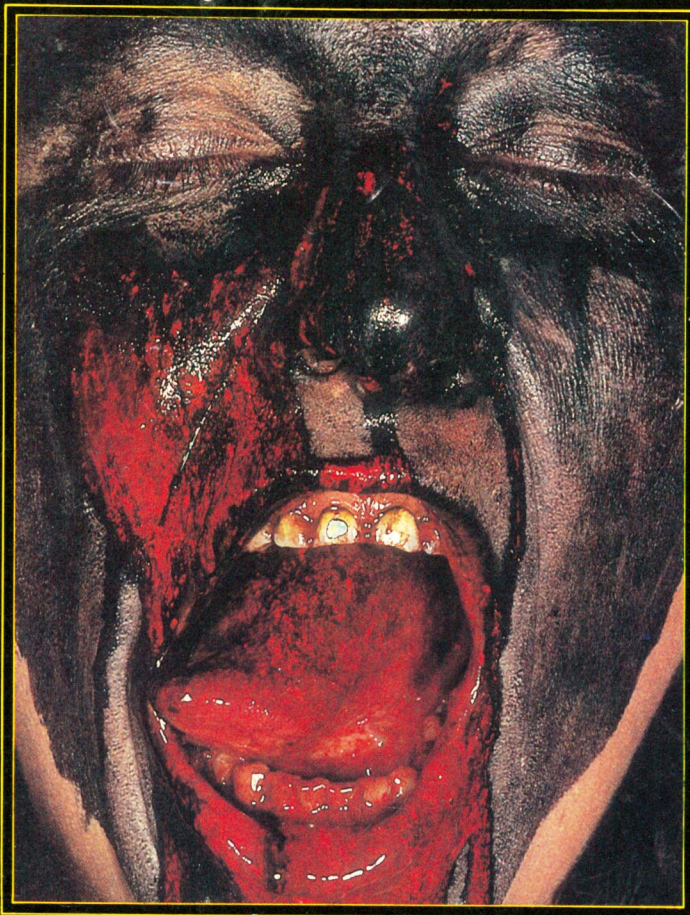




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Selected by HERBERT VAN THAL



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The 23rd Pan Book of Horror Stories

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Angus Gellatly

The sleeping prince

'Good morning, gentlemen!' Gwyneth Davies's quiet voice was raised so that her greeting would carry the length of the ward. She spoke with a gentle lilt suggestive of shyness and self-effacement. Halting at the deserted nurses' station, she adjusted the short sleeves of her physiotherapist's uniform; fleshy but firm arms, the well-exercised biceps matched by solid calves and heavy ankles. 'Another lovely morning today. We are being lucky with the spring this year.'

Bright light shone through the windows which separated each pair of beds along three walls of the room. The ward was magnificently sited, commanding the sun throughout the day. The sense of space and light seemed to mock the rows of patients waiting helplessly for the miracle of a cure and the promise of a return to normal life.

Leaving her report sheets on the nurses' desk, Gwyneth crossed over to the first bed:

'Good morning, Mr Barlas. I hope you had a good night.' She opened Mr Barlas's eyes, noting that they were bloodshot again. 'Tch, tch! I wonder what makes them go like that. Anyone would think you had been drinking.' She laughed. 'I'll be back in a moment for your exercises.'

One by one Gwyneth went round all the coma patients opening their eyes and giving a few words of solace. It was a daily ritual. She was sure it must be very bad to have your eyes closed all the time. Nerve fibres might start to degenerate. And besides, it was easier to talk to them if their eyes were open, she did not feel so strange about it. Completing her round, she returned to the first bed, pulled back the covers, and bore down on Mr Barlas's chest to deepen his breathing. 'Gosh, you are warm! Maybe you don't need so many covers.' She moved from his chest to working his legs.

'Good old Gwyneth,' called Sally-Anne Younger, hurrying

into the ward and immediately unbuttoning the top of her uniform, 'always chatting to them. Sorry I'm late.'

'Sally-Anne! I've opened their eyes.'

'Well? I don't see any heads turning.' Sally-Anne closed the uniform over her bra. 'Can't go around wrongly buttoned up, can I?' She reached behind her head and adjusted the band that held her blonde hair into a pony-tail. 'Right! Late but willing. I'll start over here. What's old Heywood been up to? Not giving any trouble, is he?'

'Talk *to* them, Sally-Anne, not *about* them.'

'Well, Mr Heywood, what have you got to say for yourself this morning? Not much, I don't suppose. Honestly, when I went in for physiotherapy I never expected to have to do so much chatting. My flat-mates say I never stop talking when I get home.'

Gwyneth laughed; she liked Sally-Anne. 'Look you, it doesn't affect me like that. I can be very quiet with people who talk back.'

'I was never quiet with anyone. I was late learning to walk but I could talk almost from birth.'

They giggled as they went on with their work. Exercising comatose patients was hard labour, sweat came easily. Gwyneth tried not to think of them as 'deadweights', but that was what they were. She would get out of breath, and sometimes the lowered oxygen levels made Sally-Anne and her mildly hysterical as they pursued their macabre task. They talked to the patients and to each other but the conversations were at different levels, one real, the other somehow like a dream. Gwyneth would feel she had entered a land whose inhabitants were cast under a spell of sleep from which no one was able to free them. Drowsiness would hang in the air like mist and when she walked it was like wading in a dense fluid that resisted her legs.

'What's this? What's this on your pyjamas, Mr Higgins? I do believe Mr Higgins has had a nocturnal emission.'

'Sally-Anne!' Gwyneth hurried to Mr Higgins's bed.

'You old devil.'

'Where? Where is it?'

'There.'

Gwyneth stared intently at the striped cotton. 'That isn't anything, it could have been there for ages. Honestly, Sally-Anne, the

things you say. Poor Mr Higgins is probably all embarrassed inside.'

'Oh well, perhaps I was being optimistic. Everyone back to bed. False alarm.'

Gwyneth gave a reproving look, but then smiled as she returned to exercising Mr Dutton. Sally-Anne was rather shocking at times, but there was something exciting about her too. It flattered Gwyneth that she was her friend and often took an interest in her. She kneaded Mr Dutton's calves. But one day, she mused to herself, there was going to be somebody to be interested in her all of the time. Not just for a minute, but for always. Someone who loved her and would draw out the things she could feel waiting inside. Lately, the certainty had been growing stronger. Not far ahead there was a corner and once it had been turned nothing would be the same again.

When the ambulance arrived wailing and screaming at the accident unit, Philip Charles's chances of survival were not rated highly. A broken leg, cracked ribs, and a collapsed lung were simply routine injuries by comparison with the mess of shattered bone where the top of his skull had used to be. He had gone too fast into a bend, and his last memory was of the barrier of black and white arrowheads looming through the side windows; that and the thought that he was not wearing a seat belt. Like his car, he had landed upside down and skidded along on his roof.

For the first week after the accident his mother was constantly by his bedside. She sat twisting a silk handkerchief in her fingers and asking God over and over again what she had done to deserve the tragedy that had befallen her son. In the evenings her husband, Philip's stepfather, collected her from the hospital. A large firm man, Peter Burleigh was anxious to check his wife's hysterics whenever they threatened to break out. It was his habit always, and one he felt of even greater importance since the accident.

'Peter, we must get him out of there. I won't rest until he is in a proper hospital.'

'He is in one of the leading teaching hospitals.'

'That's not what I mean. He should be somewhere smaller. Where they will have more time to devote to him.'

'He is a private patient, Margot.'

'He should be in the clinic. Have you spoken to the consultant?'

'Sir Frederick says he could not get better treatment anywhere. Draw some comfort from that. He could be lining his own pocket if he wanted.'

'Philip, my poor son. So broken up.'

At the end of three weeks it was decided to move Philip Charles out of the intensive care unit. In general his recovery had been encouraging, apart from the single fact that he had never regained consciousness. No longer on the critical list, he was removed to a single room in the private wing of the hospital where he lay unmoving day after day, surrounded by flowers, his life sustained intravenously, his inert features casting a spell of sleep over his private domain. Gradually Mrs Burleigh's attendance grew less frequent as her husband coaxed her back into the role of hostess in her own home.

After a further month there was still no obvious improvement. 'His encephalographic record is not far from normal, which is remarkable when one considers the insults to which his nervous tissues have been exposed,' Sir Frederick Milner explained one day. 'There is no question of brain death. But in cases like these we really do not know what is going to happen. The boy might wake up tomorrow and show no signs of his experience whatever. He might come round slowly, show considerable effects of the lesions he has suffered, hopefully ameliorating under a suitable therapeutic regime. Or he might continue in his present state until heaven knows when. There is no way of telling.'

However, as Mr Burleigh explained to his wife later that evening, the consultant had had a suggestion to make concerning the maintenance of his patient.

'But that would be monstrous, Peter. A whole ward of them like that. We owe it to him to keep him in a private room.'

'I'm only repeating Sir Frederick's words. You must face up to the fact, my dear, that Philip could remain as he is for years to come. There's nothing to be done for him unless he starts to show a spontaneous improvement.' Mr Burleigh paused. 'And you must realize what a drain it will be to keep a private room, possibly for year after year.' He looked steadily into his wife's face as she kneaded a napkin in her right hand. It never did to underestimate her capacity for unreason.

Suddenly she stood up, and spoke in a voice the edge of

which was wavering out of control: 'You should never have given him that car. I told you at the time. His father was always against convertibles. *You* did this to him.'

It was early in the morning when Philip Charles was wheeled into the men's coma ward. Gwyneth abandoned Mr Higgins halfway through his exercises to go and greet the new arrival.

There had been no premonition that this would be the day, no greater sense of expectation than had been with her for some months now. Yet as she looked down on his pale face, the contusions still visible on his cheeks, it was as if a decisive action had been taken. This was the one. She saw him with a sense of recognition, as if they had acted the scene before. For the first moments she remained quite calm.

When he was propped up on his pillows and she had tucked him securely in, she opened his eyes. Such grave smoky blue eyes. She wanted to keep on staring at them and had to force herself to return to the routine of the ward. Somewhere Sally-Anne was chattering away, but Gwyneth did not hear her. Now there was only a single focus in the room. Her numbed mind was locked on to Philip Charles.

'Gwyneth! *Gwyn-eth!* What's the matter dear?'

'What? Nothing, nothing.'

'Something must be wrong. You haven't said a word for five minutes.'

'I was thinking, that's all.'

'Quite right. Don't try to do too many things at once.'

The door opened and Tina Wainwright, another physiotherapist, slipped in. 'Natter, natter. Sometimes I think this is the noisiest ward there is.'

'Not today. Gwyneth is on strike. She's given up talking.'

'Perhaps we'll see some improvement in the patients,' Tina observed maliciously. Then: 'I hear you went out with Dr Patel. How was it?'

'Very nice, thank you. We went to a film and then for a meal.'

'And?'

'He's much more sure of himself than you'd expect.' Sally-Anne giggled. 'Never thought I'd spend the night.'

'I've heard about him. That little staff nurse, Edie, she told

me ...' Tina lowered her voice and what she said made Sally-Anne squeak with laughter.

Tearing her mind from Philip Charles, Gwyneth came over to join them. She wondered what they were laughing at. Tina and Sally-Anne together made her unsure of herself; Tina always tried to exclude her. Consciously, she prepared a smile to show that she was capable of joining in too.

'... on and on. I thought he'd never stop.'

'Sally-Anne!'

'Sh! I want to hear.'

'And you know what he made me do for him?'

'Sally-Anne, they can hear you.' Gwyneth gestured round at the rows of vacant faces, the bodies quite still beneath the bed-clothes. 'It's not fair. You'll embarrass them.'

'Nonsense, it'll give them something to think about. They must get terribly bored lying there all day.'

Tina moved idly along the row of beds. She did not care for Gwyneth Davies, a strange little girl, and priggish too. That sing-song voice and the holier-than-thou attitude. 'Do you think they really hear much? I wonder if this talking to them as if they were normal does any good.'

'I think they all do,' Gwyneth said. 'If they've got an EEG, why shouldn't they?'

Tina stopped by Philip Charles's bed and selected a pin from the lapel of her uniform. Gwyneth watched with horror as she stuck the pin into his forearm.

'What are you doing? Leave him alone.' She pushed Tina away.

'It doesn't hurt him. He didn't move a muscle. I'll bet he can't hear anything either.'

'Maybe he can hear everything and feel everything and just can't do anything about it.' Gwyneth was close to tears. She rubbed his arm and pulled down the sleeve of his pyjamas. 'Leave him alone.' If Tina did that again she would attack her; she would attack anyone who harmed Philip.

'You don't have to get so upset about it. Go on Sally-Anne, tell me what you did.'

The months that followed were the happiest that Gwyneth had ever known. It seemed terrible that she could be so happy while Philip lay in a trance but there was no denying the joy that filled

her each morning. She was wholly taken up with Philip; she wanted to care for him and help him to regain himself.

She barely noticed when Sally-Anne left for a new job, nor when Tina moved to Bristol. She put the new girl in sole charge of the women's ward and kept the male coma patients to herself. Now Philip was all hers, she could linger over him, speak to him in a whisper that others would not hear.

For the first weeks she tried to keep her conversation deliberately casual. She told him the news of the hospital and of the world outside, and she kept him fully informed of the progress of his own case and the doctor's ideas about it. 'You have a right to know,' she would whisper to him as he lay staring blankly into space. 'They tell us to talk to you all right, but how many of them do it themselves? The consultants treat the conscious patients as if they were dummies, not to mention the unconscious ones.'

Yet little by little her conversation with him grew more intimate. She tried to tell him about herself, about her family and her schooldays, about her training in Cardiff and how proud she had been to be appointed to a post in a famous London hospital. 'I've not always been good at things,' she confided. 'I wasn't always winning prizes and that kind of thing, so it was a real thrill to fetch up at a place like this and have all kinds of people envying you.'

Gradually and fearfully, as though she were undressing before him, she came to tell him about the way she felt for him. Did he know what lovely hands he had? She had noticed them almost at once, loved to touch them. And his eyes, so blue and motionless. She would give anything to see them move. She liked the freckles covering his arms and chest, they made her want to stroke him, something she had never felt before. Saying hello and goodbye, she took to grasping his hand, holding it out of sight where no one could see and squeezing his fingers, on occasion bending to brush her lips along them and touch the gold band of his signet ring.

Every day Gwyneth's life became more centred on Philip. Her poor Philip, lying in his bodily prison. She was his eyes and his ears, going out into the world and bringing its news to him. At times her infatuation worried her, but she would quickly find reasons for rejecting the idea that there might be anything wrong in what she was doing and feeling. Her life had never been so full.

How could there be anything bad in that? The blind married without ever seeing one another. People on opposite sides of the world became pen-friends and fell in love without ever meeting. Were her feelings so difficult to understand? She kept the secret to herself, but she was not ashamed.

Gwyneth's only worry was the difference in their backgrounds. She had seen Mrs Burleigh and knew that Philip came from a different world. Were it not for his accident, what time would he have had for a girl with her looks and experience? It was only because he was a captive here that they had had the time to get to know each other. But now they did, and she was sure that he had started to love her too. She could feel it between them. One evening she bent her mouth to his ear: 'Darling Philip, I've never called you that before, but you know, don't you? You are all that matters to me.' She laughed nervously. 'It's like a fairy story, isn't it? You are the prince who has been put to sleep, and I am the only one who can make you well, because I love you so much. You won't forget me, will you? You'll take me with you and teach me new things and be happy when I learn them for you.' She looked at his lips and longed to kiss them, but the time was not ready yet. That was the last weapon she had and the longer she denied herself the more powerful it would be. Where everything else had failed her love would bring him back. She would recognize the time when it came, but until then he was hers to look after.

Gwyneth had never trusted Mr Burleigh. A coldness about the man made her afraid for Philip. One evening she found him waiting impatiently for his wife by the bedside. The two of them were arguing.

'Margot, I do wish you would be more reasonable.'

'I'm sure you do, Peter. That's all you ever want me to be.'

'This is a simple financial matter. There's no need to catalogue the defects in my character.'

'Don't try to crush me, Peter. I will not be crushed.'

'Nobody wants to crush you, Margot. All I ask is that you, as his nearest relative, sign over temporary power of attorney to me so that I can determine the trustee's decision in Philip's favour.'

'Is that really all you want his shares for?'

Noticing Gwyneth's presence for the first time, Mr Burleigh

restrained himself with difficulty. He slapped his leather gloves into the palm of one hand. 'I don't think there is any purpose to our staying here longer.'

'I suppose there are more important things to attend to.'

'The world must go on. No point pretending otherwise.'

'You've never shown a moment's regret over that car. Now you want to pretend he's dead and take what belongs to him.'

'Margot, we are leaving – now!'

Gwyneth held her breath as they made their way from the ward. Then she hurried over to Philip's side. 'You heard, didn't you? You hear everything. I can feel your soul moving in there like a trapped animal. You make me so alive, Philip. We've grown so close together. We belong to each other. You won't forget that, will you?'

Tears filled her eyes. She *knew* she could revive him, but it meant losing him for the present. The time had come to set free her sleeping prince so that he could defend himself from his wicked stepfather. For a moment, in the corner of her eye, she thought Mr Barlas moved, but it was only a trick of her tears.

'Come back for me, Philip,' Gwyneth whispered. Then she bent and kissed his lips.

The months passed without any word but Gwyneth did not lose hope. Philip had been whisked off to a private clinic the same day his sudden recovery had begun, but she was sure he would return for her as soon as he was able.

The day it happened, there was again no special premonition. She was about to finish her afternoon break when she saw him step diffidently into the coffee room. He glanced about uncertainly, not sure of recognizing who he was looking for, then spotted her and strode across the room.

'Miss Davies? Gwyneth Davies?'

Gwyneth nodded. There was a rushing in her ears and she could not speak. He had come back for her. Her life had truly become a fabulous legend.

'My name is Philip Charles. You remember me?'

'Of course! You were a very special patient.'

'Thank you.' He sat down and Gwyneth wished she had been given some warning so that she could have made the best of herself. He smiled charmingly into her face. 'I don't have very clear

memories of all that time, but somehow I know that you treated me very well in the strange ward my mother described to me. You, and there were two others at one time, weren't there? Tina and ...?"

'Sally-Anne. They both left a long time ago. They weren't with you for very long.'

'No.' He paused, suddenly at a loss. 'It's rather strange coming back here like this and not really remembering it. But it was you really who looked after me, wasn't it?'

Gwyneth tried to remain calm as she agreed. He remembered; it was just that he didn't know he remembered. She would bring it back to him little by little. He was nervous now. He knew something of great importance had passed between them but he was uncertain of its details.

'Look,' he said, 'I can't stay now. Mother still insists on a very strict convalescence, and next week she's taking me abroad for a holiday. But can I contact you when I get back?'

Gwyneth felt a terrible pang of disappointment, then pulled herself together. She had waited so long that a little more patience ought not to be difficult. It was working out as she had known it would. Her spell was planted and it would grow in him while he was away.

'Of course, I'd like that,' she said. Then, curiosity getting the better of her, she asked: 'Is everything all right with you and your stepfather?'

Philip frowned with annoyance, making her blush.

'He was arguing with your mother one day. She thought he was trying to get your money.'

'Oh that! He was right to take control. Mother has no head for business I'm afraid.' Philip laughed. Then he said: 'You won't have changed jobs when I get back, will you?'

'No.'

Another three months went by without any news from Philip, not even a postcard. Gwyneth told herself repeatedly that it was all right, that he would come back. He had to; they were intertwined, and until he came back he would always feel the tug of her. She had been right about everything up to now, she was right about this too.

Yet it was impossible not to have moments of unease. There

were flashes of bitterness and anger – had he betrayed her? She could never forgive that. When the doubts came to her something stirred inside. She would find herself growing angry with the patients in the coma ward. How much had they heard? What did they remember? Were they laughing at her humiliation? She tried to fight the thoughts; they must not be allowed to poison her. She must have faith in Philip. But why didn't he come back?

One day, Sally-Anne Younger came in to see her. Gwyneth was pleased. Sally-Anne was just the same, although she had a wedding ring and very smart clothes.

'A consultant no less,' she said, showing the ring. 'David didn't have to ask me twice. I threw my arms round him and said yes before he got the question more than half out.'

They discussed mutual acquaintances for a while, then Sally-Anne asked about Gwyneth's work. 'Still chatting to the coma patients?'

Gwyneth smiled. 'I think it's worth it. I'm sure they hear you.'

Sally-Anne threw back her head in mock horror. 'Hear you! They hear you all right. Every damn word.'

'What do you mean?'

'Well one of them came to see me.' Sally-Anne leant forward confidentially. 'He rang me up and said he remembered me being kind to him and could he take me out. Well, I was very flattered of course. He'd gone to all the trouble of tracking me down through the hospital records, and even though I'd just got engaged I said I'd see him. There didn't seem to be any harm in it.'

Gwyneth grew cold. She stared hard at Sally-Anne but said nothing.

'Well he took me out to dinner and spent an awful lot of money. I told him right away about David, but he didn't seem to pay much attention. He was fine all evening, except for looking as though he might eat me instead of his meal. But when we got into the car, he went berserk. He tried to put his hand up my skirt. I mean he was good looking all right – you'd remember him, his name was Philip something – but even I wasn't going to fall into bed with him two days after I got engaged.'

Sally-Anne was not sure whether to be amused or outraged by the memory. 'The point is,' she continued, 'he said he could remember everything perfectly, even being in intensive care. He remembered the day he came down to the ward, worse luck for

me. Apparently I was rather indiscreet about going out with Basheer Patel. I blush to think what I said, because this Philip person seems to have known about it all in great detail. He said he went mad listening to me. All the time he was in coma the only thing that kept him going was the thought of me doing to him what I said I did to Bash. Would you believe it! I had to take a taxi in the end.' She breathed out sharply. 'You were right. You have to watch what you say in front of them. You be warned, there may be others like him. He turned out to be a real toad.'

Sally-Anne smiled but Gwyneth only stared back. Inside something had turned on to its reverse side, a bitterness was spreading through every vein and capillary.

'Good morning, gentlemen!' Gwyneth Davies's quiet voice was raised so her greeting would carry the length of the ward. Halting at the nurses' station she adjusted the sleeves of her uniform. 'It's a wonderful sunny morning,' she said, glancing at the drab grey clouds hurrying past the windows. 'You don't know what you're missing with your eyes shut.'

Gwyneth surveyed the line of silent men sitting upright and motionless in their beds. She walked over to the nearest one. 'Good morning, Mr Barlas.' She selected a pin from the lapel of her uniform and jabbed it sharply into his arm, her eye gleaming with satisfaction at his lack of movement.

'Mr Barlas is our oldest patient, he's been with us for three years. Three years he's been here, and he's never moved once. He just sits there not moving.' She opened Mr Barlas's eyes. 'Look you, can you see the lovely sunny sky? Mr Barlas has his eyes open, everyone. He can see, you know. He pretends he doesn't know what's happening, but he can see and hear just as well as you and me. He likes to spy on people, you see. He likes to know their secrets so he can laugh at them. But then you all like to do that, don't you? You don't fool me. You all sit doing nothing, but you're really spying on people.'

Gwyneth placed the point of the pin on the iris of Mr Barlas's left eye and pushed, sinking it in until the head was flush with the surface of the eyeball. Then she used a second pin to push the first wholly out of sight.

'Not that it matters,' she said. 'Not for Mr Barlas or any of you. Mr Barlas will always be like this. He won't ever move. Will you,

Mr Barlas?' She repeated the operation on the right eye and closed both lids. 'He won't ever be able to tell anybody. But all the same, we've got to teach him not to spy on people. We have to teach all of you.'

Gwyneth laughed as she started on Mr Barlas's ears.

Paul Theroux

Dengué fever

From *The Consul's Wife* (Hamish Hamilton)

There is a curious tree, native to Malaysia, called 'The Midnight Horror'. We had several in Ayer Hitam, one in an overgrown part of the Botanical Gardens, the other in the front garden of William Ladysmith's house. His house was huge, nearly as grand as mine, but I was the American Consul and Ladysmith was an English teacher on a short contract. I assumed it was the tree that had brought the value of his house down. The house itself had been built before the war – one of those great breezy places, a masterpiece of colonial carpentry, with cement walls two feet thick and window blinds the size of sails on a Chinese junk. It was said that it had been the centre of operations during the occupation. All this history diminished by a tree! In fact, no local person would go near the house; the Chinese members of the staff at Ladysmith's school chose to live in that row of low warrens near the bus depot.

During the day the tree looked comic, a tall simple pole like an enormous coat-rack, with big leaves that looked like branches – but there were very few of them. It was covered with knobs, stark black things; and around the base of the trunk there were always fragments of leaves that looked like shattered bones, but not human bones.

At night the tree was different, not comic at all. It was Ladysmith who showed me the underlined passage in his copy of Professor Corner's *Wayside Trees of Malaya*. Below the entry for *Oroxylum indicum* it read, 'Botanically, it is the sole representative of its kind; aesthetically, it is monstrous . . . The corolla begins to open about 10 p.m., when the tumid, wrinkled lips part and the harsh odour escapes from them. By midnight, the lurid mouth gapes widely and is filled with stink . . . The flowers are pollinated by bats which are attracted by the smell and, holding to the fleshy corolla with the claws on their wings, thrust their noses into

its throat; scratches, as of bats, can be seen on the fallen leaves the next morning . . .’

Smelly! Ugly! Pollinated by bats! I said, ‘No wonder no one wants to live in this house.’

‘It suits me fine,’ said Ladysmith. He was a lanky fellow, very pleasant, one of our uncomplicated Americans, who thrives in bush postings. He cycled around in his bermuda shorts, organizing talent shows in *kampongs*. His description in my consulate file was ‘Low risk, high gain’. Full of enthusiasm and blue-eyed belief; and open-hearted: he was forever having tea with tradesmen, whose status was raised as soon as he crossed the threshold.

Ladysmith didn’t come round to the Club much, although he was a member and had appeared in the Footlighters’ production of Maugham’s *The Letter*. I think he disapproved of us. He was young, one of the Vietnam generation with a punished conscience and muddled notions of colonialism. That war created drop-outs, but Ladysmith I took to be one of the more constructive ones, a volunteer teacher. After the cease-fire there were fewer; now there are none, neither hippies nor do-gooders. Ladysmith was delighted to take his guilt to Malaysia, and he once told me that Ayer Hitam was more lively than his home-town, which surprised me until he said he was from Caribou, Maine.

He was tremendously popular with his students. He had put up a backboard and basketball hoop in the playground and after school he taught them the fundamentals of the game. He was, for all his apparent awkwardness, an athletic fellow, though it didn’t show until he was in action – jumping or dribbling a ball down the court. Perhaps it never does. He ate like a horse, and knowing he lived alone I made a point of inviting him often to dinners for visiting firemen from Kuala Lumpur or Singapore. He didn’t have a cook; he said he would not have a servant, but I don’t believe he would have got any local person to live in his house, so close to that grotesque tree.

I was sorry but not surprised, two months after he arrived, to hear that Ladysmith had a fever. Ayer Hitam was malarial, and the tablets we took every Sunday like communion were only suppressants. The Chinese headmaster at the school stopped in at the consulate and said that Ladysmith wanted to see me. I went that afternoon.

The house was empty; a few chairs in the sitting room, a shelf of paperbacks, a short-wave radio, and in the room beyond a table holding only a large bottle of ketchup. The kitchen smelled of peanut butter and stale bread. Bachelor's quarters. I climbed the stairs, but before I entered the bedroom I heard Ladysmith call out in an anxious voice, 'Who is it?'

'Boy, am I glad to see you,' he said, relaxing as I came through the door.

He looked thinner, his face was grey, his hair awry in bunches of standing hackles; and he lay in the rumpled bed as if he had been thrown there. His eyes were sunken and oddly coloured with the yellow light of fever.

'Malaria?'

'I think so – I've been taking chloroquine. But it doesn't seem to be working. I've got the most awful headache.' He closed his eyes. 'I can't sleep. I have these nightmares. I—'

'What does the doctor say?'

'I'm treating myself,' said Ladysmith.

'You'll kill yourself,' I said. 'I'll send Alec over tonight.'

We talked for a while, and eventually I convinced Ladysmith that he needed attention. Alec Stewart was a member of the Club Ladysmith particularly disliked. He wasn't a bad sort, but as he was married to a Chinese girl he felt he could call them 'Chinks' without blame. He had been a ship's surgeon in the Royal Navy and had come to Ayer Hitam after the war. With a young wife and all that sunshine he was able to reclaim some of his youth. Back at the office I sent Peeraswami over with a pot of soup and the latest issue of *Newsweek* from the consulate library.

Alec went that night. I saw him at the Club later. He said, 'Our friend's pretty rocky.'

'I had malaria myself,' I said. 'It wasn't much fun.'

Alec blew a cautionary snort. 'He's not got malaria. He's got dengué.'

'Are you sure?'

'All the symptoms are there.'

'What did you give him for it?'

'The only thing there is worth a docken – aspirin.'

'I suppose he'll have to sweat it out.'

'He'll do that all right.' Alec leaned over. 'The lad's having hallucinations.'

'I didn't know that was a symptom of dengué,' I said.

'Dengué's a curse.'

He described it to me. It is a virus, carried by a mosquito, and begins as a headache of such voltage that you tremble and can't stand or sit. You're knocked flat; your muscles ache, you're doubled up with cramp and your temperature stays over a hundred. Then your skin becomes paper-thin, sensitive to the slightest touch – the weight of a sheet can cause pain. And your hair falls out – not all of it, but enough to fill a comb. These severe irritations produce another agony, a depression so black the dengué sufferer continually sobs. All the while your bones ache, as if every inch of you has been smashed with a hammer. This sensation of bruising gives dengué its colloquial name, 'break-bone fever'. I pitied Ladysmith.

Although it was after eleven when Alec left the Club, I went straight over to Ladysmith's house. I was walking up the gravel drive when I heard the most ungodly shriek – frightening in its intensity and full of alarm. I did not recognize it as Ladysmith's – indeed, it scarcely sounded human. But it was coming from his room. It was so loud and changed in pitch with such suddenness it might easily have been two or three people screaming, or a dozen doomed cats. The Midnight Horror tree was in full bloom and filled the night with stink.

Ladysmith lay in bed whimpering. The magazine I'd sent him was tossed against the wall, and the effect of disorder was heightened by the overhead fan which was lifting and ruffling the pages.

He was propped on one arm, but seeing me he sighed and fell back. His face was slick with perspiration and tearstreaks. He was short of breath.

'Are you all right?'

'My skin is burning,' he said. I noticed his lips were swollen and cracked with fever, and I saw then how dengué was like a species of grief.

'I thought I heard a scream,' I said. Screaming takes energy; Ladysmith was beyond screaming, I thought.

'Massacre,' he said. 'Soldiers – killing women and children. Horrible. Over there—' he pointed to a perfectly ordinary table with a jug of water on it, and he breathed, 'War. You should see their faces all covered with blood. Some have arms missing. I've never—' He broke off and began to sob.

'Alec says you have dengué fever,' I said.

'Two of them – women. They look the same,' said Ladysmith lifting his head. 'They scream at me, and it's so loud! They have no teeth!'

'Are you taking the aspirin?' I saw the amber jar was full.

'Aspirin! For this!' He lay quietly, then said, 'I'll be all right. Sometimes it's nothing – just a high temperature. Then these Chinese ... then I get these dreams.'

'About war?'

'Yes. Flashes.'

As gently as I could I said, 'You didn't want to go to Vietnam, did you?'

'No. Nobody wanted to go. I registered as a c.o.'

Hallucinations are replies. Peeraswami was always seeing Tamil ghosts on his way home. They leapt from those green fountains by the road the Malays call *daun pontianak* – 'ghost leaf' – surprising him with plates of hot samosas or tureens of curry; not so much ghosts as ghostesses. I told him to eat something before setting out from home in the dark and he stopped seeing them. I took Ladysmith's visions of massacre to be replies to his conscientious objection. It is the draft-dodger who speaks most graphically of war, not the soldier. Pacifists know all the atrocity stories.

But Ladysmith's hallucinations had odd highlights: the soldiers he saw weren't American. They were dark orientals in dirty undershirts, probably Vietcong, and mingled with the screams of the people with bloody faces was another sound, the creaking of bicycle seats. So there were two horrors – the massacre and these phantom cyclists. He was especially frightened by the two women with no teeth, who opened their mouths wide and screamed at him.

I said, 'Give it a few days.'

'I don't think I can take much more of this.'

'Listen,' I said. 'Dengué can depress you. You'll feel like giving up and going home – you might feel like hanging yourself. But take these aspirin and keep telling yourself – whenever you get these nightmares – it's dengué fever.'

'No teeth, and their gums are dripping with blood—'

His head dropped to the pillow, his eyes closed, and I remember thinking: everyone is fighting this war, everyone in the world.

Poor Ladysmith was fighting hardest of all. Lying there he could have been bivouacked in the Central Highlands, haggard from a siege, his dengué a version of battle fatigue.

I left him sleeping and walked again through the echoing house. But the smell had penetrated to the house itself, the high thick stink of rotting corpses. It stung my eyes and I almost fainted with the force of it until, against the moon, I saw the blossoming coat-rack and the wheeling bats – The Midnight Horror.

‘Rotting flesh,’ Ladysmith said late the next afternoon. I tried not to smile. I had brought Alec along for a second look. Ladysmith began describing the smell, the mutilated people, the sound of bicycles and those Chinese women, the toothless ones. The victims had pleaded with him. Ladysmith looked wretched.

Alec said, ‘How’s your head?’

‘It feels like it’s going to explode.’

Alec nodded. ‘Joints a bit stiff?’

‘I can’t move.’

‘Dengué’s a curse.’ Alec smiled: doctors so often do when their grim diagnosis is proved right.

‘I can’t—’ Ladysmith started, then grimaced and continued in a softer tone. ‘I can’t sleep. If I could only sleep I’d be all right. For God’s sake give me something to make me sleep.’

Alec considered this.

‘Can’t you give him anything?’ I asked.

‘I’ve never prescribed a sleeping pill in my life,’ said Alec, ‘and I’m not going to do so now. Young man, take my advice. Drink lots of liquid – you’re dehydrating. You’ve got a severe fever. Don’t underestimate it. It can be a killer. But I guarantee if you follow my instructions, get lots of bed-rest, take aspirin every four hours, you’ll be right as ninepence.’

‘My hair is falling out.’

Alec smiled – right again. ‘Dengué,’ he said. ‘But you’ve still got plenty. When you’ve as little hair as I have you’ll have something to complain about.’

Outside the house I said, ‘That tree is the most malignant thing I’ve ever seen.’

Alec said, ‘You’re talking like a Chink.’

‘Sure, it looks innocent enough now, with the sun shining on it. But have you smelled it at night?’

'I agree. A wee aromatic. Like a Bengali's fart.'

'If we cut it down I think Ladysmith would stop having his nightmares.'

'Don't be a fool. That tree's medicinal. The Malays use it for potions. It works – I use it myself.'

'Well, if it's so harmless why don't the Malays want to live in this house?'

'It's not been offered to a Malay. How many Malay teachers do you know? It's the Chinks won't live here – I don't have a clue why that's so, but I won't have you running down that tree. It's going to cure our friend.'

I stopped walking. 'What do you mean by that?'

Alec said, 'The aspirin – or rather, not the aspirin. I'm using native medicine. Those tablets are made from the bark of that tree – I wish it didn't have that shocking name.'

'You're giving him *that*'?

'Calm down, it'll do him a world of good,' Alec said brightly. 'Ask any witch-doctor.'

I slept badly myself that night, thinking of Alec's ridiculous cure – he had truly gone bush – but I was tied up all day with visa inquiries and it was not until the following evening that I got back to Ladysmith's. I was determined to take him away. I had aspirin at my house; I'd keep him away from Alec.

Downstairs, I called out and knocked as usual to warn him I'd come, and as usual there was no response from him. I entered the bedroom and saw him asleep, but uncovered. Perhaps the fever had passed: his face was dry. He did not look well, but then few people do when they're sound asleep – most take on the ghastly colour of illness. Then I saw that the amber bottle was empty – the 'aspirin' bottle.

I tried to feel his pulse. Impossible: I've never been able to feel a person's pulse, but his hand was cool, almost cold. I put my ear against his mouth and thought I could detect a faint purr of respiration.

It was dusk when I arrived, but darkness in Ayer Hitam fell quickly, the blanket of night dropped and the only warning was the sound of insects tuning up, the chirrup of geckoes and those squeaking bats making for the tree. I switched on the lamp and as I did so heard a low cry, as of someone dying in dreadful pain.

And there by the window – just as Ladysmith had described – I saw the moonlit faces of two Chinese women, smeared with blood. They opened their mouths and howled: they were toothless and their screeches seemed to gain volume from that emptiness.

‘Stop!’ I shouted.

The two faces in those black rags hung there, and I caught the whiff of the tree which was the whiff of wounds. It should have scared me, but it only surprised me. Ladysmith had prepared me, and felt certain that he had passed that horror on. I stepped forward, caught the cord and dropped the window blinds. The two faces were gone.

This took seconds, but an after-image remained, like a lamp switched rapidly on and off. I gathered up Ladysmith. Having lost weight he was very light, pathetically so. I carried him downstairs and through the garden to the road.

Behind me, in the darkness, was the rattle of pedals, the squeak of a bicycle seat. The phantom cyclists! It gave me a shock, and I tried to run, but carrying Ladysmith I could not move quickly. The cycling noises approached, frantic squeakings at my back. I spun round.

It was a trishaw, cruising for fares. I put Ladysmith on the seat, and running alongside it we made our way to the mission hospital.

A stomach pump is little more than a slender rubber tube pushed into one nostril and down the back of the throat. A primitive device: I couldn’t watch. I stayed until Ladysmith regained consciousness. But it was useless to talk to him. His stomach was empty and he was coughing up bile, spewing into a bucket. I told the nursing sister to keep an eye on him.

I said, ‘He’s got dengué.’

The succeeding days showed such an improvement in Ladysmith that the doctors insisted he be discharged to make room for more serious cases. And indeed everyone said he’d made a rapid recovery. Alec was astonished, but told him rather sternly, ‘You should be ashamed of yourself for taking that overdose.’

Ladysmith was well, but I didn’t have the heart to send him back to that empty house. I put him up at my own place. Normally, I hated house-guests – they interfered with my reading and never seemed to have much to do themselves except punish my gin bottle. But Ladysmith was unobtrusive. He drank milk,

he wrote letters home. He made no mention of his hallucinations, and I didn't tell him what I'd thought I'd seen. In my own case I believe his suggestions had been so strong that I had imagined what he had seen – somehow shared his own terror of the toothless women.

One day at lunch Ladysmith said, 'How about eating out tonight? On me. A little celebration. After all, you saved my life.'

'Do you feel well enough to face the Club buffet?'

He made a face. 'I hate the Club – no offence. But I was thinking of a meal in town. What about that *kedai* – City Bar? I had a terrific meal there the week I arrived. I've been meaning to go back.'

'You're the boss.'

It was a hot night. The verandah tables were taken, so we had to sit inside, jammed against a wall. We ordered: mee-hoon soup, spring rolls, pork strips, fried kway-teow and a bowl of laksa that seemed to blister the lining of my mouth.

'One thing's for sure,' said Ladysmith, 'I won't get dengue fever again for a while. The sister said I'm immune for a year.'

'Thank God for that,' I said. 'By then you'll be back in Caribou, Maine.'

'I don't know,' he said. 'I like it here.'

He was smiling, glancing around the room, poking noodles into his mouth. Then I saw him lose control of his chopsticks. His jaw dropped, he turned pale, and I thought for a moment that he was going to cry.

'Is anything wrong?'

He shook his head, but he looked stricken.

'It's this food,' I said. 'You shouldn't be eating such strong—'

'No,' he said. 'It's those pictures.'

On the white-washed wall of the *kedai* was a series of framed photographs, old hand-coloured ones, lozenge-shaped, like huge lockets. Two women and some children. Not so unusual; the Chinese always have photographs of relations around – a casual reverence. One could hardly call them a pious people; their brand of religion is ancestor worship, the simple display of the family album. But I had not realized until then that Woo Boh Swee's relations had had money. The evidence was in the pictures: both women were smiling, showing large sets of gold dentures.

'That's them,' said Ladysmith.

'Who?' I said. Staring at them I noticed certain wrinkles of familiarity, but the Chinese are very hard to tell apart. The cliché is annoyingly true.

Ladysmith put his chopsticks down and began to whisper: 'The women in my room – that's *them*. That one had blood on her hair, and the other one—'

'Dengué fever,' I said. 'You said they didn't have any teeth. Now I ask you – look at those teeth. You've got the wrong ladies, my boy.'

'No!'

His pallor had returned, and the face I saw across the table was the one I had seen on that pillow. I felt sorry for him, as helpless as I had before.

Woo Boh Swee, the owner of City Bar, went by the table. He was brisk, snapping a towel. 'Okay? Anything? More beer? What you want?'

'We're fine, Mr Woo,' I said. 'But I wonder if you can tell us something. We were wondering who those women are in the pictures – over there.'

He looked at the wall, grunted, lowered his head and simply walked away, muttering.

'I don't get it,' I said. I left the table and went to the back of the bar, where Boh Swee's son Reggie – the 'English' son – was playing mah-jongg. I asked Reggie the same question: who are they?

'I'm glad you asked me,' said Reggie. 'Don't mention them to my father. One's his auntie, the other one's his sister. It's a sad story. They were cut up during the war by the dwarf bandits. That's what my old man calls them in Hokkien. The Japanese. It happened over at the head-quarters – what they used for head-quarters when they occupied the town. My old man was in Singapore.'

'But the Japanese were only here for a few months,' I said.

Bunch of thieves,' said Reggie. 'They took anything they could lay their hands on. They used those old ladies for house-girls, at the headquarters, that big house, where the tree is. Then they killed them, just like that, and hid the bodies – we never found the graves. But that was before they captured Singapore. The British couldn't stop them, you know. The dwarf bandits were clever –

they pretended they were Chinese and rode all the way to the Causeway on bicycles.'

I looked back at the table. Ladysmith was staring, his eyes again bright with fever; staring at those gold teeth.

Ruth Rendell

You can't be too careful

Della Galway went out with a man for the first (and almost the last) time on her nineteenth birthday. He parked his car, and as they were going into the restaurant she asked him if he had locked all the doors and the boot. When he turned back and said, yes, he'd better do that, she asked him why he didn't have a burglar-proof locking device on the steering wheel.

Her parents had brought her up to be cautious. When she left that happy home in that safe little provincial town, she took her parents' notions with her to London. At first she could only afford the rent of a single room. It upset her that the other tenants often came in late at night and left the front door on the latch. Although her room was at the top of the house and she had nothing worth stealing, she lay in bed sweating with fear. At work it was just the same. Nobody bothered about security measures. Della was always the last to leave, and sometimes she went back two or three times to check that all the office doors and the outer door were shut.

The personnel officer suggested she see a psychiatrist.

Della was very ambitious. She had an economics degree, a business studies diploma, and had come out top at the end of her secretarial course. She knew a psychiatrist would find something wrong with her – they had to earn their money like everyone else – and long sessions of treatment would follow which wouldn't help her towards her goal, that of becoming the company's first woman director. They always held that sort of thing against you.

'That won't be necessary,' she said in her brisk way. 'It was the firm's property I was worried about. If they like to risk losing their valuable equipment, that's their look-out.'

She stopped going back to check the doors – it didn't prey on her mind much as her own safety wasn't involved – and three weeks later two men broke in, stole all the electric typewriters

and damaged the computer beyond repair. It proved her right, but she didn't say so. The threat of the psychiatrist had frightened her so much that she never again aired her burglar obsession at work.

When she got promotion and a salary rise, she decided to get a flat of her own. The landlady was a woman after her own heart. Mrs Swanson liked Della from the first and explained to her, as to a kindred spirit, the security arrangements.

'This is a very nice neighbourhood, Miss Galway, but the crime rate in London is rising all the time, and I always say you can't be too careful.'

Della said she couldn't agree more.

'So I always keep this side gate bolted on the inside. The back door into this little yard must also be kept locked and bolted. The bathroom window looks out into the garden, you see, so I like the garden door and the bathroom door to be locked at night too.'

'Very wise,' said Della, noting that the window in the bed-sitting room had screws fixed to its sashes which prevented its being opened more than six inches. 'What did you say the rent was?'

'Twenty pounds a week.' Mrs Swanson was a landlady first, and a kindred spirit secondly, so when Della hesitated, she said, 'It's a garden flat, completely self-contained and you've got your own phone. I shan't have any trouble in letting it. I've got someone else coming to view it at two.'

Della stopped hesitating. She moved in at the end of the week, having supplied Mrs Swanson with references and assured her she was quiet, prudent as to locks and bolts, and not inclined to have 'unauthorized' people to stay overnight. By unauthorized people Mrs Swanson meant men. Since the episode over the car on her nineteenth birthday, Della had entered tentatively upon friendships with men, but no man had ever taken her out more than twice and none had ever got as far as to kiss her. She didn't know why this was, as she had always been polite and pleasant, insisting on paying her share, careful to carry her own coat, handbag and parcels so as to give her escort no trouble, ever watchful of his wallet and keys, offering to have the theatre tickets in her own safe keeping, and anxious not to keep him out too late. That one after another men dropped her worried her very little. No spark of

sexual feeling had ever troubled her, and the idea of sharing her orderly, routine-driven life with a man – untidy, feckless, casual creatures as they all, with the exception of her father, seemed to be – was a daunting one. She meant to get to the top on her own. One day perhaps, when she was about thirty-five and with a high-powered lady executive's salary, then if some like-minded, quiet and prudent man came along ... In the meantime, Mrs Swanson had no need to worry.

Della was very happy with her flat. It was utterly quiet, a little sanctum tucked at the back of the house. She never heard a sound from her neighbours in the other parts of the house and they, of course, never heard a sound from her. She encountered them occasionally when crossing from her own front door to the front door of the house. They were mouselike people who scuttled off to their holes with no more than a nod and a 'good evening.' This was as it should be. The flat, too, was entirely as it should be.

The bed-sitter looked just like a living-room by day, for the bed was let down from a curtained recess in the wall only at night. Its window overlooked the yard which Della never used. She never unbolted the side gate or the back door or, needless to say, attempted to undo the screws and open the window more than six inches.

Every evening, when she had washed the dishes and wiped down every surface in the immaculate well-fitted kitchen, had her bath, made her bedtime drink, and let the bed down from the wall, she went on her security rounds just as her father did at home. First she unlocked and unbolted the back door and crossed the yard to check that the side gate was securely fastened. It always was as no one ever touched it, but Della liked to make absolutely sure, and sometimes went back several times in case her eyes had deceived her. Then she bolted and locked the back door, the garden door and the bathroom door. All these doors opened out of a small room, about ten feet square – Mrs Swanson called it the garden room – which in its turn could be locked off by yet another door from the kitchen. Della locked it. She rather regretted she couldn't lock the door that led from the kitchen into the bed-sitting room but, owing to some oversight on Mrs Swanson's part, there was no lock on it. However, her own front door in the bed-sitter itself was locked, of course, on

the Yale. Finally, before getting into bed, she bolted the front door.

Then she was safe. Though she sometimes got up once or twice more to make assurance trebly sure, she generally settled down at this point into blissful sleep, certain that even the most accomplished of burglars couldn't break in.

There was only one drawback – the rent.

'That flat,' said Mrs Swanson, 'is really intended for two people. A married couple had it before you, and before that two ladies shared it.'

'I couldn't share my bed,' said Della with a shudder, 'or, come to that, my room.'

'If you found a nice friend to share I wouldn't object to putting up a single bed in the garden room. Then your friend could come and go by the side gate, provided you were prepared to *promise* me it would always be bolted at night.'

Della wasn't going to advertise for a flatmate. You couldn't be too careful. Yet she had to find someone if she was going to afford any new winter clothes, not to mention heating the place. It would have to be the right person, someone to fill all her own exacting requirements as well as satisfy Mrs Swanson . . .

'Ooh, it's lovely!' said Rosamund Vine. 'It's so quiet and clean. And you've got a garden! You should see the dump I've been living in. It was over-run with mice.'

'You don't get mice,' said Della repressively, 'unless you leave food about.'

'I won't do that. I'll be ever so careful. I'll go halves with the rent and I'll have the key to the back door, shall I? That way I won't disturb you if I come in late at night.'

'I hope you won't come in late at night,' said Della. 'Mrs Swanson's very particular about that sort of thing.'

'Don't worry.' Rosamund sounded rather bitter. 'I've nothing and no one to keep me out late. Anyway, the last bus passes the end of the road at a quarter to twelve.'

Della pushed aside her misgivings, and Mrs Swanson, interviewing Rosamund, appeared to have none. She made a point of explaining the safety precautions, to which Rosamund listened meekly and with earnest nods of her head. Della was glad this duty hadn't fallen to her, as she didn't want Rosamund to tell

exaggerated tales about her at work. So much the better if she could put it all on Mrs Swanson.

Rosamund Vine had been chosen with the care Della devoted to every choice she made. It had taken three weeks of observation and keeping her ears open to select her. It wouldn't do to find someone on too low a salary or, on the other hand, someone with too lofty a position in the company. She didn't like the idea of a spectacularly good-looking girl, for such led hectic lives, or too clever a girl, for such might involve her in tiresome arguments. An elegant girl would fill the cupboards with clothes and the bathroom with cosmetics. A gifted girl would bring in musical instruments or looms or paints or trunks full of books. Only Rosamund, of all the candidates, qualified. She was small and quiet and prettyish, a secretary (though not Della's secretary), the daughter of a clergyman who, by coincidence, had been at the same university at the same time as Della's father. Della, who had much the same attitude as Victorian employers had to their maids' 'followers', noted that she had never heard her speak of a boy friend or overheard any cloakroom gossip as to Rosamund's love life.

The two girls settled down happily together. They seldom went out in the evenings. Della always went to bed at eleven sharp and would have relegated Rosamund to her own room at this point but for one small difficulty. With Rosamund in the garden room – necessarily sitting on her bed as there was nowhere else to sit – it wasn't possible for Della to make her security rounds. Only once had she tried doing it with Rosamund looking on.

'Goodness,' Rosamund had said, 'this place is like Fort Knox. All those keys and bolts! What are you so scared of?'

'Mrs Swanson likes to have the place locked up,' said Della, but the next night she made hot drinks for the two of them and sent Rosamund to wait for her in the bed-sitter before creeping out into the yard for a secret check-up.

When she came back Rosamund was examining her bedside table. 'Why do you put everything in order like that, Della? Your book at right angles to the table and your cigarette packet at right angles to your book, and, look, your ashtray's exactly an inch from the lamp as if you'd measured it out.'

'Because I'm a naturally tidy person.'

'I do think it's funny your smoking. I never would have guessed you smoked till I came to live here. It doesn't sort of seem in character. And your glass of water. Do you want to drink water in the night?'

'Not always,' Della said patiently. 'But I might want to, and I shouldn't want to have to get up and fetch it, should I?'

Rosamund's questions didn't displease her. It showed that the girl wanted to learn the right way to do things. Della taught her that a room must be dusted every day, the fridge defrosted once a week, the table laid for breakfast before they went to bed, all the windows closed and the catches fastened. She drew Rosamund out as to the places she had previously lived in with a view to contrasting past squalor with present comfort, and she received a shock when Rosamund made it plain that in some of those rooms, attics, converted garages, she had lived with a man. Della made no comment but froze slightly. And Rosamund, thank goodness, seemed to understand her disapproval and didn't go into details. But soon after that she began going out in the evenings.

Della didn't want to know where she was going or with whom. She had plenty to occupy her own evenings, what with the work she brought home, her housework, washing and ironing, her twice-weekly letter to her mother and father, and the commercial Spanish she was teaching herself from gramophone records. It was rather a relief not to have Rosamund fluttering about. Besides, she could do her security rounds in peace. Not, of course, that she could check up on the side gate till Rosamund came in. Necessarily, it had to remain unbolted, and the back door to which Rosamund had the key, unlocked. But always by ten to twelve at the latest she'd hear the side gate open and close and hear Rosamund pause to draw the bolts. Then her feet tip-toeing across the yard, then the back door unlocked, shut, locked. After that, Della could sleep in peace.

The first problem arose when Rosamund came in one night and didn't bolt the gate after her. Della listened carefully in the dark, but she was positive those bolts had not been drawn. Even if the back door was locked, it was unthinkable to leave that side gate on nothing all night but its flimsy latch. She put on her dressing gown and went through the kitchen into the garden room. Rosamund was already in bed, her clothes flung about on the coverlet. Della picked them up and folded them. She was coming back

from the yard, having fastened those bolts, when Rosamund sat up and said:

‘What’s the matter? Can’t you sleep?’

‘Mrs Swanson,’ said Della with a light indulgent laugh, ‘wouldn’t be able to sleep if she knew you’d left that side gate unbolted.’

‘Did I? Honestly, Della, I don’t know what I’m doing half the time. I can’t think of anyone but Chris. He’s the most marvellous person and I do think he’s just as mad about me as I am about him. I feel as if he’s changed my whole life.’

Della let her spend nearly all the following evening describing the marvellous Chris, how brilliant he was – though at present unable to get a job fitting his talents – how amusing, how highly educated – though so poor as to be reduced to borrowing a friend’s room while that friend was away. She listened and smiled and made appropriate remarks, but she wondered when she had last been so bored. Every time she got up to try and play one of her Spanish records, Rosamund was off again on another facet of Chris’s dazzling personality, until at last Della had to say she had a headache and would Rosamund mind leaving her on her own for a bit?

‘Anyway, you’ll see him tomorrow. I’ve asked him for a meal.’

Unluckily, this happened to be the evening Della was going to supper with her aunt on the other side of London. They had evidently enjoyed themselves, judging by the mess in the kitchen, Della thought when she got home. There were few things she disliked more than wet dishes left to drain. Rosamund was asleep. Della crept out into the yard and checked that the bolts were fastened.

‘I heard you wandering about ever so late,’ said Rosamund in the morning. ‘Were you upset about anything?’

‘Certainly not. I simply found it rather hard to get to sleep because it was past my normal time.’

‘Aren’t you funny?’ said Rosamund, and she giggled.

The next night she missed the last bus.

Della had passed a pleasant evening, studying firstly the firm’s annual report, then doing a Spanish exercise. By eleven she was in bed, reading the memoirs of a woman company chairman. Her bedside light went off at half-past and she lay in the dark waiting for the sound of the side gate.

Her clock had luminous hands, and when they passed ten to twelve she began to feel a nasty tingly jumping sensation all over her body. She put on the light, switched it off immediately. She didn't want Rosamund bursting in with all her silly questions and comments. But Rosamund didn't burst in, and the hands of the clock closed together on midnight. There was no doubt about it. The last bus had gone and Rosamund hadn't been on it.

Well, the silly girl needn't think she was going to stand this sort of thing. She'd bolt that side gate herself and Rosamund could stay out in the street all night. Of course she might ring the front door bell, she was silly and inconsiderate enough to do that, but it couldn't be helped. Della would far rather be awakened at one or two o'clock than lie there knowing that side gate was open for anyone to come in. She put on her dressing gown and made her way through the spotless kitchen to the garden room. Rosamund had hung a silly sort of curtain over the back door, not a curtain really but a rather dirty Indian bedspread. Della lifted it distastefully – and then she realized. She couldn't bolt the side gate because the back door into the yard was locked and Rosamund had the key.

A practical person like herself wasn't going to be done that way. She'd go out by the front door, walk round to the side entrance and – but, no, that wouldn't work either. If she opened the gate and bolted it on the inside, she'd simply find herself bolted inside the yard. The only thing was to climb out of the window. She tried desperately to undo the window screws, but they had seized up from years of disuse and she couldn't shift them. Trembling now, she sat down on the edge of her bed and lit a cigarette. For the first time in her life she was in an insecure place by night, alone in a London flat, with nothing to separate her from hordes of rapacious burglars but a feeble back door lock which any type of a thief could pick open in five minutes.

How criminally careless of Mrs Swanson not to have provided the door between the bed-sitter and the kitchen with a lock! There was no heavy piece of furniture she could place against the door. The phone was by her bed, of course. But if she heard a sound and dialled for the police was there a chance of their getting there before she was murdered and the place ransacked?

What Mrs Swanson had provided was one of the most fear-some-looking breadknives Della had ever seen. She fetched it

from the kitchen and put it under her pillow. Its presence made her feel slightly safer, but suppose she didn't wake up when the man came in, suppose . . . ? That was ridiculous, she wouldn't sleep at all. Exhausted, shaken, feeling physically sick, she crawled under the bedclothes and, after concentrated thought, put the light out. Perhaps, if there was no light on, he would go past her, not know she was there, make his way into the main part of the house, and if by then she hadn't actually died of fright . . .

At twenty minutes past one, when she had reached the point of deciding to phone for a car to take her to an hotel, the side gate clicked and Rosamund entered the yard. Della fell back against the pillows with a relief so tremendous that she couldn't even bother to go out and check the bolts. So what if it wasn't bolted? The man would have to pass Rosamund first, kill her first. Della found she didn't care at all about what might happen to Rosamund, only about her own safety.

She sneaked out at half-past six to put the knife back, and she was sullenly eating her breakfast, the flat immaculate, when Rosamund appeared at eight.

'I missed the last bus. I had to get a taxi.'

'You could have phoned.'

'Goodness, you sound just like my mother. It was bad enough having to get up and . . . ' Rosamund blushed and put her hand over her mouth. 'I mean, go *out* and get that taxi and . . . Well, I wasn't all that late,' she muttered.

Her little slip of the tongue hadn't been lost on Della. But she was too tired to make any rejoinder beyond saying that Mrs Swanson would be very annoyed if she knew, and would Rosamund give her fair warning next time she intended to be late? Rosamund said when they met again that evening that she couldn't give her fair warning, as she could never be sure herself. Della said no more. What, anyway, would be the use of knowing what time Rosamund was coming in when she couldn't bolt the gate?

Three mornings later her temper flared.

On two of the intervening nights Rosamund had missed the last bus. The funny thing was that she didn't look at all tired or jaded, while Della was worn-out. For three hours on the previous night she had lain stiffly clutching the breadknife while the old house creaked about her and the side gate rattled in the wind.

'I don't know why you bother to come home at all.'

'Won't you mind if I don't?'

'Not a bit. Do as you like.'

Stealthily, before Rosamund left the flat by the front door, Della slipped out and bolted the gate. Rosamund, of course (being utterly imprudent), didn't check the gate before she locked the back door. Della fell into a heavy sleep at ten o'clock to be awakened just after two by a thudding on the side gate followed by a frenzied ringing of the front door bell.

'You locked me out!' Rosamund sobbed. 'Even my mother never did that. I was locked out in the street and I'm frozen. What have I done to you that you treat me like that?'

'You said you weren't coming home.'

'I wasn't going to, but we went out and Chris forgot his key. He's had to sleep at a friend's place. I wish I'd gone there too!'

They were evidently two of a kind. Well-suited, Della thought. Although it was nearly half-past two in the morning, this seemed the best moment to have things out. She addressed Rosamund in her precise schoolmistressy voice.

'I think we'll have to make other arrangements, Rosamund. Your ways aren't my ways, and we don't really get on, do we? You can stay here till you find somewhere else, but I'd like you to start looking round straightaway.'

'But what have I *done*? I haven't made a noise or had my friends here. I haven't even used your phone, not once. Honestly, Della, I've done my best to keep the place clean and tidy, and it's nearly killed me.'

'I've explained what I mean. We're not the same kind of people.'

'I'll go on Saturday. I'll go to my mother – it won't be any worse. God knows – and then maybe Chris and I ...'

'You'd better go to bed now,' Della said coldly, but she couldn't get any sleep herself. She was wondering how she had been such a bad judge of character, and wondering too what she was going to do about the rent. Find someone else, of course. An older woman perhaps, a widow or a middle-aged spinster ...

What she was determined not to do was reveal to Rosamund, at this late stage, her anxiety about the side gate. If anything remained to comfort her, it was the knowledge that Rosamund thought her strong, mature and sensible. But not revealing it

brought her an almost unbearable agony. For Rosamund seemed to think the very sight of her would be an embarrassment to Della. Each evening she was gone from the flat before Della got home, and each time she had gone out leaving the side gate unbolted and the back door locked. Della had no way of knowing whether she would come in on the last bus or get a taxi or be seen home in the small hours by Chris. She didn't know whether Chris lived near or far away, and now she wished she had listened more closely to Rosamund's confidences and asked a few questions of her own. Instead, she had only thought with a shudder how nasty it must be to have to sleep with a man, and had wondered if she would ever bring herself to face the prospect.

Each night she took the breadknife to bed with her, confirmed in her conviction that she wasn't being unreasonable when one of the mouselike people whom she met in the hall told her the house next door had been broken into and its old woman occupant knocked on the head. Rosamund came in once at one, once at half-past two, and once she didn't come in at all. Della got great bags under her eyes and her skin looked grey. She fell asleep over her desk at work, while a bright-eyed vivacious Rosamund regaled her friends in the cloakroom about the joys of her relationship with Chris.

But now there was only one more night to go . . .

Rosamund had left a note to say she wouldn't be home. She'd see Della on the following evening when she collected her cases to take them to her mother. But she'd left the side gate unbolted. Della seriously considered bolting it and then climbing back over it into the side entrance, but it was too high and smooth for her to climb and there wasn't a ladder. Nothing for it but to begin her vigil with the cigarettes, the glass of water, the phone and the breadknife. It ought to have been easier, this last night, just because it was the last. Instead it was worse than any of the others. She lay in the dark, thinking of the old woman next door, of the house that was precisely the same as the one next door, and of the intruder who now knew the best and simplest way in. She tried to think of something else, anything else, but the strongest instinct of all over-rode all her feeble attempts to concentrate on tomorrow, on work, on ambition, on the freedom and peace of tomorrow when that gate would be fastened for good, never again to be opened.

Rosamund had said she wouldn't be in. But you couldn't rely on a word she said. Della wasn't, therefore, surprised (though she was overwhelmingly relieved) to hear the gate click just before two. Sighing with a kind of ecstasy – for tomorrow had come – she listened for the sound of the bolts being drawn across. The sound didn't come. Well, that was a small thing. She'd fasten the bolts herself when Rosamund was in bed. She heard footsteps moving very softly, and then the back door was unlocked. Rosamund took a longer time than usual about unlocking it, but maybe she was tired or drunk or heaven knew what.

Silence.

Then the back door creaked and made rattling sounds as if Rosamund hadn't bothered to re-lock it. Wearily, Della hoisted herself out of bed and slipped her dressing gown round her. As she did so, the kitchen light came on. The light showed round the edges of the old door in a brilliant phosphorescent rectangle. That wasn't like Rosamund who never went into the kitchen, who fell immediately into bed without even bothering to wash her face. A long shiver ran through Della. Her body taut but trembling, she listened. Footsteps were crossing the kitchen floor and the fridge door was opened. She heard the sounds of fumbling in cupboards, a drawer was opened and silver rattled. She wanted to call out, 'Rosamund, Rosamund, is that you?' but she had no voice. Her mouth was dry and her voice had gone. Something occurred to her that had never struck her before. It struck her with a great thrust of terror. How would she know, how had she ever known, whether it was Rosamund or another who entered the flat by the side gate and the frail back door?

Then there came a cough.

It was a slight cough, the sound of someone clearing his throat, but it was unmistakeably *his* throat. There was a man in the kitchen.

Della forgot the phone. She remembered – though she had scarcely for a moment forgotten her – the old woman next door. Blind terror thrust her to her feet, plunged her hand under the pillow for the knife. She opened the kitchen door, and he was there, a tall man, young and strong, standing right there on the threshold with Mrs Swanson's silver in one hand and Mrs Swanson's heavy iron pan in the other. Della didn't hesitate. She struck hard with the knife, struck again and again until the bright blood

flew across the white walls and the clean ironing and the table neatly laid for breakfast.

The policeman was very nice to Rosamund Vine. He called her by her Christian name and gave her a cup of coffee. She drank the coffee, though she didn't really want it as she had had a cup at the hospital when they told her Chris was dead.

'Tell me about last night, will you, Rosamund?'

'I'd been out with my boy friend – Chris – Chris Maitland. He'd forgotten his key and he hadn't anywhere to sleep, so I said to come back with me. He was going to leave early in the morning before she – before Della was up. We were going to be very careful about that. And we were terribly quiet. We crept in at about two.'

'You didn't call out?'

'No, we thought she was asleep. That's why we didn't speak to each other, not even in whispers. But she must have heard us.' Her voice broke a little. 'I went straight to bed. Chris was hungry. I said if he was as quiet as a mouse he could get himself something from the fridge, and I told him where the knives and forks and plates were. The next thing I heard this ghastly scream and I ran out and – and Chris was ... There was blood everywhere ...'

The policeman waited until she was calmer.

'Why do you think she attacked him with a knife?' he asked.

'I don't know.'

'I think you do, Rosamund.'

'Perhaps I do.' Rosamund looked down. 'She didn't like me going out.'

'Because she was afraid of being there alone?'

'Della Galway,' said Rosamund, 'wasn't afraid of anything. Mrs Swanson was nervous about burglars, but Della wasn't. Everyone in the house knew about the woman next door getting coshed, and they were all nervous. Except Della. She didn't even mention it to me, and she must have known.'

'So she didn't think Chris was a burglar?'

'Of course she didn't.' Rosamund started to cry. 'She saw a man – my man. She couldn't get one of her own. Every time I tried to talk about him she went all cold and standoffish. She heard us come in last night and she understood and – and it sent her over

the edge. It drove her crazy. I'd heard they wanted her to see a psychiatrist at work, and now I know why.'

The policeman shivered a little in spite of his long experience. Fear of burglars he could understand, but this ... 'She'll see one now,' he said, and then he sent the weeping girl home to her mother.

Elizabeth Naden-Borland

A rhyme

Don't shun this tale because it rhymes,
Dear Reader, please read on –
the rhyming has its relevance
as flowers to the sun.

It happened thus a year ago,
when Rosie Smith from Spondon
caught the 7.29
to take her up to London.

She liked to watch the budding trees
and gazed out from the window
thinking ah! how beautiful,
and then she heard some lingo
foreign to her tender ears,
she blushed from head to toe,
then whitened when she met the eyes –
bloodshot they were – and oh
how vile the drooping of his lips,
the scar above his brow!

It was the youth she'd seen before,
he once had trailed her home,
and now he sat right opposite!
His mouth was dripping foam!

She sat there mesmerized with fear,
she felt his evil stare,
and no one in the carriage!
Dear Lord! she gasped a prayer,
'Don't let this madman harm me!'
put forth her trembling hand
in a placating gesture,
but a rope he had unwound . . .

He leaned toward her, breathing hard,
and said, 'It's for your neck,
I'll rape you, then I'll kill you
and I'll torture you, by Heck!'

Poor Rosie, terrified, kneeled down
before him, pleading 'Mercy!'
She felt his breath upon her face,
he said, 'My name is Percy.'

She noticed, though in dire strait,
dishevelled and distressed
a curious fact about him,
and, cringing, half-undressed,
she gazed into his leering face
and asked him his intention –
when he heard the latter word
he said, 'No intervention
is possible – you are my prey
and I – I am the vulture,
Cruel death awaits you, but I'm glad
you recognize my culture!'

She screamed, 'I know you rhyme your rhymes
you rhyme them, willy-nilly,
every word I speak you echo
with another! Silly
youth! you'll give the game away
sometime. They'll recognize—'
But as she spoke these final words
the knife-blade cut her thighs.

He chopped and hacked, and red the floor
became 'as red as roses'
he chanted with triumphant glee,
'And here's some crimson posies
to put upon your lonely grave,
your parents and relations
will be delighted with the wreathing
scented sweet carnations!'

Poor Rosie! Reader tender her
your pity, and for Percy
keep a watch on every train,
he'll never show you mercy.
And this the burden of my song,
I'm mad as mad can be,
I cannot speak without I make
a rhyme! *Yes, I am he!*

Harry E. Turner

Fat old women who wear fur coats

The tea-shop in Brussels overlooked the gardens of the Palais d'Egmont. Bare trees, stripped by the icy winter stood like gaunt sentinels across the frozen lawns and although the sky was a rich, clear blue the air outside could freeze your breath into a cloud.

John Talbot sipped his lemon tea and fumbled for another cigarette. He'd picked the Café d'Egmont because he thought it would be quiet and he'd be able to finish reading the last four editions of the *Herald Tribune*. The café, however, was far from quiet. It was packed solid with elderly Belgians who were engaged in their two most favourite pastimes, talking loudly and ramming chocolate cakes down their throats.

That they could perform both these activities at one and the same time was wondrous to behold. Talbot found it faintly nauseating – but fascinating none the less.

On his right four ladies, whose combined weight would have equalled a Sherman tank, crouched over plates of meringues, doughnuts, iced-gâteaux, éclairs, chocolate fingers, marzipan wedges and dense, yellow fruitcake. All of them wore fur coats, and all of them sported rings that sliced into the mottled flesh of their podgy fingers. The conversation was in French, and the high speed delivery kept up a continuous spray of icing sugar, crumbs and half-chewed currants that fell like some unholy rain across the shimmering lace-trimmed tablecloth in front of them.

Just beyond, two other women, also in furs, but with the addition of fur hats, were spooning down sherry trifle and sloshing back glasses of piping hot chocolate malts. The look of dedicated concentration on their faces would have done justice to a brace of nuns who had just been kissed by the Pope.

Talbot inhaled from his low-tar jumbo filter with reactivated charcoal-type nodules designed to trap noxious poisons and release only the nutty, wide-open-spaces flavour he knew he could trust, and coughed like a sheep.

Not so much as one pretty face among the whole lot. Even the waitresses were nudging middle age and had the waxen complexions and gargantuan buttock fat of the Patisserie Aficionado.

Immediately, on Talbot's right, a small table had been wedged against the window and an elderly couple had just shuffled themselves into the constricted space and sat down.

The man was frail and birdlike with a wobbling Adam's apple in his turkey neck and sad, watery eyes. He wore steel-rimmed spectacles which had been pushed up on to his forehead and too big a suit fashioned from what appeared to be bleached horse blanket.

The woman was immense. A great quivering blancmange of a female with a face half obscured by tinted, fly-away glasses and a slash of vermilion lipstick. Her fingers, expensively beringed, were the size of pork sausages and she had clearly needed a tyre lever to get her feet into her shoes. A rim of fat overhung the gleaming patent leather and threatened at any moment to drip on to the mosaic floor like molten candle wax.

The man ordered six different cakes and they were produced almost at once and lowered by stainless steel spatula on to his plate. The woman ordered nothing, but sat impassively gazing at the man. He cut the cakes into small pieces with the side of his fork and then proceeded to feed the woman in the manner of an adult feeding a small child.

It was only then that Talbot realized the woman was blind and he felt suddenly guilty about his uncharitable thoughts.

She sat there, opening her vermilion mouth to receive the piled spoonfuls and chewing thoughtfully while he prepared the next morsel.

It was a touching scene, the old, faithful husband and the sad, grotesque – his wife.

When the cakes were finished, the man ordered more and the whole process was repeated. The woman's jaws rose and fell like well-oiled machinery and the man began to speed up the delivery. Once, she made as if to protest, but he ignored her and shovelled in another forkful of Black Forest strawberry gâteau.

It was impossible to gauge the blind woman's true feelings; her impassive bulk and the enormous tinted spectacles served as a mask to her real emotional state.

She chewed and swallowed, chewed and swallowed. More

cakes arrived. Oblong wedges filled with marmalade and honey, squat macaroons frosted with sugar icing, dark plain chocolate buns with glacé cherries sunk into their flanks, shortbread packed with sultanas, monster éclairs, bleeding cream from their slashed throats. And so on.

Talbot lit another cigarette. Where would it end? How much more could the human digestive tract receive without spectacular rebellion?

Suddenly, and inappropriately, Talbot was reminded of an old, bawdy, British Army song:

Fat old women who wear fur coats –
Very seldom get their oats,
But when they do, they screw like stoats –
And revel in the joys of forni-cation!

Now, bird man was ordering more cakes and his poor blind wife was gleaming with a light sheen of perspiration. Her breathing had quickened, and her pudgy fingers flexed and un-flexed nervously.

More cake, cut into neat, bite-sized pieces was forked past the slack vermilion lips. Jaws worked. Mouth opened, fork entered, tipped out contents, withdrew. Chewing, swallowing, opening, shutting, chewing, swallowing, opening – faster now – swallow big pieces whole, don't wait to chew. Open, swallow, open, swallow, open, swallow.

An entire chocolate éclair entered the vermilion cave and was gulped down. The fat blind lady quivered, her breath suddenly harsh, like escaping steam – then she fell forward, stone dead, and her face rested in a plate of white meringues.

The bird man reached across and unhooked her handbag from her dead, fat arm and opened it. Sheaves of paper tied with pink ribbon. Insurance policies. Talbot could see the names at the top. Bird man flicked through them, silent and unblinking. After examining one he folded them and slipped them into his jacket pocket. Then, and only then, he allowed himself to weep silently, rocking gently to and fro like a child.

Talbot lit another cigarette and picked up his *Herald Tribune*. He was English, after all, and Englishmen didn't intrude on private grief.

Heather Vineham

Daughter of the house

The car rattled to a standstill and Ted Baxter cursed under his breath. Darkness spread around the landscape like a muffling garment. He was trapped by his own stupidity. He should have known better than to trust this lane to lead him to the motorway. It was nothing but a hummocky cart-track, growing narrower all the way. Now he was stranded in the middle of an Oxfordshire wilderness, one wheel jammed in a rut of squelching mud. A cold drizzle of rain was splashing the windows of the car.

He climbed out cautiously, shuddering as his foot sank ankle-deep in the icy puddle that had trapped the wheel.

Fields stretched interminably beyond the hedges on either side of the lane. At the far end of the expanse to his left, he made out a clump of trees, and a light that glimmered in and out between the windswept branches. A house, in this benighted spot? Perhaps his luck was in.

Squeezing through a space where the hedge thinned out, he started to plod across the soggy ground.

The house stood back among the trees, almost as if it were ashamed to be seen. It was a three-storied building, and the roof tapered into a turret with a circular window, giving the place a Gothic aspect. The light that had guided him shone dimly from the downstairs window to the left of the door. It was covered by a discoloured lace curtain.

He pressed the bell. For a moment there was silence; then he fancied he heard furtive footsteps within, as though more than one person were scurrying into the back regions of the house. Then more footsteps – it sounded like only one lot this time – returned, but did not reach the door. A soft creaking told him that someone was quietly mounting the stairs.

Suddenly he started, as a window rattled open from the room above the door, and a woman's head and shoulders were thrust out.

'Are you from Gino? If so, there's no deal!'

The voice held a mixture of defiance and fear.

Ted answered as politely as he could, while rain pelted down on his upturned face:

'I'm not from anyone – my car's stuck in the mud out there—'

He jerked his thumb towards the lane. 'I wondered if I might use your phone?'

The woman still seemed to be scanning him suspiciously.

'Who are you?' she asked at length. 'Are you the one that's been here before?'

Ted made an effort to control his impatience.

'My name's Baxter,' he answered, 'though that won't mean a thing to you. 'No, I've never been here before. I was on my way to Thame, and my car got stuck—'

After a moment's hesitation, she mumbled something that might have been 'All right' and withdrew her head. The window slammed shut and presently he heard her descending the stairs. Then the door opened and she stood revealed in the light from an unshaded bulb in the narrow hallway.

She was middle aged, thin, dark haired, gipsy looking. She seemed worried, and was rubbing her hands nervously on an off-white apron.

She looked at him searchingly, as though still not convinced of his innocence; then, evidently reassured by his bland expression, she moved aside, holding the door open.

'You'd better come in,' she said, a little more amicably this time, 'You'll get soaked out there!'

She led the way to the lighted room on the left of the hall.

As soon as he entered, Ted was aware of a tension, an electric quiver left in the air, as of a sudden departure, a hovering breath of fear.

The room was small, sparsely furnished, but redeemed by a blazing fire, with a faded armchair on either side. A small table stood in the centre, and two upright chairs were drawn up to it – one, he noticed, standing slightly awry, as though it had been hurriedly pushed aside. The woman was quickly removing plates from the place in front of it. Her own meal was half finished.

'I'm sorry,' Ted began, 'I'm afraid I've come at an awkward time.'

She smiled then, rather ashamedly, and her face took on a

kinder expression. Before time and experience had made it haggard, Ted felt it must have held a certain beauty.

'No matter,' she said. 'You're welcome as long as you're not one of *his* lot. Would you care for some stew?'

She was holding a ladle over a steaming bowl in front of her. It smelt appetizingly of onion and rabbit. Ted began to realize how hungry he was.

'Well, if you've any to spare—'

He wondered if he should offer payment, but was not quite sure how to phrase the words.

'I'd like to phone first, if I may.'

She jerked her head towards a small table by the wall.

'Help yourself, while I get you a plate.'

She disappeared, evidently bound for the kitchen, and Ted dialled the Carpenter's Arms at Thame. He had been looking forward to the comfortable room booked for him, and wondered if he'd manage to make the Athletic Club Conference scheduled for the following morning. It seemed doubtful. He wondered if his temporary hostess could put him up.

She returned with a tray of china and cutlery, and seemed to guess his thought.

'Better stay put tonight, mister,' she said. 'It's seven miles or more to Little Milton, and I doubt if there's anywhere there could accommodate you.'

The house was not exactly the spot Ted would have chosen, but at that moment it seemed a haven of refuge.

He explained his predicament to the proprietor of the Carpenter's Arms. Now his hostess had left the room again for more supplies from the kitchen, and Ted's attention wandered, first to the welcome glow of the fire, then to the mantelpiece above it, where two photographs stood, one at each end. They showed the head of a girl, evidently the same girl, and he fancied he detected a likeness to the woman who was offering him hospitality. The daughter of the house? But the eyes had a haunted look, the expression thoughtful and brooding.

Then the woman returned to set a place for him, and introduced herself as Louise Wells.

'I'm sorry I wasn't more welcoming,' she explained, 'but you see, we don't get many visitors, and we have to be careful – there's just me and my daughter here—'

Ted nodded understandingly. 'You're pretty isolated here, aren't you?'

'We like it that way,' was all she said.

Feeling that the subject embarrassed her, for some reason he could not understand, Ted tried to change the conversation. He glanced towards the mantelpiece.

'Is that your daughter?' he asked. Something about that pictured face fascinated him.

Mrs Wells started slightly, and he saw that her lips were tightly compressed as though she were keeping herself under control.

'That's Marilyn,' she said, but made no further comment, and for a while they ate in silence. Then she looked at him keenly, and he fancied the old suspicion had returned. He hastened to reassure her.

'I was just thinking,' he said, 'what a beautiful girl she is.'

A bitter smile crossed the woman's face.

'You think so? That's what Gino keeps reminding me, but that's only part of his interest in her.'

'This fellow Gino – he's bothering your daughter, is that it?'

Again, that twisted smile.

'You might say that,' she said slowly, 'and again, you might not.'

Ted retreated into silence. This cryptic dialogue was getting too confusing. He decided on a bold course of action.

'I can assure you,' he said, 'that I have no connection with this person. I'm just a stranded traveller, and she has nothing to fear from me. I should be delighted to make her acquaintance—'

Louise's reaction was unexpected. She rose quickly, the grim smile playing around her lips.

'Would you now?' she said. 'I wonder. Well, there's no chance of that – none whatever.'

Leaving her unfinished meal on the table, she made for the door.

Ted stared after her uncomfortably. His attempt at reassurance had misfired.

Presently, Mrs Wells returned, and her eyes looked wet.

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I'm sure you don't mean us any harm, Mr – er – Baxter, but there are some things it upsets me to talk about.'

She went on quickly:

'I'll make up a bed for you in the back room. You can see the road from there that'll lead you to the M40.'

She started to clear the table. She had evidently no intention of finishing her meal, and Ted had made short work of his.

Feeling pleasantly drowsy after the satisfying dish, he offered no objection when she suggested showing him to his room straight away.

As they passed across the landing on the first floor, he noticed a winding stair leading to what must be the turret.

'You must excuse the untidiness,' she said apologetically, and when she opened the door, he realized what she meant. Items of female clothing were flung about everywhere – a skirt on the floor, articles of underwear over the bed and the single wicker chair. Mrs Wells was picking them up and folding them quickly into some semblance of order. She bundled them into one of the drawers of a small chest at the back of the room. Then she took fresh sheets from another drawer and started to make up the narrow truckle bed.

From the window, Ted could make out the blurred streak of what must be the road that would lead him back to normality. He hoped devoutly that the night would pass quickly.

'My daughter sleeps upstairs,' Mrs Wells was explaining, 'but there's not much room for keeping things there.'

Ted could well believe it. This room was small enough; he reckoned the one above must be even smaller.

He noticed that the top of the chest of drawers served as a dressing table, equipped with standing mirror. Some magazines were piled on it, and what looked like a child's exercise book. A disquieting thought crossed his mind. Was the girl perhaps mentally retarded? That would account for Louise's reluctance to introduce her. But there was nothing retarded about the face in the photographs. On the contrary, it had looked thoughtful, intelligent.

He made a note to glance through that book when he was alone.

Mrs Wells finished making up the bed and stood for a moment in the doorway.

'The bathroom's just across the landing,' she indicated; then halfway through the door she paused, as though uncertain of what to say.

'Just one thing, Mr Baxter,' she went on, a little hesitantly. 'You mustn't be upset by anything you may hear in the night.'

He looked at her uneasily.

'My - daughter' - again, that slight hesitation. 'She's sometimes a little noisy.'

A cold chill went through him. Was she trying to tell him there was a maniac in the house?

He was still staring blankly as she retreated swiftly, closing the door behind her. Next moment he had darted across the room, and was rattling the handle and calling loudly: 'Mrs Wells!' Softly but unmistakably, he had heard the sound of a key turning in the lock.

She made no answer, and he heard her calling down the stairs. It sounded like: 'I'm coming - I'm coming!'

Once the first shock of her action had passed, he began to visualize a possible explanation of it. Was she locking him in for his own safety?

Presently steps sounded again on the stair - more than one person's, he was sure, and he heard a whispering on the landing. Then the sound of someone climbing the winding stair to the turret. He glanced upward a little apprehensively, and as he did so, heard the soft slithering of a key in the lock, and Mrs Wells' footsteps once more descending the stairs.

He turned the handle of the door. It opened easily. So it was a precaution on her part, to prevent him seeing the other occupant of the house. Was it really her daughter? he wondered. Or was the whole thing a ploy for the concealment of some wanted criminal? Perhaps that copy book might give him some hint of the nature of this peculiar household.

The cover drew his attention. A name was printed across the top in a childish scrawl. He felt relieved to see that the bluish crayon was faint and faded. It had evidently been written a long time ago. So he need not necessarily assume that the writer's mind was childish still? Yet there was something peculiar about the writing of that name.

Louise Wells had spoken of 'Marilyn'. But the name here was curiously divided, and appeared as 'Marie-Lynne'. He smiled. Some caprice of the child? Or perhaps the parents? Wasn't it common in some southern states of America for little girls to be called Elly-May or Lindy-Lou? So why not Marie-Lynne?

He ran through the pages quickly, but could find nothing of particular significance, except that exercises on how to write simple words like 'dog', 'cat' and 'jug' were invariably duplicated in slightly differing types of print.

Suddenly he started, nearly dropping the book in surprise as a sound reached his ears from the room above. Feminine voices, at first subdued, then rising to a tone of anger. *Two* people seemed to be talking together – shouting, in fact. He fancied he heard something about 'You shouldn't have thrown down that skirt. I wanted to wear it!' Then, equally indignantly: '*You* wanted to wear it!'

Then he heard Mrs Wells running quickly upstairs, and replaced the book guiltily. Now she was mounting the winding stair, calling out something in an angry tone. A confused babble answered her. Then all was quiet and he heard her descend the stairs again. After that there was no more disturbance from the turret room, and presently he heard his hostess come up to bed. Her room, he knew, must be the one facing the front of the house; it was the only other room the first floor seemed to possess.

He woke from a confused dream of lunatic shouts from the room above, to realize that the noise was coming from a different direction, and this time the voice was masculine. Someone was shouting in the hall below, loudly enough for the words to reach him.

'This is your last chance,' the man was bellowing. 'I don't want to make this a public matter, but I've as much right to her as you!'

Ted jumped out of bed and switched on the light, then started frantically to put on his top clothes.

The man's next words were in a quieter tone. It seemed he was trying to achieve his end by persuasion.

Ted went quickly to the door and opened it a fraction, buttoning up his jacket while he listened to the words of the man below.

'Be reasonable, Louise. Think what it will mean – we'd be in clover – her too! Do you think you're giving her a fair chance, cooped up here? There's hardly room to swing a cat. I've got a strong case, and the law would be on my side. You're not providing a decent life for the girl.'

'Girl!' Louise's tone was harsh, strident. 'What sort of a girl is she? My God, what are *you* offering her?'

Now the angry tone was back in his voice.

'The only life she can expect,' he shouted, 'and a very prosperous one, I can assure you. Why, she's unique – there's been nothing like her since Annabelle Grey. Gino's getting impatient, and I'm not throwing away a fortune for your squeamishness!'

Annabelle Grey? The name sounded vaguely familiar, in what connection he could not recall, but Ted had no time to dwell on that now.

Heavy footsteps sounded on the stairs.

'I'm coming to get her,' the man was saying, and he heard Louise's protests as she clambered up behind him. The steps passed across the landing, and Ted just had time to close the door quietly as the intruder went across to Louise's room. Finding no one there, he made for the back room, but Ted was ready for him.

He threw open the door again as the man – Mr Wells, evidently – was about to storm in, and Ted found himself confronted by a shortish, thickset man in a trilby hat pulled down rakishly on one side to give him a jaunty air. He had a greying moustache, and his face was blotched and reddened, by anger or alcohol – probably both, Ted guessed.

He stared at Ted in astonishment.

'What the devil!' he began, then stepped back uncertainly as he saw Ted's belligerent expression.

'Oh,' he shrugged, evidently deciding discretion was the best course, 'so you have a boy-friend, my dear. I hope he knows how to keep his mouth shut about family affairs!'

'He doesn't know any family affairs!' Louise retorted.

She was holding a red woollen dressing-gown round her, and her dark hair fell loosely about her shoulders.

Her husband nodded, smiling grimly.

'Very wise,' he commented, viewing Ted with a half-scared, half-suspicious look. 'See it stays that way!'

He seemed completely indifferent to his wife's presumed amours; he was evidently concerned with more pressing problems, at which Ted could only guess.

The man's eyes strayed towards the spiral stair, and he made a move towards it, but Ted blocked his path. The action was instinctive. He felt called upon to protect Louise from the unwelcome intruder.

'So that's the way it is?' observed Mr Wells. It was obvious he

had no wish to take on his wife's muscular companion. For all his bullying manner, he was clearly no hero. His blustering air was collapsing like a punctured balloon.

He backed away down the stairs, flashing a malicious glance at his wife from his rather protruding eyes.

'You'll be hearing more about this!' he warned. 'I know my rights, and the law will support me!'

They heard the door slam, and presently the sound of a car driving away along the road Ted had glimpsed from the window.

Louise laid a hand on his arm.

'I'm sorry,' she said, and he could see she was trembling. 'Thank you for your help. That was my husband, of course. We're separated. At least, I thought we were when he gave up the latchkey. But of course, I should have guessed, he'd had another one cut. He's sly, that one. Gino's a friend of his, and he wants—' She broke off, as though afraid she had said too much, then continued: 'I'm always so careful to put her in the cellar when anyone knocks. She can get out into the woods from there and hide away, if necessary. I thought we were safe, but I should have known. He's had his spies round here for a long time.'

Ted nodded sympathetically. He hoped she was going to enlighten him on the complexities of the situation, but at that moment an uproar started in the room above, and she glanced at him apprehensively.

'You'd better go back to your room,' she said. 'Would you mind? It's upset her now – I'd better go up!'

She ran up the winding stair, and Ted returned to his room, but his curiosity was becoming a torment. He listened with straining ears.

He heard Mrs Wells talking in a soothing voice, and fancied that an answering voice said: 'I want to go with him – I hate this house!' Then another, similar voice, crying bitterly: 'Oh no, Marie, no – no please!'

Long after he heard Louise return to her room, he sat pondering on what to make of this strange affair. Those two photos on the mantelpiece – the divided name. Twins perhaps – conjoined twins? He had seen two Indian girls once, joined at the base of the spine, and the sight had sickened him. But if this was the case, why had Louise referred to a 'daughter'? And Wells had spoken of 'she' not 'they'. Surely 'daughters' would have been

the more logical term? A thought struck him. Those clothes that Louise had been hurriedly putting out of sight: if they were meant to cover two united bodies, there should be some indication of it in their shape.

He pulled open the drawer and searched through its contents. Two or three flowered skirts, which he felt sure did not belong to Louise. They were in the short, florid styles favoured by teenagers. There were also some loosely made top garments which puzzled him slightly, but not being a connoisseur of women's fashions, he did not give them much thought.

Unable to find any clue to the mystery, he put the clothes back in the drawer and reached for his top coat. This house was too unsavoury to stay in a moment longer.

The pale light of early morning was filtering through the faded curtains. It would be a long walk to the motorway, but he knew now the direction he had to take.

He made his way quietly downstairs, pausing at the living-room door. Switching on the light, he tore a leaf from his pocket-book and scribbled a few words of thanks. After a moment's hesitation, he added his name and address. There might come a time, he felt, when Louise needed a friend. He slipped a five-pound note under the paper and left it on the table.

At the door he turned, for a last look at the two photos on the mantelpiece. They seemed to be mirror images of each other. Could the strange Marilyn or Marie-Lynne be one woman with a divided personality? Yet he had heard two voices speaking simultaneously – or so it seemed – but why must she be hidden away? A horrible possibility occurred to him. Could she be ravaged by disease – disfigured by some nightmare accident? He took a last look at the lovely pictured face and refused to admit the thought.

Then he left swiftly, switching off the light and closing the door quietly behind him.

He passed round the side of the house, and through the gate, where the link road ran diagonally before him. As he bent forward, huddling beneath his coat collar against the biting wind, two names kept running through his head. Marie-Lynne Wells – Annabelle Grey. He thought he remembered now where he had read about the latter.

It was three weeks later that he saw the picture splashed across

the front page of one of the more sensational dailies, and he recognized the woman at once. She must have been younger when that was taken, but there was no mistaking the face. Louise Wells looked out at him from the page.

He read the headline: 'Murder and suicide in lonely house.'

With a creeping foreboding, he bought the paper.

It was a lurid account, of how the estranged husband had returned to find his wife dead from an overdose of sleeping pills. She had left a note, telling him where to find their child. Maddeningly, the paper gave no full description of the child's appearance, except to say that the body was found in the cellar, stabbed to the heart. It hinted only that it was in some way abnormal, and the mother confessed to the murder, rather than have the child exhibited in 'Gino's Circus'.

Ted laid the paper on the table, and went to the bookshelf. He had avoided looking for the book before, dreading what he would see, but he remembered now where he had learned about Annabelle Grey. It was in *Man, Myth and Magic**, and if his memory was correct, it was in Volume Seven.

He drew out the heavy volume and turned to the section where the name occurred. Anna Belle Grey.

Now he understood the significance of Mr Wells' reference to her. 'Nothing like her since—'

Rare indeed Anna Belle must have been, and rare the daughter of that tragic house.

As he studied the picture of Anna Belle Grey, the memory of that other lovely face came back with startling vividness. Why should there not have been conflicting temperaments, opposing opinions?

The photograph showed a different face, of course, and the elegant hair style was outmoded. Anna Belle must have lived near the beginning of the century. But there was the same sombre look, the same grave acceptance of fate, that had characterised Marie-Lynne Wells.

The subject was shown naked to the waist, and seated. A rug was thrown over the lap, beneath which two shapely legs were visible. Arms, shoulders and breasts were perfectly formed, and a well-manicured hand rested lightly on each thigh. It was only

* Published by Purnell.

towards the top of the torso that abnormalities became apparent; a small, smooth protruberance in the centre, suggesting a vestigial third breast, and a broadness of the shoulder region caused by the necessity of supporting, in perfect symmetry, the two slender necks with their delicate-featured, *identical* heads.

Jane Louie

Dr Dichter and the terminal cosmetic

Dr Melrose Dichter's wife was one of the most beautiful women in Beverly Hills. Bearing in mind that this particular area of Los Angeles was noted for its disproportionately high quota of stunning female flesh, this was no mean accolade. She was five feet seven inches tall with honey blonde hair that tumbled to her waist and a figure so perfect that men would bump into lamp posts or drive their cars up on the sidewalk just to get a longer look at her. Her skin was permanently tanned, but not to that extreme, leathery condition that so many of her contemporaries mistook for chic. It was golden, with a slight sheen that came from massage with perfumed oils and regular, though not strenuous exercise. When she walked, her rear view made strong men whimper and beautiful women weep silently with envy. The twin globes of her buttocks performed a rhythmic, primeval movement that Dr Dichter himself had once described as 'liquid poetry'.

Her face, devoid of make-up, was oval and the perfect blue eyes set in a complexion that was unmarred by even the smallest imperfection. Her name was Olga and she was twenty-seven years old.

Dr Dichter had married her when she had been only eighteen and he fifty. The match had caused no great stir in the area. Old men were frequently taking child brides, it was part of the Los Angeles syndrome – instant youth-sex-prestige-satisfaction. Dr Dichter had never been married before, his work as a plastic surgeon had taken all of his attention and energy and by the time he had reached the peak of his profession the years had simply rattled by. He first saw Olga in a coffee shop on Rodeo Drive, sipping coke from a frosted glass and gazing enviously at the peacock parade of rich and famous people parking their limos prior to shopping in the dazzling array of luxury stores that lined the street.

She was wearing cut-off Levis, dirty sandals and a baggy sweat-

shirt. Her hair, which was the colour of mouse-droppings, stuck out from her scalp like a housemaid's mop. Her blue eyes were cross and her thick peasant's lips forced into a pout by the yellowing, buck-rabbit's teeth that protruded horizontally from her misshapen gums.

Dr Dichter had parked his Rolls-Royce convertible in front of the coffee shop and gazed at this totally unlovely creature with more than usual interest. She had strong, square shoulders and a straight back. Her chin, though a trifle rococo was at least reasonably symmetrical. Generally she struck Dichter as being sound of wind and limb, a healthy, flesh-draped skeleton that might serve his professional purposes admirably.

Smiling his most debonair consulting-room smile, he approached her table and drew up a chair.

'Forgive the presumption,' he said amiably, 'but I am Dr Melrose Dichter of Bel Air. I am, as it so transpires, the world's foremost cosmetic surgeon, medical journals rave over my work. I have redesigned more than a score of senators' noses and demand for my artistry, in the breast and buttock area, has reached Carthaginian proportions. Film actresses and television millionaires jostle for the privilege of feeling my scalpel bite into their subcutaneous tissues. I am, in short, a celebrity myself.'

The girl glanced up from the ruins of her Danish pastry.

'So what else is new?' she mumbled.

Dichter crossed one immaculately trousered leg over the other.

'Your defensive sarcasm does you credit,' he said, snapping his fingers in the direction of a waitress.

'Too many women in this overblown town are ready, nay even willing, to succumb to the predatory blandishments of the first jack-adventurer who chances across their path. I, however, am not importuning you with a view to instant fornication. Not for me the limpid clasp of mindless lust. I reach for more esoteric goals. Will you, if I may so phrase it, consider marrying me?'

'I might,' she said. 'It depends what's in it for me.'

Dichter nodded sagely. 'Wise beyond your years, I see,' he riposted. 'But let me elaborate. If you consent to be my wife, I shall make you the most beautiful woman in the universe. Not only that, you shall have fine clothes, servants, opulent limousines, jewellery, perfumes drained from the scent glands of nearly

extinct animals that only roam the craggy heights of Hindustan, and your own personal American Express card.'

'You're very persuasive,' she said, suddenly demure. 'And I accept.'

Dichter leant across and kissed her chastely on the forehead.

'That is a decision,' he said, 'that you will not regret. Now that we are engaged so to speak, may I presume to cup my hand over your left breast – purely for medicinal purposes I hasten to add?'

She hesitated for a moment and then nodded.

'As your betrothed I cannot deny you the right to slake your unbridled lusts in whatever way you see fit. May I suggest, however, a full scale grope in my modest apartment on Sunset Boulevard? We could open a bottle of cheap red wine.'

'I'll hear of no such compromising,' cried Dichter, overwhelmed by a bout of tumescence.

'If our lewd coupling is to be accompanied by anything at all, it will be a Dom Perignon '69 and possibly some wafer-thin biscuits heaped with rare Iranian caviar flown in clandestinely from that strife-torn country by a half-mad Irish pilot who happens to be in my employ.'

'Done,' she said, rising sensuously.

And so it was. They were married a month later in Las Vegas and honeymooned in the Caribbean. These traditional formalities disposed of, Dichter then settled down to re-designing his willing bride into the dream creature he had so long craved to possess.

He lowered her cheekbones by two centimetres. He drew out all her front teeth and replaced them with perfect plastic ones that gleamed whiter than snow. He tightened her breasts and increased their size with silicon injections. He shaved the crêpe-like fat from her thighs and transformed them into columns of firm golden flesh. He re-tucked her buttocks. He dyed her hair. He rounded off her shoulders and he flattened her belly.

After nearly three years of intensive surgery Dichter declared himself satisfied with the work and Olga was allowed to view the results in a full length mirror. Metamorphosis is too inadequate a word to describe what Olga saw in her own reflection. It was as if a total stranger had invaded her body and taken possession of flesh, limbs, hair and teeth.

The goddess, for such she now was, stood motionless before the mirror drinking in the sleek hips, the silken skin, the flawless face.

It was as pure a moment of ecstasy as any human being could reasonably expect to enjoy in an entire lifetime.

A week later Dichter launched her into Los Angeles society with a substantial flourish. He booked the whole of the Beverly Hills Hotel for the occasion and issued gold-edged invitations to a glittering array of luminaries and doyens of the movie business.

Carol Channing was there, and Peter Sellers, not to mention Jimmy Stewart, Raquel Welch, Jane Fonda and Richard Burton. Representatives of several international newspapers were also present and had been earlier granted the privilege of meeting Olga at a special press reception prior to the banquet. They all dined off gold plate and consumed vintage wines flown in from Paris.

Not a single soul demurred from the general opinion that Olga Dichter was the most beautiful woman in the world.

During the months that followed Olga's confidence and personality blossomed with lightning speed. No longer the gauche, ungainly girl-child, she became self-assured, imperious, and above all, voluble.

Her vocabulary, while not elaborate, was in constant use. She talked incessantly to Dr Dichter, subjecting him to a hailstorm of cheery words from the moment she woke up until the moment when her head hit the pillow last thing at night.

When he sought refuge in his surgery, tucking the occasional limpid abdomen, or remodelling the odd mottled buttock, Olga compensated for his absence by using the telephone. She held long, vigorous, one-sided conversations with her hairdresser, her tennis coach, her fortune teller, her lawyer, her interior decorator, her landscape gardener and, occasionally, an unfrocked cardinal from Dubrovnik who now wrote gourmet recipes for Bel Air hostesses.

She invited sixty people round for coffee and croissants and spoke almost without drawing breath for two hours and fourteen minutes. She gave pool parties where the only escape from her Niagara of words was for guests to remain underwater in the swimming pool with rubber nuggets jammed in their ears.

Dichter bore all this with patience and fortitude. That is, up until the time Olga began talking in her sleep.

The occasional nocturnal mumble he could have endured, even the sporadic stringing together of a complete sentence would

scarcely have taxed his equilibrium. Eight-hour monologues conducted at full volume seven nights a week were something else altogether.

The talking began to haunt him. He imagined he could hear her voice even when he was a hundred miles away performing a nipple transplant at a remote but luxurious ranch in the Nevada Desert.

He lost weight. His usually trim figure sagged and a small tic developed under his left eye. He tried slipping tranquillizers into her late-night glass of vitamin-drenched milk, but it was of no avail.

He tried bullying. He yelled at her but she simply yelled back – only several decibels louder. Neighbours began to complain. The sound of Olga's ceaseless chatter was like a pneumatic drill. Writs were served, lawyers enriched and families broken up.

The holocaust of words continued for three full months until Dr Dichter, a one-hundred-and-thirty-pound gibbering ninny, decided upon a drastic solution. It was, he convinced himself, a merciful way out. She was still when all was said and done the most beautiful woman in the universe and his enjoyment of her physical charms only diminished by the debilitated condition into which her volcanic gabbling had so cruelly cast him.

On a Thursday at midnight during one of her Wagnerian-style monologues about the parlous state of the nail varnish industry he applied a particularly powerful sleeping draught to her raspberry and ginseng low-fat milk shake.

To his intense relief she went down like a felled telegraph pole and he was able to carry her inert body into his stylishly decorated Italian-motif operating theatre.

Eight hours later when she awoke she was aware of a cathedral-like calm. She lay in the luxury of their four-poster bed, bolstered by silk cushions crammed with swansdown.

Dichter lay beside her in his black satin karate-type pyjamas, a dreamy smile creasing his sunken cheeks. He held a mother-of-pearl hand mirror in front of her so that she might see the result of his nocturnal surgery.

Her eyes bulged at the vision she beheld. Across her face, from left to right, was a pink and white zipper that sealed off her mouth as tightly as a locked suitcase.

Speech was impossible, all she could manage was a pathetic

snort and a few silent tears. Dichter kissed her on the cheek and whispered fondly in her ear.

‘Don’t fret yourself my precious one. It’s for your own good. And as for food and drink? No problem at all, if you would like to pull back the sheets you will observe that I have arranged a feeding orifice in a *most* unusual location. Now dear one, what would you like for breakfast? One nod for porridge, two nods for grapefruit segments and three nods for hot molasses!’

Gregory Alexander

Foster parents

Old Ned Sanderson gouged his finger into the eye socket of the sheep's skull and tested the tenderness of its brain. It was firm and hot having boiled for twenty minutes in a pan of cabbage water. He withdrew his hand and sucked the finger.

'It's all ready now, Daisy Lou,' he called out suddenly, his voice like rivets sliding over a tin tray. A hundred feet from where he sat a sacking curtain was pulled back from the doorway of a crude log cabin and a woman appeared. She was thick and squat with burnished leather features and shortcropped hair. Canteloupe breasts pushed against the faded print dress that hung raggedly at her knees and she clenched a clay pipe in the corner of her mouth from which white smoke curled.

Ned beckoned impatiently with a bony hand. 'I ain't waitin' on you no more, Daisy Lou, this here food won't stay hot all day. And bring yo'self a knife for the scrapings. Sure is too good for wastin' even a mouthful.'

The woman joined him at the small woodfire he had built and squatted down on her haunches.

'Where you get this here sheep, Ned? You bin thieving down in the valley while I's bin shucking peas?'

Ned shook his head slowly and pulled the sheep's head out of the boiling water with his thumb and forefinger.

'Sure is hot as hell,' he chuckled, rolling it onto a tin plate. Daisy Lou sniffed and removed the clay pipe from her mouth.

'Smells good,' she admitted, running her tongue over her lips. Ned picked up a small hammer with a scarred, rusty head and smashed open the sheep skull. The animal's brain burst out like a flowering sea anemone and covered the plate. They ate in silence, using their fingers and a penknife that Daisy Lou had salvaged from her dead sister's belongings ten years ago at the funeral.

Ned was only forty but a life of poverty and hardship had reduced his body to a permanent skeletal stoop. His face was

cracked and fissured from decades of sun and the once blond hair now only a fuzz of dirty grey.

Like most mountain folk, he and Daisy Lou kept themselves to themselves. They were society's forgotten souls, isolated, shy, inbred, grindingly poor and pathologically suspicious of strangers.

Had they been urban blacks, instead of hillbilly whites, the media trendies and their television camp followers would have urged upon a reluctant nation some form of compulsory welfare for these reclusive misfits. Lacking the glamour of the 'fashionable' oppressed, they were instead ignored, even shunned by the rest of their fellows.

Ned was one of eight children, six of whom had died at birth. Daisy Lou was the seventh daughter of a family of sixteen who had never even known their father. Ned and Daisy Lou had married at fourteen and lived ever since in a wooden shack under the lip of Old Bluey, a towering mountain peak that reached down from its craggy eminence into the valley of the Stokehold Quarry. The quarry was exhausted now of its grainy stone, stripped and scraped over five decades by quarrymen who sold it in great slabs to builders who made fireplaces from it to grace the mansions of Long Island in New York.

In those days Ned had managed to get casual work dragging stone and shovelling sand. Daisy Lou had hitched her skirt for a hundred or more sweating quarrymen and when finally she was with child, she aborted it herself, not out of shame, but out of economic necessity. What they didn't need was another mouth to feed. Whether the dead child was Ned's or any one of the labourers' who had used her was of supreme indifference to all concerned. Since then Daisy Lou had been barren and they took that as a great blessing, for a while at least. As she approached the age of forty Daisy Lou was given to daydreaming, mooning about outside the shack nursing a bundle of old rags to her breast and crooning to it as if for all the world it was a bawling nipper. Ned ignored her when she took on these moods. There was no harm in it after all, and he was too occupied with scraping enough food together each day to keep them marginally ahead of malnutrition. Daisy Lou, however, found she could supplement her potato and beetroot diet with snakes, fat juicy beetles and occasionally a whole raw rabbit.

Ned, who was more fastidious, preferred nuts and berries to keep him going, except of course when he could cut the head off a sheep that had fallen into the ravine and was trapped between the rocks. Today, therefore, was a special treat. Boiled sheep's brains and a few black-eyed peas.

When the feast was done Ned belched appreciatively and stretched on the flat earth.

'Sure was a treat,' he murmured, closing his eyes. Daisy Lou picked up the fragments of sheep skull and sucked off the last tenacious chunks of brain that still clung to it. Finally satisfied, she sank down next to her husband and promptly fell asleep.

An hour passed and the sun moved over the top of Old Bluey, throwing cold shadows on to the sleeping couple. Ned stirred, his ribs standing out like a xylophone as he stretched and yawned. The fire was low, but still burning. Suddenly he sat upright, his head cocked and listening like an animal. Daisy Lou opened an eye and then propped herself on an elbow.

'What's up, Ned?' she asked drowsily. Ned made a hush with his eyes and continued listening. After a few seconds Daisy Lou could hear it too, plain as a bell. It was the sound of a baby crying.

'What in hell's name—' began Ned, but Daisy Lou was already on her feet and scrambling towards the direction from which the plaintive sounds emanated. Ned shrugged and followed her, the sheep's brains sitting heavy and comforting in his gut. Daisy Lou had disappeared behind the log cabin and was crouching over a natural recess in the blue-black volcanic granite. As he approached she placed a finger to her lips, warning him to make caution. He drew level with her and peered over her shoulder. What he saw made him suck in a gasp of astonishment. Nestling in the saucer-like recess was a naked boy-child, his tiny limbs flailing as he gave vent to his yells of newborn life.

'Where in heck did *he* come from?' whispered Ned, genuinely awestruck.

Daisy Lou slipped her big hands under the child's body and raised it to her bosom. All at once his crying stopped and his mouth sought voraciously for her nipple. She turned away from Ned and loosened the tie-strings on her dress.

'No nourishment here, little man,' she crooned, 'but you can take comfort.'

'Where'd he come from?' demanded Ned again, taking a pace

towards his wife. She threw him a withering glance over her shoulder.

'Keep yo' voice down. Little man here having his feed.' Ned sniffed disapprovingly.

'How long afore he cottons on to you bein' empty as last year's bean barrel?'

'Soon enough,' said Daisy Lou, rocking the child gently. 'Now you go and see if there's anythin' left over from our meal, y'hear?'

Ned shook his head slowly.

'You taken leave o' yo' senses, woman. Little critter cayn't eat no sheep's brain – besides, you wolfed it all. Ain't nothin' left. Not a scrap.'

Daisy Lou turned and brushed past her husband. 'All he needs is a scrapin',' she said.

There was a tiny puddle of gravy left in the tin dish by the fire and she scooped it up with her finger.

'Here, child,' she whispered, 'git this down yo'.' The baby sucked happily at her finger and kicked his tiny limbs.

'Y'see,' she announced triumphantly, 'he's takin' it.' Ned pulled out his clay pipe and started scooping out the encrusted tobacco.

'Best wrap him up in somethin' warm, folks'll be along soon to claim him.'

Daisy Lou looked up sharply, her eyes narrowing. 'Ain't nobody goin' to claim him,' she said. 'Folks just left him. It's a mercy we was to hand, little man coulda died. Easy.'

Ned lit the pipe with a glowing wood splinter from the fire. 'You mustn't talk that way, Daisy Lou,' he said. 'You know you cayn't jus' keep a child. He's gotta go back to where he come from. That's natural.'

'Oh?' said Daisy Lou. 'And where do he come from? You tell me that, Ned Sanderson!'

Ned shrugged. 'Aw come on, Daisy Lou. You ain't talking sense. You ain't aimin' on keeping the critter. We goin' take him down the valley. Give him to the sheriff. Maybe we get some money for him. A reward. Think on it, Daisy Lou. We ain't got five dollar b'tween us. We could do with a few bucks.'

Daisy Lou shook her head firmly.

'Ain't givin' him to no sheriff. Not now. Not anytime. He's my child Ned, and I's keepin' him.'

Ned's protests failed to move her and he eventually fell silent, surrendering to her stubborn will.

As the shadows lengthened they withdrew into the log cabin and Ned lit the old stove with a bundle of sticks. Daisy Lou made a crib for the child out of a pile of sacking and laid him gently on to it.

'He's so pretty,' she murmured kneeling over him. 'Where'd you s'pose he come from Ned?'

Ned sucked hard on his pipe. 'If you ask me,' he said slowly, 'he jus' fell outa the sky.'

A month later nobody had climbed up Old Bluey to demand the return of the child. Daisy Lou spent every waking moment with him, making a rough diaper from her own cotton dress and feeding him on crushed nuts mixed with the juice of berries. He seemed to thrive prodigiously, growing bigger and stronger by the day. Ned was resigned. He didn't actually dislike the child but there was something unsettling about the effect it had on Daisy Lou. She was in a dream world of her own, chattering and crooning from dawn till dusk. He scolded her once when he found her feeding the child beetles but she ignored his rebuke.

'He likes 'em,' she said fiercely, 'and you know what else, Ned Sanderson? Yes'day I found him chomping on a worm, that's what.'

Ned pulled a face. 'Little critter's pickin' up yo' habits, Daisy Lou, he'll git stomick cramp it he goes on with that sort of stuff.'

But the child didn't get stomach cramp. He grew bigger and firmer and more vigorous. At six months he was walking and Daisy Lou had to watch him carefully in case he staggered off into a ravine. His appetite for worms and beetles grew stronger and soon he was scampering after his prey with amazing agility, rummaging under stones and behind crevices to seek out the most succulent specimens. At nine months he looked like a two year old with sturdy limbs and a mane of tawny gold hair. It was then that Ned began to have serious misgivings. To begin with the little critter wouldn't keep his clothes on, preferring to rip them off with powerful young fingers and scamper naked on the rocks. He had also developed an amazing facility for catching snakes, hunting them out of the most unlikely places and then biting their heads

off. He'd bring them back to Daisy Lou who'd skin them and feed him on the sliced up carcasses.

'Tain't natural,' said Ned, watching the child swallowing the raw chunks of snake meat. 'Tain't natural at all.'

Exactly a year after they had found the child he fell sick. At first Daisy Lou thought it was a mild fever, his brow was moist and burning and he was tossing in his wooden bed, but soon his convulsions became erratic and he started howling and biting down on his lip. As Daisy Lou tried to comfort him, she picked him up and held him to her chest. Ned, who was watching from the far side of the cabin, took his pipe out of his mouth and pointed.

'Kid's got a sore back,' he said matter-of-factly. 'That's why he's hollering.'

Daisy Lou turned the child gently and looked at him. Ned was right, there were two vivid purple marks over his shoulder blades – long narrow bruises that ran from his neck to his waist.

'How the heck did he get those?' said Ned, frowning.

Daisy Lou shook her head. 'Don't know. Musta fallen, I guess. They look real sore. I best heat some water and bathe them.'

The next day the bruises had swollen into ten-inch raised weals and were darker in colour, almost black. Daisy Lou was distraught. 'My baby's dyin',' she sobbed. 'What are we goin' to do, Ned?'

Ned, who had been studying the child, looked up at his wife. 'Somethin' inside there tryin' to get out,' he said suddenly.

'What?' cried Daisy Lou. 'You crazy or somethin'?' Ned shook his head.

'Don't reckon so, Daisy Lou. Here, take a close peek. See there's somethin' forcin' its way under his skin. Look now – it's moving – wriggling away like I don't know what.'

Daisy Lou screamed and grabbed the child and her hands touched the swollen weals on his back.

'He's dyin',' she moaned, 'my baby's dyin'.'

Suddenly she felt the child's skin under her left hand stretch and split and she fell back in a swoon. Ned, who was sitting a foot away, reached out and caught the child before it could hit the floor. He turned it over on its stomach and looked at its back. Both weals were burst open but there was no blood. The flesh had

parted like two mouths and then Ned saw what was inside trying to force its way out.

'Daisy Lou,' he yelled. 'Git yo'self together, woman, and come and see this. I ain't gonna believe it unless you says you can see it too!'

Daisy Lou stirred and sat up, her face streaked with tears. The baby was sprawled motionless across her husband's lap not uttering a sound.

'C'mon, hurry,' hissed Ned, his eyes goggling at what he saw. Fearfully Daisy Lou crawled across the floor towards him. The two wounds on the child's shoulder blades gaped wide and from deep inside his body a pair of damp, folded wings were emerging. The feathers lay pressed against the fine frame of bones and they were a rich gold in colour. As they forced their way out they began to open with a slow, flexing motion. The feathers rippled and the jointed section extended itself, like a man stretching after a long sleep.

Daisy Lou's eyes were as wide as saucers but she couldn't say a word. When the wings were fully clear of the child's back they spread completely, a magnificent golden-feathered span of four feet. The child gave a sudden twist and knelt up, his little face gleaming.

'Holy Jesu,' said Ned, almost unconsciously. Daisy Lou tried to reach out for her child but the effort was too much for her and she collapsed again in a dead faint.

Ned sat on a jutting lip of rock high up on Old Bluey, his sheepskin jacket buttoned tightly around his throat. His face had fleshed out, covering the cheekbones, and his eyes were bright, glowing with the health of a man who ate well and often. He shielded them with his hand and looked up towards the sun. Across the valley on a neighbouring peak he could see the familiar, swooping movement, no more than a speck at first, and then a distinct shape that made his heart leap with anticipation. Seconds later there came a great beating of wings and a huge naked figure swept overhead clutching something white and bloody in its arms. It landed gracefully on a flat promontory of rock and smiled at Ned. The wingspan was almost twelve feet across and sat majestically on the broad, muscular back. Ned smiled proudly in acknowledgement. The boy grew more hand-

some every day. Only fifteen years old and yet he had the body of a mature athlete. The boy squatted on his haunches and threw his prey towards Ned; it was a sheep with its throat bitten out. Fresh blood still trickled over the boy's chin and down on to his barrel chest.

'You did well,' said Ned, touching the warm carcass with his fingers.

'Is there any more?'

The boy stood upright and spread his wings, the muscles of his torso rippling under the deeply tanned skin. He took off in an elegant arabesque and slowly circled the peak before plunging down towards the valley on a swirling current of air. Minutes later he had returned with a brace of rabbits and deposited them on Ned's lap.

Daisy Lou paused from stirring the huge cauldron of stew. Her boy was resting now and she could never resist looking at him when he was asleep. The lower half of his body was covered by a luxurious rug of furs and his wings were folded neatly towards the wall of the cabin. He lay on his right side and one sinewy arm hung over the edge of the bed. The floor of the cabin was carpeted with sheepskins and an oil burner illuminated the room with a soft warm glow.

Ned was counting dollar bills from a metal box and was having difficulty with numbers above twenty. Had he been literate he would have been amazed to realize that the box already contained a thousand and forty dollars. After the pantomime of counting he turned to Daisy Lou and grinned.

'We've got more'n twenty dollars here. Soon be enough to git us some brick-built place down in the valley.' Daisy Lou relit her clay pipe and sucked thoughtfully. 'Ain't goin' down to live in no valley,' she said, 'no place to raise that boy. He needs space and air. We best stay on the mountain. You jus' go down on yo' own and sell the skins and come back again like always. We're mountain folk and tain't natural to chop and change, Ned Sanderson, d'you hear?' Ned smiled and nodded.

'Yeah, Daisy Lou. Whatever you say.'

When the snows came Ned was unable to go down to the valley and trade the skins for oil and tobacco but he was quite content.

They had plenty of meat salted and packed into barrels and enough raw liquor to see them through the winter. The boy still hunted every day and occasionally returned with a goat and once with a small mountain lion. Daisy Lou skinned the lion and made a coat for herself. It was a really handsome garment, trimmed with the soft fur from the lion's belly.

The boy sat for hours in the corner of the cabin, happily preening his feathers, content to drink Daisy Lou's bean soup and gnaw the occasional raw rabbit she had saved from the summer.

Spring came, melting the mountain snow, and through the harsh flinty earth tiny flowers blossomed. Ned resumed his weekly trek down to the valley where he sold skins, smoked rich black tobacco and got drunk on expensive whisky.

Daisy Lou cleaned the cabin and packed away their warm winter clothes. Spring was a good time, with clear blue skies; she enjoyed watching the boy soaring off above the peaks free as air, his gorgeous wings spreading like an angel as he rode the mountain currents.

The men came in July. Twelve of them in cowhide trousers and wide-brimmed hats. The leader was a brute with a mouthful of gold teeth and a gnarled, aggressive face. All of them carried shotguns slung across their shoulders. Ned was out on the crag waiting for the boy and Daisy Lou was all alone.

She had an instinctive mistrust of strangers, especially folk from the valley, and this bunch exuded hostility and menace. The man with the gnarled face spat a jet of tobacco juice on to the ground.

'OK, woman,' he rasped, 'where you hidin' her?' Daisy Lou's expression remained blank.

'Don't know what you's clucking about, mister, I ain't hidin' nobody.'

The man took a pace forward and let his shotgun swing forward off his shoulder.

'No time for games, woman. We know she gotta be shackled up here someplace and this is the only cabin for three miles.'

Daisy Lou sniffed disapprovingly, although inside she was terrified. These men were in an ugly mood and she'd enough lynching parties in her life to know they weren't here for a picnic.

'S'pose you tells me *who* you's lookin' for,' she said firmly, holding her ground.

The man clicked the safety catch forward on his gun and lowered the barrel until it was level with Daisy Lou's chest. 'Little Miss Betty from Garson's Saddlery. She bin kidnapped, took up with some mountain boy and ain't bin seen in the valley for nigh on three days and she a deaf mute an' all.' Daisy Lou took out her pipe and wiped it on her dress.

'That so, mister? Well she ain't here. You can look.'

The man glanced at his colleagues and then pushed past Daisy Lou towards the cabin. The rest shuffled their feet, trying to avoid Daisy Lou's blazing eyes. After a minute the man reappeared, looking puzzled. 'Empty,' he said. 'Let's go.'

The men began shuffling off and their leader pointed a horny finger at Daisy Lou. 'You hear me, woman. You see hide or hair of little Miss Betty and you better run down the valley and tell folks. Some says she bin snatched by a eagle. Carried off an' eaten. We knows better than that, we reckon she shacked up with some frisky mountain boy. Well, if we catch the feller, we goin' to stretch his goddam neck so far he'll end up like a thanksgiving turkey.'

The men filed off with much hawking and spitting and soon the crunch of their boots had faded down the valley and was lost to the wind. Daisy Lou smiled a secret smile to herself and went back into the cabin.

Old Ned Sanderson died that summer in his sleep and Daisy Lou buried him herself in a shallow grave behind the cabin. The boy watched her silently, his wings folded over his back, his eyes bright with wonder. When it was done she stood up and brushed the dust from her dress.

'OK, son,' she said softly. 'You kin show me now. Ain't no purpose in hiding it no more.'

The boy cocked his head at the sound of her familiar voice and rose up from the rock where he was squatting.

Daisy Lou followed him over the crags to a lonely, windy place where the rock was black with age and no flowers grew.

The girl was in a huge nest of twigs and moss, her slim body covered in a cloak of furs. She had big pale eyes the colour of cornflower and a mane of hair that tumbled almost to her waist. Her nails had grown long and filthy and her face was tanned to a coppery hue.

When she saw the boy she smiled and her whole expression lit up with unspoken joy. He went over and touched her cheek with great tenderness. The floor of the nest was strewn with the carcasses of rabbits and a small store of beechnuts.

When she saw Daisy Lou, the girl clung to the boy and whimpered but he calmed her with soft purring sounds from his tongue. As she moved against him, Daisy Lou could see the big shiny egg she was straddling. It was the size of a football and flecked with brownish spots. Daisy Lou smiled. She may have lost her husband but the good Lord had not deserted her. In a few weeks at most he was going to provide her with a blessed grand-child.

She sighed contentedly and turned back into the wind. The sun was going down now and she'd best return to the cabin and start shucking peas.

Rosemary Timperley

A backwards shadow

At first she gave hardly a thought to the child upstairs. She'd hear the little footsteps run across the other side of her ceiling from time to time, and presumed that one day she'd see the child and its parents.

Recently widowed, she had only just moved into this ground floor bed-sit and had not met any of the other tenants of the house. From her window, she'd glimpsed a couple of young men setting off to work at different times in the morning, and another young man drive away on a motorbike, but she was too busy sorting herself out in her new quarters and accustoming herself to her new loneliness to bother much about anyone else.

As the days passed, however, it did dawn on her that although she heard that child's footsteps in the room above, she never heard its voice on the stairs or in the hall. Usually children made a certain amount of noise, but this one was exceptionally quiet. She had heard a woman's voice – presumably the mother's, as there was apparently no other woman in the house except herself – and the voices of the men sometimes as they went in and out.

Through studying the names on the row of bells outside the front door, and noticing post which arrived, she gradually identified her fellow-tenants. The two young men who went out early to work and had bed-sits at the back of the house were Mr Grey and Mr Blake, and the couple above her head were Mr and Mrs Lambert. Mr Lambert was the one with the motorbike. Sometimes his wife went with him on the pillion. Other times she set off alone, on foot. Obviously they both went to work, so there must be someone else up there to look after the child. And as she never saw anyone arrive early in the morning, it would be someone who lived in. But who? The person never made a sound, any more than the child did – except for its footsteps. That nanny or baby-sitter or whatever never went out and never took the child out. No one took the child out. Why not? Was it deformed in some

way and were they ashamed of it? She shivered at the thought of that.

More time passed and she became convinced gradually that there was no one in that upstairs flat during the daytime except the child. Those callous young parents simply went out to work all day and left the child alone. It was not only cruel but dangerous. Suppose the poor little thing had an accident. Children were always falling about on their unaccustomed legs. And what did it do with itself all day? How did it get itself anything to eat? A boy or girl of nine, ten, eleven might be all right alone, but the footsteps were those of a much younger child – four or five.

One afternoon, when she'd come in from shopping, the house seemed to be silent with emptiness, until she heard the child's footsteps. They were quicker than usual. There was a note of panic in them. The child was afraid! She could tell!

Deciding suddenly that she had ignored this unhappy situation for far too long, she went upstairs and stood outside the door of the Lamberts' flat. She listened. No sound of movement now. Oh, dear, had the child been alarmed by the sound of her own footsteps coming up, then stopping at the door? Was the poor little soul standing still in there, petrified with fear?

She tapped very gently on the door. 'Hello,' she said. 'I'm Mrs Murray, the lady who lives downstairs. I know you're alone, and I'm alone too, so if you'll let me in we could make friends.'

Silence. And no wonder. She cursed herself for a fool. No doubt the parents had instructed the child never to let anyone in. By trying to 'do good', she was only making things worse.

'Oh, I'm sorry if I've scared you,' she said now. 'I didn't mean to. We must meet properly one day, when your parents are here.' She went downstairs again, being deliberately noisy, so that the child would know she'd gone. No sooner was she back in her room again than the child's footsteps sounded overhead. And there was still that panicky, trapped sound about them.

Perhaps if she introduced herself to the mother, they could come to some arrangement by which she could keep the child company for part of the day. It seemed like a good idea, so she kept her eye on the window at about the time when Mrs Lambert usually returned from work and, when she saw the young woman walking up the path, she went into the hall and met her accidentally-on-purpose as she let herself in.

'Oh, hello,' the girl said, smiling. 'You're Mrs Murray, aren't you? I'm Mrs Lambert. Quite absurd that we haven't met before but life in these houses of flats and bed-sits is like that, and my husband and I are out so much. How do you do,' and she held out her hand.

They shook hands and, unexpectedly, Mrs Murray found herself liking young Mrs Lambert. But that just showed that you can't go by appearances. She didn't look the type to leave her offspring alone all day, yet that was what she did.

Feeling very much the interfering neighbour, yet determined to be so, she said, 'Mrs Lambert, doesn't your little boy, or girl, get lonely up there?'

'My little boy or girl? We haven't any kids, worst luck. Wish we had. We're still trying.'

'But I hear the child's footsteps above my room.'

'That's our living-room, Mrs Murray. There's no child there.'

'I happen to know that there is. I'm not deaf.'

The other woman looked at her with uneasiness. 'You're mistaken, honestly. It must be some other sound that you hear. The water system makes some clonking noises sometimes.'

'I hear a child's footsteps.' She would not give in.

'Have you been ill?' Mrs Lambert asked now.

'No. Why?'

'Oh – fever – delirium – imagining things—'

'I have imagined nothing and – and I'm sorry to be intrusive, but I think it's wrong of you to leave your child alone day after day—'

'Come up with me now. I'll show you the flat. You'll see that it's empty.'

She followed Mrs Lambert up the stairs. The other let them into the flat. The living-room was neat and undisturbed. 'Look in the other rooms if you like, Mrs Murray. There's no child here.'

She did look into the other rooms.

No child was there.

Apologizing, she went downstairs again. She sat down, feeling faint and covered her face with her hands. For if there was no living child in that upstairs room, whose were the footsteps that she heard?

An idea came to her, bringing some relief with it: This house was semi-detached. Surely it was possible therefore that sounds

might carry from the other 'half' of the place. Yes – maybe there was a child next door and, when the house was quiet, it was him or her that she heard. Next day she made inquiries. She called next door and asked: 'Please, does a child live here? I have some sweets I don't want and—'

The woman who had opened the door interrupted her: 'No, dear. No kids here. Nice of you to offer, all the same.' And that was that. Sadly, she ate the little bag of sweets she'd bought as an excuse to ask about a child. And when she got home again, she heard the child's footsteps. They were unmistakable. Also she heard them the next day, and the next day, and the next.

The day after that was Saturday and the landlord called to collect the rents, as it was the end of the month. When he was in her room, she hoped that the footsteps would sound, then she could ask if he heard them too. But the only sounds from overhead were quiet, adult movements – probably Mrs Lambert dusting and tidying.

Before the landlord left, she asked him in a tone of casual interest: 'Has there ever been a child in the flat above my head?'

He looked surprised at the question, then answered: 'Goodness knows. Certainly not in my time. But no doubt in the old days, before the house was converted, it would have been owned by one family, and there'd probably have been children. Why?'

'I just wondered,' she said feebly and wished she hadn't asked. She hoped now that Mrs Lambert wouldn't tell the landlord about 'that weird Mrs Murray hearing footsteps'. She feared being thought mad – even if she was. No – especially if she was! But I'm not mad, she told herself. I hear what I hear. It's not me that's crazy. It's this house that's haunted!

More time passed. She heard the footsteps nearly every day, in the afternoons, and often they had a trapped, panicky sound. Or was that her own imagination – because she herself felt trapped and panicky? Maybe, she brooded, I *am* going through some minor mental illness, a reaction to the shock of my husband's death and my unaccustomed loneliness.

She decided that she must leave this house and began serious room-hunting. Accommodation was scarce but she trudged the streets, looking at noticeboards in newsagents' windows; scanned advertisement columns in newspapers; applied for bed-sitters, only to find that they had just been taken, and so on. Then, at last,

she did find another room, in a distant neighbourhood, and she moved.

As soon as she'd moved into her new digs she began to feel better. At first, neurotically, she listened for footsteps, but heard none. So they couldn't have been only in her head after all. They *had* belonged to that frightening house. Maybe some poor little soul had come to grief there years ago and she, in her sensitive, vulnerable state, had caught vibrations from the past. She could think of no other explanation. She had been haunted by some ghostly shadow of a child.

It was about five years later that she had to return to her former neighbourhood to make a business call, and afterwards, on impulse, she went to take a look at the 'haunted house'.

When she arrived, she received a shock, for there had been a recent fire. The top part of the front of the building was blackened and ruined, as if waiting for builders to come and restore it. As she stood staring in dismay, one of her previous fellow-tenants came out: young Mr Grey, although not quite so young any more.

He was about to pass her, then stopped. 'It's Mrs Murray, isn't it? I suppose you read about the fire in the papers and came to see if it was true.'

She shook her head. 'No, I hadn't read about it. What happened?'

'No one knows exactly. Faulty electric wiring, maybe. Or some matches left lying around while the little boy—'

'What little boy?'

'Oh, of course, you wouldn't know. The Lamberts had a baby a few months after you left. A boy. She stopped work and stayed at home to look after him. She never left him alone, except on that one afternoon. She and her husband were expecting guests in the evening. She'd done the necessary shopping in the morning, taking the boy with her, as usual. But she forgot the wine. So, in the afternoon, she left the child alone in the flat while she slipped up the road to the off-licence. It shouldn't have taken her more than five minutes, but when she got there the place was closed for decoration, so she belted down to the main shopping centre. That, of course, took a deal longer, and when she came home again she saw flames in her living-room window.'

He pointed to the ruined upper floor front.

'She let herself in, tore up the stairs, but was driven back by fire

on the landing. When she ran out of the house again, her clothes were alight. A man who was passing threw her to the ground and crushed out the flames. She's in hospital now with shock and burns. The fire brigade came, but by that time the boy was dead.'

'And there wasn't anyone else in the house?'

'Ironically, there was. An old lady on her own was living in the room you used to have. She'd heard the child's footsteps running backwards and forwards, but then she was accustomed to hearing them, and as she didn't know that Mrs Lambert had gone out, she just thought the mother and son were playing a noisy game. By the time she did smell smoke, Mrs Lambert was back and everything was panic and chaos.'

Distressedly, he shook his head. 'My God, Mrs Murray, people never know what the future holds in store, do they?'

'Never,' whispered Mrs Murray, white-lipped, 'but sometimes the future casts – a backwards shadow.'

W. S. Rearden

Chance governs all

Chance governs all: keep casting still
Nor ever let kind hope forsake you;
Just where you least expect he will,
a fish may take you.

— Ovid

Yesterday I returned from the funeral of Joseph O'Connor.

He was buried in his village churchyard, and half the county were there, including two very old men of his regiment, the disbanded Royal Munster Fusiliers.

The memory of twenty-five years ago came back with vivid clarity as I looked at a distant gravestone that was on its own, markedly separate from all the others, as if it was on unholy ground.

I felt again the shiver of awful fear that I had experienced years ago.

Norah O'Connor, who stood beside me and saw where I had looked, put her hand on my arm and whispered, 'He is at peace now, Colonel ... Never again.'

Joe and Norah had visited me often over the intervening years, I was told of the changes that had taken place. The river had been diverted to flow into the big one and then into the Shannon. A motorway had been built to bypass the village. Fishermen still came, but they fished elsewhere; otherwise life was tranquil.

Had I not felt it my duty, because of my regard for those two, to attend Joe's funeral, I would not have put my face within twenty miles of the place.

It was on my return home that I sorted out the notes I had made of my visit all those years ago, and in the reading I felt again the chilling atmosphere that had surrounded me then. Looking back with hindsight I told myself it was not true. That the Korean war

I had unhinged me to allow this impossible thing to happen to me ... but I knew I was wrong ... it did happen.

It was a beautiful evening in May 1953. I saw the bridge across the river as I rounded a bend; and about two hundred yards ahead was the pub. It was on my left and stood back a bit from the road.

There were a few cars parked, some traps with horses feeding in their nosebags, a few motorcycles and some push bikes.

I parked; took out my suitcase and locked the car. A buzz of talk came through the open windows. The name above the lintel read Joseph O'Connor. I pushed open the door and walked in.

It was as if a radio had been switched off. There was a silence. Everybody was staring at me. Behind the bar were a man and a woman.

The man leaning on the bar was a big, broad-shouldered powerful fellow. I judged him to be in his early sixties, and I wouldn't have liked to have tangled with him. He stood up as I approached. I am six foot two inches and I reckoned I topped him by two inches.

I had experienced this silent reception before. They thought I was an Englishman, so I scotched that idea at once.

'Mr O'Connor?' I said.

He nodded, 'I am.' He had a smile on his face.

'My name is O'Malley. I'm from Limerick,' I began. He interrupted me.

'I thought you might be. I had your letter a few days ago, and a phone call from Dr Fallon of Tralee. He told me you were the son of a very dear friend of his, the late Sir Thadeus O'Malley.'

'Yes ... Dr Fallon recommended this house to me for the comfort, the food and the fishing.'

'I don't think you will be disappointed in any of them. Welcome to the house.' He stuck out a hand that appeared to be as big as a dinner plate, and I shook it.

'Norah,' he said, turning to the woman beside him, 'meet Colonel Sir William O'Malley ... Colonel, my wife.'

Norah O'Connor was a slim attractive woman with dark brown hair cut short just below the ears and the lines on her face were laugh lines, not age. She took my hand in both of hers. 'As my husband said, welcome to this house.' There was no more silence

in the bar; on the contrary, the buzz of talk and laughter, if anything, grew louder.

I glanced around. All of them were looking at us, smiling and raising their glasses. I began to feel embarrassed.

'Come,' said Norah. 'We'll talk elsewhere.'

Joe took down a bottle of whiskey from the shelf and called out to a man collecting glasses. 'Tim, please look after the bar. We could be a little time.'

We went into a cosy back room. There were several military photographs on a wall, and I excused myself to look at them: various battalions and companies of the Royal Munster Fusiliers, and one of the First Battalion of the Connaught Rangers.

On the mantel shelf was a glass-fronted case containing the campaign medals of the 1914/18 War preceded by the Distinguished Conduct Medal and the Military Medal. Of the few photographs on the mantel one was of Joe standing beside a tall rangy looking man. They were both in regimentals, not khaki. The tall fellow was grinning at the camera. He had a hard striking face. I pointed to him and said to Joe, 'This fellow looks a tough customer.'

'He was, sir.' He pointed to the photograph of the First Battalion Connaught Rangers on the wall. 'He is in that picture there. This one was taken just before the war. We lay alongside the Connicks on the Currogh for a time, and we had that picture taken. He was the finest fisherman and poacher in the whole of Ireland . . . his name is Sean O'Sullivan and we were brought up together in this village.'

I looked at the picture again. 'Is he alive?'

Joe shook his head. 'No, he was killed.' He spoke quietly, with his head down, pouring whiskey into the glasses. Because he said no more, I had the feeling I was treading on delicate ground, so I walked to the table saying, 'I had a salmon in the car that would do for this house.' I fetched it in and laid it in its greaseproof wrapping on the floor.

Norah undid the paper and we all looked at it. 'We can do with this. The run hasn't really started yet,' she said. 'What does it weigh, colonel?'

'It's a fifteen-pound cock. I caught it the day before yesterday. It has firmed up now. I hope we can have some for dinner tonight.'

She laughed. 'We will. I'll call you when it's ready.' She left the room carrying the fish and calling for somebody called Mary.

We sat down. I looked at Joe with some concern. 'Norah says there has been a run.'

'It has been so,' said Joe. 'When I heard you were coming I asked Pat Conroy – he's the bailiff from below the bridge to the sea – to keep his eyes open and report any movement of fish to me. He came this evening shortly before you arrived, saying that fish were moving just below the bend. That's about three quarters of a mile below the bridge. So you could not have come at a better time. They'll be fresh fish . . . so, tight lines!' He tossed his drink back and replenished the glasses.

'You have left the army for good now I believe?' asked Joe.

'Yes,' I replied. 'Writing is my living now. I've had a hard stint in Korea and I am glad to be out of it. I was the war correspondent for an American news syndicate. There are no words to describe those awful winters there.'

'I know,' said Joe, 'we read your dispatches. We get the American papers from Shannon.'

'Well, Joe,' I said. 'You know of me. But I am sick of war. Let us change the subject and talk of pleasanter things.' And we talked of nothing but fishing and the characters he had met, who had stayed at his house. The whiskey was very low in the bottle when Norah came into the room. She looked at Joe and she looked at the level of the whiskey in the bottle.

'You wouldn't be spoiling the colonel's dinner, darling,' she said, winking at me.

Joe got up and put his arm around her. 'No, Machushla,' he said. 'But I haven't enjoyed a drink and a talk like this for a very long time.'

After dinner I walked down to the bridge and looked upstream. The water glistened in the moonlight. The river had a steady flow which was ideal; and about two hundred yards up I saw water breaking over what appeared to be a sunken rock. That, I thought, is a taking place, and where I shall start tomorrow.

I looked downstream where Joe had told me fish had been seen moving. It did not appeal to me after having seen that whirl of water above. I decided to start at the rock pool first.

The river was about thirty yards wide, high banked on both sides. There was a path running along both sides of the water's

edge and in some places the reeds had been cleared. Grazing fields ran up to both banks. There was a clearance opposite the sunken rock; an ideal landing place.

It meant fishing the left bank. The side you fish, facing downstream. It was the far bank from the pub and the going looked easier through the field.

After breakfast I left for the river with the permit and licence that Joe had made out for me. I estimated the distance to my chosen spot, climbed the bank, looked down and saw that I was right on it; but to my great disappointment, somebody was already fishing it.

Etiquette demanded I should go elsewhere, but something held me there. I climbed down and took position about fifteen feet to his left. He said nothing; there was something about the place and the man that held me back from speech. The silence was uncanny. I felt my back hair begin to prickle and a coldness seemed to envelop me. I shivered, but paid no attention to the man.

Because of the high bank behind him, he was Spey casting with the longest greenheart rod I have ever seen, and the greased line I could see floating on the water looked as thick as window cord. The trace attached to it was a long one and from what I could make out, the lure was a black and silver thing, but after retrieving, he was moving it too fast for me to recognize. That rod would have crippled me if I had had to use it for an hour, let alone a day, but the man was a master with it, he was beautiful to watch.

I took stock of him. He was wearing dirty gumboots, one of them split with his toes sticking out, khaki trousers tied up with rope, a grey army-type shirt, collarless, a red scarf tied in a knot round his neck. His waterproof jacket, open down the front, seemed to be all pockets and there were a lot of holes in it . . . but it was his hat that was the eyecatcher. It had a black peak and was made of grey woolly material. It had a few flies stuck in it and it finished in a point with a green pompom attached. It sounds comic, but it went with the man . . . and he was far from comic.

He stood a good six feet, long and rangy. It was when he turned his head and looked at me that I saw him properly for the first time. It was a narrow Norman face, hard and bitter looking. The grey of his eyes was reflected in its grey pallor.

He had started retrieving line, still looking at me, when

suddenly his rod top bent. His eyes lit up. He held the retrieved line for a second before letting go. It ran through the rings. Then he struck. He was into the fish. He lifted his rod which now curved like a bow. I looked at my watch. It was 9.30 a.m.

The fish went upstream for fifty or sixty yards, and then jumped. It seemed to stand on its tail and shake its head; then it went for the reeds on the opposite bank and he put side pressure on it to get it away. It jumped again. Then it lay on the bottom and sulked. The man kept a tight line on it and waited. It came out of the water like a rocket, shaking its head again, plunging back and going downstream like an express train. The man was furiously winding in the slack, but it was fifty yards below him before he was in contact again.

The fish was now moving about in midstream. It was tiring. The man started to reel it in, but the fish dived to the bottom and began boring. The rod top was moving gently up and down. The fish was trying to rub the hook out of its mouth on a stone, but the man was having none of that. He locked his reel and exerted heavy pressure; with the tackle he was using he could afford to do it, though there was the risk that he could pull the hook out.

He brought the fish into the bank, but when it saw him it plunged back into deep water again. He then played it right out and brought it into the shallows. I unhitched my net to help him, but he looked at me in such a way that I stopped. He shortened his rod, tucking the upper part under his right arm, his left hand pulling the fish in by the trace. He dropped the rod, stepped into the water and tailed the fish.

It was a beauty: a cock fish that had lost one eye by being foul hooked or fighting, and it must have weighed over twenty pounds.

‘Caught in the scissors,’ I said. He lifted his head for a moment, gave me a cold hard stare, but not a word of reply; then he pulled the hook out of the hard gristle at the end of the fish’s mouth. He took the priest out of his pocket and did what was necessary. The fish quivered and died.

There was no hurry in any of his movements. He tied a stout piece of cord round the tail, making a loop to carry it, wound up his line, fixing the lure in the small ring above the butt, picked up the fish and then looked at me.

‘You are from England?’ I nodded. His voice came to me in a whisper. ‘When do you return?’

'I catch the evening plane from Shannon the day after tomorrow,' I replied. And that was all. He turned, and with rod and fish, just walked away.

The bank was steep but from the way he moved it might have been a flat road. He disappeared over the top.

I looked at my watch, it was two minutes to ten. He had had that fish on for twenty-five minutes.

I stared at the river and the broken water over the rock. It's no good fishing this now, I thought. It will be a little time before another one takes his place in that hole.

Also, I felt strange and cold and a little apprehensive, though I could not put a finger on what was troubling me. The conditions were perfect – not too bright, thanks to the cloud cover – but I wanted to get away from the place.

I climbed the bank. There was no sight of the man. I mentally tossed up whether to go up or down and finally decided to take Joe's advice and fish below the bridge.

I was into one within a few minutes of starting. He was heavy. I had him on for about five minutes. Then the fly came away. The barb had gone, snapped off. I knew I had not hit a stone. It must have gone into the hard bony structure of the mouth and with his last frantic plunge and the line held too tight, it had broken off.

'Damn, what a day,' I said aloud. 'The queer fellow up the top there must have put a jinx on me. In any case it was my fault – I should have let the fish go.'

I must have walked as far as the bend, the place Joe had mentioned, where the river swung to the left before I had my first take: a five pound grilse. It was then two o'clock. I sat down, had my sandwiches and promptly went to sleep.

I woke with a start and with the feeling that the queer fellow had been peering at me from the bushes. I looked at my watch – it had gone six o'clock. I shivered and glanced around me. Everything looked normal. I saw a salmon head and tailing in mid-stream. A short time earlier I would have been after him, but now I had no interest.

The place was giving me the horrors and I made up my mind to clear out in the morning. I packed up my gear and walked back across the fields.

The pub was quite busy when I got there. I was greeted by hand clapping when they saw the fish, which I gave to Joe.

'Well, that's a start, sir,' he said, holding the fish up.

'And the finish,' I snapped. He looked at me, startled at my tone.

'Forgive me, Joe.' I spoke quietly this time. 'I had no intention to be rude to you but I have had an experience today that I don't want to repeat.' I told him of my meeting with the strange character by the rock stand at 9.30 that morning. I had every feature of the man in my mind's eye as I talked.

Joe's face had gone white, and the look on it was one of fear and pity. His wife was sobbing quietly; he put his arm round her and she buried her face in his chest.

'May the Lord have mercy,' he said. 'That was Sean O'Sullivan you saw.' The cheerful chatter in the bar had stopped. I looked round. They were all staring at me. Then in ones and twos they got up; making the sign of the Cross as they walked out.

I stood by the bar. Then I said, 'Can you please tell me what this is all about?'

The bar had emptied except for Tim, Joe's assistant, who stood at the end of the counter looking distressed.

Joe had recovered his colour but his face was grim. He was muttering to himself. Norah with tears on her cheeks, took my hand and led me to the back room. Joe followed. We sat down. Joe poured out three glasses of whiskey. I tossed mine straight off. Joe did the same. He filled the glasses again. Norah took a drink, shuddered, and put the glass down.

'We all needed that,' she said. She turned to her husband. 'We must tell the colonel about Sean.'

'I will,' he said. 'But I am thinking . . . in this case, how it can be stopped.'

'How can what be stopped?' I asked.

'I'll be coming to that later,' he said.

'This whole business goes back to the war, and the troubles in this country after it. Sean was two years older than me; we were boys and young men together. He was bright. He learnt fast. But after leaving school he would not work. He spent most of his time fishing and poaching. We were both as wild as hares in those days. It got so bad that after a raid on the bacon store in the

big house, we were recognized and we had to run for it. The police were after us and the only safe place was the army. This was in 1907. I joined the Royal Munster Fusiliers. Sean the Connaught Rangers. The Connicks, as we called them in the army.

'In 1914 he was in the retreat from Mons. He was wounded on the Aisne and sent home. He was patched up and sent out again in 1916. We met up opposite Guillemont when the Irish Division went into the attack. He was wounded in the head there; and I believe that was the cause of his subsequent behaviour. In 1918 he was sent out again. His young brother Michael was with him this time and a week before the Armistice, Mike got a bad wound in the stomach. He was a year convalescing. Sean got through safely.'

Joe got up to get another bottle. I must confess I had a feeling of dread because of the concern these two showed for me. I knew that something had to come. And that something I felt would be terrifying. Joe returned.

'How old was this young brother?' I asked.

'Mike was twenty-five then,' said Joe. 'He joined the Connicks in 1911 to be with Sean. Sean was very fond of him. In 1919 Sean was honourably discharged and a week later so was I. We had both served twelve years. He came to the village and lived with his mother. Norah lived there too. Sean's mother was Norah's grandmother. But that has nothing to do with what I am telling you.

'The troubles had started up again in 1919. Sinn Fein tried to get us involved with them. We turned them down. We knew who they were, but they knew we would not inform. Then in 1920 Mike, Sean's brother, came home on leave and told us he had passed his medical. That he was being sent out with other replacements to the First Battalion at Jullundur, India. Sean was angry. He wrote a strong letter to the depot commandant saying that though his brother had been passed fit for service, this should apply only for the home countries. He had had a very bad stomach wound and had lost quite a lot of his insides, and India was the last place he should be, with the climate and the food.

'Sean had a very conciliatory letter back, saying they understood the situation and they were cancelling the posting. He was delighted he was able to do something about it. But a few weeks

later he had a letter from Mike, from Jullundur. He was there after all! Sean was furious.'

'I was eleven years old then,' said Norah, 'and I heard him say to Joe, "If anything happens to that brother of mine, I'll tear this country apart."'

'But things happened over there that put Mike's case on the shelf,' said Joe. 'The First Battalion Connaught Rangers mutinied. Their incoming mail was being censored. What did get through was exaggerated stories of what the Black and Tans and Auxiliaries were doing in their country – and they blew up. The revolt was quelled and the ringleaders court-martialled. I don't know whether it was one or two executed but the rest were sentenced to various terms of imprisonment.

'This made Sean more bitter than ever. "I could have been there," he said to me, "if I had signed on as they asked me to. I soldiered with a lot of those men. Battles and blood – and they treat us like that." He was getting dangerous and I could not placate him.

'At the end of August 1920 a telegram came to Mrs O'Sullivan. It was from the British War Office and it said that with regret they had to inform her that her son Private Michael O'Sullivan had died of sickness in Jullundur, that a letter would be following and so on.'

'That was when Sean turned bad,' said Norah. 'We didn't see him for three days. When he did come home, although I was only a girl at the time, I could see a terrible change in him. He reminded me of a picture I had seen of the Devil. I was frightened of him. And that was the last time I saw him alive.'

I sat up with a jerk. 'Alive? Alive?' I said. 'What on earth are you getting at?' I felt my back hair begin to prickle again, as it did on the river. She laid her hand gently on mine. 'Let Joe tell you – it won't be long now.'

Joe took up the story. 'On a Sunday morning he came to my house and asked me to walk with him. He said the English were going to pay for this, for the battalion and his brother. He had seen Hennesey, the Sinn Fein area commander. He had joined up with them. He swore he would shoot every damned Englishman he could get in his sights. I could only listen. He was a bad man to cross. "If they get me," he said, "I'll come back from the grave and get them." He was mad with hate.

'Within a week we knew he was in action. Flying columns of Crossley Tenders were charging all over the area; police barracks blown up with mortar fire, used by an expert. Tans and Auxiliaries ambushed and slaughtered. The big house completely destroyed, the owner, a man of seventy-five, a retired English stockbroker, shot on his own doorstep. Sean did that.

'Michael Collins is reported to have said that if he had ten Sean O'Sullivans he would have the English on their knees within the year.

'Then on the 14 May 1921, in the early hours of the morning, he knocked me up. I was angry and frightened when I saw him. I asked him didn't he know the consequences to me if it was known I was harbouring a man with a price on his head. He ignored that. He knew I could not betray him. "I've come to do some fishing," he said. "I want to fish that rock stand - I've been told there is a big fellow in that hole. Let me have some old clothes of your father and that hat with the black peak and the green pompom. You have still got my old rod and tackle. I'll go down below and come up under the bridge."

'He did just that. It was gone nine o'clock when I strolled down to the bridge. I couldn't see him but I saw the flash as his line hit water ... I was returning when I saw two Crossley Yenders approaching. They were free wheeling and packed with Auxiliary Police, all fully armed.

'They jumped out; there was no talking. I asked the officer in charge, "What's going on, sir?" "You will see shortly," he replied. "I should get inside if I were you. It could be dangerous."

'He walked off with his men towards the bridge. Some of them had taken position under hedges and in doorways. I watched six of them climb into the field by the near bank; others crouched under the wall of the bridge or disappeared into the far field. God help him, I thought. He's informed upon. There's no doubt of that. It was nearly 9.30 a.m.

'The only person in the road, bar the police, was myself. There was hardly a sound in the village.

'Then just before ten o'clock there was a volley of fire, and, a few seconds later, shooting from the far field. Two RIC men from the barracks up the road came running, carrying a stretcher. Presently they brought Sean's body and laid it on the grass verge

by the church. They also brought his rod and a fish. The fish had only one eye.

'The rest of the police were still in position with the exception of the shooting parties. They were leaning on their rifles, looking at the body. Their CO spoke to me. "I know you, Sgt O'Connor. You two were friends in the past," and he pointed to the body.

'I nodded. "Yes, sir."

"I knew him too," the officer continued. "He was in my battalion, a first class soldier. We knew why he turned. It was mostly our fault. I hated doing this, but it was him or us. I let him land that fish before we opened up." He pointed to the fish. "You take it."

'I shook my head. "No, sir, it will be buried with him unless you want it." He shook his head and they all returned to their vehicles.

'And that, Sir William, is how Sean O'Sullivan died. He is buried in the churchyard, with that fish beside him. A one-eyed fish that weighed 25 lb.'

I got up and walked about the room. I was trying to line up my feelings. 'Are you telling me that the character I stood a few feet away from for over twenty-five minutes was a ghost? That it was a ghost I watched hook, play and land a large salmon? Damn it,' I shouted. 'He spoke to me.' I sat down and glared at them.

They looked at me for several moments with concern on their faces.

Then Norah said, 'Would you recognize any of the clothing if you saw it again?'

'Certainly I would,' I said.

'Then follow me.' She took me upstairs to a small box room. In the corner was a large trunk. She opened it. Lying on top of a heap of old clothing was a hat with a black peak and a green pompom. Underneath was a waterproof jacket that seemed to be all pockets and full of holes. Round the holes were dark brown stains.

Norah took the articles out and shut the trunk. 'Do you recognize these?' she asked.

I looked at them and I was numbed. I had felt fear in war, but then the adrenaline flows and you go. This time a wave of horror came over me that I could not put aside.

'Joe took these away after they had cleaned him up,' she said. She led the way downstairs and laid the articles on the table. 'These must be burnt tonight,' she said firmly, looking at her husband.

'They will be,' he said quietly. 'Now, colonel. You saw Sean. It was him. It is something that is not talked about in these parts, for he must materialize from Hell; that is where he must be. This is the seventh time he has appeared since May 1921.'

'What are the consequences?' I asked.

Joe was silent for a few moments.

'Look, sir – the previous six meant the death of six Englishmen. Three were drowned in the pool, two died in car accidents, and one was found dead from a heart attack, on top of the bank. The heart attack one must have been immediate.'

'And I am to expect it then?'

'No, no,' he said. 'Things don't add up. You are an Irishman and he wouldn't destroy his own people. Tell me again what he said and what you said.'

'He said, "Are you from England?"'

Joe seized on this. 'He didn't say "Are you an Englishman?"'

'No,' I answered. 'He asked if I was from England.'

'And what did you say?'

'I said yes.'

'Then what did he say?'

'"When do you return?" I told him I was catching the evening plane from Shannon the day after tomorrow. That was all: because then he picked up his gear and flew up the bank. I then went down stream fishing. I fell asleep on the bank for at least four hours. I woke up startled and, quite frankly, frightened. I had the odd feeling he was watching me. I made up my mind to leave in the morning.'

Joe spoke sharply. 'You will not leave in the morning. Indeed you will not leave this house for four days, not even to cross the road. And I want your promise on that.'

Norah was as emphatic as he was. I promised.

I got up, thanked them, went to my room and sat on the bed thinking. There was a knock on the door. Joe came in. 'You will do what I said, won't you sir?'

'Yes, I will, Joe. I promise that.'

'Shall I get you something to eat?'

I shook my head. 'I'm bushed. It's been rather too much.'

He smiled, patted my shoulder and left.

I stayed in my room reading and jotting down notes of Joe's remarkable story.

After dinner on the second day I went down and joined them in the bar. It had just gone ten o'clock. The radio at the back of the bar was tuned on to some quiet music. Suddenly the music stopped and the announcer said in English, 'This is a news flash.' Norah turned the sound up. 'News has just come in that the Luft-Hansa plane from Shannon bound for London and Frankfurt has crashed on the Pembroke coast. The first reports say there are no survivors. The passengers were mostly German citizens and their families returning to Germany. There were some English passengers as well. That is the end of the bulletin.'

It was the plane I should have been on.

Joe reached over and touched my hand. 'You are safe now. But we have two more days to go and we won't risk anything.'

I nodded agreement and went to bed.

On the morning of the fifth day, Joe came to me and led me to the churchyard. He pointed out a stone that was separate from all the others. It read: 'Sean O'Sullivan, Born 14 May 1888. Died 14 May 1921. Aged 33 years. May the Lord have mercy on him.'

'The anniversary of his birth and death,' said Joe.

I said goodbye to them both.

'I don't think we shall be seeing you again in these parts,' said Joe.

I gripped his hand hard. 'You will not. I've had a bellyfull of horrors.'

I drove away. I decided not to go by plane but to motor to Dublin, then take the ferry and train to London. And I did just that. All the way I pondered on Ovid's (the old Latin poet) 'Chance Governs All'. Alter one factor and you alter the lot.

Did that plane crash because I had told Sean I would be on it? Or, if I had been on it, would it perhaps not have crashed at all?

Alex White

The dogs

She came up the long drive, dragging her feet wearily, and Ian watched her come. She had her head down, and hand clapped to her old felt hat, to keep it on in the fierce wind.

As she came nearer, he saw that she was a woman of about fifty, with a red, weatherbeaten face, and when she finally reached the front door, and he stared at her through the window, he could see that she had streaks of grey in her dark hair, bright blue eyes, a tight-lipped mouth, and a strong chin.

She was standing upright now, but one roughened hand still held the battered hat in place, and her fingernails were dirty. She wore an old mackintosh, unbuttoned over a shapeless brown tweed suit, with a skirt uneven at the hem, and her shoes were worn and cheap.

Who was she? Why had she come to him? Why were there no dogs about to prevent her?

She pressed the door bell, and the sound jangled through the house so fiercely that, although he had been expecting it, he was startled.

He hesitated, then went to the door, reluctantly.

Damn Jamie! He'd taken all the dogs walking at the same time! Lazy devil! He'd been told not to, time and time again, but he had disobeyed! 'Always leave one of the dogs behind to guard the place, Jamie,' Ian had told him. But no, he had taken them all as usual!

Ian was in his sixties. He was tall and lean, and rather precious. In an effeminate way, he was attractive. He was a writer and a scholar, and he enjoyed living alone in this old house, so far away from anywhere.

Jamie was his only companion, and Jamie would be leaving soon to take a job on his uncle's farm some twenty miles away.

Ian opened the door, and the woman looked at him slyly. He

was immediately repelled, and when she spoke in a high, whining, self-pitying voice, he liked her even less.

She wasn't Scottish. Her voice was accented, but he wasn't sure from where she came. Ireland? London? He disliked both the Irish and the English equally, and he frowned.

The woman saw the frown, and said ingratiatingly, 'Can you help me, sir? I'm tired and hungry, and I need a rest.'

'Why come to me?' he asked.

'I saw the house from the road.'

'Where have you come from?'

'London.'

'How did you get here, for heaven's sake?'

'The coach stopped for petrol, some way back. I got out to stretch my legs, and it started again without me.'

'Why didn't you shout for it to stop?'

'I couldn't, sir. I'd gone behind some bushes,' she said, and smirked.

The smirk irritated him, and he replied brusquely, 'I don't believe a word of it.'

'It's true, sir.'

They stared at each other in some hostility, then she continued in the whine that he so disliked, 'It's cold, sir. If you please, sir, I'd like to come in.'

He didn't know why, but he stood aside, and she stepped into the hall. 'It's a beautiful place you have here, sir. Do you live here all alone?'

He divined at once that she already knew; had been making inquiries before she came. 'No,' he said, 'I don't.'

'May I see the kitchen, sir?'

'Why?'

'I'd like a look, sir. I'm dying for a hot drink, sir. Tea, perhaps, or coffee, if you'd be so kind. Of course I will make it for myself.'

He didn't answer, but led the way to the kitchen, his feet clattering angrily down the stone passage.

When they reached the kitchen, she made for the nearest chair, and sat in it, shivering. 'It's a wicked day, sir. Shouldn't be surprised if it snowed quite soon.'

He jerked up his head. 'You'll have to find your way back to the village before the storm, then. I can't keep you here. Where were you proposing to go, in that bus?'

'Up there,' she said, vaguely. 'Up north. Scotland.'

'You're in Scotland.'

'Yes.'

'Why Scotland?'

'Sorrow, sir.'

'Sorrow?'

'Me 'usband died, sir.' She suddenly became more Cockney. 'The name is Martha, sir. Martha O'Leary.'

'You're Irish, then?'

'Irish father. Cockney mother.'

For some reason this confirmation of his earlier surmise pleased Ian inordinately. 'You can make tea for the two of us,' he said expansively. 'No, for three. Jamie will be back with the dogs soon.'

'Dogs?'

'Five Alsations.'

He thought she looked scared, but she didn't reply, and busied herself making the tea. He didn't tell her where the things were, but she seemed at home in a kitchen, and soon found what she was looking for.

'You're warm in here,' she said admiringly. 'Central heating?'

'Yes.'

'A fine kitchen, sir.'

'Thanks.'

'A lovely house, sir. Beautiful.'

'Thanks.'

She discovered a tray, and put the tea things on it, then put the tray on the kitchen table. 'Do we have tea in here, sir?' she asked.

'Of course. Where else?'

'Yes. Of course.'

The back door opened, and Jamie came in, with one Alsatian at his heels. The dog growled on seeing Martha, and his hackles rose. 'Down, Roger! Down!' said Jamie soothingly. 'Quiet, boy. Easy, lad!'

He looked inquiringly at Ian. 'Company?' he asked, surprised.

'She's lost her way, and she's cold, so she's having some tea,' said Ian.

Jamie looked at Martha with disfavour, then he jerked his head towards Ian, and said, as though Martha were deaf and couldn't answer for herself, 'Where's she from?'

'London, she says,' replied Ian.

'It'll be snowing soon,' said Jamie. 'She'd best away before the storm.'

'Just what I said,' agreed Ian.

'How will we get her away?'

'Your motorbike?'

'She'll be bloody cold.'

'I can't help that. She chose to come here, and my car is being serviced at the garage, as you know.'

'Aye, I ken that fine. Drink up, lass, and we'll be going.'

Martha looked from one to the other, then suddenly she began groaning and rolling her eyes. 'Oh, the pain of it! Oh, Mary Mother of God, the pain in me chest! Oh, me chest! Oh, the pain! Help me! Help me! It's the horrors, that it is.'

'What's the matter?' asked Ian, impatiently.

'It's me chest,' said Martha. 'I have the devil of a time with it sometimes.'

'If the pain is that bad, the sooner you get to see a doctor, the better,' said Ian, drily. 'Jamie is ready to take you.'

'Oh, me arms! Oh, me legs!' She tried to rise, but fell back dramatically in the chair. 'I can't move, sir, and that's the truth!'

'You'll have to,' said Ian.

'I can't, sir, as the good Lord is my witness.'

'You can't stay here,' said Ian angrily.

Martha continued moaning, and for good measure started pulling wildly at her hair. She dislodged the dirty hat, which fell on the floor. 'Mary Mother of God, the pain of it! Dear Jesus, the pain! Again she tried to get up, and again she fell back. Ian and Jamie exchanged looks, and the sky outside grew steadily darker. Martha, though continuing with her lamentations, was watching them keenly from under her grey-streaked fringe.

Jamie tapped his foot. 'Come on now,' he said. 'Away with us before the storm is on us.'

'You'll have to lift me,' said Martha. 'I can't walk. Me legs! Me legs! Oh, sir, have pity on me legs!'

'Stop acting!' exclaimed Ian. 'We all know there's nothing wrong with you.'

Martha moaned on.

'OK,' said Ian. 'You'd better do as she says, Jamie, and carry her to your bike. Hurry!'

The woman shrieked, and Jamie said, 'I can no carry her screeching all the way into town.'

'Once she's on the bike, she'll have to shut up or get killed,' said Ian. Jamie picked Martha up, and she waved her arms, still screaming her head off. He put her down again. 'With her kicking and making yon disturbance,' he said, 'it's no possible, and I'll no do it.'

Snowflakes hurled themselves at the windows, melting at the contact with the glass.

'What'll we do? The storm may last for days.'

'Oh, sir!' exclaimed the woman, eagerly. 'I'd work for you! I'm a good cook, and a good cleaner, and for the while the storm lasts I'd want no pay; only food and shelter.'

'If you're as ill as you make out, you won't be much good at working,' said Ian.

'It's an attack,' said the woman. 'It'll pass.' She huddled in the chair, and began swaying backwards and forwards, moaning, but softly now.

'There's no a thing we can do, except call the poliss,' said Jamie.

'No, no, we don't want the police,' said Ian, and he sounded alarmed.

The woman darted a look at him, but by the time he had turned back to look at her her eyes were shut, as she rocked herself to and fro.

The men then left the kitchen, and Martha strained her ears to hear where they were, and if they were talking about her. When they hadn't returned for several minutes, she cautiously got up, and began washing up the tea things.

The storm raged for three hours, and by the time it had blown itself out, and Ian and Jamie were back with her again, she had scrubbed the kitchen floor, tidied the room, and polished the Welsh dresser.

'I hope you didn't mind, sir?' she asked Ian coyly. 'I shouldn't a done it, I know, but the place needed a bit of a clean, and I like working.'

Ian considered her. The room certainly looked good, and when Jamie went in a few days' time he'd need someone to do a bit of the work. People were hard to get these days in an out-of-the-way place like this, and he wouldn't like just anyone. When he went to America, he'd need someone to take care of the dogs. He wasn't

prepared to put them in kennels. It would be a boon to have the house cared for, at the same time.

He patted Roger, who was lying in front of the stove with his head on his paws, watching him, and the dog wagged his tail.

‘Are you good with dogs?’ he asked.

Again the woman looked startled. ‘Dogs?’ she asked. ‘Why?’

‘Jamie is leaving here to work at his uncle’s farm, and I may have to go away for a few weeks. Could you look after them?’

She had gone very pale, and her face suddenly looked pinched. ‘If I had to,’ she said, ‘I’d do it.’

‘You don’t like dogs?’

‘I’ve never had anything to do with them.’

‘Get Jamie to show you how to handle them. They’re wonderful creatures, aren’t you, boy?’ He patted Roger again, and the dog gazed at him adoringly.

‘So I can stay?’

‘We’ll see.’

‘For a few days?’

‘Yes. For a few days, and then we’ll see.’

There was no doubt she was a splendid worker. She scrubbed and cooked and polished and cleaned until he felt that he never wanted to lose her, but it was the dogs that were the most important. They were the light of his life. The dogs and his fits. The fits were important, too. When Jamie went, he and Martha would be alone together, and he might not be able to control himself, and one day, as his mother had said when she was begging for mercy, he’d be caught. His luck wouldn’t always hold. After all, he hadn’t managed to kill Jamie the other day, but though Jamie was leaving because of his attack on him, he was certain Jamie would never tell on him.

He had never forgotten his mother’s words, nor the hatred on her face. ‘I can see now that I should never have reared you,’ she had said. ‘They told me you were dangerous, but I loved you, heaven help me, and I thought I could manage you. But one day, Ian, they’ll catch you and put you in a loony bin, and you’ll stay there for the rest of your life. You’ve always hated enclosed spaces, haven’t you? Claustrophobia, they call it. You’ll be shut up, Ian, and you’ll never be free again.’

He’d killed her then, and been glad to. He’d thrown down the chair leg with which he had been beating her, and doused the red

hot poker with which he had been branding her, and had throttled her. And he hadn't been found out, because his wife had hated his mother, and he'd told her a cock-and-bull story about how his mother had been mad, and had attacked Ian, and somehow he had managed to convince her that he had been innocent! His wife had been a fool, and when her turn came, it was laughable to see the horror on her face as it dawned on her that he had lied about his mother! He had tied her to a chair, and cut her up while she was still alive, and had then put the pieces in a sack, and buried them at the bottom of the orchard.

His younger brother had put up a better fight, and so had his co-author on his book on the history of early Byzantine architecture, yet he hadn't been found out about either of them.

He had been frightened at first, when Jamie had managed to escape him. He was getting older, and Jamie was strong, and surprisingly clever. What's more he'd never get another chance, as Jamie was now always armed, and always on the look-out for trouble, but though Jamie wouldn't give him away because of the love they'd had for one another (and because he'd managed to convince Jamie that it was the first time one of his fits had come over him), if Jamie discovered that he'd killed Martha, he'd certainly go to the police straight away. Dare Ian let her stay?

The difficulty was that he enjoyed his fits. They gave him a feeling of exhilaration and pride that nothing else in his life could do.

Martha had sought him out, so she deserved any trouble that was coming to her. The dogs needed a keeper, and Martha was good in the house. Martha should remain. It was settled!

Jamie and Martha took the dogs for a walk together every day, and all was nearly well. Though she was scared of them, all but Roger were very good natured, so she had developed a certain amount of confidence with them. Roger, though, was different. Though he behaved himself when Ian or Jamie was near, if he were left alone with her he growled at her, and sometimes he snarled. Martha hated him with a passion as intense as his own.

Jamie left, and the walks continued. Martha made Ian so comfortable that to his surprise he had no difficulty in restraining himself. The house, of which he was immensely proud, had never looked better, and he himself had never fed so well. He was able

to work without interruption, and in time he grew almost fond of Martha.

At last the letter which Ian had been expecting from America arrived, and with it a covering letter from his agent, saying that the terms offered were first class, and he fully advised Ian to accept. The lecture tour would last for three months, on a circuit which guaranteed first class hotels and every comfort. Ian was delighted.

'So there it is,' he said to Martha. 'Everything will be in your care.'

'Six dogs is a lot all by myself, sir,' she said anxiously. 'What happens if one of them falls sick?'

'I'll leave the address and telephone number of the vet.'

'Couldn't they go to kennels, sir? I don't like the responsibility, sir, with you being so fond of them.'

'They'd hate kennels.'

'They'd all be together, and there's a lot to do in the house if I give it a real spring cleaning.'

'There's plenty of time to spring clean without me to prepare meals for, and those dogs are my whole family.'

'But ...'

'But buts, Martha. Those are your orders.'

'What if I refuse?' For a moment her eyes flashed.

'I've found out all about you, Martha,' said Ian softly, 'so if I were you, I'd do as you're told.'

She looked terrified. 'You're not going to go the police?' she gasped.

'Not if you behave yourself.'

'Oh, thank you, sir. Thank you!' She threw herself at his feet and clasped him round the knees.

Ian drew himself away disdainfully. 'All the same, I'd like an explanation of why you did it.'

'How did you find out?' asked Martha anxiously.

'I hired a private detective.'

'Would he tell the police?'

'Not a chance. He had no idea where you are. Come on. Tell me what happened.'

'I was a battered wife, sir. I called the police myself, but they'd do nothing, so I called the social workers, and a fat lot of good they were! No one helped me, and I was desperate. I

couldn't stand any more, sir. So I made my plans, and the next time he came for me, I hit him.'

'With a carving knife? Sorry, Martha, that won't do. I want no lies.'

'It's no lie, sir. It's the truth I'm telling you. I hit him with a poker, then when he fell, I used the knife. I cut at him to make it look like real violence, you see, and hoped the poker hit would look like a bump, where he fell. Then I turned the house upside down, took all the money there was, and his watch, to make it look like a robbery, and left. It was the middle of the night, you see, and no one heard me, and I'd made my plans. I walked to Andover.'

'A long walk, Martha.'

'Yes, sir, then I took the first train to London, and the first coach to Scotland. I wanted to get right away, you see, and then when we got near here, I saw your drive gates, and asked about the place. The driver told me you lived alone here, and that no one ever saw you, and that you were a famous professor, so it came to me that as I was a good worker, sir, I could help you, and you could help me.'

As this was more or less what Ian had been told by the detective, he felt satisfied. 'I see,' he said.

'When you found out about me, were you never afeared of me?' asked Martha.

'No, Martha. Living alone, one takes one's precautions.'

'Yes, sir,' said Martha. She had gone very pale, and seemed to have trouble with her breathing.

'So you'll look after the dogs until I return.' This was a statement.

'Oh, yes, sir.'

She hadn't the courage to tell him of her fears about Roger, and he never referred to the subject again.

It was nearly June when Ian left for America, and Martha watched his departure with despair. The dogs watched it, too, and Roger set up a howl. She immediately took them for a walk, and to her surprise though he seemed subdued and depressed, Roger behaved himself.

For several weeks all seemed to go well. Roger growled softly and bared his teeth from time to time, but he was quite obedient, except that he never went into the kitchen if she were there, and he refused to allow her to enter Ian's room.

At first this didn't matter too much. There was no need to change the sheets and make the bed and turn out the room until just before Ian returned, and by that time, she might have come to terms with the dog. She tried kindness, feeding him on special delicacies, and giving him plenty of praise, but he seemed impervious. Then she tried to thwart his guardianship of the room by every means in her power. She'd put his food well away from the kitchen door in the yard, and go upstairs as fast as she could, but whichever staircase she used, he was always there first, having used the other. She got up in the night, having made sure that he wasn't in the house, but he had found a secret entrance which she could never discover, and was always by the room. Once she took a huge stick to beat him into submission, but his growls were so terrifying as long as she had it in her hand that she was forced to abandon the idea. She tried starving him, but he hunted on his walks, and caught and killed rabbits.

There were now only three days until Ian's return, and matters had become urgent. She couldn't not do the room, and explain to Ian, in case he turned nasty and told the police about her. Besides, she had been making her own inquiries about him, from the delivery boy and the milkman, and though neither of them knew anything like the full extent of his madness, both had heard tales of his terrible temper, which they said led to violence, and she had no wish to become a battered victim again.

In desperation she decided to poison Roger. She had seen that the weedkiller in the barn had a poison label on it, and though she was terrified at the thought of trying to kill him, she was even more worried about how to dispose of the body. He was a huge dog, and she had to find somewhere where the other dogs could never find him, to give her away.

The only possible place was the loch. It was half a mile away, at the end of the copse, and it would be a frightening journey, but if she could get him into it, she could take him there in the large wheelbarrow, tie a rope round his neck with a stone on it, tip him in, and he'd sink.

With trembling hands she made him a stew of liver, which he loved, and saw him come near the kitchen door to sniff it. She put in the weedkiller, hoping to heaven that he wouldn't taste it, and praying that she had given him a lethal dose, then poured the stew into his bowl, and when it had cooled sufficiently, she

put it outside the door, and went upstairs to her room. She didn't dare go to Ian's, in case Roger divined it, as usual, and so delayed his death.

She lay down on her bed and watched the clock. She had given herself one hour to wait.

Once she thought she heard a howl, but she didn't move. Her room was on the other side of the house from the kitchen, and two storeys up, so she wouldn't hear his death throes if there were any.

At last the hour was up, and she went down the stairs, and peered out of the kitchen window.

Roger was lying rigid and still beside his bowl. His lips were drawn away from his teeth in an expression of agony, there was foam on his mouth, and his eyes were almost starting out of his head. A fly was walking over one of them.

The struggle to get him into the wheelbarrow was horrible. It was a hot day, and Roger was unbelievably heavy. She managed it at last, and with the rope and the stone also in the barrow, she set off determinedly for the loch.

The walk seemed to take for ever. She was frightened of tripping over tree roots on the ride, and so tipping Roger out before they reached the water. Her heart was pounding, her mouth was dry, and her legs would hardly support her. There was an agonizing pain round her chest, which felt as if she were corseted with an iron band, and sweat poured down her face and neck.

She arrived at the loch and began tying the rope round Roger's throat. She was surrounded by a cloud of flies, and for some reason, the old dog smelt.

Suddenly she had a feeling that she wasn't alone. Hardly able to breathe with terror, she turned her head, and saw Ian watching her, a few yards away. He was carrying a loaded gun, and the look of venom on his face was the most awful thing she had ever seen.

'Oh my God!' she whimpered. 'It's you!' Her voice was a croak, and in her terror she nearly fell.

He nodded silently.

'He died,' she babbled. 'He ate something which poisoned him, and he died.'

'I know,' said Ian. 'I saw the bottle on the kitchen table.'

'You've come back too early,' she moaned.

'On the contrary, I've come back too late.' There was a long

silence while they stared at each other, then he said, 'Finish what you're doing, and come back into the house.'

'You mean, throw Roger into the loch?'

'Yes.'

Trying to knot the rope became a nightmare. It was thick and coarse, and tore her fingernails and the flesh on her hands; by the time she had finished, she was sobbing with pain and exhaustion.

With the gun still levelled at her, Ian said, 'Now throw him in.'

She tipped him out of the wheelbarrow, and dragged him by the rope to the water's edge. Once there, she had no idea how to proceed. 'I don't know how to get him into the water,' she said, with the tears coursing down her cheeks.

'You'd have done it if I hadn't been here,' said Ian.

With an enormous effort she dragged Roger after her, as she waded into the icy loch. He fell with a splash and a jerk, which nearly threw her off her feet. He sank quite quickly, but Ian said implacably, 'Further. Go further into the water.'

'It's cold,' she said, 'and I shall drown.'

'Further,' said Ian, flatly.

'I can't,' she said abjectly. 'I've gone as far as I can.' She stood where she was, shivering, with the water round her knees.

'Further.' His voice held menace.

She waded up to her armpits, and stopped again.

'Further,' he called. 'Go further.'

'I can't swim.'

'You killed my dog. My Roger. My greatest friend.'

She let go of the rope under the water and walked on a few paces. The water was now above her shoulders.

'OK!' shouted Ian. 'That's enough. Come back.'

Thankfully she turned to him, and staggered back towards the bank. As she tried to crawl out onto the dry land, she slipped into the mud. Ian laughed shortly, and waited until she was clear of the water. 'Now,' he said, 'home, and punishment.'

They went towards the house, Ian with the gun pressed into the small of her back, and Martha stumbling and half running in her haste to do as he wanted.

'Back door,' said Ian as the house came in sight.

They went into the kitchen, and now he was shaking with fury.

Like Roger, his mouth was drawn away from his clenched teeth in a snarl, and his head was nodding violently.

'Please,' she implored him. 'Please! I didn't want to hurt him, but I was frightened of him. He wouldn't let me do your room, you see, and I was afraid you'd be angry with me, and turn me over to the police.'

'You killed my dog!' said Roger. 'You killed my dog! Nothing is too bad for you! Nothing!'

'I didn't want to, I swear it!'

He fetched her a stinging blow across the face with the butt of his gun, and she fell sprawling on the floor.

'You poisoned him, so I'll poison you!' he said. 'You made him suffer, so you will suffer; his death took a long time, so yours will too.'

He lunged at her, and seeing the gun pointing away from her for a moment, Martha went for him. She was very tired, but terror had given her strength. She wrestled and fought, kicked, punched, and bit the wrists that supported his clawing hands in her efforts to escape him, but he too had been given an extra strength . . . the strength of a madman. He seemed hardly to notice that she was fighting him. He knocked her out, and while she was unconscious, he fetched the rest of the rope which she had used on Roger, hauled her into a chair, and tied her to it. He then poured a few drops of the weedkiller into a glass of water, and forced it down her throat.

She came to with a cry. A searing pain coursed through her gums, her tongue, and her chest, and she spluttered and gasped as her face began to swell. A foam was forming round her lips, and Ian bent over her, watching her every expression gloatingly.

'That isn't enough to kill you,' he said, 'but you'll have a dose every day. You killed Roger. My friend! My baby!'

He went out of the room for quite a time, and she waited in terror, writhing with pain. She struggled feebly from time to time, but without conviction.

When he returned, he was carrying a red hot poker, and there was a look of satisfaction on his face. 'This hurts, too,' he said. 'I'm told it's very painful indeed.'

She tried to say something, then when she found she couldn't form the words with her swollen mouth, she attempted a scream.

Ian was startled. 'Oh, dear me, no!' he said. 'That will never do!'

He put the poker carefully on the kitchen stove, and taking up a glass cloth, he wound it deftly into a gag, and tied it round her face. Tears were pouring down her cheeks again, and this seemed to please him. 'Good!' he said. 'Keep it up. Crying is good for you they say.'

He stripped off her blouse, picked up the poker again, and very very carefully branded the flesh he had exposed, making patterns in the sizzling skin.

She was waving her head from side to side, and he could hear muffled noises.

After a few minutes he seemed to get bored. 'Now what shall I do?' he asked himself petulantly. 'I really don't like the smell of burning very much, and this isn't as much fun as I thought it would be. I've done it before.' He wrinkled his nose distastefully as he searched the kitchen for inspiration. His eye lit on the carving knife, and with a grunt of approval he began slashing at her. The act seemed to send him into a further paroxysm of rage, and he kept this up until he was exhausted. Then he put the knife down on the table, and said childishly, 'Ian is tired. Ian is going to have a little bye-byes.'

For a week he kept her tied to the chair, visiting her from time to time, to torture her, and to gloat over her pain. Once or twice he actually cut bits off her arm, and carried them out of the kitchen door, murmuring as he went, 'Another horrid smell. You are making me do very unpleasant things, you filthy woman, and I shan't forgive you for this, you know.'

Martha spent much of the time unconscious, and even when she was aware, the enormity of the hurt was such that she could really hardly feel it.

At last one day, Ian said triumphantly, 'It is time. They are waiting.'

Martha's eyes widened questioningly, and as if in answer, he said, 'The dogs. But first we must get rid of the poison from your system. A nice strong purgative is what is required.'

He dosed her with a huge draught of laxative, and left her for thirty-six hours, at the end of which he returned and unbound her.

Too feeble to stand, she fell.

He kicked her hard. 'No, certainly not,' he said angrily. 'You have work to do. You must clean up this mess. It's vile. Like you are.'

She shook her head weakly and pathetically, and by bending down and listening to her closely through the gag, he thought she said, 'I can't. I really can't.'

'You can. You really can,' he answered. 'I can assure you you can, because if you don't, what you've been through already will seem like a picnic.'

He threw some cloths at her, and pushed a bucket with water and suds towards her. 'Quick!' he said. 'We don't want to waste time!' He took his gun off the table and levelled it at her.

So dizzy that she hardly knew what she was doing, she cleaned the kitchen. He watched her until she had finished, knocked her into the chair, and stripped her. He threw her clothes into the stove, lifted her up, and slung her over his shoulder. He marched her to the compound where the other dogs spent their time when not out for a walk, and said, 'They've been waiting for you.'

Then he tossed her to them, and laughed as she screamed and struggled. The dogs fell on her ravenously, and tore her to pieces.

As they began eating her, Ian suddenly began to cry. 'Roger!' he sobbed heartbrokenly. 'Roger! I should never have left you! My darling! My baby I should never have left you!'

He blew his nose, then slowly and deliberately put the handkerchief in his pocket.

'Good doggies!' he said. 'Good little doggies! Finish her up! Every scrap!'

The dogs wagged their tails as they gnawed her bones.

Norman P. Kaufman

Rightfully mine

Blood spattered her thighs.

If she had had the opportunity – she was a fair-minded young lady – Miranda Merrilees would have admitted to a temporary, albeit crucial, lack of attention to what she was doing. She might, if pressed, have freely acknowledged that when crossing a road, a busy one, and during the morning rush-hour, one should take the maximum of care, should in fact treat each vehicle as a lethal weapon.

Perhaps on this June morning she had other matters on her mind: thoughts far removed from the mundane world of hurtling cars and fleeing lorries and lumbering buses. Indeed – it is only possible to surmise – she may well have been clutching to her the memory of that goodnight kiss, bestowed on her with chaste gallantry some ten hours earlier by Jonathan, he of the Adonis physique and the long eyelashes.

Bert Brougham knew nothing of her reasons for this lapse in diligence, and cared even less. For it was his vehicle – a sleekly white station-wagon – which hit Miranda as she was half-way across the main Holborn road.

He saw it all as if in some weird dream, as if he were viewing the scene from cloud level, like some celestial planetary observer. His own bulky form jammed in the driving-seat; the stunned realization that the young girl ahead was unaware of his existence; the split microsecond out of his own life, as his brain flashed its message to hands and feet; the shrieking, deafening cacophony of sound as his brakes caterwauled in protest; and finally, finally, the bitter knowledge that he could never stop the car in time, and that even before he had stamped the brake pedal flat, there had been no chance, no chance, no chance—

Impact.

Until his very last day on earth, he would remember it. That infinitesimal splinter out of time as she turned her golden head

and saw the bonnet of the car scant inches from her; and the look on her face – dear God, that face! – as its blankness evaporated, as its chocolate-box prettiness dissolved into a grimace of pure terror.

Impact.

The station-wagon, travelling at thirty miles an hour, caught her squarely, tossed her body high in the air, slammed into it again as it dropped limply on to the tarmacadamed roadway. She lay there motionless: Miranda Merrilees, fifteen years old, limbs asprawl, clothing shredded, eyes wide and staring, teeth bared in a last supreme agony.

Blood spattered her thighs.

There was blood everywhere. It formed tiny puddles in the road and trickled feebly into a nearby grid. It lay in great patches across the bonnet of the station-wagon, its gruesome pattern startlingly scarlet against the virgin-white metal. And it gushed copiously, endlessly, out of Miranda's once-smiling lips.

Brougham sat there at the wheel of his car, his body heaving in dry retching sobs, sweat pouring down his face and through his clothes. Noise filled his ears, the noise of screaming crowds, of honking and hooting and hoarse cries, of sirens and bells and revving engines. He covered his ears, but could not blot out the cumulative blast of it. He had killed her, this poor young kid on the threshold of life; regardless of circumstances, he had killed her. Had – killed – her.

Bert Brougham, big, tough, fortyish, sat for long minutes, rocking gently to and fro, his whole frame rigid with a misery that could never be expressed in cold words.

The article in the *Evening Post* meant little to Gregory Raikes. Indeed, the sudden demise of a teenage girl was hardly new in his experience; for Gregory Raikes was nothing like his real name, and thirty-seven years earlier he had been a young major with special responsibility for the general welfare of inmates at the notorious Maidanek concentration camp, a desolate site of death near Lublin in Poland.

He smiled to himself at the thought; general welfare, though! His lips peeled away from his yellowing teeth as he remembered exactly what he had done with some of them. Especially the young girls.

He glanced idly at the newspaper, at the photograph of the girl Miranda Merrilees, taken whilst she was on holiday in Cornwall. Brimming with youth, with vigour, a lust for life that sparkled from her guileless young eyes ... His own eyes flickered as he studied the snapshot: the reproductive process of the newsprint could not obscure this girl's basic beauty. He began to recall other girls he had known; they too had been attractive – once. Until he had inflicted wounds on their bodies and their minds which nothing but death could ever erase. And often did.

Raikes yawned as he read through the text. Nothing much there to interest him; although, yes, he could still feel the tendrils of sensual pleasure at the image of how she must have looked, this little Miranda, lying there with lacerated limbs and torn body and with that vivacious face veiled in blood—

Christ! How often, how very often had he shot them down, these stupid prisoners, these proverbial pawns of war! How often had he snatched out his pistol and fired point-blank at them, men and women, children and babies, just on a whim, just to be there to bear witness to the carnage he himself had wrought, of the power he wielded, of the fear he inspired ... And the sight of the blood had been the high point of it all, the apex of all his waking dreams, the almost sexual gratification of what had always been a constant yearning.

Raikes caught himself smiling again, and glanced furtively round the hospital dormitory. No one had noticed – but what if they did? These idiots – patients, doctors, nurses, surgeons – none of them knew of his past; how could they? He was close on sixty, his early days were lost to posterity; more importantly, the War Crimes Commission had failed to gather him in. Nuremberg had not been Nemesis but merely the name of a city. That it had spelt death to so many others of his ilk was of no consequence to Gregory Raikes.

He lay back and closed his eyes and relaxed. And reflected. South America had been a welcome haven for him; and it was ironic, to say the least, that he should have been shipped to England for an operation. If those British dolts only knew! Not, of course, that he would have risked coming here from choice. But there were few facilities for open-heart surgery in his chosen country; and it was imperative that he should receive urgent treatment if he were to prolong his life.

'Heart transplant.'

He spoke the words aloud, heedless of the other patients' wondering stares.

'Heart transplant.'

It sounded unreal. It sounded – futuristic. He knew it was not impossible, that such things could be, had been, done. But the enormity of it appalled him. To cut a man open, to feel inside the walls of his chest, to sever the great veins and arteries controlling the flow of his life's blood ... Incredible! And frightening too; for Raikes was not by nature heroic, although he would never have admitted it, even to himself.

He tried to reason: the operation, although a major one, had been carried out many times, and a great percentage of patients had survived. He was fit enough, basically, which indicated that there should be no complications, no side-effects. His best bet was to relax, allow the surgeons to worry about him, it was part of their job, was it not? And once the operation was over, he could go back to South America, lose himself there, this time for ever.

But way at the back of his subconscious there was fear. Not a normal everyday throwaway fear, but an icy cloud of superstitious dread that threatened to seep through the constricting walls of his subconscious and swamp his brain; and he trembled as he fought to stave it off, this bank of emotions which would paralyse him if ever he let it invade his ken.

'Mr Raikes?'

He nodded dumbly, whitely.

'Some good news for you. We have a donor.'

'A d—' His lips could not frame the word. Strange animal whimpers issued from his throat. The treacherous heart crashed and pounded against his rib-cage as if urging itself out of its bodily confines without benefit of surgery.

'Yes,' the voice went on cheerfully. 'We shall operate tomorrow.'

Raikes stared. 'Tomorrow,' came the echo. He blinked in slow surprise: it had been his own voice. It had sounded – calm. Dear God! Calm! How laughable! How totally bloody funny! He found himself laughing and knew not why: for it was there again, floating beneath the surface of his understanding, the desperate terror that clawed at his sanity—

'May I . . . ?' He swallowed hard. This was ridiculous, it was infantile, why should his throat feel so hot and dry? 'May I know who the – the donor is?' He forced a sickly grin. 'Correction – was.'

'Why, yes. Young girl – fifteen – name of Merrilees – killed by a car.' Pause. 'You might have seen it in the papers—'

'Yes,' said Gregory Raikes. 'Yes.'

They came for him at ten a.m. For four hours he had lain supine, a sedative drug coursing through his veins, alleviating a horror which more than ever strove to break free of the mental fetters he had locked around it. But now . . . He seemed to be hovering: the world took on an unearthly calm. There it was again – calm! He wondered whether he should be frightened, but could feel only a hazy astonishment at his inability to feel scared.

It was the barbiturate, of course: soothing away the tribulations of simply being alive, dulling the brain, transfixing the mind, nullifying all serious thought almost before it could be conceived. How wonderful, Raikes mused, just to lie here with a head full of cotton-wool, no decisions to make, no worry, no pain, and – no fear of pain.

An idea wormed its way soggily through the trenchful of glue at the back of his eyes; an idea that made him smile tiredly. For it had occurred to him that this wonder drug would have come in very useful for the inmates of the Maidanek camp. They could have taken it to counteract their fear of a thrashing, or a brutal rape, or indeed the prospect of a particularly messy death . . . And if it had been available, and if they had taken it, then it would have done them no damned good at all.

As they wheeled him down the endless corridors towards the operating theatre, Raikes closed his eyes and saw faces. Emaciated faces, the young and the old, some with blood staining their flesh, some without hair or teeth or – eyes.

And some already dead, lying in the stinking mud, done with the world and what it had done to them.

No, he mused drowsily. Not what the world had done. What *he* had done.

He smiled again.

It was six minutes past ten.

It was six minutes past midnight.

Kenny lay awake. Had been for more than an hour. Shame, not sleep, filled his horizon. How could he have acted so bloody stupid? Fainting, though! Acting like some hysterical old woman instead of a mature medical student attending an important operation!

It hadn't been too bad – at first. There were all the others grouped around the operating table, they all looked a little green about the proverbial gills as the Great Man began his surgical routines. But the students were an incentive to each other, in that nobody wanted to show himself up in front of the rest ... It reminded Kenny of a comedy film he had witnessed years before; but he had never felt so unfunny. And it was when the surgeon began his spiel that Kenny realized there were going to be problems ...

'The heart,' intoned the Personage. 'See? See it? What is it but an organ of the body, a diseased organ at present, which is why I'm here to replace it. With—' He gestured. 'With this one. A nice pretty one.' He displayed the two hearts with a flick of his fingers, like a fishmonger exhibiting his best plaice. 'The heart,' he repeated, whilst Kenny swallowed the moisture accumulating in his throat. 'A hollow muscle lying between the lungs, enclosed – here – in the pericardium. And attached – here – to the diaphragm.'

Kenny stared unblinkingly. Sweat formed at the nape of his neck.

'As you know,' the Man continued, 'or as I hope and trust you know—' They could sense the taut grin behind the mask. '—the heart consists of four chambers: the two atria which *receive* blood from the great veins, and the two ventricles which push the blood out again into the great arteries.' He was pointing as he spoke, pointing and pushing and prodding ... Kenny swayed slightly.

'Now then, anyone heard of the superior vena cava and the inferior vena cava?' He was teasing them, and of course he was entitled to, but Kenny was already wishing he'd speed up the surgery and slow down on the comedy. 'The great veins I've mentioned already,' he answered himself. 'Here ... and here ... and look: this, as again you must realize, is the aorta, right? This wide artery like a tree trunk, passing the blood through for the general circulation of the body ...'

Kenny blinked. I sure hope to Christ, he reflected, that this isn't bile rising up my neck.

'And now, of course,' the Eminent Presence went on blithely, 'it's decision time. And incision time.' He bent over the still body of Gregory Raikes, and fell suddenly silent, all jocularity extinct, the face behind the mask a tight drum of concentration. For this was no longer a matter for flippancy; this was a man's life, and whether or not he had some future or none at all.

The ring of students closed in as the surgeon wielded his glittering scalpel; and Kenny watched in morbid fascination as the blade scythed through flesh, exposing the intricacies of the man's heart, its valves and ventricles, its veins and vessels and multitudinous arteries, its endless pulsing flow of blood . . . His stomach heaved suddenly, the room swam about him, his mind misted over as his thoughts crystallized into words unsaid: Jesus, what's happening to me, I want to be a doctor, don't I? Just because it's my first ever time in the theatre is no reason for me to collapse—

Kenny collapsed.

The Exalted One never flickered an eyelid. He had a job of work to do, and the advent of some young hopeful crashing to the floor was of little or no moment in comparison. He delved deep into the open wound in Raikes' chest; there was a heart he had to remove, and another one to put in its place, the healthy heart of a girl newly dead.

Raikes awoke.

It was dark in the little side-ward. He guessed it would be some time in the early hours of the morning, but beyond that, he neither knew nor cared. For he was transfixed with a weariness he had never before experienced: his eyes were heavy . . . heavy . . . Some logical segment of his senses told him that he was still feeling the effects of the massive anaesthesia, and that this deadly crushing weight on his eyelids was only to be expected, an offshoot of the post-operative condition.

He lay there, prostrate, aware of nothing but the need to rest, to relax, to garner strength for the gentle climb back to full health. And then back home, through the South American pampas, to a warm and tranquil future . . . Raikes closed his eyes; it was futile trying to keep them open, and pointless too, for there was no way he could see anything in the all but impenetrable blackness.

Through the profound torpor, he could hear faint noises in the distance, the endless sounds of a hospital that never slept: controlled bustle, efficient movements, hushed voices . . . All far, far away from him, remote and disconnected and utterly unimportant, of absolutely no significance—

His eyes flickered open. And shut. And then open again, with a monumental effort, like he was rolling back steel shutters up and away from his face. He gazed ahead of him; but there was nothing to see. Nothing but the jet shadows of the hospital ward.

And yet . . . there *had* been a sound. Not one of those he had heard and could still hear along the far-flung world of corridors outside his door. No, this one was nearer, perhaps at the doorway itself – there! There it was again, an almost inaudible scratching, a fumbling, a tentative sibilance brushing against the panels, as if someone was pushing at the door. Raikes closed his eyes again. You, he informed himself sourly, are a fool. A hyper-imaginative idiot . . . But there was a dampness at his throat that owed nothing to excess heat.

The noise stopped. His eyes urged open once more. Seconds, long seconds, passed, merging into minutes – he forced himself awake, cursing himself for a hysterical lunatic. But he had to be sure; and finally he relaxed, sinking gratefully back again into a deep exhausted sleep. His last waking thought was: What bloody madness!

Somewhere a man was whistling. It was a good distance away, this irritating discord, but it was shrill and penetrating. Enough, at least, to pierce Raikes' slumbers; and he sighed deeply, and fervently wished the man and his infernal noise a million miles away. It was still dark, and the patient merely wondered how long he had been asleep this time. Surely not long, not with the tiny window showing no light at all, and the room itself maintaining its misty gloom. He did not try to move: for there was something *alien* about the set-up, and he worked it out slowly, methodically . . .

Of course! That was it! It wasn't the goddamned whistling that had woken him – it was something else, something else, another noise, just like the first time, but nearer; an odd rustling sound, he could hear it again, and the sweat was back at his throat as he strained his eyes once more into the sombre depths. And as his

ears picked it up yet again, Raikes realized at last what the hell it was that had roused him.

The door. He had heard the door, swinging open.

The breath rasped in his chest. 'Who's there? Who's there? Who's—?' There was no sound coming out of his mouth – he had merely framed the syllables – he had not the strength to push the words between his teeth. But there was someone there, there was *someone*. Or – something . . . His mouth remained wide open, an O of dread; and although his eyes were still desperately tired, he would not, dared not, close them again. And he lay deathly still, his face gleaming whitely in the shadowed room, his frantic gaze fixed on the darkness at the foot of his bed.

Because there *was* somebody there. A person, a thing, a being, he had no way of knowing what or whom. But Raikes' frightened eyes could distinguish a specific shadow, one slightly darker than the rest, one that would not merge in with the rest of the penumbra that filled the little room. 'Who,' he gritted, 'who are you, *what* are you, for Chrissake, will you *say* something—' Tears began to roll down his face, mingling with the sweat that had already soaked through his clothes. 'For the love of God—'

Somehow – incredibly – there was a footstep somewhere, light, almost stealthy . . . He wondered if he might be losing his mind. The shadow shifted from the foot of the bed, came around to the left side of him, nearer it came, slowly, dead slow, shuffling horribly, as though unable to coordinate the movement of its limbs . . . It stopped by the head of the bed, immediately to his left: he could have reached out, could have stretched out his hand and touched it.

It.

He shuddered.

And screamed.

Loud and long he screamed into this eternal black pit; but the shadow did not waver, did not retreat, did not move at all. And there were no scurrying footsteps from outside the ward, nobody was on hand to investigate his hideous shrieks, nobody seemed to care . . . Raikes' cries diminished, died away into silent sobbing as he fought to catch his breath, to control the madness that seemed to have overwhelmed him. He had to have some form of light, he had to see what this – this entity really was; and his new heart palpitated to a new pitch of crazed terror as he picked

up the jug of water at his bedside and flung it away from him, upwards and outwards, towards the minuscule pane of frosted glass high above his head.

It was a lucky shot. If he had stopped to take aim, if his limbs had not been all but transfixed with an ague of pure panic, he might well have missed. But the jug arced upwards and away from him, its weight augmented by the water that stayed almost intact until the moment of impact. The opaque window disintegrated in an ear-splitting cacophony of glass grinding on glass, the cold water gushing down in a solid wall on to the bed and across Raikes' body; he gasped at the sudden shock, lifting his arms and squeezing his eyes tightly shut in instinctive protection against the shards of flying glass.

The watery flicker of an impending dawn glimmered through the aperture and spread its infinitesimal light around the tiny side-ward. Raikes sprawled in stunned silence, his eyes still resolutely closed; but he was gradually becoming aware that the air in the little room was changing, its hitherto comfortable warmth deteriorating into an icy chill which he felt instinctively had little to do with the glassless window. He wondered once again why no one had come in answer to the summons of his screams, or the deafening clangour of the smithereened window; he wondered too if he was the victim of some vile but intricate practical joke; and finally he wondered how long he would be able to withstand the pressure of this nightmare, this suffocating fear that even now struggled to dislodge his reason.

And . . . there was something else, something beside the craven emotion that ran amok around his mind, something apart from the dank mist that had permeated the atmosphere. Behind his eyelids, he could sense decay. He could sense it, he could smell it, could almost taste it, and he knew that the vile presence scant feet to his left was the source of it. He had to look. He had to see what faced him. He had to *know* . . .

His soul shrivelling within his breast, Raikes blinked his eyes open and shut, rapidly, like the shutter of a camera. But there was no real image retained on his retina, nothing but an amorphous shape, dark, motionless, waiting, waiting—

'For Jesus' sake—' he shrilled.

And opened his eyes wide.

She stood there in the gloom, as still as the walls about her, her

eyes the only living things in a face as white and as lifeless as any he had witnessed; and it struck him that yes, he had indeed seen faces like this one, so many times before, at the infamous Maidanek camp all those years into his grisly past. The living dead, he had labelled them. The living dead . . . His lips pulled away from his teeth in an animal snarl; for this face was not from his own past but one he had seen in a newspaper story, the face of a young woman slain on the Holborn road.

But – no longer pretty.

His bowels seemed to melt as he gazed upon her, as the sickly light illumined her face and body and the ghastly wounds inflicted by the motorist called Brougham.

Scar tissue covered her cheeks; dried blood had crusted into and over the gap where once her lips had been lusciously full. Her teeth had been pulverized at the moment of impact, her hair hung in tufts from the bloodied skull . . . Raikes' petrified stare drifted to her body and limbs – he recalled the news story, that she had been wearing a white blouse and pleated cream skirt, and some last vestige of logic forced him to wonder how she still had the same clothing, a girl who had been buried whilst covered in aessian sack . . . Or had she? Had her family insisted on her being interred in the clothes she had been wearing when death had come to her?

Raikes did not know the answer to that. He did not know anything at all right then, beyond the salient fact that within the confines of his chest, his fledgling heart was trip-hammering away in response to the stimulus of this – this thing, this filth that stood in unnerving silence at the side of his bed. Somewhere a billion light-years distant, he could hear the whining of his own voice, smell the impending faeces of his body as he fought down the urge to vomit . . . 'Will you *tell me, tell me*, what do you *want—*?'

The figure moved slightly, as if shifting to a more comfortable stance. Raikes gazed in dumb despair: never had he seen anything like this. The girl's clothes hung in tatters about her body; once, long ago, he might have felt the first glimmerings of an unholy lust for such as she, a lust he had sated on the countless women at the camp before sending them to what must have been a blessed death. But this girl – rather the remains of what had been a girl – was no fit object for carnal desire.

And yet – and yet – he could not tear his frightened eyes away

from her, from the gaping wounds in her breasts, the jagged rent across her stomach, the ruptured bones peering through the flesh of her rounded limbs; and the fragmented clothing that clung damply, precariously, to her broken frame.

'Why?' he pleaded through frozen lips. 'Why me? Why have you come? In the name of mercy . . .'

A fresh wave of horror splashed over him. A sound had issued from the unrecognizable mouth: the voice of what had once been Miranda Merrilees. 'My heart,' she whispered. 'My heart . . .' She swayed nearer, and he could smell the stench of death on her, and the stink of her clothing, the fetid odour of rotting flesh. 'You bastard, Raikes,' the girl hissed. 'I want you to give me back my heart.' Great gusting sobs wracked her body as she bent over him; hot tears dripped on to his upturned face as he squirmed away from her in mental anguish.

'I don't—' He could not catch his breath, he could not conceive that such a thing could happen to him, to anyone; and slowly he felt the paralysis of this naked fear immobilizing his limbs. 'I don't – I cannot—'

'You will!' the girl screeched suddenly. 'You can and you will! You took my heart from me, may God damn you – I want my heart, I want it back!' She shoved her head inches from his own, and he shrank back, appalled at the unspeakable carnage that had once been her face. Through the blazing eyes, set in the midst of her shattered skull, he could read nothing but hatred: his reflection filled the unwinking pupils, he could see the colourless shimmer of his own features—

'You're too late,' Raikes gabbled. He hardly knew what he was saying, merely that he had to say something, anything . . . 'Too late, too late . . .' His brain reeled from the enormity of what was happening to him, here in this cosy little room in a vast public hospital. 'I've had an operation, your heart is—' He choked. 'Is now *mine*, do you understand, *mine* – you're too late, too late, too—'

'No!' she shrieked. 'No! No!' Miranda Merrilees stretched out clawed hands and tore the covers away from him, then shredded the pyjama jacket from his back in one convulsive movement. Raikes' mouth opened in a soundless scream; he had never seen such power in a young girl, this horrifying strength that rendered him helpless. For as he lifted his arms to ward her off, she

brushed them aside and leaned her insignificant weight on his lower body. He tried to hurl her away from him – God but he tried! – but the combination of recent surgery and the stampeding panic that locked his limbs had sapped what little vitality he had had . . . And now – now – he could feel the rancid breath fanning his face as she knelt across him and began to paw at him.

Through the waves of nausea, Raikes became hazily aware that the moon had edged out of the clouds – a ball of yellow silver which, just for a handful of seconds, just for a few ticks of the clock, flung the black shadows into oblivion and lighted the girl's face as if it were beneath the rays of a midsummer sun. With revolting clarity, he saw the clotted sores that littered her face, pus leaking inexhaustibly from each of them; and the insects that had followed her from the grave and now festooned themselves in her soil-streaked hair and clothing; and the expression on her face, demonic, bestial, intent on the vile purpose that had brought her back from the dead.

Pain! Searing pain, surging through him as she ripped and tore at his naked body, pain that he had never known could exist, pain that transcended anything he had ever experienced. Dully he became aware that she was digging her filthy nails into his chest, rending his stitches asunder; blood gushed up out of him, thin jets of bubbling scarlet, washing over the feverishly digging fingers . . .

'Heart!' she kept screaming. '*My heart—!*'

Raikes was barely conscious now: the endless biting agony was sapping his will, his very motive power; and as Miranda Merrilees scraped away the last vestiges of his flesh, as she plunged white, bloodstained hands into the yawning cavity of his chest, a wild screech of delight tore itself from her throat, as she grasped his heart – *her* heart – and jerked at it, ripping it away, whilst blood gouted upwards, great founts of it splashing through the fronds of diced flesh that encircled the gaping hole in his chest.

In these, the last pitiful microseconds of his life, Raikes saw it clutched in her tiny fist, conical and slippery and somehow – incredibly – alive . . . And then came a roaring in his ears, a gurgling scream bubbled up from his colourless lips as a final anguish rent his mind asunder; and Gregory Raikes relaxed into an eternity of darkness.

'Odd,' opined the Great One.

He was right, of course. It was more than a little odd that a post-operative patient under his ministrations should be found dead some hours later; especially when all who knew about such things had themselves declared the operation to be a resounding success.

'Strange,' further commented the Exalted One.

An understatement, perhaps: for Raikes had been discovered in his bed at the little side-ward, his body perfectly straight, his pyjamas uncreased, his bedclothes unruffled. There was no mark on his body or limbs, there was no significant change in him at all. Except for his face.

'He must,' elaborated the Remarkable Surgeon, 'have had some sort of wild dream. A nightmare, no less.' He regarded the dead face, its lips stretched in a tight grimace, the baleful glare of its distended eyes peering emptily beyond Life. 'Astonishing' was the general consensus of medical opinion, as one by one they filed out of the tiny ward and went their separate ways.

Kenny was the last to leave. He cast a final backward glance at the still form, and shivered as he hurried out, his heel scraping noisily on the sprinkling of soil by the doorway.

Alan Temperley

Kowlongo plaything

Beneath the slowly turning fans the room was full. A sea of black faces, spotted with a score or so of white, nodded, smiled and sweated. The hum of voices was everywhere, British diplomatic voices and the wide range of African, punctuated by high delighted laughter. Among the guests at the reception the waiters moved with trays of drinks and delicate snacks.

In the crowd Elisha Ngwami stood out, by both reputation and appearance. A powerful bull of a man in his mid thirties, he wore his khaki drill so easily as almost to appear naked. Regarding his pleasant, good-natured face, Stephen Gresham found it difficult to believe all he had heard of the man's cruelty and excess, of the brutal guard which he had built around himself. For Ngwami was general and commander of the army in Kowlongo, a powerful and dangerous figure.

It was clear that Stephen's sister also found him attractive. He saw how her eyes shone as she dabbed the perspiration from her forehead with a handkerchief, and answered the general's question with a smile. The light perfume on the handkerchief reached Ngwami. He took it from her and held the lace edge momentarily to his broad nose, then handed it back. His teeth were white, a scar on the cheek added to his dashing air. Observing that her glass was empty he summoned a waiter. She hesitated over crushed orange then selected a glass of sparkling wine, dewed in the warm room.

Mary Gresham was a nurse with qualifications in tropical medicine. It was largely because of her appointment to the Kowlongo District Hospital that Stephen had sought and secured a post of junior official with the European Economic Mission. They were an attractive pair, tall and fair skinned with blue British eyes, clearly recognizable as brother and sister. Further observation revealed that his eyes, beneath thicker brows, were bright sea blue, hers more misty, his hair wavy and gold, hers straight and corn-coloured.

They circulated. At seven o'clock, when darkness had succeeded the brief African twilight, the party broke up. Though Mary had a car of her own, brother and sister had been given a lift by a senior member of the mission. Unfortunately the man had found the heat and wine too much, and driven home early. Stephen and Mary were pleased and rather flattered, therefore, when General Ngwami put his car at their disposal, for they lived two miles beyond the far side of the city.

It was a beautiful car, a Mercedes, which purred past the gleaming windows of the main streets, then by shabby markets and down the rough road beyond, where stone gave way to shanties and shacks set with a few colonial manors, and the odours of drains rose on the night air.

The Greshams rented a modern bungalow. The Mercedes drew up and they stepped out into the chirruping night. Ngwami stood beside them.

'Will you come in for a drink, general?' Stephen said.

It seemed almost as if Ngwami was expecting the invitation. He inclined his head with a smile and stepped aside, allowing Mary to proceed him to the gate. Through shrubs and tropic flowers they followed the drive to the garage and turned along the front of the house. As she opened the door Stephen was aware of a second car drawing up behind the Mercedes, but paid it little attention. In so far as it registered at all, he took it for some personal bodyguard of the general.

'Do come in.' Mary hovered about the sitting room adjusting lights and slatted blinds. She drew the bright curtain of hair from her face. 'Won't you sit down?'

Lissom as a tiger, perspiration scarcely showing beneath the arms of his drill jacket, Ngwami crossed the room and seated himself on a delicate upright chair beyond the broad settee.

Stephen hesitated about removing his own jacket, and decided to leave it on.

'What can I get you, general? Wine? Gin? Beer? Juice?'

'You have ananas?' said Ngwami.

'I think so.'

'With crushed ice.'

'Right. If you'll excuse me a minute.' Stephen left the room. He found no ananas in the fridge, but like most well-to-do people

kept a supply of soft drinks in the garage. He flicked on the lights and let himself out into the velvet night.

He heard nothing. As he fitted the key into the garage lock he was suddenly seized from behind in a vice-like grip and a hand was clapped over his mouth. He smelled the clean smell of an African body, saw a black wrist protruding from a neat drill sleeve.

'You be quiet,' a voice hissed in his ear, 'and no harm come to you.'

Stephen struggled. A fist struck him a stunning blow across the side of the head, a thumb pressed with frightening force on his neck beneath the ear. He felt his senses slipping away and was still. The pressure was eased, but still he was held immovable.

'Hands behind,' said a voice.

Stephen did as he was told. A garden post was between his shoulder-blades. He heard the rasp and felt the metallic bite of handcuffs against the bones of his wrists. His shoulders were released.

'Now you be quiet!' the voice repeated. 'Or I gag you.'

Terrified, Stephen nodded. 'I'll be quiet.' He moved his head to ease the pain in his neck.

There were three men, all in khaki uniform. One walked along the front of the house and knocked three times on the door, then returned. A light appeared in the hallway as the living-room door was opened. Abruptly it vanished. Stephen heard voices and the sounds of brief struggle, then his sister's voice raised in a muted scream, 'No! No! No!' and a louder scream. A shadow moved across the blinds, something in the house fell.

'For Christ's sake!' Horrified, Stephen stared from the house to his captors and back again. One of the soldiers lit a cigarette. A second grinned and laughed softly in a broken falsetto. Frightened to shout himself, Stephen struggled impotently against the post at his back.

The silence within the house was broken again by his sister's cries, cries of outrage and pain. They did not last long. Then all was quiet for a long time.

Stephen stared at the blinds with fearful fascination. The silence was almost harder to bear than the cries. His imagination was on fire. Against the silence he became aware of little night

sounds, the cicadas, the barking of a dog, a radio in a shanty a hundred yards away.

The soldier finished his cigarette. A while afterwards there was a voice within the house. Ngwami. He was speaking to Mary, but she seemed not to reply. Again the living-room light showed in the hallway. The front door opened and closed. Ngwami stood for a moment, immaculate as ever, then turned down the path towards the garage and the parked cars beyond.

'Goodnight, Mr Gresham.' His step did not falter as he passed Stephen and the guards. His driver opened the car door. Ngwami was stepping inside when Stephen's outrage broke. He tugged against the post.

'Ngwami!' he shouted. 'You bloody bastard! You ...'

Before he could say more, two savage blows knocked his head sideways and back again. Momentarily he hung from the pole. Through the dizziness he felt his nose blocked with blood, and looking up saw the gleaming car draw away, Ngwami's khaki drill pale at the rear window.

'I tell you, no noise!' As Stephen straightened a fist struck him low in the stomach, making him lurch forward retching. Overcome with nausea he scarcely felt the handcuffs being removed. Slowly he recovered. One guard held him while a second pulled his arm out straight in front.

'You listen! You hear! You hear?'

Raising his head sickly Stephen nodded. A knife was in the second guard's hand.

'You listen good. You say nothing of this. You say one word and we kill you! Mr Gresham – you understand!'

Heavily Stephen nodded again. The guard laid his knife against the outstretched forearm and drew it across with a quick deep slash. Stephen cried out.

'That help you remember. One word and we kill you!'

His arm was released, the knife returned to its sheath at the webbing belt. Their duty done, the guards turned and strolled unhurriedly down the drive to the road. A minute later their car followed in the wake of Ngwami's Mercedes. Tropical bushes intervened, the noise of the engine faded against the African night.

Blood streamed down Stephen's arm, dripping from his fingers to the ground. He raised it above his head and turned towards

the house. The blood trickled past his elbow and into the sleeve of his shirt. But though it was deep the wound was not serious. As sickness ebbed his thoughts were with his sister, fearful of what he might find.

She lay half on the settee almost as Ngwami had left her, clothes rumpled, limbs in disarray. Her face was shocked, swollen on one cheek, but beyond the ravage and emptiness lay a shadow of lust that Stephen had never seen in the face of any woman. In his pure sister it disturbed and sickened him. Heavily she drew her legs together and sat forward, staring at the floor. Her body jerked with a brief spasm.

'Oh, love!' Stephen laid his hand upon her shoulder. She drew away, violated and not wanting to be touched, too wretched and confused to cope with his comfort.

Stephen saw his blood splash scarlet on the rug and polished floor. Staunching it as well as he was able with a handkerchief, he made his way to the bathroom.

Their life was changed. Only four months in Kowlongo the excitement was over, the pleasure spoiled. They had made trips to the river, camped in the bush, made brief safaris to see the tropical birds and animals. Now the world closed about them. Since Mary wished to continue her nursing at the hospital, and the guards had made no idle threat, they took their advice and told no one. During the day there was work: in the evening they returned to the bungalow, to books and days-old British newspapers, to cold drinks and the sweating mosquitoed African night. The slight social life of Kowlongo turned hollow, the world beyond was hidden by the numbing events of that evening.

Stephen did not understand his sister. Two mornings after the assault she seemed to pull herself together. Her eyes were brighter, her hospital skirt swung as she walked to the car. But that same day she was home before him, feelings once more hidden behind a mask. She had showered and changed into a light dress with flowing sleeves that covered the bruises on her arms. Unresponsive, her replies to his efforts at conversation almost monosyllabic, she moved stiffly about the bungalow preparing the evening meal.

The following day it was the same, and continued so for the best part of a week. At the same time the expression on her

face changed. Her eyes appeared larger, her skin silky smooth. She seemed unable to concentrate, toying with a small piece of embroidery, laying aside a magazine only moments after she had taken it up. Stephen wondered if she was dosing herself with some drug at the hospital.

Then one afternoon as he walked home from his office at the mission, somewhat earlier than usual, he passed Ngwami driving back into town. They were midway between town and the bungalow. From the rear window Ngwami's powerful face gazed pleasantly and almost expressionlessly into his own. Then he was gone. Stephen stood motionless by a decaying wall. As if a veil cleared, shaken and wondering that he had not understood before, he knew without doubt where Ngwami had been.

Mary was in the shower when he reached the house. Dropping his briefcase in the hallway, Stephen crossed into her room. The bed was tidy, open white curtains stirred at the window, yet still there remained the unmistakable smell of the man. Softly he turned back the coverlet and saw the fresh sheets. With the guilt of a spy he recognized the hospital corners: their African maid never made the beds like that. Hating himself he stepped through the hallway to the kitchen and lifted the lid of the wicker laundry basket. Sheets lay bundled within. He drew them out and at once found his fears abundantly realized. Dismayed he returned them, replaced the lid, and sat at the kitchen table.

He was drinking a large gin when Mary came from her bedroom. She made no mention of Ngwami. Refreshed from the shower, lightly perfumed and in a cool print frock, only the glow on her cheek and a secret expression in her eyes, a gleam strangely assorted with the tired lines beneath, bore witness of her recent visitor. For a long moment Stephen regarded her, wondering whether to speak. But he had no need, for she saw that he knew.

Nevertheless, 'What are you looking at me like that for?' she said.

He sighed deeply. Already the gin was reaching his brain. 'I saw Ngwami on the road,' he said.

She was silent, then broke out, 'Well it's no use lecturing me - where it's going to lead, what the outcome will be! I know all that! In a month or so he'll stop coming, and that'll be an end of it. I know! So just don't lecture me!'

She was distressed and moved away. Stephen watched her, then rose from the table and crossed closer, leaning against the sink. She was right, there was nothing he could say that she did not know already. Yet he could not turn aside and watch his sister sink deeper and deeper into trouble and certain unhappiness.

‘Mary,’ he began.

And five minutes later she had broken down, tears struggling with anger and distress. She wanted to stay in Kowlongo, working at the hospital! Yes – yes – she wanted Ngwami to bring her home, didn’t he understand that! No, she didn’t want to return to England, she wouldn’t go. Why didn’t Stephen leave her alone!

Unable to speak to her brother, her closest friend since childhood and link with home, Mary retreated to her bedroom and lay sobbing tears of remorse and desire on the white coverlet. Stephen sat at the kitchen table, staring into space, then poured himself another gin.

At eleven o’clock the following morning, having bolstered his courage through a fearful sleepless night, Stephen presented himself at army headquarters on the far side of the city, and was shown into the presence of General Ngwami.

Socially polite as always, Ngwami rose and offered Stephen a chair. Stephen took it. Ngwami remained standing, ebony face handsome, his strength accentuated rather than concealed by the tropical uniform. He bore himself with a calm propriety and self-control that was the very height of arrogance.

‘Well, Mr Gresham, how nice to see you again.’ He rang a silver bell and sent a slim young private for tea. ‘I hope everything is going well with you in Kowlongo. The Economic Mission.’

Momentarily the wind was taken out of Stephen’s sails. He stiffened his resolve.

‘Yes, very, thank you. But it’s not that I’ve come to see you about. It’s my sister.’

Against the scrupulously correct manner of Ngwami, whose immaculate drill made Stephen’s linen jacket seem cheap and dowdy, the words sounded weak and falsely authoritarian.

‘Ah.’ Ngwami nodded. ‘A lovely girl. I’m very fond of her.’

‘Fond of her.’

‘Precisely so, Mr Gresham. I am very fond of her. She is a nice girl.’

'You—' Stephen hesitated at the word. 'You – raped her.'

'Well ...' Ngwami took two steps across the carpet and returned. 'This is Kowlongo, not London. Has she complained to you?'

'No. But – well, everything's changed. She used to love life here – go out into the bush, swimming, all that. She was so happy and good. Now she hardly speaks, she stays at home all the time. You're just using her.'

'It takes some women like that. In a while she will be herself again. In any case – if she has not complained. She is a modern young woman. And as I understand, it was you who accompanied your sister to Kowlongo, not the other way round.'

There was a knock at the door.

'Ah, the tea. Come in.'

The good-looking young private entered bearing a tray set with silver on a white cloth. He laid it on a small table and looked to the general for advice.

'How do you take your tea, Mr Gresham?'

Stephen replied. The soldier poured two cups and carried them across, offered a plate of fine biscuits, and withdrew.

Ngwami handled his teacup and biscuit, as he did everything else, with grace.

'If you take my advice, Mr Gresham,' he said, 'you will find yourself a woman, and stop worrying about your sister.'

Stephen could maintain the pretence no longer. 'For God's sake! My sister's raped, I'm handcuffed and beaten up, my arm's cut open,' he showed the stitches holding the long slash in his forearm, 'our whole life here is in ruins, and you tell me to find myself a woman.'

'Yes.' Ngwami smiled. 'I would argue whether your sister's life is in ruins, but that's a private matter. Find yourself a good woman – or I will find one for you, if you wish. There are plenty of Kowlongo women who would be glad of a pound and a good meal, and the chance to lie in a clean bed for an hour or two. You Europeans should give our African women a chance, you would learn many things. You would like me to arrange it?'

'No, I would not like you to arrange it.'

'Ah.' Again Ngwami smiled. He crossed to Stephen's side and unexpectedly caressed his shoulder with a strong hand.

Stephen recoiled.

'A boy, then. I saw how you regarded my steward. He is very good looking. I like that myself sometimes. In the bush we have no women. You want an African boy?'

'Bloody hell!' Stephen set his cup aside and sprang to his feet. 'No, I don't want an African boy.'

'Ah. You have some accident, maybe. Nature was not very kind to you. You do not like women, you do not like boys. You do not like sex at all.'

'Yes, of course I do. I'm a man like any other. But all I want, General Ngwami, is for you to leave my sister alone.'

At last the smile faded from Ngwami's face, the game palled. 'And that, Mr Gresham, I will not do. When my guards told you to be quiet they gave good advice. Do not come to Kowlongo with your public school voice and your weak English passions, and seek to dictate to me how I should behave. I say again, do not!'

Stephen quailed before the half-stern, half-animal black eyes that regarded him across the room.

'Very good.' Ngwami rang the silver bell a second time and the private returned. 'Mr Gresham is leaving.' He turned to Stephen. 'This soldier will see you to the front door. Good morning.' With a polite smile and inclination of the head Stephen was dismissed.

At three o'clock in his office at the mission, Stephen was informed that he was wanted at the door. Three soldiers awaited him. He recognized one of the guards who had held him handcuffed outside the bungalow.

'You are to come with us, sir,' a sergeant informed him. 'Orders of General Ngwami.'

'May I tell my senior colleague?' Stephen asked.

'Of course, sir.'

They drove through town and out towards the bungalow. Two hundred yards beyond, the car turned, drove back a little way, and stopped in the shade of a tree. The entrance to the bungalow was in clear view.

The town children were still in school, few people moved in the road. Even with the windows down and the doors open it was hot in the car. Sweat ran down Stephen's neck.

'Is it all right if I get out for a minute?' he said.

'No. You stay there,' the sergeant told him.

'What are we doing here?'

'You wait. You see.'

With a sigh Stephen leaned forward and picked the wet shirt from his back. He looked down the shimmering road towards town. The lush greenery was still, a few skinny animals sought the shade, ragged washing hung motionless outside shacks.

It was half an hour before the two cars approached. The general's, in front, stopped in the road. The driver opened the door and Ngwami climbed out. Mary drove past and turned into the drive. As she stepped out Ngwami joined her. Together they went into the house.

Fifty yards distant Stephen could not see the expression on her face, but clearly she had led the way with no reluctance.

'All right, point made.' Stephen turned resignedly to the sergeant. 'Can we go now?'

'Not now. One minute.'

They waited.

'Now, you come.' The sergeant climbed from the car. Prompted by a guard Stephen followed. The sergeant led the way towards the bungalow. His thoughts a turmoil of possibilities Stephen walked at his heels, followed by the two other soldiers.

The guard who had been to the bungalow previously drew his knife.

'Like before. You be quiet, or ...' He drew the knife a slashing curve in the air.

Softly the sergeant led the way past the garage and front door to the side of the house. Stephen's fears were confirmed.

'Oh no! No!' He resisted, and at once felt the point of the knife thrust against his spine.

'You walk. General's orders.'

Few seconds were needed to bring them to Mary's window. They stood to one side.

'Now, you look!' the sergeant whispered fiercely.

Appalled and shaking, Stephen gazed through the white slats. The room was cool. The bed stood with its head to the window wall. On it, still partly dressed, lay his sister. Ngwami rose from bending over her and began to unbutton his uniform jacket. Eagerly Mary reached up to assist. Her white hands fumbled with the buckle of his belt.

Stephen shook his head and looked away, only to see the unyielding faces of the guards. He closed his eyes then opened them again. Ngwami was nearly naked. Mary, her breasts loosened, caught at his undergarments and pulled them to the floor. The black phallus, more massive even than Stephen's imaginings, scythed from his powerful thighs. Mary caught at his waist and pulled him to the bed. In moments her caresses grew more urgent, but Ngwami would not be hurried.

Stephen could look no more. The knife pressed into his back. He closed his eyes for long moments then opened them at his sister's cries. Incredibly Ngwami was entering her. Her nails caught at his black shoulders, slowly the white legs curled to embrace his back.

Stephen fixed his eyes on a far corner of the room, impossible to blot out that irresistible thrusting on the bed and the sounds of their lovemaking. For many minutes it continued, in time growing savage, with Mary crying in abandonment and Ngwami playing with her like the splendid cat he was – finally, as she grew too weak to bear more, choosing the moment of his own remorseless culmination.

The guards, ignoring their instruction, had been watching over Stephen's shoulder. All four men were in a state of excitation. The sergeant recalled them to duty.

'Now, you follow!' he whispered intently, beckoning Stephen.

His legs weak, Stephen did as he was bidden. Ten minutes later the car dropped him at the entrance to the mission.

As he sat in his office he thought the images, the cries, would never leave his imagination. They throbbed on the walls, entered through the doorway from the corridor beyond. The sheer power of Ngwami – his presence as much as his body: small wonder that Mary was overwhelmed. Their upbringing in England had prepared them for nothing remotely like it. From embraces in doorways and parked cars, a stolen night with a boyfriend – to the lovemaking and debauch of General Ngwami. It was an hour, colleagues were going home, before Stephen could recall himself to the office and take in his surroundings.

During his absence a parcel had been delivered, a flattish box about eighteen inches square. Apart from his name it bore no inscription. With little curiosity he cut the string with a desk knife and pulled back the wrapping. Within, beneath tissues,

he glimpsed something pink, like rubber or plastic sheeting. Surprised he lifted it out.

With an electric shock of revelation he saw it was the shape of a woman, a naked woman with breasts and genitalia, and a nozzle for inflation. Horrified he thrust it out of sight behind the desk, fearful it would be seen from the door.

The thing was obscene, silky with french chalk, already turning to a grip of rubber where his damp fingers wiped the chalk away. There was no doubt from where it had come. He read the label again, 'For Mr Stephen Gresham', and imagined General Ngwami laughing at the joke, a new humiliation in his game with the two whites. Ngwami – his nakedness once more covered by the fresh khaki drill. Stephen thrust the pink woman back in the box.

Twenty minutes later, alone in the building save for the cleaners, he locked the door and drew it out once more. With guilty curiosity he lifted the cap from the nozzle and blew. Slowly, with cracks and rustles, it inflated, and in two or three minutes was erect, a swollen creature, tottering and deformed. He surveyed the sausage-like limbs, the vacant pink face. Beneath his hand the tight sides had the texture and appeal of a rubber dinghy, yet the moulded breasts and reinforced crotch disturbed him. Momentarily he wondered, and ran a hand across the creature's swollen bottom – then dismissed the idea as impossible and degrading, and pulled out the stopper. The air gushed forth, the woman collapsed like a nightmare. He returned it to the box, and thrust it from sight in the bottom of a cupboard.

Mary had no idea of her brother's presence at the window. Aching and heavy-limbed, still glowing in the aftermath of Ngwami's visit, she lay listlessly on the couch. The fan cooled her. With smooth fingers she picked over the pages of a magazine.

In an armchair Stephen finished another gin and tonic. He was three-quarters drunk, and had been in the same state since he returned home three hours earlier. The events of the day lay heavily upon him: unforgettable words and images rolled like a film through his drink-inflamed mind. His resentment was high. With the passion of a weak man he longed for revenge.

The clock struck ten. Stephen rose to his feet.

'I'm going out.'

Surprised, but more bound up in her own world, Mary glanced across.

'Where are you going?'

'To the office.' His speech was slightly slurred. 'I want to look at a couple of papers.'

'You're not taking the car?'

He sneered. 'No, I'm not taking the car. I'll walk.'

'You want a run in?'

'I said I'll walk!'

Mary furrowed her brow and hesitated, then looked back at the magazine. She had never seen her brother in that mood. It seemed best to leave him alone.

From the kitchen and garage Stephen dropped one or two items in a bag, then let himself out of the house. The night was beautiful. A breeze blew warm against his brow, odours of flowers and spice alternated with the suburban stench of drains and cess pools. Every so often he paused and raised the gin bottle to his lips. The few Africans in the road passed by without greeting.

By the time Stephen reached the mission his drunkenness was complete. Fumbling he let himself through the door and stumbled up the stairs to his office. Locking the office door with exaggerated care, he set his bag aside and opened the cupboard.

His brain reeled with every puff as the rubber woman swelled in his hands. He blew her hard, swinging awkwardly, and pressed home the rubber cap. Briefly he regarded the horror, then ran his hands lasciviously down her flanks, clutched her close, and gave the rubber lips a foolish drunken kiss. Then he propped her against the wall, and spread the floor with newspaper from his bag. He laid her upon it, blank-eyed and pink, and took up paint-pot and brush.

With long strokes he began to paint the rubber doll black. The quick-drying shellac dripped on the newspapers. He paused for another mouthful of gin, black fingermarks circling the bright bottle. At his knees the indecent creature rocked and bobbed beneath the brush.

In twenty minutes she was finished, streaky black from head to foot. He picked off some of the newspaper that adhered to protuberances, gave her a last few strokes, then stood back. Save for the face he was drunkenly satisfied with his work. Struck by an inspiration he let himself from the room, and in the secretary's

desk sought white and red correcting fluids. With the little internal brushes he gave the doll minstrel eyes and fat red lips, and as an afterthought red nipples also. Carefully he painted a scar, like that of Ngwami, on the black cheek.

Stephen stood back. Only two things remained to do. On a blank sheet of paper he painted 'General Elisha Ngwami', and sellotaped it to the already dry shoulder. Then taking a long aubergine from the vegetable basket at home, he thrust it halfway into the orifice between the legs.

With drunken pleasure he regarded his handiwork and laughed wetly, then tidied the office, opening the window to release the fumes.

The time was midnight. It had been dark for nearly six hours. As Stephen let himself out of the mission, doll awkwardly beneath one arm, bag in his hand, the road was empty. As quietly as his condition would allow he slipped along the back streets, crossing planks over storm drains, starting back as rats scurried from refuse cans, drawing closer and closer to military headquarters.

The building was silent. A light glowed in a single room. The door was closed. Stephen flitted along the pavement, climbed the broad steps, and propped the obscene doll in the entrance by the main door. Securely fastened, the notice fluttered in the breeze.

Aware, even in his drunkenness, that his action was dangerous and foolhardy, Stephen shivered as he hurried away. Pausing beneath a dark wooden balcony he took a bolstering mouthful from the bottom of the bottle of gin, then turned towards the road home. His feet led him from side to side of the pavement. He sat on a wall and laughed at his reply to that black bastard Ngwami. With drunken lust and longing he recalled the scene through the bedroom window. He wished a door would open and a hand beckon him to similar swollen pleasures. But all the doors remained closed. The trees and roofs rolled backwards against the sky. He was sick before he was a mile from town.

It was five o'clock in the morning when soldiers thundered at the bungalow door. Stephen heard nothing. Mary opened the door in her nightwear. Roughly she was dragged outside and down the path to a waiting van. Hands seized Stephen and slapped him about the face. Slowly his eyes flickered open. Naked in bed

beneath a sheet, he was thrown to the floor and told to pull on trousers and a shirt. He did so, terrified and overwhelmed with nausea. Before his clothes were fastened he too was bundled out of the house. The van doors slammed, and next moment brother and sister were speeding through the dawn streets towards military headquarters.

Any resistance was met with violence, but apart from that they were not ill treated. Stephen was sick again and fed quantities of strong coffee to bring him to his senses. In a flimsy nightdress and housecoat Mary huddled in a chair. As clearly as he could remember, in a low voice, Stephen told her what had happened. Yellow with fright she rose and stared from the window. Already hot, the sun struck slanting on the side of the building. The sounds of morning rose from the streets below.

The guard would tell them nothing. Clothes were fetched from the bungalow. They washed. Breakfast was brought. They waited. Perhaps, Stephen thought, seduced by civility, once Ngwami's initial anger had passed the incident would be overlooked. After all, the commander of the Kowlongo army would not wish to advertise what had happened.

At eleven o'clock they were summoned into Ngwami's presence. On a table lay the doll, more loathsome and voluptuous than Stephen would have believed possible. Nothing had been changed or removed. Ngwami's face remained good-natured, but behind it burned a terrible anger.

'As you see, Miss Gresham, your brother has been playing games. Very unwisely. You see the notice – "General Elisha Ngwami". I am not quite sure whether it is intended as a gift, or a representation of me. What do you think?' There was silence and he continued. 'In either case it was really most unwise. You both know I have no need of such dolls. I would be surprised to learn that you did not welcome my visits, Miss Gresham, certainly my later visits – as your brother knows well enough.' He turned to Stephen. 'I offered you good advice, and assistance too. You should have taken them.'

There was a long pause. Mary, more than her brother, understood the depths of Ngwami's character. They were helpless. Nevertheless she seized the opportunity.

'Oh, Elisha! General Ngwami! Of course he was stupid. He was drunk! He knows he shouldn't have done it. He expects to be

punished. But don't be too hard. Please! Please! You can have me any time you want.'

Ngwami drew his arm from her grasp. 'You think I want you now! You think I touch you now! I rather take that doll to my bed!'

Stricken, she withdrew. Again there was silence. Ngwami raised the silver bell. The young private who had served tea the previous day opened the door.

'Mr Gresham and his sister are leaving now,' Ngwami said. 'Tell the guard.'

The private nodded and withdrew. The guard was close at hand, for a few seconds later there was a knock and the door re-opened. Four soldiers stood at the entrance.

Ngwami turned briefly to Mary and seemed about to speak, then changed his mind. 'Take them,' he said.

The soldiers advanced, their boots muffled on the carpet. Ngwami watched impassively as Stephen and Mary were escorted from the room. An army lorry waited for them at the foot of the broad steps. Ragged vendors and passers-by watched curiously as they were urged aboard with impatient hands. Then the lorry set off, cleaving a path through the busy streets.

It was a long journey into the bush. The lorry rattled and bumped over the rough track. The sun on the metal roof and sides turned the interior into a furnace. At the rear, where their passing formed a draught, the guards played cards. Clouds of dust from the baked ground swirled in their wake. Mary sat silent. Stephen sweated out the last of the alcohol. After a time there were no road signs, but from the angle of the sun it appeared they were travelling south. The last of the morning and the afternoon drew slowly past. The lorry stopped at a petrol dump. For more than an hour they sat roasting under guard. Then they were off again. The sun was falling steeply into the trees when at last there was a shout from the cab. One of the guards looked round the side of the lorry. The wooden barracks and wire fence of an army camp were approaching.

The tall gates opened. The lorry drove through and stopped at the guardhouse. Mary was off-loaded. The lorry continued a further two hundred yards then stopped again.

The building before which Stephen stepped down was neatly

constructed of plain wood, raised from the ground to let the breeze pass beneath. A stocky soldier thrust him in the back and he lurched forward. As he did so he heard a woman's cries and looked towards the guardhouse. Ignoring them, the soldier pushed him again and again. The door opened. Stephen stumbled through the entrance. The door slammed shut at his back.

Turning, he found himself in the presence of three men. Deliberately, ensuring they did no permanent damage and marked his skin as little as possible, they beat him up. Stephen had never dreamed of such pain and screamed as boots and batons thudded with cruel skill on wrists and kidneys, bare feet and shoulders, wherever the agony was greatest. At length, as he lay threshing on the boards, one delivered the *coup de grâce*. A light blazed in Stephen's head then darkness engulfed him, his whimpering ceased, and he slumped to the boards in blessed unconsciousness.

How long he lay in that state he did not know. When he came to it was dark. He lay on a cot in a small chamber. The slatted window was barred, the door locked. His head felt as if his brains were exposed, every bone and muscle in his body hurt. Wretched with fear, he lay back on the thin mattress.

Some time later footsteps approached. The light went on. Two laughing soldiers unlocked the door.

'Come,' one said abruptly.

Barefoot, Stephen followed them into the night. They did not walk far, only fifty yards to a well-lit barrack hut from which rose the sound of men's voices.

It had all been arranged. Twenty or thirty soldiers, off-duty and in undress for the heat, sat around on beds and lockers. There was a cheer as Stephen entered and was thrust forward. There, on a bed in the middle of the room, lay the black doll. The notice and aubergine had been removed. One of the soldiers turned to the others and waved his hands for quiet. Slowly the noise subsided.

'Now.' The soldier addressed Stephen. 'You know what to do?'

Followed by the rest of the hut the man collapsed in laughter. As Stephen drew back it grew louder.

Again the man waved his hands. 'No, this way.' He ushered him forward. 'You have to take off your clothes first.' Again the barracks erupted in laughter.

Stephen struggled backwards as hands pushed him towards the

bed. Suddenly one of the soldiers seized him around the waist and caught at the buckle of his trousers. It was the signal for half a dozen more. Helpless in their hands, Stephen fought as shirt and trousers and underpants were stripped from him, and naked as the day he was born he was carried to the bed and laid beside the painted doll.

All around the black eyes watched with delight. Stephen covered his nakedness with his hand and thrust the creature from him. It was replaced. Again he pushed it away. A soldier drew his belt and slapped Stephen across the buttocks. A trace of menace was in his voice as he said, 'Go on, now. You jig-a-jig!' A second time the doll was replaced. Still Stephen drew back from it. Another stinging blow, and another. 'Go on, what wrong with you!'

Terrified of another beating, Stephen pressed himself against the bobbing rubber doll. There was a shout of encouragement. He caught it around the shoulders, lay between the swollen legs. But nothing happened, it was impossible. No matter how he sought to satisfy his tormentors, his limpid white sex refused to cooperate. The strap thudded time and again across his back. Desperately he clutched the rubber waist and wept tears of shame and frustration on the painted eyes. The laughter turned to hoots of contempt. Giving up the attempt, Stephen rolled aside and buried his face in his hands.

A man who sat near jumped forward and clutched the white buttocks with both hands and unmistakable sexual gestures. The soldiers roared their approval.

A voice cut through the noise. Ngwami, whom Stephen had not seen, was sitting with his men at the back of the hut. Laughing, the soldier sat down. And while the men's excitement was high Ngwami turned it with a new idea.

'My men! You live in bush long time. See no women. Who want this woman now?'

Again the crowd erupted. Half a dozen soldiers leaped to their feet. Voices called out one name and another. A youth with burning eyes jumped forward, tearing at his clothes. Still covering himself, Stephen had scarce time to turn aside as the black limbs thrust him from the bed and the young soldier, hugely erect, flung himself upon the rubber doll.

Stephen was dismissed. The crowd watched the strong young

soldier with shouts and cries of mounting excitement. He was followed by a second, and a third.

Ngwami rested his hand briefly on the arm of the handsome young private who had accompanied him from headquarters. The youth glanced at him quickly and smiled. They rose quietly and left the barracks. In the doorway Ngwami spoke to one of the guards who had fetched Stephen from the hut. The man nodded. Clutching his clothes, now scarcely noticed, Stephen was led through the ranks of intent soldiers. Ngwami was waiting near the entrance.

'Well, as I told you, Mr Gresham, in the bush there are no women.' He glanced towards the guardhouse and corrected himself. 'Very rarely, at any rate. The men have only themselves.' His hand rested momentarily on the seat of the slim young soldier beside him. 'As you see, the doll will be well used.'

Once more in the inferior position, beaten, shamed and naked, Stephen could find no words. Mosquitoes whined in his ears. He felt their stinging bites.

'The air is still tonight, the flies are bad. I am afraid you may not find your room as comfortable as the bungalow.' Ngwami smiled. 'Still, you will have time to get used to it. Goodnight, Mr Gresham.' He nodded to the guard and turned away with his companion towards the general's spacious hut in a far corner of the compound.

The guard urged Stephen forward. A minute later he was back in the small room. Alone in the darkness, with the door locked, he lay on the bed in a turmoil of shame and tears, fear and fantasy and pain.

It was a wretched night, suffocatingly hot, alive with the unrelenting attack of the mosquitoes. Though Stephen was exhausted, for eight interminable hours he lay unable to sleep. At last, as the light of dawn strengthened in the sky, his eyes closed.

Shortly afterwards breakfast was brought to him, and some proquanil tablets to guard against malaria. His body was covered with bites. Cruel bruises were appearing. He was allowed to use the soldiers' ablutions.

As the sun rose higher the heat grew. Through the slatted window Stephen was able to see a segment of the compound

which included the guardhouse and the gate. For a long time, in the absence of anything else to do, he gazed out. The general's car, Ngwami in the back, purred past the saluting guard and drew away up the road with a cloud of dust billowing behind.

A while later the guardroom door opened and Mary appeared, stumbling, supported by a soldier. Stephen shouted to her and shouted again. She looked up, but could not see him peering from the side of the window. In a moment she was gone from view. Fully understanding what he had witnessed, Stephen pressed his face against the window frame, racked by dry sobs.

Later that day, as he was led out for exercise, he was able to survey the camp more fully. It was larger than he had realized. The grey mesh perimeter fence was topped by several strands of barbed wire, angled outwards. Surrounding this was a brief clearing, beyond which the baked African scrub spread out on all sides as far as the eye could see. There were five or six barrack huts in addition to the one he had entered the night before, though with troops on manoeuvres and border detail most were unoccupied. Separated from the barrack huts by one or two trees and a patch of raked earth was a larger building, with white windows and a broad verandah. This was the bush hospital.

And there, as the sun sank molten at the end of his first day in the camp, Stephen was led. His clothes were taken from him, and after he had showered he was provided with a pair of much-washed khaki trousers and shirt. Despite the heat and distress of the day he was hungry, for he had not eaten since breakfast, but the significance of that did not dawn on him until much later.

Two hours after he entered the hospital he was approached by a doctor in uniform, one hand casually in his pocket, the other behind his back. He was accompanied by three strong soldiers. Wary but unsuspecting, Stephen sat as he was bidden. Then the soldiers held him rigid in the chair while from behind his back the doctor produced a large hypodermic syringe.

Stephen screamed and struggled, but to no avail. The doctor rubbed a swab across his upper arm and thrust home the needle. Slowly the plunger was depressed. The needle was withdrawn, the spot massaged briefly. Still the guards held him tight.

The doctor regarded him. 'Sorry,' he said, his voice and face expressing little true regret. 'General's orders.'

Aghast at the possibilities, Stephen was dumb with terror. He

dared not ask. Then a minute later the first walls of black began to roll across his brain. 'What are you going to do?' His voice cracked as the world began to slip away. 'What are you ... going ... to do?'

An indefinable time later – a minute? A lifetime? – Stephen stirred and opened his eyes. He was in bed. A black face stared down into his own. It retreated. There was a raging pain in his throat. His head fell to one side, blood slid from his lips. He lapsed back into unconsciousness.

It was dark when he woke again. His throat was agony. He tried to swallow and could not. Breathing hurt. Somehow he made a noise and a light was switched on. A man looked down. He took up a syringe and filled it from a little bottle. With gratitude Stephen saw the needle slide into his arm. Five minutes later with blessed relief the pain ebbed and he slept again.

They were humane. For three days, while the raw fibres of his throat healed and the most savage pain eased, they kept him drugged. When at last he came round and could focus his eyes upon the plain room and the trees beyond, the hurt was bearable.

But then, and only then, he discovered he was dumb. The army doctor had removed his larynx. He could breathe and make sounds of rushing air, even form words with his teeth and lips, but speak audibly he could not.

'Why?' he breathed at the male nurse who tended him, his eyes an agonized question. 'Why?' But the soldier either did not know or would not say.

To add to the horror, the second bed in the room was occupied by the black doll. Morning and evening, when they were not on duty, soldiers came to ease their lust in the swollen rubber body. His feelings a riot, fascination battling with shame and disgust, Stephen watched their urgency and power, the blind heaving of their backs, the thrusting of their buttocks, the gasps and running sweat, the cries and shudders of orgasm. They did not mind his presence, some took delight in boasting their manhood before him; the story of the white man's failure was common knowledge.

After two or three days Stephen was so distressed by it all that one evening, conscious of the punishment that must follow, he seized the fork with which he ate his food and thrust it time and again into the fat and collapsing body. For this he was thrashed,

despite his weakness, a beating that sent him into fever for the following forty-eight hours. And the act did no good, for that same night she was patched and resumed her queenly occupation of the second bed in Stephen's room. He did not stab her again.

Looking from the window one afternoon he saw Mary at the far side of the compound. She walked slowly, almost slattern-like, staring at nothing. The spring in her step, that he knew so well, was gone. Her dress was crumpled and lacked a belt, her hair hung lank. She was another woman: yet she was still his sister. Forgetful he tried to shout, and was convulsed by a spasm of pain, then banged on the wall and shook the blind. But she did not hear.

The following night, as he lay on his bed, from the corridor came the doctor who had injected him before the operation, and sometimes given relief in the days that followed. He carried a hypodermic syringe.

'Just to give you a good night's sleep, Mr Gresham,' he said, and leaned forward with the antiseptic swab.

Stephen drew back. He tried to cry out, 'What for? You gave me none last night. I don't need an injection.' Nothing emerged but a terrible panting of fear.

The doctor shook his head. 'General's orders,' he said briefly.

Wildly Stephen scrambled back.

The doctor called. Three guards emerged from the corridor. Stephen was caught and held. The big hypodermic slid into his arm.

He tried to scream. His eyes were an anguished appeal. 'Why? What? Oh God, help me!' Then the drug filtered towards his brain. His struggles weakened, his eyes turned back, his head fell sideways against the arm of one of the guards.

When Stephen woke he was in a dark place, overwhelmed by fear. His feet hurt. Someone was thrusting daggers beneath his toenails. His mouth opened soundlessly. A flailing arm struck a water jug and sent it crashing to the floor. Then his black friend was there with a needle, the torturer laid down his knives.

Two days later, when the grey fog cleared and the stabs had become spasmodic, Stephen discovered that both legs had been amputated above the knee. And to increase his mental agony the limbs were brought to show him, balanced on a metal tray, stinking with decay in the tropical heat. There were his knees, his calves, his feet – the legs that had run and bathed and played

cricket. Sick and sobbing Stephen turned his eyes away and wished he were dead. Then a piercing pain burned in the nerves that had once been his right big toe, making him clutch the frame of the bed and twist in agony until the sweat streamed down his face and neck. Far from being dead, Stephen had a strong hold on life.

The days passed, the pain eased. No longer when the time came for dressings to be changed did he tremble in a palsy of anticipation. The surgeon had made a good job, the stumps of his legs were firm and rounded, stitched over with flaps of skin. There was never a trace of infection.

And still, as he lay recovering, night and morning the black doll buckled beneath the bodies of the sweating soldiers. It was returning to its natural pink. The flexing of the rubber, aided by the sponging of each user, made the shellac peel. Often under a particularly passionate assault the doll had burst, and been repaired again. Stephen came to know the soldiers well, their physiques and personal habits. One youth came twice every day without fail. Whatever their mood as they laboured above the jerking rubber limbs, whether slow and dream-like or savage, the soldiers' pleasure in coupling with the dreadful creature filled him with growing revulsion. Yet it was impossible not to like some of them. He could almost have welcomed visits, but the soldiers never lost their contempt – made worse by his present mutilation. In Ngwami's hand-picked army there was no place for weakness or pity.

One afternoon, a week after the amputation, the doll was covered by a blanket and there was a noise of voices in the corridor. Ngwami entered, powerful and handsome as ever, a slim black woman clinging to his arm. She looked at the silhouette of the hidden doll and giggled. There was a strong smell of perfume. Ngwami surveyed Stephen and smiled easily.

'They are looking after you well, I hope, Mr Gresham,' he said.

Stephen opened his mouth and hissed a reply, but Ngwami either could not or did not choose to comprehend.

'I have been away for some time, but I hope to rejoin my men here in two weeks or so. By that time your treatment should be complete.' He leaned forward and gripped Stephen's shoulder

amicably. 'I shall see you again then. If there is anything you want, just tell the orderly.'

'What treatment?' Stephen gasped. 'What are you doing to me?'

But Ngwami's attention was elsewhere.

'What about Mary?' This time Stephen was understood.

'Your sister? She is being looked after.'

Immaculate, Ngwami looked about the room and prepared to leave. The girl wriggled and clutched his arm. He let her go and slapped her playfully on the rump. She squealed and teetered out of the door on high heels. Laughing, Ngwami looked back at Stephen.

'We must go. There is a carnival party in town tonight. If we do not hurry we will be late.'

The girl called impatiently. Ngwami shrugged with good humour and followed her into the corridor.

Their car drove away. Not long afterwards, as Stephen lay thinking over the visit, there was a noise of anxious voices and hurrying footsteps in the corridor. Figures carrying a woman's body bustled past the door. He glimpsed the trailing fair hair of his sister. The sounds faded. Three soldiers passed back along the corridor. No one came to tell him what was happening. In an anguish he seized a tray beside his bed and beat it against the metal frame, on and on until at length an orderly appeared in the doorway.

'Hah - hah,' Stephen panted, gesturing in the direction Mary's body had been taken.

The orderly's irritation at the disturbance was calmed by his distress.

'She try to hang herself,' he said bluntly. 'But she cut down too soon. Now she coming round.'

Stephen sank back on the pillow. The orderly waited a moment longer, then turned and walked back down the corridor. Stephen was left alone with his thoughts.

In the early evening, when the men's work was finished for the day, he saw Mary pass in the other direction. Her throat was bandaged, she stumbled as she walked. With hanging head, too wretched herself, she did not look up as she passed Stephen's door. Perhaps she did not know he was there. Soon she was gone across the compound.

Half an hour later the first soldier arrived to visit the shabby doll. Momentarily Stephen was glad of the diversion and watched as he undressed, but as the man lay on the squeaking creature and the familiar ritual commenced, he was sickened to the heart and turned aside, pressing his hands over his ears. But still he heard the little moans and grunts of pleasure, and even in his own bed, passed through the flimsy floor, felt the rocking of the soldier's fierce thrusts.

That day, in addition to everything else that had happened, Stephen's legs had given him some sharp stabs of pain. It was a relief when the doctor approached with a medical tray and the needle which brought peace and would ensure a good night's rest. It was a larger injection than usual, but that did not register. It was the doctor's demeanour which revealed the hideous truth. He stood back watching, silently waiting for the drug to take effect.

'Oh no! Oh no!' Stephen dragged himself up the pillows, shaking his head and staring at the impassive figure with terrified eyes. 'Not again! Not again! Please!' As he struggled his hand slipped and brought him tumbling from the bed. Taking much of his weight, the stumps of his legs struck the boards with a thud. The pain nearly made him pass out. Then the familiar dizziness and distance made the ceiling come and go, black clouds billowed against the light. Seconds later, with closed eyes and slack body, Stephen Gresham lay unconscious on the floor.

Immediately he felt the pain, as if his wrists were broken, his fingernails torn out, his hands nailed to a burning board, he knew the awful truth. In that flickering glimpse from death as he came round after the operation, as the tube was taken from his throat and the black faces peered down, he saw the bandaged stumps of his arms, amputated above the elbow. With a gurgle his head fell sideways, for the anaesthetic still had him.

In rough humanity, as after the earlier operations, the doctors kept him drugged for the first two days. When he woke the physical pain was bearable, at least for most of the time. Armless, legless and dumb he lay back on the pillows. There was nothing to do but think – and he wished himself dead.

As the days passed and his wounds healed the wish grew no less. The surgeon was skilled and had again made a beautiful job, the stumps of his arms, as of his legs, rounded and firm, stitched over with skin. Naked and helpless as a baby he lay beneath a cool

sheet, tortured by his thoughts. When the orderlies walked through the room, or the strong soldiers came to visit the doll, he watched their limbs – their slim muscles, the flexing of their knees and wrists, the delicacy of their hands – and could not bear it.

Ten days after the operation the stitches were removed. That same afternoon, on a stretcher, he was carried from the hospital, across the compound in the blazing African sun, to the hut he had occupied on his first day in the camp.

The room in which he was laid down had two beds. Already the doll occupied one. From beyond the slatted windows came the sound of men's voices calling, the thud of marching boots, the shriek of tropical birds in the nearby bush. It was very hot. The sweat trickled down Stephen's face and chest. He looked around, familiarizing himself with the surroundings, but there was little to see. The room was plain, clean, functional. A table and chair stood by the door, a small locker in one corner. Between the beds lay a rush mat. That was all, save for plodding beetles and small bright lizards that came in at the window and climbed spread-eagled about the walls. Stephen welcomed them.

Slowly the first afternoon passed. No one visited him. Flies buzzed incessantly about the room, troublesome as he had no hands to raise to brush them away. Only by continually shaking his head or jerking his body could he get rid of them, or by crawling beneath the sheet and sweating unbearably. When darkness came there was a brief respite, then the flies were replaced by whining mosquitoes that stung and raised lumps and drove him demented. When the orderly brought food, and left Stephen to eat it as well as he was able, he tried to indicate curtains and mosquito net, or smouldering mosquito coil, but the orderly shook his head. 'No net. Forbidden. General's orders.'

Even for the soldiers who came to use the peeling doll – a brief visit and their minds on other matters – the mosquitoes were an irritation. For Stephen they became a torment which never stopped, pursuing his white skin even into the sweating cocoon he fumbled beneath top and bottom sheet. When morning came he was exhausted. Briefly he slept. Food and water were brought. Soldiers drilled in the compound with loud commands and thud of boots. As the heat of the day mounted the flies returned, attracted by the smell of the food and his sweat.

Slowly, slowly the day passed; then another night; and another

day. Stephen longed for death, tried to plot it, but there was no way. He was too weak and helpless even to kill himself. Moreover it grew plain that following the operations his strength was returning. He would survive.

And suddenly one evening a net was hung at the window. The flies and mosquitoes were killed. A coil burned in the corner. A fan cooled the air. Ngwami had returned.

That night Stephen slept well. The following morning, for the first time since their arrival at the bush camp, he was visited by his sister. Mary did not want to come. She knew well that their meeting must be painful beyond words. She was in a dreadful condition, her face and limbs scarred with open sores, the once-lovely hair straggling, blue eyes dulled by experience, wearied to the point of death. A livid scar, circling her neck, showed where she had tried to hang herself.

When she saw what they had done to her athletic brother, and he beheld his sister, there was nothing to say. Mary's knees would not support her. Slowly, back to the wall, she slid to the floor and sat weeping silently. Stephen could not hold his own tears back. The brutalized guard regarded them with contempt.

Two or three minutes later the visit was at an end. Mary sat on Stephen's bed. 'They say he's sending me to a recovery camp by the river,' she said. 'But I don't believe it. He can't let me go, can he?'

The guard took her arm and she rose. The silence of the terrible last goodbye was between them. Their eyes met. Then she wrested her arm from the guard's grasp and flung herself on her brother's neck, arms brave and tight about his shoulders. Fiercely she kissed his cheeks and eyes, then stood back panting, her face kindled to a desperate light. The next moment, without a backward look, she strode from the room. The guard followed.

Stephen heard the back of a truck slammed shut, then the two cab doors. The engine started. It drove away in the direction of the gate. The sound faded. Mary was gone.

Five minutes later, from a mile or more out in the bush, came the crack of a single rifle shot. Stephen started up in bed. A moment later there was a second shot. Nerves strung to breaking point, he listened, but beyond the familiar sounds of the day all was still.

Minutes passed. Slowly he subsided in bed. Memories of their

childhood flooded his mind. He lost track of time. But some time later, perhaps half an hour, there was the noise of a truck returning. Through the netting at the window he saw the top as it circled in the compound. A door opened. A soldier snapped the breech of his rifle. There were voices and retreating footsteps. A sudden stab of pain in what had been Stephen's right elbow made him stiffen in bed, then rub the stump gently against the mattress. By the time the spasm had passed the compound was empty. The late morning sun scorched down.

An hour after darkness had fallen, when the men had eaten and the cicadas shrilled about the huts, Stephen received a visit from Ngwami. Following the horrors endured by Mary and himself, it was vile to see how immaculately he was turned out. The handsome black face shone, beneath the freshly laundered drill his body moved with grace and power.

'Well, Mr Gresham. As you see – as I told you – I have rejoined my men. How are you feeling?' He smiled. 'Of course, you cannot tell me. But you have survived. Apart from the obvious adjustments I would say you look very fit.' He drew the razor-sharp knife from his belt and delicately manicured one nail, then drew back the sheet and looked down on Stephen's limbless and naked body. 'Yes, my surgeon has done a good job.' Amiably he sat on the edge of the bed. 'They were asking about you at the Economic Mission. I told them about the hunting trip you and your sister made with me: how your boat got carried downstream into crocodile waters.' As he spoke, idly he traced patterns on Stephen's skin, across his stomach and up and down his thighs, with the point of the knife. 'A nasty business. There is nothing much to recover from crocodiles. We showed them an arm and leg – torn off, you understand. The rest we buried by the river.' The knife drew closer and closer to Stephen's organs of sex. 'Your friends at the mission and the hospital held a service of remembrance the day before yesterday. It was very touching.' Ngwami smiled. The edge of the knife scraped against the softness between Stephen's legs. Ngwami experimented briefly. Stephen twisted on the bed as the knife prodded and turned. Despite himself he started to become aroused.

Ngwami's smile broadened. 'So, what the soldiers are saying is not true after all.' He left off the game and stood up, turning towards the battered doll in the adjoining bed.

'It has been well used, as I told you. A pity you did not enjoy the benefit of it yourself, Mr Gresham. Or perhaps you have done – secretly.' He wrinkled his brow humorously. 'But in the soldiers' barracks at least you did not. Would you like her now? It is more private here.'

Stephen shook his head. For the first time in his relationship with Ngwami – ironically when he was totally helpless – he began to feel stronger. Ngwami was cheapening himself. Like his soldiers, it seemed that the idea of the doll excited him.

'No? But you will understand if I – well, I have not yet touched her myself.' He crossed the rush mat and sat on the edge of the doll's bed, reaching forward to caress the pneumatic breasts with experienced fingers, sliding his hand down the rubber flank to the reinforced quick between her legs.

For half a minute he was thus occupied. Rising then, he plunged his knife into the bed-head and began to divest himself of his clothing.

'I am always ready for a new experience.'

As his magnificent torso and legs were revealed, Stephen recalled the scene he had witnessed through his sister's bedroom window – the undressing, the terrible entry, the pitiless labouring of the broad back. Even as he admired the animal physique, how he hated the man! Last of all Ngwami removed his under-clothes. The dark phallus rose in silhouette, shaming and dominant. Stephen could scarce tear his eyes away, jealousy tempered by a fierce satisfaction as Ngwami cheapened himself still further.

Ngwami looked at the doll and drew it from the bed, clutching it to his ebony body, running lascivious hands down its back and flanks. The next moment, standing back, he plucked his knife from the bed and plunged it into the creature's breast. It lurched, stricken, with a rush of air. The knife plunged again, ripping the material from shoulder to thigh. Again and again he struck. The shredded rubber hung in tatters from one hand, unrecognizable. Ngwami dropped it contemptuously on the floor.

'You think I lie with that now – after what you did – and all those men – and maybe you too!' He threw his knife with a thud into the bed-board. 'No, I have other ideas.'

Slowly he advanced on Stephen's bed. A terrible light was in his eyes. There was no mistaking his intent.

'This morning my men had a woman – your sister – and a rubber doll. Now both are gone. Now they have only you. A human doll. A speechless dummy with no arms and no legs. I tell you, Mr Gresham, you will not be lonely in the evenings.'

From the compound came the thud of soldiers' boots as a platoon returned from bush patrol.

'You hear. Those men have been from camp for twenty days – more than four months from their homes. Yes, you will meet many of them . . . but first you have me!'

Stephen struggled backwards up the bed. Ngwami gripped him agonizingly and dragged him back. He lay still, racked with pain, staring up at the transformed, satyr-like face. Then strong hands caught him by the hips and irresistibly threw him on his stomach. Helpless he felt and heard the scalding blows on his buttocks, and the black limbs climbing above him. A heavy weight crushed him to the mattress, then a terrible rending force and monstrous intrusion. He could not bear it. With savage satisfaction Ngwami waited. Then cruel and remorseless he exacted his revenge, his breath and body burning and demon-like on Stephen's back. For an endless time it continued. Slowly his cries and grunts grew louder, the thrusting of his hips ever more violent. At length, close to overwhelming orgasm, Ngwami lost control. Beneath a blind onslaught of blows from fists and loins, Stephen threw back his head and screamed soundlessly.

Beyond, in the African night, soldiers missed the woman and the familiar rubber doll. Brooding eyes gazed restlessly across the compound from barrack-room windows, waiting for General Ngwami to withdraw.

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