said so.

'She had violet eyes, just like Lucinda's, You don't often see violet eyes.'¹

'No, indeed you don't.'¹ He was a little reassured: perhaps her judgement wasn't so faulty after all. Perhaps the child really did have violet eyes. At any rate it was a relief to know that on this occasion – so far, keep your fingers crossed! – her discovery of a resemblance to her dead daughter did not seem to have a bad effect on her spirits. She had a couple of drinks, chatted, and even made a few comments on the programmes as they watched television. Indeed she seemed a little better, a little

more a person, than for many weeks. But, of course, when it was time for bed they said goodnight and slept apart, as they had done ever since the day when a policeman, a tall, slim, youthful policeman, had knocked on the door of their holiday home and asked if he was the father of Lucinda Marshall . . . When he remembered this he had to fight back other memories . . . Lucinda's broken body in the morgue where they had taken her after the accident . . . Lucinda in her coffin, shrouded in white, her face unharmed, but cold and remote, not really there at all . . .

That had been five years ago. He had been advised not to take Anna back to Scotland, where they had their home and where Lucinda had been born and grown up. Anna, once her first extravagant grief was over, had agreed to buy the house on the west coast where they now lived so quietly, far away from Scotland, and also far away from the holiday town where Lucinda had died. He had retired early to care for Anna, though he was sixty-two and supposed he would be retired by now anyway. He missed the firm, but devoted himself to his collection of rare mediaeval books and manuscripts and to the catalogue and monograph he was writing on them. In spite of his wealth, this was his only extravagance. Anna took no interest in his work, nor indeed in anything else. Her own craft, sculpture, had been long forgotten, but once she had been good enough to hold an exhibition of her work in Edinburgh and then in London. He thought of her marble figures still in the shrouded house in Scotland and wondered if either of them would ever go there again. He took a couple of sleeping tablets and reflected that Anna in her room was probably - certainly - doing the same.

Next day the children were not in the park, but their patience was rewarded on the day after as they sat in the cold autumn afternoon. The same gaggle of children were playing some complicated ball game on the damp playing-field, and the tiny girl, judged too small to play, came close to them dragging a battered toy bus. They were able to observe her face, and Drew had to admit that Anna's perception had been excellent. The child's eyes were a deep blue flecked with violet, just as Lucinda's had been. In this dark child the effect was less

dramatic than in Lucinda, where the contrast between the fair hair and skin, and the deep colour of the eyes, had been almost startling, like storm clouds in a clear sky. But the resemblance was there, a real one, and Anna had noticed it. Accustomed to fanning every sign of interest, every return to humanity, he complimented her on her powers of observation. The child went by unconcerned. Then Anna did a quite unexpected thing. She called the child back, admired the battered toy bus, asked her where she lived and questioned her about her family. This was unusual. Generally, the finding of some real or fancied resemblance to Lucinda was followed by silence, withdrawal, a descent further into the depths of her own place of torment. The speaking to the child, the interest shown in her, was a good sign, definitely a flame to be fanned. Drew fanned it furiously and joined in the conversation and thus they learned the child's surname and address and the names of the other children with her, including her brother and sister who brought her to the park to play after they came out of school. 'Do you come here every day?' asked Anna. 'What about Saturdays and Sundays?'

The child looked puzzled. She was only about three or four, 'I come here every day,' she said, 'except sometimes.' Bored with all the questioning, she moved on with her battered bus. Anna looked amused, and almost laughed.

So they came every day to the park at the same time, and every day – except sometimes – the girl with the violet eyes was there. And Anna wakened, stirred, showed signs of resurrection. Drew fanned the flame faster and faster as he saw results. They brought presents and sweets for the children – not only for Helen lest any sinister interpretation be placed on their actions – and Anna improved beyond all measure.

But the days were shortening and Drew realized, with something like panic, that it would soon be too dark for the children to play in the park after school hours. What effect would this have on Anna? Fortunately they knew the child's address and one day Drew found the street where she lived on the map. He had never been down the street; it was in the crowded industrial area. Drew said:

'We could call on the parents, say we are childless,' he winced and hurried on, 'say we would like to give their children a treat,

take them out . . . Christmas is coming . . . the pantomime . . . ' He realized that in kindling her enthusiasm he might be going too fast. She listened to him, smiling. 'Perhaps later,' she said, 'or perhaps there's something better we can do.' What did she mean? The dark nights came, the children were no more to be seen in the park, but Anna continued to improve. She often spoke of the child with the violet eyes, quite naturally. She did not however take up his suggestion of visiting the parents, but seemed to have some secret plan of her own. 'We'll wait till the spring,' she said. 'They'll come again.'

Soon after this, the woman who did their shopping and cooking decided to give notice. In spite of their wealth, they had no servant living in the house. This would have meant, of necessity, having someone around on terms of intimacy, who would have to know about Anna's condition. This was something from which he shrank. So one woman came daily to do the housework and another came to shop and cook, while an active pensioner did the garden as and when his horticultural instinct told him something needed doing. They were all well paid and treated formally. They knew something was wrong, of course, and they probably talked, but it was a satisfaction to know that, much as they might speculate, they were permitted to acquire very few facts. No doubt they told their families and friends that the Marshalls had lost a daughter in an accident, and that the poor lady moped all day and did nothing, but that was the limit of their intelligence. It was a day to be remembered for Drew when Anna said she did not want to replace the woman who cooked and shopped.

Cautiously, nervously, she began to do the cooking again. She helped the housework woman with the housework. Drew drove her to the shops and she shopped. He was glad at first; at last she was coming out of her winter sleep, her frozen century of grief. She would be Anna again. Then he remembered that all this had been set off by the girl with the violet eyes. Did that matter? he asked himself. Perhaps not, but the strangeness of it all remained even as he encouraged her to take on this and that item of the housekeeping. He watched for new signs. One day perhaps she would ask him about his books. One day she might want to turn one of the empty rooms into a

studio. One day – it was possible, surely? – she might not want to sleep alone in the huge double bed.

Christmas came, not only bearable, but sometimes quite fun. However, Anna was looking forward to the spring. She often spoke of the child in the park. 'I hope she remembers us,' she would say, 'I think she will remember us.' Drew wondered what would happen if the child did not come to the park any more. Children did not always do the same thing. She might be at school and have new friends to play with elsewhere. The parents might have moved house. She might be dead – children did meet with accidents . . . His mind glanced away. The chances were that she would come.

And she did. There they were, on a blustery March day: the girl with the violet eyes; her brother and sister; and a few other faces, some old, some new. There was a small boy about her own age: she played with him and at first took no notice of Drew and Anna. Then Anna spoke to her and called her by her name. She remembered and the friendship was renewed. Anna was pleased, and smiled. Anna often smiled now.

Drew knew what was coming. He had half-known it long ago, when she had hinted at her secret plan, her 'something better'. He recalled then that in the past, when Anna had been Anna, she had on many occasions made what seemed to be a wild suggestion, but he had taken it up and made sense of it. For instance, she had once, looking at a manuscript he had acquired, commented on certain similarities which it had with some photocopies he had of Anglo-Saxon documents. She was quite unlearned in his hobby, and what she had noticed was just a casual shift of the eye, some minor marks and pauses. On a hunch he had checked her observation and found he was in possession of an absolutely unique and valuable document instead of a late forgery as he had assumed. Then there was the even more remarkable occasion when the new factory was being equipped, and she, quite ignorant of machines and power, had glanced at the plans and wondered why so many mobile parts were required, when by a slight rearrangement of space these might be made fixtures. He had laughed at that – what did she know about it? – but thinking about it afterwards he had hit on a major scheme of rationalization which had eventually proved

very profitable. And of course – he didn't often think of this – they had married late in life and it had been her idea to have a child . . .

So he was not surprised when she expressed a wish to adopt Helen, and he knew, deep down, that this was one of her ideas which it was for him to put into effect. He looked at it logically, as he thought, but entirely from one angle. Anna was much improved, and it was all due to her interest in the child. To help Anna he was prepared to be ruthless. There had been one occasion when, at Anna's request, he had been ruthless; this was when he had broken up Lucinda's association with a youth whom Anna had considered unsuitable. But just as he assured himself that this had been the best thing for Lucinda, so now he assured himself that this was the best thing for Helen. Unknown to Anna, he had once visited the child's home, and had learned a little of the squalor and poverty of her background – large family, mother seldom well, father often out of work, both of them ageing and defeated by life, living in mean and sordid conditions. Would it not be a kindness to the child to take her away? With the child herself, however, he had little interest. Apart from the eyes, she had no resemblance to Lucinda, and nothing in any case could replace his daughter. She was dead, a perfect work of art destroyed. But Anna wanted Helen to replace Lucinda, and for Anna's sake he would do this, and much more. In the event, it was easy.

He found that, although it is illegal to introduce payment into an adoption, the possession of wealth could make the wheels go round without any trouble at all. He had always believed this, it had helped in getting rid of Lucinda's unsuitable young man, and it helped now. Things could be done unofficially, and the parents' scruples vanished before a sum which the weary broken-down father could hardly have earned in a lifetime. The child herself knew them and settled in after a few tears and tantrums. Sharply pacing the days, they waited for the three months probationary period to pass, after which, at Anna's anxious request, he had sold the seaside house and they returned to their home in Scotland, which had stood empty since Lucinda's death. This address was unknown to Helen's natural parents; they intended the break to be complete,

Back in Scotland, Drew reflected that he was getting old, and knew that he must not let his hopes override his experience; nothing could ever be the same as it had been. He had been over forty, and Anna almost forty, when Lucinda was born. Now they were elderly, much too old really to be parents. Sometimes he felt disquiet. As Anna rushed around, engaging servants and gardeners, whisking off dust-covers, getting in carpenters and decorators to bring the huge neglected house back to life, he wondered how long this new-found vitality would, or could, last? He lived from day to day, not daring to look too far ahead. And Helen? She was installed in Lucinda's old bedroom, and Anna sometimes absent-mindedly called her Lucinda. Drew didn't like this, but Anna's improvement was so welcome that he made no comment. One good thing was, and it pleased him more than he thought it should, Helen was not in the least like Lucinda, except for the eyes. Who could be less like his quiet, serious, old-fashioned daughter than this noisy, raucous, chattering pixie? The word remained in his mind – she was pixie-like, with her pointed chin, too-wide mouth and broad forehead, all features irregular and so unlike his dead daughter's perfect beauty. But the deep-violet gaze of the eyes still sometimes gave a split-second illusion, like a stage impersonator who can, with one feature – a wig, a false nose, a stoop – build up a likeness to some well-known person that he in no way resembles. It was like that, reflected Drew, and yet not quite like that; since she had never known Lucinda how could there be any conscious imitation?

He wrestled with this in his mind and tried to make sense of it. Helen *did* have a lively imagination and a gift for acting and mimicry. They had noticed this on the first day they had met her, and she still had this natural ability. She could be Cinderella, the Ugly Sisters, Prince Charming, all in a few minutes, with realistic changes of voice. She would mix familiar stories up and invent her own. She was a friendly child, and had play-mates of her own age at the local kindergarten where they sent her now, and at home; but although she loved entertaining an audience, she was equally happy to chatter to imaginary companions when alone, answering herself in changes of voice with many differences of range and tone. Sometimes among the many

voices he caught an echo of Lucinda's voice. Lucinda's voice, Lucinda's eyes, in a child quite unlike Lucinda. In the end he pushed it all to the back of his mind where lay all the other unwelcome thoughts.

Drew spent more and more time with his books and manuscripts, leaving the bringing up of Helen to Anna and the nurse-maid. Anna did not return to her sculpture, which remained silent and shrouded in her studio. And they still slept apart. Anna had been mended, but it was no use pretending she was the same as she had been before. Drew had accepted so many things that he accepted this with resignation. What was left for him? A wife and daughter who seemed fond of each other and happy enough; his books and papers; and a slow decline into old age. And of course his wealth, which could smooth even this pathway.

Afterwards, Drew was never able to pinpoint the time when things began to go wrong. The first odd happenings were minor, and neither he nor Anna took much notice of them. A scratched floor, a broken mirror, a missing item of jewellery. Helen, lively and full of mischief, might have been blamed for some of these things, except that the occurrences sometimes took place when she was at school or otherwise absent. The servants were occasionally suspected, but had good alibis. It didn't seem to matter too much until the incident of the rat.

Drew was never able to forget the morning when he wakened to Anna's appalled and appalling screaming. He was in her room before he was aware he was out of bed. She sat by her dressing-table, quite overtaken by hysteria, her face distorted and ugly, her whole body shaking. He spent the next few minutes in an eternity of fear. The truth, when she was able to reveal it coherently, was bad enough, but not so bad as he had expected.

'A rat . . . a rat!' she gasped, as soon as she was able to speak . . . 'I opened this drawer . . . here . . . and out it jumped. It ran across the floor. It's still here.' And indeed it was, as Drew learned later when he brought in the gardener to catch the beast where it lurked in a corner.

Drew soothed Anna, who recovered, and hysteria was followed by anger. Who had played such a trick? she wanted to know. Who? wondered Drew. The servants, who surely had no

grudge against Anna? Helen, who at the age of six was hardly capable of obtaining and placing a large rat in a drawer? An intruder? Who on earth was capable of entering the locked and burglar-alarmed house and getting into Anna's room in the night? A possible answer span sleekly round his brain. Anna was doing these things herself – not only placing the rat, but breaking the mirror, hiding the jewels, damaging the floor. He had only to think this thought to want to reject it. Anna had been ill, sick in her mind, but she was better now; and even when at her worst her illness had never showed itself in this way. There must be some other explanation. But he had already thought the unthinkable. He must never let Anna know that he had thought it.

After that, things happened one after another. A Chinese vase was broken, soot from the boiler was scattered all over the kitchen, trees in the garden were uprooted. One day Drew entered his study to greet the sickening sight of a neat pile of his valuable manuscripts, laid on the carpet after being torn to shreds. His heart sank, and he again thought the forbidden thought. If Anna had done this, she was indeed mad and, as he later listened to her expressions of anger and grief (anger at the vandal, grief for his wasted effort), he thought that only a desperately sick and split mind could so react if indeed she had done this thing. If, if, if. He almost repented of his thoughts when he saw, later in the day, the water tank come loose from the wall and drench Anna with scalding water. He saw with his own eyes the bracket pulled away from the plaster; but then the sleek voice in his brain asked him, when had the rivets been tampered with? A minute ago, an hour ago, perhaps yesterday?

Drew had no wish to reveal these horrors to the outside world – he was as reticent on this as he had been on Anna's illness and its attendant problems. But the servants had relations and friends, tradesmen picked up things in conversation, and soon the whole thing was spread abroad. He was deluged with advice. Most vocal was the poltergeist lobby. 'The poltergeist is not a personality, but an expression of elemental energy,' claimed one enthusiastic letter-writer, 'generally it takes its power from a living person, most often an adolescent or a child. Its behaviour is malicious, destructive and usually directed against things,

though sometimes it does seem to attack people. If the adolescent or child is removed from the house, the phenomena almost always cease. This is not to say of course that the poltergeist acts through the child in any way other than by using its primitive energy, indeed, the child is usually quite unaware of what is going on.'

In all his more than sixty years he had never believed in this sort of thing – nor would he even now have considered it, except that it was better to give credence to irrational nonsense than to believe Anna responsible. Almost with relief he reclined on this explanation, as a man rests when tired. One afternoon he even rang up his correspondent, whose phone number was on his notepaper, and he was greeted by a piping treble, who none the less assured him that he was Alfred Dunning.

Drew sought from Dunning an elucidation of the one break in the spectrum which would enable him to be credulous, which was, that when some of the destruction and depredation took place, Helen had not been in the house. 'So you see,' he said, 'my little girl was at school when the mirror was broken – cracked right across both ways. How then could . . . ' Mr Dunning cut in – he was clearly a man who liked to talk about his theories – 'The records of poltergeists vary. In most cases the child is indeed actually present when the incidents occur, and this of course leads to criticism that there is some form of fraud or hoaxing, or at least that the child actually does the damage, not necessarily consciously, but I assure you that there are many instances where the poltergeist seems quite able to function when the child is temporarily absent. Though we do find, of course, that if the child is away for any length of time, say for a matter of days, the elemental energy disperses and the phenomena usually cease.' Mr Dunning went on and on, but Drew was not listening. He had a possible explanation that excluded Anna.

But what next? Move away from the house? Send Helen to boarding school? Wait till it all ceased? For a few days nothing happened, and then came the week-end when Anna and Helen went to visit his cousins in Stirling. He did not go with them, he felt suddenly old and weary, too tired to make the effort. Sitting in his study on the Saturday evening, he realized that

his whole body ached and that his head throbbed so loudly that he could hear it dinning in his ears. It had all been too much for him, he complained in a rare mood of self-pity, Lucinda's death, Anna's illness, the brief hopes buoyed up by the child with the violet eyes, and now this irrational horror. He blinked, laying aside the book that he was reading, aware of a bone-deep weariness and a wish to leave it all, to let someone else sort it out . . .

In this mood he heard someone sobbing. At first the sound seemed nowhere, anywhere, before it located itself on the floor above. It was twilight and he had dismissed the servants to their own quarters; he was alone in the deepening dusk. The sobbing went on and on, muffled, monotonous, despairing. He went upstairs.

Following the sound, he found himself outside Helen's bedroom, once Lucinda's. Once, not so long ago, he would have had no doubt there was a living person inside and would have gone in without delay. Now he hesitated, not so much from fear as in shrinking from some new revelation that he would not be able to cope with – and it was some minutes before he made up his mind and went in.

Helen's room greeted him with its nursery rhyme wallpaper muted in the twilight, the bright colours of the new bedcover and curtains darkened. He saw nothing unexpected. The sobbing came from high up in the room, behind the panelling of a cupboard. Again after a short hesitation, he opened the cupboard door. Not being able to see inside in the rapidly gathering dark, he switched on the light. The sobbing stopped. He noticed that the cupboard had two shelves. In the bottom were Helen's toys and dolls, higgledy-piggledy untidy – she was a scatter-brained child. The top shelf however, beyond her reach, had obviously been untouched since Lucinda's death. Here were Lucinda's books and papers, neatly stacked. There they sat, innocently looking down at him. As he gazed the sobbing started up again, not now located in the cupboard, but thudding in his own head, joining in with the throbbing of his own blood, and added to both was a desperate compulsion to look at what was in the cupboard. Trembling, he brought out the contents,

There were many books, from baby rag-books to adult novels, poems and books of travel. There were bundles of letters from her friends and relations. There were dress-patterns, magazines, theatre programmes, school notices, record catalogues. He moved them all down, while the sobbing went on and on in his head. Stacked at the back, where they had been hidden by the rest of the paraphernalia, were two black cloth-bound books,

He brought them down. They were diaries.

Up till this day, up to this hour, he would never have dreamed of reading Lucinda's diaries. He would have felt scorn and contempt for a person who would pry into someone else's diary. To have read his dead daughter's diaries would have seemed, only a little while ago, to be an utterly loathsome act. But now the compulsion was upon him, like a possession, ordering him to read. And he read.

The last two years of his daughter's life unfolded before him.

Here was Lucinda as he remembered her: quiet, gentle, yielding, obedient, always so sensible, old for her years. The first book was full of ordinary things, and he smiled remembering. Only now and then were there ominous notes: 'Took the green dress back to the shop, because Mummy says that green is an unlucky colour . . . ' 'Gave my Persian kitten to the gardener's daughter because Mummy is allergic to cats . . . ' The second book started on her sixteenth birthday, when she had met Ricky Jones, aged eighteen, at a school celebration. Drew read of their immediate attraction, their secret meetings, hating himself for reading, but unable to stop. And then there was the entry where she had written 'Mummy has found out about Ricky today and of course she doesn't approve. It's always what she wants, never what I want. Ricky isn't suitable she says. Well, I knew he wouldn't be, but neither would the Archangel Gabriel be suitable for her.' And later, 'Mummy has forbidden me to see Ricky, but I must . . . I love him so. She is speaking to Daddy about it and is trying to make him do something. She always gets her own way. Daddy wouldn't mind Ricky but he always does what Mummy tells him . . . '

Drew paused, shaken, while the sobbing went on and on in his head. He went back in memory to the day when Anna had

told him that she had found out about Lucinda and Ricky, and nothing would satisfy her but that he should end the affair, and warn the boy off. Lucinda with her sharp perception had seen the situation. He had not minded the association – Ricky was a decent young chap, class distinctions were a load of rubbish these days, and Lucinda liked him, but to Anna he was unsuitable, a bad influence, even after Lucinda's money: it must be stopped. As always, Anna had the ideas; he carried them out. He had first of all insisted to Lucinda that she obey her mother, but he knew that this would not be enough for Anna. The boy must be removed. He had called on him, dropped hints about making Lucinda a Ward of Court, mentioned his friendship with Ricky's employer. He had frightened the lad considerably. But to clinch the matter he had also, unknown to either Ricky or Lucinda, bribed the parents handsomely to move to another town. Lucinda had not complained – she never did complain.

Now, as he read, he saw for the first time the effect of his actions on Lucinda in the disjointed words on the tear-smudged next few pages. 'Daddy has broken things up with me and Ricky, and worst of all, he seems to think he has done me a favour. Ricky couldn't have loved me, or he would never have let it happen. What shall I do . . . ?' 'I don't blame Daddy so much – Mummy made him do it. As usual. I wanted to marry Ricky, but she doesn't want me to marry anyone – except someone she thinks suitable, and they don't exist . . . ' 'I felt sick today and stayed away from school. Mummy says one day I will thank her for it – that's a laugh . . . '

There were only a few pages left. 'They say I look pale and peaky and need a holiday. We are going to the seaside – They think I shall forget Ricky easier – they don't know . . . ' Only on the last page of all was the full horror revealed. 'I know now I'm going to have a baby. I'll never tell them and I'll never tell Ricky. He let me down, but they made him do it. They say there are cliffs at Eastbourne, or I can always get in the way of a bus.' He found his own sobs echoing the ones in his head. Lucinda had been run over by a bus. 'She dashed right in front of it,' the driver had said at the inquest, 'almost as if she didn't see it.' But yes, oh yes, she had seen it.

He destroyed the diaries. All the time they were burning in

the stove the sobbing went on and on. He knew now that the house suffered not from poltergeists, not from Anna's insanity, but from a girl's real, tangible grief which had soaked into the very stones of the place where she had endured. He knew that she had wanted him to read the diary, to be made aware. She was here, here, all around him, sobbing with a pain that the years had made no less. She had always been here, watching, waiting, in the years he and Anna were away. She was one of Helen's imaginary playmates, speaking in Helen's voice, gazing with Helen's eyes. And the senseless acts of destruction were hers, the unassuaged grief showing itself in violence and hatred to Anna and himself, and of all things belonging to them. His quiet gentle daughter had become this malevolent hating spirit – and he had helped to make it so. He wept and felt resentment . . . he hadn't meant any harm . . . he loved Lucinda . . . so did Anna . . . it wasn't true that Anna was a harsh dominating mother . . . Lucinda couldn't judge . . . she was only sixteen when she . . . his mind reeled in confusion, trying to defend itself.

But deep down he knew, and he knew that Lucinda had seen it clearly and Lucinda was right. He had worshipped Anna uncritically, and still did. She had the ideas, he carried them out. When she dealt with things, like ancient manuscripts or factory machinery, it worked well. But Anna also treated people as things, and her ideas and his actions had broken up a teenage love-affair as easily as they had removed a small child from her natural parents, convincing themselves in both cases that it was all for the best. And what about her desperate and inconsolable grief at Lucinda's death? What else was it about her determined will refusing to accept the finality of death?

The facing of the impossible, the looking at the unbearable, came over him like a tidal wave. Memory and all else failed. Sickness had been lying in wait for him, and now it pounced. The next few weeks were a blur. He was feverish, delirious; and all sense of time and place left him. Now and then he realized that he was in his room and in bed, that Mrs Gow, the house-keeper was nearby, and sometimes Anna and Helen came in and out. He knew he had to tell Anna something, but he couldn't remember what it was. Sometimes he dreamed strange

dreams and in these dreams the past became real and Lucinda was alive again; she sat in his room, saying nothing but watching, watching, the gaze of her violet eyes always on him. One day he dreamed that she was standing by his bed, trying to speak. As he struggled awake, her figure seemed to shrink and dwindle, and then he knew that it wasn't Lucinda, but Helen. In a second, memory flooded back, the diaries, his illness. How long had he been ill? Anna and Helen were obviously back from their visit . . . he must warn Anna . . . and then he realized that it was night, with the moonlight creeping through the cracks in the curtains. Helen was in her nightdress, What was she doing out of bed?

Helen was speaking, her thin childish voice high and frightened. 'I'm scared Daddy! I know it's naughty and I didn't want to do it. She made me do it.'

He sat up weakly. 'What's the matter, darling? Who made you do it? And what did you do?'

'It was the pretty lady, Daddy, with the fair hair and the white dress . . . ' Drew felt a cold sweat on him. One of Helen's imaginary playmates had been a dead girl in her shroud. 'Most of the time she's nice, Daddy, and we have fun, but sometimes she does things, and I have to help her. I don't like that, and I'm afraid.' She came close to him, shivering in the cold night air. He was shivering too, from the cold and from something else.

'Does she break mirrors and tear up papers, Helen? And did she put a rat in Mummy's drawer?'

'Oh, yes, Daddy, she's naughty. She did all that herself. But she made me swing on the water tank to make it loose. I didn't want to do it. I knew you and Mummy would be angry if you found out. She said it was a joke. I'm sorry, Daddy.' She cried as she snuggled up to him. 'She said I must do it . . . she made me . . .'

'Never mind darling,' he reassured her, 'it wasn't your fault, don't worry. But we must stop her. Will you tell me about anything she does now - anything she does herself, or makes you do?'

'Oh yes, Daddy, that's why I came in. She made me do something naughty this evening.'

He felt a lurch of terror. *'This evening!'* He tried to keep his voice calm. *'What did she make you do this evening?'*

'You're getting angry Daddy . . . I said I was sorry . . .' she was near to tears.

Drew tried hard to soften his voice and to hold back the rising terror. *'I'm not angry, honey, really I'm not, but please tell me what it was . . . it's very important.'*

'Well,' she hesitated, *'it wasn't anything as bad as swinging on the water tank.'*

'What did you do?'

'She told me to pull Mummy's electric fire underneath her bed and to hide the wires under the carpet.'

'Is that all? The fire wasn't alight?'

'Oh no, Daddy, that would have been dangerous. I don't know why she couldn't have done it herself really, she does most things, and she said she could switch it on herself, if she wanted to . . .'

Drew pushed Helen aside and leapt for the door. His terror overcame his weakness. Whyever had he not noticed the faint but pervasive smell of smoke? He rushed to Anna's bedroom, but he could not get in – appallingly, the door was locked, and smoke sleeked blackly under it. By the time he could get help to break down the door Anna's room was a blazing inferno: the bed roared red hot, the smoke was suffocating . . .

His daughter Lucinda stood by the bed, wearing her white shroud, the flames before, behind and around her. Her fair hair streamed over her shoulders. She gazed at him calmly with her violet eyes, and spoke to him for the first and only time since she died.

'I'm sorry, Daddy. I had to do it. She wouldn't let me live and she wouldn't let me die. I had to live in her grief and I had to live on in Helen's life. I can only be free when she's dead.' At this moment the blazing bed collapsed and Lucinda vanished, the gaze of her violet eyes was the last he saw of her. Sparks showered over him, he felt faint. Hands dragged him away to safety, he let himself be led, his will paralysed. Mrs Gow's mouth was moving, but it was some time before the roaring of the flames in his ears ceased and he could hear her speak. *'Poor lady, no one could save her,'* she was saying. *'But here's Helen,*

she's all right, aren't you, my pet . . . ' The child was clinging to her skirts, puzzled and confused by all the strange happenings. 'Such a brave girl, aren't you, my poppet?' And Helen was looking at him tremulously, blinking back the tears from her violet eyes.

Roger Clarke

Pond weed

Sam picked up his green tackle-box with a transparent lid and dropped it softly into an old canvas bag which was rough at the corners. The contents rattled.

He could hear his mother chopping onions in the kitchen.

'Now mind you're home in time for supper, before it gets dark,' she called to him as she started on the tomatoes.

Sam picked up the old bamboo fishing rod and flicked it so the polished wood made a buckling noise as it whipped the air, and turned the ancient mechanism of the reel so it clicked like an upset cricket. He slung the bag over his shoulder. The tackle jangled in unanimous discord at the indignity.

His mother put the tomatoes in a saucepan.

'We shan't wait and let the supper spoil if you're not back in time. And be careful of that pond. All too many people have drowned in it through carelessness. I can't think why you want to go fishing in that pond, of all places. Why not the Mill stream? It's good enough for everyone else . . .'

The endless chatter gurgled on like a stream over Sam's unreceptive ears.

Slowly he whispered to himself, in unconscious reply, 'It's a warm evening. The midges will hatch and dance in a ball held on the dance-floor of the pond. The trout will rise – great rainbow whoppers with pink speckled bellies, I've seen them in that water. No one ever fishes for them.'

He ambled out of the door into the sultry stuffiness of the evening after a cloudless summer's day. Sam's dirty, worn gym shoes squeaked in pain at the heat of the garden path. He hummed a tune the bees sang among the sunflowers. Great waves of heavy scent drifted over from the rainbow splashed borders as the merest hint of an August breeze made the flowers shuffle uncomfortably in the sticky atmosphere.

On he walked, wading through the air, hot and sickly with the smell of drying grass and wilting plants; along hedgerows with leaves caked in sugary, white chalk dust; through a meadow of browned grasses and shimmering buttercups and a path of bare earth, parched and cracked like over-baked wholemeal bread.

At last he came to it. He descended a hill and arrived at a cluster of shady elms, beneath which a host of leafy summer plants slept in the cool. Along the hillside, sulphurous butterflies of brilliant yellow flitted listlessly around, like pieces of broken sunbeam. Into the elms flowed a small stream which gurgled and giggled in private laughter. The leafy trees lined a small dell; a natural hollow in which nestled the still, smooth pond. Clouds of midges were dancing above the cool, green surface, broken only by a large trout which leapt out in a flash of silver and pink, seeming as if it were trying to bite off a piece of sunlight to take with it to the silent, murky underworld of the water.

Sam walked along the bank of the pond, crushing a clump of apple mint beneath his feet, its pungent odour rising in the heat. Beneath the water's surface long, green weeds swayed back and forth with invisible currents. Lush plants lined the water's edge, and moss covered the grey rocks sticking jaggedly from the pond.

'How can anyone get drowned here?' Sam said, softly. The tranquillity was almost disturbing.

A breeze sighed in the branches above his head, filling the dell with a strange confused murmuring.

There was a gentle plop as something entered the water. It was on the far bank, which was dark from an ancient willow dipping its fingers into the water to cool itself.

'I hope that's not a water rat,' said Sam loudly. His deep blue eyes rested on the shady far bank, but no rat appeared.

Shrugging, he put his bag down on a patch of grass near the trunk of a gnarled oak growing by the waterside.

Sam took out the tackle box and a tin of white, squirming maggots he had found in a dead blackbird in the back garden. He threaded the rod and attached a hook. No fancy fly fishing,

He looked around for a forked stick and pushed it firmly into the moist earth of the bank. He picked up the rod by its cork handle, and cast, the reel whirring and the line coming down near the middle of the pond. The red float bobbed unsteadily. The hook sank into the swaying weeds.

Sam put the polished rod lovingly on the fork of the twig in the bank and lay back against the tree trunk. He sucked a length of Timothy grass and eyed the float.

All was still. Except the weed.

He relaxed in the cool of the oak. Insects hummed in mournful symphony to the dying day. A soft, summer breeze rustled the reeds and sent ripples shivering down the pool of coolest, green glass. The weeds beneath the water danced their silent dance. A gentle heat oozed from the cooling earth.

Sam crossed his legs and watched. The red float drifted. A trout rose. There was another plop from the willow and Sam sighed like the wind through the poppies and corn.

'You keep away from my line and those trout, Mister water rat,' he called.

There was a plop from the dark of the willow. Ripples cascaded across the still water; the trout stopped rising.

'Damn,' thought Sam. 'Just what I needed - a whole family of water rats. No wonder no one fishes here.'

A green dragonfly skimmed across the water like a brightly coloured racing car.

The float twitched uncertainly.

Sam's blue eyes rotated slowly and rested on it. Nothing. After five minutes, he pulled in the line.

There wasn't even a hook.

'Must have been a weakness in the line, because it said on the packet that the nylon has a breaking strain of forty pounds.' Sam visualized a forty-one pound trout. 'The hook must have broken off after a little tug.' But Sam could not deny his annoyance at finding brand new tackle was faulty, especially since it had eluded his scrutiny.

'Or perhaps it was the water rats,' he said out loud. As if in reply, there was the gentlest plop from the far shade of the willow. Sam cursed them under his breath as he tied on a new hook.

He cast. The reel whirled in a sudden flurry of activity. The float bobbed in the water once more.

'Water rats must have sharp teeth,' Sam thought idly as he picked a new length of grass and discarded the well-chewed piece.

It was growing noticeably cooler, but still the midges clouded the cool, green surface.

No trout rose.

'Those water rats must have scared the fish away. I'll wait a bit longer and then go home.'

Suddenly, the float bobbed violently. Carefully, Sam picked up the rod and waited. The float moved again, and the reel clicked intermittently as more line was pulled out.

'Looks as if I've got a bite after all,' thought Sam.

The insects droned. A cuckoo called in the distance. The sun grew weaker. The cornflowers nodded gently in mutual agreement.

The float did not bob again. It remained stationary a few yards away from him. For several minutes he watched it, hoping, willing it to move again. Eventually fearing the worst, Sam began to wind in the line. There was a sharp, regular clicking as the old cogs and gears were spurred into life, and the float began to drift back towards the bank. Then it stopped. The end of the rod bent. The line became taut. The clicking ceased as Sam stopped winding. The hook had caught on something – the weeds on the bottom, probably. Maybe a rock or a sunken log on the bed. Sam cursed and tugged hard, but the ancient rod only bent more and groaned under the strain. It was stuck fast.

The insects hummed.

There was a plop from the shady end. Ignoring it, Sam took out his penknife and leant precariously out over the tranquil water to cut the line. Two hooks and a float gone already. The silvery blade gleamed as it caught the rays of a fading sun.

It was as if the rod was wrenched from Sam's grasp, and he keeled over into the glassy, green water as he was momentarily caught off balance. Perhaps one of the water rats had been swimming along beneath the water and had swum into the transparent line, pulling the rod forwards.

'Damn the water rats,' thought Sam as he hit the pond's

surface. He sank below the cold water into a murky, silent world. Dim shapes moved around him.

Sam struggled to reach the surface, but felt his feet held down. 'That pond weed must have caught itself around my feet – no wonder so many people drown here.'

The distant cuckoo cuckooed. Pencil-thin red clouds were etched above the western horizon. The scarlet sun slid slowly behind a hill.

Sam surveyed the tranquil, green water with equal tranquillity which verged on indifference. He did not feel at all afraid. The thought of the pond as a watery grave did not occur to him. He remained perfectly calm and collected.

'If you panic, you're done for,' Sam told himself. 'This weed is lethal.'

Sam bent down in the stillness of the water to tear away the restraining weed with scrabbling fingers. He was running out of breath.

The sky was blotched like a small child's painting, with orange, red, pink and purple. The insect humming reached a crescendo: the funeral choir. The midges danced a death-dance. The flowers closed their petals in grief.

Sam couldn't pull the weed away. Green weed waved all around him and beneath him – but there was none around his feet. He could feel two slimy, revoltingly soft hands firmly gripping each ankle. They were reminiscent of fish left out in the sun too long by a fishmonger. Some of the skin came away as Sam's hand brushed against those restraining him. The fingers had no nails.

Sam panicked. He screamed, but no scream came in that silent, green world, where the sun never penetrates, where the green weeds wave in unseen currents. Where the dead stir.

Before Sam was lost to the world, he was dimly aware of a soft, grey face with eyeless sockets being pressed against his own. The skin was cold and clammy.

The insect wail died as the sunset vanished and dusk came. The choir dispersed, their requiem over; the flowers slept. The sun of Tyrian purple sank below the hill.

The willow by the waterside, wept. The dew descended – trickling down the wrinkles of a large dock-leaf growing on the bank, like a single, large tear, night came,

Tony Richards

Child of ice

Ontario in winter. The green of the pine forests darkens till the trees seem almost blue. Ice tests the margins of the lakes like a wary bather before spreading out. A reverent silence falls across the land and the sun, high in the bleached blue sky, is bright and round and small as a new nickel. Below, the dormant earth waits to be sealed and refrigerated, stored away for the next spring.

It comes about October, the snow. Always has since the Earth cooled and the climates settled down. In August so blazing hot that grass shimmers and the sky sweats, but a mere two months later . . . the first flakes, large as falling oak leaves, tumbling and spiralling on the vagrant wind to find rest. And be joined, and joined, until the entire landscape has been smothered white. It stays that way until the end of April and right up to the week before the thaw it seems that it will never go.

Night.

Outside the newly-built log cabin, cold that is almost palpable,
Inside, sudden heat.

'My God, Jack! It's coming!'

Jack Mangold looked up from his warm place by the fire to the sofa, where his wife Celese was sitting, clutching her swollen abdomen. She had gone pale. From fright, he realized, not pain. He jumped from his seat. The *Toronto Star*, a pencil, ashtray, several dead cigarette butts, flew in all directions.

'Are you sure? This early?'

He looked at the expression on her face and knew that the answer was *yes*. No cramp, no false alarm. His first child was on the way. He crossed to the hooks by the door and snatched down his fur-lined coat, donned it, scrabbled in the pockets for his car keys.

'The hospital!' shouted Celese. 'You've got to phone them first, let them know we're coming.'

'OK. Now keep calm, or you'll rush the birth.'

He wasn't sure if that was true, but it seemed to do the trick. Celese controlled herself by breathing deeply, just as the manual had said. She glanced at her wristwatch, timing the next contraction, then put on her own coat while Jack was phoning into town. Half of the buttons wouldn't do up; no one had thought to buy a larger coat. She smiled at the stupidity of it, completely calm now.

'They're ready any time we get there,' Jack said, putting the phone back in its cradle. 'I'll go start up the car.'

He went to the door, opened it, and stopped dead.

A wind had sprung up, skimming the top layers of snow off the ground, whirling it into an animated frenzy. The sky, the distant lights of the town, were obscured. New drifts were forming all the time.

Jack thought, *Oh God, why couldn't this have waited till the thaw. Just one week longer, that's all.*

And Celese, *No, I didn't choose this moment. This is not my fault.* Guiltily.

'They say nothing good comes easy,' she managed to blurt, Jack just glared.

'Get packed,' he said. 'I've got blankets and a spare heater in the back of the car. We'll need them. If,' he added, 'we ever get that far.'

Celese considered staying put. Jack could deliver the child himself, following the manual. But one look at his clumsy, crop-farmer's hands, at the way they shook with panic, dismissed the idea. She hurried to the bedroom.

Jack had the car out by the door when she came back. He was gunning the engine furiously. Thick white smoke billowed from the exhaust; a million white locusts swirled in and out of the headlamp beams. The car was becoming covered with snow even as it stood.

Jack leaned across and shoved the passenger door open, 'Come on! You'll freeze!'

Behind the anger and the fright, there was deep concern in his voice. It was as if, in the urgency of the moment, he had only just remembered that he loved her.

Celese scrambled in, waited while Jack tucked a blanket

over her shoulders. The car's heater was still blowing cold air through. She shivered.

'I can't even put on my seat-belt,' she said mournfully,

'I'll drive carefully,' said Jack, and gazing out at the exploding night he knew there was no way to drive carefully enough. He put the car into first and, bearing down hard on the gas, moved off. The tyres made deep, narrow ruts in the snow. Within seconds, they were covered up again.

On the road, there was ice beneath the snow. Celese and Jack rode in silence, concentrating on the way ahead as the windscreen wipers scythed back and forth and still did not completely clear the glass. Condensation formed on the inside, and every time Jack went to wipe it the car swerved a little. Eight miles an hour, so slow and yet too fast. Around them, the snow snatched and tried to hold and, failing, tried again.

Celese winced and said, 'The contractions are coming every ten minutes now, Jack. We don't have that much time.'

Jack edged the speed up to twelve. Immediately, a flurry of snow blew flat into the windscreen, stayed there. The wipers cleared it to reveal that he had nearly gone off the road,

'It almost trapped us,' Jack said.

Outside, the snowstorm howled. Like an animal. The veil of white parted for an instant to reveal distant lights. The town, dangled like a bait. For the first time since they had set off, Jack and Celese felt hope. It blinded them, made them unwary. Jack's foot inched the gas pedal further down.

The car took the next bend at fifteen, and Jack practically did not see the drift until he hit it. Huge and solid, blocking the whole width of the road, it loomed out of the night like a tidal wave. Jack braked as hard as he dared, spun the wheel, and the car skidded round. It hit the drift rear on. Celese screamed as she was flung back against her seat. She clutched at her neck in agony.

'Are you OK?' asked Jack, hoarsely.

Celese managed to nod, though she was hardly sure. The impact had set the life inside her kicking madly, sending sharp slivers of pain up through her stomach. What if the child had been turned upside down? A breech birth, after all of this. Perhaps even a still birth. She curled up inside, focusing every

thought, every muscle, nerve and ganglion on her womb, trying to protect it. Her breathing was ragged. She fought to steady it, won.

'It's not coming yet?' asked Jack.

'No.' Celese gazed out of the window. 'Wonderful, isn't it? I can control my body like a machine, but that doesn't matter a damn now. The snow has never heard of breathing exercises or contractions, and even if it had heard it wouldn't care.'¹

She screwed her eyes tight shut.

'I wonder what the manual has to say about this?'

Jack looked at her as he had never looked before, and said, 'I'm going to get help.'²

'That's crazy, Jack. They're bound to find us soon.'³

'It could be hours. We can't take that chance.'

He leant across the back of his seat, rummaged, surfaced with the last blanket and a cylinder of brass.

'I won't be long,' he said. 'The blanket will help keep you warm. And keep your left foot on the gas pedal. Here. If the engine stops, the heater stops too. It shouldn't; there's a full tank of gas and a new battery. But if it does . . .'⁴

He held up the cylinder. It looked like an old-fashioned miner's lamp.

'This is what I usually use to warm the crop shed. It runs off kerosene. You just have to light the wick. Here - here's my lighter. Don't lose it. And open the window a fraction first, or the fumes will get to you. All right?'

'I suppose so. Jack, be careful.'⁵

'I will,' said Jack. 'For the sake of all three of us. I love you, Celese.'

And then, without waiting for her reply, he was out into the storm. Turning as far round as she could manage, Celese watched him clamber up the side of the drift, terrified that he would sink through it and be lost. Jack reached the top at last, vanished from sight,

She was alone,

The snow. It understood. Seven days left. Seven suns. And then, gone. The warmth of spring. Thawing. Melting. Death.

But in the iron thing, something fresh, something new. Wait-

ing to be born. To live. To see the spring. To exist always. Never melts. Never dies.

It understood, and it wanted,

Ceese's left foot was getting cramp by the time she heard the scream. She had been pressing on the gas pedal, just as Jack had told her. It was difficult. She had to stretch her leg to reach it, and the contractions were coming faster now. It was like a carefully devised torture.

The scream broke through her dazed discomfort, bringing her to her senses. She sat bolt upright, peering out. It came again. It could have been the wind. So often, on the winter nights when she lay in her bed, the gales had seemed to shriek with human voices. But this was not her bed, and her husband was out there somewhere.

'Jack?' she said. Then loudly, '*Jack?*'

Something replied and, not caring what it was, Ceese unlocked the passenger door. The wind blew it open, wide, beckoning. She stumbled out and immediately lost her footing. Face down she fell, yelping in fear for the child inside her, knowing that the shock would injure it. The snow did not let that happen,

Live. Must live.

Soft as down, it cushioned her. She sank into it and the space behind her clenched eyelids was filled with dazzling white. The pure, crisp coldness seeped into her body like a drug, soothing her, draining her last reserves of energy. The area around her womb began to tingle. It felt so, so pleasant, so good. She could stop fighting now, and sleep.

No! Ceese burst out and clawed the snow from her face, from her front. Especially from her front. As soon as she stood up, the cold became a hostile thing, tearing at her like a beast. She folded her arms protectively over her abdomen, glared at her surroundings, Hating it, she hated herself. She had almost given in.

Another contraction, the closest yet. She could not stand up straight.

'Please wait, baby,' she whispered. 'Don't come now. Not yet. We've got to find your Daddy.'

Behind her, the car door was slammed shut by the wind,

"Jack!" she yelled. "Where are you?"

The air was filled with cries for help, from at least a dozen separate directions. Celese could not get her bearings in the storm. She staggered forward, her arms outstretched, her frozen hands grasping. They captured only snow. It swarmed at her, a horde of moths and she the light, filling her mouth, clogging her nostrils, coating her with ice. She was crying; the tears hardened on her cheeks.

The car was very far behind. Ahead, the flying snow made shadows which looked like men. Like Jack. Jack trapped in a drift, flailing. Jack fallen, his leg broken. Jack numbed with cold and dying, needing her, needing her. She hurried to him, only to find he was not there. At last, exhausted, she stopped to rest against the ivory pillar of a tree.

She leant there, gasping, her breath gossamer on the wind. Something Jack had said came back to her,

It almost trapped us,

Almost.

There were rows of footprints nearby, her own. She had already passed this tree twice, walking in circles. She groaned. Inside of her, the child struggled in sympathy. Celese realized that, in her panic, she had ignored its existence. She was torn between duties, loyalties. Jack, or the baby? At the final count, with the live warm thing moving inside her and the contractions coming fast, there was no contest. Jack was strong enough to make it by himself. The child, on the other hand, relied on her alone.

She glanced back in the direction she thought the car lay, could not see it. Only more trees that way. They were all around her. She had wandered into the forest, quite how deep she could not tell. *Lost*. The thought welled up inside her like a sickness, like a sea of bile, filling her mouth with foulness and her mind with terror. She could not let go of the tree trunk; ice formed on her hands and held her. She jerked her head from side to side, trying to see the car. Snow and more snow met her gaze. And trees. And . . . there! A glimmer of light, lost at once. The headlamps.

Tearing herself free as if her hands and feet had become roots, Celese headed for the source of the brief light. All the

way, the wind battered her head on. She leant into it and pushed. *Does the wind change direction like this, to suit itself?* It lashed pine branches into her face, grasping.

Must have. Must have.

The snow was knee deep, sucking at each footstep, making progress practically impossible. She would have given up had it not been for the child. So tiny, so helpless, its presence gave her the strength to challenge the elements. There were two storms raging, and the one inside her was very powerful and very warm. She forged on.

The car was still running when she got back. That was a miracle in itself. She tugged at the door, but it would not give. Frozen. A thin, clear sheet of ice sealed tight the jamb. Past caring now, Celese struck at it with her elbow, once, twice, very hard, too cold to feel the pain. The ice shattered, and she was in.

It was quiet inside the car, unearthly quiet after the shrieking of the wind. Warm air from the heater caressed Celese as she flopped into her seat. She lay back, shivering, enervated, her body prickling with flushes of hot and cold. The snow on her melted, drenching her clothes, her hair, her skin. Water streamed across her lips and bubbled.

The child. It must be dead by now, she thought.

It stirred inside her, and the next contraction came. She smiled.

'Tough kid. Your Daddy would be proud of you.'

She wondered how Jack was doing. There was one way to find out. Reaching for the dashboard, she switched on the car radio.

'... a world record ...'

The voice was drowned in static, surfaced again like a cork. It was crackly, but Celese could make it out.

'... slalom. Which makes him the overall winner of the championships for the third year running.'

'Southern Ontario still shivers in the grip of the worst recorded blizzard for sixteen years. The snow ploughs are making progress, but police warn that all roads are now impassable and no one should attempt to drive tonight.'

Thanks for the advice, thought Celese,

'On a human note, rescuers are still searching for a man and woman thought to be trapped in the snow. Jack Mangold and his wife were hurrying from their farm five miles out of town to Toronto General, to deliver their first child, when the blizzard blew up. They were an hour late when the police were called. Dozens have joined the hunt. Rescuers fear the worst, but no one is giving up hope just yet,

'We'll keep you posted.'

So Jack had not got through yet. Celese snapped the voice off.

At least help was on its way. *Hear that, kid?* And in the car, she was completely safe.

The snow flurried across the sides of the metal box, probing, testing, finding its weaknesses. It came at last to the engine, the warm heart, and entered.

It piled up, throwing itself against the hot steel, melting, dying, dying. However much turned to water, there was plenty more, a continent more. It had always ruled this land, and it would not be beaten. Suicide, steam, and still it came. The engine began to cool.

Celese was gliding through a waking dream, of hospitals, of beds, of cribs and baby clothes. Jack beside her, the proud father. She the mother, cradling the baby in her arms. The grandparents. The presents. And, next Christmas, the three of them sitting around a tinsel tree. In Florida. Where it was warm. Not here. Never again.

The ignition light flashed on, bright red. The engine began to stutter.

Celese stamped her foot down on the gas pedal. It did no good. The engine continued to lose power and, with a final half-hearted shudder, stilled. The heater sighed its last breath. Alarmed, Celese switched on the light inside the car. It was fading too; the cold was destroying the battery.

There was a rustling noise from near Celese's feet. She stared down to see snow pouring in through the heating vents. *How in God's name could it do that?* Her right foot was already covered, the snow creeping towards her ankle. There was a knob which closed the vent . . . somewhere, Celese scrabbled till she found it,

Safe?

Above her head, the light went glow-worm dim, flickered off. The headlamps and the lights on the dashboard followed. Darkness. The car became a bubble of pure black surrounded by pure white,

Ceese was far too tired to panic now. She found Jack's lighter in her pocket, sparked the flint. The glow of the butane flame reflected off the windows, came back white. The car was covered with snow, there was no way of telling how deep. Ceese sat rigid, fighting back a surge of claustrophobia. It was like being locked in a padded cell. She felt the urge to hurl herself against the walls. The breath from her mouth was turning to mist. The temperature was plummeting. Ceese picked up the kerosene lamp.

You just have to light the wick. Open the window a fraction first.

She gazed at the window, at the thick snow outside. Surely if she opened it a mere half inch the snow could not get in? Surely? The alternative was to freeze to death, her and the child. She busied herself with the wick, goading it into flame. An orange, mellow light oozed out, and with it a strong oily smell. Ceese coughed.

The fumes will get to you.

She grasped the window handle with one trembling hand, turned it. Just one quarter of an inch. For the snow, it was enough. Alive, with the blind fury of an avalanche, it rushed in. Ceese struggled to close the window again but the handle was stuck. The snow found footholds in the gap, applied a fraction of the pressure which had shaped mountains. The glass shattered, and then there was no stopping it. Like crystal water, it flowed.

Ceese dragged herself across to the driver's seat, flattened herself against the door. There was no further to go. The snow filled the car around her until she was isolated in a pocket of air with her precious burden. Within, the birth pains slammed her like a hammer.

Fort of hot blood, wall of ice. The snow hung there, waiting, wanting, and Ceese knew that she would die before she let it have her child. She flung the kerosene lamp at the snow. It hit, gouged a deep wound, was finally extinguished. The snow

crashed down on Celese, burying her, tightening about her. She screamed until her mouth was filled, and then went on screaming inside her head. The noise echoed through her skull, growing distant, vanishing down a deep well . . .

Silence, save for the howling of the wind.

The snow poured into her,

'It's tragic,' said the nurse. 'Pregnant, and trapped like that.'

She walked quickly along the corridor, beneath the rows of bright, sterile lights. Beside her, the doctor ran a hand through his matted hair. His eyes were still puffy with sleep. He had not shaved.

'Christ,' he said, 'what a night to have a baby.'

'They found the father half a mile from the city limits,' the nurse continued. 'Dead. Half-buried in a drift. The mother was in the car, much further back. She was dead too, but the child was still alive, inside her. They removed it by caesarean section.'

The doctor nodded bleakly. 'It's been heard of before. The mother stays warm for a while and that keeps the child going.'

'No, that's the amazing thing. The mother was stone cold, the child too. Like ice, and white as snow. A little girl. It's a miracle she lived.'

They turned a corridor together, headed for a wide swing door.

'We've got her in the incubator now,' the nurse said. 'It's on as warm as we dared.'

Entering the room, they stopped and stared, aghast. The incubator was empty. From below it came an unfamiliar sound.

Drip, drip,

Norman P. Kaufman

From the depths of the earth

Well, they say you're a long time dead, but I never expected it to last twenty years. What I mean is, I always imagined I'd be able to surface long before now. But whoever planted me did so with great vigour, with what must have been an over-enthusiastic yearning to see me buried, and buried good and deep. Probably it was Thomas who wielded the most energetic shovel: I can picture him now, back in – when was it, 1960, for God's sake? – Thomas with that huge slimy gut of his hanging over his trouser-tops, the sweat pouring off that great fat pasty face, as he busily spooned muck down on to the pine box containing my humble self . . . Yes, dear Thomas would willingly have shed a few ounces of adipose tissue for the exquisite pleasure of witnessing the end of a younger brother, who represented a threat to his own chances of reaping the benefits of Aunt Hilda's will.

Jay would have been there too. Not that she'd have wielded a shovel or in any way soiled her lily-white fingers; no, she would simply have stood there and gazed emptily into the hole in the ground, keeping her thoughts locked well out of sight behind those brilliant blue eyes of hers. But she could never deceive me, never. I'd been married to her for too long to be unaware of her feelings, the emotions that she would sooner die than betray. And if you consider that to be a gross exaggeration, if you consider that I've taken some sort of histrionic licence, then all I can add is this, that it is I who lived with her in marital disharmony for the best part of ten years, and it is I who claim to know her better than any possibly can.

Although – correction – Simon will doubtless know her even better now. After all, he's had the benefit of twice as long as I had, or at least I assume he has. Certainly he was never away from her side in those last few months of my – ha! – my illness,

Certainly he was constantly devouring her with that stupid intense stare of his, whilst simultaneously taking it for granted that I was far too preoccupied with my own physical anguish to notice such incidentals. The dense creep! Or maybe it was I who was the dense one, letting it go on so long, that God-awful pain, without saying anything to anyone, until the day came when I was stricken down with that vile sickness that all but tore the intestines out of my body; whereupon it was too late to do anything, and all I could manage was to look at them both, Jay and Simon standing at the foot of the bed, their faces mere blurs through the haze of deathless agony which enveloped me.

And that was something else I now had to investigate; exactly where the hell did that illness come from in the first place? I mean, look, there I was, a man of quite ordinary aspect, thirty-two-years old and in perfect health. Not overly fit, admittedly: but quite well enough . . . And then suddenly, violently, on that evening late in May, those abdominal contractions hit me, along with a pain which my modest pen can never adequately describe. Suffice to say that, although the doctor diagnosed food poisoning, I was far too poorly to read any special significance into the fact, or the realization that as the days and weeks wore on, I became steadily worse, not better, yet the doctor was not sent for again, and I began to sink into the morass of hopelessness which so often overtakes those who want release from an indestructible suffering.

Suspicion, therefore, found no place in my mind in those early days – not that it would have helped me at all, anyway. Tenderly, Jay nursed me, ignoring my half-demented pleas for medical help, wiping my white, wet forehead, uttering soothing and totally meaningless phrases, the kind one would use for an infant child. And finally, finally, I succumbed, relinquishing my hold on a life that had come to mean nothing, beyond a twilight world of gastric torment,

Twenty years!

Twenty years submerged beneath the crushing weight of a wet and filthy strata of soil, encased in a wooden box that lasted just long enough for the worms to have their fill of the cheap timber and then to drop on to my shrouded lifeless body, there

to begin their feast. To begin it and to continue it over the years, and yet never to complete it, for although my physical presence was dead, riddled with what my instincts told me was some sort of virulent poison, slow and insidious in action, but nonetheless deadly – although *I* was beyond help, my mind was not. My *instincts* lived, I wanted to return to a world of sunlight and air and sweet-smelling grass; I wanted to find out what I had missed whilst festering beneath the earth; and most of all I was curious to know what twenty years had done to Thomas, and to Simon. And to Jay.

And so, here I am, standing by the edge of my unsung grave, the sound of a distant midnight tolling from the church I had known since boyhood. Here I am in this all but impenetrable darkness, wondering just what I might look like after two decades of being nibbled at and chewed into by those countless millions of voracious insects, grubbing and foraging into my skin and flesh and bones . . .

But I cannot stand here for evermore, the night is cold and I have things to do, places to go. People to see. And the years have not dimmed my memory; I speed unerringly through the silent streets, towards the house where brother Thomas had lived.

Thomas died instantly. His face contorted into a frozen mask of dread and disbelief, his hands lifted high as if to protect himself, to push away the image of a man he had seen buried seven thousand long nights ago . . . He died, his legs folding as if the tendons had been ripped from the back of his knees, his torso pitching forward, his skull crunching on to the cold concrete of his front path, whilst the hot bile of pure terror gushed up from his stomach and out through his dead lips like some vile gastric silt.

I gazed down upon him, aware of a sensation of mild satisfaction. Now that he was horizontal, I had the opportunity of studying him in minute detail. Twenty years had not been kind to my unlamented brother: the waistline had thickened abominably; the brown hair had taken on a dull yellowish sheen plentifully admixed with splashes of grey; and – whilst in my humble opinion he had never enjoyed film-star looks – his apparent

excesses had fleshed and distorted his features almost beyond credence. Plus of course, he was only scant seconds into death, which by no means added to his beauty. But as a final tribute to him, I crouched low beside his body and spat into the dead, snarling face.

Simon was not so easy to find. When I reached his lodgings – an over-simplified term for the opulence of this block of residential flats – it was to find that he had vanished. There had been no problem in gaining access: a harsh kick against the Yale lock was sufficient for the purpose; whereupon I stared blankly round the empty room, at the film of dust across the furniture, the uncarpeted floor, the undraped, dirty windows. Simon had not only gone, he hadn't lived here for some considerable time, and nor had anyone else.

The noise behind me was slight, almost infinitesimal. But I had spent a long, long time in an atmosphere of total and unalienable silence, so that the feather-light movement was more than enough to engage my attention. I whirled round quickly, and the faint moonlight from the slatted window illuminated the little man framed in the doorway.

There was a brief moment of stillness as we gazed curiously at each other. What I saw was a fellow clad in some kind of uniform, a man around sixty, his face the sort of face one might see on a long-retired ex-policeman, eking out his pension on a night-security set-up such as this . . . What *he* saw was somebody – something – presumably not to his liking. He did not drop down dead as Thomas had done, but neither did he stay to discuss the reasons for my physical state, whatever my physical state was, since I had as yet had no opportunity of viewing my reflection in any convenient glass. Or maybe I had had the opportunity but subconsciously avoided the confrontation. Be that as it may, the little chap emitted a squeal of sheer panic, and stumbled away, back down the steps, fleeing into the night.

I stood irresolute for long moments, listening to the sounds of his fear floating back to me in the still night air. I fell to wondering what he had seen, and what I had become. I wondered too, whether it was more important to locate Simon

than to find a looking-glass, to witness for myself the extent of the ravages of my ten-score months below the stinking earth . . . Finally I decided. I would find Simon, I would find Jay. Then I would embrace the truth.

On the assumption that Simon's whereabouts should logically lead to Jay, I was still left with the apparently insuperable problem of making inquiries. There was no one I could approach for assistance; there was no way I could file my story with Missing Persons; and neither had I recourse to the services of any journalists. Evidence was already manifest that I was not a prepossessing sight, and thus my sources of information were limited to whatever media I could effectively employ during those dark hours of early morning. I sat and thought till my brain ached: but kept coming back to the same notion, that there was only the telephone which might conceivably be of some assistance; and as an extension of this idea, or rather on a sudden impulse, I lifted the receiver and dialled Directory Enquiries. Then I rang the number they had given me, that of the local mortuary.

Yes, I informed them, I am a relative, I am his brother, recently returned, (I smiled to myself here), from Down Under, and if they wouldn't mind checking their records for me . . . ?

It worked as well as I had never expected nor hoped; my hunch had paid off, or should I say that the one outlet open to me had produced the results, if only in a negative way, for Simon was already dead. He had died only two years after watching the soil being scattered over my own wooden box, died after a lingering and agonizing illness, having been fed enough cumulative poison to annihilate a proverbial regiment . . . It all sounded very familiar indeed, and I felt it superfluous to ask who had done such a terrible thing to my dear devoted brother Simon – of course inserting suitable signs of vocal grief.

The mortuary official was most forthcoming, and indeed extremely sympathetic. He was sorry to be the bearer of bad tidings, he understood the close fraternal relationship which Simon and I must have enjoyed, he had three brothers himself, and did I really feel I was up to hearing the details of my brother's death . . . ? I could almost feel the eagerness in his voice, the urgent desire to gossip about one of his erstwhile

charges, a corpse still memorable even after eighteen-years. I did not disappoint him. I made it clear that I would be pleased to hear the gory minutiae, the whys and wherefores of Simon's premature decease. Not of course that I expressed myself in such grandiose terminology. My voice – I wish you could have heard it! – was broken up into monosyllables and heaving sighs, alternating with the odd tear or two or three. One might almost say it was an Olivier/Laughton Production.

I digested the news in silence for some seconds, and perhaps the fellow wondered whether I had hung up or lost interest or some such other catastrophe. It was at this point the noise impinged on my consciousness as if from a great distance. Police sirens approached the road leading to the block of flats. I dropped the receiver back on to the hooks, cutting the querulous whine off in mid-flow. And out into the night I plunged once more,

Where to now? Thomas was dead, Simon was dead, Jay—What had become of her? Was she still alive somewhere? I had to know. I had to satisfy this raging urge of mine, this thirst for a knowledge of how these people had spent the years of my death. That's what I wanted, *needed*, to be *sure*, so that my soul would be at peace, so that the remnants of my body could return to the dark, dank grave from whence it had sprung, impelled by a mind in mad torment . . .

But it had to be soon. I had to know quickly, for already the rooftops were glimmering in the faint light of another dawn. The hours of darkness were fading into irretrievable memory; and it was then, in an abrupt spasm of inspiration, that I knew where I must go, to seek the truth,

The cemetery was as motionless and as deathly still as the corpses that rotted beneath the eloquent headstones. In the far distance was a small area, fenced off, with two graves situated within the railings. In the half-light, I stumbled towards them, not knowing why I had chosen these particular tombs, but yet with something more compulsive, more frightening than logic urging me onwards.

And as I knelt by the left-hand grave, squinting through the

almost-darkness in an effort to decipher the inscription, there was a movement beside me. Twin emotions of triumph and dread skewered me, triumph that I had indeed found Simon's last resting-place; dread of whom – of what – stood by me, scant inches away. I did not move. Could not move. Could not speak. Eons passed, the world began to fill with the insipid illumination of a tentative sunlight, watery as yet, uncertain, as if hesitating to shed its rays on a scene such as this one . . . I knelt there, and the silence seemed to swell, and swell, burgeoning into an unbearable vacuum, out of which grew the chilling realization that the being on my right was moving closer,

Closer . . .

A hand dropped on to my shoulder. I think I screamed out loud, hoarsely, incomprehensibly, something borne of a horror that paralysed me into rigid immobility. And then somehow, somehow, I swivelled my head to the right, my very soul cringing from what I felt – knew – to be standing there.

Jay smiled at me. 'So you came back,' she said. 'You came back, Martin – to look for me. To ensure that I suffered as you suffered.' I gazed dumbly at her. 'I killed Simon,' she went on blandly. 'And they took me to prison and kept me there for three weeks. And then they hanged me, Martin. By the neck, until I was stone-cold—'

'Stop it!' I shrieked at her, or at least that's what I intended. But the words came out in a soundless scream as I let my gaze drift over her face and body, as the birth-light of the day washed over her.

Where was the gorgeous blonde hair that had framed a face of classic beauty? Where were those luscious red lips and the peerless splendour of her teeth? Where were the fine breasts and the delightful allure of her model's legs? I stared at Jay in a sick loathing: at the mould that wove its way around the festering meat of her arms and legs; at the vile fleshlessness of her upper body; at the skeletal frame of her face; the bone jutting through the putrefying mess that had once been her cheeks . . . Incredibly she smiled again, a smile nothing more or less than a faint disturbance of the lipless mouth, a spasm of her jawbone which dislodged even more slivers of decomposing skin from the lower part of her face. 'You seem shocked,' she observed

quietly. 'It occurs to me therefore that you can't have seen yourself, your own reflected glory—' Jay laughed, shedding further fragments of dead flesh from her face and body, whilst I stood transfixed, numb with terror, aware that she was right, that I hadn't yet had a clear look at myself, and that if Jay looked like this after less than eighteen years, then surely I—

The smile again; the crumbs of lifeless matter raining freely from her dead face, the insidious whisper of her voice, the insects crawling upon and around and inside her limbs and body and into the sockets of her skull . . . 'Yes, dear husband: I *did* poison you; and now you are no different to me, a corpse that cannot stay dead, a zombie, but with a mind intact.' She leaned towards me. 'You had to come back, didn't you? You *had* to – *didn't* you?' Her cold claw dropped on to my cheek, stroking it gently.

'You and I, Martin, we belong together. We cannot die – so in our own way, we must live.' Jay paused, and the dawning day fell suddenly silent, and it came to me then that, yes, she was right, we did belong, she and I: belonged together, to live down there beneath the clammy earth, the residence of the undead . . . I held out my hand to her, ignoring the mottled scraps of meat that hung from the finger-bones.

'Come, Jay,' I said. 'Let us go home.'

Fay Woolf

Sideshow

The Hallowe'en Charity Fête had been Mr Tenby's idea, and the weather had accommodated him to the extent of bright golden sunshine and incredibly blue skies, thus smithereening all preconceived notions of what Mr Tenby was quite reasonably expecting at this time of year. However, he was not the type to look askance at the proverbial gift-horse; and by twelve noon on 31 October, the vast acreage of playing-fields at the back of the school was dotted with stalls and roundabouts and coconut-shies and slot-machines and guess-the-weight-of-the-cake: all the paraphernalia of a festive occasion, organized by a geography teacher whose sole aim in life for at least that afternoon was to ensure that as many folk as humanly possible enjoyed themselves for as long as physically capable, to the financial benefit of a dozen deserving charities.

The Hallowe'en Charity Fête had been Mr Tenby's idea, but the Sponge-Flinging Stall was the brainchild of Pete Nelson and his willing band of lunatics. Here, for the modest outlay of fifteen pence, a flinger could throw three waterlogged sponges at the grinning face of whomsoever volunteered to stand in the village stocks.

In the interests of accuracy, it must be recorded that the village stocks had originated, not in the mists of rural antiquity, but in the workshed at the side of Pete Nelson's house. Nevertheless, it was a solid piece of workmanship, consisting of three blocks of wood, one atop the other, each two inches thick, and with the requisite holes cut in for arms, legs and head. All planks were split centrally and lengthwise along two vast hinges which opened wide to receive whichever set of limbs or skull it was due to imprison; whereupon it could then be locked back into place, trapping the willing captive into apertures through which

extremities could not be extracted. Three monstrous and rusting padlocks completed the picture, adding to the victim's presumed discomfiture.

Not that there was any sign of discomfort about the youngsters who manned the stocks that hot Saturday afternoon. They had, they believed, conceived a rather brilliant money-making idea; and the beauty of it was that there were no prizes, and thus no overheads, no inroads into the fifteen-pences which, even now, so early on in the afternoon, were beginning to mount up at a considerable and gratifying rate of knots. The name of the game was enjoyment, whether it was weight-guessing or missile-hurling; and if the public enjoyed shelling out shekels at the rate of a-bob-a-sponge, simply for the exquisite pleasure of witnessing streams of water dripping from a schoolboy's features, then how could the charities fail to benefit?

There was perhaps one drawback: the fact that the home-made stocks had been built with a full-grown adult in mind. This was obviously an oversight, and in fact Pete Nelson's dad had assumed the full mantle of blame. There was no time to assemble a new stocks; and therefore it was up to Pete and his friends to overcome the insurmountable. This they did by the simple expedient of standing on a chair behind the sturdy timber framework, so that each volunteer could place his hands through one set of holes and his head through the upper hole. It was not, to be honest, the most restful or agreeable of positions; but for the sake of the charities, such personal drawbacks would have to be ignored.

By two-thirty, the crowd around the stocks had swollen to several dozen, and sponges were flying thick and fast, to the tune of endless five-penny and ten-penny pieces changing hands. There really and truly was something rather satisfying about propelling a saturated wodge of sponge into an impish twelve-year-old face, especially when the owner of said face was physically unable to lift his hands in any kind of protective gesture . . . It was – almost literally – good clean fun,

The Hallowe'en Charity Fête had been Mr Tenby's idea, yet it was Pete Nelson who made up in youthful initiative and vigour

for what he lacked in years and physical stature. And it seemed to him that, at about three-thirty, the novelty of the situation was beginning to pall; the crowds were losing interest, were in fact thinning out around the throwing area some thirty feet away. Something was needed, in the best interests of show business, to bring them back again.

Pete's eyes alighted on a group of children at the back of the dwindling crowd, two of the youngsters were wearing Hallowe'en masks, grotesque caricatures of what might purport to be a human face . . . And suddenly it occurred to him that this might be the very thing, the kind of additive which could whet and renew the flagging interest of the audience.

Whilst a contemporary was doing his ten-minute stint of peeping through a hole to watch the soft and soggy mess hurtle towards him, Pete Nelson inched his way through the group around the stocks and made his way determinedly towards the Hallowe'en masks. And it says much for his insistence and resolve that only three minutes later, he was walking back to his post, clutching both masks. True, it had cost him a bagful of marbles, including his treasured Big Glass Bottlestopper, but Pete was not only bright, he was good-hearted too. He saw his sacrifice as his own personal contribution to the causes that were collectively manifest on this great sprawling field. And if the advent of these masks would provide extra cash, then his own personal sense of loss would be alleviated. Not that Pete thought in such grandiose terms: his philosophy was much more basic, much more simple, yet no less sincere. Besides, he mused, if he really and truly wanted those marbles back, he could offer to fight Harry Finlayson for them. Harry would welcome the chance, no doubt. He'd only asked for the marbles to spite Pete. No love lost there . . .

Pete clambered on to the chair and waved his arms about for effect. 'Ladies and gentlemen,' he shrilled. 'An additional part of the act for your enjoyment. The object will now be to land a sponge inside the mouth of the mask, like this . . . ' He demonstrated the flight of a sponge, showed it entering the gash of a mouth; people laughed, and their laughter brought others closer. Pete Nelson surveyed them, and grinned contentedly. 'There is of course a new fee,' he went on daringly. 'Twenty pence—'

A great 'Ooooooh' arose from the throng, and he quickly added: 'But you'll get four sponges . . . ' The applause followed him down from the chair, until he vanished self-effacingly at the back of the stocks framework.

The Hallowe'en Charity Fête had been Mr Tenby's idea, although the benign and balding geography expert would have been the first to admit the extraordinary success of the Sponge-Flinging Stall. Queues had formed at the rear of the throwing area; some of the sponges were dropping short of target, some were hitting the framework, others did strike the mask but mostly on the head or the eye, for no logical reason that anyone could think of, and only twice had the sponge dropped inside the actual carved-out slash of a smile that made up the lower half of the mask. Not that the paying customers were too bothered about this: many of them handed over a pound for the privilege of booking a score of sopping-wet sponges, until universal protest had forced Pete and his minions to ration the maximum number of throws to eight at a time.

Not that there was any shortage of volunteers for the role of Aunt Sally; and there was almost as much of a clamour for this as there was for the privilege of shying heavily-wet items at round young faces trapped in a set of stocks . . . Pete stared in some disbelief as Harry Finlayson strolled over to him, indicating that he would not be averse to a stint between the boards.

Pete Nelson hesitated: was this his chance to recover those marbles without the prospect of getting battered to a pulp by the big hulking loutish Finlayson? 'Tell you what,' Pete suggested. 'How's about a bet?' The older boy gazed dubiously at him. 'Let's say,' Pete continued, 'that you stand there and get pelted for – what, quarter of an hour? And if you don't yell out to be let go, then I'll—' He swallowed, and ground the words out, '—I'll give you twelve of my Penny Browns.'

Harry's eyes gleamed. He was almost as keen a philatelist as Pete. Almost. He knew what such an offer meant to Pete; and knew too how Pete would feel if he had to hand over a dozen of those smashing stamps to someone he detested . . . Harry Finlayson grinned his nasty grin. 'An' if I do call out, you'll want your alleys back, that it?' Pete nodded mutely. 'Yer on,'¹

Harry said simply; and stalked off, leaving Pete wondering if he'd done the right thing. *Was* it possible to subdue this overgrown thug Finlayson? Could he be made to shout for mercy in the space of a mere fifteen minutes? Pete glanced round thoughtfully: it was necessary, he decided, to have a quiet word with his friends, to instruct them to pass the word on to the paying punters that this boy would stay in his place for longer than usual, and that he liked the sponges being flung fast and hard. . . .

They lifted the heavy blocks of wood, and Harry Finlayson stepped on to the chair and placed his head and hands in position. There was a mocking smile playing about his lips that infuriated Pete, but there was little else he could do but promise himself that when he got hold of a wet sponge, it would be tossed with unerring accuracy into the mouth of that mask, thereby rendering Harry's mouth soaking wet, and also hopefully stunned from the velocity of Pete's throw.

The mask was secured around Harry's head and face; the wooden blocks were snapped into place, and the padlocks rammed home. The boy gazed down the long avenue of grass, at the first competitor, an elderly woman with a dripping sponge in each hand, and an incandescent fire in her little black eyes. . . . At the given signal, she threw as hard as she could: the first sponge landed in the grass, the second a foot past the stocks. A hoot of laughter all but lifted the woman off her feet; she glared round inimically, hefted the third sponge in her right hand and let fly. This time she had better luck: the missile struck the framework just below the boy's face and splashed water up into his concealed mouth. Pete was watching closely: he saw the head jerk up, as if trying to withdraw from the apparatus encircling it. He hoped – fervently – that the water tasted foul, and that Finlayson wished he could get away, yet realized that there was no possible way he could ask for release. No face-saving device in the Universe could have paved the way for that. . . . Pete smiled sourly. He wondered what the big slob was thinking; wondered too what the face looked like under its gargoyle disguise.

Five minutes passed, in the course of which there seemed to be a thunderstorm of sponges. The boy in the village stocks had

attracted the best marksmen and women in the area: few had missed the region in and around the hole that framed his powerless and immobilized skull; his mouth, nose and eyes seemed totally immersed in water. His whole world was water. He could not breathe in comfort, he certainly could not see with any particular clarity. And the chair itself, where his straining feet balanced precariously, was becoming not so much wet as completely waterlogged.

Certainly it was not the place for a pair of wavering feet to balance with any degree of safety: feet clad in smooth-soled plimsolls, feet that weaved and twisted one way and another in concert with the boy's head as it strove to avoid the better-placed sponges,

At five minutes to four, with seven minutes remaining of Harry Finlayson's proposed fifteen, came the inevitable.

Harry felt the chair sliding away from beneath his feet. He sought somehow to retain his hold on the shiny surface of the chair, but it was hopeless. He opened his mouth and yelled out as the chair toppled slowly away from him, and the voice came out muffled under the thick covering of the Hallowe'en mask. Nobody heeded him, doubtless the noise of the crowds round the framework had something to do with it. Finlayson drew in breath once again; but it was Pete Nelson's turn with the sponges, and his first shot flew unerringly into the other's mouth. Water filled Harry's mouth once again, stifling the cry of anticipatory fear as the chair tipped back and flopped on to the grass behind him, leaving him without any support for his head. The whole of his weight now dragged against his neck, jammed on the lower half of the hole where his head rested.

In that instant, in that single micro-second of unbelievable agony, the boy Finlayson wondered why nobody was rushing forward to succour him, to catch hold of him so as to take the weight from his neck and head. And then realization came, and with it the dumb anguish of irrevocable despair, the knowledge that no one knew what had happened to the chair, no one had seen his legs swing helplessly against the back of the framework, no one had heard his dull cry for assistance. And even more pertinent: no one could see his face behind the papier-mâché scowl of the Hallowe'en mask.

And as the minutes ticked away, there was no lull in the barrage of heavy sponges: they hailed down at him in a veritable blizzard, as if for all the world like some abominable extra-terrestrial rain, ceaseless, heedless, terrifying . . .

Meanwhile the excess weight of Harry Finlayson began to drag even harder on his exposed neck, constricting his breathing within the confines of the ridiculous mask.

The Hallowe'en Charity Fête had been Mr Tenby's idea, so that he was perfectly in order to suggest that he should take a turn at the sponges, as he himself labelled it. Perhaps there might be some loss of dignity involved, but if it helped to swell the crowds and therefore the coffers, then who was he to refuse the risk of ridicule?

He took his stance at the centre of the throwing-line, weighed his first sponge carefully, and threw. The sponge described a vast arc, hung momentarily in the air, then swung lazily downwards, landing a good ten feet beyond the masked Finlayson. A ripple of sardonic applause drifted up from the ranks of the schoolboys and, meanwhile, Pete Nelson was glancing at his watch and mentally wishing his collection of Penny Browns a fond farewell. He shook his head. He wouldn't have believed it if he hadn't seen it in black and white, so to speak. Five past four! Nearly twenty minutes he'd been up there, getting smitten right and left and centre with those sopping things.

Mechanically he wandered over to the back of the framework, to retrieve Mr Tenby's sponge and, as he bent to pick it up, he looked across at Finlayson, and saw a most curious sight. For the boy was no longer perched on a chair and yet he was still upright and still erect, his face pointing back along the field to where the sponges careered towards him in deathless repetition. Still upright, still erect, but with his feet . . . dangling.

Pete Nelson's breath rasped in his throat: cautiously he moved towards the motionless figure, and was perhaps two feet distant when he saw that beneath the ghastly mask, Finlayson's chin had caught on the lower curve of the aperture.

Around Pete was the noise and laughter and music of the fête; but all he could hear was somebody screaming, and it was a long time before he realized that yes, it was his own voice he

could hear, shrilling out in a hysterical terror. But instinctively he reached out and pulled at the still form, and it crumpled in his arms, its dead weight crushing him to the grass, the mask dropping from his face,

The face!

Pete Nelson gazed at the sightless eyes and the blackening skin, at the jutting tongue embedded in the little sea of froth, at the blood and vomit issuing from the opaque lips and coursing down the broken neck in a last vile manifestation of despair, of what must have been the final realization that Death itself was growing out of the numbing agony in chest and throat and slowly dying brain—

Somewhere, somebody was still screaming,

The Hallowe'en Charity Fête had been Mr Tenby's idea. So why, he wondered, was that stupid Nelson boy trying to disrupt it with all that silly shouting and bawling?

Mr Tenby was not always benign. Sometimes he could be very sharp; and as he stalked across the field towards the stocks, he told himself sternly that this, surely, was the time and place for discipline,

Jane Louie

The trump card

The pacemaker is a device inserted into the muscular tissue of the chest that sends out a regular, electric pulse designed to keep the heart beating. It is usually prescribed by surgeons for patients with a history of cardiac failure and, at worst, it acts as an insurance policy for a few more years of active life.

President Byfield Rochester of the United States of America was just such a patient. He was sixty, stockily built and aggressive by nature. His physician had, in the popular jargon of the day, written him down as a bad cardiac risk. He was hyperactive, slept only a few hours each night and was prone to alternating bouts of temper, enthusiasm and despair.

His three years at the White House had not been without achievement, but in the complex modern world no task was ever totally completed, no problem ever finally resolved. President Rochester was proud of his time at this mighty pinnacle of power, but like so many of his predecessors, the attainment of world peace still eluded him.

The build up of nuclear weapons had reached a new high with rings of warheads bristling like spines around the borders of the major powers, USA, Britain, France, China and the United Arab Republic. Countless non-proliferation treaties had been signed, but like so many others of the late twentieth century, they proved to be no more than useless pieces of paper filled with the pompous, empty language of the bureaucrats who had drafted them.

In the year 2017, when the Soviet Revolution was celebrating its first century – the Russians had picked a new leader, Anatole Dubrovsky, an aggressive Siberian peasant with a hostile, old-fashioned view of the Western bloc.

He and President Rochester had met twice, once in Moscow and once in Washington, but in spite of the respect both men felt one for the other their feelings were tinged with mistrust,

Dubrovsky, although a rough-hewn man of simple tastes, had cultivated close friendships with his country's leading nuclear scientists and spent many of his week-ends talking with these intense and brilliant men. They told him, first hand, of Russia's major advances in nuclear weaponry and of the staggering stockpiles of plutonium which Russia had built up in the first decade of the twenty-first century. In the year 2012, the world's largest nuclear power plant had been completed at Dimitrov, just north of Moscow, and the Soviets proudly announced it was totally automatic. Vast computer banks monitored its prodigious output and the entire plant, covering two thousand acres, employed only six technicians, themselves mere computer engineers.

Although the plant, named 'Red One' was primarily a source of peaceful domestic power for Soviet industry, the various and sparse, intelligence reports that the West had been able to pull out suggested that it could rapidly be converted to offensive use.

Dubrovsky spurned the 'softly, softly' approach of previous Soviet leaders and was given to delivering 'tough' speeches about the accelerating decline of capitalism and how Soviet military strength should be increased to fend off any unpremeditated aggression from the 'imperialist' powers.

The rest of the world listened to the flurry of words that rattled like sabres between Dubrovsky and President Rochester and a sense of unease permeated international affairs.

Russia's subjugated colonies, like Hungary and East Germany, received new, unasked for military 'assistance' and those parts of the Middle East that had fallen under Communist stewardship found themselves the recipients of brigades of 'advisors' and heavy 'agricultural' equipment.

In Western Europe, the dessicated, socialist Republic of Britain was still a member of NATO and the European Common Market but nobody took much notice of the little, strike-torn, bitter, shabby, proletarian slum that she had so steadily become.

In the summer of 2019 President Rochester underwent major heart surgery and many expected him to either die or, if he recovered, resign. He did neither, but instead emerged as a

living tribute to American medicine and technology. The little silicon computer in his chest had cost several billion dollars to develop and he was the first man on earth to have his heart-beats monitored by such an incredibly advanced device.

What the world saw was a statesman snatched from the jaws of death, a new hope for the Western democracies. What the world didn't see – as it was most carefully concealed from them – was a desperate politician who had devised a plan so diabolical that they would have dismissed it as fiction even if they had been told about it.

President Byfield Rochester knew that death was beckoning, his whole body told him so. All he wanted was another year – just twelve months – to complete his plan. They were concerned only with keeping his old heart beating, and this they achieved with consummate skill.

A month before he submitted to surgery, President Rochester held a private meeting in the Oval Office. Those in attendance were General Clark Wentworth, the senior military officer in the US Armed Forces, Jay Kettner, his foreign affairs advisor, and a young scientist called Klaus Loman.

Of this quartet, who settled into the soft luxury of the Oval Office sofas and sipped cognac and coffee, Loman was the most incongruous.

A lank, vapid man with untidy hair and bitten nails, his facial expression seemed to permanently resemble the grimace of a frightened rabbit. He had met the President only twice before, once at Cape Canaveral and more recently at the President's farm in Virginia. The farmhouse meeting had been most significant. The President had asked him to prepare, personally and privately, a definitive paper, couched in lay terms, setting out the consequences of a nuclear power plant failure with particular emphasis on what would happen if breeder reactors, with their massive inventory of plutonium, exploded, or were made to explode.

As a separate exercise, Loman was also asked to prepare a paper on the new, twenty-first century technology of supra-normal ultra-high frequency power transmissions. Devices no bigger than a ten cent piece had already transmitted signals and shattered inch-thick plate glass ten miles away. Loman was also

sworn to secrecy and, it is sad to relate, threatened with death for treason if he uttered a word of his meeting to outsiders.

Loman's two papers, written laboriously in his own spidery hand were now spread out on a small table in the Oval Office.

President Rochester took a sip from his decaffeinated coffee and wished fervently that he could smoke a cigarette. General Wentworth lit his pipe and settled back into his sofa, the chandeliers above him sending ripples of light over his gold braid and silk breast ribbons.

Loman sat anxiously on the edge of his chair, biting a fingernail while President Rochester slowly read through the flimsy sheets of notepaper. After ten minutes of silence, the President looked directly at Loman.

'Tell me,' he said in his famous, laconic drawl, 'What exactly do you mean by the phrase, "If water is lost in the complex of a nuclear power plant the primary fission reaction automatically stops?"'

Loman cleared his throat and leant forward.

'Well, sir, it's hard to put into absolutely lay terms but, as you already know, the breeder reactors built both here and in the Soviet Union cannot "explode" or fail because they are boiling water reactors and their fissionable materials are too dilute to form the critical masses of the correct geometric equations to trigger a runaway chain reaction or nuclear explosion. Plutonium requires "slow" neutrons and these are obtained by the collision of "fast" neutrons produced by the primary reaction with the water in the reactor vessel. The water acts as both a coolant and a moderating influence.'

Loman paused and coughed politely, 'Am I going too fast for you, sir?'

The President glanced at General Wentworth. 'No you're not. But tell me, the water is a crucial element in this whole structure, is it not?'

'Yes, sir.'

'And, if the water is lost, what happens?'

'Well, sir, the primary fission reaction automatically stops.'

'And?'

'It's what we call a LOCA - loss of coolant accident. The temperature shoots up dramatically and as there's too much

heat to be radiated, the fuel rods and, indeed, the whole structure, including the plant and surrounding housing, becomes a molten mass of collapsing metal spewing radioactive waste over a wide area.²

'How wide?'

'It would depend on the size of the plant and such other factors as prevailing winds.'

'And, hypothetically speaking, from what you know of Red One, the Soviet complex at Dimitrov, if the water coolant failed there, how widespread would the damage be?'

'I'm not familiar with Red One, Mr President. All I know is it is large. The biggest in the world. I can only guess that radioactive fall-out from a structure of that kind of magnitude would be catastrophic.'

General Wentworth relit his pipe and picked up a cap from the table in front of him.

'Mr Loman, the Soviet nuclear station at Dimitrov is located less than one hundred miles from Moscow, due north of the city.'

Loman shrugged. 'In that case, Moscow would become a pile of radioactive, hot, white ash in no time at all.'

President Rochester pushed aside his coffee cup and folded his arms. His face was grim, it was a familiar pose he used on nationwide television.

'One final question, or maybe *two*. How is the water coolant administered in modern breeder reactors both here and in the Soviet Union?' Loman managed a weak smile.

'By computer, Mr President. It's all preprogrammed.'

The President stood up and placed the palms of his hands on the big mahogany desk.

'And could those programmes be alienated by remote control – or interference from outside by electronic devices?'

Loman nodded slowly. 'Yes, sir. Provided you had the right frequency on which to lock into the computer's electronic brain. And you were close enough.'

'Thank you, Mr Loman,' said the President. 'If we need you again we'll send for you. That will be all for now.'

The big armoured train with the silver and gold markings

pulled slowly away from the flag-bedecked, but still snow covered, station. A small crowd of Russians in fur hats and heavy greatcoats waved woodenly, as if to order, while the train gathered speed and disappeared into the mist.

Inside, behind inch thick plate glass, Anatole Dubrovsky lit a fat Cuban cigar and snapped his fingers for more cognac. A steward came gliding towards his table with a bottle of Remy Martin Fine Champagne and poured a generous measure into Dubrovsky's balloon glass.

The Russian leader settled back into the red plush seat and surveyed the luxury of his Presidential coach.

It had been decorated in florid nineteenth century style right down to the stained glass windows and silk tasselled curtains. A series of heroic paintings in birds-eye maple frames were screwed to the blue velvet walls. They depicted smiling Russians performing acts of manual labour, tilling the soil, hewing coal, mixing cement.

Anatole Dubrovsky hated them. Phoney proletarian realism, officially approved by the Supreme Soviet. He'd have preferred pictures of ballerinas in various stages of undress, or even peasant women, big fleshy mothers, breast feeding their young.

He pulled back the tasselled curtain and looked at the countryside speeding past the window. The ground was a mantle of white dotted with countless birch trees, the taiga - one of Russia's most familiar landscapes. He sighed and pulled hard on his Havana cigar. Another hour at least before they reached Tula and his opulent dacha.

Contrary to popular belief some of the most magnificent country estates had been preserved after the Revolution, not all were put to the flames by marauding Bolsheviks. Many became museums or institutions, but a few were preserved for the pleasure of high government officials and a small handful of Soviet heroes. Stalin had favoured the Black Sea and had selected an immense Gothic fortress as his week-end retreat. Khrushchev preferred the southern pine forest where he could walk in the palatial grounds of a former prince's summer palace. Brezhnev had enjoyed guns and spent boisterous shooting week-ends in a house that had boasted Rasputin as a house guest in 1908,

For Anatole Dubrovsky, however, it was the spaciousness of a stately home designed by two French architects in the seventeenth century. This 'official' residence stood outside the town of Tula in four thousand acres of pine and heather with a boating lake, a herd of snow deer, an immense tropical greenhouse that covered a thousand square yards and a stable of twelve Arab horses. Here, behind towering wrought iron gates and guarded by a hundred soldiers with machine-guns, Anatole Dubrovsky spent almost every week-end. The chateau had been the setting for numerous diplomatic house parties and it was to one of these that he was now heading.

His secretary had shown him the guest list before he had boarded the train and it had filled him with depression and boredom.

The Chinese Chargé d'Affaires, the Bulgarian Ambassador, two of his economic ministers, grey bureaucrats, the pair of them and an exiled American called Gilderstein. Of this clutch of unsavoury guests only Gilderstein promised to be vaguely interesting. He was a lifelong Communist who had passed American nuclear secrets to the Soviets and escaped imprisonment by fleeing to Moscow five years previously. His contacts were still good and his intelligence reports about US military manoeuvres surprisingly fresh and accurate.

Gilderstein also had a wife. A big, raw-boned Jewish woman of fifty with breasts like water-melons and a wide, rubbery mouth.

Anatole liked his women vast. Beauty to him was something you could sink your fingers into up to the first knuckle. This week-end he intended to seduce Mrs Gilderstein. It was at least *something* to look forward to.

He drained his brandy glass and called for more. Yes. Within the next forty-eight hours he would have the big Jewish woman in his bed, of that he was confident. He smiled and blew a smoke ring towards the ceiling.

President Byfield Rochester was convalescing at Camp David and already he felt ten years younger. The operation had been a complete success and the incredible little silicon device was toiling away inside his chest and ensuring the healthy regularity of his heartbeats. He put his hand inside his shirt and felt the

thin wires and the small antiseptic pad that was adhering to his left breast. Next to it was a smaller, even thinner device and this one had been grafted deep into the tissue of his pectorals. It was roughly the size of a man's fingernail and about as thick as a ten cent piece. Inside its stainless steel casing was a complex network of miniaturized electronics that fifty years earlier would have needed a small room to house them. He ran his thumb over the slightly embossed scar tissue and smiled. His plan was already in action.

Over lunch he received Jay Kettner, his foreign affairs advisor and they ate boiled fish and drank a little chilled Californian wine.

Kettner produced a folder of documents all marked 'Top Secret' and stamped with the red Presidential seal. Among them were some photographs and an aerial view map of Central Russia. President Rochester studied the documents carefully and then touched Kettner's arm.

'You know I intend to go through with this Jay - don't you?'

'Yes, Mr President.'

'And you will not betray the confidence I have placed in you and General Wentworth?'

Kettner's eyes flashed. 'Wentworth and I know it is the only way. The trump card! We are both honoured to be in your trust. You are a great American, sir. The free world will bless you.'

The President shuffled his feet in slight embarrassment. Kettner was inclined to overdo the drama and the loyalty routine just a fraction. But the man was essential to the plan. To the split-second timetable he had prepared. Jay Kettner may well have been condemned by the liberals as a hard-liner, a neo-fascist, but his devotion to the President was unswerving.

A butler served coffee and withdrew leaving the two men alone in the sunny dining-room. The President raised his cup slowly to his lips.

'When does my cable go to Russia?' he asked. Kettner took out a slim cigarette case and lit an oval Egyptian cigarette.

'Tonight, sir. Anatole Dubrovsky should be able to read it over dinner at his dacha in Tula within four hours.'

President Rochester chuckled and sat back in his padded chair.

'It'll probably ruin his appetite. And serve the old bear right!'

'The cunning old warhorse is up to something! I'm certain of it!'

Anatole Dubrovsky was speaking through a mouth crammed with beefsteak and red cabbage and he held a top secret cable at arms-length in front of him. It had arrived an hour earlier, been decoded and then presented to him by an aide, on a small silver tray. President Rochester was requesting an immediate top-priority meeting with him in Russia to discuss a matter of monumental importance related to world peace and stability.

He re-read the cable carefully and then held it over a candle flame.

'We will take cognac in the library,' he said curtly. 'And fetch a fresh box of cigars.'

His guests, burning with curiosity, had to remain unsatisfied because for the remainder of the evening he regaled them with peasant folk stories, lewd jokes and eventually an old Russian drinking song.

At midnight the great house was silent and the guests were asleep. All save one – Mrs Gilderstein, who had sneaked up a flight of backstairs to join the Russian leader in his four-poster bed.

He took one of her huge breasts in his shovel of a hand and kneaded it like dough. She groaned and spread herself open like a flower under his hard, hairy body.

As they moved together in rhythm, he kissed her on the mouth, biting down on her rubbery lips and drawing blood. When it was over he smacked her buttocks and pushed her away with the sole of his foot. She lay next to him gasping – it had been years since she had reached such a frenzy of ecstasy and she was like a young girl in a daze.

Dubrovsky propped his head against the pillows and lit a black cigarette. Now his lust was slaked this woman no longer existed. But his mind was racing in top gear. An American Presidential visit to Russia! And as soon as possible! Before agreeing he would activate his KGB undercover men in Washington and get them to do some surreptitious digging.

A month had passed and on a fresh February morning President Byfield Rochester called a press conference at the White House.

For days now the world's newspapers had been speculating about a summit meeting in Russia and when the President walked into the big press room, it was crammed to overflowing with journalists, TV cameras, broadcasters, technicians and photographers.

He sat on a raised platform behind a battery of microphones and was flanked by Jay Kettner and General Wentworth. Flash bulbs popped as he stood up and folded his arms in the familiar pose.

'Ladies and gentlemen,' he said slowly, savouring the moment. 'I can today tell you that one month ago, I requested a meeting with Premier Dubrovsky of the Soviet Union. My purpose was to discuss, urgently, the question of arms limitation which is perhaps the most crucial issue facing the great powers today. I have a proposition to put to him, which I cannot reveal to you in advance, naturally, and I am delighted to tell you that late last night Premier Dubrovsky replied to my request in the affirmative and a date has been set - March 4. Note it down gentlemen. March 4 in the year 2020. It will be a historic date. That is all I have to say. Forgive me but there will be no questions today. My doctors tell me I must conserve my strength.'

At this a ripple of disappointment ran through the throng of reporters who had until then remained in total silence.

President Rochester smiled at them and unfolded his arms. It was his moment and he was enjoying it.

Anatole Dubrovsky waited while the soldier unlocked the massive iron door and pushed it open. The room beyond was no more than a cell with a stone floor, a bed, a hand basin and a single wooden chair. A man sat on the chair with his hands folded nervously on his lap. He wore a grey prison tunic and cloth slippers.

Dubrovsky sat on the edge of the bed opposite him.

'Now, Comrade,' said Dubrovsky in an avuncular, fatherly tone. 'Suppose you repeat to me personally what you over-

heard on the train to Portland, Oregon in the United States of America two weeks ago.'

The man's face twitched and he licked his lips.

'Comrade Premier,' he began haltingly. 'I must protest at being held here. I have served the Soviet cause with scrupulous loyalty. I have risked my life in America for ten years. I have delivered my reports faithfully and yet I am bundled back into my country, drugged, like a common thief and incarcerated.'

Dubrovsky's face turned to thunder and he glanced at the KGB Colonel who stood on his right.

The Colonel stepped forward and prodded the man in the chest.

'You are here for your own safety, Comrade,' he said. 'The knowledge you possess is so lethal you could be dead in a trice if you were to run loose in Moscow. The American agents are being reinforced in readiness for the Presidential visit. The Western embassies are crawling with spies - all of them. Your "detainment" is only temporary, I promise you.'

The prisoner shrugged. Argument was useless. He was hungry and thirsty but he knew they wouldn't let him eat until he had told Premier Dubrovsky his story first hand.

'Very well,' he said softly. 'It was on the nine o'clock train from Washington to Portland. I shared a compartment with a man called Loman. He's a nuclear scientist at NASA. We got into conversation and . . .'

The Presidential jet gathered speed as the huge engines thrust it like a silver dart into the net of low, moist cloud. At four thousand feet the plane emerged into brilliant sunshine and began to make a wide arc, climbing towards the intense blue of the upper stratosphere. At a hundred thousand feet they levelled and seemed to hang motionless in space. The President glanced at the TV monitor in front of him. Their speed was Mach 4, and yet the machine was only working at three-quarters of its full capacity. A steward poured cocktails and at one o'clock, American time, grilled chicken and Pouilly-Fumé was served, followed by apple pie, cheese and crackers.

The President finished his meal and closed his eyes. Things,

he mused, before slipping into unconsciousness, were going like clockwork.

Dubrovsky soaped his hairy chest vigorously, working up a huge lather and spreading it over his belly and his thighs. The bathroom was filled with steam and smelled of carbolic and sweat. A laquered mirror that covered one wall was completely misted over, reflecting only a ghostly image of the Russian leader as he stood up in the gleaming, cast iron tub and finished his ablutions.

An attendant with a plastic apron picked up a jug of clear water and tipped it over Dubrovsky's back, rinsing away the lather and bubbles. Dubrovsky stepped out of the tub and grabbed a big, rough textured towel.

'That's all,' he said to the servant. 'You can go.'

The man withdrew, carrying with him a whole paraphernalia of bathroom equipment, loofas, blocks of yellow soap, foot square flannels, scrubbing brushes and bath oil. Dubrovsky sat in a wicker chair and rubbed his hair with another towel having wrapped his body in the first one.

Ten yards away, vaguely outlined through the steam, a man sat on a small, wooden stool. He had a square, peasant's face and cropped hair. His uniform was bulging with the bulk of his muscles and his immense hands were clasping a slender document case.

'It's all in there,' said Dubrovsky, towelling himself vigorously. 'A verbatim statement. You find it incredible. Yes?'

Major General Ivan Turgenovitz nodded solemnly.

'Incredible, Comrade. So incredible that it might be true.'

Dubrovsky stopped rubbing and ran his fingers through his mane of damp hair.

'Exactly what I concluded, General. Now, do your people confirm that such a device could actually *work*.'

The General forced a smile, but it made his iron features crease like a bear's snout.

'Yes, Comrade Premier. It can most definitely work. We have no doubt of it.'

Dubrovsky stood up and broke wind with a sharp report.

'Ah,' he said, stretching. 'Who would have dreamed of such

a thing even five years ago? The President of the United States – here in Mother Russia, with a computer sunk in his chest that can alienate our nuclear power plant in Dimitrov, a hundred miles away mark you, and cause the water to drain away and trigger an immense plutonium malfunction that will destroy not only Moscow itself but the whole of Eastern Europe, China and God knows where else. Such a prospect sounds like the ravings of a decadent Western novelist or newspaperman and yet, and yet, it is true!

The General stood up, beads of perspiration showing on his broad, mongol forehead.

‘Dr Savola has prepared a counterplan, Comrade Premier, When shall you hear it?’

Dubrovsky was combing his hair now, his features contorted as he squinted in the steamy mirror.

‘I shall hear it after dinner Comrade. You will, of course, join me. I have uncovered a case of Chateau Lafite ’89. It would be a crime to drink such a vintage alone!’

Lying to the United States Ambassador was the hardest part of President Byfield’s task. The Ambassador was a decent, honourable man and he had swallowed every word of the President’s phoney reasoning for the visit.

‘All I ask, John,’ said the President, ‘is half an hour alone with Dubrovsky, after the State dinner and John, I mean alone. Just the two of us – Anatole and me – just like two old buddies.’

The Ambassador had nodded, agreeing at once, even though he was puzzled by the request. Talks about arms limitation usually needed a battery of advisors and specialists in attendance on both sides – the subject was too technical and too far reaching for world leaders to discuss on their own. But President Byfield Rochester was a very individual president, a bit of a cornball in his way, with his Southern drawl and his homespun philosophy but a powerful and determined man nonetheless.

At the American Embassy in Moscow the President took a shower and changed from his travelling clothes of slacks and sports-coat into a more formal suit. The negro valet insisted that he wear something thick and warm, warning that ‘these Moscow nights can be real mean, Mr President’,

At seven o'clock, the President, his Ambassador, Jay Kettner, General Wentworth, six aides and a marine captain all climbed into a fleet of black Cadillac limousines and began the short drive to the Kremlin.

It was bitterly cold as the valet had forecast and a flurry of snow whirled around the deserted streets.

The hospitality wing inside the Kremlin is breathtakingly opulent. Flawless crystal chandeliers illuminate stately rooms hung with tapestry and silk maroon wallpapers.

The main dining hall is linked to a reception room by arched doorways and a thick red carpet runs between both rooms. Only the very observant would notice that those parts of the marble floor left uncovered by the carpet still carry within their mosaic pattern the insignia of Czar Nicholas II.

In a society purporting to be equal, the casual visitor would have been surprised to see the regiment of flunkies that had been assembled to serve at the banquet.

A sharp imagination might have transposed on this black suited throng the glittering silk jackets, powdered wigs and knee breeches of a bygone age.

High above the long oak table, already gleaming with cut glass and old silver, a massive portrait of Lenin hung, its image set boldly in a gigantic red star.

Anatole Dubrovsky swallowed his third large vodka and glanced up at the gilt sunburst clock on the wall of the reception room. Byfield would be exactly on time, that much he knew. The official invitation had said seven-fifteen and seven-fifteen it would be. Two and a half minutes to go. Time for one more drink. He held his empty glass and a black suited waiter filled it to the brim immediately.

The small library in the south wing of the Kremlin is an oblong room with tall, curtained windows looking directly over Red Square. It has a warm, clubby atmosphere with its old leather chairs and finely bound volumes that reach up to the ceiling. Although the central heating was turned up fully, a log fire crackled in the grate.

Dubrovsky sat in a wing chair, his huge hands clasped around

a quarter of a pint of cognac. President Rochester faced him on a small sofa and, for the first time in several months, he was enjoying a cigarette. Dubrovsky raised his glass.

'So, Mr President. As you can see, we are quite alone. And, you have my solemn word, we are not overheard either.'

President Rochester managed a weak grin. Even Anatole Dubrovsky couldn't guarantee that. The Russians were paranoid about eavesdropping devices and this room was certainly bugged. But it didn't matter. Nothing mattered. His plan was almost complete.

'Anatole,' he said slowly, using the Russian leader's Christian name for the first time that evening. 'We are old adversaries, you and I. Both of us full of years. And both of us, I am sure, seeing our duties and our responsibilities from different ends of an immense spectrum. I have no wish to minimize these differences. They exist. They are reality. But I am dying, Anatole – I have only a little time left on this earth and I crave to leave some mark, some smudge on the pages of history. What can I do? How will the American people judge me? They fear you and the Soviet bloc. You are their enemy – no Anatole – this is not a personal assault – just a philosophical analysis. They are baffled. Afraid. They want their children to live in peace, but in the kind of peace that is enshrined in the American dream – not the Communist nightmare.'

Dubrovsky's face hardened and he drew slowly on a fat cigar, 'What are you saying, Mr President?'

The American glanced down at the glowing tip of his cigarette, silent for a moment.

'What am I saying, Anatole? I am saying that before I die I want to deliver to the people of the free world a gift they will never forget. The gift of peace.'

Dubrovsky leant forward, his face gleaming in the firelight, 'And how do you propose to deliver such a gift?'

The President crushed his cigarette into the ashtray with a sudden, savage movement.

'By destroying what menaces them. Once and for all. Listen carefully to what I say, Anatole, time is running out, for you, for me, for Russia. In my body is a small device, placed there alongside the pacemaker that keeps me alive. They are con-

nected, these two small miracles of technology, and when I die and my old heart stops beating, the second device – the most incredible little computer ever devised by man, will be activated to send out a series of ultra high frequency transmissions that will cause—'

The President stopped in full cry and then his eyes went wide. Something small and sharp had struck him on the back of the neck – no more than a pinprick, but it sent a shock wave of numbness down his limbs and through his body. Dubrovsky was grinning at him like a wolf, the glass of cognac still in his hand.

'My apologies, Mr President. But one of my aides has just fired a small dart into your neck. The sensation – or lack of it – that floods your body in a paralysing drug, the very latest and the most powerful. You can hear and you can see, but alas you cannot move.'

The President rolled his eyes and his lips quivered but no sound would come. Dubrovsky chuckled and took a swig of cognac.

'You were going to put your hand inside your jacket, weren't you Mr President, and you were going to wrench out the little wire that connects your pacemaker to your doomsday machine and hoopla!'

The Russian leader sank back in his chair and shook his head.

'But now Mr President, you are alive and we intend to keep you alive until my surgeons have cut open your chest and removed the little computer. Oh yes, such an operation can now be performed in twenty minutes by means of a freezing anaesthetic we have perfected here in Russia. Within half an hour you will be stitched up again, minus the computer, scar tissue intact but, and here's the rub, you will then suffer a massive cardiac failure and I shall be obliged to call for help, but it will be too late Mr President, too late, you will be dead and we will be alive.'

He leant across and shouted the last words into the paralysed American's face,

Jay Kettner looked at his watch. The President had been gone fifteen minutes now – zero hour must be imminent. He tried to

pay attention to what the Russian diplomat was saying but his head was pounding and his heart was racing. It was for America, this terrible thing they were doing, for America and the free world. A sheen of perspiration gleamed on his forehead and he felt himself swaying. The Russian was raising his glass in salute – 'To peaceful coexistence,' he was saying, 'To peaceful co-existence!'

The surgeon's face was obscured by a mask as he leant over President Rochester's naked torso. The American was stretched along the length of a large sofa and his legs were covered with a sheet.

Two guards stood by the door, listening, while Dubrovsky faced the window, gazing impassively across Red Square,

'Make haste,' he said softly. 'And make it perfect.'

As the surgeon leant forward, scalpel in hand he saw the old American's eyes flicker and his lips move.

'Damn,' said the surgeon, unemotionally, 'the first drug is wearing off – give me the syringe.'

Even as the Russian spoke, President Rochester could sense the feeling rushing back into his face. He could taste his saliva, touch his teeth, move his tongue. Carefully, he dislodged the small capsule of cyanide from behind his left molar and positioned it between his upper and lower incisors. Then he bit it hard, and swallowed,

Outside in the Great Hall, Jay Kettner was reviving from a brief faintness, a waiter had caught him as he stumbled and offered him a chair. Now he sat facing a window gazing numbly at the rooftops of Moscow silhouetted against the dark, leaden sky.

Suddenly, on the northern horizon, there was an explosion of vivid orange light and the heavens were illuminated by its incandescent glow.

Kettner closed his eyes and lowered his head on to his chest.

Outside in the Square a wind had sprung up and while the orb of orange light on the horizon grew brighter a huge radioactive cloud, spreading like a mushroom drifted slowly towards the sleeping city,

Bessie Jay

Incident in Cairo

The dry, Egyptian wind known as the 'Khamsin' whipped across the deserted square, flinging sand and grit against the windscreen of my rented Fiat.

I lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply. It was two hours since my wife had gone into the Egyptian Museum – and even her love of Middle Eastern antiquities couldn't account for so extended a visit. Of course, Dr Nestlewhite would be with her, the young, arrogant, handsome Dr Nestlewhite, who I intended to murder in a spectacular and gruesome fashion.

I'd discovered their sordid little liaison soon after we'd arrived in Cairo. The bitch scarcely attempted to hide her infidelities any more and half an hour after Nestlewhite had met us in the bar at Shepherd's, she'd been giving off the usual signals. The half-parted lips, the langorous crossing and uncrossing of her legs, holding his hand unnecessarily when he offered to light her cigarette. Of course, Nestlewhite, being an American from Boston, had responded with what he thought was gentlemanly interest, but none of this had fooled me.

I'd seen it all before, damn her eyes. The lugubrious Greek waiter in Athens, the deck steward on the QE II, the riding instructor in Andalusia, the tennis coach at the Beverly Hills Hotel in California. But enough was enough. A man could only take so much humiliation.

Not that I hadn't tried to avenge myself before. I had certainly tried. Hadn't quite worked out, though. The Greek waiter, for example, it had been my plan to stab him with a swordstick as he left the restaurant down at Piraeus, but the bloody Greek oaf had left by another door and I had only succeeded in slightly wounding a hen that had wandered out of the restaurant kitchens. An aggrieved manager had expostulated with me, claiming that the stringy bird was destined to be the

next day's *specialité de la maison* and I was forced to pay an exorbitant sum to prevent the man summoning the police.

I'd fared no better with the deck steward on the QE II. This lout, with his Levantine chuckle and oily charm had mounted my wife in one of the lifeboats during a ship's concert. My plan was to way-lay the fellow on the boat deck and chuck him over the side. Unfortunately, I slipped on a patch of spray and fell overboard myself, necessitating a full rescue operation with all the attendant embarrassment and humiliation.

The Spanish riding instructor, with his pencil-thin moustache and ridiculously tight jodphurs had enjoyed Mrs Salaman's thrusting loins in a hayloft behind the 'El Rodriguez School for the Equestrian Arts'. In this instance, my brilliant plan was to half-sever the girth on the instructor's prancing stallion so that he would be thrown off at full gallop and dash his brains out on a rocky protruberance, with which I had noted, the Andalusian Plains were liberally dotted. Unfortunately, as I had been slicing through the canvas girth with my Harrod's penknife, a car had backfired somewhere in the distance, startling the horse so that he reared, catching my tie, also from Harrods, in the stirrup. Then with great vigour, the stallion had bolted, dragging me by my throat for two hundred yards over terrain that offered little or no comfort to my thinly clothed body. On reflection of this event, I conceded that I was indeed fortunate to have escaped with multiple fractures of the hip and shin and mild concussion.

It would be churlish to describe the incident of the poisoned tennis ball as a fiasco. But it was, nonetheless, something a little short of a success.

Mrs Salaman, her lust unslaked after a week in the Californian sun, had set eyes upon the tennis coach at the Beverly Hills Hotel. While I myself had consumed several pink gins in the polo lounge of the self-same hotel, she had seduced the bronzed young Los Angelean on the very gravel of his own practise court. My plan was essentially simple. Immerse an ordinary tennis ball in a solution of sulphuric acid, methane and nitro-glycerine and then lob the lethally saturated spheroid into the court of play! The coach, with his odious suntanned thighs, would stoop to pick it up and bingo! Multiple acid burns, severe shock, heart arrest and death!

Unfortunately, the wretched fellow had struck the alien ball – lobbed by me from behind a nearby shrub – high over the surrounding fence where it had bounced harmlessly in the road until a French poodle of uncertain lineage had swallowed it whole. The poor animal's digestive system had been unable to cope with such an unscheduled invasion and caused the hapless pooch to evacuate its bowels over a parked Ford Thunderbird. This car, as luck would have it, had been rented by Yours Truly only the day previously and the corrosive effects of the poodle's emergency diarrhoea finally cost me three hundred and ninety-seven dollars for a cellulose touch-up job.

For several years, Mrs Salaman had nagged me to take her on a holiday to Egypt. It was, she argued, a cradle of civilization with its history of art and philosophy, its pyramids, its trackless desert wastes and belly-dancing at the El Salam Hotel accompanied by Norwegian champagne at seventeen quid a bottle.

For years I myself had nursed a weakness for hieroglyphics and the Tutankhamen legend and so it was with little or no resistance that I forked out the cash for two first class air fares to Cairo plus a lavish five-roomed suite at the El Salam in Heliopolis.

At first, sightseeing at Giza and eating in the rooftop restaurant of Shepherds seemed all that Mrs Salaman wanted to do. I had been fascinated by the stunning contrasts of the country. The suburb of Heliopolis, a few kilometres outside the city centre of Cairo was sprouting new apartment blocks and shopping precincts but amid the builders' rubble and the cement mixers old Arabs still lived – stubbornly refusing to be rehoused in the concrete towers of Babylon. Whole families had settled themselves in the man-made ruins of this municipal wasteland. The old women, fat and sallow, their black robes frayed and torn, carried huge bundles on their heads, moving with unhurried dignity among the cement piles and mounds of shattered bricks. Goats, chickens and scrawny dogs accompanied these nomads of the jet age and no amount of bureaucratic urging could upset their timeless, rhythmic routine.

Old men, with leathern faces peered from the folds of their desert headdress, they squatted on their haunches amid the nightmare ruins, chewing dates and salty nuts while half-naked children gambolled on the corrugated iron sheets,

Across the Nile, in Giza, one could still feel, or sense, the Egypt that once had been. The mindbending hugeness of the desert, the gaunt beauty of the pyramids, the camel drivers silhouetted on their awkward mounts against the purple skyline. And, in the city itself, with its smells and sounds – dark serpentine alleys running like choked arteries away from the glittering main thoroughfares – the bulbous onion-domed mosques from which the faithful were now summoned to prayer by tape-recorded message.

The atmosphere of crumbling, near chaos that permeated the bustling streets, potholes, broken copings, attempts at shoring up collapsed walls long since abandoned. The bedlam of traffic, incessant braying of motor horns, pedestrians in a confused mixture of ancient and modern dress, the Fez and Levi jeans being a common mixture. Open fronted shops crammed with rows of fruit, dried meat, half-cured goatskins. The ancient, miraculous buses with their bodies dented and scraped and their back windows punched out, crammed beyond belief with laughing, gibbering Egyptians, some of them clinging precariously to the outsides, defying gravity and ignoring fares.

The River Nile, a silver-grey ribbon splitting the city in two halves, bridged at several points, making it look modern and depressingly ordinary. Only the occasional, forlorn sailboat with its scimitar prow and turbaned fisherman served as a reminder that this was the waterway of Cleopatra and the Pharaohs and not the Rhine or the Thames or the Seine.

The food, however, I confess I found less than fascinating. With my usual innocent eagerness, I had opted for a genuine Egyptian meal at Shepherds, while Mrs Salaman stuck to steak and chips.

With a flourish my wretched intestines were later to regret I had ordered *Kalauwi* and a side plate of *Ataiyef*. The former had turned out to be an enormous helping of grilled offal on a bed of parsley, and the latter an almost indigestible cheese filled dough, folded and fried in a dense oil and not unlike Readimix cement to the palate.

To crown this altogether monumental first course, I had chosen *Baklawa*, heavy, fat pastries flavoured with sour nuts, almonds, ginger and what appeared to be half a gallon of resinous honey,

The convulsions performed by my stomach and delicate intestinal membranes later that night had kept half the hotel awake with their orchestration of bubbling, squirting, heaving and urging. Mrs Salaman had moved into the living-room of the suite and locked the door. Not, as it turned out, an altogether unwise decision.

I glanced at my watch impatiently. Surely, they hadn't chosen the Egyptian Museum for an act of adulterous licence? It was unthinkable. Or was it? Mrs Salaman did enjoy a regular carnal trouncing, and had been known to perform lustful acts in the most unlikely places. With a plumber in the Whispering Gallery of St Paul's, for example. And on ice skates at Streatham Rink with an Australian dentist. I would have minded less if the wretch hadn't been an Australian. Even as these depressing reminiscences flooded back to me, I saw Mrs Salaman and Dr Nestlewhite appear at the gates of the museum.

They strolled over towards the car, arm in arm, chattering like children. Dutifully, I climbed out and opened the rear doors for them. Ignoring me, they slumped on the back seat, lost in an enthusiastic re-run of what they had just seen.

'—and do you know,' drawled Nestlewhite in his Bostonian accent, 'When the body was being prepared for mummification in the embalmer's tent, the priest would draw the brain through a nostril and put the other organs into four canopic jars. The heart always remained in the body for the journey into the afterlife.'

I dwelt for a moment, exquisitely, on the prospect of drawing Dr Nestlewhite's brain through one of his superior, arched nostrils, but the pleasant thought was interrupted by Mrs Salaman's shrill voice.

'Don't just sit there, darling — drive us to Giza, Clancy wants to see the Great Pyramid of Cheops, it's one of the Seven Wonders of the World.'

Silently, I nodded, and started the engine. Giza it would be then — and a horrible death for bloody Nestlewhite. Oh yes, the American medico would laugh on the other side of his face when he was buried under forty-five tons of Mokattam limestone that had been dragged by slaves across the Nile four thousand five hundred years previously.

This time, I knew, my plan was *certain* to succeed. The pre-

paration and research had been immaculate. Nothing could go wrong.

The Arab guide had a face like crumpled vinyl. His shabby robe hung loosely from skeletal shoulders and he wore a blue saffron headdress that half obscured his tiny, gnarled features.

'Belief in an afterlife,' he said, in a surprisingly rich baritone, 'is the single fact that renders the art of Ancient Egypt intelligible.'

The little knot of tourists stood in the shadow of the Great Pyramid of Cheops, listening intently to the guide's preamble. They were a mixed bunch, with a fair sprinkling of Americans, most of whom were overweight and dressed, hideously, in loud, tartan trousers and flowered shirts. Bellies like trapped balloons wobbled gently behind the tasteless fabric while the womenfolk, only distinguishable as such by their iron grey bouffant hairstyles, kept up a ceaseless battery of clicks and whirrs as they photographed every object in sight.

The Arab guide paused, like the old theatrical he was, and waved an arm.

'Death,' he continued, 'was considered but a necessary transition to the next world where the dead continued an existence without end that in many ways resembled the one they had just left. This is the reason why bodies were embalmed, why funerary offerings were provided in such abundance. It explains too, why the retinue of servants accompanied their master as little wooden figures and were buried together with him. Every aspect of the existence of the living and their possessions were held to be at the eternal disposal of the dead.'

The old man turned and walked towards the base of the Great Pyramid.

'Come,' he said, 'we shall enter a world that was created 2,500 years before the birth of Christ.'

The group shuffled forward with little clucks of awe and approval and the cameras whirled with renewed intensity.

Inside the cool interior of the Great Pyramid, they had to stoop double as they filed along the low corridors into the musty-smelling King's Chamber. The old Arab stood by a broken sarcophagus and smiled at his charges,

'As you can see, it is empty, as indeed are all the tombs of Egypt – save one – that of the boy King Tutankhamen. The edifice is one of the Seven Wonders of the World – a miracle of construction that would baffle even the most advanced engineers of the twentieth century. Each rock and each granite beam is held in place by gravity and the interplay of weight against weight. There is no mortar – no adhesive substance of any kind. And look! See how the razor sharp edges of the stone, cut by hand, fit so flushly with their neighbours. The geometry and the precision is a wonder in itself.'

One rubbery Texan with plum coloured slacks and white shoes muttered 'Jeeze' and his wife, overawed by the massive dignity of the empty tomb, reprimanded him with a piercing 'Shhhh!'

The Arab guide turned, swirling his robe with dramatic effect.

'And now,' he said sepulchurally, 'We make the ascent. It is steep, it is hard. Stay close to each other, we will rest frequently, Come!'

The shaft that leads to the apex of the Great Pyramid is cut from limestone in the north east cant and is so low-ceilinged that the ascent needs to be made almost on hands and knees. The Egyptian authorities have installed lights and a handrail but it is still a pulse-quickenning experience as you progress up the slope to the top.

The Arab guide allowed four short periods of rest for his gasping, out of condition group before bringing them out on to the thirty-three-foot-square flat top.

The view was spectacular and soon the cameras and the superlatives were working overtime.

After an interval of five minutes, by which time some of the plumper members of his party had overcome their breathlessness, the guide suggested a leisurely descent, where camels awaited to transport them the short distance to the Sphinx.

This extraordinary structure, in reality much less imposing than the glossy travel guide photographs would have us believe, faces an Arab tenement of outstanding ugliness. A few stringy camels squat in the grimy sand and all around are the forlorn reminders of twentieth century progress, Crushed cigarette

packs, battered Cola cans, broken bottles, tiny pyramids of excrement covered with flies.

The poor, broken Sphinx – once a proud lion couchant with a king's head, is heavily disfigured from centuries of neglect and gazes with constipated indifference at the chattering throng that nestle in its shadow, gawping and photographing.

It was here, at this shabby, but nevertheless historic location that I lurked with murder in my heart and a Hungarian bow and arrow secreted about my Austin Reed, showerproof top-coat.

Readers of an astute turn of intellect will not have failed to notice that my original wheeze, i.e. death from being crushed by a two and a half ton rock hewn from Mokattam limestone and dragged by Nubian slaves across the desert 4,500 years previously, had been abandoned.

I make no apology for this. My first, casual attempt to lift, or even budge, one of these stones resulted in a severe twinge in my right groin and it is an established medical fact that men of a certain age are prone to sudden hernias if they overreach themselves.

Browsing in an antique emporium, I chanced upon a bow and arrow which, inexplicably, had been constructed in Budapest and I purchased it for seven Egyptian pounds.

My revenge, therefore, would take on a classic, even majestic style as the lethal sliver of winged metal hurtled towards its target – Dr Clancy Nestlewhite's black, promiscuous heart!

I raised the weapon to my shoulders, testing the power of the catgut bow and, as I did so, Nestlewhite and my wife appeared on camels at the very feet of the Sphinx.

My timing, I noted with a jolt of satisfaction, was impeccable.

I drew back the arrow, squinting down its length in the manner I had observed in such cinematic classics as *Ivanhoe*, *Robin Hood* and *Carry on Sherwood Forest*.

It was at this juncture that my luck abandoned me. As I released the feathered missile, the camel on which Nestlewhite sat, shifted its position and the deadly messenger, instead of plunging into the loathsome medico's torso vanished without trace *into* – or rather *up* – or perhaps *between* – but mere words cannot but coarsen what was an amazing phenomenon.

The camel, in some pain and more than a little startled, took off like a cannonball in the general direction of Luxor at what can only be described as a maniacal gallop.

Four hours later, I regret to record, Nestlewhite was back in the bar of the El Salam Hotel in Heliopolis, enjoying the adulation of a throng while he recounted his adventures and bought extravagant rounds of champagne cocktails.

I showered in rust coloured water – a peculiar speciality of Egyptian hotels – something to do with drains, or lack of them, but I must not be churlish, the El Salam is on the whole rather grand. During these technicolor ablutions, I planned my next move, my resilience and determination undimmed by the afternoon's events. My wife, in her petulant and childish fashion had suggested we visit a night club and enjoy supper while being entertained by 'authentic' belly dancing. The establishment she selected, apparently at random from a guide book, was called the 'Nile Basin' – all credit cards welcomed. The awful Nestlewhite lent weight to my wife's suggestion and I found myself trying to book a table for three by means of the Cairo telephone system. When I say that this was not easy, it represents a massive understatement rather akin to describing Niagara Falls as a trickle of water. According to the latest information, the Cairo telephone system is clogged with sand, only one in four calls actually reaches its destination, and the technical gear is on the point of total collapse.

I reached the 'Nile Basin' nightclub at the seventeenth attempt but was obliged to share the call with an Alexandrian dentist who appeared to be labouring under the misapprehension that he was through to a deaf patient with terminal gum disease. 'Rinse the mouth at once!' he screamed while I negotiated a nice table for three near the band.

My plan for the evening was stark and masterly. I had earlier purchased, at huge expense, a jar of authentic embalming fluid and to this resinous substance I had added a heaped teaspoonful of domestic rat poison. Preparations thus complete I slipped the jar into my dinner jacket and waited.

The taxi, a large and comfortable Mercedes, took us from the hotel deep into the city centre. It was still crowded, the streets and pavements jammed. Eventually, after much cursing and horn-blowing, we arrived at the 'Nile Basin',

It was a scrofulous looking edifice with garish neon signs and a shabbily uniformed commissionaire but my wife and Nestlewhite were enthusiastic.

We entered and were at once assailed by an odour of stale cooking and metal polish. The manager, a sinister fellow with a front tooth missing, showed us to our table. The place was already full and a small orchestra were grinding out Egyptian music while waiters weaved between the tables with trays of food and drink.

The meal, as it transpired, was passable, lightly grilled hoof of buffalo covered in lukewarm pigeon spittle. At least that's what it seemed like to me as I forced it down by the light of one, guttering, tallow candle.

Nestlewhite drank two bottles of Egyptian Beaujolais – not a wise decision in my view, and followed this by several large cognacs. My wife, who had scraped her plate clean, insisted on French champagne and got instead the usual Norwegian rubbish with the art nouveau label and plastic cork.

At the stroke of midnight, a spotlight illuminated a circle of faded red curtain that apparently concealed a small stage. There followed a roll of drums and the curtains parted. The authentic belly dancer was about forty-five and built on the style of a Japanese Sumo wrestler. In her navel something red and glassy glimmered and she wore a veil over her face, which was one blessing at least.

The dance went on interminably and seemed to consist of a series of pelvic thrusts which sent rippling waves over the flabby surface of the dancer's wax-white abdomen. I noticed that my wife and Nestlewhite were both transfixed by this crass performance and I took the opportunity to empty my deadly phial into Nestlewhite's cognac.

It is with profound regret that I am compelled to reveal that before the odious doctor could raise the lethal mixture to his lips the belly dancer, reaching the zenith of her elephantine cavortings, leapt from the stage, sat on Nestlewhite's lap, kissed him on the nose, seized his glass and drained its contents to the last drop!

What followed is hardly worth recording. The belly dancer screamed and bent double, the manager punched me in the throat, my wife fainted in the arms of the wine waiter who was

hanging around in the hope of a tip and a certain amount of furniture was destroyed. The dancer, we later learnt, was made of stern stuff and only suffered an hour or so of bellyache but I received a bill for damages to the night club as a result of the fracas which amounted to three hundred Egyptian pounds.

All bloody Nestlewhite would say was it was 'An evening of local colour and authenticity,' and my wife, needless to say, agreed!

And thus it was, gentle reader, that I planned to risk all with my final throw of the dice and in gambler's parlance, be resolved to do or die without flinching from the consequences. I was finished with shallow artifice, with skulking in the shadows. I purchased a pistol and ammunition in the Bazaar and determined, in broad daylight, to confront Nestlewhite and shoot him dead at point blank range.

First, however, he had to be lured back to the pyramids at Giza. The final dénouement would not be without a certain style, I was, after all an Englishman with a thousand years of civilization behind me.

The luring back procedure was laughingly easy. I obtained two tickets for the 'Son et Lumiere' display which thrills tourists daily in the shadow of the Sphinx. My wife and Nestlewhite accepted them eagerly while I excused myself from joining them by complaining of a slight headache.

Unbeknownst to the artful couple, however, I donned a turban and ragged kaftan and hurried on to Giza in a taxi to set the scene.

A substantial bribe enabled me to gain entrance to a part of the interior of the Great Pyramid of Cheops that was usually forbidden to visitors. It was a small, windowless chamber, carved from the mighty rock, and accessible only by rolling back a three ton, finely balanced boulder.

It was here that the gremlin of misfortune struck again. Instead of leaving the boulder door open, a crack to permit the entry of air and light, I accidentally nudged it with my shoulder and it clicked shut like a clam.

Now I had planned to spring from this hiding place as Nestlewhite and my beloved sauntered past and get the awful deed over with.

Instead, I found myself squatting on my haunches in this stuffy hell-hole with only the light of my long-life Ronson Variflame to illuminate the pages in front of me,

I must have been in here for two hours now and I have set my experiences down in careful handwriting in my Boy Scouts Association diary. Then, with infinite patience, I have pushed each individual flimsy page under the hair-thin crack of the mighty door in the hope that someone, somewhere will find them and commit them to posterity.

The thing is, will anybody believe that the writer is incarcerated inside the Great Pyramid of Cheops and is now planning to write a rescue note to follow the aforementioned manuscript?

The light has failed and the air is becoming stuffy, I grow drowsy. I can write no more,

Carolyn L. Bird

Dante's Bistro

Gothric O'Hooligan-Dante preferred to be called, just simply, Dante. It was no fault of his that doting parents had wished to attach to him the combined names of a Norwegian philosopher, an Irish flautist and their own obscure appellation. Being given such names, however, did leave a mark on Dante's adult personality that close chums of a charitable disposition might well have described as maniacal. Enemies would certainly have chosen stronger words.

Dante was six-feet-nine-inches tall and built along the lines of a corrugated steel slaughterhouse. The massive body was softened by a fine, handsome head with curly blond hair and sparkling, ice-blue eyes. He also sported an immense tawny beard which was plaited in the style of a Viking warrior. In spite of this rather daunting appearance Dante was a gentle soul and his one passion which surmounted all others was catering.

Even as a child at home in Tooting's Irish-Norwegian ghetto, he would occasionally fry an egg or boil a sprout for his parents' tea. The passion for things culinary flowered in his teens until he was offered a job in the kitchens of a South Kensington hotel. Here he learnt his craft with devoted enthusiasm, mastering the techniques of French, Italian and even Russian cooking.

London was in the early stages of a gastronomic renaissance and excellent little restaurants were popping up all over the City. Dante was fascinated. Once a month he would save enough from his wages to try a full blown dinner at one of these *haute cuisine* establishments and he soon acquired a keen palate for fine cooking and even finer wines. The trend was towards exotica, Japanese cafes with Italian chefs, Russian grill rooms which specialized in Mongolian peasant dishes. Combination restaurants where the discerning gourmet could eat

Greek food with chopsticks and wash the meal down with Australian Rosé. Dante watched all this with a growing sense of excitement. The eating public were ripe for experiment, that much was clear. They had money, and they had cosmopolitan tastes. A gap in the market existed, and only a man of daring, possibly lunatic daring, could satisfactorily fill that gap. Dante was determined that he could be the catalyst for the world's most bizarre and unusual restaurant and, by so doing, become rich, famous and celebrated.

He sold his car, an ancient Citroën, and persuaded his bank manager to lend him the few thousand pounds necessary to lease and equip an old shop just off Sloane Square, in Chelsea. At first, with its stripped pine walls and the menu chalked on a blackboard, Dante's restaurant was a shade austere. He offered simple dishes, but superbly prepared, and within weeks he had built up a strong clientele. The fare was of the conventional 'bistro' variety, roast baby chickens, corn on the cob, fresh vegetables, steaks, rough carafe wines and so on.

After two months, he introduced his first bizarre speciality. At first customers assumed it was a joke, but Dante, towering over them in a striped apron, assured them it was absolutely genuine. The item, chalked up on the board among the 'starters' simply said:

Dante's Special

Groin of Panther Soup 70p

It was delicious, and moreover, absolutely genuine. Dante had purchased a brace of dead panthers from a travelling, Hungarian circus and crammed the immense creatures into his deep freeze.

His contract led to an interview with the London Zoo and with several collectors of exotic animals. The purchases were not easy, and obtaining prime specimens a hazardous task.

Within another month Dante's menu looked like this:

Dante's Monday Special

Gibraltar Monkey's Eyeballs, sautéed in Hoof of Buffalo
gravy

125p

Deep-fried Rhinoceros Testicles and chips

130p

Braised ovaries of Andean Llama with thinly sliced Parrot's
liver

205p

The result was sensational. Queues formed outside Dante's bistro an hour before opening time. Dante doubled his prices and restocked the restaurant cellar with expensive French wines. Still the customers came, in droves.

Six months later the establishment was the talk of London and celebrated personalities began to patronize it, hoping for a mention in the gossip columns.

A famous pop singer was photographed enjoying the delectable nostril of dromedary stew and his companion, a blonde actress of dubious morality, told a reporter that she had never enjoyed a meal so much in her life. She had chosen gorilla's thighs simmered to a golden brown in butter and warthog blood.

A week later two Members of Parliament and a restaurant critic from the *Sunday Times* had dined together on powdered spine of Siberian wolf and delicious hunks of braised kangaroo buttock.

Dante paid off the bank loan and hired six waitresses with dazzling smiles and hourglass figures. A simple three course dinner now cost twenty pounds, without wine. Dante bought a Ferrari. Booking in advance was imperative and the bistro was open seven days a week.

The first anniversary was a 'by invitation only' affair and Dante's guest list was the envy of London's smart society. The menu, printed by Smythsons of Bond Street on blue velvet paper, was simple – but dramatic,

Giraffe throat soup with Croutons

Afghanistan Water Snake stuffed with Carthorse Pâte

Penis of Racoon in Pastry Puffballs

Sprouts – Carrots – New Potatoes

Sugared Alsations' Brains with Custard

Coffee – Liqueurs – Chocolate Mints

Chateau Lafite '59

Gevrey Chambertain '55

The world's press beat a path to Dante's door and he was interviewed by David Frost on a late night chat show,

With his riches and fame, Dante realized that London alone could not contain his genius and with the maximum publicity he flew to Los Angeles and opened 'Dante's Hollywood Bistro' amid scenes of such hysteria that the Los Angeles Police Department had all its leave cancelled for three weeks. Rich hippies from the California Hills swarmed to the establishment in 1962 Chevrolets and the film colony fought like wolves for the best window tables.

A supply of fresh exotic animals was a lot easier to obtain in California and Dante found his visits to London becoming less frequent.

For a while the Chelsea establishment continued to draw the crowds – but Dante's prolonged absences began to show themselves in a deterioration of the food. A careless chef burnt the Javanese funnel spider pie and a badly skinned koala bear drew complaints from a titled patron who got a tuft of fur stuck between his dentures.

Dante hired new staff. A Russian hypnotist with a bald head and a cleft palate who claimed to be the world's greatest saucier. Within two weeks he was fired, ignominiously, for sloshing tinned tomato soup over a particularly delicate vole's scrotum mousse. It was clear that Dante had to face a painful decision. Return home to London and take personal charge of the Chelsea bistro or close it and concentrate on the Californian operation. California won by a nose – primarily because Dante preferred the weather and also because he had struck up a passionate liaison with a negress lion tamer who owned a Tudor-style bungalow overlooking Malibu Beach.

It was here, surrounded by furniture that looked as if it might have been designed by a colour-blind Walt Disney, that Dante conceived of his long term master plan.

His girl friend, Samantha, had already encouraged his Hollywood venture by selling him lame pumas at wholesale prices and she also explained the fickle nature of Californian consumers.

'OK, honey,' she had drawled, her gold lamé ski pants bulging with muscle. 'At the moment Dante's Hollywood Bistro is hit city – the biggest thing in LA. But believe me, something else will take its place. It always does, you gotta understand that. Folks down here can't even spell the word loyalty. Look at me

– do you think I want to be a lion tamer. Jesus H. Christ, I'm a trained wig maker. Who needs it? Hollywood's full of wig makers. Every third person you meet on Sunset Boulevard is a wig maker. They're only out on the street taking a breath of fresh air between making goddamned wigs, for Christ's sake!

'Look, sweetheart,' Dante had said, patiently stroking her taut thigh with his pork sausage fingers. 'What do you suggest?'

Samantha had stretched like a cat – sending Dante's temperature up four degrees.

'You gotta dream up a new gimmick, honey. You know like me and you do between the sheets.'

Dante had blushed. He was an Irish-Norwegian chef, things sexual still made him vaguely uncomfortable, at least to talk about.

'What kind of new gimmick?' he had asked, plaintively.

Samantha had kissed him, using about a foot of glistening red tongue, and smiled.

'Something in the food line, honey! The cobbler should stick to his last. But believe me, you gotta dream up something fast. Look at me! I shoulda gone from wig construction to plastic surgery, something logical like that instead of this motherfuckin' lion taming routine. Jesus, those cats stink. Best place for them if you ask me, is in your deep freeze at the Bistro. Right on! Wow, man! Kiss me *there* again.'

'Extensive renovations' was what the sign said. And it was up for nearly three months. Not a lot of actual renovations actually took place during that time, the tables of the Bistro being shrouded in dust sheets and the window shutters securely fastened.

Dante and Samantha, meanwhile were in Europe, and their frenetic itinerary included visits to a Catholic mortuary near the Vatican City, two teaching hospitals in London, a luxury hotel in Monte Carlo, a nursing home in Geneva and a pathologists convention in Vienna.

The negotiations that were conducted at these august establishments were of a lengthy and delicate complexity. Dante wore a pin-striped suit and Samantha tried to bottle down her

buxom figure behind a discreet Givenchy number and thick woollen stockings. At last, satisfied with the outcome of their bargaining, they returned to Los Angeles and put the final touches to an advertising campaign that would launch Dante's new Hollywood Bistro.

The world's press had described Dante's original restaurant in London as a 'sensation' but the new Hollywood Bistro brought forth a cascade of superlatives that surpassed anything that had gone before. The *Hollywood Reporter* called it a 'mega success' and the *Los Angeles Times* admitted to it being a 'thunderstorm of trendiness beyond the wildest dreams of a drug soaked demi-god'.

It was, in fact, the 'ultimate' eating house. Prices were stratospheric – eliminating all but the super-rich and the new decor suitably lavish. The menu, printed on rich, glossy art paper was in itself a collector's piece and, on those occasions when a magpie guest smuggled one off the premises, it could be sold on the black market for eighteen thousand American dollars.

Dante's principle was, as usual, essentially a simple one. Taste sensations enhanced by psychological shock and an atmosphere of affluent corruption.

All the items on the menu were genuine – and, what is more, strictly limited. Dante knew that to maintain such standards would require frequent trips to Europe, but the knife edge of uncertainty added a piquancy both to the food and to the anticipation of the guests. The menu read as follows:

"The Management venture to explain to patrons that there is only one set bill of fare. The quality of the food, and its meticulous preparation are the responsibility of our five world class master chefs. Each dish, however, is inspected by Dante himself who sets standards that can only be dreamed of by other restaurateurs. Food, in our view, should excite not only the palate, but provide a theatre of sensation for the whole body. Sight, sound, smell, touch, intellect, sexuality. All of these will be tantalized by what is placed on the table before you. But now to the food itself:

To begin:

Fetlock of Archbishop soup with Croutons

A recently dead holy man's leg flesh tenderly braised for five hours in a sauce of gymnasts blood mixed with herbs and a rare 1898 Napoleon brandy. The aromatic thick stew is then whisked, peppered, sprinkled with organically grown wheaty croutons and served piping hot in a fluted porcelain dish with a silver spoon. A mind-shattering experience.

Seconds:

Pâté of Grand Prix Driver

A richly seasoned liver pâté obtained at enormous expense from the corpse of an unknown (we must respect the relatives) racing driver, minutes after the fatal impact. The remains buried at sea at our expense with taste and style.

The pâté, studded with Himalayan python's scales is very strong and gamey. We have added rock salt, paprika pepper and half a thimbleful of genuine ballerina's tears obtained from the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, England.

A solemn middle course which will thrill your sense of dignity.

Main Course:

Jugged Goulasch of Human Endeavor

Fully justifying its price of a thousand American dollars a portion, this main dish is one of which Dante is most proud.

The right forefinger of an eminent gynaecologist has been ground to a purée (the man still lives in Paris and volunteered willingly) and added to the delicate tonsils of an Italian baritone. To this immaculate base we have added the frontal lobes of a dead nuclear scientist who twice won the Nobel Peace Prize and, for raffish piquancy, the sex glands of a Portuguese rapist and the eyeballs of a Venetian voyeur who shot himself on the Grand Canal while being apprehended by the police.

Seasoning, a little chopped onion, a quarter of a litre of Beaujolais and the whole, succulent goulasch has been packed into the pre-heated skull of a German chiropodist and pan-simmered over charcoals and incense and oak logs.

Finally, a sprinkling of grated parmesan and the dish arrives on your table steaming hot and exuding an irresistible musk.

Solid gold knives and forks are provided with this dish.

Sweets

Mousse Surprise

We ask patrons to trust us, and enjoy, in thrilling ignorance, this most secret and terrible of recipes.

Coffee – Liqueurs – Cigars

No charge and no limit for the above.

BON APPETIT

Dante.

The success of Dante's Hollywood Bistro was so immense, that in the manner of all brilliant and spectacular things it could not sustain the incredible impetus of those first few months.

Unscrupulous look-alike cafés sprang up along the coastline of Malibu, offering hamburgers of dubious lineage and wines so poisonous that patrons needed cholera injections before being allowed to venture as much as a glassful.

Dante tried to prevent the imitations, but in spite of a battery of expensive lawyers and a few bursts of litigation the rot had clearly set in.

The final, humiliating blow came when a sausage tycoon from the San Fernando Valley began to market take-away 'Ghoul Food' which rapidly became available at every cheap grocery store in the State of California.

Embittered, Dante returned to England with his faithful companion, the wig maker, and together they set up home in a remote part of Sussex. For some years they lived in total seclusion until a few weeks ago a small paragraph appeared in a little known Sussex local paper.

Mr Gothric O'Hooligan-Dante, the retired restaurateur, had died at his home 'Pancreas Manor' aged fifty. The cause of death was unusual, and the coroner could only record a verdict of misadventure. Dante had expired while trying to fry his own foot in a pan of boiling yak's milk.

Edwin Brown

The clock

She was nine years old and trespassing in the forbidden territory of her mother's bedroom. She observed herself in the oval mirror of the richly-stocked dressing-table. Her child's face, pale-skinned, naïve, stared back in excited innocence, the grotesquely painted mouth and cheeks giving her small features a bizarre, clownish quality. The eyebrows were blackened over and extended in ugly lines almost to her temples. She shook her head in annoyance. She could never get those eyebrows right. More haste less speed. She put aside the eyebrow pencil, stretched a hand to the eyeshadow then, impatiently, petulantly, tossed it to one side. No time for fussiness or subtlety. She had other things to do.

She turned away from the looking-glass and opened a door in the wardrobe. Inside was the complete range of her mother's dresses. She reached up and unhooked from the rail a brightly coloured beaded evening gown that shimmered and sparkled even in the half gloom of the late afternoon. She laid it on the bed and, for a heart-pounding moment, took in the full beauty of its grown-up, spellbinding presence. Then, moving swiftly, she manoeuvred her mother's small, round-topped dressing-table stool across the room and set it before a rectangular mirror by the window. She went back to the dress and, with comparative ease, because of the slightness of her body, pulled it hurriedly over her head. Much too long it dropped down her childlike frame and fell in untidy folds around her feet. Lifting it clear of the floor she hobbled across the room and clambered awkwardly on to the stool, at first kneeling, then slowly rising until she was standing precariously perched on the seat-top. She tugged at the gatherings of material about her ankles until they fell clear so that the dress hung straight down from her puny shoulders to the ground. Now, as she surveyed herself in

the mirror, the stool was invisible and the dress a straight fall from shoulders to feet.

What she saw in the mirror was not a nine-year-old school-girl wearing ridiculous make-up and a gown several sizes too large nor did she have any conception of the absurdity of such a situation. She saw herself only as a sophisticated young woman of about twenty-one, elegant, beautiful, poised.

She struck a pose, the kind of pose she imagined was suitable for a glamorous, refined, gracious lady. With both hands she smoothed back her shoulder-length blonde hair and held it in position behind her ears. Experimentally, she piled it on top of her head, one knee forward, one hip jutting to the side in the way she imagined models do and it was at that moment she became conscious that she was not alone in the room. It was a feeling not unfamiliar to her. Several times recently she had experienced the sensation of an unseen presence close by, an awareness that someone or something was watching her. And yet, strangely, she had no apprehension of fear, only a mild curiosity. She glanced over her shoulder but saw nothing. Then, as she turned back towards the dressing-table, she glimpsed, for one subliminal flash of time, the figure of a man reflected in the mirror, a man with lean, dark features, black hair and black upswept eyebrows. He was wearing a long night-cloak and looked something like the Demon King she had seen at the pantomime last Christmas holidays. He was standing just behind her and he was smiling. Then, almost instantaneously, as if he had been switched off, he disappeared, although she was still conscious of his presence in the room. But, even now, albeit with a sense of passing wonder, for some reason she did not understand or question, she was not afraid. In her artlessness, her childish mind still accepted the possibility of the existence of fairies and similar otherworld creatures and she pondered, quite calmly, the apparition at her shoulder a moment ago. Yes, now she thought about it, he was exactly like the Demon King in the pantomime.

He was the one she'd liked out of everyone in the show. She'd thought Aladdin was silly – a girl dressed as a boy. And Aladdin's mother was even sillier. She had liked the Demon

King because he was so handsome and powerful and he made her frightened in an exciting sort of way.

She looked at herself again in the oval glass. If only she could grow up without having to wait. She wanted so much to be an adult like her mother with grown-up clothes, grown-up hair-styles, make-up, high-heeled shoes, weddings, a husband . . .

She smiled to herself. Husband. As long as she could remember she had wanted to marry only one man when she grew up – her father. Recently, with a sense of regret, she had come to understand that this was not possible, but even so, she still experienced pangs of jealousy towards her mother and, without fully comprehending, was secretly glad she was an only child without a brother or sister who would also be possible rivals for her father's affections.

She quite enjoyed school, except for the wearing of school uniform which she hated. Saturday and Sunday were her best days when she could wear more informal, prettier dresses. On Saturday she would go shopping in the High Street with her parents, holding her father by the hand. She was so proud of him, he was so good-looking.

She found herself thinking about the Demon King once again. He was very handsome, she thought, as her father was handsome, swaggering about the stage, cloak swirling, eyes burning, appearing and disappearing in explosions of fire and smoke, not anything like a pop star but much more grown-up (there was that word again) much more like a real man . . .

She stood dreaming before the mirror as she always did on these occasions. Suddenly the sound of the key in the lock of the front door. Almost before she could move, her mother's voice floated up the stairs from the hall,

'I'm back, Elizabeth!'

Hastily, clumsily, she jumped down from the stool and in a frenzy of confusion attempted to struggle out of the dress, tried messily and unsuccessfully to wipe away the make-up from her face. She heard her mother go into the kitchen below, heard her call again.

'Elizabeth! I'm back early. Where are you?'

Footsteps on the stairs. The bedroom door opened. Her mother's shocked voice,

'Elizabeth! Elizabeth, my dress! My best dress!'

She was grabbed, the gown was unzipped and pulled off, she was propelled through the bedroom door and thrust headlong into the bathroom. Her mother was beside herself with rage and distress.

'Get yourself cleaned up – at once! Then straight into bed. You're not to be trusted. Just not to be trusted. We'll let your father deal with you. My best dress! What have you been doing—?'

It was next day. She was on her way home from school. She stood in her school uniform, satchel over shoulder, gazing into the window of a High Street boutique, Madam Leroy's, devouring with her eyes, the provocative display of dresses on the other side of the glass – a hundred pounds, a hundred and fifty pounds, even two hundred pounds. She sighed. If only . . .

A man's voice, low, pleasant, in her ear.

'You can't wait to grow up, can you, Elizabeth?'

She turned her head sharply. He was there, just behind her, tall, attractive, arrogant, cloaked in jet-black from head to foot, a strikingly exotic figure, a sight so outlandish that she wondered why other people in the street appeared not to see him. He was smiling down at her. Suddenly she was short of breath.

'If you want to grow up fast,' he said, 'ask your father to buy you a clock for your bedroom.'

Her throat was closed. She could not answer. Her sense of exhilaration was almost too much to bear, but still she was not afraid. He continued to smile. His eyes were like magic.

'It will be quite easy. He will buy you a clock and it will be the one I want him to buy. Ask him. But remember. You can never be a little girl again. Think about it. It's your decision.'

His hand touched her shoulder briefly then he was gone. She stood motionless for a long time gazing blankly into the shop window waiting for the thudding of her heart to subside.

'A clock? Now what would you want with a clock in your room? People go to bed to sleep. A ticking clock would only keep you awake.'

But as he spoke these words her father's eyes were twinkling and she knew it would be all right. She would get her clock in spite of the protests of her mother.

She went with her father next day – a Saturday – into the High Street. There was only one shop that sold clocks. They looked into the window at the assortment of timepieces and her father said, 'There's the one for you. Just there, see, next to the marble clock.'

It was small and circular, made of black plastic with a white face and black hands. On the face was painted a smiling mouth, a longish nose and two dancing dark eyes.

They entered the shop. The shop owner, middle-aged, looked in the window and picked up the clock.

'Funny,' he said, turning it over in his hand. 'I don't remember seeing this before. Didn't even know we had it in stock.' He rubbed his face reflectively. 'But I expect my son knows about it. He always dresses the window. He's at lunch at the moment but when he comes back . . .'

Smiling, he wound up the clock, setting it right by his own wristwatch, then he lowered it carefully into a cardboard box, sealing it with Sellotape. He placed it on the counter,

'There you are, sir. Five pounds ninety-five.'

Her father paid the money and they left. As they walked along the street she held the box to her ear, listening to the ticking sound which came quite clearly through the cardboard container. She felt elated and in a state of excited anticipation as if the purchase had started a series of happy events. She was impatient to get home and put the clock in its place on her bedside table. For the first time they could remember, her parents had none of the usual difficulties in getting her to go to bed that evening,

She lay on her side in bed, staring, as she had been doing for the past ten minutes, at the face of the black plastic clock only inches away on the bedside table. Something very strange had been happening since her mother kissed her goodnight only about ten minutes ago. *During that short time the clock hands had moved forward more than an hour.*

She had come to bed at her usual time, seven-thirty. Her

mother had stayed in the room for less than a minute and yet the hands now stood at a quarter to nine. She wondered if it was her imagination. Had she been asleep? Did she doze off for a while? She felt confused. She deliberately looked away, counted up to twenty and looked again at the clock. Now the hands showed five minutes to nine. Uneasily, and with a slight feeling of panic, she turned completely over in the bed and stared at the opposite wall. She began to tick off seconds in her head. She counted up to three hundred. Five minutes. She looked again at the clock. Half past nine. She lay very still, trying to think clearly, fighting off the disquiet that nagged at her nerve edges, reasoning that the clock was faulty, that it should go back to the shop and be repaired or exchanged, but she knew, with simple childish wisdom, that she was wrong, knew, above all, that here was something quite unaccountable, an abnormality. Her gaze was drawn back to the clock again and she saw now that the time showing was ten minutes past ten and suddenly, with a start of fear, realized she could actually see the hands turning – eleven o'clock, twelve o'clock, one o'clock, faster and faster until they became a revolving blur and almost disappeared. And all the time the eyes on the face of the clock seemed to be taking on a life of their own, burning, dazzling, hypnotic, eyes she had seen before, in the mirror of the dressing-table and only yesterday in the street and, in the moment of recognition, she felt herself drifting away, her eyelids fluttered and closed, she slept . . .

Out of the blackness of nowhere she returned slowly towards the light. By degrees she became aware of a low-pitched hum like the whine of distant machinery, a wheel rotating at speed, but almost at once she realized that the sound was coming from close by.

She made an effort to open her eyes and, through the half-closed lids, saw that the room was illuminated by a soft blue glow. She turned her face towards the source of the light. On the bedside table the clock was bright with a blue incandescent brilliance, the sound of humming emanating from the point where the hands were revolving at incredible speed and the dark eyes floated and danced somewhere in the centre, provoking,

tantalizing, seductive. She could sense the familiar presence once again in the room but for the first time she was afraid.

More awake now she was sharply aware that her nightdress appeared to have shrunk. It was so small and tight that as she moved slightly in the bed the material at the back split from the neck down to the waist and the bed itself seemed to be so much shorter that her feet were sticking out over the bottom edge.

Everything around her had changed.

The ceiling was lower, the walls had closed in, her dressing-table was smaller and, panic-stricken, she thought she had woken up in a strange room. Heart thumping, she sat up quickly. Her nightdress fell away leaving her naked to the waist. She stared down in amazement at her body. *Her* body? It was not possible. Two perfectly formed young breasts above a smooth round belly, arms that were long and slender, that is all she could see, was she having a bad dream, who was she, what was happening, where was Elizabeth? I am only nine, this is not me. Oh, mummy, where are you?

The sense of someone in the room was almost overpowering. She knew it was him. Where was he? Why couldn't she see him? She was so afraid, why couldn't she scream?

She tried to get out of bed, threw back the bedclothes. Her legs were the legs of a young woman, strong, smooth . . .

She heard his voice. 'Elizabeth.'

Suddenly he was there, looking down at her. She could not move.

'Elizabeth. You wanted to grow up quickly. Well, you have. You are seventeen, Elizabeth. In one hour from now you will be thirty years of age. The clock will make that possible. In two hours time you will be fifty. That's very grown-up. But you wanted too much too quickly, Elizabeth. You're still only a child. The mind cannot develop without experience of life – and it's too late now. The clock is turning. You will sleep soon and when the morning comes . . .'

He smiled, a smile of utter evil and depravity. She heard his whisper, corrupt, gloating.

'But first, Elizabeth . . .'

He stretched out a hand towards her and in a flash of nightmarish insight she shrank away, pressing herself back on the

bed, at once repelled and attracted, stark terror and revulsion fusing with an unaccountable and unfamiliar sensuality. His eyes. She could not resist . . .

His fingers were as cold as ice,

At seven thirty next morning Elizabeth's mother went softly into her daughter's room, glanced briefly at the bed and the outline of her sleeping child, smiled tolerantly to herself as she observed the black plastic clock ticking serenely away on the bedside table, walked over to the window and opened the curtains. She paused for a moment or two, admiring the beauty of the morning sun on the garden below. She turned to the bed.

'Elizabeth.' She bent over the sleeping form, gently pulled at the bed covers.

The head on the pillow was almost bald. What hair remained in patches was withered and grey and the scalp had a profusion of small ulcerations across its surface. The fetid odour of ageing flesh rose from the bedclothes. The head turned towards her. The yellow, wizened face of an ancient hag gazed bemusedly up at her, toothless, shrunken. The wasted, colourless lips moved in a travesty of a grin. The voice was thin, barely audible,

'Good morning, mummy,' said the hag.

Gregory Alexander

The singer not the throng

The Lear jet with silver and blue livery touched down on the runway and its engines roared into reverse thrust. Using less than half of the runway's massive length the pilot swung it off at the first intersection and began taxiing towards Terminal One.

High above in a steel and glass tower filled with two million pounds worth of equipment a young traffic controller nudged his colleague and grinned.

'If a scheduled airline pilot did that he'd be on the carpet before you could say Jack Robinson. Short landings like that can reduce the active life of a plane's brakes by as much as two thirds. The pilot must be daft - he had miles of runway to play with.' His colleague glanced up briefly from the radar screen with its luminous green blips and geometric tracings.

'That pilot doesn't have to worry about the cost of new brakes. His job is to get his passenger on the ground fast.'

'Who's the passenger, then?' inquired the young traffic controller. His friend smiled again and reached for a pack of cigarettes.

'It's the Singer,' he said. 'Making a one night appearance at the Albert Hall. Tickets are changing hands on the black market at fifty quid a throw.'

The VIP lounge at Terminal One was furnished like a 1950s Hilton Hotel with lots of spongy chairs, thick carpet and abstract modern paintings. An airport official, warned of the Singer's arrival from Paris, paced up and down nervously.

The Singer would be angry when he learnt that his car had been delayed by heavy traffic on the outskirts of London. It wasn't the airport official's fault, of course, but he'd almost certainly be blamed.

The swing doors of the lounge opened suddenly and the Singer walked in, followed by five enormous men in square

suits, button-down shirts and heavy, patterned brogues.

The Singer himself was a small man, under five-feet-five and quite old. His face was the colour of mahogany and seamed at the cheeks and forehead. A fuzz of recently transplanted hair grew from his bony, almost skeletal head. He wore sunglasses, a neat blue suit and inch-high elevator shoes. He stopped in front of the airport official and scowled.

'OK mister, where's my goddamn car?' The official smiled, but it was a pretty weak attempt under the circumstances.

'I'm afraid it's a little delayed, sir. Probably ten minutes. Certainly no more.'

The Singer sniffed and took out a pack of cigarettes. One of his followers stepped forward instantly with a lighter and lit his master's king-size Chesterfield.

The Singer was clearly annoyed but the airport official's extreme politeness had thwarted his desire to be rude to the first person he encountered on alighting from the plane.

He turned to his five henchmen.

'Whoever organized this goddamn snail for a driver ought to have his ass incinerated.' The five men nodded, and one of them stopped chewing for a moment.

'Yeah,' he said, finding difficulty with the complex pronunciation of such a long word. The Singer made a snarling noise and turned back to the airport official.

'OK, where's the customs officers?'

'On their way, sir,' said the official, crossing his fingers.

Forty-five minutes later a shiny black Rolls-Royce with smoked glass windows drew up outside the back entrance of a large London hotel. Several pieces of expensive hand-stitched luggage were removed and then the Singer alighted, a tiny hat tilted at a rakish angle on his bony head. He swept into the hotel, surrounded by his five colleagues.

In the lobby a photographer stepped from behind a potted plant – he'd no idea the Singer was in town at that precise moment – but he'd recognized him in a second. He was actually on assignment to cover a Jewish wedding but this was an opportunity too good to miss.

The Singer spotted him and gave a howl of rage.

'Punk!' he shouted. 'Lousy punk.' This intellectual obser-

vation acted as a goad to his five followers who rushed towards the surprised photographer like a herd of water buffaloes.

Within microseconds his camera was in a trash can, normally reserved for extinguished cigar butts and he was sitting on the hotel's marble floor, bleeding very slightly from his right nostril.

'So, sue me, punk!' screamed the Singer as he was hustled into the lift.

The concierge sighed and moved round to help the photographer. It was all in a day's work.

The artists' entrance to the Albert Hall was ringed by four policemen who in turn were surrounded by a howling mob of six middle-aged women. Actually they were sobbing rather than howling – but only a trained observer would have known the difference.

Inside the great building the Singer was remonstrating with a man in a pin-striped suit.

'How did these old bags know I was rehearsing today? I thought the deal was for me to put the act together without being goddamned hassled by people at the stage door.'

Pin-stripe gave a watery smile. He'd heard it all before.

'The fact that you're in London is enough to start all sorts of rumours – those six ladies probably turned up on the off-chance that—'

The Singer interrupted him with a snarl.

'Get rid of 'em. Don't give me any old horse manure about offchances – goddamned inefficiency that's what it is. And another thing—' the Singer prodded Pin-stripe in the chest, '—my dressing room is a crock of shit. I want it redecorated by tomorrow to the colour scheme my secretary sent on in advance. And fetch me a bottle of Jack Daniels, *now*, before this lousy joint makes me die of boredom.'

He strode away on his elevator shoes, bristling. Pin-stripe shrugged and went off to carry out the Singer's demands.

It was eight o'clock and a steady rain had been falling for two hours. The pavements glistened and a raw wind whipped across Hyde Park and buffeted around the brightly lit windows of the Albert Hall. Policemen, two deep, held a huge, excited crowd at bay as the Singer's Rolls-Royce came gliding alongside the stage door. Flashbulbs popped and a cheer spread

through the crowd. The Singer, in a midnight blue silk tuxedo, sprang from his car and acknowledged the applause by clenching his hands above his head in a boxer's salute.

The show itself was a dazzling success. The Singer gave them twenty numbers and a couple of encores, oozing with sincerity. A woman in the fifth row threw him a single rose and then fainted from what appeared to be a terminal orgasm. She was forty-three and lived in Tooting.

The orchestra, almost philharmonic in size, accepted the Singer's gracious compliments, but the lead violin gritted his teeth as the applause reached a crescendo. Ten minutes before the concert was due to start, the Singer had called him 'a fucking musical pygmy'. Only a timely intervention by the orchestra leader had prevented a walk-out.

In his freshly decorated dressing-room, the Singer sipped a glass of bourbon and lit a cigarette. His five henchmen stood around bulging in their expensive dinner suits. The Singer had asked for a late supper to be arranged at his favourite Italian restaurant in Soho - and already the excited proprietor was selecting the best *petit pollo sorpresa* he could find. Two bottles of Refosco di Sequals had been uncorked and were breathing on the Singer's flower-decked table.

At eleven-fifteen the Singer started walking along the deserted corridor at the back of the Albert Hall. His Rolls-Royce, by way of decoy, had been drawn up at the main entrance while a blue Citroën awaited him at the rear. A scenery hand happened to walk across the Singer's path as he walked briskly towards the swing doors and two of his henchmen manhandled the fellow out of the way like a basket of garbage.

Outside the rain had stopped and a clear moon had emerged from behind the clouds. The Citroën was twenty yards from the door with the engine running. As the Singer stepped on to the pavement he was conscious of a sudden movement to his left. He turned his head and saw a group of boys in scruffy jeans and leather jackets. There were four of them, and they lounged under a street lamp with the bored nonchalance of the urban young.

The Singer continued towards his car, surrounded by his swaggering entourage. The boys evidently hadn't recognized

him, and that was a relief. He'd had enough of the 'public' for one goddamned evening.

As he drew level with the car he heard a soft 'thunk' behind him and he felt one of his henchmen stumble heavily against his shoulder. He turned and saw the man go down on his knees with a groan. Blood gushed from a hole in his chest, through which protruded the gleaming point of a knife. The Singer froze in horror and took a pace backwards. His four remaining bodyguards fanned out in a circle, protecting him.

The leather boys had spread themselves too, and now the Singer could see their slicked down hair, tattooed arms and pimply complexions.

'Let's get in the goddamn car,' he yelled, but the youths had cut off their approach and were closing in.

'Kill the bastards,' the Singer screamed, and his face was ashen with fear.

One of his remaining henchmen made a lunge at the nearest youth, there was a flash of steel, a yelp of agony, and two of the man's finger's fell into the gutter, sliced neatly from his hand by the youth's cut-throat razor.

When the fight began it was conducted in deadly silence. But it was a one-sided affair. The leather boys were good. And extremely quick. Within a minute the road was slippery with blood and all five of the Singer's henchmen were sprawled about in it. Two of them were dead, one of them had a broken jaw, one of them a broken leg and the last was dying slowly from a stab wound in the throat.

The Singer fell to his knees, his face contorted with terror.

'Please, please,' he whimpered, and his bowels turned to water.

The tallest of the youths wiped the blade of his stiletto on the sleeve of his jacket.

'No!' screamed the Singer. 'I beg you - I beg you!'

The youth put the blade between his teeth like a pirate and began rummaging in his back pocket. After a few seconds he produced a scrap of paper and a ballpoint pen. He offered them to the Singer.

'Ere,' he said amiably, 'can I 'ave your autograph?'

Harry E. Turner

Love bites

Captain 'Mad Jack' McAlpine had faced death many times and survived. As his pale blue Tiger Moth careened through the dense clouds just above the treeline he knew he was in for another close shave. The altimeter was winding down at an alarming rate and the crippled engine of the tiny aeroplane was spluttering like a Chinese firework. He braced himself and pulled hard on the stick, but the Moth was nose diving into the swirls of cloud and he realized there was no hope of stopping it. Suddenly he was through and smashing into the massed branches of the forest, the impact flung him forward and his head struck the instrument panel with considerable force. There followed a scream of tearing metal, another massive jolt and the windscreen collapsed into a jigsaw of crazy splinters. The plane's impetus carried it along the treeline, shearing through branches like a demented scythe until it belly-flopped into a great mound of tangled fern and shuddered to a halt.

Half-blinded by a ribbon of blood that was running across his eyes, Jack tore open his seat-belt and scrambled clear of the cockpit.

He fell on to the spongy grass and rolled himself into a ball just as the Moth exploded in a sheet of orange flame. When the first cloud of acrid smoke had cleared he raised his head and looked back. The little plane was already a charred skeleton with fire ravaging its guts and turning the broken wings into sheets of blistering paint and swollen metal.

He pulled out a handkerchief and wiped the blood from his eyes. His whole body ached but he was still very much in one piece. The heat from the blazing Moth was intense and he scrambled away to shelter behind a big, flat rock. After a few minutes he had gathered his wits and taken out his silver cigarette case. He lit one of his monogrammed Egyptian filter

tips and inhaled deeply. He was alive, that was true, but what of his predicament? Just before the crash his compass had packed up and he'd lost all sense of direction. He knew he was somewhere in the Brazilian jungle, but he doubted if he could pinpoint his exact position within two hundred square miles. He finished his cigarette and stood up, brushing the dirt from his leather flying jacket.

Maybe somebody would have seen him come down – or more possibly would spot the plume of black smoke that curled upwards above the trees. His best bet was to stay where he was and hope for rescue. A damned inconvenient business when all was said and done – he hadn't even had dinner. Pity that, he mused, a chap looked forward to a decent meal and a glass or two of cold champagne, even in Brazil.

It was, of course, his own fault. If he'd stayed in England he'd have been snug at Hestercombe Towers, his country estate in Surrey, and not lost in the damp green hell of the South American jungle.

Funny how you missed England almost as soon as you left it behind.

Boredom made him do these things needless to say. Why else would a millionaire playboy with more than average charm and intelligence volunteer to explore the upper reaches of the Amazon looking for a lost tribe of superwomen? Of course, no such incredible people existed – he *knew* that. Just a lot of tommy rot babbled about in the Travellers' Club after too much Napoleon brandy.

But it had seemed fun at the time – and Lady Fiona Selston-Bunter was closing in for the kill. Jack hadn't fancied her, in spite of her mighty wurlitzer thighs and ballooning bosom. Well covered was *one* thing. Eleven stones of hockey playing, pink perfumed flesh was quite another. Nevertheless, it was fruitless to reminisce, survival was the thing he had to concentrate on now, and England was a long, long way behind him.

He crushed out another cigarette on the rock and gazed up at the sky. The sun was touching the line of palm fronds on the horizon, its orange colour leaking over the skyline and staining the thin white clouds. Dusk was a short-lived business in the jungle, that much he knew, and soon it would be as black as

Erebus. He would head west, towards the setting sun. It seemed a reasonable decision and at least gave him a goal of sorts.

The ground was heavy and clotted with a spinach-like growth that made walking tough work, but his flying boots were sturdy and rubber-soled and he reckoned they would survive a fair amount of punishment.

Two hours later he was at the foot of a gently sloping hill and the only light was from a sky full of huge glittering stars and a pale, watery moon. The air was chilled and alive with the chatter of a thousand crickets. In spite of this, he was sweating profusely. He'd make for the high ground and find a crude shelter for the night and then, at sunrise, continue his trek westward. Decisions of this sort came easily to Captain 'Mad Jack' McAlpine and he was far from downhearted.

It took the best part of an hour to scale the hillside and by then he was ready for another cigarette. The hilltop was flat, and covered with an outcrop of dense granite between which coarse bush grass sprouted.

Jack uprooted a few handfuls and spread them carefully over a smooth, flat boulder. Then he pulled up enough to cover his body and settled down to enjoy his smoke. The sky was a picture, like a dark purple canopy, and he kept his eyes open just long enough to finish the cigarette before falling into a deep and dreamless sleep.

The early morning sun was intense and the surface of the rock on which he lay had already grown hot. He kicked away the dry grass and sat up. Far below in the valley stretched a dense forest as far as the eye could see. There was no sign of his wrecked Tiger Moth. He took out a hip flask and swallowed a mouthful of whisky. Not the most adequate breakfast he had to confess, but it would do. He stood up and stretched, flexing his fingers and yawning.

The movement made him conscious of his Smith and Wesson revolver pressing against his hip in its soft kid holster. That was most reassuring, and he patted the handle affectionately.

He wasn't quite sure *why* he turned and looked behind him, there hadn't been any noise or movement – not even a rustle. But a sixth sense had made it inevitable.

'Good Lord,' said Jack, and his lower jaw fell open.

Standing three yards away was one of the most beautiful women he had ever seen. She was all of six feet tall, but superbly proportioned from her head of tawny hair down to her neat, slim ankles. She was absolutely naked and the pale, coffee-coloured skin of her body gleamed under the bright sunshine. Her face was exquisite, with full arched lips and enormous oriental eyes. The cheekbones were classic as was the high intelligent forehead. Her breasts were large and firm with big erect nipples and her thighs were straight from a Michelangelo mural in the Sistine Chapel. In spite of himself, Jack let his eyes wander down over her flat, muscular belly and dwell on the swelling 'v' at the top of her thighs. A man could die for such a creature, he suddenly thought, and be glad to do so.

'My name is McAlpine,' he said briskly. 'I'm British and I'm lost. How do you do.'

The woman smiled, revealing perfect teeth, but made no reply.

Jack took a pace forward and extended his right hand. The woman hesitated for a moment and then reached out and took it. Her touch was warm and firm and Jack felt his excitement suddenly climb. She linked her fingers through his and tugged gently. Obediently Jack moved closer until their bodies were almost touching. Her eyes were on the same level as Jack's and he could smell her fresh, clean skin. She slid her left hand around his waist and pulled him against her breasts. Before he could utter another sound she pressed her mouth over his and kissed him. But what a kiss! Her lips parted and she plunged her pink, moist tongue against his teeth. Jack being what he was, namely human, responded with some zest, allowing the delicious tongue to probe deeply into his mouth. The woman's hands moved around his waist and clasped his buttocks firmly – and then, with slow deliberation, she sank back on to the grass drawing him down on top of her. Jack's clothes, at this point, seemed a trifle superfluous and he struggled to unbutton his flying jacket. The woman helped, but during the struggle she kept her mouth on his and her tongue busy. By now Jack was so excited that he actually ripped his shirt off without undoing the buttons. Eventually, all his clothes were scattered in little crumpled heaps over a radius of six feet and his flying boots, by dint of a super-human effort, were ten yards away.

The woman clung to him, hooking her legs over his shoulders and thrusting her hips against his until he thought he would die from the sheer pleasure of it.

Suddenly, and without warning, he felt a sharp blow across his buttocks – which at this time were moving with speed and precision of a fiddler's elbow – and the shock made him disengage his mouth and release a cry of pain. He turned and looked over his shoulder.

Straddling them was another huge woman, she was darker, more muscular than the one clinging beneath him but with the same high-cheekboned features and full curved lips.

She was naked except for a wide leather thong that was slung over one shoulder and across her chest and in her right hand was a short, plaited whip. Jack's tumescence had evaporated like snow on a stove and he rolled away, covering himself like a virgin schoolgirl.

The woman with the whip stepped over him and raised her arm, muscles rippling under the mahogany skin, there was a swish and the plaited end of the lash came down across the other woman's shoulders. She yelped and tried to scramble clear but the big woman rammed a foot into her chest and spreadeagled her. She then proceeded to administer a series of sharp strokes about the woman's body until Jack could see the livid marks swelling with blood.

When the punishment was complete the big woman dragged her victim to her feet and slapped her face a few times for good measure before pushing her towards a clump of bushes.

Jack watched all this with a growing sense of horror. The big woman was all of six-feet-seven-inches and the width of her back would have shamed a prize-fighter. Cautiously he snatched up his trousers and pulled them on – his nakedness seemed worse than ridiculous.

The big woman turned and looked at him, and Jack actually felt himself blush. Her eyes were huge and exquisite, betraying no hint of her obviously savage nature.

Jack picked up his shirt and jacket and walked over to retrieve his flying boots, trying hard to present a picture of nonchalance. What could be more natural than copulating with a total stranger in the jungles of Brazil?

The big woman cracked her whip with a short, sharp move-

ment and Jack pretended not to wince. All at once he was surrounded by a dozen naked women, all of them tall and superbly beautiful.

The big woman pointed with her whip and nodded at Jack. It was evidently a command and he grabbed his leather jacket before following the direction in which she pointed.

The women formed a circle round him and he realized that he was under a form of arrest – but what an escort! Never in all his thirty years had he seen such a display of physical perfection. They made the dancers at the Crazy Horse Saloon in Paris seem like frumpish matrons, by comparison. In spite of their nakedness they were all possessed of highly intelligent eyes and faces, no crude savages these, and they walked with the grace of panthers.

The pace they set was brisk and soon Jack was sweating as they led him down the hillside over flat rocks and coarse spiky grass. A lizard with gleaming eyes scurried across a boulder and disappeared into one of the narrow crevices. High above them a hawk circled in a huge arc against the fierce blue sky.

After about a mile they were in the forest, their feet sucking against the damp soil, the sun blotted out by the mass of tangled branches that formed a canopy over the ground. Monkeys and parrots screeched overhead and once, in the dense undergrowth, Jack fancied he saw a big, crouching animal the size of a horse. The pace quickened and soon they were at a jog-trot, with Jack stumbling over roots while the women seemed to skim like gazelles. It was tough work and Jack, twice middleweight champion at Oxford, was beginning to flag. After a further ten minutes the jungle opened on to a massive clearing, thirty acres at least. Clustered in the middle were a series of linked, single-storey buildings which reminded Jack at once of a Spanish village in the Balearic Islands. The houses were immaculate whitewashed stucco, with deep windows protected by metal grilles. Patios of polished flagstones surrounded each house and there were huge pottery vases overflowing with brilliant flowers. A few sleek dogs ran between the buildings and Jack gasped at their size. They were as big as ponies, with great heads and gleaming muscular flanks. They looked like a nightmare

version of the Doberman pinscher and Jack made a mental note to try and hang on to his revolver – however difficult that might prove to be.

His escort directed him towards a large house in the centre of the clearing and as they approached more women began to appear, some of them old, with nut-brown faces and scrawny bodies. A door in the house opened and a tall, slim woman with rings in her ears stepped on to the patio. Jack reckoned she was about fifty, but she was magnificent with a tawny body and shiny, jet black hair that spilled to her waist. The other women, including Jack's escort, raised their hands in salute and the woman in the door returned it. The big woman with the whip who had 'arrested' Jack stepped forward and exchanged a Roman handshake with the woman in the doorway. For the first time since his encounter with them Jack heard them speak and his heart leapt. The language was unmistakably Spanish. The dialect was archaic, and the phrasing curiously stilted, like a ceremonial tract being read in church. Jack's own Spanish was impeccable and in spite of the antique vocabulary he was able to follow every word the women spoke.

'Greetings, Pella,' said the woman with the whip, 'Come and gaze upon our prisoner.'

Pella, with the earrings, smiled and moved towards Jack.

'He is a fine specimen, Lai, well nourished and clothed. What do we call him?'

Lai fingered her whip and shrugged. 'We have not given him a name yet. We judged it best to wait until he has been cleaned and examined.'

This was too much for Jack and he cleared his throat loudly.

'Now, look here,' he said in Spanish. 'I may have spent the night in the jungle but I'm not exactly dirty. Neither am I diseased. And I do have a name. Allow me to present myself, Captain Jack McAlpine at your service Ladies.'

He made a formal little bow and clicked his heels.

Pella's face showed incredulity and she moved closer.

'You speak our tongue,' she said, 'And yet you are not an Indian. How is this so?'

'I learnt Spanish at Oxford,' said Jack, 'Also German and

Russian, but that's of no consequence. I am British. Born in Scotland. Have you heard of it?

Pella shook her head slowly. 'Of Spain only. The ancient country of the Conquistadores. But Spain, to be sure, perished in the flames many centuries ago. How did you learn – from old books perhaps?'

Jack laughed. 'You could say that. But Spain is still very much in existence. A modern state – a democracy even – since Franco died.'

Pella looked uncomprehending, and Lai fidgeted with her whip.

'He must be cleaned Pella. We can talk with him later.'

Pella nodded and raised her hand. Immediately Jack was seized from behind and his arms pinioned. He protested loudly, but to no avail. Strong hands propelled him towards one of the whitewashed houses, a door was pushed open and he was bundled inside.

The floor was of gleaming mosaic and the walls rough white plaster. In the centre of the room was a circular wooden tub, and next to it a long polished bench. On the deep window sills were vases filled with bright flowers and tiny cactus plants.

Jack's escort released his arms and he turned to face them. They grinned, showing perfect teeth and one of them prodded his chest.

'You must remove your garments,' she said, and the others giggled.

'Now just a minute,' protested Jack. 'What the Devil's going on here?'

The girl threw back her head and laughed.

'It is a rule. You must be cleaned first. Please remove your garments.'

Jack glared at them, but he reckoned he would be no match for half a dozen muscular amazons and with a sigh of resignation, he began to remove his shirt.

The girls turned and withdrew, slamming the door behind them and Jack was alone.

He crossed to the window and looked out. The village was alive with naked women, all hurrying about various tasks, some of them very old, others middle-aged but most of them

young, perfect creatures with bodies of such sumptuous proportions that Jack felt his throat going dry. Of all the scrapes that Captain 'Mad Jack' McAlpine had been in, this one took the first prize for weirdness. The whole business was incredible – so incredible that nobody would believe a word of it when he told the tale in London. Those pompous old farts at the Travellers' Club would laugh him out of the Billiard Room.

He moved away from the window and sat on the bench. He was ravenous. Maybe after his bath, presumably in the wooden tub, they would deign to feed him. It was a comforting thought, and he peeled off his shirt.

Their language was a clue. Ancient Spanish – obviously handed down over the generations from the conquering armies of Spain – but that had been centuries ago.

And how did the tribe – if that was the proper description of them – survive? He'd not seen a male in the village – nor a child. Just women and those Hounds of the Baskervilles.

He rummaged in his leather flying jacket and took out his silver cigarette case. A smoke would do no harm and might even ease his hunger pangs.

He was just drawing a monogrammed cigarette from the case when a small inner door, which he had assumed was a cupboard, opened.

An enormous woman emerged, ducking her head to avoid the beam and then she straightened up in front of him. She was seven feet and a few inches tall and incredibly proportioned. Her face was faintly negroid with curved purple lips and high cheekbones. Her eyes like her compatriots, were intense and penetrating. Her breasts and thighs, although massive were firm and symmetrical and her belly had the flat muscular planes of an athlete. She wore an apron and nothing else and it looked grossly inappropriate.

'Quickly now,' she ordered, 'I am very busy.'

Jack opened his mouth to protest, noted her sixteen-inch biceps and thought better of it. Instead he undressed methodically, folding each garment carefully and stacking them on the bench. He took great care to conceal his revolver inside his left flying boot which he then zipped up and covered with his shirt.

When he was naked the woman nodded her approval and pointed to the wooden tub. He stepped over the rim and into a pale greenish liquid that was pleasantly and astringently perfumed. It was cool and he sank on to his haunches, splashing himself and going through the motions of bathing.

The woman made a clucking noise with her tongue and came across to the tub. A large scrubbing brush had appeared as if by magic in her hand and she proceeded, in spite of Jack's groans, to scrub his chest and back with considerable gusto.

The liquid was slippery against his skin and the general sensation was not unpleasant. After a few minutes she was satisfied and told him to get out of the tub.

Still tingling, Jack climbed out and looked around hopefully for a towel. Instead the woman took his arm and led him to the bench.

'Flat on your belly,' she ordered, giving him a shove with a plate-sized hand.

Feeling like a recalcitrant child Jack did as he was told, lowering himself on to the wide, polished surface of the bench.

The woman then proceeded to cuff his body with what looked like a large palm leaf until all the moisture had vanished.

'Turn over,' she commanded, and Jack did so, now quite beyond any sense of embarrassment.

The woman dried the front of his body with the leaf and then, to his amazement, began to poke at his neck, chest and shoulders with her fingers, as if examining a side of best Scotch beef. Her hands were quick and she pinched and kneaded the muscles of his thighs, her huge forearms brushing his belly. It was, Jack presumed, a kind of ritual examination-cum-massage and, he had to admit, reluctantly, it was rather pleasurable.

So much so that within a few seconds he was conscious of the inevitable, mechanical reaction to her fingers and there was damn all he could do to conceal it.

The woman stopped and looked at him. Jack flinched, expecting her to swing a right hook or deliver a karate chop to his throat. Instead her eyes were bright and her lips were moist. She whipped away the useless apron and straddled the bench, towering above Jack, her massive thighs either side of his hips.

'Oh God,' thought Jack, 'here we go again.'

His intuition was correct and the woman impaled herself on him with a single swift movement. Her breasts squashed against him like two beach balls and her mouth closed over his in a deep, lascivious kiss. He knew he should resist – it was all too crass, too outrageous – but his body was treacherous and he groaned and thrust himself hard against her huge bulk.

Almost at once she stiffened, and a spasm racked her body. Jack opened his eyes, surprised that she should finish so quickly and what he saw was not a woman in the throes of passion but something decidedly unpleasant.

Her body was upright, and still astride him, and between her breasts there protruded the head of a spear. Blood vomited from the wound and splashed over Jack's chest. Jack yelled in horror as the woman's eyes glazed in death and then she toppled sideways and crashed on to the bath-house floor.

Standing behind her was Pella, still holding the spear by its shaft, a look of cool determination on her handsome face.

'I'm sorry you were troubled,' said Pella. 'It was our mistake in leaving you alone. Cetrus has not had a man for some months now – but she was always unreliable. Do forgive us. Supper will be served at the House of El Presidente. You will be escorted safely. Wait here.'

Jack rolled off the bench and grabbed feebly at his clothes, when he looked back Pella had gone and two stringy old crones were dragging the corpse feet first out of the bath-house door.

All that remained as evidence of what had transpired were the bright splashes of red on the tiled floor and the discarded spear which had been swiftly and expertly drawn from the body.

Jack felt sick and slumped on to the wooden bench. He was the captive of a crew of madwomen, that much was clear. He touched the rough nub of his revolver handle and it steadied him. Captain 'Mad Jack' McAlpine would find a way out of this awful predicament – after all it would be expected of him. 'Turning up like a bad penny at the Club' was how they often described Jack's reappearance at the Travellers' after some foreign jape. He was determined they would not be disappointed this time.

He towelled the blood from his chest with the big palm leaf and dressed, tucking the Smith and Wesson inside his trousers.

Five minutes passed and he heard the scrape of bolts before the door opened again. Two luscious blondes carrying short daggers appeared in the doorway and one of them beckoned.

'Prisoner and escort,' thought Jack irreverently, 'quick march.' He stood up and straightened his silk cravat. If one was going to dine with a lady it was the least a chap could do.

The two girls flanked him and directed him across the main quadrangle of the village. There was still considerable bustling activity and Jack noted huge stores of grain and fruit being checked by nubile wenches. All the houses were neat and spotless and all of them were decorated with lush tropical flowers. Once across the quadrangle the streets narrowed and Jack saw metal braziers bolted to the walls and wooden house signs in old Spanish script.

At the end of a particularly long, narrow street they emerged into a smaller square. It was surrounded by houses of elaborate design, with carved stone balconies and hand-painted murals. The largest house had wide marble steps leading to a pair of superb carved mahogany doors. A puma's head with a ring in its mouth decorated each one. Jack's escort stopped at the foot of the steps and signalled for him to continue.

Feeling quite inexplicably jaunty, Jack bowed to them and they giggled.

He mounted the dozen steps and stood in front of the massive wooden doors. As he raised his hand to reach for the puma's head knocker the doors swung wide open, noiselessly, revealing a long tiled corridor. It was empty, the doors apparently functioning by some remote control device, and Jack stepped inside.

The air was warm and faintly perfumed with the distant smell of delicious cooking. Jack hurried along the corridor past blank whitewashed walls and ceramic jars of green palms until he reached a richly painted door at the far end. The panels each depicted a historical scene and were executed in the style of El Greco, with bold splashes of colour. In each was the ominous presence of a helmeted Conquistador astride a stylized, prancing horse.

This door opened unbidden and the scene it revealed made Jack stare with amazement.

The chamber beyond the door had a high vaulted ceiling and

tall stained glass windows. Flaming torches gave additional light from iron stanchions in the stone walls. A long banqueting table stood in the centre of the room on a mosaic floor that depicted the ancient signs of the Zodiac.

The table was piled high with fruit, raw vegetables, huge black loaves, massive sides of cold meat, stone flagons, silver chalices, bowls of brilliant flowers.

Four women wearing embroidered gold tunics stood by the table and they moved towards Jack slowly. He recognized one of them as Pella and she smiled.

'El Presidente will be here soon. Please take wine with us.'

Jack nodded, at a loss for words. Pella clapped her hands and a door opened admitting a naked servant. Jack did a double take – the servant was male! He must have been about forty-five, a pink, unhealthily plump-looking man with a round expressionless face and blond, curly hair.

As Jack's eyes scanned the fellow's podgy frame he observed, with a jolt of revulsion, that he had been castrated – 'swept clean' in the style of court eunuchs in the old Ottoman empire.

The man poured red wine into five silver chalices and brought them over on a tray.

The four women took their drinks without even glancing at the servant and he in turn kept his own eyes averted.

Jack watched him fearfully. There was something quite hideous about the fellow and his grotesque deformity that chilled the blood.

Pella raised her chalice. 'Good fortune Captain,' she said, smiling. The other three followed suit. Jack swallowed hard and managed a weak grin. 'Cheers,' he murmured, and took a long pull at the wine. It was cool and fruity and quite delicious.

Pella smiled at Jack over the rim of her goblet.

'Captain McAlpine,' she said, 'El Presidente, our leader, will be joining us shortly. It is a tradition among us that we kneel when she enters this chamber. We will then rise to drink the health of our people and dinner will follow immediately. I should remind you that you are still under constraint and cooperation with our leader's wishes is an unswerving requirement.' Jack saw Pella's eyes harden as she spoke and he ascertained that this was a thinly veiled warning to behave himself.

The hideous 'castrato' bowed and withdrew, as somewhere outside the room a gong boomed sonorously. Pella's head lifted like a hunted beast.

'She approaches,' she whispered. 'She is nigh.'

At the far end of the room double doors glided open and six luscious girls carrying short spears entered, lining up three by three at the head of the table. The gong boomed again and Pella dropped to her knees. Jack hesitated for a moment but she tugged fiercely at his sleeve.

'Lower your head and don't raise it until commanded,' she hissed. Jack obeyed, feeling faintly uneasy.

There followed the soft swish of naked feet on polished marble and as they approached Jack's nostrils were assailed by a delicate perfume of roses and mint.

'Please arise,' said a light, fluting voice and Jack raised his eyes.

Standing a few feet from where he knelt was a woman in a silver and gold robe. She was more beautiful than anything he had expected. She was tall, nearly six feet, and slender. Her face was oval and her lips full with the negroid pout. Her eyes were enormous, with rich lashes, and her hair, which was blue-black, hung like a mane over her shoulders.

Her skin tone was golden and seemed to exude a luminescence which was enhanced by the light from the flaming torches in the walls.

Pella stood up and touched Jack's shoulder. 'El Presidente, this is Captain Jack McAlpine.'

Jack sprang to his feet and executed his snappy, Burlington Bertie half-bow.

'An honour Madam,' he said, extending his hand.

El Presidente fixed him with a long, cool stare. 'You are welcome here,' she said, ignoring his outstretched palm.

'Now we must drink a toast to our people.'

Pella clapped her hands and the castrato re-appeared as if by magic with more chalices of wine. They drank in silence and then El Presidente waved them to the table.

Jack was ravenous and as soon as they were seated he attacked the food with gusto. El Presidente, at the head of the table kept up a barrage of questions during the meal and Jack was obliged to tell her about London, which fascinated her,

about aeroplanes, which she disbelieved and about his knowledge of Spanish colonial history which she found cosmetic.

The delicious wine, served ice cold in the heavy chalices was remarkably strong, and by the time they had reached the fruit Jack was feeling quite exceptionally light-headed.

El Presidente, who had consumed a sparse meal, speared a ripe pear with a golden prong.

'Pella,' she said suddenly, 'it grows late. Make the arrangements and leave us.'

Pella nodded and clapped her hands. The castrato and the six young girls came running to the table and began clearing away the debris of fruit and cold meats.

Jack, still clutching his brimming chalice, watched the flurry of activity through a pleasant, fuzzy haze.

'My God,' he thought, 'I'm two thirds cut.'

In spite of this accurate self-analysis he upended his chalice and gulped down the remainder of the wine.

Within minutes the table was cleared and being pushed against a wall. Jack stood somewhat unsteadily in the middle of the chamber and watched the servants as they wheeled in a huge, overstuffed couch with carved wooden legs and raw silk cushions.

'That looks extraordinarily comfortable,' mumbled Jack and sat heavily on the couch. The wine was really getting to him now and his head felt as if it had been crammed with damp cottonwool. It was several moments before he realized that he was alone with El Presidente. All the others including Pella, had left.

El Presidente sat next to him on the couch and he could smell her curious, cloying perfume of roses and mint. He tried to focus on her face but the outlines were blurred. She leaned towards him and ran her tongue across his lips. It was hot and snakelike and caused a flutter of reaction deep inside him.

It was short-lived, however, swamped by the wine which seemed to course through his veins. He shook his head and took a deep breath. Damn the wine. He felt numb. El Presidente had loosened the clasp at the neck of her gown and was peeling it down over her hips. The torches threw a gleaming light over the nakedness of her breasts and Jack reached out mechanically—

Her kisses were frantic, almost choking him, and she made guttural sounds as he struggled out of his clothes. Jack was experiencing some difficulty in removing his left flying boot and the manoeuvre was not enhanced by El Presidente biting his chest and clawing at his thighs with her fingernails.

Finally she fell back across the sofa with Jack clenched between her thighs. 'My God,' thought Jack, 'I can't breathe.'

Her open mouth clung like a limpet to his own, the prehensile tongue flickering half-way down his throat, hard, swelling nipples pressed like rivets against his chest, warm silky thighs contracted and slithered on his hips. This was the paradise that all men dream about. The ultimate, body-fusing experience that made worlds turn back on their own axis. El Presidente raised her pelvis, lifting Jack clear off the couch.

'Now – now!' she cried into his trapped mouth. 'Impale me. Hurt me. I am yours.'

Jack managed to free enough of his mouth to draw a shallow breath.

'Sorry.' He gasped. 'Can't.'

El Presidente's body went limp and she pushed him to arms length. He felt like a doll, half-suspended in the air.

Her eyes blazed at him. 'What do you mean?' she hissed.

Jack shrugged, not very successfully, as El Presidente had his shoulders in a grip of iron.

'Too much wine, I'm afraid.' He stifled a drunken giggle. 'Back in England we call it brewer's droop.'

El Presidente twisted her body from under him and sprang to her feet, her face quivering with rage.

'Son of a dog!' she cried. 'Viper!' Jack slithered off the couch and fell in a heap on to the tiled floor. El Presidente gave him a sharp kick in the chest.

'You have insulted me like a trollop of the gutter. You will pay for this Captain – I swear it.' And then she kicked him again, harder, and Jack gave a yelp of pain.

'I say,' he protested, 'steady on old girl. I mean, these things can't be turned on like a ruddy tap you know.'

El Presidente kicked him again, but her foot slipped on the tiles and she fell over sideways, striking her head against the carved arm of the couch,

'My God,' said Jack, kneeling. 'Are you all right?'

El Presidente groaned and rolled her head from side to side.

'She's fractured her skull,' thought Jack, with rising panic. 'What's the punishment for murdering the President? Boiling in oil? Buried alive in an anthill?'

He crawled over to her and took her face in his hands. 'Come on,' he pleaded, 'wake up.' El Presidente opened her eyes and moaned again. Her breathing seemed laboured and Jack decided it was artificial respiration she needed.

He covered her mouth with his own and began to blow into her lungs. At first nothing happened and then her chest rose and fell with great gasps and she hooked her legs around his waist. The sudden contact with the cool marble floor and the shock of seeing El Presidente unconscious had temporarily cleared Jack's head and he felt his own body respond to her lewd thrustings.

El Presidente made a noise like a she leopard on heat – a mixture of growling and whimpering and clung to Jack as he began to pump his hips in unison with hers. The whole thing was all over in three minutes and then El Presidente threw Jack over on his back as easily as a housewife tosses a pancake. She mounted him again with the velocity of a locomotive and Jack's senses reeled. It was ecstatic – but rough.

Five minutes later their positions were reversed again and this time El Presidente was issuing sharp instructions for the nearly-exhausted Jack to follow.

'There – yes – ah – harder – faster – *faster* – don't stop – left a little – now right – more speed – make bigger circles – ah – aaaaah!'

'Ouch!' said Jack weakly, and rolled free of her windmilling arms and legs. She snaked out a hand and grabbed him.

'More,' she pleaded, but Jack shook himself away.

'You may be El Presidente,' he gasped, 'but there is absolutely no question whatsoever of any more.'

'Why?' pouted El Presidente, her eyes softening. Jack stifled a yawn, gasped for breath and then hiccupped sharply.

'Because—' he said, and then rolled over sideways snoring like an overfed child.

When he regained consciousness it was a slow, almost ethereal

process. His mind, syrupy with sleep rose sluggishly to the rim of wakefulness and then wallowed back into its weightless torpor. After a few more determined attempts he managed to open both eyes and cling, somewhat feebly, to a semblance of being alert.

He was in a large, soft bed – a sort of precursor of the medieval four-poster – and swathed in soft linen sheets. His body felt as if it had been clubbed relentlessly by a posse of madmen. Every fibre, every tissue, every hair follicle ached and smarted.

Surreptitiously he slid a hand under the sheet to check his vital equipment – the very movement a symphony of lancing pain – he was, thank God, still in one piece. The piece, it is true, felt not unlike a limp noodle, but under the circumstances it was wholly understandable.

Music from a stringed instrument wafted into the room and his nostrils were assailed by the smell of something hot and spicy.

He raised himself on to an elbow and looked around the room. It was pleasantly furnished and the walls hung with colourful examples of primitive art. A door opened and an elderly woman – in her seventies – entered carrying a tray. She was clad in an embroidered tunic and wore a beaded headband which gave her the appearance of a geriatric squaw.

On the tray was a bowl of hot soup from which she proceeded to feed him with a wooden ladle. It was racy, but not unpleasant and he finished it all in about five minutes.

The old woman watched him unsmilingly but there was something in her eyes that comforted him. Most of the other women he had encountered on this crazy journey had exhibited either unbridled lust or animal savagery, sometimes both – and it showed in their eyes. This old dear, however, was more akin to an auntie – or ancient mother superior. He was certain she would neither club nor rape him, so he felt safe enough to smile at her and thank her for the broth.

‘Where am I?’ he asked, as she busied herself around the room.

The old lady turned and smiled. ‘You are in the Rehabilitation Centre,’ she said softly. ‘May the Gods be with you.’

Jack frowned, 'Why do you say that?' he asked. She shrugged and moved towards the door – then she hesitated, her old shoulders hunching with indecision. For a moment she didn't move, but remained frozen.

'Why?' repeated Jack. She turned and her face was gaunt with fear.

'They will use you till you die – and die you must or your young body will wither and dry like all those fine men who came before you.'

Jack forced himself off the bed and moved towards her.

'What are you trying to tell me?' he demanded. The old woman gave a sigh and she raised a hand as if to stop him.

'I have spoken enough. They will kill me if they think I have betrayed them. You *can* escape, but it must be tonight, during the Rites of Ratamundu – only one guard at the North Gate – at the hour of midnight when they disrobe after the feasting.'

'But listen,' said Jack. 'I don't understand.'

The old woman shook her head. 'It is enough,' she said. 'I must go. Remember my words. It has to be tonight or you will surely die.'

She turned and scuffled from the room leaving Jack alone.

Some hours later, after a brief tropical dusk, it was night and Jack, locked securely in the Rehabilitation Centre, was already fully dressed. His Smith and Wesson, hidden inside his flying boot, was crammed with six rounds and he had two dozen spare bullets in his jacket. His watch showed up luminously against the darkening room but it had stopped and he had no way of judging how close to midnight it was.

The question was answered a minute later when a throb of drumbeats began to waft towards his window.

'The Rites of Ratamundu,' thought Jack, 'whatever the devil they are.'

He pressed his face against the bars of the window and peered into the gloom. A hundred yards away, on sloping ground there was the flare and crackle of freshly lit bonfires – soon they painted the sky with tongues of flame and plumes of creamy smoke.

Jack pulled his bed across to the small window and stood on it, bringing his shoulder level with the stout wooden bars.

'Here goes,' he muttered and flung himself against them with every ounce of his strength. His shoulder jarred badly, making him wince – but the bars had given a little. Gritting his teeth he tried again and this time the wood splintered and tore from its frame leaving Jack's head and right shoulder hanging out over the wall. He bunched his legs and forced his body through the narrow space, swearing as a splinter ripped into his thigh.

Seconds later he was crouching on the soft turf beneath the wall, revolver in hand, his head pounding like a trip-hammer.

The drums were very loud now, hammering out a rising tattoo that was both menacing and exciting. He ran quickly over the dark ground towards the blaze of firelight, having selected a thick bush for his next patch of cover. What he saw when he peered over it made him cry out briefly in shock.

There were six huge bonfires blazing in a clearing of flattened earth. Hundreds of naked women danced in frenzied circles around the leaping flames. Their bodies glistened and their faces were savage – like maddened beasts. Close to the bonfires he saw something else which made his blood turn to water. A naked man, young, about thirtyish, tied securely to a wooden stake. His face was haggard and his muscular body streaked with sweat. Even from twenty feet Jack could see his wide-open eyes and hugely dilated pupils. The man was clearly drugged. He was also powerfully tumescent, his manhood arching upwards like a rhino horn.

Suddenly one of the women rushed at him and wrapped her body over his – the others clapping and shrieking with excitement. The woman writhed and clawed at him, her hips grinding against his in a thunderstorm of passion. Two minutes later she fell away, satiated and another took her place – then another, and another.

As the eleventh woman prepared to take her turn the man opened his mouth and gave a scream that shattered the night, rising shrilly even above the frenzy of the drums.

Jack saw Pella and El Presidente run forward clutching curved machettes – and then he turned away to blot out the horror of what was to follow.

Half stumbling, Jack ran across the soft turf away from the

nightmare of blood and lust towards what he knew must be the direction of the North Gate. The village perimeter was fenced with closely driven bamboo stakes, seven-feet high, and the gate was no more than a three-foot gap.

A single guard lounged against the fence, a young pantherish creature with a black ebony skin and hair like dark ropes. She was drinking noisily from a leather gourd and crooning softly.

Jack paused twenty yards from her in the shadows and slipped the safety catch off his revolver.

'This is it,' he thought. 'One drunken guard between me and freedom.' He took a deep breath and started running. She didn't see him until he was a yard from her and her eyes went wide with surprise. Still running he raised the revolver and squeezed the trigger. At that precise moment his foot struck a root and he went crashing down in a half-somersault. The bullet zoomed high over the trees and the revolver crashed against the bamboo fence.

She was astride him in an instant, her left hand around his windpipe and a flat-bladed dagger raised above his chest in the other.

Her thighs were warm and slippery and he could feel the heat of her sex against his chest.

She gazed down at him, with big eyes, and Jack could smell the raw alcohol on her breath.

'Captain Jack McAlpine,' said Jack, it seemed pointless to pretend otherwise.

'I know you,' she said, grinning suddenly. 'You belong to El Presidente. She will reward me well for catching you. Trying to escape were you? Was that your plan?'

Jack shook his head with great solemnity.

'Not at all. Just out for a spot of air. Jolly bracing, too.'

He breathed deeply.

The girl frowned and lowered the knife a fraction.

'I don't believe you,' she slurred, and shook her head as if to clear it. Jack slid his hands around her waist and cupped each of her taut, slippery buttocks.

'You can turn me in later,' he said softly. 'But why don't we have some fun first. I mean to say, you're missing out on all the jollies aren't you - guarding this silly old gate?'

The girl groaned and spread her thighs, pushing herself up to the level of Jack's face.

'I can't do much good with all this clobber on,' said Jack. 'Be a good girl and let me up for a moment.'

Panting, the girl rolled sideways and allowed Jack to stand up. She was still on her knees when Jack's right hook landed under her chin. Her head snapped sideways and she collapsed like a punctured balloon.

'Sorry, old girl,' said Jack. 'Never hit a woman before. Bye bye now.'

And with that he was through the gate and running like a gazelle towards the dark ridge of mountains that were lit by a pale moon high above the trees,

Lieutenant-General 'Snaffles' Wordley, VC, DSO, took a sip from his whisky and soda and frowned.

'If you ask me,' he said. 'The whole thing's a pack of damn lies. Do you seriously expect us to believe all that tommy rot about naked Amazons and Rites of Sacrifice by bonfires and so forth. Absolute bunkum!'

Captain 'Mad Jack' McAlpine twirled his brandy glass and smiled.

'Believe it or not, General,' he said, 'it's *all* true. I've had my fair share of sex – *and* women – and I want nothing more to do with them for the rest of my life.'

'But just a minute,' spluttered the old General, putting down his cigar. 'If you're finished with women why are you getting married to Lady Fiona Selston-Bunter next Tuesday? Answer me that, eh?'

'Because,' said Jack slowly. 'She is the most unattractive female person I have ever encountered in my whole life. However, I am assured by her mother that she prepares a truly magnificent lemon soufflé and her embroidery is a thing of wonder. *That*, my dear General, is the most excitement I want from any woman for the rest of my life. More whisky?'

Ian McEwan

Pornography

O'Byrne walked through Soho market to his brother's shop in Brewer Street. A handful of customers leafing through the magazines and Harold watching them through pebble-thick lenses from his raised platform in the corner. Harold was barely five foot and wore built-up shoes. Before becoming his employee O'Byrne used to call him Little Runt. At Harold's elbow a miniature radio rasped details of race meetings for the afternoon. 'So,' said Harold with thin contempt, 'the prodigal brother . . . ' His magnified eyes fluttered at every consonant. He looked past O'Byrne's shoulder. 'All the magazines are for sale, gentlemen.' The readers stirred uneasily like troubled dreamers. One replaced a magazine and walked quickly from the shop. 'Where d'you get to?' Harold said in a quieter voice. He stepped from the dais, put on his coat and glared up at O'Byrne, waiting for an answer. Little Runt. O'Byrne was ten years younger than his brother, detested him and his success but now, strangely, wanted his approbation. 'I had an appointment, didn't I,' he said quietly. 'I got the clap.' Harold was pleased. He reached up and punched O'Byrne's shoulder playfully. 'Serves you,' he said and cackled theatrically. Another customer edged out of the shop. From the doorway Harold called, 'I'll be back at five.' O'Byrne smiled as his brother left. He hooked his thumbs into his jeans and sauntered towards the tight knot of customers. 'Can I help you gentlemen, the magazines are all for sale.' They scattered before him like frightened fowl, and suddenly he was alone in the shop.

A plump woman of fifty or more stood in front of a plastic shower curtain, naked but for panties and gasmask. Her hands hung limply at her sides and in one of them a cigarette smouldered. Wife of the Month. Since gasmasks and a thick rubber sheet on the bed, wrote JN of Andover, we've never looked back. O'Byrne played with the radio for a while then switched

it off. Rhythmically he turned the pages of the magazine, and stopped to read the letters. An uncircumcised male virgin, without hygiene, forty-two next May, dared not peel back his foreskin now for fear of what he might see. I get these nightmares of worms. O'Byrne laughed and crossed his legs. He replaced the magazine, returned to the radio, switched it on and off rapidly and caught the unintelligible middle of a word. He walked about the shop straightening the magazines in the racks. He stood by the door and stared at the wet street intersected by the coloured strips of the plastic walk-thro. He whistled over and over a tune whose end immediately suggested its beginning. Then he returned to Harold's raised platform and made two telephone calls, both to the hospital, the first to Lucy. But Sister Drew was busy in the ward and could not come to the phone. O'Byrne left a message that he would not be able to see her that evening after all and would phone again tomorrow. He dialled the hospital switchboard and this time asked for trainee Nurse Shepherd in the children's ward. 'Hi,' O'Byrne said when Pauline picked up the phone. 'It's me.' And he stretched and leaned against the wall. Pauline was a silent girl who once wept in a film about the effects of pesticides on butterflies, who wanted to redeem O'Byrne with her love. Now she laughed, 'I've been phoning you all morning,' she said. 'Didn't your brother tell you?'

'Listen,' said O'Byrne, 'I'll be at your place about eight,' and replaced the receiver,

Harold did not return till after six, and O'Byrne was almost asleep, his head pillowed on his forearm. There were no customers. O'Byrne's only sale was *American Bitch*. 'Those American mags,' said Harold as he emptied the till of £15 and a handful of silver, 'are good.' Harold's new leather jacket. O'Byrne fingered it appreciatively. 'Seventy-eight quid,' said Harold and braced himself in front of the fish-eye mirror. His glasses flashed. 'It's all right,' said O'Byrne. 'Fucking right it is,' said Harold, and began to close up shop. 'Never take much on Wednesdays,' he said wistfully as he reached up and switched on the burglar alarm. 'Wednesday's a cunt of a day.' Now O'Byrne was in front of the mirror, examining a small trail of

acne that led from the corner of his mouth. 'You're not fucking kidding,' he agreed.

Harold's house lay at the foot of the Post Office Tower and O'Byrne rented a room from him. They walked along together without speaking. From time to time Harold glanced sideways into a dark shop window to catch the reflection of himself and his new leather jacket. Little Runt. O'Byrne said, 'Cold, innit?' and Harold said nothing. Minutes later, when they were passing a pub, Harold steered O'Byrne into the dank, deserted public saying, 'Since you got the clap I'll buy you a drink.' The publican heard the remark and regarded O'Byrne with interest. They drank three scotches apiece, and as O'Byrne was paying for the fourth round Harold said, 'Oh yeah, one of those two nurses you've been knocking around with phoned.' O'Byrne nodded and wiped his lips. After a pause Harold said, 'You're well in there . . . ' O'Byrne nodded again. 'Yep.' Harold's jacket shone. When he reached for his drink it creaked. O'Byrne was not going to tell him anything. He banged his hands together. 'Yep,' he said once more, and stared over his brother's head at the empty bar. Harold tried again. 'She wanted to know where you'd been . . . ' 'I bet she did,' O'Byrne muttered, and then smiled.

Pauline, short and untalkative, her face bloodlessly pale, intersected by a heavy black fringe, her eyes large, green and watchful, her flat small, damp and shared with a secretary who was never there. O'Byrne arrived after ten, a little drunk and in need of a bath to purge the faint purulent scent that lately had hung about his fingers. She sat on a small wooden stool to watch him luxuriate. Once she leaned forwards and touched his body where it broke the surface. O'Byrne's eyes were closed, his hands floating at his side, the only sound the diminishing hiss of the cistern. Pauline rose quietly to bring a clean white towel from her bedroom, and O'Byrne did not hear her leave or return. She sat down again and ruffled, as far as it was possible, O'Byrne's damp, matted hair. 'The food is ruined,' she said without accusation. Beads of perspiration collected in the corners of O'Byrne's eyes and rolled down the line of his nose like tears. Pauline rested her hand on O'Byrne's knee where it

jutted through the grey water. Steam turned to water on the cold walls, senseless minutes passed. 'Never mind, love,' said O'Byrne, and stood up.

Pauline went out to buy beer and pizzas, and O'Byrne lay down in her tiny bedroom to wait. Ten minutes passed. He dressed after cursory examination of his clean but swelling meatus, and wandered listlessly about the sitting room. Nothing interested him in Pauline's small collection of books. There were no magazines. He entered the kitchen in search of a drink. There was nothing but an overcooked meat pie. He picked round the burnt bits and as he ate turned the pages of a picture calendar. When he finished he remembered again he was waiting for Pauline. He looked at his watch. She had been gone now almost half an hour. He stood up quickly, tipping the kitchen chair behind him to the floor. He paused in the sitting room and then walked decisively out of the flat and slammed the front door on his way. He hurried down the stairs, anxious not to meet her now he had decided to get out. But she was there. Halfway up the second flight, a little out of breath, her arms full of bottles and tinfoil parcels. 'Where d'you get to?' said O'Byrne. Pauline stopped several steps down from him, her face tilted up awkwardly over her goods, the white of her eyes and the tinfoil vivid in the dark. 'The usual place was closed. I had to walk miles . . . sorry.' They stood. O'Byrne was not hungry. He wanted to go. He hitched his thumbs into the waist of his jeans and cocked his head towards the invisible ceiling, then he looked down at Pauline who waited. 'Well,' he said at last, 'I was thinking of going.' Pauline came up, and as she pushed past whispered, 'Silly.' O'Byrne turned and followed her, obscurely cheated.

He leaned in the doorway, she righted the chair. With a movement of his head O'Byrne indicated that he wanted none of the food Pauline was setting out on plates. She poured him a beer and knelt to gather a few black pastry droppings from the floor. They sat in the sitting room. O'Byrne drank, Pauline ate slowly, neither spoke. O'Byrne finished all the beer and placed his hand on Pauline's knee. She did not turn. He said cheerily, 'What's wrong with you?' and she said, 'Nothing.' Alive with irritation O'Byrne moved closer and placed his arm protectively across her shoulders. 'Tell you what,' he half

whispered. 'Let's go to bed.' Suddenly Pauline rose and went into the bedroom. O'Byrne sat with his hands clasped behind his head. He listened to Pauline undress, and he heard the creak of the bed. He got to his feet and, still without desire, entered the bedroom.

Pauline lay on her back and O'Byrne, having undressed quickly, lay beside her. She did not acknowledge him in her usual way, she did not move. O'Byrne raised his arm to stroke her shoulder, but instead let his hand fall back heavily against the sheet. They both lay on their backs in mounting silence, until O'Byrne decided to give her one last chance and with naked grunts hauled himself on to his elbow and arranged his face over hers. Her eyes, thick with tears, stared past him. 'What's the matter?' he said in resignatory sing-song. The eyes budged a fraction and fixed on his own. 'You,' she said simply. O'Byrne returned to his side of the bed, and after a moment said threateningly, 'I see.' Then he was up, and on top of her, and then past her and on the far side of the room. 'All right then . . . ' he said. He wrenched his laces into a knot, and searched for his shirt. Pauline's back was to him. But as he crossed the sitting room her rising, accelerating wail of denial made him stop and turn. All white, in a cotton nightdress, she was there in the bedroom doorway and in the air, simultaneously at every point of arc in the intervening space, like the trick photographer's diver, she was on the far side of the room and she was at his lapels, knuckles in her mouth and shaking her head. O'Byrne smiled, and put his arms around her shoulders. Forgiveness swept through him. Clinging to each other they returned to the bedroom. O'Byrne undressed and they lay down again, O'Byrne on his back, Pauline with her head pillowed on his shoulder.

O'Byrne said, 'I never know what's going on in your mind,' and deeply comforted by this thought, he fell asleep. Half an hour later he woke. Pauline, exhausted by a week of twelve-hour shifts, slept deeply on his arm. He shook her gently. 'Hey,' he said. He shook her firmly, and as the rhythm of her breathing broke and she began to stir, he said in a laconic parody of some unremembered film, 'Hey, there's something we ain't done yet . . . '

Harold was excited. When O'Byrne walked into the shop towards noon the following day Harold took hold of his arms and waved in the air a sheet of paper. He was almost shouting. 'I've worked it all out. I know what I want to do with the shop.' 'Oh yeah,' said O'Byrne dully, and put his fingers in his eyes and scratched till the intolerable itch there became a bearable pain. Harold rubbed his small pink hands together and explained rapidly. 'I'm going All American. I spoke to their rep on the phone this morning and he'll be here in half an hour. I'm getting rid of all the quid a time piss-in-her-cunt letters. I'm gonna carry the whole of the House of Florence range at £4.50 a time.'

O'Byrne walked across the shop to where Harold's jacket was spread across a chair. He tried it on. It was, of course, too small. 'And I'm going to call it Transatlantic Books,' Harold was saying. O'Byrne tossed the jacket on to the chair. It slid to the floor and deflated there like some reptilian air sac. Harold picked it up, and did not cease talking. 'If I carry Florence exclusive I get a special discount *and*,' he giggled, 'they pay for the fucking neon sign.'

O'Byrne sat down and interrupted his brother. 'How many of those soddin' inflatable women did you unload? There's still twenty-five of the fuckers in the cellar.' But Harold was pouring out Scotch into two glasses. 'He'll be here in half an hour,' he repeated, and offered one glass to O'Byrne. 'Big deal,' said O'Byrne, and sipped. 'I want you to take the van over to Norbury and collect the order this afternoon. I want to get into this straight away.'

O'Byrne sat moodily with his drink while his brother whistled and was busy about the shop. A man came in and bought a magazine. 'See,' said O'Byrne sourly while the customer was still lingering over the tentacled condoms, 'he bought English, didn't he?' The man turned guiltily and left. Harold came and crouched by O'Byrne's chair and spoke as one who explains copulation to an infant. 'And what do I make? Forty per cent of 75p. Thirty p. Thirty fucking p. On House of Florence I'll make fifty per cent of £4.50. And that,' he rested his hand briefly on O'Byrne's knee, 'is what I call business.'

O'Byrne wriggled his empty glass in front of Harold's face, and waited patiently for his brother to fill it . . . Little Runt.

The House of Florence warehouse was a disused church in a narrow terraced street on the Brixton side of Norbury. O'Byrne entered by the main porch. A crude plasterboard office and waiting room had been set up in the west end. The font was a large ash-tray in the waiting room. An elderly woman with a blue rinse sat alone in the office typing. When O'Byrne tapped on the sliding window she ignored him, then she rose and slid aside the glass panel. She took the order form he pushed towards her, glancing at him with unconcealed distaste. She spoke primly. 'You better wait there.' O'Byrne tap-danced abstractedly about the font, and combed his hair, and whistled the tune that went in a circle. Suddenly a shrivelled man with a brown coat and clipboard was at his side. 'Transatlantic Books?' he said. O'Byrne shrugged and followed him. They moved together slowly down long aisles of bolted steel shelves, the old man pushing a large trolley and O'Byrne walking a little in front with his hands clasped behind his back. Every few yards the warehouseman stopped, and with bad-tempered gasps lifted a thick pile of magazines from the shelves. The load on the trolley grew. The old man's breath echoed hoarsely around the church. At the end of the first aisle he sat down on the trolley, between his neat piles, and coughed and hawked for a minute or so into a paper handkerchief. Then, carefully folding the tissue and its ponderous green contents back into his pocket, he said to O'Byrne, 'Here, you're young. You push this thing.' And O'Byrne said, 'Push the fucker yourself. It's your job,' and offered the man a cigarette and lit it for him.

O'Byrne nodded at the shelves. 'You get some reading done here.' The old man exhaled irritably. 'It's all rubbish. It ought to be banned.' They moved on. At the end, as he was signing the invoice, O'Byrne said, 'Who you got lined up for tonight? Madam in the office there?' The warehouseman was pleased. His cackles rang out like bells, then tailed into another coughing fit. He leaned feebly against the wall, and when he had recovered sufficiently he raised his head and meaningfully winked his watery eye. But O'Byrne had turned and was wheeling the magazines out to the van.

Lucy was ten years older than Pauline, and a little plump. But her flat was large and comfortable. She was a sister and Pauline

no more than a trainee nurse. They knew nothing of each other. At the underground station O'Byrne bought flowers for Lucy, and when she opened the door to him he presented them with a mock bow and the clicking of heels. 'A peace offering?' she said contemptuously and took the daffodils away. She had led him into the bedroom. They sat down side by side on the bed. O'Byrne ran his hand up her leg in a perfunctory kind of way. She pushed away his arm and said, 'Come on then. Where have you been the past three days?' O'Byrne could barely remember. Two nights with Pauline, one night in the pub with friends of his brother.

He stretched back luxuriously on the pink candlewick. 'You know . . . working late for Harold. Changing the shop around. That kind of thing.'

'Those dirty books,' said Lucy with a little high-pitched laugh.

O'Byrne stood up and kicked off his shoes. 'Don't start that,' he said, glad to be off the defensive. Lucy leaned forwards and gathered up his shoes. 'You're going to ruin the backs of these,' she said busily, 'kicking them off like that.'

They both undressed. Lucy hung her clothes neatly in the wardrobe. When O'Byrne stood almost naked before her she wrinkled her nose in disgust. 'Is that you smelling?' O'Byrne was hurt. 'I'll have a bath,' he offered curtly.

Lucy stirred the bathwater with her hand, and spoke loudly over the thunder of the taps. 'You should have brought me some clothes to wash.' She hooked her fingers into the elastic of his pants. 'Give me these now and they'll be dry by the morning.' O'Byrne laced his fingers into hers in a decoy of affection. 'No, no,' he shouted rapidly. 'They were clean on this morning, they were.' Playfully Lucy tried to get them off. They wrestled across the bathroom floor, Lucy shrieking with laughter, O'Byrne excited but determined.

Finally Lucy put on her dressing gown and went away. O'Byrne heard her in the kitchen. He sat in the bath and washed away the bright green stains. When Lucy returned his pants were drying on the radiator. 'Women's Lib, innit?' said O'Byrne from the bath. Lucy said, 'I'm getting in too,' and took off her dressing gown. O'Byrne made room for her. 'Please yourself,'

he said with a smile as she settled herself in the grey water.

O'Byrne lay on his back on the clean white sheets, and Lucy eased herself on to his belly like a vast nesting bird. She would have it no other way, from the beginning she had said, 'I'm in charge.' O'Byrne had replied, 'We'll see about that.' He was horrified, sickened, that he could enjoy being overwhelmed, like one of those cripples in his brother's magazines. Lucy had spoken briskly, the kind of voice she used for difficult patients. 'If you don't like it then don't come back.' Imperceptibly O'Byrne was initiated into Lucy's wants. It was not simply that she wished to squat on him. She did not want him to move. 'If you move again,' she warned him once, 'you've had it.' From mere habit O'Byrne thrust upwards and deeper, and quick as the tongue of a snake she lashed his face several times with her open palm. On the instant she came, and afterwards lay across the bed, half sobbing, half laughing. O'Byrne one side of his face swollen and pink, departed sulking. 'You're a bloody pervert,' he had shouted from the door.

Next day he was back, and Lucy agreed not to hit him again. Instead she abused him. 'You pathetic helpless little shit,' she would scream at the peak of her excitement. And she seemed to intuit O'Byrne's guilty thrill of pleasure, and wish to push it further. One time she had suddenly lifted herself clear of him and, with a far-away smile, urinated on his head and chest. O'Byrne had struggled to get clear, but Lucy held him down and seemed deeply satisfied by his unsought orgasm. This time O'Byrne left the flat enraged. Lucy's strong, chemical smell was with him for days, and it was during this time that he met Pauline. But within the week he was back at Lucy's to collect, so he insisted, his razor, and Lucy was persuading him to try on her underwear. O'Byrne resisted with horror and excitement. 'The trouble with you,' said Lucy, 'is that you're scared of what you like.'

Now Lucy gripped his throat in one hand. 'You dare move,' she hissed, and closed her eyes. O'Byrne lay still. Above him Lucy swayed like a giant tree. Her lips were forming a word, but there was no sound. Many minutes later she opened her eyes and stared down, frowning a little as though struggling to place him. And all the while she eased backwards and forwards,

Finally she spoke, more to herself than to him. 'Worm . . . ' O'Byrne moaned. Lucy's legs and thighs tightened and trembled. 'Worm . . . worm . . . you little worm. I'm going to tread on you . . . dirty little worm.' Once more her hand was closed about his throat. His eyes were sunk deep, and his word travelled a long way before it left his lips. 'Yes,' he whispered.

The following day O'Byrne attended the clinic. The doctor and his male assistant were matter-of-fact, unimpressed. The assistant filled out a form and wanted details of O'Byrne's recent sexual history. O'Byrne invented a whore at Ipswich bus station. For many days after that he kept to himself. Attending the clinic mornings and evenings, for injections, he was sapped of desire. When Pauline or Lucy phoned, Harold told them he did not know where O'Byrne was. 'Probably taken off for somewhere,' he said, winking across the shop at his brother. Both women phoned each day for three or four days, and then suddenly there were no calls from either.

O'Byrne paid no attention. The shop was taking good money now. In the evenings he drank with his brother and his brother's friends. He felt himself to be both busy and ill. Ten days passed. With the extra cash Harold was giving him, he bought a leather jacket, like Harold's, but somewhat better, sharper, lined with red imitation silk. It both shone and creaked. He spent many minutes in front of the fish-eye mirror, standing sideways on, admiring the manner in which his shoulders and biceps pulled the leather to a tight sheen. He wore his jacket between the shop and the clinic and sensed the glances of women in the street. He thought of Pauline and Lucy. He passed a day considering which to phone first. He chose Pauline, and phoned her from the shop.

Trainee Nurse Shepherd was not available, O'Byrne was told after many minutes of waiting. She was sitting an examination. O'Byrne had his call transferred to the other side of the hospital. 'Hi,' he said when Lucy picked up the phone. 'It's me.' Lucy was delighted. 'When did you get back? Where have you been? When are you coming round?' He sat down. 'How about tonight?' he said. Lucy whispered in sex-kitten French, 'I can 'ardly wait . . . ' O'Byrne laughed and pressed his thumb

and forefinger against his forehead and heard other distant voices on the line. He heard Lucy giving instructions. Then she spoke rapidly to him. 'I've got to go. They've just brought a case in. About eight tonight then . . .' and she was gone.

O'Byrne prepared his story, but Lucy did not ask him where he had been. She was too happy. She laughed when she opened the door to him, she hugged him and laughed again. She looked different. O'Byrne could not remember her so beautiful. Her hair was shorter and a deeper brown, her nails were pale orange, she wore a short black dress with orange dots. There were candles and wine glasses on the dining table, music on the record player. She stood back, her eyes bright, almost wild, and admired his leather jacket. She ran her hands up the red lining. She pressed herself against it. 'Very smooth,' she said. 'Reduced to sixty quid,' O'Byrne said proudly, and tried to kiss her. But she laughed again and pushed him into a chair. 'You wait there and I'll get something to drink.'

O'Byrne lay back. From the record player a man sang of love in a restaurant with clean white tablecloths. Lucy brought an icy bottle of white wine. She sat on the arm of his chair and they drank and talked. Lucy told him recent stories of the ward, of nurses who fell in and out of love, patients who recovered or died. As she spoke she undid the top buttons of his shirt and pushed her hand down to his belly. And when O'Byrne turned in his chair and reached up for her she pushed him away, leaned down and kissed him on the nose. 'Now now,' she said primly. O'Byrne exerted himself. He recounted anecdotes he had heard in the pub. Lucy laughed crazily at the end of each, and as he was beginning the third she let her hand drop lightly between his legs and rest there. O'Byrne closed his eyes. The hand was gone and Lucy was nudging him. 'Go on,' she said. 'It was getting interesting.' He caught her wrist and wanted to pull her on to his lap. With a little sigh she slipped away and returned with a second bottle. 'We should have wine more often,' she said, 'if it makes you tell such funny stories.'

Encouraged, O'Byrne told his story, something about a car and what a garage mechanic said to a vicar. Once again Lucy was fishing round his fly and laughing, laughing. It was a funnier story than he thought. The floor rose and fell beneath

his feet. And Lucy so beautiful, scented, warm . . . her eyes glowed. He was paralysed by her teasing. He loved her, and she laughed and robbed him of his will. Now he saw, he had come to live with her, and each night she teased him to the edge of madness. He pressed his face into her breasts. 'I love you,' he mumbled, and again Lucy was laughing, shaking, wiping the tears from her eyes. 'Do you . . . do you . . . ' she kept trying to say. She emptied the bottle into his glass. 'Here's a toast . . . ' 'Yeah,' said O'Byrne, 'To us.' Lucy was holding down her laughter. 'No, no,' she squealed. 'To you.' 'All right,' he said, and downed his wine in one. Then Lucy was standing in front of him pulling his arm. 'C'mon,' she said. 'C'mon.' O'Byrne struggled out of the chair. 'What about dinner then?' he said. 'You're the dinner,' she said, and they giggled as they tottered towards the bedroom.

As they undressed Lucy said, 'I've got a special little surprise for you so . . . no fuss.' O'Byrne sat on the edge of Lucy's large bed and shivered. 'I'm ready for anything,' he said. 'Good . . . good,' and for the first time she kissed him deeply, and pushed him gently backwards on to the bed. She climbed forward and sat stride his chest. O'Byrne closed his eyes. Months ago he would have resisted furiously. Lucy lifted his left hand to her mouth and kissed each finger. 'Hmmm . . . the first course.' O'Byrne laughed. The bed and the room undulated softly about him. Lucy was pushing his hand towards the top corner of the bed. O'Byrne heard a distant jingle, like bells. Lucy knelt by his shoulder, holding down his wrist, buckling it to a leather strap. She had always said she would tie him up one day and fuck him. She bent low over his face and they kissed again. She was licking his eyes and whispering, 'You're not going anywhere.' O'Byrne gasped for air. He could not move his face to smile. Now she was tugging at his right arm, pulling it, stretching it to the far corner of the bed. With a dread thrill of compliance O'Byrne felt his arm die. Now that was secure and Lucy was running her hands along the inside of his thigh, and on down to his feet . . . he lay stretched almost to breaking, splitting, fixed to each corner, spread out against the white sheet. Lucy knelt at the apex of his legs. She stared down at him with a faint, objective smile, and fingered herself delicately. O'Byrne

lay waiting for her to settle on him like a vast white nesting bird. She was tracing with the top of one finger the curve of his excitement, and then with the thumb and forefinger making a tight ring about its base. A sigh fled between his teeth. Lucy leaned forwards. Her eyes were wild. She whispered, 'We're going to get you, me and Pauline are . . .'

Pauline. For an instant, syllables hollow of meaning. 'What?' said O'Byrne, and as he spoke the word he remembered, and understood a threat. 'Untie me,' he said quickly. But Lucy's finger curled under her crotch and her eyes half closed. Her breathing was slow and deep. 'Untie me,' he shouted, and struggled hopelessly with his straps. Lucy's breath came now in light little gasps. As he struggled, so they accelerated. She was saying something . . . moaning something. What was she saying? He could not hear. 'Lucy,' he said, 'please untie me.' Suddenly she was silent, her eyes wide open and clear. She climbed off the bed. 'Your friend Pauline will be here, soon,' she said, and began to get dressed. She was different, her movements brisk and efficient, she no longer looked at him. O'Byrne tried to sound casual. His voice was a little high. 'What's going on?' Lucy stood at the foot of the bed buttoning her dress. Her lip curled. 'You're a bastard,' she said. The doorbell rang and she smiled. 'Now that's good timing, isn't it?'

'Yes, he went down very quietly,' Lucy was saying as she showed Pauline into the bedroom. Pauline said nothing. She avoided looking at either O'Byrne or Lucy. And O'Byrne's eyes were fixed on the object she carried in her arms. It was large and silver, like an outsized electric toaster. 'It can plug in just here,' said Lucy. Pauline set it down on the bedside table. Lucy sat down at her dressing table and began to comb her hair. 'I'll get some water for it in a minute,' she said.

Pauline went and stood by the window. There was silence. Then O'Byrne said hoarsely. 'What's that thing?' Lucy turned in her seat. 'It's a sterilizer,' she said breezily. 'Sterilizer?' 'You know, for sterilizing surgical instruments.' The next question O'Byrne did not dare to ask. He felt sick and dizzy. Lucy left the room. Pauline continued to stare out the window into the dark. O'Byrne felt the need to whisper, 'Hey, Pauline, what's

going on?' She turned to face him, and said nothing. O'Byrne discovered that the strap round his right wrist was slackening a little, the leather was stretching. His hand was concealed by pillows. He worked it backwards and forwards, and spoke urgently. 'Look, let's get out of here. Undo these things.'

For a moment she hesitated, then she walked round the side of the bed and stared down at him. She shook her head. 'We're going to get you.' The repetition terrified him. He thrashed from side to side. 'It's not my idea of a fucking joke,' he shouted. Pauline turned away. 'I hate you,' he heard her say. The right-hand strap gave a little more. 'I hate you. I hate you.' He pulled till he thought his arm would break. His hand was too large still for the noose around his wrist. He gave up.

Now Lucy was at the bedside pouring water into the sterilizer. 'This is a sick joke,' said O'Byrne. Lucy lifted a flat, black case on to the table. She snapped it open and began to take out long-handled scissors, scalpels and other bright, tapering, silver objects. She lowered them carefully into the water. O'Byrne started to work his right hand again. Lucy removed the black case and set on the table two white kidney bowls with blue rims. In one lay two hypodermic needles, one large, one small. In the other was cotton wool. O'Byrne's voice shook. 'What is all this?' Lucy rested her cool hand on his forehead. She enunciated with precision. 'This is what they should have done for you at the clinic.' 'The clinic . . . ?' he echoed. He could see now that Pauline was leaning against the wall drinking from a bottle of Scotch. 'Yes,' said Lucy, reaching down to take his pulse. 'Stop you spreading round your secret little diseases.' 'And telling lies,' said Pauline, her voice strained with indignation.

O'Byrne laughed uncontrollably. 'Telling lies . . . telling lies,' he spluttered. Lucy took the Scotch from Pauline and raised it to her lips. O'Byrne recovered. His legs were shaking. 'You're both out of your minds.' Lucy tapped the sterilizer and said to Pauline, 'This will take a few minutes yet. We'll scrub down in the kitchen.' O'Byrne tried to raise his head. 'Where are you going?' he called after them. 'Pauline . . . Pauline.'

But Pauline had nothing more to say. Lucy stopped in the bedroom doorway and smiled at him. 'We'll leave you a pretty

little stump to remember us by,' and she closed the door.

On the bedside table the sterilizer began to hiss. Shortly after it gave out the low rumble of boiling water, and inside the instruments clinked together gently. In terror he pumped his hand. The leather was flaying the skin off his wrist. The noose was riding now round the base of his thumb. Timeless minutes passed. He whimpered and pulled and the edge of the leather cut deep into his hand. He was almost free.

The door opened, and Lucy and Pauline carried in a small, low table. Through his fear O'Byrne felt excitement once more, horrified excitement. They arranged the table close to the bed. Lucy bent low over his erection. 'Oh dear . . . oh dear,' she murmured. With tongs Pauline lifted the instruments from the boiling water and laid them out in neat silver rows on the starched white tablecloth she had spread across the table. The leather noose slipped forwards fractionally. Lucy sat on the edge of the bed and took the large hypodermic from the bowl. 'This will make you a little sleepy,' she promised. She held it upright and expelled a small jet of liquid. And as she reached for the cotton wool O'Byrne's arm pulled clear. Lucy smiled. She set aside the hypodermic. She leaned forwards once more . . . warm, scented . . . she was fixing him with wild red eyes . . . her fingers played over his tip . . . she held him still between her fingers. 'Lie back, Michael, my sweet.' She nodded briskly at Pauline. 'If you'll secure that strap, Nurse Shepherd, then I think we can begin.'

Ken Johns

Waste nothing

She drove. Anxious look shared between the road, the sky, the petrol gauge. The road followed the coast, narrow and bending and seeming endless. The sky darkened from the east and night crept down. The petrol gauge sank its needle closer to empty.

The sign she braked to examine said 'petrol'. Just a small finger board, its legend almost destroyed by flaking age and half-buried in hedge. She turned into the narrow lane with empty hope. But it was something.

She recalled the doctor's bedside clichés. There's nothing organically wrong with you. Rest. Your voice will come back. Hysterical aphony. Run down. Need a change. Take a holiday.

She did. It hadn't worked. Seven days in a sea view flat. Too shy, too nervy to go out. Now she shivered with the inadequacy of brief shorts and thin blouse. She'd only left the car for minutes after packing it. Everything taken but what she wore.

The garage she found was from yesterday's time, and as deserted. A dilapidated tumble of wood with an iron, hand-operated pump that offered petrol at three shillings and nine-pence. She tapped her petrol gauge pleadingly. It ignored her. She was too apathetic to cry.

A timid pressure on the horn and she left the car. No sign of human habitation in that ominous desertion. Until. The figure melted away from dark planks of door. Bent, overalled, brown-toothed gapped with black spaces, his skin a dry and baggy pouch for the contained bones of slack face.

'Want petrol then?' his hanging features said, spreading finally to grin.

Her hopes climbed wildly, then subdued to nervousness as he dismissed her bare legs with a glance and concentrated a rapturous stare upon her breasts. Her attire, normal for where she had been, now gave her a naked feel. Fleeting, his con-

centration was a shared pleasure, for with pride and vanity she claimed perfection of that which he studied. But yielded, for his look fierced a power that disputed ownership of her flesh.

She nodded answer to his question.

He nodded an eager return, eyes fixed on her chest. She stood aside as he took the nozzle and with a brief look at the centre of her shorts, thrust the nozzle into the uncovered hole of the filler tube with a breathy noise of triumph. Eyes back to her chest again, plucking buttons, spreading the material, distorted mouth that moved and noised a manifest of his longings.

Leaving the nozzle in place he moved the handle back and forth, faster until achieving a masturbatory spurt into the passive tank. He groaned and bent and withdrew it painfully.

Her legs jellied at his charade of rape as she thrust a note at him. He took it, pampering jealous eyes on the curve of her blouse while his free hand passed longingly over his own bony cage in mental transference.

‘Going Exeter?’

She opened the car door, look still fearfully upon him to see he stayed his ground.

‘Don’t go back,’ he croaked. ‘Long way. Round the corner here, gate. Turn there. Mile or so. Save ten.’

She found the lane by the gate obscured by rhododendron and it would be unnoticed but for given directions. The car brushed between and found a path little wider than itself that pointed a foliar tunnel ahead. Tight lines of apprehension held her face immobile.

Standing in a clearing that showed no other path out, a house of heavy stone with grey slate roof that seemed to warp a smile. Elsewhere the only movement was a cat that humped in grotesque limp. For one of its legs was longer than the others, and of a different colour.

She jumped when her car door was opened and the appeared woman beckoned her out. Old head swathed in polka-dot around some rosy cheeks. Comfy body aproned loosely to the ground.

‘Admiring Cat, I see,’ she said. ‘Good, fine job that. Leg like new.’

Blankness from the girl,

'Too big, I know, that leg. Must make do with what we has. Other cat was past it, see. Waste nothing here we don't.'

Unknown horror seeped into Girl as she was led firmly from the car.

'Doing it long afore the doctors, dear. Though they're catching up that's true. Bind tight the part till it's near through, soothed easy by the saps. Then through the bone neat and . . . QUICK. New part stitched and wrapped in herbs. A simple task, my dear.'

Girl made a sound, pointed. Herself, her car, the road, the distance.

'Poor dear, poor mute. Mother understands, of course. Wants to get on your way. You shall. There is a path but it'll take a while to clear. Old fool at the garage still thinks travellers comes through here.'

Mother hung limp arm to indicate a way, and at its end was plainly seen by Girl . . . *a youthful hand*.

Girl trembled to a stop and made some fluttering signs of haste.

'Of course, my dear, you needs to go, and so you shall quite soon.' She turned and called out, 'Son.'

A young man came in awkward gait of painful limp though with a wolfish grin.

Mother said, 'Son, take a tool and clear the path. We has a Passer here at last.'

'Why so we do have, Mother.' He came close to Girl and eyed one leg to make a measure against his own. 'A new Passer come at last.'

Mother then to Girl, 'Come on in house, my dear, for a while. Drink my special lemonade to refresh.'

Girl turned back for the car and shook her head, word-froze.

'Yes!' Mother shrilled with eyes alive and sparked in light, as her young hand reached to persuade. 'Be rude to refuse.'

Mother held the glass to Girl's lips who drank and watched with dread the hands on the glass; one young, one old. Then the chair took her deep and her limbs would not move.

'Father,' Mother said to the man now in. 'See what we has, a new Passer.'

The man was a bear in clothes far too small, one arm bent

painful in arthritic lock. Then Son joined the two and they grouped their stare down. On helpless Girl.

'She's prime,' finished Son from an open-mouthed nod.

But Father worried it out. 'She don't never speak. May be bad in her blood. Want none of that passed round here.'

Mother vanquished his fears with a laugh. 'Fine, healthy specimen I say that she is. She'll do us a treat.'

'But a girl,' snorted Father. 'I wanted a man. Girls are no use to me.'

'Selfish you are,' snapped Mother. 'I wanted a girl. And Son here, he'll benefit too. Folks like us can't have tailor-made. Your turn'll come one of these days.'

'She got any flaws?' asked Son, now aquiver.

'None that I see. But you do the honours and we'll see what we has.'

Girl heard them, and saw them, and felt Son do his work. Then they prodded and squinted and turned her all ways.

'Perfect!' screeched Mother. 'A beautiful Passer we has in our midst.'

'When, Mother, when?' choked Son in fever pitch.

Mother screwed up her face then came out of deep thought. 'Tomorrow at cock-crow our labours begin. Son, take her up to the guest room, she must have her rest. No . . . wait.'

Mother circled the room and then came, back to the chair where Girl's limbs and dread were numbed by the extracts. 'Son, a drop of my syrup when you has her up there. There's someone who deserves a little reward. It'll be good test of her strength to recover.'

Son laid her to rest and obeyed Mother's bidding with syrup past Girl's lips, and the last of all feeling went out of her body. But they were come back in the room and she knew it all plain. Son carried bandages. Father a bowl of stink-smelling herbs. And Mother a cheese-cutter with thin glistening wire. And the handles were stained a dark red,

Girl fainted to sleep.

And awoke to see, smell, hear. Though her body slept lead-like and all that she knew was thick quiet from the house. Till came a loud creak, and another on the stair. Outside the door now, then in,

Son stood at her bed, long arms adangle, fingers atwiltch to draw back the sheet from her form. A loose drool above surveyed every Girl inch.

'Fine, young skin,' he told in relief, testing here and there for stretch. 'Last for years so it will.'

Took a jar and from it sprinkled oil to smooth it all places. 'Preserves and peels it easy. A dying craft these days,' he said in pride.

From his pocket a dark crayon was touched upon her skin and moved in squares about her. 'Three large, four small. They'll pass a lovely light. Our Mother's a gem at such things.'

Girl fainted off again.

And was alone when she awoke. No light crept to the shuttered room. Though bound securely, there was movement from her limbs. A sharp recoil from backward thought abated as she sensed her skin, intact. Though around her chest thick bandage swathed and pressed a numbness. Then they filed into the room and stood around the bed. Girl closed her eyes in dizzy remove from the scene.

Uncovered Girl upon the bed brought out a snap of anger. From Mother, 'Who bound her so?'

Son, 'It was me. I thought to . . .'

'Fool! Dolt! Too tight. She must have circulation. Loose them off at once I say. My snake-tongue brew will hold her firmer to that bed than any rope. Be she awake?'

Son pulled at Girl's eyelid and stared at her conscious but unanswering eye. 'She sleeps,' he said in error. And dropped it back again.

Son rubbed his hands. 'Which parts?'

'I've thought it out,' said Mother. 'I shall have one hand. My, how good it will be to have two good hands again. Son, you shall have a leg.'

'But it's a good deal shorter?'

'So's the one you had before. You're used to limp by now. Make do with what we got, waste nothing. Father, how's your arm?'

'Weaker. All the time more painful.'

'Well you needs wait till we get a more suitable Passer. Her arm would look too queer dangling on you. Besides, a hand and

a leg are enough at one time. We mustn't tax her strength. She can stay here quiet till we need some more. A pity they last less than a year on us.'

'And the teeth, Mother,' Son reminded.

'Shape them nice and thread them neat. Fine price they'll fetch. And look at that hair, I'll be spinning for days. And the skin, now peel it careful while it lives, there's some fine lamp-shades there. Waste nothing, eh?'

They nodded agreement in close-knit excitement.

'When shall we cut, Mother?' Son urged, eyeing Girl's parts with boy eagerness.

'Like I told, at first good daylight. Will be a busy time for us with three in all to lose or change some parts. A mercy we had good crops of herbs, there'll be much pain to numb. We'll take first a hand, and then a leg – perhaps the two and try long-term preserving. After we have set them to ourselves, we'll have the skin. Hair and teeth can wait a while. Now we must prepare.'

'I'll gather in the herbs,' said Father.

'And I the saps, three kinds,' said Son.

Mother nodded satisfaction. 'And I will do the mixing.'

Father tapped Girl's bandaged chest. 'How's it coming on, eh, Mother?'

'Quite well, my dear. They've never yet been suckled on. I don't suppose they ever will be now, not by no babe.'

It was a huge and pleasing joke, that rippled terror into half-slept Girl. Struggling desperate to force unmoving fingers closer to her herb-wrapped chest. A whimper tip-toed past her lips.

They turned a simultaneous menace with snarling from their eyes.

'Give her more snake-tongue, Son. Enough to keep her quiet till past our needs. At daybreak, rub her well all over to get her blood flowing fast and warm. Be diligent now.'

Still Father grumbled. 'All this work and trouble and nothing this time for me.'

'There'll be other Passers, Father,' Mother soothed. 'And I'll tell you what, my dear. She has a fine and tender tongue that's no use to her at all. Tomorrow night a little treat for your supper. How's that!'

Father licked his lips and spilled involuntary juices to his chin.

'Come now,' Mother said to all. 'We must be about our chores. The syrup, Son. Then off with you.'

And when he fed, Girl managed to hold most in her mouth. Alone, she expelled it on the bed. What little ran on down her throat sent her soon dark into sleep.

A short-lived sleep that ended abrupt with wide-snapping eyes that saw pale light creep through the shutter. Tight lips closed her mouth when remembrance tried to force a scream. And her skin crawled and iced as she thought of that trio with their bandage and herb and cheese-cutting tool. But she had movement. Creep to the door now, open slow. From below a rattle and scrape.

Someone preparing for her!

The window shutter open with painful protest. Light was reaching over trees. Below, at a stretched body length, a slate roof, and below again, the ground. And there, in the clearing still, her car.

Still naked, but no time for that. Except . . . The bandage? She pressed. There seemed fulness there. Oh, thank . . .

A call hollowed up from the house. 'Rub her well now, Son. Get the blood aworking strong.'

Quick. Over the sill. Hanging by fingertips, not feeling the roof with her toes. Afraid to look down.

Above her, panic shout. 'Mother! The Passer have gone!'

Anger noise welled up the house. A shrill cry of rage that trembled the walls. Then silence.

Should she drop? Or wait? But *they* would go down from the house for a search. Girl lifted her head to seek up a way. And saw, Mother and Son looking down upon her, features gravity drawn to slack spite, clawed hands whispering down to grip hers. Terror sucked in her cry and loosened her grip. From a sprawl on slate roof she looked for its edge, dropping over her weight while the slates snapped and crumbled, slivering her fingers with red.

'My hand!' screamed out Mother, clawing the air. 'She's cutting my hand! Father below, catch her quick. We'll cut into her now while the blood's coursing hot. Catch her quick I say.'

Girl dropped, floundered and ran. Father was swerving her way. He caught from behind, high up on her waist. She thrashed like a fish till her sweat sheened body, slithered out from his grip and he fell.

The key was in place and the starter whirled round. Father struggled up to his knees. The starter whirled slower. Mother's scream found a way from the house. The starter stopped, restarted. Mother and Son erupted out from the house. The engine fired.

The rhododendron seemed thicker. Girl threw an arm across face as they leaned to thrash her windscreen. Then they fell back to show the garage. Near blocking the way a rusty old van with the man standing near.

Girl slid to a halt, pointed back to mouth with voiceless plea, 'That house. Those people. Get help.'

He motioned above and there in pale light, a glint of telephone wire. Inside the dark and odorous place searched frantic for the hand-set. Those three back there could reach her soon.

Found at last. Emergency number. Jiggled and dialled and heard a response. Though she strained and she forced no voice would come out, and tears followed fast. The man outside leaned up from her open bonnet.

'Help me,' her earnest silent moan.

As Brother closed the bonnet she heard thrashing down through the bush. Girl dived in the car as Brother in full sight rent open his shirt . . .

A long pierce of scream threw her foot to the floor. Brother watched her scrape past with content on his face, *as he smoothed brake fluid around her herb-bedded parts.*

Mother and Father and Son now appeared, in the clearing with Brother. They heard the short crash, and climbed in the truck that Brother had started.

Mother said out voicing all of their fears, 'A hand and a leg, I hope they survived.'

'And an engine,' said Brother, 'and good tyres as well. Waste nothing, eh?'

David Case

A cross to bear

They were three men, not young, who shared the habit of walking in the park on pleasant afternoons. At first they politely avoided one another, as strangers do, but in time they began to nod as they passed, and then to exchange greetings, and eventually to speak together and become acquainted. They had little in common. Their backgrounds were not at all similar and such philosophies of life as they possessed were widely separated. But they shared one thing. They had time. And so they met and discovered that different backgrounds did not prevent friendship, and came to look forward to the casual meetings beside the placid river. Their respective pasts diverged rapidly, but at this point they met, in space and time, if nothing else, and that was sufficient. Gradually, without forcing it, they came to know a great deal about one another.

Andrews was a historian, well thought of by his bookish colleagues but without the creative spark which would have made him known to the public. A learned and passive man, he had led a sedentary life and asked no more. He had a long and sober face, wore spectacles and used a walking stick.

Barlow was a self-made businessman. He had risen from a lowly job as a tourist escort (he preferred to say courier) to become the managing director of a large and prosperous firm of travel agents, and was fond of relating episodes which indirectly implied how he had risen by his bootstraps. He was never obnoxious or obvious about this, however, and was often amusing. He had a florid complexion and wore a watch chain across his waistcoat.

Carter had been a jack of all trades who, in his time, had dabbled in many strange things and many strange places and was content that the adventures were behind him. He had

leathery skin and wore a red scarf knotted at his neck in lieu of a necktie. Neither Andrews nor Barlow were at all snobbish, and did not object to this affectation – realized it was more than affectation since the scarf had formerly been functional in keeping perspiration from running beneath his collar in warmer lands and had become quite natural to Carter, although he no longer had cause to sweat.

Usually they met by expected accident in the park, although several times in the early stages of their friendship they had met elsewhere, by arrangement. But these occasions had never been quite satisfying. The differences between them became more pronounced in social situations. They met once in a public house near the park but Andrews, who never took alcoholic drinks, seemed uncomfortable. They had dinner at Barlow's spacious and grand, if somewhat hollow, home and found that Carter did not fit into the surroundings in a strangely physical sense, like a slightly warped segment of a jigsaw puzzle. Carter himself was at ease, but certain aspects of his appearance affected the other two. The brandy glass was too symmetrical in his large horny hand, his clothing too casual in the leather and wood of the library, his seamed skin more suited to cover the old volumes on the shelves behind him than to bind a human skull. They stopped at Andrew's club and were profoundly bored by the members and the atmosphere. And so, by tacit agreement, they came to limit their meetings to the comfortable common ground of the park. It was on such an occasion that Barlow told of his experiences in the Spanish morgue and, indirectly, reminded Carter of the curious affair of the jaguar-man.

The three men sat on a bench beside the river, beneath the overhanging trees. It was late afternoon and there were not many others in the park. A few courting couples passed, a few children ran and shouted on the opposite bank, someone was flying a kite in the distance. No one paid any notice to the men on the bench. They were not very noticeable, just three conventional men passing the time, and Carter's red neckerchief was hardly remarkable in the relaxed atmosphere of the park. Barlow was smoking a cigar and Carter was smoking a

stubby black pipe. Andrews did not smoke. Andrews had been telling an anecdote concerned with an anachronism which had slipped into one of his early books which had magnified in the developing text until it became a preposterous distortion causing him great embarrassment. His narrative flowed as slowly as the river, neither interesting nor obtrusive, mild and rather pointless. Like many historians, he could not get beyond the facts and dates, could not fashion a meaningful theme behind his words. However, the reference to Spain served to remind Barlow of his adventure there, and when Andrews had finished, and they had waited a proper length of time to make certain he actually was finished, since the conclusion had been as pointless as the development, Barlow studied the even white ash on his cigar and spoke.

'Spain,' he said. 'I've been there. I don't know much about Spanish history, but of course I know what all the landmarks and famous buildings are from my days as a courier. Had to memorize all that. Always liked Spain, it was a good place to relax. And yet, I had one of most disturbing incidents of my life there.'

He paused and regarded the ash once more. Andrews and Carter waited patiently for his tale, and Barlow waited to make sure they wanted to hear it. Barlow had a great fear of boring his companions, possibly stemming from the days when he had to strive to make a tour interesting and meaningful. After a suitable pause, he began again.

'It was when I was young and impressionable,' he said. 'I expect that things far more frightening have occurred since, but one invariably remembers the first time things happen. They are more disturbing because they are unique and unknown. This particular incident occurred just after I'd started guiding the travelling sheep around Europe and it was the first time I'd encountered the courier's nightmare – a death in the party. It happened in Granada. I had a group of ancient tourists with me and had just got checked into our hotel. We were only scheduled for one day there, and the plan was to have lunch in the hotel and look at the Alhambra in the afternoon. I was in my room, reading a guidebook so I'd know

what to tell them when they asked the invariable questions, when all of a sudden I heard a great weeping and wailing and then someone pounded on my door. I opened it, fearing the worst, and there was one of the wives who had suddenly become a widow. Only she couldn't believe it. She kept insisting that he was asleep and that someone should wake him up in time for lunch. I went down to their room and there he was, stretched out fully clothed on the bed, dead as could be. I tried to console her but she just kept shaking her head and asking him to wake up and saying how it would be a shame to miss lunch, since it was already paid for. That seemed very important to her. I suppose it was a defence mechanism, transferring the importance of his death to an insignificant fact. I tried to reason with her, but she didn't seem to hear me. She sat down at the foot of the bed and began taking his shoes off. Well, there was nothing I could do there, so I went downstairs and sent a clerk for the authorities. But this was during siesta, you see, and the police and the coroner were all sleeping, so no one could come for several hours. It was very unpleasant. I went back up to the room and the woman was still sitting beside the body, still trying to wake him. Gave me an eerie feeling, that. His eyes were wide open, you see, and I had the strangest sensation that any minute he was going to sit up and ask for his lunch. That was the most significant fact, somehow – that damn lunch. And she kept repeating, "It would be a crime to waste it, since it's paid for." It got me so frustrated that eventually I told her she could have a refund. I wasn't sure what company procedure was in such a case, but I would have been willing to give her the whole price out of my own pocket, just to make her stop talking about it. But even that didn't calm her down. It wasn't the money at all, of course. So finally I left her there and went back to my own room and waited for the authorities. Eventually they arrived. They came to my room and I took them down the hall and when we went in the dead man's room, I had a shock. There was the widow, still sitting on the bed, and what had she done but had lunch – for two – sent up to their room. And, calm as could be, she was eating her own food and trying to spoon the other portion into the dead man's mouth. It really shook me, I'll confess. Made me feel physically

sick. There were food stains on his lips and chin and the front of his shirt, and I think she'd actually pried his mouth open and got some of the stuff into his throat. Well, it even bothered the cops. They didn't know what to do. Spaniards don't give much of a damn about death, but we were afraid that the woman had gone mad. That's the second worse courier's nightmare, insanity. It might even be the worst, I don't know. Never had it happen, thank God. Because as soon as they'd carted the body away, the woman relaxed and seemed quite undisturbed. She was so calm that she even came out to the Alhambra with the rest of the party, and took a great interest in the Moorish architecture. So I thought it was all over. But the really horrid part was still to come . . .²

Barlow puffed on his cigar and looked at his companions; nodded slightly, seeing that he held their interest, puffed again and continued.

'Well, the widow decided to remain in Granada to make arrangements, of course, and we had to leave in the morning. I don't mind telling you I was glad I'd be gone . . . couldn't forget how she'd forced that food into his dead mouth. But then, just as I was getting ready for bed, she came down to my room again, all flustered. All their money and both passports were in her husband's wallet, and where was the wallet but in his trousers, and where were the trousers but on the deceased, and where was he but in the morgue? Naturally, I had to take care of it. I didn't want to, but the poor woman spoke no Spanish and, anyway, if we tried to get the wallet returned through legal channels I figured Spanish indolence and inefficiency and red tape might take weeks. I just couldn't leave her there with no money or passport. So I had to go to the morgue.

'I expected it would be just like home, you know, but it wasn't. First of all, the morgue wasn't in the city. It was an isolated building outside the city limits, in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada. By the time I got there, it was dark. I mean, it was night. It wasn't really dark because there was a full moon. Everything was silver and black, and those mountains were looming up behind the building. They were very ominous. How do I describe them? Even in daylight they are sort of foreboding. The colours . . . they seem to be formed of modelling clay.

Different colours of clay that some impatient child has moulded into one lump, you know. And dotted with poppies so red that they didn't seem real – like the paper flowers one sees on flag day. But at night, with the sky all bright around that disc of a moon, and the last dregs of sunset very murky on the opposite side of the sky – well, it gave me goose flesh. I kept thinking of the Spanish gipsy superstitions about those things they call *mantequeros* – wild creatures that look like men from a distance and when you get close to them you see they aren't really men at all, only then it's too late because they roam the hills looking for men to eat. Lot of nonsense, of course. But still . . . well, I wanted to get it over with as fast as possible. I walked up to the entrance and found that the door was open. I knocked and called but no one came. There was no attendant at night. Can't say I blame anyone for not wanting such a job, at that. But what could I do? We were leaving early in the morning and I had to get that wallet. I went in. There was only one room. The moonlight poured in the doorway and there were big flat shelves along the walls, in the shadows. I took a step forward and my foot rang out loudly on the tiled floor. I took another step, looking from side to side, wondering how I could find the body. And then I saw it. There was a slab in the middle of the room, directly in the path of the moonlight, and the body was on the slab. Right there in plain sight. I went over and stood beside the slab, looking down at the corpse. I stared at it. The eyes had been closed, but the mouth was wide open. He seemed to be waiting to be fed. There were unchewed food particles in his mouth and on his lips, and his false teeth had slipped out of position. I must have stood there for a good ten minutes, trying to get my courage up. Every time I started to reach out a wave of revulsion passed through me and I jerked my hands away. Finally, I closed my eyes and grabbed him by the shoulders very suddenly, not allowing myself time to think, and heaved him into a sitting position. Once I touched him most of my dread vanished. It was only a corpse, after all. It couldn't hurt me. I told myself my fear had been ridiculous and felt so relieved – forced relief into my feelings – that I was able to very calmly draw his wallet from his hip pocket. I had to unbutton the pocket first, and then work it out carefully, I put

it in my own pocket and then – so very very calm now – I decided I had better close his mouth. Some vague concept of respect for the dead, you know. I placed the heel of my hand under his jaw and pushed it shut. His lips were forced out by the false teeth. It made him look as if he were pouting. Then I started to lower the body again, and all of a sudden his mouth dropped wide open. The jaw slammed down like a guillotine, with a distinct little click, against his chest. I guess his wife had dislocated his jaw when she pried it open with the spoon. But it scared hell out of me. I let the body go and ran – actually ran – to the door. Then I looked back. The body hadn't fallen, he was still in a sitting position and the moonlight was full on his face. His mouth lolled open like a hungry wolf, unbelievably wide and dark, just as if he were soundlessly screaming. Screaming for me to return and straighten his body out on the slab. But I'm damned if I did. I went away and left him sitting there. Often wondered what they thought when they found him like that in the morning . . . '

Barlow shrugged and smiled faintly. It was growing dark and the river made soft sounds against the bank. The children had stopped playing and the kite no longer drifted above the trees.

'Perhaps it doesn't seem so terrible to you,' he said. 'It doesn't seem so bad to me, either, thinking back on it. But at the time it affected me greatly. It was the setting which frightened me, of course. Not the corpse. After all, they can't rise from the dead, can they?'

'Well,' said Carter, 'there are those who say differently.'

'Oh?'

His two companions looked at Carter and he knocked the ash from his pipe; began to fill it again, pressing the tobacco down with his thumb. He struck a match and lighted it; pressed it down and lighted a second time, then puffed until it was burning evenly. His eyes were distant.

'Well?' Barlow asked.

'All this happened a long time ago, you know. Things were different then. One thought differently. Just as you were disturbed by the setting in the morgue, by the strange surroundings. Sitting here, we recognize the variety of natural phenomena, but in other circumstances one tends to credit the super-

natural – to ascribe a cause beyond the definitions of natural law. Oh, I wasn't superstitious. Not a bit. Never have been. And yet . . . well, I vowed I'd never transport another missionary up that river . . .'

He puffed away contentedly. The stubby pipe hissed, light grey smoke billowed up in the dusk.

'Well?' Barlow repeated.

'I've never told the story before. It might take some time . . .'

'Time is what we have, my friend,' said Andrews.

'Have you ever heard of a jaguar-man?'

'Isn't that something like a werewolf?' Barlow asked.

'Something like that.'

Andrews coughed. He had a very pedantic way of coughing.

'Excuse me,' he said, 'I believe that is the South American equivalent of the werewolf. The legend of lycanthropy is almost universal, you know. Quite remarkably similar in all continents. But in countries where they do not have wolves, the most fearsome carnivore is substituted. In China and Japan they ascribed the powers of metamorphosis to the tiger or fox. In Greece and Turkey they used the boar. Africa has the hyena, leopard and crocodile. But the basic legend is very similar everywhere.'

'Well, I wouldn't know about all that,' said Carter. 'But I knew about the jaguar-man. Lot of nonsense. But, the point is, the natives believed in it. They thought that certain sorcerers could turn into jaguars, or maybe that their spirits could leave the bodies and take over a real jaguar's form. I'm not quite sure which . . .'

'Both theories usually exist together,' Andrews said. 'It's the classic legend. Funny how it spread throughout the world.'

'Funny? Oh, maybe. And yet, if a thing is universally believed . . .' Carter shrugged.

'Of course, in many cases this legend was used by the witch-doctors and sorcerers. They played upon primitive fears to further their own ends, deliberately spreading superstition to strengthen their positions. Sometimes they even dressed in the skin of these animals to inspire terror or even to commit a crime.'

'Oh, I'm not saying there isn't a scientific explanation for such things,' Carter told him. 'I'm just saying that the people

believed it, that's the thing. Not that I did, certainly. I've never had any superstition at all.'

'Superstition is another historical concept,' Andrews said. He was about to continue when Barlow gestured impatiently.

'Never mind the theories. Let's hear Bill's story.'

'Oh, of course. Forgive me.'

'Ever seen a jaguar-man, Bill?'

Barlow laughed as he asked this, but Carter looked serious.

'I've seen the work of one. A nasty business.'

'Tell us about it.'

Carter nodded. He was collecting his thoughts.

'You must understand that this was a long time ago, gentlemen,' he said, almost apologetically.

Then he began to speak.

'It was when Sam and I were running a private trading outfit. I guess I've mentioned that before. We had an old steamship and used to trade up and down the river and the tributaries and sometimes we'd take a passenger, although there weren't many that wanted to go into those wilds. We also had a long term contract to supply the mission. It was just a small place quite a ways inland, and we only went there two or three times a year. Old boy name of Wright ran it, all on his own. Nice old fella. Got to know him quite well over the years. Then one day, when we were due to take the usual shipload to the mission, another missionary turned up in town. He was the replacement for Wright, a young man, very zealous and impatient to be started. Quite an impressive figure of a man he was, too. A big, rangy type with a sharp glance, a way of turning his head to suddenly look at a man with that keen glance, like the blade of an axe. He came down to the ship the first time we met, striding along the wharf for all the world like Christ walking on the waters, full of confidence, you know, and right off he began telling me about his duty to save souls. I didn't pay much attention because I've never been superstitious and didn't have much religion to speak of. But I sort of humoured him and made out I agreed and believed what he was saying, because I figured it would be easier that way. Otherwise he'd have been trying to convert me. And, of course, I had to be polite since he was a passenger

and we needed the money. I didn't have any idea what trouble there would be, in the end. The strange paradox in the man's thoughts. There the savages were chucking spears at the ship and he was standing in plain sight commanding us to put down our weapons and preaching about how they were benighted unfortunates who must not be killed, and then a bit later he does an about face and pleaded with us to use our guns to stop a harmless burial rite. Never could understand such reasoning. Didn't want us to kill in self defence, but thought killing justified to stop a mere ceremony. Oh, I can see how it was offensive to him, with his religious convictions. I never minded the headhunters much, myself. I mean, you know just where you stand with a headhunter. But with him it was different. Superstition was his greatest enemy. Other sorts of superstition, things he'd never encountered. I can't see what the harm is in burning a man's heart after he's dead. Can't see how God would mind much, either. But not that missionary. He got so excited he was frothing at the mouth.

'But I'm getting ahead of my story. Never was much good at telling a story. Can't remember jokes, either, although I guess maybe that's a different thing.'

Carter deliberated for some minutes, his brow furrowed and his pipe smouldering in his teeth.

'Well, there was Sam and I and this missionary fella and our three native crewmen. That was all. The missionary's name was Stanford. I forget what the blacks were called, but that isn't important. They were useful enough. They could run the boat as well as Sam or I, although they hadn't the faintest idea of the principles behind it. Didn't understand about steam and such. They thought the boiler was a sort of minor god that drank water and breathed steam. Good enough chaps, for all that. Ignorance never hurt a man. But we hadn't gone more than a few miles upstream before this Stanford had them lined up, telling them all about God and keeping them from their duties. I had to ask him not to interfere with their work and he began ranting at me about how it was a sin to leave them in ignorance and I got a little heated and told him it was better ignorant than holed on a sandbank and that shut him up. I don't think he was afraid of drowning so much as falling into the muck

on the river bank. That was on account of he was so clean, you see. Cleanest man I ever knew. Used to wash himself five or six times a day. Always looking at the grease and oil on Sam and me as well, not to mention the blacks on whom the dirt didn't show up so much because they were black anyhow. Mind you, the load of blankets and clothing he'd brought to cover the natives' nakedness didn't look all that clean, either. Second hand, came from the hospital I think. But no one knew much about germs and sterilization and such in those days. He just liked to wash, I guess. Thought it was what God wanted.

'Cut quite a figure, he did, standing at the rail sniffing the jungle. Looked like a prophet. You could see he was a man with a mission just by looking at his eyes. Sort of deep and fiery, with flared nostrils and a thrusting jaw. Good looking fella, too. Couldn't see why on earth he wanted to bury himself in that jungle. Could have had the girls chasing after him in any city in the world, I should think. Didn't seem quite real, somehow, in his black suit and white linen, on that river. You know that river? No? The jungle comes right down to the banks, real wild rain forest, no trails at all. At some points where the stream narrowed the trees met right overhead so we were steaming through a green corridor with vines looping down above. And hot! My God, it was hot. Hot and sticky. But Stanford didn't seem to sweat much, he was so clean, even in his heavy suit. Sam and I wore shirts because of the mosquitoes but the blacks were half-naked and glistening. The mosquitoes didn't trouble them any. Stanford didn't like them to expose their bare torsos, thought it was indecent, but after I told him not to bother them he didn't say much, just wiggled his fine nose in disgust and muttered some prayers.

'We were well upriver, only a few days from the mission, when the attack came.

'There was a spot where we had to pass to one side of a sandbank in the middle of the stream. Quite a large bank, long and thin, with grassy humps appearing first and then a shallow yellow sandbar. The trees overhang the banks at that point. To get by we had to follow a course very close to the verge of the jungle and when we were about half-way past the sandbank they began shouting and screeching in the trees. Sam and I

looked at one another and then, without a word, we got our carbines and got up on top of the wheelhouse and lay down flat. One of the boys was inside the house, steering, and the other two got their knives out and crouched down behind the packing crates. But that fool missionary just stood at the rail, looking noble. He didn't seem to understand that this was hostile territory. I called down to him to take cover, but he didn't seem to hear. He seemed confused by it all.

'Then they started shooting arrows and throwing spears. The arrows looked like little twigs that couldn't hurt anyone, although I don't know but that they were poisoned, but the spears were big and heavy. One struck into the wall of the wheelhouse and split the planking wide open. Another hit the deck right beside Stanford's foot and bounced across and into the water on the far side. He just looked down at the spot and scowled disdainfully. I shouted to him again and he looked up. He started shouting back, but I couldn't hear what he said because just then Sam started firing. We couldn't see a thing, of course. Just jungle. But we figured we might have a lucky hit, or that maybe the noise would frighten them off. So we banged away as fast as we could. The bullets snapped through the foliage and ferns and smacked against the boles of trees. Well, the screaming stopped then. But we kept firing. And suddenly Stanford's face appeared right at my elbow, black with rage. What he'd done, he'd hooked his fingers over the top of the wheelhouse and drew himself up that way, so that only his head and fingers were above the roof and he was shouting into my ear - shouting about how it was a great sin to kill, and especially to kill a fella who hadn't been baptized. And it struck me so funny that I had to laugh. I guess it was a reaction, now that the danger seemed to have passed, and I just guffawed right in his disembodied face, while Sam continued to fire. Then we had drawn clear of the sandbank and the boy took us back into the centre of the current. It was safe enough in midstream, and we came down from the wheelhouse. Stanford was waiting to berate us. He was very angry, gesturing and pointing at us with his index finger, his hair all wild and his eyes bright. The boys stared at him and rolled their eyes and grinned nervously. Sam tried to explain that they had meant to kill us, but it didn't seem

to make any difference at all. He just couldn't understand. After a while he quieted down, but for the rest of the trip he brooded glumly and hardly spoke at all. Just washed his hands and brooded . . .

'Well, then we came to the mission.

'We nudged up to the shore where there was a sort of crude platform serving as a wharf and Wright came limping down to greet us. He was a nice old fella that the natives liked pretty well because he doctored them and didn't interfere where he wasn't wanted. He looked disappointed when he saw Stanford. Not surprised, just disappointed. I guess he'd been expecting to be replaced soon. They shook hands and I got the boys started unloading the supplies while they talked, then we went up to Wright's hut. It was just like all the other huts, a fact which startled Stanford. He wrinkled his nose and stood by the door, turning his head about as though looking for something. He didn't look pleased. It was a small, dusty village with a bamboo stockade running in a semi-circle back from the water. Some of the huts were supported on poles over the bank of the river. Stanford looked at all this and, from time to time, he blinked and flushed and lowered his eyes. I tried to follow his line of vision. There were naked children running about, and he winced at that, but what really got to him was that some of the women had bare breasts. A couple were grinding some sort of grain in a wooden mortar, looking shyly at the missionary and grinning. Their breasts swung back and forth over the bowl, and Stanford's eyes seemed to pivot as he stared at them, and then he shook his head violently. I could see the muscles of his jaw grow tight, determined.

'“Why is this permitted?”' he asked.

'Wright tried to explain that it was not immodesty, that it was just the natural mode of dress for these people, but Stanford just kept shaking his head.

'Then he asked where the church was.

'Well, there was no church. When Wright admitted this, Stanford looked in disbelief down his long nose. He said, “I don't understand you.” Then he shook his head some more. Wright said he figured there were things more important than a church, that he was trying to establish a hospital of sorts and instruct them in medical procedures and sanitary methods.

Stanford wasn't impressed. "But what of their souls?" he demanded. Wright told him he was instructing them in the tenets of Christianity, and that it was important to get a sound background of theory established before one imposed a church upon them – that otherwise they would fail to understand the significance of the church. But he couldn't get through to Stanford at all. The younger missionary became very quiet and angry. We went into the hut. Wright got out a bottle of brandy and Sam and I took a drink with him. But this made Stanford more furious. He looked at us and then, very coldly, asked if Wright was in the habit of such incontinence. Wright blushed and talked about aiding the digestion and such, and Stanford talked about invalid excuses. There was more. Pretty soon they were arguing heatedly. I can't remember all they argued about. Couldn't follow all the arguments at the time, as I recall. But the gist of it was that Stanford considered that Wright had made a complete failure of the mission – that he had committed a positive sin by letting the savages carry on naturally.

"You have failed miserably," he said. "You have failed to be strict enough, strong enough!"

"I didn't come here to be strict," Wright said, growing angry himself by this time. "I came to help them."

"You were sent here to save them, and you have failed. I can only thank providence that I have come to this place, where the laws of God have been ignored, and that the harm you have caused by your neglect will not prove irreparable."

"And then Stanford turned and stood staring at the wall, very straight and stiff, shoulders squared, muttering to himself. His fingers clenched and unclenched at his sides. Poor Wright looked at Sam and I and sighed. That was that.

"Well, after a while Stanford calmed down somewhat. The boys had brought the crates up and stacked them around the missionary's hut and he sat on one of the boxes and tried to look tolerant and resigned. Wright was encouraged enough to volunteer to show him the hospital and the school. He showed little interest. In truth, neither was very interesting, although one couldn't expect much. The hospital was a large bamboo enclosure with a thatched sunshade and grass pallets on the ground. Two or three old people were groaning on the pallets, wasted and wizened, and Stanford averted his eyes as

if he found physical infirmity distasteful. The school was even less impressive, without desks or books, except for a Bible. Stanford nodded approval about the Bible, however. Then it was time to meet the headman. There was a bit of indecision over whether they should go to the headman's hut, or summon him to the missionary's hut, and in the end they met in the centre of the clearing. The headman was a proud fellow with plenty of scars on his face and chest and an aristocratic bearing. He didn't understand what was going on. Stanford raised his hand and blessed the man, quickly and disinterestedly and the headman, thinking it was some form of greeting, emulated the gesture. This was when we discovered that Stanford didn't speak a word of the local dialect. Not a word. He seemed to think it wasn't very important; had expected that Wright would have taught them all to speak English or Latin by this time. Wright just looked confused. And then another nasty moment occurred. The village witch doctor came marching up to meet the new missionary. Well, as you may imagine, witch doctors and missionaries are not all that compatible. Wright had managed to get along with the old boy all right, because he didn't try to interfere in his business – went out of his way to make their spheres of influence seem separate, so that there was no question of superior magic between them, and didn't object to the old rites being celebrated. In return, the witch doctor had rather grudgingly come to respect Wright. But we could all see instantly that this wouldn't be the case with Stanford. It would have been humorous, that meeting, if it hadn't foreshadowed trouble in the future. The witch doctor was an ancient fella, his skin as dry and aged as parchment – not parchment made from papyrus, but from the pulp of mahogany. He had long, greasy hair and dark, furtive eyes. His eyes seemed to reflect a certain wisdom, and to be much younger than his face, and they were set very deeply. One had the impression that his eye sockets were so deep that he could not look sideways without turning his head – that if he turned his eyes, he would look only at the shelf of his own skull. He wore a filthy old skin over his shoulders, a rag around his loins and a brilliant headdress of feathers. He did not smell very well. Stanford, in fact, recoiled from the man's odour. But the witch doctor didn't realize what

had caused that retreat, and perhaps assumed that Stanford had recognized the power of his magic, for he actually smiled – a remarkable thing, to see that old toothless face smile. Then came the part which was almost humorous. Stanford raised his hand and blessed the man. He held a small silver crucifix and made the gesture perfunctorily. And the witch doctor, in return, held up some old dried bones and made gestures of his own. There they stood, blessing one another. I saw a hint of amusement pass over Wright's face. Then it disappeared as Stanford turned to him.

“Who is this man?” he asked.

Wright hemmed and hawed. He was embarrassed again. Stanford repeated the question and, finally, Wright blurted it out. Stanford's eyes grew very very wide. He said, “A witch doctor? A witch doctor? Am I going mad? Is everyone totally mad? A witch doctor?” And the old witch doctor looked from one to the other – I guess I was right about the eye sockets, because he swivelled his whole head on the scrawny pivot of his neck – and then, quite distinctly, in English, he repeated the words. “Witch doctor,” he said, and pointed to his chest with the handful of dry bones and looked very proud of his title.

Stanford turned abruptly and walked back to the missionary's hut, and the witch doctor rattled his bones and, funny as it was, we could all see that there was going to be difficulty.

What else was there? It's not easy to recall details, after this length of time – to decide which facts have bearing on the ultimate disaster. Let's see . . . there was the thing of the stockade, yes. Yes, that was important. Wright had tried to establish a plantation outside the palisade. Bananas aren't indigenous to that country, but they grow well enough if they are imported, and one of his favourite projects had always been to teach the natives to cultivate the fields, to afford them some sort of security. Well, they hadn't quite grasped the idea and it wasn't much of a plantation. A bit overgrown and untended. But the bananas themselves were flourishing, perfectly suited to the soil and climate and not really requiring much attention. Wright felt he had to explain this project to Stanford. Stanford was still dazed by the fact that there was a witch doctor in the same village as the mission, and he followed along in a sort of

stupor. Wright pointed out the fields and mentioned some of the things that had to be done, to keep the jungle back. Stanford paid no attention. We came back into the village and, noticing that the bamboo stockade was not very sturdy, I mentioned that we'd been attacked down river. I wondered if it might not be wise to strengthen the fortifications. But Wright, speaking to me and perhaps not thinking that his replacement was listening, said that the headhunters had never attacked this village and seldom came up this far into the headwaters. The stockade, he said, was just to make the village feel secure against the evil spirits about which Ooma – that was the witch doctor's name – kept them terrified. It was standard procedure, of course, and Wright thought nothing of it, but suddenly Stanford wheeled and faced him.

“Am I to assume that those walls are to keep the devil without?” he asked, coldly.

“Well, devils, yes,” Wright said.

“The devil. Satan. The fallen angel.”

Wright lowered his head nervously. He wouldn't look at Stanford, and maybe he had begun to feel that he had, indeed, been a failure. Staring at the ground, he mumbled about how these people still believed in evil spirits of the forest – water demons, tree spirits, wind devils. And, I believe, it was at this point when mention of the jaguar-men was first made, although at the time, of course, it made no particular impression on me. No more than any of the other things he spoke of. Stanford had gone white in the face again, his lips trembled. The whole affair had been a series of crests of anger followed by depressions of resignation. He didn't speak. Wright, now that he begun, felt he should explain further, and mentioned that Ooma performed certain precautionary rites and sacrifices to ward off these evil spirits; suggested that it was just as well to let him continue to do so. “It can do no harm,” he said, by way of offering an excuse, and this caused even greater anger in Stanford. At length Wright fell silent. Stanford said, “We have nothing further to say to one another.” He walked away. He was quite serious about that, and did not speak another word to the old missionary.

Wright was to return with us.

We stayed the night to give him a chance to get his posses-

sions packed and loaded. Sam and I slept on the boat and Wright stayed in the hut with Stanford, but all that night not a word passed between them. Early in the morning, Wright gathered his meagre belongings. While he packed, Stanford was unpacking the crates which we had brought with us – the usual consignment and also the boxes which he'd brought himself. Sam and I offered to help, but he refused with a gesture; tore violently at the packing cases, as if taking his annoyance out on the wood and nails. We had the boys load Wright's possessions on the boat while the missionary said good-bye to the villagers. They couldn't seem to understand that he was leaving for ever, or why. This parting took some time, as he wished to speak to each villager individually, and in the meanwhile Stanford had unloaded a crate of cheap cotton dresses and begun to distribute them among the women, gesturing and averting his eyes. The women were pleased and excited about the colourful cotton cloth, although they did not understand about modesty at all. They didn't know how to put a dress on. Most of them merely tied them about their waists, like sarongs, leaving their breasts bare. Then they strutted about in their new finery, adding the sin of vanity to that of indecency in Stanford's eyes – averted eyes, of course. Eventually he gave up on this and walked away, leaving them to fight and tussle over the remaining cloth, and even old Ooma seized a dress for himself and strutted as proud as any of the women.

'Stanford returned to the unpacking, and the next crate he opened happened to be Wright's regular consignment of brandy. We'd forgotten all about this in the tension of the circumstances and the desire to be away, and the first we recalled it was when Stanford came striding down to the ship with the crate in his arms. He was very powerful. He carried it as if it had no weight at all, holding it well away from his chest, almost at arm's length, as if it were liable to contaminate him. Without a word, he threw the crate over the ship rail. It smacked heavily on the deck and the wood splintered, but fortunately it had been well packed in wood shavings and none of the bottles shattered. Sam, rather impertinently, thanked him. He just glared at us and turned back. Wright had finished with his farewells and they passed close by each other as he came down to the boat, but Stanford refused to notice his predecessor. A great crowd of

villagers followed Wright to the water and stood about, smiling and kicking up dust, as he clambered aboard. He looked very old and sad. He sat on deck and from time to time raised his hand, in a sort of feeble wave, which the natives enthusiastically copied. He was looking beyond them, at the dusty little village which had so long been his home.

‘We had to wait a bit longer to get the steam up.

‘Pretty soon the crowd lost interest in Wright’s departure – I expect they still believed he would return – and wandered back to the village. The women began grinding with their mortars and pestles of hard wood, the men were squatting about greasing their bows and sharpening flint-tipped arrows and spears, preparing for a hunt. Ooma, very fine in his new dress – it was bright yellow – was chanting and rolling bones to ensure that the hunters were successful. Then the sound of hammering came from amidst the buildings. We could hear Stanford shout from time to time and the hammering rang out, a strangely alien sound in that village, too regular, too sharp. I noticed some of the men wander towards the sound. They undoubtedly thought the new white witch doctor was making his own spell to aid their hunt. I went into the bows and from there could see what he was up to. He’d taken the packing crates apart, straightened out the nails and was using them to build an altar beside his hut. I watched him for a while, fascinated by his energy. He had no hammer, and was using the flat of an axe to drive the nails, striking violently. I had the impression that he was striking these blows against more than wood – was striking at sin itself, at ignorance – whose ignorance, Ooma’s or his own, I could not say – at the ideas he wished to destroy; that he was, with each blow, committing the deicide of false gods. He hadn’t even removed his coat. I had never yet seen him without his coat and tie. His hair flew about wildly and he was sweating for the first time. A group had gathered around him, watching with great interest, and between strokes he spoke to them. They jabbered back. No one understood. Sparks glinted from the axe and some of the planks split. Then Sam called to me. The steam was up. We were ready to depart.

‘As the village slipped away, Stanford was hidden from sight for a moment, and then he appeared again, viewed between hut and palisade. He had managed to get half a dozen of the women

kneeling at the altar. They were grinning and giggling. The men stood behind and nodded, perhaps pleased that this new man had chosen to help them in the hunt. He thought they were worshipping, and they thought the crucifix represented some wood spirit, I suppose. Perhaps it was just as well they had no common language.

‘Then we moved into midstream and he was lost to sight.

‘The last sound we heard, as we steamed away, was the ringing of a small bell.’

Carter broke off his narrative and looked at the little stream gurgling peacefully at his feet; frowned, as if he saw a different stream, from a different time, reflected in the darkening waters. Andrews and Barlow waited patiently for him to begin again and presently he did so.

‘That was the last I saw of Stanford or the village for some six months. That little bell was the last impression I had. Somehow the tinkling seemed as out of place as the hammering had been, muffled in the thick jungle growth. I suppose, in a way, I had been impressed by the man – not favourably, you know, but an indelible impression nonetheless. Or perhaps, at that time, I felt only relief at being finished of him, and the impression came later because of the events – well, no matter. I retain a distinct visual image of Stanford along with a memory of distaste and, of course, pity. I have spoken about him a great deal – too much, possibly – but I felt it was necessary to try to show you what sort of man he was at the beginning. He was strong, very strong. He proved how strong he was, and that caused his ultimate downfall. But that came later. During the interim, neither Sam nor I thought much about him, other than occasionally wondering how he was getting along – not caring, just out of curiosity, you know. And I’m sure old Wright thought a great deal about it, wondering if his own works had been carried on or abolished. I remember how tremendously defeated he looked when we steamed away, as he gazed back at the village and the plantation without. He had moisture at the eyes. I assumed that his sorrow was at leaving, but later – we had drunk some of the brandy by that time – he asked me, very seriously, whether I considered him a failure. I assured him he had been absolutely right, but he wasn’t very convinced. I suppose he was getting too old, at that, and had lost the

courage of his convictions. Now that he had no duties to occupy his time, he began to tear apart the things he had done, and wonder if they had been worthy. I suppose we all do, gentlemen, when that time of life is upon us, eh?

Carter glanced at his companions. Neither replied, although thoughts flowed behind their eyes, and they knew perfectly well what he meant. Andrews poked at the ground with his stick and Barlow fingered his gold watch chain and Carter loosened his gay red bandana before he continued.

'Time passed,' he said. 'Time passes. Soon enough, it was necessary to take a new load of supplies to the mission and the consignment was delivered to the ship. It was the same as usual, even to the case of brandy. We knew that Stanford would not want the brandy and figured there was no sense in loading it. We also saw no sense in returning it. Sam and I divided half the bottles, and took the other half around to Wright. He was still in the town, living in a cheap hotel, absolutely at loose ends. He was too old to go home and had nothing to do there but wander through the streets. He had aged considerably. His eyes were vague. We stopped to have a drink with him and found his conversation pointless and wandering. He couldn't understand where the brandy had come from and we didn't press the point. He seemed grateful to have it and the church could afford it – owed him that much – and it seemed proper and right. Finally, when we were leaving, he came to understand that we were going back to the mission. He couldn't believe that six months had passed, and kept asking us if there had been trouble. We explained it was a routine journey but he shook his head and mumbled about evil spirits and how he had failed and asked us to do everything we could for his villagers. He had forgotten all about Stanford, it seems. That was just as well. We left him with his brandy and went back to the ship.

'The trip was uneventful.

'We had managed to retain the same three boys and, by this time, they had become quite capable of running the ship on their own, although they still believed the boiler was a water demon. We had to pass close to the shore to avoid the same sandbar, and took the precaution of getting on the wheelhouse with the carbines and stacking crates around us, but we weren't attacked and saw no sign of savages. It was a very smooth

passage and, of course, we should have suspected that this was merely the lull before the trouble we were to encounter at the mission. Curious how the events of life invariably move with an undulating rhythm. It seems to be a descriptive law of life. But there was no foreshadowing of the evil until the night before we reached the village. We did not move at night, of course, because of the danger of snags and floating trees and newly formed sandbars and had just anchored in midstream and settled down to the evening meal. Then we heard the jaguar cry. It is impossible to attribute direction to sound in a rain forest, but it seemed to come from ahead, in the vicinity of the mission. It was not remarkable to hear a jaguar, of course, and neither Sam nor I would have thought anything of it but for the exceptional behaviour of the crew. They stopped eating and rolled their eyes about, food dropping from their open mouths. They made signs with their hands. When we asked them what was troubling them, they wouldn't answer. The cry came again and they cocked their heads, listening intently and shivering. Then, simultaneously but without a word, all three got up and took their food below. We looked at one another and followed; found them squatting around the still hot boiler which was, of course, the most powerful demon on board. They were somewhat calmer then. One of them had begun to stuff food into his mouth again. But they all glistened with rivulets of sweat and they all had wide eyes. Sam asked once more what had disturbed them.

'One - the one who had started eating, a broad-chested young brute who'd always seemed quite fearless - said, "The cry." The others nodded.

' "But it was only a jaguar," Sam said,

' "No. Different."

' "What was it then?"

' "It was the cry of a jaguar-man," he said, and at that instant the howl sounded a third time and they huddled against the boiler with complete disregard for the heat of the metal. Sam and I shook our heads and went back on deck. We knew it was futile to tell them otherwise and didn't try. Of course, we thought it was perfect nonsense. But they had been right. That was exactly what it was . . . ²

Barlow turned on the bench and looked sharply at Carter. It

was quite dark now and he could barely make out the profile of Carter's face. Andrews frowned at the ground, where he had chopped it up with the end of his walking stick. The stick felt damp in his hands. After a moment Carter faced Barlow and twitched his shoulders in a gesture which failed, somehow, to be a shrug.

'I mean, of course,' he said softly, 'that was exactly what it was to them. To Sam and I . . . well, neither of us was superstitious. What we may have thought is unimportant and it's better if I continue with the facts of the matter.

'As soon as we drew up to the wharf, we could tell that there was trouble. It was a tense scene – so tense that no one had even seen us approach. The villagers were banded together in a sullen group with the headman at the front and Stanford was facing them, obviously furious and gesturing at heaven and hell. He was shouting in English and stamping his foot to accent the incomprehensible words. Sam and I stood at the rail and we were both struck by various small changes in the village. The plantation was almost completely overgrown now and tentacles of jungle reached to the palisade. A roof had been erected over the altar Stanford had made, much sturdier than any of the other buildings, and the bell was suspended over this roof in a little wooden tower. All the women wore cotton dresses, and wore them correctly, covering their breasts. But these impressions registered superficially in our minds, for we were concentrating on the strange tableau in the clearing. We didn't know what to do. The boat nudged and bumped against the makeshift platform, causing us to sway and grip the rail. I don't know how long we remained there but at length someone saw us and pointed. The headman looked in our direction and then Stanford turned, his face dark with rage. He squinted for a moment, then seemed to realize who we were and with a final violent gesture directed at the natives he came running towards us. His face was streaked with sweat and dust, the first time I'd seen him less than clean, and his features were contorted. He pounded over the planks and grasped the rail with one hand.

'"Thank God you've come," he gasped, tilting his head back to look up at us. "You're just in time."

'"In time for what?" Sam asked.

“To prevent sacrilege.”

‘I told him to calm down and explain, but he wouldn’t listen. He kept saying that we must hurry and that we were to bring our firearms. Well, that surprised us. We remembered, you see, how he hadn’t wanted us to use our rifles even in self defence and so we assumed this must be something very bad indeed. He had both hands on the rail now and was shaking the boat frantically, and shouting for us to hurry before it was too late. Well, we didn’t like to take the rifles into the village, but what could we do? It was all so sudden, and we hadn’t any idea what it was all about. So finally we got the two carbines and followed Stanford up to the village. We were very careful to keep the weapons pointed at the ground but all the natives moved away, looking at the guns with big eyes. They knew what guns could do . . . knew they were the militant arm of Christianity. As the crowd broke up we saw the old witch doctor, squatting over some bones and feathers in front of his hut. He glanced up at us and glowered, then dropped his face and spat fiercely and concentrated on his incantations and charms.

‘Stanford led us past the makeshift church and paused at the door of his own hut. He looked in and took a deep breath, then stepped back and pointed into the interior. I moved to the door and looked in. Sam looked over my shoulder and I heard his breath rasp sharply. It was not a pretty sight. A mangled body never is.

‘It was a young fella, quite dead of course. The body was stretched out on the floor and someone – obviously Stanford – had made an attempt to position the limbs in a peaceful attitude. The hands were folded over the chest and the eyes had been closed. But somehow this attitude only added to the horror. It seemed a mockery to have positioned such a horribly mutilated body in that manner. The throat had been torn out, the torso was shredded with ghastly wounds and I saw the white arch of his ribcage – unbelievably white – through the gashes in the dark flesh.

‘Stanford was facing us, but still pointed sideways at the body with a righteous forefinger,

“Jaguar?” I asked,

‘He nodded,

“Well? It’s gruesome enough but what’s the trouble?”

Stanford had to make several attempts before he was able to control his voice. At last he said, “They wish to desecrate the dead.” I raised my eyebrows. “They intend to . . . were going to . . . to cut the heart from this corpse and burn it!”

“Oh, that,” Sam said.

We sighed and put our carbines down, leaning them against the wall. It was the first time we’d encountered this thing, but we’d heard about it and we knew what it meant. We didn’t know how to explain it to Stanford, however, and his eyes were pouncing back and forth between us. Finally Sam said, “I guess you haven’t mastered the dialect yet, huh?” and Stanford said, “What do you mean? I understand what they intend to do all right.” Sam nodded. “Yes, but you have to understand why. It’s a rite they have.” Stanford’s lip curled up like a cat’s. “A rite? an abomination, a blasphemy!” “No,” Sam said, sort of slow and weary. “No, just a rite. A ritual. They have a superstition about these things. For some reason they must believe this fella was killed by a jaguar-man and they believe that you got to burn the victim’s heart before his soul can be released. Don’t know why they think that, but that’s the way they see it. It’s harmless enough and it keeps them happy.”

Stanford fairly howled then. He hopped up and down as if he were throwing a tantrum, but somehow it wasn’t very funny. “Harmless?” he repeated. “Harmless? To defile the dead? And a Christian, at that. I baptized this man myself. He was my most faithful convert, perhaps the only one who truly believed. I will not allow his body to be defiled. He will go whole to a hallowed grave. No matter what the consequences! You understand? No matter what, I say! I will prevent this fiendish act!” He was foaming at the mouth as he shouted these words. The cords stood out in his neck, his face was thrust forwards, his arms moved. He seemed on the verge of violence. But then, quite suddenly, he lowered his head. His shoulders seemed to slide down. “He died in the church, you know,” he said, in a soft voice. “I found him dead at the altar. He was kneeling there and at first I thought he was praying and then I saw the blood. I . . . I don’t know if he dragged himself there with his last breath, hauling his poor torn body along the ground . . . or

perhaps he had been worshipping when the beast attacked him. I don't know. If only I'd been able to erect walls . . . my fault , . . the church is open, you see. And yet a church should be open for all good men . . . " He looked up, his eyes hollow with suffering. "Please understand me. He was a good man, a true Christian. He took a Christian name. Joseph. He was so proud – not vanity, you understand – so pleased with his new name. Like a child, really. So you can see why you must not – cannot – let them do this thing. You must talk to them, reason with them. Perhaps if you explain that he was of the white man's religion it will make a difference . . . make them see that they cannot use his body for a ceremony offensive to his God. Yes, they might understand that. Somehow. Please . . . "

"How did I feel? Stanford's thinking was alien to me, and yet I saw his point of view well enough. I could even feel a sympathetic vibration of his turmoil and pain. I felt sorry for the man, that's the thing. And, too, he had this strength. It was difficult to refuse him . . . difficult even to look at him, pitiful and powerful at the same time, incapable of comprehending any dogma but his own and yet absolutely incorruptible within his limits. He placed his hand on my shoulder and stared at me. Sam moved nervously beside us, and I could tell he felt the same as I. There seemed to be no choice. I agreed to talk to the headman. We wouldn't use the guns, of course, but there seemed little harm in trying to reason with the man, even if I were reasoning with arguments which were not mine. Simply to be a translator, the mouthpiece for Stanford. He squeezed my shoulder gently, as one does to a companion, a friend, a comrade. "Thank you and God bless you," he said. Well, I had to help him if I could, that was all there was to it.

"The headman was standing by the palisade, half-turned towards the open gates, ready for flight. He was afraid of the guns. The rest of the village had scattered. Some hid in their huts, some had gone into the overgrown plantation. They were not a warlike people, of course. That was why the mission existed there, amidst a peaceful village surrounded by stronger tribes. So we had no fear of them. We left the carbines leaning against the hut and walked towards the headman. He made one quick movement towards the gates, like a feint, and then paused.

He saw we had no firearms and after a moment was able to resume his proud bearing. He advanced to meet us. The villagers came drifting up cautiously behind him from their huts and through the gates and Stanford stood in the doorway of his own hut, as if barring the entrance. His expression was hopeful and determined. Sam and I greeted the headman solemnly and respectfully and then we squatted in the dust to talk. The villagers formed a silent semi-circle behind him. They looked timid and curious. But the headman himself – it was strange – he looked exactly like Stanford. He looked hopeful and determined. It is hard to conceive of two men whose features were more dissimilar, and yet at that moment the headman might have been a reflection of Stanford, glimpsed in a black looking glass. Even the scars on his countenance seemed no more than faults in the glass. We spoke for some moments to no consequence, fulfilling the formalities of the meeting and then, gradually, the story emerged . . .

‘The dead man had, indeed, been converted.

‘To the headman, the villagers, even one supposes to the witch doctor, there was no paradox between Stanford’s religion and their own superstitions. They believed in many gods, and were quite willing to admit the existence of Stanford’s god – even to pay him respect and to believe, because he was the god of the white man, that he was a most powerful being. They were willing to worship as Stanford demonstrated they should – more than willing, they were quite eager to appease this new deity. It seemed quite proper. But it was inconceivable that they should cease to pay homage to their former beliefs. They were not, you see, as narrow-minded as Stanford. And that was where the trouble began – with his narrow-minded attitudes. You can imagine how frustrating it was for him. He would believe he’d converted one of the villagers because the man had been to his church and then he’d discover this same man participating in one of the pagan ceremonies, sacrificing a cock, consulting the witch doctor. He’d become enraged. I can picture the scenes all right. It must have been like Christ driving the moneychangers from the temple. The headman mentioned some of this, how he’d broken fertility idols, interrupted sacrifices, scattered the feathers and bones used to predict the future, torn

the sacred periapts from their necks. They resented this, and yet tolerated his interference. Perhaps they feared him as a man – he was powerfully built, constructed on a larger scale than the natives, and must have appeared truly dangerous with his flashing anger and his black coat-tails flying like wings behind him as he advanced, face thrust forwards, index finger pointing towards the object of his wrath – or perhaps they feared his god. Possibly both. The very fact that he could disrupt their worship and come to no harm, of course, protected him from them. They reasoned that, if he were powerful enough to avoid punishment from the devils and spirits of their religion, he must be protected by his own god – that his god was more powerful than theirs. For him. That's the point. They thought his god was personal to him, not that he was more potent in any objective sense. And, after all, they could see the manifestations of the ancient deities for themselves. The storm and the swamp and the carnivore. It seems to me they would have had to be braver – and more simple – than they were to neglect the old religion. Nor did they. They practised the old ceremonies in secrecy and the new in his presence and the compromise satisfied them. The witch doctor may have resented sharing his domain but made no attempt to disrupt it. He, too, feared the white god. So this uneasy balance was maintained for some months.

‘Then Joseph tilted the scales.

‘He was a young man, no more than a boy really. It is impossible to tell the age of these people. They mature quickly and age rapidly. But he hadn't yet participated in the ceremony of manhood so he couldn't have been more than a youth. And he'd come to awareness since Stanford had arrived. He hadn't been indoctrinated and wasn't steeped in the old fears, recognized Stanford's power and became, as Stanford told us, a true convert. He even learned a bit of English. Not much. More, I daresay, than Stanford had learned of his own language. They became very close and, eventually, Stanford took the boy to live in his own hut. I expect he was lonely and certainly he was delighted at finally achieving success. Probably the youth was more intelligent than most of the villagers. But under Stanford's influence, he became arrogant. He refused to participate in the

old rites and treated the witch doctor with insolence. He wore a cross at his neck and carried it like a shield. Even the headman had no influence over him. His parents – the whole village – despaired of him, were scandalized by him. His very presence became an outrage as he strutted about the village with the cross on his chest, sneering at the elders. He announced that he would, when the time came, refuse the ceremony of manhood. This could not be tolerated. The elders consulted and decided he must be banished. But he lived with Stanford. They did not know how to exile him. How do you banish a man who refuses to recognize your authority? And then they went to the witch doctor, seeking his advice. He was well aware of the situation, of course, but had remained aloof from it, to avoid direct confrontation with Stanford. But once they went to him he had no choice. He lighted his sacred pots and scattered the bones on the ground. He studied the pattern in which they fell. The pots smouldered and smoked and he went into a trance. His voice became a high-pitched wail, his old body trembled. I expect he was stalling, trying to find a solution without losing face. Perhaps he would have, for he was a clever old devil. But at this point Stanford made his gravest blunder. He had never directly interfered with Ooma before, and now he did.

‘Joseph knew that his future was being decided in the throwing of the bones, and told Stanford. He was a trifle nervous. Stanford gave him confidence. Stanford was not about to lose his solitary follower. They went together to the hut of the witch doctor. Stanford ranted and raged, Ooma took no notice – took refuge, as it were, in his trance. And this indifference, real or feigned, drove Stanford’s anger beyond control. He lashed out with his foot and tilted one of the burning pots. The elders crouched away in terror. Stanford was determined to show what nonsense this ceremony was, and gestured to the boy to help him. Joseph hesitated for a moment. Stanford overturned another pot. And then, in a passion of enthusiasm, Joseph joined in the desecration. He kicked at the pots and the bones. He stamped on the embers and crushed the bones under foot. Stanford stood back, arms crossed over his chest, and looked on with full approval as the boy destroyed the religious objects. Then they turned away, Stanford put his arm around the boy’s

shoulder and they walked back to their hut. And, at that point, Ooma came out of his trance. He regarded the scattered objects before him and then, slowly, raised his eyes to look at Joseph. His eyes . . . the headman, as he told this, shuddered, and behind him the villagers nodded and whispered to themselves. "He possessed the eyes of the jaguar," he told us. And they all knew, then, that Joseph would die.

'And they all knew how . . .

'And he did . . .

'Well, it might have been a coincidence, you know. It is conceivable that a man-eating jaguar, through pure chance, happened to strike that night. But it seemed far more likely that the witch doctor had been directly responsible . . . had killed the boy himself and made it look like the work of a beast. Sam and I suggested this, in a roundabout way, not wishing to be offensive. But the headman failed to see our point – understood the inference, but saw no paradox. These people did not draw a sharp line between spiritual and physical entities, between the natural and the supernatural. A jaguar-man was not exactly a deity, but was feared more than most of the gods. When the headman understood what we were saying, he nodded agreement. Certainly it might have been the witch doctor, he admitted. He suspected as much himself. And it was common knowledge that many witch doctors possessed the power of transformation. It seemed perfectly logical that Ooma had used this power to avenge himself against Joseph . . . to instil fear and prevent others from acting as the boy had. But what difference did it make? Whether it was the witch doctor in the form of a beast, or whether he had sent his spirit out to control a beast, or if it had been another jaguar-man entirely, it was all the same in the result. The boy had been killed by a jaguar-man, and therefore his heart must burn . . .

'The headman rocked back on his heels and nodded, as if his explanation had solved everything – as if it had been no more than a problem of translation. And, still standing in his doorway, Stanford saw that the talk had ended and assumed an expectant expression. He, too, counted on the translation. But no translator was going to reconcile that difficulty. We hadn't really expected to. We thanked the headman and walked back

to Stanford. "Well?" he asked. We started to tell him what the headman had said. We didn't get far. Stanford's face began to change, to darken and sort of contort. He interrupted us. He whispered and he shouted and the whispers were worse, somehow, than the outcries. He spoke of demonology and the work of the devil. He even, as I recall, threatened us with eternal damnation. Then he became quiet again. "Will you prevent it, gentlemen?" he asked, very calmly. "In the name of God, will you prevent it?" "There is nothing we can do," I told him. "The guns," he said. I shook my head. He was staring intently at me, and then suddenly he wasn't. He didn't shift his eyes, but he looked through me. Lord knows what he was looking at, or into. The headman and some of the villagers had advanced behind us, depending on our ability to reason with him, and perhaps he was looking at them. Then he roared. A positive roar. He spun about and seized one of the carbines which were still leaning against the wall. He moved very quickly, knocking Sam to one side and snatching up the weapon in one motion. Then he turned on the villagers and thrust the gun at them. He didn't know how to hold it properly – didn't even have his finger on the trigger – but he prodded at them as if it were a spear and they knew nothing about triggers, of course. They fled, howling. In the space of seconds there was not a native left in sight. Even old Ooma had vanished. There was no one there but Sam and I and Stanford and the corpse.

He looked down at the carbine in his hands. He seemed surprised to see it there, and leaned it very cautiously against the wall once more. Had he threatened us with it, I think we should have overpowered him without hesitation, but he didn't. He just set it down. He looked embarrassed. He shrugged. Sam said, "Well, I expect you'll be coming back with us now." He blinked. "What's that? Of course not. My work here has not even begun, as this day's evil testifies." "I wouldn't advise you to stay here after this," Sam said. "You've threatened them with a gun and you've offended their beliefs." "I'll destroy those beliefs before I'm finished," Stanford said, through his teeth. "Suit yourself," said Sam.

Stanford leaned against the wall, beside the rifles. Then, slowly, he descended into a sitting position, and looked up at

us. "I wonder, gentlemen, if you would be so kind as to prepare a burial place for the departed?" he asked. "I fear I am too weary."

He certainly looked it. His physical appearance seemed to change as often and as dramatically as his moods. He towered with anger and shrunk with resignation. A trick of perception, no doubt. We didn't want to be a part of this thing, but it was a bit late to halt it and we figured it would be best to get the body out of sight before we left. There was a chance – just a chance – that they might forgive him with the physical symbol of the confrontation removed. It was the least we could do, and all we could do. And if it meant we could never again come to this village, well we only came there to supply the mission, anyway. So we agreed to dig the grave.

'It was late afternoon by this time. The shadows of the stockade extended to the river. It would have been wiser to dig the grave in the morning, of course, but somehow we couldn't have postponed it. It was a task to be done without taking time to think about it. Sam suggested that we measure the body so that we didn't make the grave larger than necessary, and this seemed a logical, if unpleasant, idea. We entered the hut. We had nothing to measure with, nor did Stanford, and in the end we laid the carbine alongside the body, marked the spot and shifted it up. Joseph was not very tall. The carbines were short, the sort of rifle which is useful in heavy bush, and even so he measured only one and a half barrel lengths. He was young and slender and the cross was still around his neck. Somehow it made me more fully aware of his death, seeing that cross – the same amplification of the horror I'd felt when I saw that his hands had been folded in repose. Worse, in a way. It was only a crude wooden cross – perhaps he'd made it himself – and it rested on his breast just over one of the gruesome wounds where the skin had peeled away. I wanted to move it, but couldn't bring myself to touch him . . . drew my hand back and, at the movement, several heavy-bodied flies rose from the corpse, gorged with blood, hovered in the air for a moment and then settled again to the feast. One alighted on his face and began to crawl about, looking for a wound. I hadn't the energy to brush them away. What did it matter? Sam and I went back

out and Stanford handed us spades. He said he would stay with the body, to watch over it. When he entered the hut we heard the flies buzz. We took the carbines and the spades and walked without speaking to the graveyard . . .

'It was eerie. It was silent and there was moonlight. The village seemed strangely two dimensional, flat blacks and silver patches, and the jungle was plastered against the sky. We knew where the graveyard was, for Wright had proudly pointed it out to us once, long before. The natives had been accustomed to leaving their dead out for the scavengers to deal with, but Wright had seen this as a possible means of creating man-eaters – of giving the large carnivores the taste for human flesh – and the villagers had understood him when he explained this. That was the difference between Wright and Stanford. Wright wanted to improve their lives and Stanford wished to improve their deaths. We went through the gate and followed a narrow path back from the palisades. There was heavy jungle on our right and, from time to time, I thought I saw dark movements and assumed the villagers were watching us from the trees. We carried the rifles so that they could not help but see them and we walked quickly. Soon enough we came to the graveyard. It was very neat. The graves were laid out in precise rows and over each mound a black wooden cross raised its crosspiece like the wings of a vulture descending. We went directly to the end of one of these rows and, without a word, began to dig. The earth was soft and moist and rich. It turned over easily and the spades bit deeply. It required little effort and we both looked, with every rise, towards the trees. But no one attempted to stop us. My senses must have been particularly alert, for I remember that scene in great visual detail. Our shadows fell into the pit we were opening in the earth. To the left, through a slender gap between black growth, there was moonlight on the river and overhead the sky was the colour of pewter, an inverted bowl from which the moon was slipping, the moonlight pouring. The jungle was still. Only Sam and I moved in that scene and our spades made the only sound. That was remarkable. The jungle is seldom silent. And then, abruptly, the silence was torn apart by Stanford's scream. He screamed once – just once. For a moment we were frozen. Sam was bent over, his spade half in the earth and I had straightened to let the loose soil slide

behind me. Sam looked up at me and I looked down at him. We were waiting for a second scream, but it did not come. He only screamed one time. Then, still without speaking, we took up the rifles and went back. We didn't hurry. We knew it was too late for haste for when a man screams only once it is always too late.

'Stanford was dead.

'He lay across the doorway, his feet sticking out and his head inside. His toes pointed upwards. His boots gleamed. He had always been immaculate and it was proper that his boots were well polished. We moved in from opposite sides of the doorway. Sam's face was taut. Mine must have looked the same. We carried the guns out before us as we converged and I thrust the muzzle into the hut ahead of me. But there was nothing inside – nothing but the top half of Stanford's body. His throat was torn open and heavy ropes of blood writhed from the wound. Blood had splattered around the room. But there was nothing else. Nothing. You see, Joseph's body was no longer there.

'The villagers came back in silent groups, as if they felt that danger had passed – that the white god had departed with his mortal representative. They did not fear us and we no longer had cause to fear them. What we feared – well, it was a fearful thing. Yes, we were afraid. I had to force myself to kneel beside the body. He was dead, that was quite obvious, and yet it was so natural to feel for his heartbeat or pulse, such habits are so strong. Yet I could not bring myself to place my ear against that gory breast. I took his wrist instead. There was no pulse. His fist was clenched and a leather thong hung from between his fingers. I stared at this thong for some time and I set my teeth. Then I pried his hand open. It took considerable strength to draw those fingers back, but I managed it and there in his palm, clenched so tightly that the edges had broken through the skin, was the object I had expected to find. He had grasped it with all his strength and with the last effort of his life. It was Joseph's cross . . .¹

'What a ghastly experience,' Andrews said. He was visibly shaken and the blood had drained from his long scholarly face. There were elements of horror in his expression.

'Ghastly? Yes, it was that,' said Carter.

'How do you explain it?' Barlow asked.

'I don't know that I do. I've tried, of course. Several possibilities come to mind. It could have been an actual jaguar, you know. A remarkable coincidence but possible. The beast might have returned for his kill, found Stanford there and struck him down and dragged Joseph's body off. I doubt it, though. There were no paw marks around the hut, for one thing. Or, I suppose, the witch doctor could have killed him. But he was such a frail old fellow and Stanford was large and powerful. Or it could have been Joseph . . .'¹

'But the man was dead,' Barlow said.

'So we thought. But we could have been wrong. Many of those primitive people have a tendency to go into a self-induced trance in times of stress. Something akin to what we think of as suspended animation. Perhaps Joseph was not so far removed from the superstitions of his tribe after all. He may have regretted his actions, half-believing the jaguar-man must come for him and driving himself to an agony of suspense and anxiety. So that, when the witch doctor appeared in the skin of a jaguar, he fell into a trance . . . or was mesmerized. His wounds looked mortal enough, God knows, but possibly they were more superficial than it seemed. And then, when he awoke on the death mat – I find this every bit as horrible as what the natives believed – he actually believed himself to be a jaguar-man and, believing it, acted accordingly and attacked the only man in sight. He should have been no match for Stanford. And yet, with the violence of madness, and with Stanford petrified as he saw a dead man rise . . . well, who knows?'²

Carter shrugged.

'At least it's an explanation,' Barlow said.

'It's an attempt at a scientific explanation. But what is that, really, but a semantic difference? What does the terminology matter if the effect is the same. If a man awakes from a trance or rises from the dead, it's all the same to those who admit to both possibilities. At the time – well, as I've said, one's thoughts can be changed by the setting. I was not in civilization, I was not a savage but I was in a savage land . . .'³

Carter's face was troubled.

'Then that was the end of it?' Barlow asked,

'Just about. There was only the one thing left to do. We did it. We never went back to that village.'

'What thing was that?' Barlow asked,

Carter turned to face him.

'Why, we had to bury Stanford, you see. The villagers were afraid to touch the body. They still had too much respect for his god. He might not have been as powerful as a jaguar-man, but he was not to be trifled with. And we couldn't just leave his body there. We'd already started digging the grave for Joseph and figured it would do just as well for Stanford. They were both Christians, after all. It was too late that night. We slept on the boat and, with the first light, finished the grave and buried Stanford. Neither Sam nor I knew the proper words to say over a grave, especially a missionary's grave, but we buried him with his prayer book and put a wooden cross up and bent our heads in silence for a while. Then we walked back. Sam went directly to the boat. There was no need to unload the supplies now, and he wanted to get the steam up. But I went back through the village. I don't know why. I crossed the clearing and stopped in front of the little makeshift church. The shadow of the belfry fell into the clearing. Two slender posts and, between them, the distorted shadow of the bell. There was a breeze from the river and the shadow of the bell swayed back and forth. But it was a gentle breeze and the bell did not ring. I remember thinking how strange it was that a bell was swinging without a sound. Then I walked on past the fire. I didn't look at the fire. The charred smell still hung on the saturated air. It made my stomach heave. I didn't know it would linger so long, that stench. I didn't know the human breast was so resistant, either, nor that it would be so spongy in my hands. But the savages were afraid to touch him and someone had to do it. I had to. Because I wasn't superstitious, you see . . .'¹

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