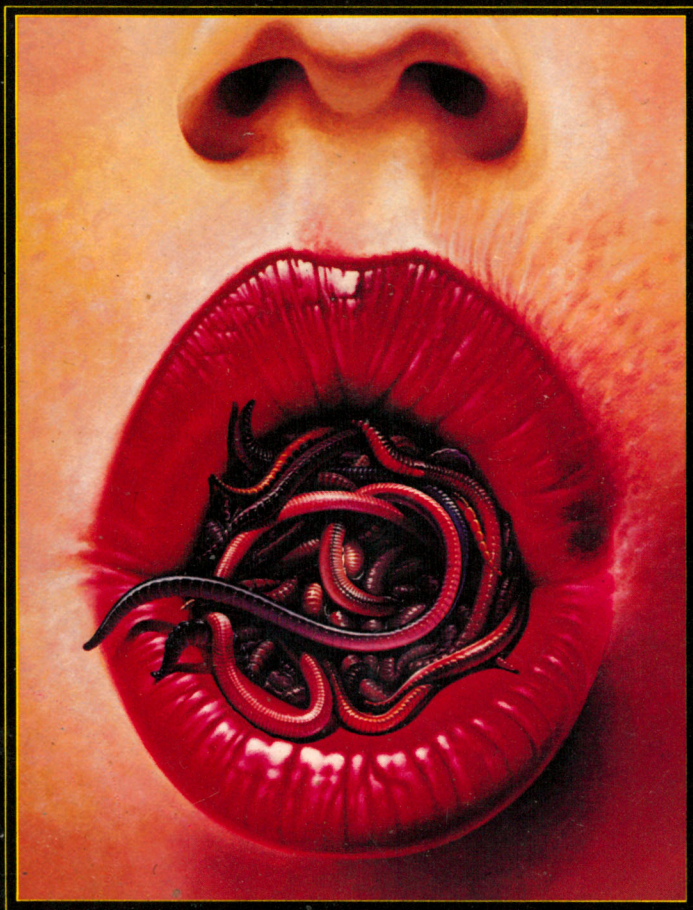




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Selected by HERBERT VAN THAL



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# The 24th Pan Book of Horror Stories

**Pan Original**

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Ken Alden

## The moment of death

There were only two men in the committee room, Monsieurs Spenglar and Dorleac. For a while they tidied up their papers, sharpened pencils, or made a few notes. Then Spenglar raised an inquiring eyebrow. Dorleac nodded, so Spenglar pressed a button on his intercom.

‘Could you send the doctor in please?’

‘Yes, sir.’

There was a pause. Then the door opened and a thin, superior looking young man stepped into the room.

‘Monsieur Fegree?’ Spenglar asked.

‘Yes.’

‘Please sit down.’

‘Thank you.’

Fegree moved stiffly across the room and sat down. Spenglar had enough years of experience behind him to recognize a highly tense individual. Fegree was already on the defensive, his superior, cold manner made that plain.

Dorleac took off his glasses and began to clean them while he spoke. ‘Now I would like to make it clear that this is not an official inquiry. My colleague, Monsieur Spenglar, and I are here to make preliminary inquiries into the events surrounding the Lanover execution.’

Fegree leaned forward. ‘As a preliminary to what?’ he demanded.

Dorleac looked up from his glasses. ‘There is no need to take up such an aggressive attitude, doctor.’

Fegree sat back. ‘It’s professor’, he said.

‘I’m sorry – professor then.’

‘Thank you’.

Dorleac concentrated on his glasses once more. ‘There is no need to worry about your position’, he said. ‘The authorities are concerned about the prison governor’s behaviour, not your own.’



The general feeling is that he should never have let you carry out your experiment.'

Dorleac had hoped this news would help Fegree relax, but he only became more aggressive.

'Really,' he said, 'when the head of my faculty at the university wrote to the governor asking for permission we understood that – how shall I put it – that he was the top authority – at least as far as this matter went.'

'Yes – quite.' Dorleac put his glasses back on. 'But let us deal with that matter later. First we would like to establish what exactly happened. I understand that your first meeting with the prisoner Lanover was rather – ah – eventful. Could you describe it, please?'

'Very well. On my second visit to the governor I asked permission to see the prisoner, which was granted. I was taken through the prison to the condemned cell by one of the guards. Outside the cell door this guard explained to me that I would have ten minutes alone with the man. I had asked that there be no guards in the cell with us so that the man would talk more freely. But I was told that there would be a guard posted at the end of the corridor. He would not be able to hear what I said to the prisoner, but would hear me if I shouted for assistance. Apparently attacks from prisoners were quite common. I was also advised to keep a firm grip on my walking stick and use it if the man got closer than five paces. Once all this was made clear to me I was allowed into the cell.'

Lanover got up off his bed as the cell door opened. He was a burly, threatening looking individual who did not seem too pleased about having a visitor.

'You're not another priest are you?' he demanded.

Fegree shook his head. 'No, I bring you something a lot more practical than religion. My name is Fegree. I'm a doctor.'

'You don't say.' Lanover did not sound impressed.

'I've come to talk about your execution tomorrow. I'm in a position to do you some good.'

'Are you indeed.'

'Yes.'

'What bloody good can anyone do me tomorrow?'

'I can do—'

'Ah go to hell.'

Fegree took a deep breath before he continued. 'I can do more than you imagine,' he said. 'You have three children don't you?'

'Ya - so what?'

'When you're dead they will be orphans won't they? I've made inquiries - your brother doesn't intend to look after them. In fact none of your family seems very eager to look after them.'

'Ya, well that doesn't surprise me.'

'They will be dumped in an orphanage and they will stay there until they are adults. Nobody will adopt them - not with a family history like theirs.'

'So what?'

Fegree took an envelope out of his case. 'I know a couple who want children and they are prepared to adopt yours,' he said as he held the envelope in front of Lanover. 'This is a statement from them in which they agree to the adoption.'

Lanover ignored the envelope. So Fegree dropped it on to the cell's table.

'They don't believe personality is inherited', he went on. 'Now I take it you would like to see your children in loving, responsible hands?'

Fegree paused so that Lanover could reply. But it seemed Lanover had nothing to say. So after taking another deep breath, Fegree continued.

'Well, I am going to assume that you do anyway and make you an offer. You do what I want and your children will have loving parents. You won't have to do anything unpleasant or difficult either. In fact it is as much in your interest as it is in mine.'

Lanover considered this for a few seconds before nodding. 'All right then - what do you want?'

'You can help me in my research. I study muscle nerves. It's part of a large project being carried out by my university. A project commissioned by the French Medical Council.'

Spenglar looked up from his papers and smiled. They had now reached the part of the proceedings that concerned him.

'Just one moment,' he said. 'I would like to hear a little more about this project of yours. I believe it may be very relevant.'

Fegree appeared to be rather surprised by Spenglar's interest.

'Yes, I suppose so,' he murmured. 'Well, as I said, it is part of a large university project commissioned by the Medical Council. My speciality is nerve death. I have worked on the subject for several years.'

Spenglar nodded. 'Yes I understand that. But what exactly is the nature of the project?'

'Well, we are trying to find out what constitutes life and what constitutes death. We are trying to draw up an official formula – a list of standardized tests that every doctor must carry out before he can certify a man as dead. Most corpses – sorry, corpera – most of them – in a way – are still alive, even though the life force has left the body. A man's beard will continue to grow for several days after he is officially dead. Undertakers are always shaving corpses. We are trying to decide where you would draw the line between that form of sub-life and, say, somebody in a coma.'

Spenglar went on nodding. 'I take it this test aims to simplify matters when it comes to organ transplants.'

'No – no – that wasn't the original aim. Though, of course, it's involved. No, our aim is to prevent premature burial.'

'Really.' Spenglar looked rather taken aback. 'Premature burial?'

'Yes. It's much more common than most people are prepared to admit. There have been countless cases of patients who have been officially pronounced dead, but have suddenly returned to life. There was a study done here in Paris some years ago. It was at the time when they were still digging up corpses after five years to make way for new ones. They found that on average one skeleton in five hundred had brought its knees up on to its chest. That means the person was still alive in his coffin and had brought his knees up in an attempt to push the lid off. So at least one person in five hundred is buried alive. In Britain a similar survey concluded that in England and Wales, every year, at least two thousand, seven hundred people are buried alive. In the Munich mortuary the dead are laid in rows so that they can be connected to cords which lead to bells in the caretaker's office. Apparently his sleep has been disturbed on several occasions – enough to justify the precaution.'

Now that he had an opportunity to talk about his work Fegree

had relaxed and taken up a more natural manner. It was the only thing that really interested him. He would talk about it for hours if anyone would listen.

'Several famous people have narrowly avoided premature burial,' he said. 'The poet Francesco Petrarch sat up in his coffin a few hours before he was to be buried and reprimanded the attendants for leaving him in a draught. The Greek Orthodox Bishop of Lesbos recovered while mourners were walking past his coffin – that caused a great panic. Once, when Vesalius was dissecting a nobleman – and Vesalius is probably the most celebrated of all anatomists – the nobleman returned to life during the dissection. The church's Holy Inquisition said this was sorcery and killed Vesalius. Not long afterwards the Grand Inquisitor himself recovered consciousness while on the table of another anatomist – poetic justice really. In fact the shock of dissection seems to have brought lots of people back to life. In Georgian and Victorian Britain there were twelve well recorded cases of people declared dead and buried – stolen by body snatchers – and then returned to life on the dissection tables. There have been innumerable cases of noises coming from graves. The victim is rarely got out in time – they suffocate. But they have often scratched or bitten themselves in their frantic attempts to get out. So it's clear they were alive. One American girl even gave birth to a baby in her coffin.'

Dorleac gave a polite cough, which brought Fegree's enthusiastic harangue to an abrupt halt. He reddened and looked away from the two men.

'I'm sorry – of course, this is not the thing to discuss in polite society.'

'Oh, that's quite all right,' Spenglar gestured at Dorleac. 'Both my colleague and I have experienced the more unpleasant side of life.'

Fegree gave them an uneasy and uncharacteristic smile. 'I'm afraid I have a rather childish enthusiasm for my subject,' he said. 'I sometimes get carried away and forget the proprieties.'

'Oh, I quite understand. In fact, I find your enthusiasm most commendable.'

Fegree's smile disappeared. It was replaced by the old cold look and the hard tone.

'What I was trying to do was impress on the two of you that

this is a very real problem. Many doctors are desperate to solve it. So desperate that they will take very unconventional steps. Steps that may revolt a non-medical man. I told the prison governor much of what I told you in order to impress on him the importance of my work and show him why I needed to attend Lanover's execution.'

'Very well,' the hard tone was creeping into Spenglar's voice now. 'We have noted that. Now let us return to your visit to the condemned man. What occurred?'

'Well, I explained to him why I was there and why I wanted his help. He appeared a reasonable man. Intelligent as well. He easily grasped what I meant.'

'I get it,' said Lanover. 'You want to be there when they put my head in the guillotine.'

'Yes, well . . .'

'You want me to be some damn headless chicken, don't you?'

Fegree looked offended. 'I beg your pardon?'

'When I was a kid we used to cut off chickens' heads and then watch them run around with just a bleeding neck. Some of them would last for minutes. You want to see me do that don't you? An' have a good laugh.'

The offended look gave way to a frown. 'This is not something I find funny. Now if you would let me finish. Remember this is also to your advantage.'

'OK, OK, go ahead.'

'Thank you.' Fegree shifted uncomfortably in his seat. Then he continued. 'About thirty years ago a Doctor Shapiro did exactly what I am doing now. He came to an agreement with a man like you. He wanted to prove that man was still conscious after the guillotine had beheaded him. I want to repeat that doctor's experiment. But I want to do more as well. I want to measure certain electrical forces in your body and see what happens to them at the time of death.'

'I see.' Lanover fell silent for a few seconds.

'What I—'

'Just a minute. Let's get this straight. You think I'm still going to be alive when they cut my head off then — do you?'

'Yes. There is no reason why a guillotined man should die instantly. After all there would still be enough blood in the head

to keep the brain active for several minutes. In fact all the main faculties – your hearing, your eyes, your nose – they should remain active.’

Lanover grinned. ‘Really. Well thank you for telling me. That’s cheered me up no end.’

Fegree leaned forward. ‘I’m in a position to make sure you don’t suffer though. That doctor I was telling you about – according to him his man’s head was still active five minutes after it had been guillotined. They had arranged beforehand to communicate by blinking in a certain manner – that’s how he could tell. According to reports written during the Revolution, executioners used to find heads that were still alive fifteen minutes after the guillotine had fallen. One of the executioners dictated a detailed description of what happened. According to him, after executions, he would look in the basket and find that nearly half the heads in there were still twitching and twisting – or grinding their teeth in agony.’

Lanover got up on to his feet. ‘You’re a bloody sadist, you are – aren’t you?’

Fegree got up as well. He held his walking stick above his head, ready to strike. ‘I can help you though,’ he said. ‘We can help each other. What’s more if you help me, I can make sure all these things don’t happen to you. Once you have done what I want I will drive a spike into your skull – that will kill you sure enough. You shouldn’t suffer for more than forty-five seconds, and your kids will be looked after.’

Lanover picked up a crucifix that had been standing on the cell’s table. It was a large iron thing, a formidable weapon.

‘Put it down,’ Fegree told him.

‘How long would you last if I put this in your skull, Monsieur Doctor?’

‘Guard,’ Fegree shouted, ‘guard.’

Lanover took a step forward and went to hit him. But Fegree brought his walking stick down on the man’s arm. The crucifix fell to the ground.

Lanover then tried to strangle the doctor. But Fegree hit out at him again. This time, though, Lanover grabbed hold of the stick and pulled at it. Fegree kept a good grip on his end of the stick and pulled back. The stick’s handle was rammed into his chest. He fell back against the cell door.

Lanover tried to kick him before he could recover. But in the excitement the convict missed and kicked the door instead.

Fegree heard voices behind him. Then there was the clang of a bolt being pulled back and the door opened. Fegree fell backwards on to the corridor's floor.

The guard jumped over him and hit out at Lanover with a truncheon. He needed only one blow to knock the prisoner to the ground. Then he turned, stepped over Fegree and pulled the doctor out of the cell.

Lanover tried to get on to his feet and follow them, but the door was slammed shut before he could do so.

Outside the guard helped Fegree up.

'Are you all right, sir?'

'Yes, I think so, thank you.'

'You shouldn't have gone in there, you know. He's one of the nastiest animals we have ever had in here.'

Lanover began to bang on his side of the cell door and shout something.

'Shut up in there.' The guard banged his side with the truncheon.

'Just a moment. Stop that.' Fegree took a step forward and listened at the door.

'All right, doctor,' Lanover shouted at him. 'I'll do what you want. I'll show I'm still alive. I'll give you proof.'

'And did he?' Spenglar asked.

'Oh, yes.'

Spenglar and Dorleac glanced at each other. They had heard otherwise.

'What exactly happened then?'

'Have you ever attended an execution?'

Both men shook their heads.

'Well apparently every time there is one the whole prison is always in an uproar. It certainly was when I was there. Every prisoner in every cell was shouting and banging, and making as much noise as he could. It reached a peak when Lanover appeared in the courtyard. Two guards held his arms behind his back. They ran him across the yard to the guillotine. Within seconds his head was in the thing. The governor had not allowed me to attach my electronic equipment to Lanover's body. But

as the blade fell I was permitted to run up the steps to the guillotine. I crouched down by the body and picked up the head.'

'Yes?' Spenglar demanded. 'What happened?'

'He kept his promise – he showed me.'

'Showed you what?'

'This.'

The doctor held up his hand.

Spenglar looked puzzled. 'I don't understand.'

'Look at my hand.'

'Well, you have cut it – that's all.'

'These are teeth marks. Lanover bit me.'



# Miranda Seymour

## Obsession

'You must be pleased to have got this,' the pale young man said as he laced the Chinese chair into a strait-jacket of cardboard padding. 'The bidding was pretty tough. For a collection, is it?'

Mr Mallet rubbed invisible layers of dust from his fingertips, folded his silk handkerchief into a neat triangle for his breast-pocket, the last rites of a familiar and pleasurable ordeal. 'I buy for myself,' he said.

'I've got an eighteenth-century mirror,' the young man said, 'if you're interested. A Chinese Chippendale looking glass, to be exact. Half a minute.' He dived deep into the pockets of his overalls, unearthing a half-eaten plum, a sheaf of sepia photographs, a couple of watch faces and a candle butt before holding out a crumpled card. 'That's the address, sir. It's dead easy to find. Past the canal, look right, second basement. Watch out for the dustbins. Don't want you breaking a leg.' He pushed the card into Mr Mallet's limp grasp. 'Jackdaw's the name. Ask anyone. They all know me.'

The street by the canal was a narrow waste of orange peel, stray cats, billowing sheets of newspaper. A black Lagonda gleamed unexpectedly among the crushed row of Austins and Cortinas. Two children squatted on the far side of the rusting railings, dangling thread fishing lines down the canal wall. The sight of Mr Mallet, flour-faced in a tight black suit as he minced past the railings with averted head, brought a high jeering whistle from behind.

'Wotchere, Al Capone.' A handful of pebbles peppered Mr Mallet's rounded rump. He turned to wither them with his disapproval.

'Nah. Cancha tell insurance when you see it?'

'Undertaker, more like.'

Giggling and unwithered, they stared boldly at him. Mr Mallet

crossed the street and descended a broken row of steps to the second basement. The bell did not appear to work, so he rapped on the door.

If the collector resembled an ageing mobster, the Jackdaw looked a suitable candidate for corruption. His face was pinched and bristling with ginger-coloured stubble. He was attired in a loose grey tracksuit of indeterminate age, on the chest of which were pinned a flourishing row of medals from the Ashanti and Boer campaigns. His narrow eyes assessed the appearance of his guest, and approved it.

'I love the suit,' he said. 'How about trading the jacket for Winston Churchill's telephone? It's got Chartwell on the dial.'

'Certainly not,' Mr Mallet said, outraged. 'This belonged to my grandfather, young man.'

'That's what I like about it,' the Jackdaw explained, unperturbed. 'Maybe you'll change your mind when you see it. Coming in, then?'

Mr Mallet suddenly lost his nerve. He raised a protesting hand, too late. The door slammed and he was plunged into a blackness punctuated by wheezing clocks and the Jackdaw's giggle. Warm fur brushed his leg. He gave a small shriek. 'Only Nosferatu,' his host reassured him. 'He doesn't bite my friends.'

Half an hour later, perched on a stool above a pile of shrapnel in the Jackdaw's kitchen, Mr Mallet did not feel in control of the situation, a novel experience which he did not enjoy. The Jackdaw's drink – he had insisted on opening a bottle of something called Southern Comfort which had not lived up to its promise – had confounded his senses. He felt giddy and slightly sick. The Jackdaw, poised like a neat Buddha on top of a cardboard box, appeared perfectly sober. He sighed as he looked at his guest's half-drained glass.

'You're a cautious man, Mr Mallet. Ready to see the rest of the house?'

'I would like,' Mr Mallet said thickly, 'to see the Chinese glass. That is what I came here for, if you remember.'

'Oh, that . . .' He waved it away. 'In time, Mr Mallet. But I have to be sure you're the right client. I wouldn't sell it to anybody.'

Mr Mallet smiled. It was a line he had heard before.

Uneasy though he was, the *chinoiserie* collector recognized the

Jackdaw's house for a museum piece, hideous but unique. The taste of Sir John Soane seemed to have exerted a considerable influence, notably in the Gothic Room, a panelled and gargoyle cathedral made out of a back bedroom. Crimson curtains framed representations of green and writhing martyrs in stained glass. A chandelier of antlers scythed at Mr Mallet's head as he squinted up at a row of emaciated Victorian ladies, white and drooping in their black lacquer frames. The Empire Room offered a large gilded bed in the shape of a swan, beside which an array of Victorian mourning trinkets had been laid out on a shabby marquetry table. Mr Mallet confessed that he did not greatly care for the wreaths of plaited hair, nor for the skull painted with orchids. The Jackdaw was clearly disappointed, but said nothing.

Mr Mallet was not happy. Everywhere they went they were pursued by the sound of clocks, all ticking to different beats, rapping and tapping through a haze which was rapidly becoming a headache. He should never have accepted the bourbon, let alone drunk it from a broken and probably contaminated tumbler. His soft city feet ached. The narrow, curved staircase pressed against his rounded hips, obliging him to creep sideways after the more supple form of his host. In all, Mr Mallet knew that he was in no state to drive a hard bargain – if a deal was there to be done.

'Here we are then,' the Jackdaw said suddenly, opening a door on to a tangled allotment. He pointed a torch across the weeds. 'See?'

But all that Mr Mallet saw by the flickering beam were two white figures with gaping mouths and eyes, their hands scrabbling at the window of his host's potting shed. It was too much. He gave a small cry and sank down on the stairs.

The Jackdaw tittered and gave him a pat on the shoulder. 'They're only dummies, Mr Mallet. Cheer up. You're not the first to think it was Crippen's kitchen. Up we get then.'

He went ahead to kick open the shed door and turn on the light. His face was acid in the sudden glare of the neon strip as he swung round to touch Mr Mallet on the arm. 'I like your style,' he said gently. 'We're going to be good friends, you and I. But you know that, don't you? It's fated.'

Mr Mallet hesitated. The man was, he decided, unhinged,

possibly even dangerous. But he badly wanted to see the Chinese Chippendale looking glass. He smiled into the Jackdaw's eyes. 'Absolutely.'

He peered through a cobwebbed jungle of legless chairs and upside-down tables for a glimpse of the promised treasure and frowned with disappointment.

'You'll see it soon enough,' the Jackdaw said, watching him from the door. 'I told you. I've got to know you're the right one before we talk business. See?'

Mr Mallet raised his eyebrows, but there was something in the Jackdaw's manner which warned him not to mock. He glanced at his watch. One o'clock . . . he'd never get a bus at this hour. Wearily, he nodded his head.

'Shall we get on with it then, Mr Jackdaw?'

The dealer moved past him to drag back a green velvet curtain which had been strung across a corner of the shed. Standing on one side with clasped hands, he looked like a nervous acolyte. 'Well?' His voice was imperious. 'Look at her. Isn't she beautiful?'

Curiosity drew Mr Mallet closer.

He saw a low table, covered by an embroidered cloth. Several objects had been arranged on it, an ivory bible, a coiled plait of black hair, a sepia photograph, and a funeral service sheet, yellowing slightly at the edges. He glanced at the date. 1918. Rose Marie Leigh. A pretty name.

'Why don't you look at her?' the Jackdaw demanded. Dutifully, he bent his head over the photograph. Her lidded eyes stared up at him with a look which was both calculating and voluptuous enough to trouble Mr Mallet's Puritan spirit. He glanced away from them to the curving coils of black hair, the soft slightly parted lips, the full white throat. It had been so long since Mr Mallet had felt desire for a woman that he did not immediately recognize the sensation and when he did, he was deeply shocked. His body was quivering like an animal's, for want of a woman who had been dead for fifty years. Turning away from the light, he wiped his face with his handkerchief, hoping that the dealer had noticed nothing.

'A relation, Mr Jackdaw?'

'You're a lonely man, aren't you,' the Jackdaw said, stating it. 'I saw how you looked at her, my Rose Marie. You under-

stand. You're not like the rest. We're going to be good friends, Mr Mallet.'

'She must have been about seventeen at the time of the photograph,' he guessed.

'Just twenty,' the Jackdaw said tenderly. 'The year before she died. I found her in Highgate. Same birthdate as mine. I knew she was the one straightaway, just like I knew about you. I had to have her. I spent two months tracing the family before I struck lucky with an old niece in Dorset. I didn't waste much time Mr Mallet. I took the first train down.'

'You mean you chose her for her grave?' Mr Mallet asked in bewilderment as he sidled towards the table for another look.

'Not now,' the Jackdaw said sharply, and he pulled the curtain forward. 'You've had your treat. She's mine now. I bought everything to do with her, pictures, furniture, letters, the lot.'

An uneasy silence fell. Mr Mallet felt that something was expected of him, but he hardly knew what to say. 'Well, *chacun à son mort*,' he said finally with an effort at lightness. 'Look, it's getting rather late. Don't you think. . . ?'

'I just wanted to be sure,' the Jackdaw said earnestly. 'Now I am. It was hers, the glass. In her room to the day she died, facing the bed. Here it is. Round the side of this cupboard. I meant to clean it up a bit before you came.'

'It doesn't matter.' Slowly, he went towards it. He took out his handkerchief and delicately brushed the corner of the frame. The warm wood glowed rich and soft as a candleflame, so delicately carved that the arabesques trembled at his touch. But the uniqueness of the piece lay in the glass itself. He did not trust his eyes. His hand shook as he touched the surface. No mistaking solid silver. A silver glass. He peered at his reflection, softly blurred, haloed by a cloud of light, as faint as if it reflected his shadow, not his substance. In thirty years of collecting, he had seen nothing like it. He folded the handkerchief back into his pocket, taking his time, terrified of betraying his excitement.

'An interesting piece. Of course, we can't be certain that it came from the Chippendale workshops—'

'Don't give me that crap,' the Jackdaw said. 'It's the best and you know it.'

'How much do you want?'

'Give me five hundred and it's yours.'

Mr Mallet's mouth dropped open.

'Make it four fifty, then,' the Jackdaw said rapidly. 'In cash.'

'I won't hear of it. I insist on giving you five hundred,' Mr Mallet said virtuously. At that price, honour was cheaply bought. 'But I'm afraid I don't carry, er, cash.'

'I should have known it. The rich never do.' The Jackdaw shrugged. 'I'll take a cheque. Make it out to James Leigh.'

Mr Mallet pounced. 'So she *was* a relation!'

'Lay off the questions,' the Jackdaw said in a hard voice. 'There'll be plenty of time for them later.'

'Oh, quite,' Mr Mallet said, afraid that the dealer would change his mind. He wrote the cheque in a careful hand and held it out. 'I'll have it collected next week.'

The Jackdaw shook his head. 'Oh, no. It goes tonight – or not at all. That's the deal. We can carry it between us if you don't mind the dirt. The Lagonda's got a good boot. I'll run you home.' He walked past the glass and tried the weight of a corner. 'It's not too heavy. Ready?'

Mr Mallet stood still, staring into the glass in which he had seen no reflection but his own as the dealer passed behind him. 'Tell me something,' he said. 'If you feel so strongly about – Miss Leigh and her possessions – why are you so anxious to be rid of this? And why did you choose me?'

The Jackdaw grinned. 'You like *chinoiserie*, don't you? I sell antiques, not explanations, Mr Mallet. Let's just say that I'd like to share her with you.'

It fitted the alcove above his desk as if it had been made for it. Three times a week, Mr Mallet lovingly dusted the frame – he would have trusted no one else to touch it – his hands lingering on the subtle curves of the wood. Only the glass resisted his care. However hard he polished its shining surface, the reflection remained as opaque as when he had first looked into it in the dealer's shed, turning his neat characterless room into a treasure-house of silvered light and flitting shadows.

Mr Mallet was entranced by his new purchase. He contemplated a treatise on the reflection in art from Van Eyck to Magritte. He could not pass his desk without leaning forward to stare into the silver world beyond it, hoping, ridiculous though the idea was, that he would catch a glimpse of its former owner.

The smiling knowing face of the photograph never left his mind for long – from the fancy of a shadowy figure trapped in the glass's image, he came quickly to conviction. Sometimes, standing alone in the dusk, he saw a pale smiling face beside his own, a black dress melting into the darkness. . . .

'You're getting addicted to it and no mistake,' the Jackdaw said one day on coming into the study and finding the collector staring raptly into the looking glass. He had fallen into the habit of visiting Mr Mallet once or twice a week, an unasked but not unwelcome visitor.

Mr Mallet turned, his face flourey above the sagging folds of his suit. 'Do you believe in ghosts?'

The Jackdaw grinned as he perched on the window-sill, well out of reach of the reflection. He leaned back over the swoop of concrete, staring down. 'I never used to imagine people living here. Just machines, in thousands of boxes of steel and chrome—'

'I never used to believe in them.' Mr Mallet dabbed at his face with his handkerchief. 'Perhaps I'm ill – I've been working too hard on the inventory.'

'You haven't touched it for weeks,' the Jackdaw said. 'I can see the dust on the cover from here. What you need is a good meal. You look like a stick of frozen celery.'

Mr Mallet shook his head. 'I'm not hungry.'

'Obsession's a dangerous game, Mr Mallet,' the Jackdaw said. 'Don't play it too hard. Put your coat on. You're coming out for lunch with me.'

'The carpet is not going to suffer from one more pair of shoes,' Mr Mallet observed, watching him. 'I could almost suppose you were afraid of being reflected.'

From the safety of the doorway, the Jackdaw gave him an easy smile. 'Every eccentric has his games. Now, where shall we go?'

Mr Mallet pushed the cooling mound of rice over his skewered lamb and laid down his fork. 'It's a very cosy little restaurant,' he said, hating it for keeping him from his treasure.

'Only place round here that still feeds two for under three quid.' The dealer glanced up from his plate with accusing eyes

and jabbed a finger at Mr Mallet's chest. 'Naughty. You're thinking about it again.'

'Nonsense.' He flushed. 'There's no need to be so aggressive.'

The Jackdaw chuckled. 'I bet your mother was a Tartar. You take to a bit of discipline like a duck to water. All these years, you've been looking for it. Lucky we met. Sweet?'

'I'll enjoy mine vicariously,' Mr Mallet said with a sour little laugh. 'I expect you'll have one, just to fill the gaps.'

'I've put on a stone,' the Jackdaw said as the cake arrived. Smirking, he squeezed a thumb into his waistband and tried to wiggle it, making his point. He was in a good mood that day and Mr Mallet was hungry for information. He leant forward, pressing the fingertips of each hand lightly together as he prepared to do a deal.

'You said you had her letters. I'm prepared to offer you fifty pounds for them, sight unseen.'

The dealer laughed as he brushed the sweet crumbs off his knees. 'You *are* obsessed and no mistake. But they're not for sale.'

'At least, let me see them.' He was disgusted by the craven note in his voice, but the Jackdaw seemed to like it, judging by the width of the grin into which he scooped the last of the cake.

'Later, maybe. When I'm sure.'

'Sure of what? Surely you know you can trust me?'

But the Jackdaw shook his head. 'Not enough yet, Mr Mallet. Not quite enough.'

Mr Mallet lived the life of a possessed man. He had lost his appetite for collecting as completely as his wish to eat. Every day, he woke to the mirror's world of shadows and evasions. He moved his bed into the study and went to sleep each night with his face turned towards its silver double. Sometimes, confronted by bloodshot eyes and a chin like a nail-brush, he wondered if he was going mad. On calmer days, he accepted that his only hope was to continue playing the Jackdaw's games. His hungry imagination was starving for the slightest detail of the girl. He had to be content with promises and an occasional invitation to worship at her Highgate home.

Mr Mallet was not content. He decided one day that he had played the Jackdaw's games for long enough. He was not a child,



to be given orders. The whole business was, frankly, demeaning, to a man in his position.

It was understood between the two men that Mr Mallet would never visit Rose Marie's grave alone. This was the rule he had decided to break. A cemetery was, after all, public property. After shaving and dressing with particular care, he went out and bought a large sheaf of arum lilies. The florist's look of discreet sympathy gave him a moment of mildly wicked amusement – he was intoxicated by the sense of his own disobedience. In the taxi, he jiggled the lilies on his knee and hummed 'He who would a pilgrim be'. He felt quite like a bridegroom.

The cemetery was drooping with November melancholy on an afternoon dreary enough to deter all but the faithful. Two middle-aged couples in brown mackintoshes trudged stolidly towards Marx's grave, crushing the gravel path with determined steps. Mr Mallet watched them go out of sight before beginning his own more furtive pilgrimage.

Sodden leaves had gathered on the overgrown paths, muddying his black leather shoes as he hurried down the hill, plunging through a wilderness of fallen crosses and proud-winged angels, wan guardians of forgotten tombs. Mr Mallet paused for breath by one of them, cradling the lilies in their polythened stiffness, peering fearfully back up the paths. Nothing stirred. He gave a little sigh and began the final descent.

He would never have discovered the grave without the Jackdaw's guidance. It lay at the centre of a small maze of paths at the lower and less exclusive end of the cemetery, one among a neglected group by the wooden fence. The dealer had done what he could to honour her. The stone casket was free of weeds, pristine as a virgin's bed under the bunch of wildflowers. Looking up at Rose Marie's sculpted face, Mr Mallet silently amended the analogy. There was no innocence in the curving lips and lidded stare of his queen. He stood quite still, looking up at her with dumb and fearful lust. No living woman could match her pale sensuality. Only she could demand and receive homage with such frightening assurance. He was sure now that the looking glass, her looking glass, had cast the same spell over the Jackdaw, the elusive sense of a past reflection trapped for ever in the silver depths. But to what degree, that it had exor-

cised the dealer's image from its silver surface? Or absorbed it. He was conscious that he looked now as the Jackdaw had when they first met, thin, nervous, narrow-eyed from lack of sleep. The look, he mused, of a haunted man.

Bending quickly to push aside the Jackdaw's flowers and lay his rich lilies in their place, he felt a glassy breath on his cheek. He turned, scarlet, fumbling for an explanation. There was no one in sight, but he scuttled in breathless panic up to the safety of the gravel paths.

In retrospect, his act of defiance seemed gratuitous and absurd. He had gained nothing. He had very possibly lost all chance of obtaining the coveted letters. The Jackdaw had not visited him again. No answer came to his apologetic cards. Mr Mallet, who had always admired Henry James, read *The Aspern Papers* again and grew thoughtful, then guilty. He returned to the glass and stared into it, trying to imagine her there until his eyes burned with the strain. He tried to see how she had looked when the door was closed, when she was naked, when she combed her hair down over her white shoulders and leant forward to stare at her silvered image. But the glass could not speak and imagination was no longer enough. He had to have more to possess her.

Mr Mallet came to a decision. He would make one more offer for the letters. If the dealer refused, he would, quite simply, take them. They went with the glass. They were, morally, his. So, uneasily, he silenced his scruples.

'I was busy, that's all. I've got better things to do than hang around the Barbican to keep you entertained.'

Stretched out on his bunk in the basement kitchen with a plate of sausages balanced on his chest, the Jackdaw stared at his visitor. 'You look sick,' he said. 'The original shrinking man. Eaten anything today?'

Mr Mallet tried to remember and shook his head.

'Get that in your stomach.' The Jackdaw threw a cold sausage at him. 'What brings you here anyway? I don't remember inviting you.'

'I came to apologize,' Mr Mallet said humbly.

The dealer gave him a hard look. 'That's desecration, what

you did, chucking flowers off graves. And for a bunch of polythene lilies. Where did you think you were – Harrods' hot house?'

Mr Mallet choked down the sausage in silence before taking a wad of notes from his pocket.

'I didn't just come to apologize. I'm prepared to give you three hundred pounds. For her letters.'

The Jackdaw looked bored. 'I thought you understood.'

'Understood what?'

'Enough not to ask. Enough to wait. Do I have to spell it out to you?'

'But I *have* waited, for months.'

'Sure,' the Jackdaw said coldly. 'That's your game, waiting. You're a collector, aren't you?'

Mr Mallet allowed a moment to pass then he laughed. 'Your game, Mr Jackdaw. Set and match. I wonder if I might trouble you for a glass of your excellent whisky before I go. I'm a little weak.'

The Jackdaw nodded. 'It's upstairs. I'll get it.'

He waited until he heard the floorboards creaking upstairs. He knew where to look. Incautiously, the Jackdaw had once revealed that he kept his personal treasures in the drawer under his bunk. The keys hung over the stove. He took them from the hook. Tiptoeing through the dusty carnage of two world wars, he reached the side of the low bed. The drawer was, surprisingly, unlocked. He squatted on his thin haunches, prodding its dark recesses with greedy fingers. Everything of hers was here, beaded dresses in soft shrouds of tissue, ribboned hats, satin shoes. The letters were underneath, tied with a black ribbon. Mr Mallet's fingers closed on them like a vice.

'I think you'd better put them back where you found them.'

He managed a weak laugh. 'You don't think I'd take them? I was just . . . I had to see them. I *have* to see them.' He got to his feet and turned to where the Jackdaw stood, his bulk blocking out the stair light. 'You knew what you were doing when you sold me the glass. You started this. What right have you to keep her from me?'

'Every right,' the dealer said. 'I found her, and I'm keeping her. She's mine. Mr Mallet. My Rose Marie. You, you're nothing to her. You bought the glass, that's all. And look what

it's done to you. That's why I sold it cheap, before I went the same way. You're nuts, Mr Mallet. Plumb crazy.

Safely closeted in his citadel, Mr Mallet spent the days sitting in front of the Chinese looking glass, his breath misting the pale images. He knew it so well that he could gauge the precise time of day when the reflection would be most clear, the time when he might learn its secrets. Patiently, he watched, waiting for a flicker of movement, a passing shadow. But it never came.

'Stress, city life. I'm afraid it's something we all have to accept with age, Mr Mallet.' The doctor's smile was bland as he glanced down at his watch. 'A rest is what you need, my dear sir. A month in the sun with a little light reading and an afternoon siesta. You'll feel a new man. One of the Normandy resorts, perhaps? The food is excellent.' He raised a rogueishly professional forefinger. 'You really must work up a little appetite. We can't have you fading away.'

The collector smiled listlessly. His opinion of Harley Street doctors was confirmed. It had been a waste of time and money to come here. 'There's no question of my going abroad,' he said. 'I can't leave her now.'

The doctor looked up sharply, struck by the flatness of his patient's voice. He shrugged and scribbled out a prescription. 'Twice a day. Just to boost the system a little.' He gave a confidential chuckle, but Mr Mallet did not respond.

Slowly, he went down the carpeted stairs past the smiling receptionist and out into the hard brightness of the midday street. He stood on the pavement, a short drab figure in a baggy black suit, blinking at the passing cars. He wondered if he had the courage to go back, and knew that, somehow he had to find it.

Wetherbridge Crescent had not changed much since his first visit. Two different children dangled slack lines in the canal, the Fords and Cortinas still gathered dust and sycamore leaves by the sidewalk. There was no sign of the jutting length of the black Lagonda. Mr Mallet had always considered it to be a ridiculous extravagance. He did not grieve for its departure. He walked slowly, leaning on his ebony stick, rehearsing his words. The children turned, but saw nothing worthy of comment.

The windows and doors were boarded up, but he recognized Nosferatu in the shabby mongrel on the basement steps. He looked as emaciated as the collector himself. The dealer must have left some time ago. Futilely, Mr Mallet thumped on the wooden boards. No answer came but a suppressed snigger from the two children. The planks were made of cheap plywood, very thin. If he prised them apart with his stick. . .

'Breaking and entering, or are you just having a little fun, sir?'

Mr Mallet flushed and lowered his stick. 'Do I look like a burglar?'

'They come in all shapes and sizes,' the policeman said. 'Now, sir, if you wouldn't mind—'

'A friend of mine lives here,' he said feebly. 'I have to see him. It's most important.'

'Funny friend who doesn't tell you when he's leaving,' the policeman said. 'It's been boarded up for weeks, this house. Your friend did a midnight scarper. Left it to the wreckers—'

'The wreckers?'

'You're not in Kensington now, sir,' the policeman said. 'Anyone down here who does a moonlight and leaves the door open needs his head examined.'

Mr Mallet grasped his arm, staring up into his face. 'The letters – nobody could have wanted them. Surely you could give me some sort of pass? I must have them. I *must*.' His voice rose to a wail of despair.

The policeman gave him an odd look. 'You can't just wander into other people's houses like that, sir. It's not legal. And like I said, the wreckers stripped it. There's nothing left but a couple of dummies and a few antlers. Nothing.'

Slowly, Mr Mallet released his hold. 'I see. Thank you, officer. I'm sorry to have troubled you.'

The policeman watched the small hunched figure move slowly away up the street. He shook his head. Letters – it took all sorts.

It was pouring with rain when Mr Mallet arrived at Highgate. The gates were being closed as the last visitors shuffled out. He felt in his pocket for a pound note and pressed it into the porter's hand. 'My mother's grave,' he whispered. 'Train from Dorset – I have to leave this evening.' The man looked at his haggard

face and nodded. 'Not more than ten minutes, mind, or you'll be locked in.'

Mr Mallet could have wished for nothing more.

The rain ran like tears down his face as he forced his way through the sodden undergrowth, careless of the sharp brambles which sprang up to rip at his coat, oblivious to the glaring whiteness of the stone faces rising on either side of the paths. Only when he saw the Jackdaw there before him did he pause, trembling with indignation.

He lay sprawled in sleep on the grave with his head against the stone casket. His legs were almost buried in a bank of leaves. He must have been with her for the whole day, Mr Mallet thought as he stood still, staring down. Rage flooded through him, shaking him until he could hardly stand. The blood roared in his head as the angels rose around him and clapped their glistening wings. They knew what he must do. They knew how the Jackdaw had tortured him.

Mr Mallet walked quietly and quickly towards the grave and knelt beside the Jackdaw's sleeping body. He placed his hands on the dealer's throat. It was cold and hard as marble. Slowly, Mr Mallet rolled the body over until he could see the Jackdaw's face. It wore a smile of gratification and around the body he noticed a faint smell of pot-pourri. He looked at the face for a moment, then climbed over the body. He raised his eyes to look up at Rose Marie, his Rose Marie. It seemed to him that she was smiling at him. Mr Mallet smiled back. Gently, with a reverent hand, he touched the swelling throat.

'You're mine now,' he told her.

Mr Mallet locked the door of his flat when he arrived home. From the kitchen cupboard he took a bottle of Madeira and a small glass which he filled. He then had a bath, changed his clothes, and went into the study. Outside the flat, he heard a man call his name. The doorbell started to ring. Frowning, Mr Mallet closed the study door and walked towards the glass. With a little smile, he leant towards the silver surface and peered in. Deep in the shadows, he saw what he took to be a single figure, strangely contorted. Then he realized that what he could see was a slender black-haired girl, tightly clasped in a man's arms. He knew the man at once, although he could not see his face. As

he watched, the man pulled her down to the ground and fell on her.

Mr Mallet left the room. He returned with a blanket, which he draped over the frame, and a hammer. He hesitated for a moment, then swung it with all his force at the figures behind the blanket. When he was sure that he had destroyed them, he drank another glass of Madeira and sat down to wait until the man outside should break down the door.

# Alan Temperley

## Gypsy candle

The Martinmas goose fair took place in a field at the side of the lane, sheltered to north and west by a copse of oak and larch. The chill November breeze blew from the hills and fingered through the branches, a few clinging leaves fluttered against the sky. At the foot of the slope the river, broad and silver, was ruffled into wavelets.

In 1862, the year of the Queen's silver jubilee, the fair was bigger and busier than ever. From far and wide the people came flocking, and by late morning the bravely gay stalls, the coconut shies and games of chance, the drinking booths and eating tents, were thronging. Best shoes and boots ploughed the meadow to mud. The air was filled with voices and excitement and the wonder of children.

Among the crowd, as happy as any, moved John Honeyman and his small family. He was a farm labourer, but no one worked on goose-fair Saturday. They had travelled the six miles from home on the back of a neighbour's lurching cart, a journey which took two hours.

He was a big man in his early thirties, well-built and plainly good-looking, dressed in his best for the occasion. He hitched his three-year-old son comfortably on to his arm. The boy turned his wide eyes from the crowd to his father's head and pulled the turned-down brim of his hat.

'Now stop that, Dod!' John said. He pulled the hat straight and glanced down at his wife and daughter.

The little girl, Abbie, held her mother's hand. In the pocket of her coat she clutched her precious pennies in a hot palm. For the twentieth time she stopped to examine the contents of a stall, this time a multi-coloured display of striped candies, sugar sticks and toffee. She ached for them, her mouth watered, but the pennies remained in her pocket. She looked up at her father, a pretty frown of anxiety between her eyes.



John smiled, pleased to spoil his children on this special occasion. He bought a cone of boiled sweets. They all took one and strolled on, jostled by the crowd.

From the mouth of a booth, crowded with men, came a hot waft of spirits and beer-laden air. There was a clamour of voices. A young man, his face flushed, careered from the entrance and knocked Mary sideways. Apologetically he raised his hat and lurched away. With a scowl of displeasure John watched him go. A clean, good-living man, he did not, in general, approve of alcohol.

His wife touched his arm. 'It's all right, John. I'm not hurt.'

He looked at her, small-boned and delicate, her face framed by a cloud of light brown hair. She was a pretty young woman with a quick mind, a great reader of books, and though she was so slight that John could lift her with one hand, she was tough. He adored her. She in turn loved her strong, simple husband.

'But I would like a sit-down,' Mary said. 'And I think the children should have something to eat.'

He looked above the heads of the crowd for an eating tent and saw one not far off. They found seats near one of the stoves. For half an hour they warmed through and devoured large plates of pie and potatoes. For her size, fragile as a sparrow, Abbie had a sterling appetite, and her sturdy brother was not far behind. They watched the crowd. John and Mary drank a glass of punch, the children sipped hot lemon and cinnamon.

Then it was out once more into the chill November breeze. The sky remained clear but it had turned colder. There was an hour before they were to meet their neighbour for the journey home. Briefly they regarded the thin animals and poor geese in their pens. John shook his head: on the farm where he worked the animals were in better condition. They tracked down a stall where Mary had seen some printed cotton during the morning. She made one or two purchases. John managed to knock down a coconut and gave it to Abbie, who carried it with pride. Dod sucked a sugar stick. There remained only Abbie's pennies, most difficult of all.

At the top of the field, close to the wood, lay a corner of the fair which they had missed. They turned the end of a stall and found themselves in a small open space filled with people. Abbie stopped, her mouth opened in delight.

‘Daddy, look! A bear!’

For there, above the heads of the crowd, rose the head and shoulders of a huge dancing bear. An iron muzzle was about its jaws, its clawed fore-paws swayed in the air to the rhythm of a musical pipe.

They advanced closer, and in two or three minutes found themselves in the front of the crowd.

A gypsy woman with earrings and ropes of oily hair, held the bear on a stout chain. Her husband sat on a rug by the entrance to a small enclosure, a flute to his lips. The bear, shaggy brown, shuffled from foot to foot apparently in time to the music – though it seemed to Mary that in this case the man was keeping time to the bear.

They had seen dancing bears before, half-funny, half-sad creatures, often ill-kempt, scarred and frightened by the beatings of their owners. This bear was different. It was enormous, fully eight feet high, powerful and in beautiful condition. More than that, it was not in the least cowed or beaten. It moved with a majestic air, as if it were lord of the fair, yet there was something sinister about it, almost malevolent. It was savage, with the savagery of jungles, and the different savagery of evil. To an extent this could have been because of one red eye, a vicious little eye that roved about the circle of onlookers as it danced.

Too young to appreciate what he saw, Dod chuckled in his father’s arms. John glanced at his son, then down at his daughter. Abbie, quick-minded as her mother, stood stock-still and watched the bear with fear and wonder. John put an arm about her thin shoulders. She moved against his protective legs.

From side to side, side to side the bear rocked, almost hypnotically. Its belly fur looked soft to stroke, its sturdy legs paddled on the muddy grass. A gypsy youth moved among the crowd with a collecting bag. John dropped in a couple of small coins.

Abruptly the bear spotted something in the crowd. Slowly it stopped dancing. The gypsy woman tugged the chain. The bear took no notice. Motionless it faced the little family at the front of the spectators. Behind the unyielding bands of the muzzle its bead-bright eyes were fixed on Abbie. Lightly the massive creature fell to its fore-paws and padded forward. The gypsy stopped playing. The people drew back, a woman cried out.

Three or four feet away the bear stopped. Intently it stared

at the little girl. Her hand blue with cold, clutching her father's leg, she stared back pluckily. For several seconds no one moved. Then John tightened his grip on Abbie's shoulder and drew her behind him. The bear turned its attention to the man. Intently it leaned forward until its great muzzle almost touched the edge of his jacket. Dod reached out a hand and touched its furry ears above the lock on the iron muzzle. The bear's lips wrinkled in an embryo snarl showing its white fangs. It turned sideways and looked at the gypsy woman. In the thin brown face her eyes burned.

For a full half minute no one moved, then suddenly the spell was broken. The bear swung round and padded back up the clearing. At the entrance to the enclosure it paused. A gaudy notice proclaimed 'Menagerie'. The bear reared up on its hind legs and looked back at the crowd. The seated gypsy played a few wild notes. The bear opened its cavernous mouth as far as the muzzle allowed and roared, slashing its clawed feet in the air. It was magnificent. The country people were thrilled. Then it fell to four paws, looked once at the little group in the forefront of the spectators, and padded away through the menagerie entrance. The performance was over.

The crowd drifted away. Among the last, by reason of their situation, John and his family looked around. He set Dod on the grass and eased his shoulders. Mary smoothed her daughter's hair.

'Were you frightened, Abbie? It took quite a fancy to you.'

Her face still a little pale, the girl shook her head and raised a smile.

'Can we go and see the animals?' She looked at the array of shabby cages that ringed the enclosure.

'Not now, we've got to be going soon. Anyway, you've got plenty of animals at home.'

'But this is different.'

'No. Poor things. I don't like to see animals shut up like that. It's cruel.'

Abbie knew it was no use arguing.

The gypsy youth locked the bear in the menagerie's single splendid cage, a stout wooden structure painted crimson and gold. At the entrance the man and woman sat waiting for customers. Between them lay a packing case on which rested an

assortment of cheap pot animals and dishes with animal motifs. Abbie caught Dod's hand and they crossed to look.

Mary took her husband's arm. 'It's been a lovely day. The children have enjoyed it.'

He laid a big labourer's hand on top of hers. They followed to the menagerie entrance.

Thirty or forty pot animals stood on the packing case. They were cheaply made, ill-fashioned, the glaze pocked with tiny bubbles and grit. Dod seized a mis-shapen pig. He thought it beautiful and John had to prise it from his grasp. Abbie, more sensitive, examined a green monkey and crude yellow crocodile.

'Nothing you like?' said the gypsy woman.

She put the crocodile down and shook her head shyly.

'Here, what about these?'

From a bag at her side the woman lifted several ornaments carefully wrapped in scraps of rag. She dropped the coverings at her feet and set them along the front of the packing case. They were candle-holders made of fine china and fashioned in the form of animals – a rabbit, a puppy, a sleeping lamb. Unlike the other ornaments these were beautiful. Abbie's hand crept out to pick up the long-eared rabbit. It was eggshell-blue and decorated with a spring-like assortment of flowers – dog-daisies, buttercups and twined rosebuds.

She put her mouth to her father's ear. 'Can I have one of these?'

'If that's what you want. They look a bit expensive.'

'How much are they?'

'Ask the lady.'

Abbie plucked up her courage and did so. The gypsy regarded her, dark eyes ageless above the high cheekbones and taut brown skin.

'How much you got?'

Abbie drew her hand from her pocket and showed the coins in her palm.

'Fourpence,' she whispered.

'Well!' The gypsy widened her eyes in mock surprise. 'That's a funny thing. That's exactly how much they are. Fourpence. Which one do you want, my love?'

'This one.' Abbie held out the blue rabbit.

The gypsy wrapped it in the scrap of rag and handed it back.

'Be careful you don't break it.' She took the four hot pennies and dropped them into a pocket somewhere among her long skirts. She beckoned Abbie forward. 'Come here a minute.'

Abbie moved towards her, reassured by her father's proximity. The gypsy woman took hold of her arm and squeezed it confidently.

'I've took quite a fancy to you,' she said. 'What's your name?'

The girl glanced back at her parents. 'Abbie,' she said shyly.

'Well, Abbie, what do you need to go with a candle-holder?'

She was silent. The gypsy smiled.

'A candle isn't it? You need a candle to go with a candle-holder.'

She fumbled at the bottom of the bag and produced a small bundle wrapped in brown paper. Carefully she unfolded it. They were yellow candles, tallow and beeswax, about five of them. She picked one out and folded the others away.

'There.' She handed the candle to Abbie. 'That's a present from me - to burn in your nice holder.'

The gypsy woman sat back.

Abbie retreated to her father's side.

'Go on,' Mary prompted her. 'What do you say to the lady?'

Abbie lowered her eyes. 'Thank you,' she whispered.

The sun was low above the hills as they left the cart in the lane and started up the farm track towards their cottage. They passed the stables and barns and climbed the stile into a pasture. At the far side stood their cottage, an irregular two-storey building with sagging red tile roof and dormer windows. It was flanked by a couple of stone outhouses, one or two fruit trees, and John's vegetable patch.

A rough collie, black and white, heard their voices and scrambled over the dry-stone wall. Delightedly it bounded to greet them. Dod ran ahead. The dog paused, twisting and curvetting as the little boy patted it, then ran the last few yards. Its mouth laughed wide, its tail wagged furiously. John reached down and rubbed the warm head and shoulders affectionately. The dog looked at him with bright brown eyes and turned to Mary and Abbie.

Abruptly its tail stopped wagging. Momentarily it froze, then the neat head went down. Growling it backed away.

They were surprised, for it was a gentle creature, a family pet as well as a working dog.

Abbie advanced towards it. 'Come on, Fly. Good boy! Come and see me.'

The dog backed further. The lips curled from its white teeth. Its growl rose to a threatening snarl.

Abbie looked back at her father. She tucked her parcel more securely beneath her arm.

John was displeased. 'Fly, come here!' he ordered.

The dog skirted widely about Abbie and slunk to his side.

'Now, what's all this!' he lectured. 'Sit down!'

Obediently the animal did as it was told. He caught it by the collar.

'Abbie, come and pat him now.'

As the little girl approached, the dog sprang to its feet and struggled back so suddenly and wildly that John lost his grip on its collar. In a frenzy it barked and snarled in Abbie's direction.

John was seriously angry. 'Abbie, you stay there.' He walked a dozen yards across the field. 'Now, Fly! Come here!'

The dog returned to his side, pressing against his legs in a fever of distress and savagery. John seized it by the collar and thrashed it about the flanks with his heavy hand. Tail between its legs the collie cowered.

'Now, Abbie, come and pat him!'

The dog shivered uncontrollably as the girl approached. Then its nerve broke. It struggled wildly. John held it. The dog caught his wrist in its teeth and bit him. He let go. Terrified and overwhelmed the dog raced away across the pasture and disappeared over the cottage wall.

It was a distressing scene and spoiled their homecoming. Indeed it cast a shadow over the whole day. In the house, John cleaned his wound, then went out to look for the dog. It was nowhere to be seen and would not answer his call.

When he returned Mary had set the table for tea. There were one or two unaccustomed dainties from the fair. A wood fire flamed and crackled in the hearth. He was not a man to forget or forgive lightly, but over the meal his anger evaporated. They talked of the fairground and the events of the day, the children's excitement now battling with tiredness, their eyes bright and cheeks flushed. Mary cut some more rounds of bread, pretty at

the end of the table. John smiled in contentment, still wondering about the dog. Abbie's clothes must have caught the scent of the bear, he could think of no other explanation. He spread his bread with tangy farm butter and reached for the cheese curd.

An hour later Dod was sound asleep in his cot, clutching a scrap of blanket from which he refused to be parted at bedtime. In a pink flannel nightdress edged with ribbon, her hair loosened, Abbie came downstairs from the children's bedroom. She held the blue rabbit and candle. Carefully she fitted the candle into its socket in the rabbit's back and handed it to her father to see it was safe. Then she lit a taper at the fire and touched it to the wick.

With pleasure, for she liked pretty things, Abbie surveyed her purchase at the corner of the table. The tallow flame burned clean and bright, reflecting on the flower-patterned china below. She carried it to show her mother, leaning against the wooden arm of her chair.

'It's lovely,' her mother said.

'Mm,' Abbie agreed.

Mary put an arm about her daughter's waist. She was so slight there was nothing of her. In a glow of love she kissed the girl's hair.

'Away to bed now. Have you got Millie-Meg?'

Abbie collected her rag doll from a box in the corner. She kissed her big father, with his own special smell, and trailed off into the hallway and upstairs. The gypsy's candle flickered in her hand.

Half a minute later came her customary call. 'I'm in bed!'

'Good girl,' they replied. 'Night-night.'

'Sleep tight.'

'Don't let the bed-bugs bite. Good-night!'

The ritual over, John stretched and trimmed the flame of the lamp. Then he and Mary settled down for the evening.

The wind rose. They heard it rushing about the windows. The fire burned brightly, the flames sucked up the chimney. Mary closed the vent to make the logs last longer.

A while afterwards there was a scratching at the back door, followed by a whine and a low quick bark. John opened the door. Fly stood at the entrance, ears half laid back, watching

with anxious eyes. He knew he had done something dreadful and was uncertain of his reception.

John yielded. 'All right, old chap. Come on in.'

Instantly the dog trotted past and turned in the kitchen, desperate to please and be forgiven. John spoke to him firmly but softly, then rubbed his head and allowed the dog to the fire. Fly made a fuss of Mary, returned to John, then settled in his customary place on a strip of torn rug to one side of the hearth.

They returned to their evening pursuits. Mary darned a working smock of her husband's. Laboriously John read an article on agriculture, lips forming the words as his broad finger traced them along the line.

He could not concentrate. His thoughts kept returning to Fly's behaviour in the pasture. As the dog lay beside the fire, repeatedly it raised its head and looked towards the door that led into the hallway and the rest of the house. A soft, almost apologetic growl stirred in its throat.

John laid his paper aside. 'Come on, then. Good lad.' He rose and led the way to the door. The dog followed. He opened the door and stepped into the hallway. Fly held back. 'Come on, good boy!' The hackles rose on the dog's neck. Obviously frightened it crept to the doorway and looked along the dark passage. At the far end the staircase rose to the landing, where a faint glow from Abbie's candle touched the wall and bannisters.

John crouched and ruffled the dog's coat, smoothing its head, trying to tempt it into the shadows. Fly took a single step then stopped, shivering as he had done in the field, understanding the ruse perfectly.

John shook his head. Leaving the dog in the doorway he climbed the dark stairs to the children's bedroom. They were asleep, pink and innocent on the pillows. In its pretty holder the gypsy's candle stood on a small chest of drawers. Its clear flame danced in the draught created by the door.

He returned to the landing and leaned over the rail of the bannisters. 'Fly', he called softly. 'Come here. Come on, good dog.'

But Fly, who crept into the children's room whenever he had a chance and made himself comfortable on the foot of Abbie's bed, refused to venture into the shadows. Unhappily he shifted



in the living-room doorway, clinging to the lamplight. He growled, then barked and barked again, deafening in the confines of the hallway.

'Fly, be quiet!' Mary called across the room.

John glanced into the children's bedroom. Abbie stirred but did not wake. He pulled the door half shut and returned downstairs. The dog danced to meet him. In the light and warmth of the living-room it pressed about his legs, eyes shining with love, eloquent to please and be reassured that John understood and forgave.

'It beats me,' he said to his wife, soothing the dog with his hand. 'He's never acted this way before.'

'Well, you know what you said, John.' The darning lay in Mary's lap. 'It must be the smell of that bear hanging on her coat. If it's a fine day tomorrow I'll give it an airing before church.'

John nodded. 'Come on then, Fly.' He mixed the dog's meal, lit a lantern, and led it out to the shed where it slept in a box of warm rags. Leaving it gulping the food, a dish of clean water alongside, he fastened the catch on the door and returned to the house.

The clock on the mantelshelf chimed eight. Mary looked up. She had finished the darning and read a month-old copy of *The Gentlewoman's Companion*, which she was lent regularly when the wife of John's employer had finished with it. A pair of wire-framed spectacles rested on her nose.

'Did you blow out Abbie's light when you were upstairs?' she asked.

'Mm?' His eyes had fallen shut. 'No, I left it. I thought she might wake up with the barking.'

Mary laid aside her magazine and spectacles and mounted to the children's room. Both were sound asleep. She tucked in the corners of their blankets and kissed each softly on the brow. Dod stirred, pink thumb against his lips.

The candle burned in its holder on the end of the chest. She examined it closely for the first time. It was a pretty thing, she thought, small wonder that Abbie liked it. Good quality for fourpence, too, with a penny candle thrown in. She raised it and held her small house-lamp beneath. There was the maker's mark, a well-known Staffordshire firm. Apparently the gypsy had taken

a genuine liking to Abbie, so good an ornament would have cost a dozen times fourpence in the shops.

She set it down again, looked once about the room, and blew out the flame. A trail of acrid smoke touched her nostrils as she turned away, and leaving the door ajar returned downstairs to the living-room.

It was time to make John's supper, though on Saturday they did not need to go to bed so early. She topped up the kettle at the water bucket and set it on the hob above the licking flames. Then she sliced some bread and went to the pantry for cheese and a jar of dripping flavoured with rosemary. As an after-thought, to finish the Martinmas holiday with a treat, she filled two small glasses with damson wine.

In the shed Fly began to bark, not the occasional bark that sometimes broke the silence of the night, but a wild outburst. They heard his claws raking at the shed door.

'What is wrong with that dog today!' John cried, as Mary turned with the two bright glasses. He rose impatiently. 'I'll be back in a minute. Perhaps there's someone prowling around.'

He pulled on his jacket and took a lantern and stick. But even as his hand was on the outside door there was a scream from the children's room – and another scream. It was Abbie. Dod added his shrill voice. For an instant they stood frozen, then John ran across the room with Mary at his heels.

The lantern threw wild patches of light and shadow on the walls as he raced up the stairs. From the children's room came a sound of crashing, and above it the hysterical screaming of Abbie and Dod. He ran along the landing and burst into the bedroom. For an instant as the door flew back he had the impression of a shape, a darkness, an insubstantial something at the edge of his vision. He spun round and held the lantern high – but there was nothing there.

The room was a turmoil. Abbie's bedclothes were flung half across the floor. Dod's cot was thrust aside. An old chair on which they left their clothes lay tumbled on the boards. He ran to the window and pulled back the curtains. Both catches were securely fastened. There was nothing beneath the beds, or in the little wardrobe. The children crouched against the wall, still crying aloud with terror.

Mary ran to them. Quickly John searched the other rooms.

They were the same as always, there were no intruders. He returned to his wife and children.

Slowly the children quietened in their parents' arms. Mary held her daughter tightly. Dod clutched his father round the neck.

'Oh, Mummy!' Abbie panted through her tears. 'It was the bear! It was here – in this room! It was going to eat us!' Her thin chest heaved in a fresh paroxysm of sobs.

'It was the bear! It was the bear!' Dod wailed.

A faint musky odour hung on the air. Mary wrinkled her nose, she could not place it. Perhaps it could have been the smell of the bear, clinging to Abbie's coat. John, too, had noticed it. He shook his head slightly in puzzlement.

When at last the children had calmed sufficiently, they carried them downstairs. Mary warmed some milk in a saucepan and they sat by the fire. Slowly, in their parents' laps, the terror of the darkness receded.

'But how could it be the bear?' John said gently to his daughter. 'The bear was at the fair – and you know what a long journey that was.'

She looked at him disbelievingly.

'It was all a nightmare,' he said. 'You were excited. The fair, the big bear, Fly acting like he did.'

'But Dod saw it as well.'

'Saw it?'

'Well, knew it was there.'

John squeezed her. 'You know how you can start him off.' He turned her round to look in her face. 'I know it doesn't seem like it. But do you think I would be saying all this if it wasn't true?'

She did not reply, looking towards the fire, comforted by her father's presence but a thousand miles away from his words.

The two children were exhausted. Despite the distress of their waking, soon their eyes were pricking and closing with tiredness. Mary straightened the bedroom and John carried them upstairs.

'One for a farmer, two for a cow,' he chanted on the treads.

'Three for a shepherd, four for a plough,' they continued. 'Five for a lady, six for a . . .'

Then they were snug in their beds once more. The gypsy's candle burned brightly on the end of the chest. Leaving his wife

to sit and tell comforting stories until they fell asleep, John returned to the living room.

Mary joined him fifteen minutes later. Now she no longer had to wear a practical reassuring face for the children, her eyes were anxious.

'I know it doesn't make sense, John, but there's something not right. She's never had a nightmare like that before – throwing things around the room. And Fly barking. Did you notice how he stopped just after we went upstairs? And that funny smell in the bedroom.'

'Yes, what was that? Was it that candle?'

'I don't know. I don't think so. It's not there now anyway, and the candle is burning.'

'Perhaps that's what Fly smelled.' He thought. 'The bear didn't actually touch her, did it?'

'No, you know it didn't.'

They had eaten with the children. Mary felt the tea-pot and found it was still hot. She poured two more cups, orange and strong, and topped them up from the steaming kettle.

'It was the same sort of animal smell, wasn't it,' John said. 'Hot and musky.'

Mary shivered. 'Let's not talk about it any more.'

She crossed to a shelf and lifted down the black family Bible. Seated at the hearth, with her legs curled beneath her, aloud she read comforting words from the Old and New Testaments. John listened, calmed by holy writ and the figure of his wife, her face bowed in the firelight.

Shortly afterwards it was time for bed. John looked around outside and locked the door, then banked up the fire with damp peat and wood that would keep it alive until morning. As he loosened his boots and set them by the hearth he glanced up at the clock and saw it was a little after ten o'clock.

Mary had changed into her night-dress and loosened her soft brown hair. John loved her so. He moved about the bedroom, hanging his good trousers and jacket in the cupboard, collecting his night-shirt from beneath the pillow.

'Should I leave Abbie's light burning?' Mary wondered aloud.

'No, she won't wake up again,' John said.

Mary nodded. 'The candle would burn out before the morning,' she said. 'She would be disappointed.'

On light bare feet she crossed the landing into the children's bedroom. They lay as she had left them an hour earlier. Softly she blew out the candle and returned to her husband.

John extinguished the lantern. They lay in darkness. Mary curled against his chest. His arm cradled her shoulders.

'It's been a lovely day,' she said.

'Until this evening. Did it bother you very much?'

'Yes, at the time. But the fair was nice. I did enjoy it.'

His arm tightened about her shoulders. He moved his neck and kissed the top of her head, smelling the familiar fragrance of her hair.

The sounds of the night rose to their room. Owls called about the barns and in the copse. Two fields away a cow lowed.

The bed warmed.

'Mm.' She lay more closely against him, her hand curled lightly on his broad chest.

John felt the deep stirring of his longing. Lying on his back, he looked towards the dim rectangle of the window.

'John', Mary murmured.

Tenderly he turned to his wife.

As he did so, the peace of the night was disturbed by another outburst of barking from Fly in the shed. John stiffened, romantic thoughts driven away in an instant.

'Blast the dog!'

The barking redoubled. John sat up in bed. They could hear the dog hurling itself against the shed door.

'I've got to get up. There's something not right.'

He pushed back the bedclothes. At the same instant there was a piercing scream from across the landing, a child's high shriek of terror. It was repeated. A second later it was continuous. Something fell heavily.

Hands outstretched before him, John ran across the bedroom and landing. With a crash he burst into the children's room. All was darkness and confusion. The screaming was in his ears. A blanket whirled in the air and struck him in the face. Nothing was to be seen but the shadowy outline of the window. He started forward and tumbled headlong over some piece of furniture.

'Mary!' he cried loudly. 'Mary! Fetch a light! Quickly!'

Her footsteps were on the landing. She raced down the stairs to light a taper at the fire.

John struggled upright, caught his feet in a chair, and fell again.

Silhouetted against the dim rectangle of the window something moved, a huge black shape, ceiling-high. Before it was Abbie, struggling and screaming. Her legs kicked wildly in the air. He seized the chair and sprang forward, flailing at the top of that dark shape. There was a cracking thud, followed by a deep coughing roar. A second time he smashed down the chair.

Abbie was released. He half-felt, half-saw her skinny body fall. Frantically she scrambled away past his legs, sobbing and panting.

Something struck him across the shoulder, a massive crunching blow, a shredding rip that tore through the muscle. Momentarily it did not hurt. A third time he raised the chair. It was batted from his hand.

As if the thing could see, it came at him across the darkened bedroom. His hands grasped fur, it was all about him, his face was forced into a hot musky blanket. Two massive arms, tipped with raking claws, embraced his shoulders. They tightened. John struggled impotently. His cries joined the screams of the children. The arms tightened further. He could not breathe. Long claws pierced his back. Rank animal breath was in his face. A huge open mouth nuzzled the top of his head. Teeth raked his scalp. Wildly he kicked out and pulled his head aside. The savage mouth pursued him. He felt the teeth shred his ear. Blood ran down the side of his neck. The pressure about his ribs grew tighter still. His senses began to slide away. Flashes of light and darkness burst before his eyes.

Then lamplight glimmered in the open doorway. The unbearable pressure eased about his chest. Mary's footsteps were upon the stairs. The light brightened. The creature was leaving him. She reached the landing. The lamp, shedding rays of brilliance, burst through the doorway. The bedroom was illuminated.

For an instant a shadow hung in the air. Then John stood alone. Blood streamed down his face and seeped through his nightshirt from a score of wounds. Momentarily he swayed, close to fainting. His groping hand caught the foot of Abbie's bed. Shakily he sank on the tumbled blankets.

The creature's rank smell hung on the air. Wide-eyed the children crouched against the wall, then ran sobbing to their

mother. She held them tightly to calm their distress, eyes turned with fear upon her mauled husband.

As the thudding in John's head grew easier and the room stopped reeling about him, he raised his head and saw that his family was safe.

'Oh, thank God!' he mumbled.

Then his head fell forward on his breast. Blood from his ripped ear dripped upon the knees of his night-shirt.

An hour later Mary had cleaned his wounds as well as she was able in hot salt water. With a small needle and white thread boiled in the kettle, trembling as she worked, she put three stitches in his ear and half a dozen in his torn shoulder. In a clean night-shirt he sat with a cup of tea. Pale as death beneath his country tan, he was slowly recovering.

Mary tidied about the sink and joined him by the crackling fire. At their feet, wrapped in blankets and heads on pillows, the children lay on the living-room floor. Dod slept, thumb in his mouth. Abbie lay still, her scratches bathed and bandaged, comforted by the nearness of her parents. She gazed towards the leaping yellow flames.

'It's the devil's work, sure enough,' John said. 'And it's got something to do with that candle-stick.'

Mary nodded imperceptibly.

'The way it stared at her!' He looked down at his daughter. 'Abbie, did you feel anything, anything strange, when the bear stopped dancing and looked at you?'

Abbie lay without moving. 'I was frightened,' she whispered. 'And that's all. Nothing more?'

'It was big,' she said. 'And it was looking at me in a funny way.'

'What sort of funny way?'

Her voice quavered. 'As if it was hungry and wanted to eat me up.' She turned to look at her father.

'Well, it's not going to eat you up,' John said, rallying for his daughter's sake. 'Whatever it was, it's gone now. And I'm going to put the candle out of the house.'

He rose from his chair.

'I'll do it, John,' Mary said.

'I can do that much, love,' he said smiling. 'You stay here with the children.'

He trimmed the wick of the lantern and adjusted it to a brilliant fish-tail, then took up a long knife and let himself into the hallway. Nothing moved. He ascended the staircase. The children's bedroom was in a turmoil, just as they had left it. Innocent and pretty the blue china rabbit and half-burned candle stood on the end of the chest. He looked at the painted flowers, the familiar trickle of wax and blackened stub of wick. It was impossible to believe they had anything to do with the nightmarish events of an hour before. He took them up and carried them downstairs.

'I'll put them out in the shed,' he said to Mary.

The bolt shot back on the door and he stepped outside. It was dark, there was no moon. The lantern threw swinging patches of light on the bushes and rough stone of the shed wall. Fly barked a soft greeting as he unlatched the door. But as he stepped inside the welcome turned to a growl and snarl of warning.

'Come on, old chap,' John urged.

But again Fly would not 'come on'. Hackles raised and teeth bared, he backed to the farthest corner. Seizing an opportunity, he circled round his master and fled through the open door.

The inside walls of the shed were as rough as the outside. Wooden boxes lay about the floor, tools and old bits of equipment hung from nails, long-handled implements stood propped in the corners. A stack of planks lay along the open beams.

John set down the china rabbit and candle by the cobwebbed window, pretty and out of place on the brown work bench. Briefly he regarded them, then turned away into the November night. He latched the door firmly, hooking a six-inch nail through the hasp to secure it from the outside.

Fly stood waiting in the doorway of the house, jumping from his front paws and swishing his tail as he approached. Appreciating the dog's fear, John made a fuss of him. Sensing his master's hurt, Fly pressed close sympathetically.

Now the dog showed no fear in the house. When they returned upstairs he accompanied them. That night Abbie slept with her mother. The children's room having been straightened, Dod was returned to his cot. Then John squeezed into the unaccustomed confines of his daughter's bed. His shoulder smarted, but much more troubling were his thoughts. The night was far gone before at length he sank into a restless sleep.



The morning broke bright and chill, the sun red in the trees which flanked the cottage. Dew hung in the spiders' webs.

It was Sunday. John did not accompany his wife and children to church, which was unusual, for the whole family was regular in its attendance. He limped stiffly, and people would have been certain to ask about his injuries, his cut face and torn ear. Many of the country folk were superstitious, and he did not want to encourage a reputation. Earnestly he counselled his children against speaking of the frightening events of the night.

Left alone a little after ten o'clock, for it was a considerable walk to the church, he read an extract from the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer. Spiritually refreshed, he returned the books to their respected positions on the shelf, and did one or two small jobs. But his thoughts centred on the gypsy's candle. Now the Sabbath daylight was strong he planned to examine the china rabbit and tallow candle carefully, then burn them on a fire or bury them far from the cottage where their influence could do no further harm.

Fly followed him contentedly as he went about his tasks. As he approached the shed, however, the collie's feathery tail curled between its legs. With two or three backward glances it slunk away beyond the vegetable patch.

Cautiously, poised for retreat himself, John lifted the bent nail and eased open the green-painted door. Nothing stirred, nothing had been moved. The shed lay before him the same as always. The bright autumn sunlight revealed the dirt on the windows, the dust and scuffed shavings on the floor.

A couple of planks lay on the dewed grass waiting to be stacked away. He slid them through the doorway on to the pile that lay along the beams overhead. Then he entered.

Incongruous on the work bench stood Abbie's floral rabbit and candle. Despite the dog's fear and the events of the night, it seemed foolish to regard such a pretty object with suspicion, yet in his eyes it had become an evil thing. He took it in his practical hand and carried it into the sunshine.

The china rabbit, as Mary had seen, was a manufactured article, beautifully glazed and of fine quality. It must have been one of thousands, or tens of thousands. He set it aside on the stone wall and turned his attention to the candle.

It was hand-made, not an unusual fact in rural areas in those

days. The yellow tallow and beeswax mixture was poorly blended and mottled in appearance. The wick, where it had burned and smouldered, was curled and black. He broke an inch from the end of the candle and examined it more closely. It was of twisted cotton like any other wick. Then his eye detected one or two dark strands running through the white. He looked more closely, then pulled off the broken wax and fluffed up the cotton with his finger-nail. Carefully he separated and pulled out one of the dark threads. It broke, but the wisp he held was enough to reveal it was a coarse brown hair. With a flash of intuition he knew it was a hair from the dancing bear. It was the right colour, the right texture. In his imagination he saw the creature as vividly as if it stood there before him.

The hair drifted from his fingers. He pushed the candle back into its holder and stood for a long time thoughtfully. Then he trimmed the wick with his pocket knife, returned the rabbit to the work bench, and fetched flint and tinder from the house.

The low sun shone through the shed door and struck diagonally through the window panes. Despite its brightness the bare walls and wood begrimed with the dust of centuries gave the shed a gloomy air. Carefully John set the candle by the beams of sunlight and struck a spark. The tinder rag smouldered. He touched it to the wick of the candle and blew gently. The wick ignited. Quickly, more frightened than he had realized, he jumped back towards the open door.

The candle burned with a clear flame. Nothing happened. Nervous as a boy he advanced and blew it out, then retreated again.

A curl of smoke rose in the air as the dying wick smouldered. Momentarily he imagined it assumed a shape, a shape that he recognized; but it was so fleeting that he could not trust or believe his eyes. Before he could look a second time the smoke was gone, diffused, vanished in the sunbeams that slanted from the grimy window. A faint musky scent, a scent that he remembered all too well, hung on the air, insubstantial as the shadow in the smoke.

John gazed around the shed. Nothing had changed, all was still. He paused thoughtfully, then moved the blue rabbit to the corner of a crate where it was darker, and half closed the door behind him. The gloom intensified.

A second time he struck a spark and touched the glowing rag to the wick. The candle ignited. He waited, poised for flight, then blew it out with a rough breath and retreated hastily to the door of the shed.

The smoke rose, dim in the shadows, and this time there was no mistake. It was no fancy of his imagination. He pushed the door almost shut, holding it with a hand behind his back. Slowly the smoke curled and hung in the air, neither thickening nor diffusing. Uncertainly it gathered and assumed an outline, a ghostly image of the dancing bear, that regarded him with wicked eyes and bared teeth. It was so insubstantial that through it he could see the hanging tools and timbers of the shed wall behind. Its dusky-pink mouth opened in a silent roar, the smoky arms lifted, it took a half-step in his direction.

John pulled open the shed door. The sunlight streamed in, too strong for the creature of darkness. The ghostly shape thinned and evaporated. In a matter of seconds he was left alone with the acrid animal smell of its passing.

John shivered and stepped into the healthy air of the morning. It was time to make his fire. It was best to burn the candle, destroy its evil in the cleansing flames whilst he was protected by the Sabbath sunshine. He took a deep breath and looked around. Armfuls of brushwood lay to hand in the bottom of the hedges.

It did not take long to gather some handfuls of grass and cover them with a tent of twigs. As he blew his tinder the grass flared. The twigs crackled. He fed the blaze with sticks and dry cabbage stalks. Soon the flames of a hot yellow fire leaped head-high at the bottom of his vegetable patch.

John returned to the shed. As he went he saw Fly standing at the end of a low stone wall. He called. Unresponding, the dog watched him. He called again, sharply. Fly raised his muzzle and issued a volley of barks that ended in an eerie howl. In distress he circled, but still refused to approach.

John shook his head and sighed. He continued to the shed door. Again, with the birds twittering on the bushes around and the sunlight streaming through the entrance, it was difficult to believe that evil lurked in so pretty a little ornament, almost a frippery, gay in the familiar dusty brown of the shed. Yet he had seen the shadow of the bear. He touched his torn ear: his

shoulder stung with the stitched rake of its claws. He hesitated. It was tempting to see the bear materialize in its full strength. Soon it would be destroyed for ever in the heat of his fire. He could control it so easily, simply by opening the door to let in the sunlight.

He descended the vegetable patch and threw some more wood on the flames, then returned to the shed. Carefully he lit the candle and set it chest-high on a stack of boxes at the inner end. With a hammer and a few tacks he fastened a couple of dusty sacks across the window. The shadows deepened. Finally he retreated to the door and pushed it shut at his back. The shed was plunged into the darkness of night. In the midst the candle shone brightly like a flickering star.

He snatched the door open, closed it, and opened it again, for the door was his means of escape and safety. The sunlight flooded in, the shed was illumined, the candle sank into obscurity.

His heart thudding, John pushed the door almost shut, narrowing his eyes against the candle flame until they accustomed themselves to the gloom. Through the heavy sacks he could just make out the faint square of the window. At last he was ready. He crossed the floor and blew out the candle, retreated hastily to the door and pushed it shut. Then he waited, poised for instant flight, his palm sweating on the handle of the door at his back.

John's keen eyes stared into the gloom. He could distinguish the dim outline of the boxes, a coil of rope hanging from a nail. There was not enough light to see the first drifting coils of smoke.

After half a minute, however, he perceived a deepening of the shadow in the corner, a darkening that grew yet blacker and more substantial as he stared. It moved. At last he was able to make out the figure of the dancing bear, on four paws. It was unmuzzled. Its head lifted with opening jaws, jaws in which he could see the glint of long teeth. Its eyes watched him across the shed, one dark, the other fiery red. The huge creature shuffled from side to side, then heaved itself upright on its hind legs, beam-high.

John tested the handle of the door and felt it turn easily. For a moment longer he waited with fatal fascination.

The bear took a step forward in an odd half-dancing movement and raised its fore-paws, tipped with long raking claws. Momentarily John lost sight of what it was doing, for its head was behind the pile of timbers stacked high on the open beams. Then abruptly, more swiftly than he supposed possible, the lumbering creature pushed. The pile of planks skidded forward, reached a point of balance, and crashed down where he was standing. John leaped aside, turned, and wrenched the door open. At the same instant the timbers struck the handle from his grasp, smashed the door shut again, and piled against it in tumbled confusion.

Suddenly terrified, John looked across the shed. The eyes blinked, there was a low growl. The bear started towards him in the gloom. Feverishly he tore at the fallen planks. There was no time. He rushed for the sacking that covered the windows. A massive paw batted him back; claws ripped his chest and tore open the stitches from the evening before. It burned like fire. Biting back the pain he flung himself at the timbers. Desperately he heaved. A tangle of planks moved together. The door was almost cleared, but the bear stood right above him. John sprang aside and ran round a pile of crates to reach the window. A second time the bear struck him with its claws. He staggered headlong, sprawling in a confusion of boxes and falling tools.

On hands and knees he scrambled away. The bear rose above him, midnight-black and enormous. Streaming blood he staggered to the door. Wildly he tore at the remaining planks. They fell aside. He grasped the handle. The bear's claws hooked in his belt and dragged him back. Its paw cuffed him about the head, terrible disfiguring blows that shredded his face from brow to chin. He screamed, but there was no one to hear.

Then the nightmarish creature held him in its grasp. The shaggy arms tightened about his chest, the hot red mouth was lowered to bite at his head and shoulder. He could not breathe. The pain in his chest was unbearable. With a loud 'snap' a rib cracked, then another. They splintered. The broken ends curved into his lungs. They ceased to hurt. Almost dreamily he felt the long teeth sink into his neck. The bear's hug was unrelenting. Flashes of red and black exploded in his brain, drifted like clouds across his eyes. He felt his senses slipping away. Then

John Honeyman, farm labourer, thirty-two years old, gave a little choking sigh – and knew no more.

The noise and upheaval of the past two minutes were stilled. Nothing moved in the shadows but the slow head and shoulders of the great bear. Silence fell upon the darkened shed, a dreadful silence broken only by an occasional snap and crunch, and the sounds of some big carnivore feeding.

At a little before one o'clock Mary and the children were half-way home from church. Dod and Abbie kicked their toes through the piles of rustling golden leaves that edged the lane. A flock of rooks rose from the trees and sailed cawing to a ploughed field beyond distant hedgerows.

Watching them go, Mary spotted Fly trotting at a brisk pace across a meadow. The children called. The collie stopped and looked around, then spotted them in the lane. With tail flying, he came bounding through the cattle, which pranced aside and watched with planted forefeet and lowered heads. In a quick wriggle he was under the gate and greeted them with bright eyes and laughing mouth. Dod thrust two gleaming conkers into his pocket and crouched to pat the dog daintily on top of the head.

Then the children took their mother's hands, Abbie on one side, Dod on the other. Fly trotted alongside, stopping every now and then to examine some tantalizing scent at the side of the lane. A fresh breeze blew across the fields. With rosy cheeks and laughter they skipped homeward in the November sunshine.

Patricia Highsmith

## Woodrow Wilson's neck-tie

The façade of *Madame Thibault's Waxwork Horrors* glittered and throbbed with red and yellow lights, even in the daytime. Golden balls like knobs – the yellow lights – pulsated amid the red lights, attracting the eye, holding it.

Clive Wilkes loved the place, the inside and outside equally. Since he was a delivery boy for a grocery store, it was easy for him to say a certain delivery had taken him longer than might be expected – he'd had to wait for Mrs So-and-so to get home, because the doorman had told him she was due any minute, or he'd had to go five blocks to find some change, because Mrs Zilch had had only a fifty-dollar bill. At these spare moments, and Clive found one or two a week, he visited *Madame Thibault's Waxwork Horrors*.

Inside the establishment, you went through a dark passage to get in the mood, and then you were confronted by a bloody murder scene: a girl with long blonde hair was sticking a knife into the neck of an old man who sat at a kitchen table eating his dinner. His dinner was a couple of wax frankfurters and wax sauerkraut. Then came the Lindbergh kidnapping, with Hauptmann climbing down a ladder outside a nursery window. You could see the top of the ladder outside the window, and the top half of Hauptmann's figure, clutching the little boy. Also there was Marat in his bath with Charlotte nearby. And Christie with his stocking throttlings of women. Clive loved every tableau, and they never became stale. But he didn't look at them with the solemn, vaguely startled expression of the other people who looked at them. Clive was inclined to smile, even to laugh. They were amusing. Why not laugh? Farther on in the museum were the torture chambers – one old, one modern, purporting to show twentieth-century torture methods in Nazi Germany and in French Algeria. Madame Thibault – who Clive strongly suspected did not exist – kept up to date. There were the

Kennedy assassinations, of course, the Tate massacre, and as like as not a murder that had happened just a month ago somewhere.

Clive's first definite ambition in regard to *Madame Thibault's Waxwork Horrors* was to spend a night there. This he did one night, providently taking along a cheese sandwich in his pocket. It was fairly easy to accomplish. Clive knew that three people worked in the museum proper, down in the bowels as he thought of it, though the museum was on street level, while another man, a plumpish middle-aged fellow in a nautical cap, sold tickets out in front at a booth. There were two men and a woman who worked in the bowels. The woman, also plump with curly brown hair and glasses and about forty, took the tickets at the end of the dark corridor, where the museum began. One of the men lectured constantly, though not more than half the people ever bothered to listen. 'Here we see the fanatical expression of the true murderer, captured by the wax artistry of Madame Thibault . . . blah-blah-blah . . .' The other man had black hair and black-rimmed glasses, and he just drifted around, shooing away kids who wanted to climb into the tableaux, maybe watching for pickpockets, or maybe protecting women from unpleasant assaults in the semi-darkness of the place, Clive didn't know.

He only knew it was quite easy to slip into one of the dark corners or into a nook next to one of the Iron Molls – maybe even into one of the Iron Molls but, slender as he was, the spikes might poke him, Clive thought, so he ruled out this idea. He had observed that people were gently urged out around 9.15 p.m. as the museum closed at 9.30 p.m. And lingering as late as possible one evening, Clive had learned that there was a sort of cloak room for the staff behind a door in one back corner, from which he had also heard the sound of a toilet flushing.

So one night in November, Clive concealed himself in the shadows, which were abundant, and listened to the three people as they got ready to leave. The woman – whose name seemed to be Mildred – was lingering to take the money box from Fred, the ticket-seller and to count it and deposit it somewhere in the cloak room. Clive was not interested in the money, at least not very interested. He was interested in spending a night in the place, to be able to say that he had.



'Night, Mildred! See you tomorrow!' called one of the men.

'Anything else to do? I'm leaving now,' said Mildred. 'Boy, am I tired! But I'm still going to watch Dragon Man tonight.'

'Dragon Man,' the other man repeated, uninterested.

Evidently the ticket-seller, Fred, left from the front of the building after handing in the money box, and in fact Clive recalled seeing him close up to the front once, cutting the lights from inside the entrance door, locking it.

Clive stood in a nook by an Iron Moll. When he heard the back door shut, and the key turn in the lock he waited for a moment in delicious silence, aloneness, and suspense, then ventured out. He went first on tiptoe to the room where they kept their coats, because he had never seen it. He had brought matches (also cigarettes, though smoking was not allowed, according to several signs), and with the aid of a match, he found the lightswitch. The room contained an old desk, four or five metal lockers, a tin wastebasket, an umbrella stand, and some books in a bookcase against a rather grimy wall that had once been white. Clive slid open a drawer or two, and found the well-worn wooden box which he had once seen the ticket-seller carrying in through the front door. The box was locked. He could walk out with the box, he thought, but in fact he didn't care to, and he considered this rather decent of himself. He gave the box a wipe with the side of his hand, not forgetting the bottom where his fingertips had touched. That was funny, he thought, wiping something he hadn't stolen.

Clive set about enjoying the night. He found the lights, and put them on, so that the booths with the gory tableaux were all illuminated. He was hungry, and took one bite of his sandwich and put it back in the paper napkin in his pocket. He sauntered slowly past the John F. Kennedy assassination - Robert, Jacky, doctors bending anxiously over the white table on which JFK lay, leaking an ocean of blood which covered the floor. This time Hauptmann's descent of the ladder made Clive giggle. Charles Lindbergh, Jr's face looked so untroubled, one might have thought he was sitting on the floor of his nursery playing with blocks. Clive swung a leg over a metal bar and climbed into the Judd-Snyder fracas. It gave him a thrill to be standing right *with* them, inches from the throttling-from-behind which the lover was administering to the husband. Clive put a hand

out and touched the red-paint blood that was beginning to come from the man's throat where the wire pressed. Clive also touched the cool cheekbones of the victim. The popping eyes were of glass, vaguely disgusting, and Clive did not touch those.

Two hours later, he was singing a church hymn; 'Nearer My God to Thee' and 'Jesus Wants Me for a Sunbeam'. Clive didn't know all the words. He smoked.

By 2 a.m. he was bored, and tried to get out by both front door and back, but couldn't. No spare keys anywhere that he could find. He'd thought of having a hamburger at an all-night place between here and home. His incarceration didn't bother him, however, so he finished the now dry cheese sandwich, made use of the toilet, and slept for a bit on three straight chairs which he arranged in a row. It was so uncomfortable, he knew he would wake up in a while, which he did at 5 a.m. He washed his face, and went for another look at the wax exhibits. This time he took a souvenir – Woodrow Wilson's neck-tie.

As the hour of nine approached – *Madame Thibault's Waxwork Horrors* opened at 9.30 a.m. – Clive hid himself in an excellent spot, behind one of the tableaux whose backdrop was a black-and-gold Chinese screen. In front of the screen was a bed and in the bed lay a wax man with a handlebar moustache, who was supposed to be dead from poisoning by his wife.

The public began trickling in shortly after 9.30 a.m., and the taller, solemn man began mumbling his boring lecture. Clive had to wait till a few minutes past ten before he felt safe enough to mingle with the crowd and make his exit, with Woodrow Wilson's neck-tie rolled up in his pocket. He was a bit tired, but happy. Though on second thought, who would he tell about it? Joey Vraskey, that blond idiot who worked behind the counter at Simmons' Grocery? Hah! Why bother? Joey didn't deserve a good story. Clive was half an hour late for work.

'I'm sorry, Mr Simmons, I overslept,' Clive said hastily, but he thought quite politely, as he came into the store. There was a delivery job awaiting him. Clive took his bicycle and put the box in front of the handlebars on a platform which had a kerb, so a box would not fall off.

Clive lived with his mother, a thin, highly strung woman who was a saleswoman in a shop that sold stockings, girdles and underwear. Her husband had left her when Clive was five. She

had no other children but Clive. Clive had quit high school a year before graduating, to his mother's regret, and for a year he had done nothing but lie around the house or stand on street corners with his chums. But Clive had never been very chummy with any of his friends, for which his mother was thankful, as she considered them a worthless lot. Clive had had the delivery job at Simmons's for nearly a year now, and his mother felt that he was settling down.

When Clive came home that evening at 6.30 p.m. he had a story ready for his mother. Last night he had run into his old friend Richie, who was in the army and home on leave, and they had sat up at Richie's talking so late, that Richie's parents had invited him to stay, and Clive had slept on the couch. His mother accepted his explanation. She made a supper of beans, bacon and eggs.

There was really no one to whom Clive felt like telling his exploit of the night. He couldn't have borne someone looking at him and saying, 'Yeah? Well, so what?' because what he had done had taken a bit of planning, even a little daring. He put Woodrow Wilson's tie among his others that hung over a string on the inside of his closet door. It was a grey silk tie, conservative and expensive. Several times that day, Clive imagined the two men in the place, or maybe the woman named Mildred, glancing at Woodrow Wilson and exclaiming:

'Hey! What happened to Woodrow Wilson's tie, I wonder?'

Each time Clive thought of this, he had to duck his head to hide his smile.

After twenty-four hours, however, the exploit had begun to lose its charm and excitement. Clive's excitement arose only again – and it could arise every day and two or three times a day – when he cycled past the twinkling façade of *Madame Thibault's Waxwork Horrors*. His heart would give a leap, his blood would run a little faster, and he would think of all the motionless murders going on in there, and all the stupid faces of Mr and Mrs Johnny Q. Public gaping at them. But Clive didn't even buy another ticket – price sixty-five cents – to go in and look at Woodrow Wilson and see that his tie was missing and his collar button showing – his work.

Clive did get another idea one afternoon, a hilarious idea that would make the public sit up and take notice. Clive's ribs

trembled with suppressed laughter as he pedalled towards Simmons's, having just delivered a carton of groceries.

When should he do it? Tonight? No, best to take a day or so to plan it. It would take brains. And silence. And sure movements – all the things Clive admired. He spent two days thinking about it. He went to his local snack-bar and drank Coca-cola and beer, and played the pinball machines with his pals. The pinball machines had pulsating lights too – MORE THAN ONE CAN PLAY and IT'S MORE FUN TO COMPETE – but Clive thought only of *Madame Thibault's* as he stared at the rolling, bouncing balls that mounted a score he cared nothing about. It was the same when he looked at the rainbow-coloured juke box whose blues, red and yellows undulated, and when he went over to drop a few coins in it. He was thinking of what he was going to do in *Madame Thibault's Waxwork Horrors*.

On the second night, after a supper with his mother, Clive went to *Madame Thibault's* and bought a ticket. The old guy who sold tickets barely looked at people, he was so busy making change and tearing off tickets, which was just as well. Clive went in at 9 p.m.

He looked at the tableaux, though they were not so fascinating to him tonight as usual. Woodrow Wilson's tie was still missing, as if no one had noticed it, and Clive had a good chuckle over this, which he concealed behind his hand. Clive remembered that the solemn-faced pickpocket-watcher – the drifting snoop – had been the last to leave the night Clive had stayed, so Clive assumed he had the keys, and therefore he ought to be the last to be killed.

The woman was the first. Clive hid himself beside one of the Iron Molls again, while the crowd oozed out, and as Mildred walked past him, in her hat and coat, to leave via the back door, Clive stepped out and wrapped an arm around her throat from behind.

She made only a small 'Ur-rk' sound.

Clive squeezed her throat with his hands, stopping her voice. At last she slumped, and Clive dragged her into a dark recessed corner to the left of the cloak room as one faced that room, and he knocked an empty cardboard box of some kind over, but it didn't make enough noise to attract the attention of the other two men.

'Mildred gone?' one of the men said.

'She might be still in the office.'

'No, she's not.' This voice had already gone into the corridor where Clive crouched over Mildred, and had looked into the empty cloak room where the light was still on. 'She's left. Well, I'm calling it a day, too.'

Clive stepped out then, and encircled this man's neck in the same manner. The job was more difficult, because the man struggled, but Clive's arm was thin and strong, he acted with swiftness, and he knocked the man's head against the nearest wall.

'What's going on?' The thump had brought the second man.

This time, Clive tried a punch to the man's jaw, but missed and hit his neck. However, this so stunned the man – the solemn fellow, the snoop – that a second blow was easy, and then Clive was able to take him by the shirtfront and bash his head against the wall which was harder than the wooden floor. Then Clive made sure that all three were dead. The two men's heads were bleeding. The woman was bleeding slightly from the mouth. Clive reached for the keys in the second man's pockets. They were in his left trousers pocket and with them was a penknife. Clive took the knife also.

Then the taller man moved slightly. Alarmed, Clive opened the pearl-handled penknife and went to work with it. He plunged it into the man's throat three or four times.

*Close call!* Clive thought, and he checked again to make sure they were all dead now. They most certainly were, and that was most certainly real blood coming out, not the red paint of *Madame Thibault's Waxwork Horrors*. Clive switched on the lights for the tableaux, and went into the exhibition hall for the interesting task of choosing the right places for the corpses.

The woman belonged in Marat's bath, not much doubt about that, and Clive debated removing her clothing, but decided against it, simply because she would look much funnier sitting in a bath with a fur-trimmed coat and hat on than naked. The figure of Marat sent him off in laughter. He'd expected sticks for legs, and nothing between the legs, because you couldn't see any more of Marat than from the middle of his torso up, but Marat had no legs at all, and his wax body ended just below the waist in a fat stump which was planted on a wooden platform

so it would not topple. This crazy item Clive carried into the cloak room and set squarely in the middle of the desk, like a Buddha. He then carried Mildred – who weighed a good bit – on to the Marat scene and stuck her in the bath. Her hat fell off and he pushed it on again, a bit over one eye. Her bleeding mouth hung open.

God, it *was* funny!

Now for the men. Obviously, the one whose throat he had cut would look good in the place of the old man who was eating franks and sauerkraut, because the girl behind him was supposed to be stabbing him in the throat. This work took Clive some fifteen minutes. Since the wax figure of the old man was in a seated position, Clive stuck him on the toilet off the cloak room. It was amusing to see the old man on the toilet, throat bleeding, a knife in one hand and a fork in the other, apparently waiting for something to eat. Clive lurched against the door jamb laughing loudly, not even caring if someone heard him, because it was so ludicrous, it was worth getting caught for.

Next, the little snoop. Clive looked around him, and his eye fell on the Woodrow Wilson scene, which depicted the signing of the armistice in 1918. A wax figure – Woodrow Wilson – sat at a huge desk signing a paper, and that was the logical place for a man whose head was split open and bleeding. With some difficulty Clive got the pen out of Woodrow Wilson's fingers, laid it to one side of the desk and carried the figure – they did not weigh very much – into the cloak room where Clive seated him at the desk, rigid arms in attitude of writing, and Clive stuck a ball-point pen into his right hand. Now for the last heave. Clive saw that his jacket was now quite spotted with blood, and he would have to get rid of it, but so far no blood was on his trousers.

Clive dragged the second man to the Woodrow Wilson tableau, heaved him up onto the platform, and rolled him towards the desk. His head was still leaking blood. Clive got him up on to the chair, but the head toppled forward on to the green blottered desk, on to the phony blank pages, and the pen barely stood upright in the limp hand.

But it was done. Clive stood back and smiled. Then he listened. Clive sat down on a straight chair somewhere and rested for a few minutes, because his heart was beating fast, and he

suddenly realized that every muscle in his body was tired. Ah, well, now he had the keys. He could get out, go home, have a good night's rest, because he wanted to be ready to enjoy tomorrow. Clive took a sweater from one of the male figures in a log cabin tableau. He had to pull the sweater down over the feet to get it off, because the arms would not bend, and it stretched the neck of the sweater but that couldn't be helped. Now the wax figure had a bib of a shirtfront, and naked arms and chest.

Clive wadded up his jacket and went everywhere with it, erasing fingerprints wherever he thought he had touched. He turned the lights off, and made his way carefully to the back door, which was not locked. Clive locked it behind him, and would have left the keys in a mailbox, if there had been one, but there was none, so he dropped the keys on the doorstep. In the wire rubbish basket, he found some newspapers, and he wrapped his jacket in them, and walked on with it until he found another wire rubbish basket, where he forced the bundle down among candy wrappers and beer cans.

'A new sweater?' his mother asked that night.

'Richie gave it to me - for luck.'

Clive slept like the dead, too tired even to laugh again at the memory of the old man sitting on the toilet.

The next morning, Clive was standing across the street when the ticket-seller arrived just before 9.30 a.m. By 9.35 a.m., only three people had gone in (evidently Fred had a key to the front door, in case his colleagues were late), but Clive could not wait any longer, so he crossed the street and bought a ticket. Now the ticket-seller was doubling as ticket-taker, or telling people, 'Just go in. Everybody's late this morning.' The ticket man stepped inside the door to put on some lights, then walked all the way into the place to put on the display lights, which worked from switches in the hall that led to the cloak room. And the funny thing to Clive, who was walking behind him, was that the ticket man didn't notice anything odd, didn't notice Mildred in hat and coat sitting in Marat's bathtub.

The customers so far were a man and woman, a boy of fourteen or so in sneakers, and a single man. They looked expressionlessly at Mildred in the tub, as if they thought it quite 'normal', which

could have sent Clive into paroxysms of mirth, except that his heart was thumping madly, and he was hardly breathing for suspense. Also, the man with his face in franks and sauerkraut brought no surprise either. Clive was a bit disappointed.

Two more people came in, a man and a woman.

Then at last by the Woodrow Wilson tableau, there was a reaction. One of the women clinging to a man's arm, asked:

'Was there someone shot when the armistice was signed?'

'I don't know. I don't *think* so,' the man replied vaguely.

'Yes-s - Let me think.'

Clive's laughter pressed like an explosion in his chest, he spun on his heel to control himself, and he had the feeling he knew all about history, and that no one else did. By now, of course, the real blood had turned dark red. The green blotter was now dark red, and blood had run down the side of the desk.

A woman on the other side of the hall, where Mildred was, let out a scream.

A man laughed, but only briefly.

Suddenly everything happened. A woman shrieked, and at the same time, a man yelled, 'My God, it's *real*!'

Clive saw a man climbing up to investigate the corpse with its face in the frankfurters.

'The blood's *real*! It's a dead *man*!'

Another man - one of the public - slumped to the floor. He had fainted!

The ticket-seller came bustling in. 'What's the trouble?'

'Coupla corpses here! *Real* ones!'

Now the ticket-seller looked at Marat's bathtub and fairly jumped into the air with surprise. 'Holy Christmas! Holy *cripes*! - *Mildred*!'

'And this one!'

'And the one here!'

'My God, got to - got to call the police!' said the ticket-seller Fred. 'Could you all, please - just leave?'

One man and woman went out hurriedly. But the rest lingered, shocked, fascinated.

Fred had trotted into the cloak room, where the telephone was, and Clive heard him yell something. He'd seen the man at the desk, of course, Woodrow Wilson, and Marat on the desk.



Clive thought it was time to drift out, so he did, sidling his way through four or five people who were peering in the door, coming in maybe because there was no ticket-seller.

That was good, Clive thought. That was all right. Not bad.

He had not intended to go to work that day, but suddenly he thought it wiser to check in and ask for the day off. Mr Simmons was of course as sour as ever when Clive said he was not feeling well, but as Clive held his stomach and appeared weak, there was little old Simmons could do. Clive left the store. He had brought with him all his ready cash, about twenty-five dollars.

Clive wanted to take a long bus ride somewhere. He realized that suspicion was likely to fall on him, if the ticket-seller remembered his coming to *Madame Thibault's* very often, or especially if he remembered his being there last night, but this had little to do with his desire to take a bus ride. His longing for a bus ride was simply, somehow, irresistible and purposeless. He bought a ticket westward for something over seven dollars, one way. This brought him, by about 7 p.m., to a good-sized town in Indiana, whose name Clive paid no attention to.

The bus spilled a few passengers, Clive included, at a terminal where there was a cafeteria and a bar. Clive by now was curious about the newspapers, and went at once to the news-stand near the street door of the cafeteria. And there it was:

TRIPLE MURDER IN WAXWORKS

MASS MURDER IN WAXWORKS MUSEUM

MYSTERY KILLER: THREE DEAD IN WAXWORKS MUSEUM

Clive liked the last headline best. He bought the three newspapers, and stood at the bar with a beer.

This morning at 9.30 a.m., ticket man Fred J. Keating and several of the public who had come to see *Madame Thibault's Waxwork Horrors*, a noted attraction of this city, were confronted by three genuine corpses among the displays. They were the bodies of Mrs Mildred Veery, 41; George P. Hartley, 43; and Richard K. MacFadden, 37, all employed at the waxworks museum. The two men were killed by concussions to the head, and in the case of one also by stabbing, and the woman by strangulation. Police are searching for clues on the premises. The murders are believed to have taken place shortly before 10 p.m. last evening, when the three employees were about to leave the museum. The murderer or murderers may have been among the last patrons of the museum before closing time at 9.30 p.m. It is thought that he or

they may have concealed themselves somewhere in the museum until the rest of the patrons had left . . .

Clive was pleased. He smiled as he sipped his beer. He hunched over the papers, as if he did not wish the rest of the world to share his pleasure, but this was not true. After a few minutes, Clive looked to right and left to see if anyone else among the men and a few women at the bar were reading the story also. Two men were reading newspapers, but Clive could not tell if they were reading about him necessarily, because their newspapers were folded. Clive lit a cigarette and went through all three newspapers to see if there was any clue about him. He found none at all. One paper said specifically that Fred J. Keating had not noticed any person or persons entering the museum last evening who looked suspicious.

. . . Because of the bizarre arrangement of the victims and of the displaced wax figures in the exhibitions, in whose places the victims were put, police are looking for a psychopathic killer. Residents of the area have been warned by radio and television to take special precautions on the street and to keep their homes locked . . .

Clive chuckled over that one. Psychopathic killer. He was sorry about the lack of detail, the lack of humour in the three write-ups. They might have said something about the old guy sitting on the toilet. Or the fellow signing the armistice with the back of his head bashed in. Those were strokes of genius. Why didn't they appreciate them?

When he had finished his beer, Clive walked out on to the sidewalk. It was now dark and the streetlights were on. He enjoyed looking around in the new town, looking into shop-windows. But he was aiming for a hamburger place, and he went into the first one he came to. It was a diner made up to look like a crack train made of chromium. Clive ordered two hamburgers and a cup of coffee. Next to him were two Western looking men in cowboy boots and rather soiled broad-brimmed hats. Was one a sheriff, Clive wondered? But they were talking, in a drawl, about acreage somewhere. Land. Money. They were hunched over hamburgers and coffee, one so close his elbow kept brushing Clive's. Clive was reading his newspaper all over again, and he had propped one against the napkin container in front of him.

One of the men asked for a napkin and disturbed Clive, but Clive smiled, and said in a friendly way:

‘Did you read about the murders in the waxworks?’

The man looked blank, then said, ‘Saw the headlines.’

‘Someone killed the three people who worked in the place. Look.’ There was a photograph in one of the papers, but Clive didn’t much like it, because it showed the corpses lined up on the floor. He would have preferred Mildred in the bathtub.

‘Yeah,’ said the Westerner, edging away from Clive as if he didn’t like him.

‘The bodies were put into a few of the exhibitions. Like the wax figures. They say that, but they don’t show a picture of it,’ said Clive.

‘Yeah,’ said the Westerner, and went on with his hamburger.

Clive felt let down and somehow insulted. His face grew a little warm as he stared back at his newspapers. In fact, anger was growing very quickly inside him, making his heart go faster, as it did when he passed *Madame Thibault’s Waxwork Horrors*, though now the sensation was not at all pleasant. Clive put on a smile, however, and turned again to the man on his left. ‘I mention it, because I did it. That’s my work there.’ He pointed at the picture of the corpses.

‘Listen, boy,’ said the Westerner, chewing, ‘you just keep to yourself tonight. Okay? We ain’t botherin’ you, and don’t you go botherin’ us.’ He laughed a little, and glanced at his companion.

His friend was staring at Clive, but looked away at once when Clive looked at him.

This was a double rebuff, and quite enough for Clive. Clive got his money out and paid for his unfinished food with a dollar bill and a fifty-cent piece. He left the change and walked to the sliding door exit.

‘But y’know, maybe that kid ain’t kiddin’,’ Clive heard one of the men say.

Clive turned and said, ‘I ain’t kiddin’!’ Then he went out into the night.

Clive slept at a YMCA. The next day, he half expected he would be picked up by any passing cop on the beat, but he wasn’t and he passed a few. He got a lift to another town, nearer his home town. The day’s newspapers brought no mention of his name, and no clues. In another café that evening almost the

identical conversation took place between Clive and a couple of fellows around his own age. They didn't believe him. It was stupid of them, Clive thought, and he wondered if they were pretending? Or lying?

Clive hitched his way to his home town, and headed for the police station. He was curious to see what *they* would say. He imagined what his mother would say after he confessed. Probably the same thing she had said to her friends sometimes, or that she'd said to a policeman when he was sixteen and had stolen a car:

'Clive hasn't been the same boy since his father went away. I know he needs a man around the house, a man to look up to, imitate, y'know. That's what people tell me. Since fourteen, Clive's been asking me questions like, "Who am I, anyway?" and "Am I a person, mom?" Clive could see and hear her already in the police station.

'I have an important confession to make,' Clive said to a guard, or somebody, sitting at a desk at the front of the station.

The guard's attitude was rude and suspicious, Clive thought, but he was told to walk to an office, where he spoke with a police officer who had grey hair and a fat face. Clive told his story.

'Where do you go to school, Clive?'

'I don't. I'm eighteen.' Clive told him about his job at Simmons's Grocery.

'Clive, you've got troubles, but they're not the ones you're talking about,' said the officer.

Clive had to wait in a room, and nearly an hour later a psychiatrist was brought in. Then his mother. Clive became more and more impatient. They didn't believe him. They were saying he was a typical case of false confessing in order to attract attention to himself. His mother's repeated statements about his asking questions like 'Am I a person?' only seemed to corroborate the psychiatrist and the police in their opinion.

Clive was to report somewhere twice a week for psychiatric therapy.

He fumed. He refused to go back to Simmons's Grocery, but found another delivery job, because he liked having a little money in his pocket, and he was fast on his bicycle and honest with the change.

'You haven't *found* the murderer, have you?' Clive said to the psychiatrist, associating him, Clive realized, with the police. 'You're all the biggest bunch of jackasses I've ever seen in my life!'

The psychiatrist lost his temper, which was at least human.

'You'll never get anywhere talking to people like that, boy.'

Clive said, 'Some perfectly ordinary strangers in Indiana said, "Maybe that kid ain't kiddin'." They seem to have had more sense than *you*!'

The psychiatrist laughed.

Clive smouldered. One thing might have helped to prove his story, Woodrow Wilson's neck-tie which still hung in his closet. But these bastards damned well didn't deserve to see that tie. Even as he ate his suppers with his mother, went to movies with her, and delivered groceries, he was planning. He'd do something more important next time; start a fire in the depths of a big building, plant a bomb somewhere, take a machine-gun up to some penthouse and let 'em have it down on the street. Kill a hundred people at least. They'd have to come up in the building to get him. They'd know then. They'd treat him like somebody who existed.

# Philip Sydney Jennings

## The golden teddy bear

I begin to tell my story again . . . I am dreaming over the cash register. Suddenly a woman is standing in front of me, offering up a birthday card she has selected with, I am sure, unwavering taste.

'I could spend hours in this shop,' she says. I look into her face and smile and say:

'I do.'

She makes a sort of a smile back as though I have not quite said the right thing and stands before me on the opposite side of the counter like an actress about to make her debut. I slip the card into a bag and watch as a small triangle of lines pulls at one corner of her mouth. Her smile muscles like automatic cranes hoist the cargo of a geometric smile. They do a lop-sided job and have been doing the same kind of job for a number of years, for that side of her young face is lined. The painted illusion of her beauty disappears. She looks suddenly different as though in the past her dreams were creased and there was no iron that could smooth out those folds.

'Of course, it must be different for you . . . but so many fascinating things . . . I love those dear little frogs.'

I nod and say nothing because I have never been able to understand why the customers like all these funny gifts and cards.

'Thank you . . . thank you . . . Bye . . . Bye.'

The brief ritual of the transaction is over. It varies with each customer but not very much. Mostly we remain civilly in our roles: I the seller of these cards and gifts, they the customers, the buyers.

I notice we (I and the shop) need more ten pences in the till. I bring out five pounds worth from the change sack and fill the drawer of the till in a silver cascade. The phone on the wall begins ringing. I welcome its distraction and the prospect of a voice that wishes to speak to me – for whatever reason.

'Hello,' I say, "This is 'Tomorrow's Antiques'".'

There is a pause at the other end of the line and I know that it is Tony Powers, the owner of the shop, calling from the other branch. I also know that, before he says anything, the tone of my voice has slightly upset the apple cart he wishes to trundle through my dreaming. He begins by establishing who and where he is: 'Mmm . . . Tony here.'

He doesn't ask me how I am and I don't expect him to. In fact I have trained myself not to anticipate his asking after my welfare. Several times in the past few years he has caught me out like this and I've never known what to say on being asked how I was. This morning he sweeps like a bird to business.

'I'm sending a new girl over. She's highly recommended by the Jolly Rep. She'll keep the place dusted. She should be all right, shouldn't she? Mmmm?'

I realize he is asking me about a woman I have never met. What can I possibly say? I don't have to answer because he goes on.

'We do need two people in that shop. She'll be there soon. I'll talk to you later. I've got a hundred salesmen lined up in front of me. Bye.'

I serve three more customers and make the same remark to all of them: 'Nice November day, isn't it?' It's July and the sky is grey and sunless. It feels like a steel helmet is clamped over the city. All three of the customers raise their eyebrows in acknowledgement of the statement and their resignation to it. The customers leave. A woman with a ghastly white face, no make-up, water-blue eyes with cracks beneath them like shattered window panes, extends a hand to me. She is smiling all over the place and in the space of several microseconds looks mad several times.

'Hello. I'm Sorrel. Mr Powers told you I was coming to work in the shop, I believe.'

'Hello,' I say, 'I'm John. Yes, Tony told me. He said you were recommended by the Jolly Rep.'

I laugh and she gasps as though not sure if that's funny or not. I show her where our things are – the toilet, the coat-hangers, the electric kettle, the tea and coffee and sugar jars. She lights a cigarette with a sallow hand.

'Would you like a cup now?' she asks.

'I'll make it,' I offer but she takes a quick stand and plugs the electric kettle in.

We sip our coffee and I learn Sorrel is thirty-two years old, the same age as me. Silently I think she looks forty-two. Her youth seems to have been pillaged by a soldier who left her with the struggle of children.

I soon begin to notice other things about her. She has the desire to find something small and suffering so that she may hold it in her arms with a protective 'oh'. Constantly she seeks to manoeuvre herself into a position where she may make this 'oh' sound. She ohs many times a day at a hundred little things. She even sighed over the green plastic frogs and then looked around for someone to share her communion with.

'I don't like things very much,' I said.

She doesn't hear me even on that first day. Her coffee cup only half drained, she seizes a duster and a poisonous spray and assaults the dust like there's no tomorrow. I call to her to take breaks, go to lunch, have another cup of coffee, but she shakes her head, or rushes back to make the coffee.

She leaves at five o'clock and I stay open another two hours as usual. Despite Sorrel's help I feel more tired than I normally would. She seems to have robbed me of my energy and dreaming. The phone rings. It's Tony.

'How was Sorrel?' he says without introducing himself. I hesitate and say: 'I've never seen anybody work so hard.' Tony chuckles as though he's got a bargain.

'That's what the Jolly Rep said. He said she'd have that place spick and span in no time. How was trade today? I won't be over tonight.'

I press a button and total the till and tell Tony the figure.

'Mmmm,' he says, not pleased, not displeased.

I close the shop up soon after this conversation. Then I wait for the bus. In my flat I eat fish fingers and fill the room with loud music. My feet slip into a couple of notes like a pair of slippers. I music my way around the room and at eleven thirty when my buoyancy is beginning to sink I drink a large undiluted Dubonnet. I feel fuzzy and fall asleep.

The next day Sorrel is there before me. A feeling of territory invaded passes through me. We exchange pleasantries. I am convinced she will not work so hard today. But I am wrong.



She works harder than her first day. She washes and dusts and takes on the small responsibility of rearranging a shelf of cards.

In the evening Tony comes over from the other branch and comments on the already changing face of this shop. Sorrel has made an impression. I am silently convinced that her performance won't last. But I am wrong again. She leaves me at the till and works and works her way around the shop all the time pulling on a cigarette like a hungry baby guzzling a nipple. She dusts and rearranges the mugs on the mug tree. After that she turns her attention to the glass birds. She arranges them so that they appear to be chattering to each other in straight columns facing each other. She somehow makes the green plastic frogs look like an army hopping off to war. She screws up all the old labels and writes new ones, checking up on the spelling of some words with me. She erects card stands and fills them correctly. In the second week she goes back to dusting and Hoovering but continues rearranging. Then she builds square houses with the exotic bars of soap and just when I'm beginning to wonder what she'll do next, she seizes the step ladder and hangs glittering Japanese mobiles from the ceiling. The shop changes. Although Tony ultimately dictates, the shop becomes Sorrel's. Everything is in its place, including myself, dreaming over the till and no longer bothering even to ask her if she would like to reverse our working roles for a while. I am tired at the end of most days and in the evening I often drink two or three glasses of wine. I decide I must be getting fed up and decide it doesn't matter since I've been fed up before.

Each day Sorrel arrives and her face is ghastly white and her eyes are bright with blueness. She never goes out to lunch, and sometimes when I do I know she sits reluctantly behind the till. She eats pork pies from cellophane paper and trays of shrink-wrapped cooked chicken from the supermarket. She sucks on the pink bones quite boldly behind the counter.

One day when I come back from doing the banking I find her imploding. Little hisses of panic are coming out from between her lips as though somewhere inside her bombs of chaos and destruction are exploding.

'You OK?' I say.

She swings her face round at mine. It wears a crazy smile.

Then she hisses violently so the lines beneath her eyes are all crazy paving.

'Look at the card stand!'

I look at it. It looks the same to me. I shrug my shoulders into question marks. Her voice comes out again:

'Somebody messed it up on purpose!'

'Did you see them?' I ask.

She doesn't answer but instead rushes to straighten a card on the stand. She works ferociously at the stand as though she is nursing a sick baby back to life.

For the rest of that week she works at the shop with a vengeance unmatched in Tony's dreams of display. The shop shines. Dust is outlawed. Sorrel pursues vagabond motes with a greasy flag. Gifts wait in line for buying hands and a home to go to. Deliveries arrive and are soon unpacked and priced and displayed and beginning to sell, or remain staring off the shelves. Orange hairy monsters are very popular at this time. Girls, the women of the future, dance into the shop and seize on them with delight. They say the monsters are cute and I register the price of this commodity on the cash register. I wonder how many men are as passionately held as these orange hairy monsters that retail at two pounds eighty. Oh the breasts they are clasped to! I dream my days over the till and my nights over Dubonnet and wine. I think I've decided I'm going to be fed up for quite a while.

In the fourth week of Sorrel's employment she is running out of things to do and she begins to realize it. The glass birds can't gleam any brighter and the frogs can't look any greener. She falls in love with little things less. I am mercifully starved of 'ohs'. Her capability for inventing romance, if that's what it is, begins to leak and she begins to hiss. One day I find her suddenly dropping a gnawed pink bone on to the floor. I am draped over the till and I turn my head and watch the bone fall. Her face is aghast.

'You OK?' I say.

'You bastard,' she suddenly shouts. 'You bastard!'

I start back even though I instantly realize she isn't shouting at me but at a tall man, Latin in appearance, who has inadvertently, knocked two bars of soap off a towering display. The man turns

shocked and unable to believe his ears. He stares at Sorrel with his mouth slightly opened. Sorrel is squirming now in an agony-ecstasy of constipated anger. Indignation picks its way around her face and I feel I am choking with embarrassment. The Latin's eyes have turned to fire. He burns his way out of the shop and I sigh with relief.

'They do it on purpose!' Sorrel mutters. She rushes to restore her tower of soaps. Her hands are shaking. I feel alarmed and unable to dream.

Tony phones me in the evening.

'Is everything all wrong then?' he says, making a joke he makes about once every two weeks. I don't say anything about Sorrel because I don't really know what to say. I give him the trade figures and the talk is of business and the pending arrival of a carton of golden teddy bears.

Willy, the grinning odd-job man, brings us the box of bears the next day. Then he rushes off to the pub as though to clean himself from the soil of work. Sorrel tears the carton open. She is nearly weeping as she pulls out the first golden teddy bear. She holds it at a short distance from her face and sighs with 'ohs'. She stares into its little glass eyes and at its puckered nose. The arms of the bear are moveable. Sorrel adjusts them so that they stretch out towards her. The bear is waiting to be picked up and nursed!

'They'll sell like hot cakes,' I say.

She flashes a look at me: 'You're getting commercial,' she says.

'I personally prefer the orange hairy monsters to these golden teddy bears,' I say for something mildly self-assertive to say.

She spends an hour and a half, perhaps blissfully, arranging the bears on a table top.

The golden bears sell quickly. They fill girls with sighs. Boys buy them to fill their girls with sighs. Children force their mothers to buy them at the end of a shotgun anger fit. Finally the sky breaks open and it is a sunlit morning and there is one golden teddy bear left, its arms outstretched, waiting to be held for ever. Sorrel is standing at my elbow. She is sipping coffee and sucking on a cigarette. She's very quiet today and I feel uncomfortable and a bit hung over.

'I'm going to buy that bear,' she says suddenly.

I'm suddenly fed up with her and I say: 'Go on then, buy that damned golden bear!'

Her face is pasty white. She dumps her coffee mug down. 'You bastard!' she cries and I start back but she is not shouting at me. A young woman with a made-up face has picked up the bear, and with a posed smile and a voice out loud, she says: 'I must have this bear. It's such a darling.'

She is beaming with beauty as she steps up to the counter but quick as a fox terrier Sorrel is round the counter and has seized one arm of the bear. Her voice is hoarse and low as though her spirit has been thrashed with the last straw: 'It's not for sale. It's mine! Give it to me!'

'Oh God!' I said out loud. I had been slicing off a piece of cheese to nibble. I look up with the knife in my hand. Each woman has one arm of the teddy bear and each refuses to let go. I can't believe my eyes. Both are holding on like dogs. Sorrel is determined and hissing. The other woman is shouting with equal determination: 'Let go of it, you bloody little fool.'

'Give me that bear,' I say.

'I *am* buying this bear,' says the customer.

'It's mine,' says Sorrel.

I remember the story of Solomon and the two women who each claimed the baby was theirs. I step quickly around the counter and stepping between the women who are both holding on to the bear tighter than ever, I bring out the cheese knife and with its serrated edge I saw the bear's head off so that its spongy guts spew like blood over the shop floor. The cute little head rolls over the carpet and lies by itself, still looking cute, I suppose. The customer gasps and lets go of the corpse. Sorrel holds the decapitated trunk to her breast. I drop the cheese knife wearily. Suddenly Sorrel is on me, attacking me with a blind fury. I fall backwards still unable to stop the flow of this madness. My hand shatters a glass shelf. Sorrel is pressing down on me. I suddenly see that she has the cheese knife in her hand. Her armpits smell. I am to be sliced like cheddar. There's a first time for everything. My fist comes up and collides with the bone of her jaw. The knife scatters. She slumps and falls asleep. The phone is ringing on the wall. I am glad someone wishes to talk to me. I pick up the phone.

'Hello, this is "Tomorrow's Antiques".'

'Mmm . . . Tony here,' says the voice at the other end.

I wait for him to go on. He says:

'How are you?'

Immediately I don't know what to say. He's caught me out.

'How's Sorrel?' he goes on.

I wake up a bit. I glance over at her. 'She's lying unconscious on the floor in the middle of the shop', I say. 'There's a little blood around her mouth.'

'You can't be serious,' he says and now he's impatient to get on with business talk.

'It's true,' I say, 'I just knocked her out because she attacked me with the cheese knife.'

'Mmm . . . if you're not pulling my leg you'd better call an ambulance. Better do that now. Keep me informed.'

I phone the ambulance and they take Sorrel out on a stretcher. The customer who fought with Sorrel for the bear has disappeared. Despite everything business begins to go on as usual. Then there are two uniformed policemen and a detective standing in front of me. The detective slips behind the counter with me. The men in uniforms stare at me and then become fascinated by the cards and gifts which are lit up beneath theatre lights. I am serving a woman customer and the detective tells the side of my head that after they took Sorrel to the hospital they took her to the morgue.

'Oh God, I've killed a woman,' I say.

'It's twenty-four pence, isn't it?' says the woman in front of me.

I realize this is a terrible moment in my life and that I have broken a human commandment.

'Yes, it's twenty-four pence,' I say.

The transaction is completed. I go away with the policemen. My environment changes. I'm in a room being questioned by two detectives, who ask me one question after another as though they're not interested in getting a full reply. They almost look jolly when I mention the cheese knife and they smirk when I mention the customer who fought for a golden teddy bear.

'What about the bleeding mutilated bear!' I cry.

Then they look serious and say: 'What about Sorrel! She was human you know.'

I begin to tell my story again. They move me to another

building more like a hospital. Doctors and people beaming with sanity wish to talk to me. I'm really glad to get this good conversation and communicate with someone. They all wish to hear about Sorrel so I tell them as best I can what she was like. I tell them what my feelings about her were. They make little notes in the margin of their foreheads. I begin to tell my story again . . . I am dreaming over the cash register.

I'm always dreaming these days and although a lot of people still talk to me they're really not as interesting as the customers are. And strangely enough I miss Tony. I miss him phoning me up and not asking me how I am. He never phones me here. There's no need to. My trade is finished. I wriggle on glass beneath microscopes.

**Roald Dahl**

## **The landlady**

Billy Weaver had travelled down from London on the slow afternoon train, with a change at Swindon on the way, and by the time he got to Bath it was about nine o'clock in the evening and the moon was coming up out of a clear starry sky over the houses opposite the station entrance. But the air was deadly cold and the wind was like a flat blade of ice on his cheeks.

'Excuse me,' he said, 'but is there a fairly cheap hotel not too far away from here?'

'Try The Bell and Dragon,' the porter answered, pointing down the road. 'They might take you in. It's about a quarter of a mile along on the other side.'

Billy thanked him and picked up his suitcase and set out to walk the quarter-mile to The Bell and Dragon. He had never been to Bath before. He didn't know anyone who lived there. But Mr Greenslade at the Head Office in London had told him it was a splendid city. 'Find your own lodgings,' he had said, 'and then go along and report to the Branch Manager as soon as you've got yourself settled.'

Billy was seventeen years old. He was wearing a new navy-blue overcoat, a new brown trilby hat, and a new brown suit, and he was feeling fine. He walked briskly down the street. He was trying to do everything briskly these days. Briskness, he had decided, was *the* one common characteristic of all successful businessmen. The big shots up at Head Office were absolutely fantastically brisk all the time. They were amazing.

There were no shops on this wide street that he was walking along, only a line of tall houses on each side, all of them identical. They had porches and pillars and four or five steps going up to their front doors, and it was obvious that once upon a time they had been very swanky residences. But now, even in the darkness, he could see that the paint was peeling from the woodwork on

their doors and windows, and that the handsome white façades were cracked and blotchy from neglect.

Suddenly, in a downstairs window that was brilliantly illuminated by a street-lamp not six yards away, Billy caught sight of a printed notice propped up against the glass in one of the upper panes. It said **BED AND BREAKFAST**. There was a vase of pussy-willows, tall and beautiful, standing just underneath the notice.

He stopped walking. He moved a bit closer. Green curtains (some sort of velvety material) were hanging down on either side of the window. The pussy-willows looked wonderful beside them. He went right up and peered through the glass into the room, and the first thing he saw was a bright fire burning in the hearth. On the carpet in front of the fire, a pretty little dachshund was curled up asleep with its nose tucked into its belly. The room itself, so far as he could see in the half-darkness, was filled with pleasant furniture. There was a baby-grand piano and a big sofa and several plump armchairs; and in one corner he spotted a large parrot in a cage. Animals were usually a good sign in a place like this, Billy told himself; and all in all, it looked to him as though it would be a pretty decent house to stay in. Certainly it would be more comfortable than *The Bell and Dragon*.

On the other hand, a pub would be more congenial than a boarding-house. There would be beer and darts in the evenings, and lots of people to talk to, and it would probably be a good bit cheaper, too. He had stayed a couple of nights in a pub once before and he had liked it. He had never stayed in any boarding-houses, and, to be perfectly honest, he was a tiny bit frightened of them. The name itself conjured up images of watery cabbage, rapacious landladies, and a powerful smell of kippers in the living-room.

After dithering about like this in the cold for two or three minutes, Billy decided that he would walk on and take a look at *The Bell and Dragon* before making up his mind. He turned to go.

And now a queer thing happened to him. He was in the act of stepping back and turning away from the window when all at once his eye was caught and held in the most peculiar manner by the small notice that was there. **BED AND BREAKFAST**, it said.



BED AND BREAKFAST, BED AND BREAKFAST, BED AND BREAKFAST. Each word was like a large black eye staring at him through the glass, holding him, compelling him, forcing him to stay where he was and not to walk away from that house, and the next thing he knew, he was actually moving across from the window to the front door of the house, climbing the steps that led up to it, and reaching for the bell.

He pressed the bell. Far away in a back room he heard it ringing, and then *at once* – it must have been at once because he hadn't even had time to take his finger from the bell-button – the door swung open and a woman was standing there.

Normally you ring the bell and you have at least a half-minute's wait before the door opens. But this dame was like a jack-in-the-box. He pressed the bell – and out she popped! It made him jump.

She was about forty-five or fifty years old, and the moment she saw him, she gave him a warm welcoming smile.

'Please come in,' she said pleasantly. She stepped aside, holding the door wide open, and Billy found himself automatically starting forward into the house. The compulsion or, more accurately, the desire to follow after her into that house was extraordinarily strong.

'I saw the notice in the window,' he said, holding himself back.

'Yes, I know.'

'I was wondering about a room.'

'It's *all* ready for you, my dear,' she said. She had a round pink face and very gentle blue eyes.

'I was on my way to The Bell and Dragon,' Billy told her. 'But the notice in your window just happened to catch my eye.'

'My dear boy,' she said, 'why don't you come in out of the cold?'

'How much do you charge?'

'Five and sixpence a night, including breakfast.'

It was fantastically cheap. It was less than half of what he had been willing to pay.

'If that is too much,' she added, 'then perhaps I can reduce it just a tiny bit. Do you desire an egg for breakfast? Eggs are expensive at the moment. It would be sixpence less without the egg.'

'Five and sixpence is fine,' he answered. 'I should like very much to stay here.'

'I knew you would. Do come in.'

She seemed terribly nice. She looked exactly like the mother of one's best school-friend welcoming one into the house to stay for the Christmas holidays. Billy took off his hat, and stepped over the threshold.

'Just hang it there,' she said, 'and let me help you with your coat.'

There were no other hats or coats in the hall. There were no umbrellas, no walking-sticks – nothing.

'We have it *all* to ourselves,' she said, smiling at him over her shoulder as she led the way upstairs. 'You see, it isn't very often I have the pleasure of taking a visitor into my little nest.'

The old girl is slightly dotty, Billy told himself. But at five and sixpence a night, who gives a damn about that? 'I should've thought you'd be simply swamped with applicants,' he said politely.

'Oh, I am, my dear, I am, of course I am. But the trouble is that I'm inclined to be just a teeny weeny bit choosy and particular – if you see what I mean.'

'Ah, yes.'

'But I'm always ready. Everything is always ready day and night in this house just on the off-chance that an acceptable young gentleman will come along. And it is such a pleasure, my dear, such a very great pleasure when now and again I open the door and I see someone standing there who is just *exactly* right.' She was half-way up the stairs, and she paused with one hand on the stair-rail, turning her head and smiling down at him with pale lips. 'Like you,' she added, and her blue eyes travelled slowly all the way down the length of Billy's body, to his feet, and then up again.

On the first floor landing she said to him, 'This floor is mine.'

They climbed up a second flight. 'And this one is *all* yours,' she said. 'Here's your room. I do hope you'll like it.' She took him into a small but charming front bedroom, switching on the light as she went it.

'The morning sun comes right in the window, Mr Perkins. It is Mr Perkins, isn't it?'

'No,' he said. 'It's Weaver.'

'Mr Weaver. How nice. I've put a water-bottle between the sheets to air them out, Mr Weaver. It's such a comfort to have a hot water-bottle in a strange bed with clean sheets, don't you agree? And you may light the gas fire at any time if you feel chilly.'

'Thank you,' Billy said. 'Thank you ever so much.' He noticed that the bedspread had been taken off the bed, and that the bedclothes had been neatly turned back on one side, all ready for someone to get in.

'I'm so glad you appeared,' she said, looking earnestly into his face. 'I was beginning to get worried.'

'That's all right,' Billy answered brightly. 'You mustn't worry about me.' He put his suitcase on the chair and started to open it.

'And what about supper, my dear? Did you manage to get anything to eat before you came here?'

'I'm not a bit hungry, thank you,' he said. 'I think I'll just go to bed as soon as possible because tomorrow I've got to get up rather early and report to the office.'

'Very well, then. I'll leave you now so that you can unpack. But before you go to bed, would you be kind enough to pop into the sitting-room on the ground floor and sign the book? Everyone has to do that because it's the law of the land, and we don't want to go breaking any laws at *this* stage in the proceedings, do we?' She gave him a little wave of the hand and went quickly out of the room and closed the door.

Now, the fact that his landlady appeared to be slightly off her rocker didn't worry Billy in the least. After all, she was not only harmless – there was no question about that – but she was also quite obviously a kind and generous soul. He guessed that she had probably lost a son in the war, or something like that, and had never got over it.

So a few minutes later, after unpacking his suitcase and washing his hands, he trotted downstairs to the ground floor and entered the living-room. His landlady wasn't there, but the fire was glowing in the hearth, and the little dachshund was still sleeping in front of it. The room was wonderfully warm and cosy. I'm a lucky fellow, he thought, rubbing his hands. This is a bit of all right.

He found the guest-book lying open on the piano, so he took

out his pen and wrote down his name and address. There were only two other entries above his on the page, and, as one always does with guest-books, he started to read them. One was a Christopher Mulholland from Cardiff. The other was Gregory W. Temple from Bristol.

That's funny, he thought suddenly. Christopher Mulholland. It rings a bell.

Now where on earth had he heard that rather unusual name before?

Was he a boy at school? No. Was it one of his sister's numerous young men, perhaps, or a friend of his father's? No, no, it wasn't any of those. He glanced down again at the book.

*Christopher Mulholland      231 Cathedral Road, Cardiff*

*Gregory W. Temple              27 Sycamore Drive, Bristol*

As a matter of fact, now he came to think of it, he wasn't at all sure that the second name didn't have almost as much of a familiar ring about it as the first.

'Gregory Temple?' he said aloud, searching his memory. 'Christopher Mulholland? . . .'

'Such charming boys,' a voice behind him answered, and he turned and saw his landlady sailing into the room with a large silver tea-tray in her hands. She was holding it well out in front of her, and rather high up, as though the tray were a pair of reins on a frisky horse.

'They sound somehow familiar,' he said.

'They do? How interesting.'

'I'm almost positive I've heard those names before somewhere. Isn't that queer? Maybe it was in the newspapers. They weren't famous in any way, were they? I mean famous cricketers or footballers or something like that?'

'Famous,' she said, setting the tea-tray down on the low table in front of the sofa. 'Oh no, I don't think they were famous. But they were extraordinarily handsome, both of them, I can promise you that. They were tall and young and handsome, my dear, just exactly like you.'

Once more, Billy glanced down at the book. 'Look here,' he said, noticing the dates. 'This last entry is over two years old.'

'Is it?'

'Yes, indeed. And Christopher Mulholland's is nearly a year before that – and more than *three years* ago.'

'Dear me,' she said, shaking her head and heaving a dainty little sigh. 'I would never have thought it. How time does fly away from us all, doesn't it, Mr Wilkins?'

'It's Weaver,' Billy said. 'W-e-a-v-e-r.'

'Oh, of course it is!' she cried, sitting down on the sofa. 'How silly of me. I do apologize. In one ear and out the other, that's me, Mr Weaver.'

'You know something?' Billy said. 'Something that's really quite extraordinary about all this?'

'No, dear, I don't.'

'Well, you see – both of these names, Mulholland and Temple, I not only seem to remember each one of them separately, so to speak, but somehow or other, in some peculiar way, they both appear to be sort of connected together as well. As though they were both famous for the same sort of thing, if you see what I mean – like . . . well . . . like Dempsey and Tunney, for example, or Churchill and Roosevelt.'

'How amusing,' she said. 'But come over here now, dear, and sit down beside me on the sofa and I'll give you a nice cup of tea and a ginger biscuit before you go to bed.'

'You really shouldn't bother,' Billy said. 'I didn't mean you to do anything like that.' He stood by the piano, watching her as she fussed about with the cups and saucers. He noticed that she had small, white, quickly moving hands, and red finger-nails.

'I'm almost positive it was in the newspapers I saw them', Billy said. 'I'll think of it in a second. I'm sure I will.'

There is nothing more tantalizing than a thing like this which lingers just outside the borders of one's memory. He hated to give up.

'Now wait a minute,' he said. 'Wait just a minute. Mulholland . . . Christopher Mulholland . . . wasn't *that* the name of the Eton schoolboy who was on a walking-tour through the West Country, and then all of a sudden . . .'

'Milk?' she said. 'And sugar?'

'Yes, please. And then all of a sudden . . .'

'Eton schoolboy?' she said. 'Oh no, my dear, that can't possibly be right because *my* Mr Mulholland was certainly not an

Eton schoolboy when he came to me. He was a Cambridge undergraduate. Come over here now and sit next to me and warm yourself in front of this lovely fire. Come on. Your tea's all ready for you.' She patted the empty place beside her on the sofa, and she sat there smiling at Billy and waiting for him to come over.

He crossed the room slowly, and sat down on the edge of the sofa. She placed his teacup on the table in front of him.

'*There we are,*' she said. '*How nice and cosy this is, isn't it?*'

Billy started sipping his tea. She did the same. For half a minute or so, neither of them spoke. But Billy knew that she was looking at him. Her body was half-turned towards him, and he could feel her eyes resting on his face, watching him over the rim of her teacup. Now and again, he caught a whiff of a peculiar smell that seemed to emanate directly from her person. It was not in the least unpleasant, and it reminded him – well, he wasn't quite sure what it reminded him of. Pickled walnuts? New leather? Or was it the corridors of a hospital?

'Mr Mulholland was a great one for his tea,' she said at length. 'Never in my life have I seen anyone drink as much tea as dear sweet Mr Mulholland.'

'I suppose he left fairly recently,' Billy said. He was still puzzling his head about the two names. He was positive now that he had seen them in the newspapers – in the headlines.

'Left?' she said, arching her brows. 'But my dear boy, he never left. He's still here. Mr Temple is also here. They're on the third floor, both of them together.'

Billy set down his cup slowly on the table, and stared at his landlady. She smiled back at him, and then she put out one of her white hands and patted him comfortingly on the knee. 'How old are you, my dear?' she asked.

'Seventeen.'

'Seventeen!' she cried. 'Oh, it's the perfect age! Mr Mulholland was also seventeen. But I think he was a trifle shorter than you are, in fact I'm sure he was, and his teeth weren't *quite* so white. You have the most beautiful teeth, Mr Weaver, did you know that?'

'They're not as good as they look,' Billy said. 'They've got simply masses of fillings in them at the back.'

'Mr Temple, of course, was a little older,' she said, ignoring

his remark. 'He was actually twenty-eight. And yet I never would have guessed it if he hadn't told me, never in my whole life. There wasn't a *blemish* on his body.'

'A what?' Billy said.

'His skin was *just* like a baby's.'

There was a pause. Billy picked up his teacup and took another sip of his tea, then he set it down again gently in its saucer. He waited for her to say something else, but she seemed to have lapsed into another of her silences. He sat there staring straight ahead of him into the far corner of the room, biting his lower lip.

'That parrot,' he said at last. 'You know something? It had me completely fooled when I first saw it through the window from the street. I could have sworn it was alive.'

'Alas, no longer.'

'It's most terribly clever the way it's been done,' he said. 'It doesn't look in the least bit dead. Who did it?'

'I did.'

'*You* did?'

'Of course,' she said. 'And have you met my little Basil as well?' She nodded towards the dachshund curled up so comfortably in front of the fire. Billy looked at it. And suddenly, he realized that this animal had all the time been just as silent and motionless as the parrot. He put out a hand and touched it gently on the top of its back. The back was hard and cold, and when he pushed the hair to one side with his fingers, he could see the skin underneath, greyish-black and dry and perfectly preserved.

'Good gracious me,' he said. 'How absolutely fascinating.' He turned away from the dog and stared with deep admiration at the little woman beside him on the sofa. 'It must be most awfully difficult to do a thing like that.'

'Not in the least,' she said. 'I stuff *all* my little pets myself when they pass away. Will you have another cup of tea?'

'No, thank you,' Billy said. The tea tasted faintly of bitter almonds, and he didn't much care for it.

'You did sign the book, didn't you?'

'Oh, yes.'

'That's good. Because later on, if I happen to forget what you were called, then I can always come down here and look it up.'

I still do that almost every day with Mr Mulholland and Mr . . .  
Mr . . .'

'Temple,' Billy said. 'Gregory Temple. Excuse my asking, but haven't there been *any* other guests here except them in the last two or three years?'

Holding her teacup high in one hand, inclining her head slightly to the left, she looked up at him out of the corners of her eyes and gave him another gentle little smile.

'No, my dear,' she said. 'Only you.'



# Alan Temperley

## Love on the farm

Myra Thomson stood at the window, a gaunt high-shouldered woman of forty-five. Her skin was sallow. The mulberry birthmark which covered half her left cheek and spread down her neck, was muted by make-up. Her dark hair was coiled in a bun, her lips inexpertly sketched with lipstick. It was Sunday, she had changed from her working clothes into a skirt of green tweed and a maroon jumper. Like the lipstick and the make-up, drying to an orange rim at her temples, they were the wrong colour. But they did not dim the woman's presence. Even in stillness her bony frame radiated strength and vigour of life, almost a ferocity, mirrored in the intense black eyes. Sometimes for days on end her mind was clouded by dark impenetrable moods – though they had not troubled her for several weeks. The few shopkeepers and rare visitors who encountered this lonely pig-farmer's widow, found her disconcerting.

She breathed deeply, almost a sigh. Her breath clouded a small patch of window. Beyond the mud yard the track led downhill between hedges to the narrow lane. The November twilight was falling, a dank gloom settled over the rolling hills and coppices. For several days there had been rain. Near at hand the gateways were soups of mud. The farm stream gushed brown through the trampled pasture.

But it was not upon the scene that she looked. That was merely the setting of her life, sunk into her spirit until she rarely saw it. Her eyes were fixed upon the long hill for a first glimpse of the black motorbike. She had given it to Duggie for his nineteenth birthday, a week before. He had scarcely been off it since, riding the countryside for fifty miles around, rainbeaten but dry within the space helmet and leather suit.

He had promised to be back for tea at five. She looked at the clock on the high mantelpiece. Twenty to six. Patiently she resumed her vigil. Following twenty-five years of unremitting

work on the farm she was little affected by disappointment. She had been standing at the window for an hour. At her back the fire burned brightly; in the kitchen the table was set. Two meat pasties and a batch of scones kept warm in the Aga stove, the brown kettle steamed on the hot plate.

At length he appeared, half a mile away, speeding up the lane half-hidden by the hedges. A surge of pleasure rose into her throat, her breathing quickened. Briefly she watched, then returned to the kitchen to warm the tea-pot and see that all was ready.

The deep-throated growl of the motorbike passed the door and boomed within the shed where it was stored, then ceased. Half a minute later Duggie came through the kitchen door. She glimpsed his face through the curved perspex visor as he pulled off his gloves. Then the visor was thrust up, the strap unbuckled beneath his ear. He lifted the helmet and ran a hand through his rough hair.

'Are you wet?'

He sniffed. 'No. Only a drop over Midchurch way. Stopped in a chap's garage till it went off.' He snapped open the studs of his jacket and hung it on the back of the door.

'Ready for your tea?'

'Yeah. I'll be down in a minute.'

She heard his feet moving about the bedroom, then the gush of the toilet. When he returned a hot pasty lay on his plate, a steaming cup of tea to one side.

Duggie Wayman was a sturdy youth of middle height, with shortish brown hair and blue eyes above broad cheekbones. He had arrived in the neighbourhood eighteen months previously to work on a nearby farm. When Myra's husband died he came to work for her. The money and accommodation were better, she needed help. That was the original arrangement.

He was not a thoughtful or observant youth, but could not fail to see that Myra had taken a great deal of trouble. The table was spread with a fresh cloth. The sticky jar of jam had been replaced by a china dish, the butter stood in another, the bread lay ready sliced on a plate. There was an iced cake. Briefly he regarded her hatchet face, the tidied hair and lipstick, the maroon jumper. She looked every one of her years. It was gruesome, he liked her better in her working clothes. Still, she

had done it on account of him – as she had done so much, he thought, the pathetic old crow. Almost as payment he gave her a smile.

‘I like the new jumper.’

‘It’s not new.’ Pleased, nevertheless, she smiled back.

‘It’s a good pie, this.’

Her eyes considered him with quick intelligence. She checked the compliments.

‘Tell me about your run. Which way did you go?’

His mouth full, he began a brief account. Most of what he told her was a lie. He had not been to Midchurch, or sheltered from the rain in a garage. He had spent the afternoon at the house of a girl in a small town eight miles away. Beneath the neck of his sweater his shoulder was marked with the bruising of her mouth and teeth.

After she had washed up, Myra collected an accounts sheet from a drawer in the kitchen dresser, and joined him in the sitting room. The television was switched on, but he read a Commando picture book. A friend had lent him a pile of twenty the previous day. He was lost in it, oblivious of her presence, legs stretched towards the banked-up fire. Involuntarily she recalled how mean her husband, twenty years older than herself, had been with coal. Now Duggie threw on half a scuttle without a word.

For half an hour she sat, the accounts sheet on her lap, aware of the flickering television but her thoughts centred on the young man who sat opposite. Unnoticed by Duggie she regarded his thick hair and peasant face – strong brows, short nose with a sheen of oil upon it, thick lips. The desire that had been in her all day blossomed afresh as her eyes fell to his broad shoulders beneath the tight sweater, his big knuckles, his strong legs within the clinging denim.

Myra was no fool to believe herself attractive to a lad of his age. She was too hard and realistic for that. Yet she had taken considerable trouble on his account and felt that she deserved some recognition.

He glanced up and found her gaze fixed upon him. Again he smiled. But a smile was not enough. From past experience he recognized the expression on her face and felt a slight stirring of desire – not for Myra, but for himself. His embraces with the

girl had remained unconsummated, despite the violence of his advances. He moved his head slightly.

‘Come here.’

Laying aside the accounts pad she kneeled forward on the rug, reached up to kiss him on the lips, then curled at his feet. It was unseemly, like his mother reclining there. The mulberry stain was away from him, her elbow and cheek rested against his knees.

For a while they sat thus, without speaking. He looked down at her, waiting, blue eyes fringed with thick short lashes. Already he was largely aroused. His hand came down to her head. Briefly he stroked her hair and drew her towards him.

For ten minutes then she pleased him, in ways she had never dreamed with her husband. His sturdy youth gave her wonderful satisfaction. He lay back, wallowing in the shamelessness, half contemptuous, but powerless in the grip of his own pleasure. Steadily it mounted. His back arched. He closed his eyes.

A while later, his feelings a riot, Duggie watched as she made him respectable. His limbs felt swollen with a warm lethargy. Her eyes turned to his with a smile. She kneeled forward to kiss his glowing cheek, then sank to the hearthrug facing the fire. Her possessive arm encircled his knees.

They were solitary people. Reared in a series of institutions and several times in trouble with the police, Duggie had severed all contact with his parents and assorted half-brothers and sisters. Myra was mother, mistress, employer. For the first time he had a home where he could come and go as he chose. Moreover she had showered him with gifts, of which the motorbike was the last and greatest, bought from her husband's insurance. He glanced from his soft leather boots to the expensive wristwatch, fingered the gold chain at his throat. But there was a price to pay – physically a price he paid gladly. He enjoyed his role as a kept man, earning his living from this besotted middle-aged widow. Emotionally, however, it was a bond that hobbled him like a bull in a field. A score of times he had broken loose, sometimes openly with a scene, but more often secretly. The motorbike gave him a wonderful new freedom. A time was coming when he must snap the bond for ever, ride from the farm one morning and never return. But not yet, there was still much to be gained and enjoyed – even as now. It was an agreeable

price to pay for a new 500cc Kawasaki. His eyes glinted with arrogance and self-congratulation. Pleasurably he eased his legs, smoothed her hair with dishonest affection, and reached for the Commando book which had fallen to the floor beside his chair.

Myra went to bed at ten. She started work early. Duggie made love to her twice – to preen his image, for she awoke no desire. She had never known such feelings with her husband, had never imagined them. Leaving her drowsy and content, still feeling him as she drifted towards sleep, he padded naked about the house and took a large mug of tea and a thick ham sandwich to his own bed. Crumbs fell among the sleek hair of his chest and stomach. With the electric fire full on, he sat reading beyond midnight. Roused by the printed violence he wanted sex again and returned to her room. Woken from sleep she turned to accommodate him. Careless of her feelings he used her savagely. His bruising hands and ferocity excited her. For the second time that night she cried aloud and clung to him. Immediately afterwards, with little more than a grunt, he returned along the landing, well-pleased with himself, climbed into bed and fell asleep.

When Duggie came down to breakfast at half past seven, Myra had been up for an hour. The kitchen and living room were cleaned, bacon sizzled in a big frying pan on the stove. In a lumpish brown skirt and cardigan she carried out a waste bucket. Her cold morning wash had removed the last of the make-up, the birthmark was vivid on her cheek and neck. Returning she clattered the bucket beneath the sink and busied herself with tea and toast and eggs.

It was a high rectangular room crossed by cracked oak beams. A pulley draped with clothes hung overhead. So did two flitches of home-smoked bacon, bundles of herbs and an oil lamp in case of electricity failure. A tall dresser stacked with plates and junk faced the window. A coloured photograph of Duggie, proud owner of the Kawasaki on his birthday, leaned against a willow-pattern plate. Between two prints of wild duck and a fox-hunting scene a shotgun hung on the wall, ready to warn off prowlers. Above the sink the window looked out on the yard.

Duggie had not washed or shaved. In denims giving at the seams and an old work shirt he yawned and sat at the table.

'I'm killing that young boar this morning,' Myra told him as she spooned tea from the caddy. 'The one in the second end sty. I've sharpened the knife and washed out the enamel buckets. You can give me a hand.'

He nodded and yawned again.

They talked little. After breakfast Duggie padded across the worn linoleum to a pair of turned-down rubber boots and lifted a stained denim jacket from the hook behind the door. When she had washed up, Myra pulled on her old anorak and followed him outside.

It had rained during the night, but the grey morning promised fair. For an hour they mucked out the sties and fed the pigs. With many squeals, pink ears flapping and broad backs jostling, they pressed around the troughs. Released into the fields some scampered away, filled with joy, trotters squelching in the mud near the gates. In other sties sows nestled piglets in half-clean straw, batteries of pink dugs running the length of their bellies.

Both were harsh with the animals, beating them aside with boots and sticks as they pressed round their legs. It made little difference, for the pigs were used to the blows and Duggie and Myra were the food providers.

At length they entered the sty where the young boar had been penned alone. Realizing that something sinister was afoot he ran wild with fear, squealing and racing round and round the miry walls. Catching him was a rough and cruel business, but at length he was flung from his feet. Duggie held him down while Myra tied his front and back legs with lengths of rope. Slung between them, avoiding his terrible bite, they carried him down the yard to the shed where she did the illegal killing. A vat of boiling water simmered in the corner. With a heave they hoisted the boar to a sturdy table. A small block and tackle hung overhead. He bucked and squealed with terror.

'Shut up!' Myra struck him across the snout with her strong fist. 'Shut up!'

With a longer rope they bound him to the table-top, head and neck projecting over one end. Still he struggled, but it was futile.

Then Myra lifted a long butcher's knife from a shelf, the blade worn concave with years of whetting. Duggie took the first of two white buckets and stood at the animal's head. He shivered,

he did not like the killing. Myra was untouched. Her lack of feeling on these occasions disconcerted and even frightened him.

‘Are you ready?’

‘Yeah.’ He pulled himself together and reached forward with the bucket.

Hooking her fingers in the wet snout Myra dragged back the pig’s head and laid the knife-edge against its throat. Firmly she sliced it across. The animal convulsed, its squeals were deafening. Blood ran, but the cut was not deep enough. Exerting considerable force Myra pulled the head back further and laid the long blade back in the gash. Setting her feet, she sliced slowly and deeply, backwards and forwards.

The squeal was cut off. A fountain of blood spurted forth, drenching Duggie’s bared forearms, splashing his face and boots. Quickly he thrust the bucket beneath the stream while Myra held the pig’s head as still as she was able. The terrified little eyes rolled between white lashes, its mouth opened and closed spasmodically.

The bucket filled, its struggles weakened. Soon the pig lay still, the blood subsided to low spurts. The last dying life gazed from its blinking piggy eyes. Myra loosened the rope that bound it to the table and thrust a hook from the hanging tackle through the binding on its rear legs. Hauling on the end-rope she hoisted it into the air. Briefly the blood spurted afresh, subsided, and at length became a mere trickle. The pig’s heart stopped, its eyes remained open.

Duggie regarded it, open-mouthed with distress.

‘Well, that’s that.’ Myra rubbed her hands with an old sack, stiffened with the blood of previous killings. ‘Set the bucket down there.’

He placed it beneath the dribble that ran from the gaping throat.

‘Let it hang for a while,’ Myra said. ‘Come on in the house. It’s time for a cup of tea.’ She saw the expression on his face and smiled with wry amusement. ‘You look as if you could do with it.’

Recalling the pleasure he had given her the previous night, a thought that had recurred several times since waking, her eyes fell to his broad shoulders and sturdy limbs. Yielding to impulse

she stepped forward and kissed him on the cheek. Her bloody hand slipped down to cup the front of his denims, moved by the male softness and warmth, at once feeling him stir beneath her palm. With two hands on his seat she pressed him to her. Involuntarily he responded. A spasm of pleasure burned in her breast, intense, for this strong young man was at the same time both son and lover to her. For long moments they were still, then reluctantly she moved away.

Her voice was softer but matter-of-fact. 'Come on in for a cup of tea.'

Duggie regarded the carcass of the pig, open-mouthed and spinning slowly on its rope. Beneath stood the startling bucket of blood, so red and clean in the brown gloom. He followed her into the farmyard. The sun had broken through the clouds, a thin sun that brought no real warmth. At the wall tap he rinsed the blood from his arms and boots, splashed his face, and continued to the farmhouse where Myra had left the kitchen door open for him.

Afterwards they returned to the shed. With a hose and stiff brush Duggie scrubbed the floor clean. Myra lowered the pig upon it. With boiling water and knives they scraped away the bristles, then hoisted the dripping carcass to the table. With the long knife Myra slit the pig's belly from end to end. The hot entrails gushed out and spilled in links to the floor. There was a sharp familiar smell. Some parts they kept – kidneys, liver and heart, lights for the farm cats. The offal they did not want – the stomach and bulk of the intestines, bladder and other small organs – Duggie carried off and buried behind the midden.

Then he left Myra to joint the carcass with knife and cleaver, to clean the intestines they had kept and prepare the bucket of blood for black puddings. There was a deep freeze in the garage. The pig would keep them supplied with pork and puddings for a long time. Meanwhile, he carried a bag of tools to a pasture beyond the stream where some fences needed repairing and strengthening.

He was a good worker when he was in the mood. As he sawed lengths of rail and tightened the fence-wire and mesh, his mind wandered freely. Things had been going well with Myra recently, there had been none of her dark moods. In his gratitude for the motorbike he had been unusually attentive and considerate. For



a few months yet they could continue, perhaps into the spring or even the following summer, surviving by her love and his hypocrisy, her fantasy and his lovemaking, her generosity and his filial acceptance of it. But in the end the difference in their ages was too great. Still – he hammered home a nail – the old woman got what she was paying for.

The swill cart arrived in the farmyard. Two men humped down the heavy bins and threw up the empty ones. They drove away.

Duggie's thoughts wandered to the girl he had visited the previous afternoon. He recalled her fair body, the softness of her breasts and thighs beneath his hands. If only Myra was more like that, firm and plump with youth. Reflectively he sat back on his heels. That night he was to see the girl again. It was only a matter of time before she gave in like the others. He visualized the scene, his thick lips parting in a smile of anticipation.

He was right. Two nights later, when her parents were out, she gave in to the vehemence of his demands and he took her on the red moquette settee of their living room. An hour later he did so again on the coverlet of her bed. She was a quiet, cow-like creature, but the neighbours heard her cries, her lacquered nails scratched long weals down his back beneath his sweater. Afterwards, well pleased with himself, he lay back in an armchair and watched midweek soccer on the television, while she made him sandwiches and coffee.

And so the days went by. Duggie saw the girl two evenings a week, and in the intervening days made enough of Myra to keep her from suspecting. He played private games. Sometimes, roused by his image of himself and the ride home, he made love to both the same evening, even within the same hour, though the girl's clinging perfume made it dangerous.

One day he wondered how quickly this could be accomplished, how long it would take him to rise from the girl, race the eight miles home, and resume making love to Myra. Two nights later, for his amusement, he attempted it. With a wild excuse he sprang from the girl's arms, rode home through the narrow lanes like a madman, and rushed into the farmhouse. As Myra received him on the hearth rug, excited but briefly hurt by the importunity of his demands, he glanced at his gold watch in the firelight. The time was fractionally under fifteen minutes. He smiled, and

bore down upon her with all his weight. Her legs curled about the tight denim of his buttocks.

For Duggie, particularly, it was a pleasant time. But soon there were murmurings of marriage.

'Duggie,' the girl said one night at they sat in the lounge bar of a hotel in the town. 'You do love me, don't you?'

'Yeah, course I do,' he said easily. 'I just showed you that, didn't I?'

She looked down and with embarrassment saw a tiny piece of straw caught in the hem of her skirt. She picked it off.

'I don't mean like that,' she said. 'I mean really.'

'Wasn't that real?'

But she wasn't smiling.

He picked up his glass and took a mouthful of beer. For him their brief couplings were oases in a desert of disinterest.

'Yeah, I love you. You're all right.'

She squeezed his arm. Without a ring her left hand looked naked and vulnerable on the black leather.

'Are we going to get engaged soon?'

He swallowed his impatience. 'I said so, didn't I?'

She nodded uncertainly.

'Well, then, we're going to get engaged. Give us a chance.'

The black motorbike helmet, emblem of freedom and independence, lay at his feet. He had promised her everything. Now he no longer cared.

Moreover, at a disco he had met another girl, a gypsy-looking creature with a sensational figure and a purple blouse and trousers that might have been painted on. They danced once, her bold eyes challenging, body twisting and inviting. Then his girlfriend was bearing across the floor. 'See you,' said the dark girl. He winked and allowed himself to be dragged away. But he had found out where she lived.

With the dark days of December and the approach of Christmas, one of Myra's black moods fell upon her. Her face sagged. A solid gloom, an atmosphere almost of savagery, descended over the farm. She did not speak, and went about her work with shoulders bowed beneath some brooding cloud. In a sudden rage she slammed one of the sty doors so hard that the hinge broke clean off. She struck a troublesome piglet so hard with the food bucket that an eye was dislodged and the vet

had to be called. No longer at night was the sitting-room fire lit. In a wooden chair Myra sat at the kitchen stove, her fierce eyes deadened, turned in upon thoughts that Duggie could not fathom.

Though he knew this was a recurring sickness, it made him uneasy. He tried to think of ways in which he had displeased her. He wondered if – though he had done his best to hide it – she knew of his affair in the town. There was no way of knowing. He tried to soothe her, crossed behind her chair and slipped his hands over her breasts, her head against his stomach.

‘Get your bloody hands off me,’ she said.

He backed away, readily flaring up in response. ‘Bloody hell, you’re changeable, aren’t you!’

‘Maybe I am,’ she said, her voice cold and dismissive. ‘That’s my business.’

Angry and sulky Duggie slouched across the kitchen.

‘You old cow,’ he thought. ‘You old bitch! That’s the last time I’m making love to you.’ Beneath lowered brows he regarded her at the stove. She was haggard. ‘I can’t bear to touch her,’ he thought. ‘God, I’ve got to get out of here.’

He still wore his work clothes.

‘I’m going down to the pub,’ he announced. ‘I can’t stand being in this bloody house tonight.’

‘Suit yourself,’ she said. ‘It’s nothing to me. Go where the hell you like.’

‘Right.’ He grabbed his jacket and helmet from the back of the door. ‘I will.’

With a bang the door slammed shut behind him.

Myra listened to the rattle of the shed door, the brief kick-start and deep revving of the motorbike. Briefly the headlight touched the curtain as it circled in the yard and throbbed past the window. Then it drew away down the track, picked up in the lane and slowly faded into silence.

For a long time afterwards Myra sat still, hatchet face taut and unyielding. A pulse throbbed in her head. Her brow tightened. A bitter sob was torn from her breast. Two or three scalding tears squeezed from her eyes and slid down the gaunt brown cheeks.

Christmas was not a time that Myra enjoyed. Her heart did not

lift to the season of happiness and good will: life had not shown it how. But this year she looked forward to spending it with Duggie. He had been speaking of a new suit, blue and fashionable, or a radio cassette player. She determined to buy him the radio, the best in the shop.

And so, when she woke on Saturday morning a few days later and found the dark mood lifting, she made preparations to drive into the city, eighty miles away. There was much to be bought – Christmas food and decorations for the house, presents for her few distant relatives, a new dress and shoes for herself, Duggie's radio and one or two smaller gifts. The trip would take her out of herself. She would lunch in a pleasant restaurant, have her hair cut if the hairdresser could take her. With brisk step and lightening heart she cleared the breakfast dishes and changed into her woollen dress and coat. Kissing Duggie fondly and smiling in the old way, she collected the farm van from the shed and drove off, leaving him to feed the pigs and look after the place.

He watched the van disappear down the track, and a minute later reappear at the top of the hill in the lane. Soon it was gone from sight. The farm was his for the whole day. She would not be back until the early evening. Grinning like an imp, he danced in the yard.

At top speed he mucked out the worst of the sties, slopped in the swill and let the pigs loose to root about the pasture. By mid morning he was finished. Carefully he shaved and scrubbed his work-roughened nails, pulled on his best denims and sweater, and polished his fine leather boots. He examined himself in the wardrobe mirror. With his hair brushed and the gold chain at his throat, he thought he looked pretty good. His bedroom was a bit untidy. Quickly he straightened the coverlet and bundled his discarded clothes and scattered magazines out of sight. Then he pushed a few crumpled pound notes into a tight back pocket, collected his leather jacket and space helmet, and let himself out of the house.

At one o'clock he returned. He was not alone. Riding pillion, her arms circling his waist, legs and breasts warm against his back, was the gypsy-looking girl from the disco. Her eyes danced, for Duggie had ridden fast, touching eighty on the straight, bucking on the bridges, leaning hard over on the bends.

He drew up at the door. She climbed down, pulling off a saucy peaked cap and shaking her hair free. He leaned the motorbike on its stand and put an arm around her waist.

'Now then, cheeky!' She wriggled aside teasingly and looked about the yard and mud-spattered sheds. 'Pooh! Pongs a bit, dunnit.'

'It's all right,' he said. 'You get used to it. Pigs are like that.'

'You should know,' she retorted, looking at the sties. 'Which one's yours?'

She squealed and fled as he threatened her.

'If I was that woman,' she said, 'what's her name – Myra Thomson – I'd have it all burned down and build a new one out the insurance. Anyway,' she stood back and looked at him, 'what are you doing, living out here with her?'

He grinned meaningfully. 'Come inside and I'll show you.'

'She's an old woman, isn't she, with a horrible ugly mark down her face.'

Again he looped an arm around her. His hand caressed her breast.

A second time she pulled free. 'You said to come back for a bite of lunch didn't you – not that.' She laughed and wriggled back to his side. 'Not yet, anyway. I want my dinner first, I'm starving.'

Duggie unlocked the door with a big iron key. They dropped jacket and coat on a kitchen chair and kissed, lips and bodies moving together. Then the girl sat by the stove while he unhooked a flitch of bacon from a beam overhead and sliced several rashers. With a pair of shears he cut off the rind. He dropped the rashers into Myra's big breakfast frying-pan and set it on the stove. Soon the mouth-watering odour of home-smoked bacon filled the kitchen. From the bottles in the sitting-room cabinet he poured a large gin and a whisky and carried them through. Then into the sizzling bacon he dropped two eggs and tomatoes and a slice of bread. Standing behind the girl's chair, as he had done with Myra, he pressed her against him and ran eager hands down her shoulders to cup her breasts, splendid and warm beneath the light sweater. She stirred dutifully as if to say 'do not', but she did not remove his hands, and her head rubbed back and forth beneath the ornate buckle of his belt.

He returned to the stove and lifted the sizzling food on to plates. They sat at the table, she in Duggie's place, he in Myra's. For a minute they were silent, cutting the succulent bacon, buttering bread, satisfying the first demands of appetite. The girl's eyes wandered about the old farm kitchen, not missing the photograph of Duggie on the dresser, and through the door to what could be seen of the hallway and sitting-room beyond.

'I don't know how she can live in a place like this,' she said. 'If it was mine I'd have those old beams covered up, and a stainless steel sink unit, and new cupboards and that.'

'It's all right,' Duggie said uncritically.

'Yeah, but you're a man. Men don't notice things like that. There aren't many women would put up with a place like this, I can tell you.' She smeared a forkful of bacon with egg yolk and raised it to her pert mouth. 'Still, maybe it's like herself - old and queer.'

They both laughed. Duggie felt a brief pang of betrayal. Myra's bony face and figure appeared momentarily in his thoughts. He dismissed them.

'It's not very clean, neither,' the girl said.

The meal was greasy and delicious. But now their stomachs were satisfied it was not upon food their thoughts turned. The girl was interested in the house, in Myra and Duggie. He pushed back his plate and wiped his lips with his hand. A minute later he rose to his feet.

'Come on, if you're so interested, I'll show you around. We'll have a cup of tea when we come down.'

'Yeah - when!'

'You want one now?'

'I don't mind.' She laughed and stood up. 'Come on, I'm dying to see the house!'

They had to remove clinging arms from shoulders and waists to get through the door.

Duggie's room was at the front of the farmhouse, facing away from the yard. This, plus their mutual satisfaction and exploratory delights beneath the tumbled blankets, was how they failed to hear the return of the old farm van three-quarters of an hour later.

Myra climbed out. Twenty miles from home the bonnet had started to belch clouds of steam. By the time the AA had arrived

to correct the fault it was too late to make the trip she planned. Moreover, now her thoughts were clearer, she had changed her mind about the radio cassette player: she hated the sort of pop music that Duggie would play incessantly. So she had lunched in a small café, bought a few essentials in a village shop, and returned home. She was happy. Her dark mood had evaporated with the outing. On Monday she and Duggie would drive into the city together, and he could be measured for the suit.

She saw the motorbike at the door, pleased he should be at home on Saturday afternoon. Birthmark livid in the December sunshine, she gathered her shopping from the back of the van and turned towards the farmhouse door.

Abruptly she stopped. The passenger footrests on the motorbike were down. It could have meant several things – he could have been cleaning it, he could have given someone a lift. But she knew at once it was a girl. He never brought friends home. A lump surged into her throat, her heart thudded. Briefly she paused, trying to collect herself, then ran to the kitchen door and threw it wide.

The smell of bacon greeted her as she entered. The table was set for two and still uncleared. Greasy plates lay where she and Duggie always sat, two of her best glasses stood on the edge of the stove. One was smeared with lipstick, like the cigarette stub crumpled on the enamel alongside. Duggie's leather jacket and a girl's coat were thrown on the spare chair. She listened. All was silent. Then from upstairs came the brief murmur of a voice and laughter.

A low animal cry started in her throat. Blindly she set down her shopping. The room began to turn about her. Clutching the table and dresser she stumbled across the kitchen. A chair fell. Her cry grew louder. Wildly she ran through the hallway and up the stairs towards Duggie's room.

He appeared in the doorway, naked, a tee-shirt held before him. A broad streak of hair ran from his stomach to his chest. He was flushed, the hair damp on his brow.

'I was having a lie-down,' he protested, trying to out-face her. His eyes were shocked, his mouth smeared with lipstick. 'I didn't hear you come in.'

He blocked her vision into the room and tried to bar her entrance. With a gaunt hand she thrust him aside as though he

was a child. He staggered into the wardrobe. Momentarily his nakedness was revealed. Myra lurched into the room.

The girl stood at the far side of the bed, the sheet clutched to her throat. Her face was as flushed as Duggie's. The blue-black hair stuck to her shoulders, her eyes were wide with warring emotions.

'Duggie!' Myra's mouth writhed with ugly distress. Her cry was an agony. Black eyes gazed from the crumpled bed to its shocked occupants. 'Duggie, how could you! How could you!'

There was an anguished silence.

Myra turned to the girl, a beautiful little slut.

'You,' she said. 'Out! Out of my house. Go on! Get out! This second!'

But the girl had spirit. She tugged the sheet from the bed to cover herself more fully.

'All right,' she said. 'Give us a chance to get my clothes on.' She ran a hand beneath her hair and shook it free. 'Anyway, what's all the fuss. What do you expect. Fancy him yourself, do you?'

Duggie stood rooted to the spot. The colour drained from Myra's face. A pulse beat in her brain, mounting like muffled hammer blows. Her eyes stared, the room began to swim.

Foolishly the girl misunderstood, and seized the initiative.

'Oh, that's it! You want him yourself! Like to think about what we've been doing!' She crossed to Duggie's side, the sheet trailing about her feet. 'Well, he's with me, and it was great! Wasn't it, darling!' Boldly she embraced him and kissed him on the lips. For a moment their bodies were crushed together. Then she turned. 'Go on, granny, back to your rocking chair. Find yourself a plastic surgeon.' She laughed. 'And shut the door behind you, I want to get dressed.'

Myra's breast heaved with a dreadful panting. With a cry she darted forward. The girl dodged behind Duggie. Myra grabbed at her, seizing the sheet. Briefly they struggled, but Myra was much stronger. The sheet was torn from the girl's grasp. Duggie tried to come between them. Myra struck him across the face with the back of her arm and sent him reeling. The naked girl ran to the far side of the bed. Myra saw her beautiful young figure, slim-waisted, her breasts capped with rose pink. She could not bear it.



'You little slut!' she cried. 'I'll kill you!'

She rushed around the end of the bed. The girl scrambled over the tumbled blankets and ran through the door. Myra pursued her along the landing. Their feet thudded on the stairs.

Duggie started after them. Fatefully he halted. 'Damned cats,' he thought. 'Let them fight.' He crossed the room and picked his jeans from the floor. As he turned them right side out, there was a terrified cry from downstairs. Hastily he thrust in his legs and stumbled to the door, fumbling for the zip.

Now truly frightened, the girl ran round the settee in the sitting-room. Myra caught her by the upper arm in a pinching grasp. The girl tugged free and fled through the hallway into the kitchen. There she paused, back to the window, on the far side of the table from Myra. By her hand lay the flitch of bacon and the heavy shears Duggie had used to cut off the rind. She snatched them up by one handle, blade downward like a dagger.

Myra clutched the back of a chair. Her chest heaved convulsively. She regarded the beautiful little trollop who stood opposite, naked, with whom Duggie had. . . . The hammer-blows in her head rose to a crescendo. Her brain was bursting. She saw the shears in the girl's hand. With a sob she turned to the wall at her back. There hung the twelve-bore. She seized it from its nails. Her bony thumb pulled back the safety catch. Deliberately she raised it above the table. The girl screamed, wide-eyed with terror. Her legs moved to race away. Before she had taken a step, Myra pulled the trigger.

The weight of shot caught her full in the chest. She was flung back against the sink and draining board as though she had been kicked by a horse. Her left breast vanished in a fountain of red. A hideous black and red hole, big enough to thrust both fists into, appeared in her ribs. Momentarily she straightened, blood gushed from her mouth. Then in a welter of breaking china she slid to the floor.

At that moment Duggie stumbled through the doorway, still tugging at the zip of his trousers.

'Oh Christ! Oh my God!'

He ran round the table and bent over the girl. Myra stepped towards him, shotgun pointing. Her finger touched the chill metal of the second trigger. He looked round, eyes alight. Her face was an agony. Before he could move she swung the barrel

up and clubbed the butt across the side of his head. There was a sickening splitting crack. Duggie spun round and fell to the floor across the mutilated body of the girl. His head lolled back, his bare arm trailed between her thighs.

Sobbing freely Myra flung the shotgun behind her and knelt at his side. Was he dead? She clutched his face to her bosom.

'Duggie!' she moaned. 'Oh, Duggie! How could you!'

Her burning kisses fell upon his eyes and cheeks. Her square, work-roughened hands brushed the short hair from his brow.

His shoulder was scratched, the girl's nails had pierced his skin in her passion. A series of fading love-bites marked the base of his neck. His breath was warm on her face. His lips, those thick lips she loved, which had given her such exquisite pleasure, were red, smeared with lipstick. She looked from the dead girl's face to her hips and the wet triangle of dark hair, then back again. How had he kissed her – made love to her? How often, how many times? How many others had there been – how many would there be? She could not bear it! He belonged to her! No one should have him. No one! He was hers! He had betrayed her!

'Duggie!' she cried aloud. 'Duggie!'

On the floor at her side lay the heavy shears which had dropped from the girl's hand as she fell. Myra caught them up. Her mouth writhed. She was disfigured – so should he be! Then he would be hers for ever! No one would want him – no whore, no shop girl, no pretty little slut!

'You're mine!' she sobbed. 'Mine!'

Shaking with horror she caught at his mouth, tugged at his smeared lips with her fingers, and began to cut them from his face. The room was clouded. Tears drenched her cheeks. The blood spurted over her hands and wrists, flowed down his face in a river to saturate her clothes. His neck and shoulder were scarlet. The muscle was tough, she had to exert a great deal of force. She felt it crunch beneath the blades. His teeth were hard and sharp against her fingers. She turned his head sideways. Slowly the rubbery band lengthened, an inch wide, falling from the young man's face across his jaw and hanging towards the floor. At last it fell free, bobbling down her skirt to the blood-wet linoleum. His ghastly teeth snarled up at her in a welter of foam and blood. He would bleed to death! She seized a towel

and pressed it to the terrible wounds, turning his face aside so that the blood should not choke him. Still deeply unconscious Duggie moaned at the pain and gave a guttural bubbling cough.

For minutes Myra slumped against the shelves beside the sink. Slowly the storm passed. Her panting quietened, the unbearable pressure in her brain eased. Her eyes cleared. She regarded the butchery on the floor before her.

At last, rousing herself, she dropped the shears in the sink and automatically rinsed the blood from her arms. Then, taking the strip of twisting flesh by one end, she carried it from the kitchen.

The pigs looked up as she reached the field gate. Drawing back her arm she flung Duggie's once-sensuous lips towards them. A big boar trotted forward and sniffed at the bloody flesh with a dirty snout. He picked it from the mire. The lips flopped from his piggy mouth, and were engulfed by the chomping jaws.

Myra watched, then fell against the top bar of the gate, head on her arms and close to fainting.

Thirty minutes later Duggie stirred. His arm moved and his eyes flickered half open. His head was bursting. Something terrible had happened to his face. He wondered what he was doing on the kitchen floor. Then memory came flooding back, a nightmare. But even worse was whatever had happened to his mouth. He put up a trembling hand and felt rough cloth. Gently he tried to pull it away and screamed at the pain. Slowly it ebbed to a scalding burn. Through eyes bleared with sickness and tears he saw that the girl had gone. He lay alone. Slowly he put a hand to the floor to push himself up. It skidded in the drying pools of blood. The towel caught beneath his knee and was ripped from his face. Again he screamed, and rolled about the floor in agony. Exploring fingers encountered some terrible wound, teeth and blood.

He forced himself to his feet, his chest and jeans filthy with gore. At the far side of the kitchen was a mirror. Leaning heavily against the table he lurched towards it, retching at the blood he had swallowed. Unable to prevent himself, he was sick over the table leg and worn linoleum. It took a minute to recover. A few shuffling steps took him to the mirror. Slowly he raised his head to see.

A monster regarded him in return, a skeleton's teeth reddened and black with blood that trickled afresh where the towel had been torn from the wounds. A cry of despair – animal as Myra's cry – rose from his throat. Helplessly he slid to the floor and slumped in the corner between the wall and dresser. His head hung on his breast.

Meanwhile, Myra was five miles from the house, far up a woodland track. In the back of the farm van lay the girl's body, rolled in an old rug and thrust into a large sack bound tight with ropes. She stopped in a small clearing and climbed out. It was a lonely spot. Few people passed that way. Heaving the sack to her bony shoulder, she set off into the trees.

The wet December wind blew through the wood. The undergrowth tugged about her knees, scratched her ankles, tore her stockings into ugly holes. After three hundred yards she came to a fallen trunk. She shrugged her burden to the ground with a thud. Where the spreading roots met the trunk grew a thick patch of bracken and tangled brambles. Carefully she packed the bulky sack out of sight and tugged more russet leaves and thorny branches around it. She stood back and surveyed her work. She was satisfied. Briefly she hesitated, then turned back purposefully towards the green van, dusting her hands and biting a thorn from her finger as she went.

The kitchen reeked of blood and vomit. When she entered Duggie was still slumped in the corner against the dresser. From mouth to trailing belt his skin was dark with dry blood. With hate-filled eyes he snarled up at her. She could expect no less, she thought, for the time being at least, perhaps for ever. Her heart was already hardened against it.

'Does it hurt – much?'

'Yes, it hurts!' he replied bitterly. 'Very much!' He began to cry. 'Why? For Christ's sake! Just because of a girl?' His fingers gestured towards his face. 'What have you done to me?'

The speech that emerged from his throat was a grunting mockery of his old voice.

'Myra!' His shoulders shook. 'Oh God! Aahhh! What do you want from me? Why? What did you do this for?' His words were lost in rending sobs, male tears of fear and desolation.

She ignored his plea. Her words were matter-of-fact, practical. 'I can ease the pain for you. You want me to?'

He nodded weakly, then grunted-savagely, 'I want a doctor.'

Myra hesitated, then strode briskly from the kitchen and across the yard to a clean shed. From a shelf in the white veterinary locker she lifted a packet of disposable hypodermic syringes and a box of ampoules. Carefully she studied the label to ensure she had got the right one. She carried them back to the kitchen, pushed aside a greasy plate and salt cellar, and set them on the table. Business-like, she removed her coat. The end of an ampoule snapped in her fingers. She unpacked a syringe from its cellophane and thrust the bright needle into the liquid. In a moment it was sucked up. Quickly she looked at Duggie, judging his weight against the pigs, consulted the dosage chart, and filled the hypodermic from a second ampoule. She tilted the needle vertical and pressed the plunger. A tiny fountain sprayed into the air.

Frightened, Duggie cowered away. Then, grateful for anything that would give relief from the pain and distress, he submitted and held out his arm. He felt dizzy, too weak to stand. Briefly Myra rubbed his shoulder with antiseptic. Firmly and with steady hands she thrust home the needle and pressed down the plunger.

Two minutes later Duggie's eyelids twitched. Blinking sleepily he gazed up at her. His blue eyes lost their focus. The next moment his head fell forward upon his chest.

Myra cared for him like a child or a young husband. Tenderly, though he was heavy, she carried him to the bathroom, stripped off his jeans and bathed him clean in a warm bath. Carefully she rinsed the blood from his mutilated face and painted the wound with iodine. Then, since he owned no pyjamas, she dressed him in a clean tee shirt and underpants and laid him in a freshly made bed.

By the time she had finished it was dark outside. With the curtains drawn she swept up the broken china and mopped away the sickness and blood. Then she called in the pigs, fed them, and locked them away for the night. She washed the dishes and tidied the kitchen.

When all was done, she gathered together every trace of the girl's presence and the events which had followed, and stoked the stove high. With the big shears she cut up Duggie's bloody denims and fed them into the blaze. Likewise, a scrap at a time,

she did the same with all the girl's clothes and the bloodstained parts of her own dress and coat. The rest she cut up for rags.

Everything unburnable, the buttons and hooks and zips, she snipped away as she sat by the stove and gathered into a paper bag with the girl's wrist watch and the rag-bag contents of her pockets. With a torch she issued into the darkness and buried them in the corner of a distant field where the pigs would not root them up again.

The grass rustled beneath her feet, a cold wind blew her hair. She looked up, spade in hand. The clouds had parted and a hard moon shone over a vista of fields and rough copses. A few lights twinkled from neighbouring farms. Many miles off, beyond a range of hills, the lights of the town touched the horizon with an orange glow.

Myra passed a wretched night. A hundred times she re-lived the bloody events in the kitchen. Detailed images of Duggie making love to that girl and a score of others, all beautiful and responsive, haunted her mind. Lying awake in the darkness she thought of wheel tracks on the woodland road, and wondered whether the rug in which she had rolled the girl's body could be identified. Several times she froze, certain she heard a car slowing in the lane, waiting for the police to come rocking up the farm track with the girl's parents in the back of the car.

But no police car arrived, either that night or in the days that followed. By chance no one had seen Duggie meet the girl on the edge of town. No one remembered her in her jaunty cap, riding pillion through the country lanes. There was nothing to connect the pig farm with her disappearance. Despite the mutual promise of their dancing at the disco, she and Duggie had never met again until that lunchtime.

The rug, however, the bloodstained rug from the kitchen floor, was evidence. Some time the body must be discovered, even though five years hence, and the rug had been bought from a shop in the town. It bore a label. The shop might have records. Some neighbour might recall seeing it. Even if not, forensic scientists could piece together a whole jigsaw from such a rug.

And so, three days later, Myra took the van once more and returned to the clearing. Duggie, whom she had kept half-drugged through the intervening days, lay asleep in bed.

The sack lay where she had hidden it behind the russet bracken and twisted brambles. Though it was mid afternoon the sun had not reached that corner of the wood. The undergrowth and sacking were white with frost. With difficulty, for the girl's body was stiff, Myra pulled the bundle out and hoisted it to her shoulders. At every step as she returned to the van she expected some inquisitive farm worker or forester, some countrywoman seeking holly, to appear through the trees. But she reached the clearing safely, and five minutes later was latching the barred gate at the bottom of the track. If anyone saw the van at the edge of the wood they did not pay it the slightest attention. The body bumped heavily in the back as they bucked over potholes in the lanes on the five mile drive back to the farm.

Myra knew what she must do. Leaving the van in the yard, she carried her burden into the shed where she killed the pigs. A sharpened cleaver and the long butcher's knife lay on the end of the table. Two enamel buckets stood ready. She bolted the door behind her and switched on the electric light. Then she untied the sack and rolled the girl's corpse from the rug. It was dreadful, blue-white and deathly cold. The flesh was hard but the skin yielded with a slight skid beneath her touch. With the solid thud of a carcass she hoisted the body to the table.

Even though Myra had prepared herself she tried not to look at the face. Knotting her fingers in the rumpled black hair, she sliced quickly through the throat, chopped away the backbone and cast the head behind her. With a splitting crack it bounced on the concrete. That was the worst part. When that was done she was more or less able to treat the corpse the same as a pig. With the long knife she slit the girl from end to end. Soon her entrails – blue, grey and bruised pink – filled one of the white enamel buckets. Her shattered lights and dark liver, her heart and other internal organs, lay wet and shining in the other. Then, with practised hands, Myra severed the limbs from the torso. With the sharp knife she sliced around the top of the hip bone, cutting deeper and deeper until buttock and thigh hung on the joint. With an experienced twist she bared the tendons, cut them away, and broke the thigh bone from its cup. The long leg fell away in her hands. She threw it aside on the floor. Soon it was joined by the other leg and the two arms. Left with the red torso, only one breast remaining, Myra sliced through the

sternum, forced back the ribs, and chopped the length of the backbone like a butcher.

Once the body was jointed only two things remained to do. She tackled the worst first and lifted the head from the floor. As if she were going to peel an orange, she sliced around the head beneath the hair-line. Then, knotting her hands in the jaw and tangled locks, she tore away the scalp. With a splitting, ripping sound it parted from the red skull. Shuddering, she cast them behind her once more. Then, one at a time, she took up the limbs and cut them in rings, right to the bone, from top to bottom. With the long knife she sliced between the ribs, so that they hung from the backbone like chops. She rubbed her hands clean on the blood-stiffened sack. The work of preparation was complete.

Carefully Myra opened the door and looked outside. It was almost dark, the last green glimmer of daylight faded above the fields. As always the yard was deserted. Taking up the girl's hair she hurried into the house and cast it into the stove. At once it flared up in a bright blaze. The scalp crumpled with an unpleasant sizzle. As she returned to the shed the acrid fumes reached her nose from the chimney.

She had not fed the pigs that day, nor let them loose in the pasture to root for themselves. As she turned on the yard lights and opened the top half of the sty doors they trotted forward, looking up with eager eyes. She carried the buckets of entrails from the shed and slopped them into two troughs. The pigs squealed, jostling and scrabbling with excitement to reach the succulent mouthfuls. Long links of intestine trailed from their jaws. The purple liver burst into deliciousness as they dragged it around the sty. Myra left them to it and returned for an armful of limbs. She heaved them over the half-doors into the straw and paddled filth. Puzzled the pigs snuffled around them, then one pushed an arm with its snout and bit at a slice of flesh. The arm jerked into the air. A second pig seized the wrist. This way and that the arm was tugged between them. Satisfied, Myra returned to the shed for the second leg and the head. She flung both into the last sty where the pigs were full grown. The bare skull struck the floor with a crack and bowled against a sow's legs. It skittered aside, then returned to snuffle. Its piggy teeth closed on the girl's face and blank eyes. For a moment Myra watched,



then closed the door, and did the same down the line of sties. From inside came the steady sounds of snuffling and wet munching. Sickened, despite herself, she returned to the shed to sluice it down and rinse the buckets and tools.

An hour later, still numbed with drugs, Duggie sat up against the pillows and watched with tired eyes as Myra entered his bedroom with a bowl of broth and some sliced bread and butter on a tray. His mouth was healing. Black scabs ringed the snarling grin of his teeth. His cheeks were shadowed with whiskers.

She set the tray on his lap. Dutifully he took up the spoon and raised the barley broth to his mouth. It was difficult to eat. The broth spilled down his chin on to the tee shirt and sheets. It was not too hot, so as it fell on the scabs it did not burn. Somewhat noisily he did his best to suck and lick himself clean. Myra sat on the end of his bed and watched maternally. In a few minutes he was finished.

‘Do you want any more?’

He shook his head, dabbing his mouth with a handkerchief.

‘Rice pudding? Fruit and evaporated milk?’

Again he shook his head.

She carried the tray to the dressing table and resumed her seat.

‘What about Jacqui?’ he grunted. ‘You know.’

It was the first time Myra had heard the girl’s name. A pang of jealousy burned in her breast.

‘Don’t worry about her,’ she said. ‘I’ve got rid of her. No one will ever know.’

‘What did you do?’

Images of the shed and sties rose in her memory.

‘Never you mind. She’s gone – that’s all you need to know.’

‘Why?’ he urged. ‘Why did you do it?’

She regarded the puzzlement and distress on his young brow, but did not answer.

‘I’ll give you one jab tonight, and that’ll be the last,’ she said.

He stared at her sickly.

She thought the time had come. ‘There’s no operating on that, you know.’ She indicated his wounds. ‘That’s the way your mouth will be from now on.’

‘As soon as I get out of this bed I’m going to a hospital,’ he said. ‘You can’t keep me here for ever.’

She shook her head. 'They can't make lips.'

'A plastic surgeon can,' he said.

'Not lips.'

'How not?'

She shrugged. 'They just can't.'

He was silent for a long time. 'Is that right?'

'Yes. You'll have to get used to it.'

He did not reply. What had happened was so dreadful there was no talking about it. The silence became a wall between them.

Myra tried to break through it. She leaned forward and smoothed back his hair.

'But you've got me,' she said. 'You've got me always. I'll never desert you.'

Through the wretchedness and despair a look of hatred moved in his eyes.

She removed her skirt and jumper and lifted the blankets to slip in beside him. He was too weak and full of drugs to resist. The clean male smell of his body was in her nostrils. For fifteen minutes she sought to rouse him to the remembrance of pleasure by her caresses. But in the end it was she herself who was stirred. She clutched him close. Murmuring against his chest she gave a little cry. Duggie did not move. Too sick in soul and body to care, he lay and let her do what she pleased.

The following morning Myra lit a fire on a broad strip of concrete near the midden, and threw on the blood-stained rug. With branches she stacked the fire high. Then she loosed the pigs into the pasture and collected what remained of the girl from the sties.

The animals had made a good job. Only wet bones remained, hung with brief scraps of flesh and cords of sinew. Their strong jaws had demolished hands and feet completely. And not only hands and feet, ribs too were gone, forearms and shins fractured and chewed. The skull had been cracked open. A soggy basin and broken jawbone were all that remained of the girl's head. Her spine straggled in one corner.

Carefully Myra gathered the pieces and flung them into the leaping flames. For an hour she searched the scattered straw and dung for loose teeth or scraps of bone that she had missed. Then

she mucked out and threw this debris too on the fire, and hosed the sties clean.

At a little before midday Duggie appeared in the kitchen doorway. He had dressed in old jeans and a sweater. A scarf was about his mouth. Apart from the tired, watchful look in his eyes and a dejected attitude very different from his customary vigour, he looked the same as always.

'What day is it?' he mumbled.

'Thursday,' she called.

He inclined his head, looked about the sky, and returned into the house. When he came out again he wore his leather jacket and motorbike helmet.

Myra stared from the side of the fire as he came towards her.

'You're not going on the bike,' she exclaimed. 'It's not safe yet. You're not strong enough.'

She could not make out his vicious reply. He pushed the visor up. His eyes blazed at her. Stepping close to the fire he heaved out a heavy branch. The end flamed. He drew it back and thrashed her across the body. She cried out. Again he struck her, and again. She stumbled and fell. Remorselessly the branch beat her shoulders and back. The glowing end seared her legs. Myra thought he meant to kill her. Desperately she seized the stick and struggled to her feet. There was great power in her bony frame. She wrested the branch from his grasp and flung it back on the fire.

Her body hurt.

'You bitch! You madwoman!' he cried gutturally. 'You bloody murderer! I'll kill you one day! I'm going on the bike, and you can't stop me!'

A dozen strides took him to the shed where the motorbike was garaged. He backed it out, sat astride, and turned the key. At once the powerful engine roared into life. He revved it hard and flipped down the visor on his helmet. With a toe he clicked down the gear pedal. Grit spat from the rear wheel as he drew away fast across the yard and down the farm track. One after another he raced through the gears on the narrow lane. The deep roar of the engine faded. Briefly Myra saw him flashing behind the hedges at the crest of the hill, then it dipped and he was gone. She stood alone beside the fire. The blue smoke of the burning bones rose on the morning breeze.

He did not return for lunch. Myra ate alone. The food turned cold on her plate.

In the afternoon she raked out the ashes of the fire and separated the scorched bones from the charred sticks. The sticks she threw into a small brick compound where she normally burned her rubbish. The pile of bones she gathered into an unidentifiable sack, and scrubbed the concrete clean. Afterwards she drove back to the wood and buried the sack close to the spot where she had first hidden the body. It was very cold, the earth hard as iron. Her cheeks were blotched, her hands blue on the handle of the spade. She scarcely noticed. Carefully she scattered mould and leaves across the patch of disturbed ground, and pulled some dead brushwood over the top. For the third and final time no one took any notice of the old farm van as it descended the track by the wood and sped home through the December lanes.

Darkness fell, she prepared the evening meal. Still Duggie did not return. She bathed, uncaring about the burns on her legs and the cruel bruises on her arms and body. A tray of drinks stood on the sideboard, a welcoming fire blazed in the living-room hearth. She sat alone and stared into the heart of the flames.

The house had no telephone. Fearful of some accident on the motorbike, she rang the police and town hospital from the box a mile down the road. They could not help her. As she drove home a few flakes of snow whirled in the headlights. They tickled her cheeks as she locked the van in the garage and returned into the silent house.

The eight days to Christmas passed slowly. Myra did not feel well. Her long limbs, normally so strong, were heavy. She was sick, sometimes her head spun. Nevertheless she continued with her festive preparations, longing for Duggie to return, determined that when he did – for most of his few possessions remained in the bedroom – everything would be to his liking. The tragic atmosphere of the house was punctuated by gay streamers and balloons. Holly adorned the picture frames, a glittering tree winked in the window. Beneath stood a beautiful cassette radio, ringed with chocolates and fruit, and an assortment of parcels wrapped in colourful paper.

On the end of the mantelpiece lay half a dozen Christmas cards which the postman had delivered for Duggie. A few more

than that stood open, half from agricultural suppliers, the rest from Myra's family. She had not posted any in return, nor that year had she sent any presents to their children.

Each morning, with hope renewed, she rose early. Each evening, with hope dead, she sat late by the ashes of the fire.

Christmas Day arrived. The kitchen steamed. Myra set the turkey in a hot stove and prepared the rest of a traditional Christmas dinner from the overflowing fridge. The mouth-watering odours filled the house. She was sick, but the feeling passed. She set the table and drank an unaccustomed whisky. At one o'clock the meal was ready. At three she could keep it hot no longer. Alone she sat with the golden turkey, a steaming pile of floury potatoes, dishes of vegetables, all the trimmings. Dejectedly she picked at a slice of breast, a few sprouts and gravy, then pushed back her plate.

It was Myra's last card. After that she lost heart. Two days later the turkey went to the pigs, along with the Christmas pudding and mince pies. The decorations were a mockery. She tore down the streamers and thrust them into the fire, threw out the tree, banished Duggie's radio and presents to his bedroom and shut the door upon them. In an hour Christmas was gone. In her long brown skirt and anorak she set about giving the sties a thorough scrub out. From time to time she paused, feeling unaccustomed sweat break out on her brow. Briefly she sank back against the wall, then pulled herself together, brushed a clinging strand of hair from her face, and resumed.

In the harsh routine of work there was less time to think and during the days that followed, as New Year came and went unrecognized, she achieved a certain stoical comfort – or if not comfort, at least the grim determination to carry on.

As dusk was falling on the Sunday following New Year, the farm had a visitor. Myra sat at the stove with the previous day's paper. Suddenly there was a knock at the back door. Her heart jumped. Sure it must be news of Duggie, she threw the paper aside and almost ran to answer it.

A girl stood at the entrance. She was fair and rather plump, pretty in a docile way. Clearly she had dressed for the visit, her red coat was immaculate, her hair shining and freshly set.

Dark and fierce Myra stood in the doorway. The birthmark

was livid, she radiated hostility. Momentarily the girl was taken aback.

‘Does Douglas Wayman live here?’ she said.

Myra regarded her. ‘What’s that to you?’ she said.

A weak defiance crossed the girl’s face. ‘I want to see him,’ she said.

‘Oh yes? And what is he to you?’

The girl flushed. ‘That’s none of your business,’ she said. ‘I want to see him, that’s all.’

‘Well he’s not here,’ Myra said.

‘What, do you mean he’s out?’

‘No, I don’t. I mean he’s gone.’

A look of hurt surprise came into the girl’s eyes.

Myra smiled. ‘That’s it, he’s gone, and he’s not coming back. Why – he was something to you, was he?’

‘Yes, we’re getting engaged.’

‘Engaged!’ Myra was surprised. ‘You and my pig man. He never said anything about it to me. Where do you live?’

The girl glanced over her shoulder, beyond the car that waited at the bottom of the track. ‘In the town,’ she said.

Myra looked her over – pretty and sincere and all dressed up. She thought of Duggie in his dirty work clothes. There was little doubt what had happened.

‘Do you know where he’s gone?’ the girl said.

‘No, I don’t.’ Myra’s hostility returned. ‘He buggered off on his motorbike, that’s all I know. Left me to run this place on my own.’

The girl’s eyes fell, her hopes dashed, her feelings wounded. Myra stepped back and began to close the door.

‘If he comes back will you tell him I called,’ the girl said.

‘It’s you that’s getting engaged,’ Myra said. ‘It’s more likely he would call on you isn’t it? Anyway, he’s not coming back here. I never want to see the bugger again.’

She shut the door in the girl’s face. The girl turned away dejectedly. From the sitting-room window Myra watched her red coat descend the track. She climbed into the well-polished car. A moment later it drew away down the lane.

Myra returned to the stove. It was a lot to think about. Slowly her face crumpled, ugly with longing and love.

January drew on. Rough winds buffeted the exposed farmhouse. The water froze. Deep snowdrifts formed along the dykes. Work was hard. For three days the road was impassable, for a fortnight the sties were fringed with icicles. Then a southerly wind brought rain and thaw that left the fields deep in mire.

Myra's hands, cracked by the severe weather, began to heal. But her sickness did not pass. At length, unable to ignore the implication of her symptoms any longer, she visited a doctor. It did not take long to confirm that she was expecting a child. The doctor surveyed the last yellow streaks of bruising on her back and shoulders. The bold warning of her gaze, accentuated by the birthmark, checked the questions that rose to his lips. He gave her the customary information and advice, spoke at some length of her age, and she left the consulting room.

Now that her suspicions were confirmed, Myra had to adopt some practical attitude. For a while she thought it best to get rid of the child. Her circumstances and age made a good case for abortion – and if not legal, there were ways and means. But as the days passed the thought of the child growing inside her – her child, Duggie's child – warmed her imagination. Approaching her forty-sixth birthday she was to become a mother. To her amazement she accepted the idea of maternity with the placidity of a cow. The doctor had spoken of possible complications. With her splendid constitution – not a day's illness for as long as she could remember – she had no fears on that score. The old ferocity was muted. As she sat by the stove on the long winter nights she put from her mind the dreadful events of December. Fondly she dreamed of Duggie, and the growing baby, and the months and years to come.

The winter passed. Snowdrops shook their green and white heads beneath the hedges, followed by the thrusting spears of daffodil and yellow-pollened hazel and willow. Lambs sprang and wriggled their tails in neighbouring fields. The pigs warmed their fat flanks in the spring sunshine. Myra leaned on the sty doors and watched the piglets tumbling in fresh straw.

One morning in early April, as she crossed the yard with a bucket of skimmed milk, she saw a figure in the lane at the foot of the farm track. Her heart surged – then faltered. No, it wasn't

Duggie, for this man walked with a limp, his shoulders sloped to one side. Nor did he wear Duggie's customary denim. He was too far off for her to be certain one way or the other. She set down the bucket and ran to the end of the yard. Slowly he halted up the track towards her. She saw that the lower part of his face was covered with a scarf.

Myra wanted to cry out, run towards him and clasp him in her arms. But she did not. Now she had the child. And even at a distance something repelled her. This man was not the Duggie she knew. He was dishevelled, unshaven, and looked as if he had been sleeping rough. She stood still, her dress stirred by the breeze, watching as he came closer. At length they faced each other, four or five paces apart. For a long time they were silent.

Then Myra said, 'You're back, then.'

'I'm back,' he replied.

Silence returned. She looked past his head to a copse beyond the road. A flock of rooks rose from the treetops and sailed towards a newly-ploughed field. Their cawing sounded on the sweet air. Myra turned back into the yard.

'Then you'd better come in,' she said.

It was several days before she was able to piece together the details of what had happened. Far from the farm, more than seventy miles away, at dusk on that day in December, the motorbike had hit a patch of black ice. He was going fast, and was flung sidelong into a stretch of iron railings, with the machine at his back. His left hand was so damaged that there was no saving it. He wore an artificial hand beneath a leather glove. His hip was held by a metal pin.

A plastic surgeon had done all that was possible with his face. The wounds of the crash were disfiguring, though not too bad. The side of his left eye was tugged down by scar tissue, his ear was twisted. Further operations would rectify these to some extent.

But his mouth, destroyed by Myra, was truly hideous. The surgeon had never seen such wounds. Clearly they were the result of some deliberate mutilation, but Duggie managed to sidestep the most probing of his questions. In an operation lasting many hours, the surgeon did all in his power to rebuild the mouth with skin grafts. For a fortnight it had survived, clay-



cold and dead, a thing of flesh that looked like rubber, a shark's mouth. It opened and closed and covered his teeth, that was all. Duggie was sickened by it. He remembered the inadvertant glance, a glance of revulsion, from a pretty nurse he had tried to chat up from his hospital bed. Then his strong body rejected it, the new mouth died and began to smell on his face. It was removed. A second time the surgeon tried. The result was the same. At first covered by sterile dressings, then scabbed and healing in the air, his mouth remained as it had been in the farmhouse.

A fortnight later, unable to face more operations, the sympathy of hospital staff and sickened gaze of the ward, he had stolen another patient's clothes and wallet from his locker, and run away. For a month he had lived by his wits, eating in the corner of cafés, gnawing turnips he gathered from the fields, sleeping in barns, reluctantly drawing closer and closer to the pig farm.

It was little wonder that from the time of his return Duggie sought solace in drink. Unable to make friends, unwilling to bare the lower part of his face even in a shop, he spent his days on the farm. It was claustrophobic. When the weather was fair he went shooting or fishing. Occasionally, for the want of something to do, he helped Myra with the animals, but his leg hurt and the artificial hand was of limited use. Long before lunchtime whisky was on his breath. Then he sat with his elbows on the table, a glass by his hand, nails long and black with dirt. By mid evening, more often than not, he slumped in his armchair half-helpless, more like a tramp than a young man. His broken mouth drooled beneath a face heavy with drink. His cheeks were stubbled, his collar dirty, his trousers stained.

Clearly he believed that Myra owed him a living. In the violence of her revenge she had sought to bind him to her. She had succeeded only too well. But she had vigour. Far from dragging down her spirits, Duggie's return gave her an additional sense of purpose. Once she had grown used to it, she liked having him about the farm, dependent upon her. He was a man to be looked after – a sick husband, injured son, weak brother. His disreputable slouching about the house and farm buildings drove her in the opposite direction. Gradually, as the weeks passed, the rooms began to shine as they had never done before.

She bought new curtains and lampshades, the shelves were dusted regularly, she even did a little decorating. The sty doors were given a fresh coat of paint. She threw away the long brown skirt and anorak, and bought a neat set of clothes for work.

Two things only worried her. Sometimes, as they sat at the table or by the fire in the evenings, she caught his eyes upon her, one straight and young, the other twisted and unnaturally bright, like the eye of an evil old man. In their depths was hatred, a veiled well of hatred so deep that it frightened her. Also she had not yet told him of the child. Inwardly she nursed her secret, waiting for the right moment, which never came.

Occasionally in the darkness they coupled again. Still Myra took pleasure in it, but it was not as it had been. No longer was Duggie a fine young man, priding in his virility, keen for conquest. Now his lovemaking was crude, ugly as his exterior, a matter of necessity and relief. More than that, he sought to punish her by his contempt and even abuse. He used lovemaking to express hatred and stress his disfigurement, to remind her of what she had done. Though frightened for the child, Myra let him have his way. Occasionally both forgot, then, briefly, she felt a shadow of the transports which in the past he had so easily aroused in her. But then she felt the stump of his arm or the hard clasp of his artificial hand, the rough press of his teeth upon her shoulder, and the moment was gone. For his sake she tried to counterfeit pleasure, but he knew at once. Then passion died, and it was merely a matter of waiting, with distracted thoughts, for his solitary orgasm, and the aching loneliness that inevitably followed.

Thus, through April and the first weeks of May, their lives continued. The countryside was caught in the throes of spring. Daffodils nodded in the hedgerows, hawthorn budded, the blue of the sky deepened between white clouds.

Though Duggie had changed beyond recognition he was only nineteen years old, and as his strength returned and the days grew warm towards summer, he wanted to spread his wings. He walked a little, but his damaged hip kept him within a radius of two miles from the house. The insurance from the motorbike would have enabled him to buy another, save for the artificial hand. Myra offered to add to it so that he could buy a good second-hand car. But in the end he took to using the old farm

van and touring the countryside on beautiful days in May. With a light scarf covering his mouth, he visited pubs and drank alone in corners. There he saw young men and girls chatting, sometimes couples with their arms around each other. He regarded the men's undamaged faces, gazed with longing and rising desire at the girls' slim waists and legs, their full breasts moving against summer blouses and soft woollen sweaters.

Once, only once, he engaged two girls in conversation. They were silly but companionable, and in the old days one or the other would clearly have been available. The prettier girl asked about the scarf covering his mouth. He told her about the motor-bike crash.

'Let's see, then,' her friend said.

Duggie hesitated. He glanced at the face of the first girl, then slowly, with trembling fingers, lifted his hands to the scarf. So acute was the agony on his face that the two girls exchanged looks of apprehension. He paused, visualizing the dreadful sight that confronted him when he looked in a mirror. His breathing quickened. He could not do it. With a sob of distress he sprang to his feet. The table was knocked sideways, their drinks tumbled to the floor. Heedless, he lurched from the bar-room and ran from the pub to the battered green van. For fifteen minutes he drove like a madman. At length he stopped at a barred gate high on a country road and put his head in his arms on the wheel. His heart was racked, his shoulders shook, scalding tears ran down his cheeks and were smeared by the sleeve of his jacket.

But the repulsion of his looks did not check his longing and desire. On sunny afternoons he sat in the van near shop doorways and watched the girls passing on the pavement, pretty assistants moving to and fro behind the bright reflections of the windows. Often he was half-drunk. Savage thoughts rose in him, fantasies in keeping with the glossy male magazines he bought in news-agents, memories of past conquests, thoughts encouraged by the harsh life he lived with Myra on the pig farm.

And so, one night near the end of May, he hid the van among trees and waited in a quiet country road for the return of a girl he had followed earlier in the day. In his hand he carried the long knife which Myra used to kill the pigs. A thick length of

stick, like a club, was thrust through his belt. He was many miles from home. Occasionally the moon showed through gaps in the cloud. The trees were dark against the sky. He pressed back into the shadows as a car passed with blazing headlamps. A man walked by, unsuspecting.

At length he heard the crisp, shorter step of the girl. He waited at the edge of the road, hidden by a leafy bough. His breath came unsteadily, his stomach quaked, fear warring with an ungovernable desire.

Duggie saw her plainly in the shadows. Her footsteps clipped past, only three or four paces away. He rushed forward and caught the girl about the shoulders, his hand across her mouth. She screamed and bit him. He struck her with his hand, and struck her again.

'Shut up! Shut up! Or I'll kill you! See!' He held the long knife before her face.

'Aaaahhhh!' She screamed and kicked out wildly. Her heel raked the length of his shin.

Duggie drew the club and struck her across the side of the head. The girl reeled.

'Be quiet, or I'll kill you! I mean it!'

Dazed and terrified the girl cowered away. He caught her by the arms and tugged her into the shelter of the bushes.

'No!' she pleaded. 'Oh no! Please. Please!'

But her pleading, her anguished girl's voice, only inflamed his excitement. He flung her to the ground and lay on top of her. His hand crushed her breasts and thrust beneath her jacket to the warmth of her young skin. Then he was tugging at her clothes, heedless of how violently, tearing at her tights and slight panties, grunting instructions all the while.

'Be still! Open your legs! Open them!! Wider!'

And at last his hand found what it sought, he tore at his jeans, and after momentary force sank into a softness so warm and sweet that he was overwhelmed. Following the months of harshness and longing Duggie had never known anything like it. Blindly his body heaved. In less than a minute he lay drained and shivering across the girl's weeping body.

But now the storm was over he was frightened of discovery. Swiftly he rose to his feet and straightened his clothes.

'You stay there!' he said to the girl. 'Don't move for five minutes. If you do I'll be waiting out there in the road, and I'll kill you. I will, I swear it!'

The long knife glinted in his hand. Leaving her huddled in the undergrowth he hurried away as fast as he was able on silent feet. Two minutes brought him to the van, parked out of sight in a leafy turning. He flung the knife and stick on the passenger seat, started up, and drew out into the road. For a minute, until he was round the corner and out of sight, he drove without lights. Then he switched on and drove a twisting route up and down and around lanes until he was sure he could never be followed. At last he turned the van back home towards the pig farm, twenty miles away.

He felt wonderful, and tilted a half-bottle of whisky to his mouth. He had forced his attentions upon girls in the past, but they had always been partly willing. This was the first time he had attempted rape. He lived it over and over in his mind, every quiver and cry as vivid as if it was happening there and then. Now that he was safe, his only regret was that he had not had the courage to hold the girl longer, until he had made love to her – raped her – a second time, at greater length. He was aflame and indulged a fantasy of her responding, wanting him, sleeping with him in the curtained bedrooms of the cottages as he drove past.

By the time he arrived back at the farm his desire was so great that he left the van at the kitchen door and hurried straight to Myra, who was in bed. Pausing only to pull off his boots, he climbed in beside her and used her as a whore.

As he lay in bed the following morning, for the twentieth time Duggie re-lived the events of the night. Daylight brought no regrets. He stretched luxuriously. His only desire was to repeat the adventure. Hand behind his head, he watched the sunlight on the curtains. He looked like a savage, he thought, he lived like a savage with Myra; the world did not want him; well, then, he would act like a savage. Trapped in his disfigurement it was a new and exciting idea – planning, violence, excitement, satisfaction – the perfect antidote to his claustrophobic days on the pig farm.

In the course of the next fortnight he attacked two more girls, in different parts of the county. One girl he raped twice, the

other three times in the course of a long and unforgettable hour in a deserted barn a mile from town. The girl half-struggled and half-yielded, crying out against the bales of straw. Duggie drove home swollen with pleasure and success.

Finding him so much more content, clearly with some secret to which she was not privy, Myra at last found an opportunity to tell him about the child. Her stomach was so swollen it was not possible to keep it secret any longer. More than once he had commented about her getting fat, without the least suspicion of the truth. They were sitting at the table having tea. Duggie stared at her, at first with disbelief and then with amazement. She was an old woman, even six or seven years older than his mother. The thought of a child was ridiculous, disgusting.

'Christ!' he said. 'When?'

'A bit over two months,' she told him. 'Mid August.'

'Bloody hell!'

He worked back nine months, but mid November meant nothing in particular. His feelings were a confusion. Clearly she was pleased, wanted the child. But that she, Myra, should have his child, at her age! He looked at the hatchet face, the mulberry stain, the swollen stomach. That she should have the one child of his strength – when no girl would ever look at him again! It was unjust, wrong. This fierce old woman bore life, while he sank into decay. Not only had she destroyed his looks and future, she had stolen his child as well. His mouth opened in an ugliness of resentment and hostility.

'Pleased, are you?'

'Yes,' she said. 'It's wonderful. At my age, a child. Your child, Duggie.'

He nodded. An image of a newborn baby entered his mind, pink and struggling in a bath. Immediately it was replaced by the darker image of a girl, her white legs spread in the dank leaves of a hedgerow. He shut both from his mind and rose to fetch another drink.

'Ah, well, if that's what you want,' he said.

But from the living-room came the crash of his boot against the door of the sideboard, the smash of a glass, and a muted indistinguishable cry.

For a moment Myra was stricken, then hardened herself. Now that Duggie knew, the worst was over. She straightened her

back and reached for another slice of bread. The child kicked lustily within her. She stiffened, then smiled secretly, comforted against whatever the days might bring.

Natural violence was a fact of life, but criminal violence was almost unknown among the quiet fields and roads of that countryside. Duggie's victims reported to the police, and the following Friday the local newspaper carried news of the attacks.

*Masked Rapist Attacks Three, read the front page headline. Girls in knife ordeal. Man must be caught, say police.*

Myra read the newspaper as always. The attacks were a local sensation, but occupied her thoughts no more than the fat-stock prices and news of neighbouring farms.

It was Duggie who gave the game away. Three times she found him engrossed in some article. Sitting at the unlit fire before lunch, he gave a start and ruffled over the front page when he felt her eyes upon him. Guilt flashed between them like lightning, the air was electric with it. Duggie kept his head lowered, pretending to be absorbed in the inner pages. Beneath the fair stubble his cheek was white. She saw his eyes slide sideways to see if she was still there. For a moment Myra could not understand. Then the black headline blazed in her memory – and she knew! Rooted to the spot she stared at Duggie in his customary sweater and denims, a can of beer on the arm of the chair. There was no doubt. Involuntarily she touched the corner of the sideboard for support, visualizing the scene, and in the same second recalled a score of details from their own love-making over many months. Sensing her immobility, Duggie raised his eyes. Myra saw into them, very clearly, for a split second, then looked down at the carpet and turned back into the kitchen.

In the afternoon, when he was out of the house, she looked for the newspaper to read the report again. It was nowhere to be found, then she discovered it thrust down the back of an unused chair. The three girls, who were unnamed, described their attacker as young and powerful, armed with a butcher's knife, the lower part of his face hidden by a scarf. Myra noted the dates. At least two tallied with occasions when Duggie had been away in the van and returned after midnight.

For a long time she stood at the window. Apart from talking

to him, which was difficult, there seemed nothing she could do. The thought of the rapes did not disturb her too deeply, not now. It was discovery that she feared. Still undecided, she replaced the newspaper and straightened the cushions.

That night, hoping to take the edge off his sexual appetite and keep him from trouble, she tried to take Duggie to her bed. For a time he submitted to her caresses, then pushed her back and rose from his chair buttoning his shirt. He wanted a walk, he said, he was restless.

In the light of the waxing moon, with the wind upon his face and the lights of distant farms punctuating the summer-dark countryside, he longed to be out there again. His blood mounted with his imagination. Regretfully he turned back across the fields towards the pig farm.

As he approached the house he saw the light burning in Myra's bedroom, a yellow rectangle above the front porch. It angered him. She was waiting, hopefully, for his return. He looked round the door, tousle-headed and fearful-mouthed, and bid her a brusque goodnight. Aware of his disinterest, no longer hurt by it, she persevered.

'Come on, Duggie.'

He returned to the doorway.

'Make love to me,' she said. 'You haven't made love to me for a fortnight.'

'Nah, I don't feel like it,' he said. 'Another time, eh? Anyway, it's bad for the kid, isn't it?'

'Not if you're gentle.'

'Gentle!' He laughed. 'I don't feel very gentle these days.'

He switched off her light and pulled the door half-shut. She heard his footsteps on the stairs, then the clink of bottles as he poured a last nightcap. Unhappily she turned into the pillow and pulled the sheet about her neck.

In his bedroom along the landing, Duggie set the whisky on the chair, took off his clothes and climbed into bed. Reaching to the floor he picked up a magazine. For a while he thumbed through photographs of girls in postures of ragged submission and lust, then settled to read the pages of experience and erotic male fantasy.

The following morning, at a little before noon, Myra was working in the sties when Duggie appeared at the kitchen



doorway. He wore his customary jeans, faded on knees and seat, a black tee-shirt and training shoes. A light nylon jerkin was rolled in his hand.

'Can you lend us five quid?' he called across the yard.

It was hot. Myra eased her back and wiped her brow. She followed him into the kitchen.

'I'll cash the unemployment at the post office,' he said, taking the note she held towards him. 'Pay you back tomorrow. Got to get some petrol.'

She pushed her purse back in the drawer and turned to face him.

'Don't go, Duggie,' she said. 'Not today.'

Her heart was thudding.

He looked up, startled, then masked his alarm with a bold gaze.

'What do you mean?' he said bluntly. 'Don't go where?'

'Well, you're going out in the van, aren't you? I hoped you might give me a hand with the pigs this afternoon.'

'Doing what?'

The exchange had overtaken her. 'Well – there are lots of things need doing. The hinge is broken on the end sty, for a start. The yard needs a scrub-down.'

'I'll do it tomorrow.' He tucked the note into a tight pocket. 'I'm going out today. I want a break from the farm.'

There was no stopping him.

'What time will you be back?'

'For Christ's sake, what is this – an inquisition? Late, I expect.'

She nodded. 'All right, Duggie. Be careful.'

He glanced at her quickly, his twisted eye pink in the sunlight.

'In the car, I mean,' she amended. 'Drive carefully.'

'Yeah,' he said after a moment.

As she watched him cross the yard the rolled jacket in his hand seemed strangely rigid. He turned the van. She waved as it drew away down the track. A moment later it disappeared along the leafy lane.

At once Myra returned to the kitchen. She looked for the butcher's knife – the knife with which she killed the pigs, the long knife mentioned in the newspaper report. It was nowhere to be found.

At eleven o'clock that night Duggie stood in the gateway of a hay field on a lane that wound above swelling farmland. It was a fine night, the scent of newly-cut hay was sweet on the air. At the far side of the lane brambles coiled thickly against a dry-stone wall. At the near side cow-parsley formed a long white cloud beneath the rambling hedge.

It was a lonely spot. Duggie looked a mile one way to the street lights of a little village, and a mile the other to the occasional headlights of a car on the main road. Hidden from view by a small pine copse where the van was concealed, was a large market garden where young people from fifty miles around came for training. They were accommodated in a residential hall within the grounds. At the weekend they were allowed a late pass and need not return to the hostel until midnight.

On foot, keeping his distance, Duggie had followed a girl, a pretty girl with a fresh face and tumbling fair hair, to the house of friends in the village. Swollen with desire, blood aflame with vodka, he awaited her return.

At length, among the rustles and sounds of the night, he heard her step upon the road, and the soft notes of a melody she sang beneath her breath. His heart thudded with a familiar surge of excitement and anticipation.

He stepped into the road and walked casually towards her. In a moment they saw each other. The song died on the girl's lips. They drew close.

'A grand night,' Duggie said easily, a passer-by on the road. She relaxed. 'Yes, it is.'

They passed. At the very instant they did so, Duggie whirled round like a wild thing and sprang at her. Before the girl could move, his artificial hand was across her mouth. The other arm clutched her to him. A cudgel was in his hand.

She screamed a muffled scream and bit him, but beneath the leather glove his hand was metal.

'Shut up!' he hissed savagely.

She smelled the sweet stench of spirits on his breath.

'I've got a knife. Make another sound and I'll kill you!'

Momentarily she was still. The hand holding the club fumbled at her breast. The girl could not stand it. Overwhelmed by terror, she struggled frantically. Duggie felt her slipping from his grasp. Drawing back his arm he thrashed the club against

the side of her head. The girl jerked. He hit her again. She gave a soft sigh, her legs buckled.

Duggie caught her before she hit the road. Panting with the struggle and mounting desire, he seized her beneath the arms and dragged her towards the gateway into the hay field. Her heels trailed on the gravel chips and cut grass. A dozen yards along the field side of the hedge he had strewn hay in a den beneath overhanging boughs. He dropped the girl full length and pulled the butcher's knife from the crude sheath at his belt.

'See!' he hissed. 'Do as I tell you, and you'll be all right. Struggle – and I'll stick it through you!'

The girl made no response. Uncaring, blinded by the urgency of his needs, Duggie set the knife at his side. Roughly he thrust his hands beneath the light wool of her sweater. On that warm June night she wore little. He moaned at the softness of her skin, her waist, her young breasts. Her loins were burning. He could not wait. Urgently he tugged at her brief undergarments, struggled with the zip of his jeans. In a minute she lay beneath his bucking body. In another minute he cried aloud and stifened, jerking galvanically in the grip of an ungovernable orgasm.

It was a while before the world stilled. Duggie stroked the girl's soft hair and ran his hands up her sides. Still she did not move. Rolling from her at length, he bared her breasts and pressed his face between them, pulling down the scarf to feel her healing softness against his mutilated mouth.

Minutes passed. The girl was still unconscious. His hand caressed her thighs. Desire mounted once more. He unbuckled his denims and eased himself above her. Slowly, deeply, he resumed making love. His eyes closed with pleasure. It was this that made girls cry out – but she was still, so very still. She did not move at all. Without interrupting that timeless movement Duggie raised his head. In the shadows he could see little. He lay upon her and rested his cheek against her lips. They were chill. Her mouth was open.

Duggie lay still. Beneath his black tee-shirt the girl's breast did not stir. She did not seem to breathe. A terrible suspicion thrilled through him. He seized her hand, fingers limp and cold in his rough grasp. There seemed no pulse at her wrist. He

withdrew and crouched back, his good ear pressed to her chest. There was no heart-beat. Desperately he gave her cheek a series of short, wakening slaps.

'Come on!' he hissed in her ear. 'Come on! Wake up! Wake up!'

But there was no response. The girl's head rolled lifelessly to one side. Her arm fell with a small slap against her naked thigh, and was still. There was no doubt – the girl was dead. He had been copulating with a dead body. He had killed her.

Horried he drew back. Pale in the shadows her limbs sprawled indecently upon the hay. He dragged his trousers together and fastened the belt. What was he to do? He must leave no evidence, that was the main thing. Quickly he thrust the knife into its sheath and caught up the cudgel. He patted his pockets, remembering that he had emptied them in the van. Save for the girl's body and evidence of the rape, all was clear. He backed away, automatically pulling the scarf across his mouth. Then, leaving the girl as she lay, he turned and ran.

So great was his fear and haste that he failed to check the road was clear, and ran from the gate almost headlong into two men who were passing. They were a farmer and his son, a youth about the same age as Duggie. They had a dog with them. At once the animal set up a terrific noise of barking, and rushed forward at his legs. Duggie jumped back.

'Bran! Come here. Come here!'

Roughly the farmer rapped his stick on the road and called the dog back. At the same moment he switched on his torch and flashed the beam on the startled stranger. Even as Duggie danced back from the shadowy collie, they saw the scarf about his mouth and the stout cudgel in his hand. Then Duggie turned and ran away down the road. They saw his bobbing uneven shoulders and heard the limping patter of his feet.

'Christ!' said the farmer's son. 'Was that . . . ?'

'I don't know,' said his father. 'Have a look in here.'

Purposefully he strode through the gateway into the hay field. It was big and flat, strewn with long lines of drying grass. They listened. Slowly the beam of the torch swept round, and moved down the hedge. In a moment it settled on the straggled limbs of the girl. They looked down on her dead, open-eyed face and proffered nakedness. The son went to cover her.

'No. Leave her, boy. Let the police see how she's lying.' In modesty he turned the torch away. His voice shook with anger. 'Get after that murdering bastard! If I catch him there'll be no need of a trial!'

They ran from the gate and turned down the lane. The youth, a strong farm lad, soon left his father behind. The black and white collie ran at his side.

The copse of spruce and pine where the van was hidden, stood more than a quarter of a mile down the road. Hampered by his pinned hip, Duggie could not run quickly. Even as he turned from the lane on to the rutted track through the trees, he heard the racing footsteps behind him.

The farmer's son saw his shadow flit into the dark copse. He followed cautiously. There was a quick 'pad-pad' and the snap of a twig ahead. He ran on up the twisting track. Duggie appeared in a gap of the trees. In fifteen seconds he was upon him. Duggie turned at bay, tugging the butcher's knife from his belt. Panting, the farmer's son regarded him.

'You bastard!' he said.

Duggie backed up the track, trying to reach the van, the keys ready in his hand.

The young farmer urged his dog to attack.

'Go on, Bran! Sic him! Sic him!'

The rough collie ran forward, snarling and worrying Duggie's ankles. He dodged this way and that, striking out with the knife. The collie sprang back, then darted forward like lightning. Its teeth nipped Duggie's leg. He cried out. Then suddenly icy cold he stood quite still, waiting, tempting the dog forward. It took the bait. A second time Duggie was bitten, and a third. It grew over confident. On the instant he lashed out with his foot. The blow caught the dog full in the mouth. There was a sharp snapping noise. The dog was flung backwards, skidding into a thicket of weeds. Picking itself up, it ran off into the trees, broken-mouthed and howling.

The young farmer gave an oath. 'Oh, Jesus! You bastard! Bran! Bran!'

With hatred he turned back to the track.

Duggie panted with satisfaction – then suddenly he stopped, horrified. In the fierce skirmish the van keys had fallen from his hand. Without them he was lost. He looked down. The ground

was rutted and broken, almost invisible in the darkness. Without light there was no chance of finding them.

The young man seized a branch and tried to snap it from a fallen trunk. It split but would not break.

The light of the farmer's torch flashed among the trees. In a minute he was with them, thick-set and breathing heavily.

'Watch, he's got a knife,' his son said.

'I'll watch the knife,' he said. His voice was harsh and ominous.

The torch turned full on Duggie, dazzling him. In his haste and battle the scarf had fallen to his neck. His teeth snarled horribly, saliva glinted on his chin. One eye was scarred and twisted. The zip of his trousers gaped to dark underpants. The long butcher's knife was raised in his hand.

'God! What a beauty!' the farmer said.

He advanced behind the torch, stick ready.

'Come on!' he said. 'There's two of us. We've got you now! Throw down the knife.'

Duggie's eyes glittered.

'Come on, son. Make it easy for yourself.'

Duggie glanced quickly over his shoulder. The torchlight touched the side of the van forty yards up the track. He backed further.

The farmer was a blunt, unimaginative man, hot-tempered, accustomed to having his way. His strength, he was sure, with torch and stick, was more than a match for the half-lame youth who retreated before him.

Abruptly, before Duggie or his son was prepared for it, he rushed forward and thrashed downwards with the stick. But he was clumsy and Duggie's reaction was like lightning. He sprang to meet the man, heedless of the stick that thudded on his shoulder. With his knife he plunged at the darkness behind the torch. The blow caught the farmer in the upper arm. He cried aloud as the long blade passed clean through the muscle and out the other side.

The torch fell to the earth.

Still dazzled, Duggie plucked back his arm. Like a wild thing he struck again and again at the figure before him. The farmer reeled. His throat gurgled with blood. Momentarily Duggie made out his dark silhouette. With a last terrible blow, slicing

through breast-bone, he plunged the knife handle-deep. The farmer's heart and liver were pierced. Briefly he sagged upon the blade, already dead, then Duggie tugged it free and he fell heavily to the carpet of pine needles.

Duggie seized the torch.

So swift and furious had the struggle been, that the farmer's son was not able to intervene. All in a moment, before he could move, his father lay dead at Duggie's feet. With a terrible cry of distress, he flung himself forward. Duggie slashed downwards. The blade jarred against the youth's skull, the shock ran up his arm. It stopped him in his tracks. A second time, and a third, Duggie slashed at him. The young man's face was lacerated from brow to chin. His ear flapped loose, a terrible gash ran down the side of his neck. Blood began to course hot and wet down his face and shoulder. Another chop, full-force, sliced bone-deep through the light cotton of his sleeve. He staggered away. Duggie pursued him with knife and torch. Blinded by blood the youth stumbled back down the track towards the lane.

Duggie was winded. Holding his scratched face and struggling for air, he let him go.

Fortunately the van key was attached to a substantial red tab. As soon as he could breathe again, Duggie turned the torch on the ground. There were many red splashes on leaf and grass, but after a minute's search he found the key beside the leg of the dead farmer. He picked it up, fierce and panting, and hurried on up the track.

The engine fired at once. Soon the van was rocking and lurching back down the track towards the lane. The headlights illuminated the tangled copse. The solid body of the farmer lay in Duggie's path. Unwilling to stop he swerved aside, but could not avoid the man's legs. A knee cracked like a pistol shot beneath his wheel. The steering wheel spun in his hands as he hit a deep rut. For a hundred yards more he jolted on, then turned from the track into the lane.

Briefly in the headlights he saw the farmer's son, crouched against a tree trunk at the roadside. His face and neck were a sheet of blood. The youth put up a hand to clear his eyes. Then the headlights were off him and the van drew away down the road, accelerating fast.

But it was not fast enough, for through his dizziness and

smearing vision the young man saw the number plate. Once was enough. It was a number he would never forget.

Heavily he pushed himself to his feet. One arm hung limp. His sleeve was sopped with blood that ran in dark rivulets down his hand and fell 'drip-drip-drip-drip-drip' to the dusty tarmac. He looked up and down the lane for sign of a car. There was none. Pulling himself together he set off towards the nearest house, half a mile away. His senses swam, he felt sick. The sky began to roll backwards, ever backwards, over his head. His feet led him from side to side of the lane.

Duggie reached across to the passenger seat for the bottle of vodka. He could not feel it with his artificial hand and switched on the inside light. The bottle, half empty, lay tumbled with his jacket and a new male magazine which straggled open at a glossy nude. The long knife lay on top, streaked with blood. He grimaced, took the bottle, and flicked off the light switch.

A long swallow of the heavy, slightly oily spirit, was not enough. He took another and set the bottle on the seat between his legs. On top of his earlier drinking the vodka was not long in taking effect. His shuddering eased. The horrific events of the night whirled more slowly in his brain, and at length came to rest. He was able to think. He cursed himself for leaving on the headlights and revealing the number plates. The farm lad had certainly seen them.

What was he to do? He could return and finish him off, but that might be running into danger. If he did not return, the police would soon know. Then they would be after him. And once they caught him, he was finished. There was no choice, he had to make a run for it. But where could he go – there was nowhere!

Panic began to rise. He lifted the bottle of vodka and tipped it against his teeth. The spirit spilled down his neck and tee-shirt, cold against his chest. But in his stomach it glowed warm, comforting.

As he pushed the bottle back between his legs he felt a twinge of remembered pleasure. Sensuously he recalled his coupling with the girl in the dark privacy of the hedge. Alive or dead, what matter, it had been wonderful, something to remember. His lust began to revive. If only he had her lying in the back of



the van, dead as she was, it would have been nice to pull into some quiet lay-by, somewhere they would not be disturbed.

Smiling drunkenly, seesawing between fear and hope, satisfaction and bloody memory, desperation and an alcoholic calm, he drove on towards the pig farm. There were things he needed to pick up. Myra would advise him. Poor cow, he thought, even now she loved him. Then he remembered the child – his child, pink and perfect – and his own hideous countenance. A terrible anger mounted within him. Tears of self-pity swam in his eyes.

By the time he reached the pig farm the vodka had taken full effect. Scraping the bushes the van careered up the track, skimmed a stone gate-post, and swung to a skidding halt in the yard.

Myra was awake. She looked at the luminous face of her alarm clock. It was twelve-thirty. Her bedroom, like Duggie's, was at the front of the house. On that June night the window was ajar, but she had no thought for the scents of the countryside that drifted into her room. She heard the slam of the van door, the crash of glass as Duggie flung his empty bottle against a shed wall. The kitchen door opened and closed behind him. His footsteps were in the hall. She heard him muttering. There was a familiar chink of bottles from the sideboard cupboard. Myra waited, her imagination alive to several possibilities. Then she rose and pulled on her dressing gown, drew her loosened hair from beneath the collar, and descended the stairs.

Duggie stood by the kitchen sink. There was no vodka in the house, a three-quarter-empty bottle of brandy was in his hand. His face was swollen and heavy-eyed with drink, and it was badly scratched. She knew at once that something had gone terribly wrong. He stared at her belligerently.

'What's happened, Duggie?'

He scowled and smiled sarcastically, but did not reply.

'Something's wrong! What is it?'

He grunted something unintelligible. His voice was thick.

'Tell me!'

'No.' He tipped the brandy to his mouth.

The zip of his jeans still gaped. Duggie saw the direction of her gaze. He hitched the waist of his trousers and tugged his zip closed. On the draining board at his side, still wet from rinsing, lay the missing knife.

Myra hesitated. 'Duggie,' she said. 'I know about the girls – in the newspaper.'

He looked up in quick alarm, brow furrowed with questions. 'It wasn't very difficult,' she said.

There was a brief silence.

'What happened tonight?' she said. 'Can't you tell me!'

He shook his head.

'Someone's been hurt!' she said. 'Badly?'

His head lolled on his chest. He slopped the remains of the brandy around the bottle.

'Badly? Duggie, tell me!'

'Yes, badly! She's dead!'

His breath came unsteadily. He sniffed back returning tears.

'Dead! For God's sake, Duggie! What happened? What did you do?'

'It doesn't matter. She's dead!' He began to sob. 'A man's dead, too. And someone's seen the van. The police will be here in a minute.'

Myra caught the back of a chair and sat at the table. She regarded him. As if a glass cleared she saw that Duggie was finished, ruined. He might as well himself be dead. And it was her fault. A hand tightened in her breast. But it was no good being emotional, it was time for action. She pushed back her hair. The mulberry birthmark was startling on her cheek and neck. Sympathy did not sit easily on that hatchet face.

'You've got to get out,' she said with cold practicality. 'That's certain. Get away from here, for the time being at least. Find somewhere to stay while the fuss dies down. Have you got any money?'

He shook his head. Drunken tears glistened beneath his eyes.

Impatiently Myra rose and went to him, calming, trying to give him strength. She took his head on her shoulder. He shook with sobs.

'There,' she murmured. 'There.' Her square hands stroked his back. 'Come on! Who's my strong man.'

Slowly his sobs lessened. She held him to her.

'Did you have to?' The heat and press of his body prompted her to prurient curiosity. 'With the girls – was it so very special?'

His chest heaved. 'I couldn't help it.'

She was still. 'Will you do it again?'

'I don't know.'

Slowly her hands slipped to the seat of his denims, gently holding him against her as she had done so often in the past. Instinctively responding, his back flexed. But her pregnancy intervened, her stomach pressed hard and unfamiliar against his belt. Then abruptly, shockingly, he felt movement as the baby stirred and kicked. Momentarily he was taken aback by surprise, then his mouth moved with sudden anger. He looked up from Myra's shoulder. Five feet away, his monstrous reflection confronted him in the kitchen mirror.

Violently he thrust her from him and stepped back. With blue, hostile eyes he gazed at her swollen stomach. His child! He stared up into her face – gaunt, unattractive, old. He could not bear it. Drawing back his fist he struck her, struck her on the breast so hard and painfully that she staggered backwards and fell.

'You bitch!' he cried. 'You thieving, ugly, old bitch!'

A terrible drunken rage rose in him. His training shoe lashed out, hacking her side. Fearful for the child she cried aloud, shielding her stomach with her arms as his foot struck her again and again.

'I'll kill you!' he screamed. 'I'll kill you!'

He seized a chair and swung it above his head. Desperately Myra scrambled aside. The chair thudded across her back and shoulders. She fell to the linoleum. Half rising, she seized the poker from the side of the stove. A second time the chair knocked her sprawling. She struggled to her feet and brandished the poker, backing round the table. Duggie advanced. She raised it warningly. Still he came on. She drew the poker back and thrashed him across the body with all her strength. By chance the blow struck his elbow. There was a wooden crack. He cried aloud, momentarily convulsed with pain. The chair fell to the floor. Murder was in his eyes. His glance flew to the wall, where the shotgun hung on its nail.

'Duggie!' Myra cried. 'Duggie! No!'

In two strides he was across the room. He seized the gun and snapped open the breech. Following the girl's death it was unloaded, but a box of cartridges lay in the dresser cupboard. He wrenched open the door.

'No, Duggie!' Myra cried again. 'Duggie! No!'

He took no notice. The box of cartridges was in his hand.

With a cry Myra ran from the kitchen, back through the hallway and up the stairs to her bedroom. With a bang she slammed the door and snapped the iron key in the lock.

His footsteps were on the stairs.

'Come out!' he roared. 'Come out! You fucking bitch! I'll kill you!'

There was a deafening explosion. The panel of the door disintegrated. Shot tore into the wall opposite. There was a second explosion. A ragged, gaping hole appeared in the second panel. Smoke drifted through.

Myra seized her wardrobe. With the strength of desperation she pushed it along the wall. Even as it reached the edge of the door Duggie fired again. The lock shattered and fell limp, pellets sprayed across the room. But the heavy wardrobe slid across the entrance and held the door shut. Duggie's boot thudded against it. He flung his weight against the panels. Myra held the wardrobe firm. Duggie drew back and fired the second barrel. Her hanging clothes were ripped to shreds, the front of the wardrobe splintered. She tore the blankets from her bed and propped the mattress against the wardrobe door. She thrust the dressing table and frame of the bed against it.

Nursing her stomach, terrified the beating and her exertions had injured the child, Myra sat in a chair against the wall. Beyond the barricade Duggie's oaths reached new heights. A dozen barrels of shot poured into the door. Flock burst from the mattress like handfuls of feathers.

Out on the landing the air was blue and thick with cordite smoke. Duggie thrust two more red cartridges into the breech and snapped the gun shut. He paused, face and neck running with sweat. The bitch had barricaded herself in securely! The door was a splintered ruin, her clothes hung like tattered rags within the wardrobe. He saw a blue dress and remembered the first evening she had worn it. But he would get her out! Wild with destruction he rammed the barrel through the bedroom door and fired, then swung it to the side and fired again. The clothes convulsed. He withdrew and broke the gun open. The dead cartridges sprang into the air. He thrust in two more, snapped the breech shut, and fired the first barrel. His ears, already ringing, were stunned. Another ragged hole was punched

in the door. Smoke curled about the light-shade above the foggy well of the stairs.

He coughed and leaned against the banisters. Thoughtlessly he caught hold of the end of the barrels. His fingers were seared by hot metal. He swore and took them in his mouth, blowing on the burn, smelling the scorched skin.

It stung, but it gave him an idea. He would burn her out!

Laughing, he propped the shotgun against the banister rail and hurried downstairs. A battered tin of petrol stood on the garage shelf for emergencies. He seized it and returned to the house, throwing the cap aside as he crossed the yard.

'I'll get you now, you bloody cow!' he cried. 'I'll burn you out!'

Starting at the kitchen door he advanced through the hallway, trailing the petrol across the carpet, splashing it over walls and furniture. As he ascended the stairs it gurgled in a clear stream. The air was heavy with smoke and fumes. He reached the landing and flung it about the floor and wallpaper. The petrol spurted through the splintered door of Myra's bedroom. Her clothes and the inside of the wardrobe were drenched.

'Can you smell it!' he cried with drunken glee. 'Can you smell it! Petrol! I'll burn you out, you ugly old cow. You and that bastard of yours! There's no escape. None! I'll be waiting for you outside. Try to get out that bedroom window and I'll blow your fucking head off! You hear!'

The can was empty. He flung it against the door.

'Now I'm away down to get the matches. Are you ready? Ready to burn!' He laughed aloud. 'That's right! Burn, you bitch, burn!'

In the swirling smoke on the landing Duggie looked almost devilish, lopsided and gambolling, his monstrous mouth leering, face and ear twisted, eyes burning with drunken excitement.

He stepped backwards. He was not careful enough. His heel touched the walnut butt of the shotgun. Slowly, like a dream, it slid sideways along the rail of the banisters towards him. He grabbed to catch it, but his artificial hand was clumsy. The barrel bounced from his fingers. He capered aside. Sharply the shotgun struck the boards and went off with a deafening bang.

The charge of shot hit Duggie in the ankle. Briefly blood and

bone sprayed across the landing. At the same instant the flash from the muzzle ignited the overpowering petrol vapour.

With a stunning 'whoosh' and roar the hallway exploded in a ball of flame. Caught in the midst Duggie screamed. He was on fire – his clothes, his face and hair, his hands. Through the thin tee-shirt his chest and back were sheets of flame. Blind, dying, he screamed and screamed, threshing in his agony.

Only five or six yards distant Myra listened to his cries. It was a long time before they weakened to a soft animal whimpering. But at length all was quiet, save for the spitting and roaring of the fire.

Flames belched through the gaps in her barricade. The varnish blistered and ran on her wardrobe door. Already the room was like an oven.

She ran to the window and pushed it wide. It was a drop of fifteen feet to the ground, but directly beneath her window stood the ridge of the porch roof. At one side was a drainpipe. On a warm high-spirited night the previous autumn, when Duggie first became her lover, he had climbed naked to her bedroom and departed by the same route. Myra glanced over her shoulder. The mattress was a sheet of fire. Flames sucked through the wardrobe from the inferno beyond, and ran licking across the wallpaper.

There was no time to lose. Hitching up her nightdress, she sat astride the window-ledge and swung her legs outside. Twisting awkwardly, she clutched the frame and lowered herself down the house-front. Her swollen stomach squeezed over the corner of the sill and scraped against the wall. Down she stretched, further and further. Her bare foot touched the tile ridge. Carefully she loosened her grasp and balanced against the stonework. Then, crouching with difficulty, she slithered down the tiles and clutched the rough drainpipe.

Despite her exertions and the mildness of the night Myra was shivering. She was terrified, not for herself but for the safety of the child. Overhead her window was an orange glow. Smoke billowed into the night, hot down-draughts scorched her face.

Bracing her feet against the stone wall, she slid from the guttering and hung by her hands. She felt for a foothold. Her stomach ached with a terrible pressure as if it would burst, she

was sure she must miscarry. Gritting her teeth with effort, she reached lower. Her toes found a wall bracket. Slowly she took her weight and let go with her arms. For a full minute she clung trembling against the wall. But she was down. A lesser stretch and her foot was on a broad sandstone window-ledge. A moment later Myra stood barefoot in an overgrown flower-bed.

She tried to collect herself, and walked half a dozen paces to the garden path. It was only later, by the rash on her legs, that she realized she had walked right through a thicket of stinging nettles without knowing it.

She was safe. But was the baby? She wrapped her arms about her aching stomach. Abruptly she felt the child kick in healthy protest. An electric spasm of relief ran from her legs to the crown of her head.

'Oh, thank God!' she breathed.

Above her tongues of flame licked from the bedroom window. A crimson glow flickered through smoke behind the glass of Duggie's room, further along the house-front. Wincing as she trod on sharp pebbles and thistles, Myra made her way from the garden and around the end of the farmhouse into the yard.

The pigs squealed in their sties. For the moment she left them.

A wind sucked through the kitchen door, drawn by the flames within. She entered. Beyond the inner door the hallway was a wall of fire that lit the room. Terrible coils of flame swirled up the well of the stairs. They roared – a savage, remorseless, hungry sound, as if the fire was a living thing. Somewhere in there was Duggie. Myra pictured him on the landing, curled-up and burning in the furnace heat, his beautiful body falling apart.

She pressed the light switch, but the electric cables were dead, short-circuited in the fire. In the leaping red light she pulled open a dresser drawer and tugged out her wallet of documents. A timber fell with a crash in the hallway, a searing back-draught of heat singed her hair. She drew back, coughing with the fumes. Turning to the light of the inferno she fumbled through the envelopes for her fire insurance. It was there. She tucked the wallet beneath her arm and headed towards the back door. At the entrance she turned and looked around the room. The heat was unbearable. She could not breathe. The linoleum was ablaze, paint flared on the walls.

An unframed photograph of Duggie stood on the dresser. Protecting her face she returned and seized it, then ran to the door. At her back another down-draught sent a coil of flame through the room. The new curtains ignited.

Outside in the yard a fresh wind blew from the fields. Myra was sweating. She gathered her breath. The pigs squealed incessantly, wild with fear. She unbolted the doors of their sties. They burst past her, little trotters scrabbling past the midden into the safety of the pasture. Their pale flanks were swallowed up in the shadows of the night. Myra closed the gate at their backs.

The van stood close to the kitchen door. The key was still in the ignition. Tucking the dressing gown about her, she drove to the end of the sheds. On the passenger seat lay Duggie's jacket and the magazine he had been reading. With a feeling of desolation she turned a few pages and tossed it aside. Briefly she sat, then drew a deep breath and stepped from the van. Firmly she shut the door behind her.

Alone she stood in the yard. The breeze blew the fire away from the rest of the farm buildings. They were safe, but the big farmhouse was already gone. Windows exploded like blazing yellow eyes, the kitchen door was a rectangle of flame. The roaring of the fire drowned all other sounds of the night. The heat beat against her face and struck through her scuffed night-dress and dressing gown. At her back the breeze felt chill.

A car sped along the lane and turned up the track. Calmly Myra prepared to face the police. But it was not the police, it was a neighbouring farmer. He had telephoned the fire brigade.

Soon they were joined by others. The firemen's hoses snaked across the yard. In a volcano of fire the roof collapsed. Flames leaped sixty feet, sparks whirled into the darkness.

The police were not far behind. But they came for the fire. No mention was made of the van, or the rape and murderous events of that night a dozen miles away.

And no mention was ever made, not even after the farmhouse was rebuilt and Myra settled down with her fair-headed son and the plain country girl who came to help her with the pigs. For while she stood in the yard that night, surrounded by neighbours and firemen, the farmer's son who had seen the van lay unconscious and dying at the side of the country lane, hidden by the



high banks of cow-parsley. A trail of blood led two hundred yards to the turning into the copse where his father lay dead with a dozen stab wounds in his chest. And beyond, at the edge of the hayfield, the partly-clad body of the girl lay still, gazing with open eyes towards the rising moon – where she was first found by crows a little after dawn.

Nothing remained to link Duggie, or the pig farm, with the events of that night.

Myra stared at the ruin of her farmhouse. The flames had passed their height.

‘What happened?’ a neighbour said.

‘I think it was Wayman,’ she said automatically, repeating the story she had told the police. ‘You know, Douglas Wayman, my pig man. He was drunk.’

The neighbour regarded her gaunt, high-shouldered figure by the light of the firemen’s floodlights. Her hatchet face was set towards the dying fire, her hair blew back from the disfiguring birthmark. Barefoot and heavily pregnant she stood in the pig dirt. He turned away.

Myra felt the baby stir. She glanced down. Seeing the photograph she turned it in her fingers. Duggie stood as she remembered him, fresh-faced and stocky, smiling beside the new black Kawasaki. A faint smile of response gathered at the corners of her mouth.

# Tom Cunliffe

## Twisted ash

Sarah Beaumont had often been regarded as a peculiar old bird. Some people actually thought she might live for ever. It was a strange aura she possessed. That, and a remarkable sense of awareness. Even to her very end, almost ninety-four years of age, she was in complete control of all her faculties. However, her one passion in life is perhaps the best thing she will be remembered for – her love of nature and the things that grew about her.

The garden that surrounded Sarah's quaint, country cottage, was vibrant and alive with colour. Old English roses, tall lupins, foxgloves, and a herbaceous border, edged with dozens of varieties of tiny alpines. An aged lavender stood by the front door. And on warm, sunny afternoons, the faintest breeze would waft its scent through every room in the house. Everything about the garden was in a state of symmetry; that is, all except a twisted, gnarled, ancient ash tree. It stood directly in front of the parlour window, and when in full foliage, caused the interior of the room to be in a permanent state of semi darkness. It could well have been that she was such a devoted naturalist, that she left the tree standing – for all its inconvenience. For anyone else would have taken the initiative years ago and had the ugly old thing felled. But not Sarah. For her, it was even too much pain to cut a single flower while still in bloom. But potted plants festooned the interior of the house wherever the sunlight penetrated its miraculous, life-giving rays. Particularly in the deep recessed window bottom of the kitchen.

Marriage and children had eluded Sarah. Though there had been several men in her earlier life; and from the faded photographs in a stained, leather album, she could never have been described as plain or unattractive when in her prime. Of course, the real reason for her remaining a spinster will now never be known. Some say it was because the only man she ever antici-

pated marrying was killed in the First World War – and that the heartache and grief she suffered was almost too much to bear. After which, according to several older inhabitants of the village, she never allowed herself the luxury of such emotions ever again.

The cottage used to reflect every aspect of her personality. It was rather bijou in appearance, with a place for everything, and everything in its place. The parlour was a sombre room; undoubtedly, this was where she used to sit and recollect her past, or read one of her many books on the subject of botany. Her bedroom, with its pretty chintz curtains and matching bedspread displayed a much gayer side to her personality. Also the kitchen, with its rows of brightly coloured containers – and not forgetting the resplendent floral display in the window bottom.

But all this was soon to change. The house and its entire contents she left to her great nephew, James Beaumont – her only brother's son.

James was then in his early thirties, and had become quite successful in recent years. He and I were at college together; and it came as no surprise, once he acquired his degree, that he chose to enter the hectic world of advertising. His approach to life had always been extrovert and open. He knew full well at an early age that nothing came free. Seeming to be perpetually motivated by such positive thoughts – there's no wonder he found success. However, when Helen came along, his wife, I did happen to notice a slight difference in his general attitude. But I put this down to him having extra responsibilities. Now I recall, it was round about the time he and Helen moved into the cottage – they hadn't been married very long when his great aunt Sarah passed away.

My wife and I were invited over to dinner shortly after they had completed the remodelling of the interior of the house. An invitation I couldn't refuse, for I had so many haunting memories of that place. You see, as children, James and I would often visit his great aunt. We'd spend a whole afternoon weeding the borders. Or, as the trees shed their leaves, in the autumn months, we'd make a bonfire and burn the aftermath of what was once so full of vitality. The smoke of which, in the dank, October air, would slowly swirl upwards. And afterwards, as we

would sit in the kitchen drinking hot, sweet tea with homemade cakes – our clothes would reek of the earthy odour of the previously burnt offerings. This always gave me a warm feeling of satisfaction, for this was the reward of a job well done. But once tea had been dispensed with, great aunt Sarah would never permit us to linger very long in the house. We were either sent home, or given other gardening chores to do.

Dusk was just beginning to fall as we arrived at the garden gate. Here, I paused for a few moments. Marian, my wife, continued down the path towards the front door. It all now looked so different. Oh, the plants were all the same; the roses, lupins, etc. But they now appeared lacklustre. As if they were no longer receiving such devoted attention. It could well have been that this reaction was all in my mind. Nevertheless, I couldn't help feeling the garden was no longer what it used to be.

Helen was now greeting Marian on the threshold. After which, they disappeared into the confines of the cottage. Slowly, I walked down the path and soaked in those familiar surroundings. That was, until James came and stood at the front door – and asked if I would like a sherry before dinner. The spell broken, I too entered the cottage. It felt as if I was crossing a barrier in time. Outside, remained the past. But within, everything was changed. Apart from a few oddments of furniture and bric-à-brac, it was hard to believe great aunt Sarah had ever been here at all.

After dinner, a worthwhile experience, for James had indeed married himself a truly amiable cook, the conversation began to flow a little easier. Helen turned out to be the perfect hostess, and I could see Marian was completely taken with her. My wife insisted on helping with the dishes. At first, Helen wouldn't hear of it. But Marian has always had rather fixed ideas about protocol; to her, it was an obligatory, but unwritten rule to help with the clearing away. Realizing there was no point in arguing, Helen relented – and James and I were left in peace to finish our second cup of coffee.

We discussed various topics, ranging from current affairs to our occupations. At least, in one area, James had not changed one iota – his ambition was still very much intact. And he proceeded to explain, in lengthy detail, his proposed plans to

open up an agency of his own. He always made me feel inadequate, as if I had no specific aim in life. Whereas he knew exactly where he was going, and just how, taking into account the smallest of considerations, he would eventually arrive at his predestination.

As the women rejoined us, I happened to remark on how much of the interior of the cottage had changed – which gave Helen the perfect opportunity to put on a conducted tour of the house.

As we slowly progressed from room to room, again, a peculiar sensation crept over me. Just as it had previously at the garden gate. It was a feeling of foreboding, as if something was vitally wrong. I somehow sensed that a very tragic event had taken place here. Other than that, I couldn't begin to define my sudden apprehension.

Helen was most appreciative of the benevolent legacy. And back in the parlour, James, for the first time all evening, spoke of his great aunt Sarah. More importantly, of the curious stipulations she had made in her last will and testament. It was an over-emphasised condition concerning the ancient ash tree. On no account was James to have the tree felled. Were he to sell the cottage at a later date, that same condition was to be paramount, and written into any future contracts. And, even more curious, was Helen's bequest. Great aunt Sarah never met James' wife, yet she had left her all her gardening and botany books. Apparently, Helen had no affection for the old woman's one love in life. But felt compelled, through a sense of duty, to carry out her last wishes. This, then, would appear to explain why the garden bore little or no resemblance to its former self.

In passing, Marian said she thought the tree was strikingly ugly – never before had she seen an ash grow so twisted and gnarled. A common enough observation made by all and sundry over the years. The ash is normally a tall, elegant tree, which produces a white, hard wood. By the sound of things, my wife and I had accidentally touched upon a rather sore point. It turned out that James, without informing Helen, had consulted a firm of arboriculturalists – who, in turn, had already examined the tree. Their findings stated it was in perfect health, but the report did contain reservations. For example, were the tree to be struck by lightning, it could well fall on to the roof of the

cottage and do untold damage. Besides which, James suggested he had found a perfect use for what good timber they could salvage from its dishevelled carcass. On the other hand, Helen deplored the idea. By all means she often complained about the tree blocking the path of light to the parlour window. But it was something she could live with. The legacy of the cottage itself was more than enough compensation for putting up with one solitary tree. Adamantly, she stuck to her principles. James, however, was determined to see the walls of the study lined with panels of the seasoned, well-matured wood.

By now, it was well turned ten. Quite understandably, after the heated debate of the tree, there came a quiet lull – conveniently, Marian and I made our excuses and left.

Several weeks were to pass before I saw James again. It was a purely chance meeting. Twice a week, I call at the library in town. And, on this particular occasion, I had plenty of time to spare.

My other business concluded, and the weather being reasonable, I chose to go and sit for a while in the recreation area of the newly completed civic centre. A huge monster of a building, composed entirely of concrete and glass. No sooner had I sat down and begun to gaze through a book, when a familiar voice asked me, rather apathetically, if I had nothing better to do. It was James. He looked drawn, and appeared agitated and nervous – as if the weight of the world was resting upon his shoulders. Naturally, I didn't say as much, but I sensed he knew what I was thinking by the expression on my face.

We exchanged small talk for a while; I asked about Helen, he asked about Marian, that kind of thing. Then it happened. For a moment, I thought he was actually going to burst into tears. His voice became distorted with emotion. I tried to calm him down and told him not to get so upset. He began to mumble incoherently, but from the gist of it, his primary concern was his job. The agency he worked for was in some sort of financial trouble. He pulled a crumpled envelope from his coat pocket and showed me its contents. The firm was going to have to close a number of its branch offices – James's branch was one of them. Then he began to go on about Helen, saying they had done nothing but argue for weeks on end. I listened with a sympathetic ear and tried to find a few choice words of consolation.

As if the situation wasn't bad enough, he suddenly went quiet and looked about himself, furtively. According to him, great aunt Sarah's ash tree was the cause of his now dire straits.

Confession might be good for the soul – for the confessor, that may well be true, but this I didn't want to hear – least of all from James. In the study, which had now been refurbished with panels constructed of the old ash – he said he could hear a strange woman's voice. At this, I wanted to ask him if he had been doing a little serious drinking – but he was stone-cold sober.

My car was parked just around the corner. So I suggested that I would drive him home – I couldn't leave him alone, not in this condition. He might try something stupid, and I didn't want that on my conscience. Besides, if Helen truly knew just how bad he was, and he'd been out all day on his own, she was probably frantic with worry.

He argued at first, saying there was no way he would go back to that house – not while the voice was still there. A scene began to develop. Passers-by were looking at him inquisitively, as if he had suddenly sprouted another head. His pleas for me not to take him home grew louder. I was embarrassed; not for myself, but for James. Never, in the many years we had known each other, had I seen him in such a pitiful state.

My only alternative was to lie. In a condescending attitude, I told him we were about to take a ride into the country. To somewhere peaceful and quiet, where we could sit and discuss his problem undisturbed. Reluctantly, he agreed.

As luck would have it, while we were travelling, James dozed off to sleep. By way of making my deception more convincing, I didn't drive directly to the cottage. Instead, I took a series of country roads and narrow lanes. The car heater had also been instrumental in getting him to feel drowsy.

I pulled up a few yards away from the garden gate, so as not to alarm him were he to wake up suddenly and discover his whereabouts.

Helen was indeed going out of her mind with worry as she came to answer the front door. The tell-tale signs of anxiety were plainly written across her face in the deep furrowed lines of her forehead; coupled with the dark stains beneath her eyes, probably due to the lack of sleep. However, when I told her

James was all right and resting in my car, she sighed heavily from either exasperation, or sheer relief.

The task of getting him into the house was to be no easy affair. As soon as he saw Helen, he knew exactly where he was – and reproached me bitterly for bringing him here. Under the circumstances, I couldn't blame him, for he was obviously terrified of this strange, mysterious voice. His fear was openly exhibited in his wide, gaping eyes, and sallow complexion. Understandably, I assumed all this was a by-product of the stress, caused by his life appearing to be collapsing around him. At least, at the time, I thought that to be the case.

Obstinately, he refused to move. Eventually, and realizing we couldn't accomplish the job by ourselves, Helen decided to telephone Dr Jessop. We then had to wait a full twenty minutes before he and an ambulance arrived – twenty minutes that seemed like an eternity.

Fearing James becoming violent, Helen was sent into the house. Again, deception was employed. It was imperative that he be given a strong sedative, thus making him much easier to handle. Me being the decoy, while Dr Jessop, armed with a loaded syringe, came at him from his blind side. Though I must say, surprisingly, there was no scuffle. James suddenly became very placid and accepted the medication with no trouble whatsoever.

The administered drug must have been very powerful, for James instantly went limp and slightly drowsy. One of the ambulance attendants lifted him out of the car, his limbs drooping like those of a child's rag doll. As they laid him on an awaiting stretcher, he beckoned me closer to him. I stooped and listened carefully to his whispered tones. He begged me not to think he was going mad, but, above all, I was to go to the study and look long and hard at the third wooden panel from the left – on the far wall. That was all he said before his eyes closed, indicating that the drug was now taking its fullest effect.

Helen wasn't allowed to accompany James in the back of the ambulance. Dr Jessop thought it unwise. Opening his bag, he gave her several sleeping pills and told her to get some rest. I assured him that in the meantime, Marian and I would take good care of her. He then told us that James would be placed in an admission ward of a nearby psychiatric hospital, St Michael's



Hospice. Then the sorry cortège departed, leaving us standing by the road side.

Presently, James' odd request was beginning to nag in the back of my mind. So, while Helen packed an overnight bag, I went on up to the study.

The room was on the first floor at the back of the house. To reach it, there was a small, narrow hallway – leading off the main landing.

As I approached the door, I must admit, my nerves were jangling. Undoubtedly caused by a preconceived notion that James might well have had a real, unusual experience in there. I tried to block such thoughts by telling myself not to be so silly. Even so, as I reached out and caught hold of the door handle, I felt the adrenalin surge through my bloodstream. The door opened with little effort. Immediately, my eyes scanned the walls to locate the panel James had mentioned – the third panel from the left on the far wall. It wasn't difficult to find. Staring at me, like a pair of large, evil brown eyes – were two distinctive knotholes. The more my gaze became transfixed, the more detailed the odd marking appeared. Curiously, I went and ran my fingers over this natural pattern in the wood. Frankly, if I hadn't, no one would have convinced me that I hadn't seen a face, leering at me from within the panel.

I don't know if it was because my nerves were still on edge, but as I turned and began to leave the room, I got the strangest feeling someone was watching me. It was a penetrating stare; a stare that seemed to burn right through me. Quickly, I spun round in my tracks. But the room was empty of any presence other than my own. If my personal reactions were anything to go by, is there any wonder poor James had become so obsessed with ghostly voices and the like – especially when he allowed his partially unhinged mind to latch on to those two, weird knotholes.

I'm no authority on the subject, but I do know that the putting to rights of a nervous breakdown is no easy matter. Primarily, the individual has to regain his self confidence. With James, this was to take almost four months.

Helen stayed with us for a couple of weeks, but then grew impatient to return to her own home. A typical reaction really.

Being a creature of habit, as many of us are, she soon missed the routine in her life. We didn't try to dissuade her. However, Marian insisted that she telephone us regularly – and feel free to drop in any time.

I made only two visits to St Michael's Hospice while James was resident there. On the first, I was filled with the most morbid sense of fear. My mind conjured pictures of a Victorian lunatic asylum. A place littered with huge, locked doors; behind which were confined a sea of twisted, dehumanized, flotsam and jetsam. Where cries of mental anguish were stifled and suppressed by a regime of manly matrons – bent on filling the veins of these unfortunates with venomous concoctions.

On the contrary, as I made my way through the grounds and on to the admission wards, I was aware of my ignorance of the modern developments in psychiatric nursing. And felt quite guilty when the ward sister, in the sweetest voice, bade me a good afternoon before pointing out the location of my friend's bed.

He looked so altered and broken as he lay there on top of the covers of the metal-framed, National Health cot. Pale and languid, as if the once wilful spirit he had possessed was now shattered beyond all redemption. Affectionately, he took hold of my hand and thanked me for what he called my 'expedience and initiative' in handling his problem. It was a very emotional reception, one I was totally ill-prepared for. Swallowing hard, hurriedly, I changed the subject and presented him with a copy of a light-hearted, humorous paperback.

He tired easily, presumably a result of his medication. When I left him, his eyes were closed. The sun was setting on the horizon, its deep reddish hue filtered through the window and cast an eerie glow across his face, adding even more depressing melancholy to the scene.

Fortunately, I was approaching one of the busiest periods of my occupation. For several years, I worked as a journalist for a national magazine – before attempting my first novel. On the advice of a colleague, who also happened to be a literary agent, I decided the time was ripe for me to put to good use the wealth of experience I had acquired in my previous capacity. Marian, to quote a frayed-edged cliché, was my source of inspiration.

Believing I was capable of stringing together any number of words, all of which had to make sense, she suffered an untold number of sacrifices in order to offer me this opportunity.

The galley proofs had arrived. Reams of print to be gone over meticulously. This, then, would occupy the majority of my time for some weeks to come. Helping me to forget the trauma of recent events – and hopefully bring nearer the recovery of my life-long friend.

My second and final visit to see James was of a much more cheerful nature. In point of fact, it was to bring him home.

Between them, our wives had gone to painstaking lengths in preparing the welcoming home celebrations. During his stay at the hospital, Helen said James had often expressed an overwhelming desire for some really good food. Not that he was in any way criticizing the catering standards at St Michael's you understand. But rather missing out on certain dishes he had a particular preference for. At any rate, I kept well out of the way. Marian was, and still is for that matter, unbearable when anyone gets under her feet while she's working in the kitchen.

I pulled up in the car park of the hospital. James' last appointment to see his doctor was at two p.m. – after which came his discharge. Helen decided not to come with me, she wanted everything just right for when he arrived.

It was a bitterly cold day, a sombre reminder of the forthcoming winter months. The trees were displaying their golden, autumnal colours; but fallen, dried leaves were already ever-present in wind-swept corners. Again, I was revisited by the memories of great aunt Sarah's garden. Imagining a faint, nostalgic wisp of the scent of the bonfire filling the air.

Caught up in my own thoughts, I hadn't noticed James walking towards me, a weekend case in one hand and a plastic carrier-bag in the other. He looked astonishingly well, a marvelous contrast to when I last saw him. He had a broad grin on his face, and was at last beginning to resemble his former self.

On the journey home, he talked incessantly – hardly stopping for breath. No stone was left unturned. Bubbling over with new optimism for the future, his dark clouds of despondency and pessimism were now totally dispersed.

The reunion turned out to be just as predictable as anticipated.

Helen and Marian burst into tears at the sight of James looking

so well and fully recovered. Embracing his wife, he stressed how good it was to be back home; but broke off in mid-sentence and lifted his eyes towards the ceiling. Momentarily, he seemed spellbound and fixed to the spot. Eagerly, I waited for the pause to end. When it eventually did, he appeared more composed than ever, with a resigned expression on his face. Happily, I assumed he was mentally ascertaining the atmosphere in the house. Listening, perhaps sub-consciously, for one of the main symptoms of his breakdown – for any audible evidence of the ghostly voice. Apparently, he had heard nothing, confirming the success of his rehabilitation.

Shortly after seven, we left the lovebirds billing and cooing before a log fire in the parlour. After such a lengthy separation, they would now need time to re-establish their relationship.

That was on the Tuesday. Up until a week the following Thursday, we heard nothing from James and Helen. Not that we expected to. All the same, Marian, on our way home from a visit to her mother's, said she would give Helen a ring on Friday morning – just to see if everything was working out. I argued and told her not to get too involved. A pointless bit of reasoning on my behalf, for my wife is unmovable once she has something fixed in her mind.

We got back from the visit around eleven p.m. Not being a keen television fan, I sat in the kitchen and re-read a newspaper, while Marian curled up in the lounge to watch a late-night American series. Sitting there, against the central heating boiler, I must have dozed off. Only to be awakened some one and a half hours later by the repeated ringing of the telephone.

When I answered it, the caller was Helen. She was screaming hysterically, begging me, imploring me, to go over to the cottage as soon as possible. I didn't ask questions. The urgency of her pleas told me not to hesitate. But more importantly, in the background, I could hear James yelling and shouting the foulest obscenities in full voice.

Marian wanted to go with me but, under the circumstances, I preferred to go alone.

Twenty-five minutes later, I pulled up outside the cottage. All the lights were blazing, and the frontdoor had been left standing open.

As I walked down the path, Helen came and stood in the

doorway. With the light behind her, even from this distance, although her features were not yet fully recognizable to me, I almost felt her fear – radiating from her in the strongest wave of nervous tension. Like a soul in torment, she whimpered as she tried to explain what had been happening.

That night, after dinner, James had locked himself in the study, saying he had some important work to finish. As to what this work was, he wouldn't say. But he'd been acting mysteriously all week. It began when he found a very old book among those left to Helen by his great aunt Sarah. It bore no title, no author's name, no identification whatsoever. But from his finding of it he read the book constantly for hours on end. Her account stopped abruptly, as, from above, there came a loud, agonizing cry of pain. We both scrambled for the stairs. Ascending them, I don't remember touching a single tread. Blindly, I rushed towards the study door and shook the handle violently – it was locked. The only sounds now coming from within were like rasping gasps for breath. Hammering with both fists on the door, I demanded James to let me in. There was no reply, only that suffocating, exacerbated, rasping noise.

Helen leant against the wall of the hallway and began to sob. She was very much at the end of her tether. Any more of this insufferable torment would surely snap her mind beyond all repair.

My only course was to try and break down the door. Which was secured on the other side by a bolt, rather than a mortice lock, and hopefully this would make my task somewhat easier.

Taking several steps back, I charged at the solid structure. Again and again I repeated my efforts, applying more body-weight with every lunge of my shoulder – soon becoming oblivious to anything other than my objective.

Eventually, one of the screws leapt free of its mounting, resounding noisily as it hit the bare polished floor of the study.

There was now a slight gap between the door and the jamb. To my astonishment, issuing from this came the most odious, acrid stench; accompanied by that horrible gasping – now as plaintive as a warning bell on the still night air.

Helen, briefly invigorated by my partial breakthrough, began throwing herself wildly at the door. She reacted like a terrified bird when confronted with a pane of glass. The obstacle between

her and her husband was real enough. But, as with the bird and the pane of glass, she appeared to be able to see beyond it.

When the door finally gave way, I had to restrain her. For the life of me, I couldn't let her go in there, not yet at any rate. In mortal dread of what she might have to bear witness to in that room.

Pushing her well behind me in the hallway, I told Helen to wait there at all costs until I called.

As I entered the dark, foul smelling place, my heart was pounding like a trip hammer. The pungent, nauseating odour made my nostrils flare wide as I feebly fumbled and groped along the wall in search of the light switch.

On finding it, I hesitated for the briefest moment. Here, I wanted to turn and run from that evil place, to run as fast as my legs would carry me. But then I heard James utter the faintest moan. The room was suddenly flooded with light, several seconds were to pass before my eyes became adjusted. But once they had, I knew where to look for whatever tragedy had befallen my dear friend. The third panel from the left on the far wall. What I saw was beyond all logical comprehension. James was somehow being mysteriously drawn into the panel. And all that now remained was his face, resembling a macabre death mask, hanging on the wall. I can still see that horror stricken grimace in my dreams. His complexion almost purple in colour, with his tongue and eyes protruding violently from their respective orifices – as if the wood was choking the very last drop of sacred life from him as he passed into it. Helplessly, and filled with an inestimable degree of painful emotions, I looked on as he slipped even further into what looked so firm and solid a background. But it was too late, James had disappeared completely.

All fell silent, and the over-powering stench had totally dispersed. There, lying open on top of the desk, was the curious old book Helen had previously mentioned. As I glanced down at this, the name 'Rebecca Beaumont' instantly caught my attention. The work was written entirely in a scrawly longhand – and rather awkward to decipher:

'Know ye that this be a true account of Rebecca Beaumont, sorceress and witch of these parts, who, at dead of night, was dragged screaming from her cottage by certain elders of this village. Her accusers were many and would only be satisfied when her life was took. Her spouse,

Josiah Beaumont, denounced her as being a disciple of Satan. For which, she cursed him and all his to their dying days.

The trial being soon concluded, and a verdict of guilty reached, she were torn to pieces by the mob, and strung up on an old oak for all to see. Some days later, Rebecca Beaumont's spirit was seen by an untold number of villagers. So it were decided that a sapling ash, the witch repeller, be planted on the ground where she took her last breath. And all confirmed that the tree should remain for ever more on that same site. For, within it, it is said, is incarcerated the evil spirit of Rebecca Beaumont. Dated this eighteenth day of February, 1689.

Immediately, I looked back across the room to the panel. There, peering at me from within its confines, were now two sets of knotholes – one set, looking remarkably like the eyes of James Beaumont. Then I remembered Helen. My God! Helen. . . .

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