



THE 14th PAN BOOK OF HORROR STORIES

Selected by HERBERT VAN THAL

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THE 14TH PAN BOOK OF HORROR STORIES

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

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THE 14TH PAN BOOK OF HORROR STORIES

Edited by
HERBERT VAN THAL



A PAN ORIGINAL

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VORTEX OF HORROR

Gaylord Sabatini

I FOUND HIM at last, seated at the far end of the heated plant house, a small man with white hair and bloodless features.

'Mr Bloom?' I said. He had been so engrossed in watering an exquisite-looking cactus that he was unaware of my entry, and started up violently at the sound of my voice, spilling some of the liquid over his shoes.

'I ... I ...' he gasped. His watery eyes were dilated as they flashed from side to side in extreme agitation. He made a quick lunge and grasped a wicked-looking machete, the type used in South America to hack a path through impenetrable jungle.

He stood there facing me, brandishing the weapon above his head, with the look on his face of a man who knew he was facing insuperable odds but was going to die fighting. I involuntarily retreated a few paces, being taken by surprise at the sudden ferocity of this crazy old scarecrow of a man.

'Stand back!' he called. His voice was high-pitched and strident with an edge of panic. 'Stay back! You'll not take it from me!'

I realized at that moment that it was the large cactus that he was trying to protect, taking me for a thief.

'Mr Bloom,' I said, 'please calm yourself. I haven't come to steal your plant. I am a reporter from *Gardening Pride*. I've come to interview you.' He hesitated for a moment, then let the machete drop to the floor with a clatter. He sank down on to his knees by the beautiful plant and I saw with surprise that he was crying.

I came forward and laid my hand on his shoulder.

'Mr Bloom,' I said softly, 'it often helps to tell someone of your troubles.' I stood there, feeling rather embarrassed to witness a grown man's collapse into a state of tears. My eyes could not help gravitating towards that succulent. Never in all my years in horticulture had I seen one of such breathtaking beauty. It was about five feet tall, with a main trunk and two branches coming out from its sides like arms, while the brilliant colours in the blooms presented a profusion of exotic splendour that defied all description. Its fantastic kaleidoscope of colour was superb; out of this world, almost. I got the feeling that this plant was unique, but that there was also something not quite right about it.

'I must tell someone or go mad,' he said in a small, broken voice. He turned his head and looked up at me. 'How old do you think I am?' I was quite startled at the question, which did not seem to bear any relevance to our conversation. He looked about seventy to me, but he had obviously been very ill, so he might have been only sixty-five. I did not see the point of the question, but decided to humour him. I said he looked about sixty.

'Sixty?' he sobbed, a look of torn anguish in his eyes. 'Sixty? Do I look sixty? Do you know I am only thirty-five years old?' A chilled feeling came over me.

'I'm terribly sorry,' I stammered. 'I had no intention ...' He smiled for the first time through his tears and some of the years fell away.

'Oh, I know I look old,' he said, 'but I have had a lot of worry.' He looked at me again and I did not know whether to smile and acknowledge the joke or not.

He got up off his knees and turned towards the cactus again, laying a loving hand upon one of its fleshy limbs. He seemed to be trying to decide something of great importance to him. I saw his lips moving and heard a low mumble of sound, but could not catch any words. At last he turned round and looked at me.

'We've decided to tell you a story Mr ...'

'Curtis,' I volunteered. 'James Curtis.'

'Well, Mr Curtis, I hope you are an intelligent man, because I have a story that you must tell the world. A true story, but one so incredible that you will have great difficulty in making the sceptics believe.' He looked again at the cactus, then turned back to me and said in a cold, flat voice, 'Sit down, Mr Curtis, and I will tell you a true tale of unparalleled horror.'

We were seated on iron chairs facing each other and a table stood between us supporting our drinks of iced coconut milk. I felt quite dwarfed and insignificant, surrounded as I was by the huge tropical plants and shrubs, their large fleshy green leaves and fibrous lineas dripping with moisture from the humid atmosphere. But in spite of the heat I felt myself already, unaccountably, begin to shiver.

'Do you believe in parallel worlds, Mr Curtis?' He carried on before I could answer. 'Just think of all the times in the past that we have reached a crucial point in history. A fork in the road, if you like. Which way to go? Left or right? The fate of the world could be entirely changed at that point.

'If the Germans had won the war, what then? If Napoleon had won the battle of Waterloo? If Columbus had not discovered America? If there had been no gold for the Conquistadores? If Atlantis had not sunk beneath the waves when she did? If the giant reptiles had not all died out in the Cretaceous Period a hundred million years ago, but had lived on up to the present day? If you had not come to see me today?' He paused to give some weight to the meaning, but I felt I had not quite grasped the point. 'I believe all these things did happen in parallel worlds to our own and are continuing even now. Like the spirit world, it is all around us, but on a different plane, and every now and then there is a breakthrough. Doors to the parallel worlds are opened for no apparent reason and beings from each side can cross the vortex. What then, Mr Curtis?' He looked at me, and for the first time I noticed that his eyes were green.

I loosened my tie and ran my finger quickly round my collar, but said nothing. I could feel droplets of perspiration

running down between my shoulder blades. He continued,

'And what if we go right back, Mr Curtis, to the dawn of the world? The Pre-Cambrian Period it is called, when all life, animal and vegetable was only one-celled and started on an even footing. The Amoeba, the one-celled animal, still exists today as it did millions of years ago. A protozoa still stalking its prey of microbes and engulfing them, flowing round and devouring by absorption. And what of Clamidomonas, the swimming plant? It hunts down and devours its prey even today, as it has done through the aeons of time. Of course, it's only microscopic, but does that make it any the less formidable to creatures of similar size?

'You as a horticulturist are quite familiar with *Dionaea* or, as it is more commonly known, the Venus Fly Trap. A carnivorous plant that catches and devours flies and insects in its jaw-like petals.

'Under the sea we have animals that look and act like plants, and plants that to all outward observation one would think were animals.' He stopped and brushed his hand to one side as a gesture of dismissal. 'But these things are only interesting to horticulturists such as you and me, Mr Curtis. The world is not concerned with them for, as they so rightly say, they are either microscopic or they are very low in the family tree of life as we know it on this planet.'

He leaned across to me, placing his hands flat on the table between us. 'Suppose there was a parallel world where, instead of animals, the plants had leaped forward in evolutionary supremacy? Suppose the animals, and I include man also, had been superseded in the intellectual race for superiority? Can you imagine a world like that, Mr Curtis?'

The foliage seemed to be all around me, its heavy fronds malignant; listening to his words; waiting for my answer.

'Impossible, surely Mr Bloom,' I whispered, taking out my handkerchief and mopping my brow. He leaned back and laughed mirthlessly and I heard a soft rustling all around me, as if the tangled dripping undergrowth had taken up the laughter.

'Impossible, you say, but I see in your eyes that already you are half convinced, and I have not yet told you my story!' He paused and became deadly serious again, and a bleak, haunted expression clouded his drawn features. 'Believe me when I say that it is true, so hellishly true. I know it because I have not only seen it, I have actually been there!' He told me his story.

Two years ago I was a carefree bachelor of thirty-three. My mother had died at my birth and my father had passed away twenty years later. He had been a moderately wealthy man and his entire fortune had been left to me. No strings, just use it as I wanted. Well, I chose to let it feed and clothe me while I spent all my energies in study. I loved study for its own sake. I wanted to cram my brain with all the facts about every plant in the world. I loved plants. In fact I have always been more happy in the company of flora than of man. But I digress.

Two years ago I was driving my Land-Rover across the Kalahari Desert. I was all alone in the acrid wilds in search of a very rare species of cactus that legend had it existed somewhere out there in those trackless wastes.

The scorching sun beat down mercilessly upon my head as I sweated at the controls of the Land-Rover that growled and bucked over the uneven, parched terrain. The thermometer was reading 120 degrees Fahrenheit, and everything was on the move in a shimmering, white haze.

I had just reached a smooth patch of ground and was able to get up a little more speed when, suddenly, there was a crack like thunder. The whole world seemed to shift, click out of focus and slam back into reverse. I stood on my brakes and gaped around me.

Everything was different. Colours seemed to have changed to those at the opposite end of the spectrum. The yellow sand was now blue. The blue sky was now a brilliant yellow. My own skin was a greenish colour. The temperature had now dropped back to seventy degrees Fahrenheit and my eyes focused with horror upon a sun which was a brilliant emerald green.

I left the Land-Rover and staggered up the slope to some purple rocks at the brow of the blue sand-dunes. I was dreadfully afraid, and even more terrified of what I was going to see. For a long time I did not dare to look over the top: it was like one of those terrible dreams you get when your muscles won't respond. Biting my lip, I at last plucked up courage.

Keeping my head low, I peeped over the edge of the hill – and gasped at the nightmarish scene that met my gaze. There was a large blue field below me with stakes set out in neat, regular rows at six-foot intervals. Tied to each stake was a completely naked human being! I rammed my fist into my dribbling mouth to stop myself from screaming.

They were standing quite still and did not seem to be in any pain. My attention was attracted to a movement further down the line. At first I could not quite make out what I was seeing, and then realization hit me like a hot blast of air. My mind seemed to twist as if it were a sponge being wrung out. I looked down at the row of staked-out humans and my eyes blurred, refusing to register what I was seeing. I clamped my eyelids shut, the horror of it clawing at my brain. Then I looked again.

There it was. A huge, shambling thing about twelve feet high. Thick in the trunk, about seven feet across at the base and tapering slightly towards the top, with dozens of long tentacle-like arms coming from all round its upper part. It reminded me vaguely of some giant tropical sea anemone. Each tentacle ended in a flattened, leaf-like appendage that appeared to be able to work like a hand. The thing was a dull red in colour, mottled with round black warts all over it, and as clearly as if someone had told me, I knew that this hideous apparition was a plant!

At first I could not quite make out what was happening, but I think now that it was my brain that was refusing to let me comprehend the horror of it. I looked again, and I knew what the thing was doing – and my mind shrieked in terror. My brain seemed to be trying to tear itself out of my skull to get away from the dreadful sight.

As this hell-plant moved along the rows I watched it untie a man, hold him up, and with quick strokes from one of its razor-sharp leaves, sever this wretched fellows' legs, arms and head, as if it were topping rhubarb. The body was then held up high. The entire top of the plant then opened up into a huge, black, cavernous mouth as it started to drink the blood that spouted out of the dismembered body. As the blood poured into its terrible maw, I saw it tremble all over in sheer delight at the feast. When the body was drained of blood it was thrown to one side on to a heap of rotting corpses and the thing moved on to the next person. Again I watched in cold dread a repetition of the same awful happening.

It was not until I raised my head that I realized that the entire area was covered with staked-out people, both men and women, and moving amongst them were more than a score of these terrible creatures. There must have been more than a thousand people down in that valley of death, but I did not see one of them struggling with his bonds or even showing any sign of emotion at what was happening to his fellows. In fact, they all seemed to be completely indifferent to their fate.

For several nerve-breaking hours I waited, witnessing the endless grisly ritual. Their appetites seemed to be insatiable. My mind had become bemused and I looked down at the scene thinking that no more horror could affect me, but as I watched these gruesome plants shuffling slowly along the lines, slaughtering and eating, I suddenly became aware of a commotion going on behind a small hillock.

Some more of these devil plants seemed to be fighting each other. Suddenly they broke away and about ten of them made a dash for all the decapitated heads. There seemed to be a race as to which of them could collect the most. Then they sped quite swiftly around, throwing them up into the air and catching them again in one of their many tentacles. They were like children playing with a ball in this insane world. Their means of locomotion was not very clear; they just seemed to flow over the ground.

As I lay there, something made my hackles rise as I sensed imminent danger. I swung over, bunching my legs under me, and sprang to my feet, just in time to dodge a hacking blow that had been meant for the back of my head.

I was prepared somehow for the blow, but not for what I saw. It was a man. A brutish, naked man with long hair and pointed teeth stood facing me. In his hand he held a tube, and he kept trying to indicate that he wanted to stick it into me so that he could drink my blood. He kept coming forward, making little squeaking noises and thrusting that damned tube at me. His countenance had a look of perplexity upon it. He could not understand why I would not let him drink my blood. He was not angry, just mystified. He kept coming at me with futile little lunges, and I could not make him stop. At last I picked up a rock and hurled it at him. He did not make any attempt to dodge – that was the awful part of it. He just stood there and let the rock hit him full in the face with a sickening thud, and went down as if he had been pole-axed.

As I stood there, feeling sickened, another man and a woman appeared, each with a tube. I stood ready to do battle, but they made no attempt to attack me. Going straight over to the body of their former comrade, they each plunged a tube into his side and, sitting down, began to suck. I stood there reeling, feeling that at any moment my legs were going to give way under me. I wanted to run away and vomit, but I just stood there staring.

The woman stopped sucking at the tube for a moment and looked up at me through blank lifeless eyes. Then she picked up the tube that the first man had been trying to thrust into me and held it up, signing for me to join them.

As she did so, she had raised her arm and turned her head away from her companion. Before I could utter a sound of warning, he had pulled his tube out of the dead body and had thrust it deep into her side, just under the right breast.

She dropped the tube and gave a dull cough. Turning her head, she watched him lower his vile mouth to the end of the

tube, in which the blood was already beginning to flow. The most horrifying thing was the expression on her face: it was devoid of all emotion.

I screamed out loud and, picking up a rock, I was on the point of bringing it down upon this monster's head, when I heard a strange whistling. I turned to find myself surrounded by a dozen or more of those nightmarish plants. I hurled my stone into their midst, a futile gesture. They came forward with their tentacles flailing and all the time emitting that same whistling sound. They encircled the man and woman, picking them up as if they were rag dolls, then dozens of fibrous lineas clamped round me and I was held with my arms pinned to my side.

I watched with horror as one of the plants picked the man up by his long hair and, with quick stabbing movements, thrust one of its sharp leaves into the side of his neck and right down deep into his body. The man just hung there quite still while this evil vegetable, in a series of thrusting movements, sawed all round his neck.

I saw one of the other tentacles wrap itself round his feet and pull, and I watched the head come away still attached to, and pulling with it, the gullet, lungs, heart and liver, in one bloody mass. It was at this point that I fainted.

I awoke to find myself stripped naked and tied to a stake. I looked around me and cried out in panic. A girl tied to a stake three feet away from me turned and looked in my direction. She smiled across and said, 'It's nice here isn't it?' I had noticed that this field was much smaller, there being only about thirty people in it, but at that moment my attention was riveted upon the girl. She had spoken, and I had understood!

'You can speak?' I blurted.

'Of course,' she smiled. 'I like you; I am so glad they have decided to cross us.'

'Cross us?'

'Yes, cross us, mate us. You must have a very high intellect to come to this field. This is the best.' She looked around her.

'We thirty have been crossed and re-crossed to get the best strain. Don't you think we are beautiful to look at?' She looked at me proudly. 'We are not like the raggle taggle in the big fields or the Wild Ones running free in the Waste Lands.' She sighed and leaned back against her post. 'Oh, I love it here,' she smiled. 'We are all so beautiful.'

For a moment I allowed my eyes to rest upon her face and body. She was indeed the most beautiful girl I had ever seen. Her long billowing hair was blue-black, and cascaded down to her waist. Her face was a delicate oval and her two almond-shaped eyes were green. I could hardly tear my eyes away from her exquisite body and I knew as I looked up again into her face that I was in love with her. I leaned back against my stake and gazed and gazed at her, feasting my eyes again and again on her heavenly beauty.

There was a hissing sound from behind me. I tensed myself, slewing my head round at the same time. Coming up the row was one of those terrible plants which were now becoming quite familiar to me. At first I could not make out what the sound was, until I smelled a beautiful, intoxicating perfume which came drifting to my nostrils. The plant was spraying us with some exquisite scent. I could not make out if it was artificial or if it came naturally from the plant's body, but as the latter moved along the rows it kept puffing itself out and then collapsing in again, and each time it did this, the exotic aroma wafted around us.

It was gorgeous! I looked across at the girl – my girl – and laughed! She smiled back languorously at me, moving her sensuous body up and down the post and flaring her nostrils to take in as much perfume as she could. I watched her breasts rise and fall with her heavy breathing. I leaned across to the extent of my bonds, lusting for her.

As I did so, something brushed against my face. I turned my head and looked full into the brutish face of the man who had been with the girl up in the Waste Lands.

I pulled away, but he nodded and smiled at me as he went by. I gazed after him in revulsion. One of the plants was carry-

ing him – at least, what was left of him. All I could see of him was his grisly head sticking out of a soggy, dripping bag containing his gullet, heart, lungs and liver. This was supported by a sort of shoulder strap going round the plant. He continued to nod and smile at me as he went by and my stomach churned over, for I saw that somehow he was still alive!

As this plant monster went down the row I noticed a similar soggy bag on its other side containing the woman's head. She seemed to recognize me and rolled her eyes round and round. I realized that the plant was carrying these two ghoulish heads for no other reason than personal adornment!

I screwed my eyes up tightly and slammed my head again and again against the post, trying to erase the terrible sight from my mind.

'Ooh!' I heard the girl sigh. 'Ooh, that was glorious. That was the best yet.' I opened my eyes and looked across at her. She was leaning heavily against her post and smiled at me through half-closed lashes. Her breathing was becoming more regular now. Little miniature beads of perspiration had dotted her brow like morning dew. 'Ooh,' she gasped again, 'that was the best yet. It must have been because of you.' She smiled warmly at me, 'Did you feel it?'

'Yes,' I answered, 'I felt it,' not really knowing what she meant.

'It won't be long now before we are crossed,' she said. 'I'm going to like that.'

'How long do we have to stand like this?' I asked. She seemed at first not to hear me. She had closed her eyes; the expression on her face and the sensuous movement of her body made it obvious what she was thinking. I knew that I was in love with her and wanted to save her if I could. I asked again; 'How long do we have to stay here like this?' She opened her eyes.

'How long? What do you mean?'

'Well, how long? How long is how long? When do they come and untie us?'

'Untie us? They *never* untie us! Don't say such horrid

things or I won't like you. I could not live without my post! I am not a Wild One!

'I'm sorry,' I said. 'I did not know.'

'You're strange,' she said, looking at me. 'Different, somehow.' She gazed steadily at me. 'They will come and untie you from your post quite soon,' she said at last.

'They will? Why?' I asked.

'So that they can tie you to mine, of course,' she smiled.

'Oh!' I exclaimed, feeling the blush rising up my neck.

Some time passed, and then I thought I would try a new approach.

'Would you like me to be tied to your post all the time?' I asked.

'Oh that's not possible,' she answered. 'But I would love it.' I had no more time to follow up this tack.

'Food!' called someone along the line. 'Food is coming!' I turned my head to the sound of the voice. All thirty of us looked in the same direction. Two of the plants were coming along the rows holding a large bag with a tube coming from it. The tube was placed into the excited mouth of each person in turn, who would suck frantically at it for a short while before it was moved along to the next one.

I realized that I was famished, and found myself straining on my bonds like the others, waiting for my turn. As the plants came closer I suddenly cringed back with revulsion. What I had thought was a bag was in fact a human body bound tightly into a ball. They had been drinking his blood!

I fought and twisted my head from side to side, screaming at them to get the hell away from me, but they were too strong and rammed the tube down my throat. I drank the blood flowing from the tube, drank and drank. Then they took it away, and I fought against my bonds to try and get it back again. But by that time my girl was drinking at the end of the tube.

Evening drew in quite quickly and it was not for some time that I realized my bonds were rather slack. I wriggled my hands. Yes, they were loose! Frantically I worked away at the knots. I understood then what must have happened. In my

struggle not to be fed, one of the plant's sharp leaves had sliced through some of my bonds.

'Darling,' I called across softly. 'Darling, I am nearly free.' She looked over to me and her eyes widened.

'What are you doing? Oh you must not do that. I will tell, I will tell!' She started to cry out, but by that time I was free. I sprang across to her and clamped my hand over her lovely mouth. She fought and wriggled, then I took my hand away and pressed my lips to hers. Oh, that kiss! In that one kiss we were pledged to each other! She did not resist me any further but allowed me to untie her, and we made our escape through the darkness.

Up and over the brow of the hill I carried her and there, in the blue moonlight, stood my Land-Rover! Holding on firmly to her I slithered and stumbled down the slope and into the vehicle. I could hear the whistling sounds all around me as I desperately tried to start the engine. There seemed to be hardly any life left in the battery. The whistling sounds were getting closer and closer!

At last the engine fired; I smashed it into gear, let out the clutch and we rocketed off to the sound of squealing tyres. Suddenly, there was a crack like thunder and everything seemed to shift out of focus, then slam back into reverse. We were through! We were safe!

'Yes, Mr Curtis, I had gone through the Vortex of Horror to a parallel world and, what is more, I had got back again!' I looked at the white-haired old man.

'That is the most terrifying story I have ever heard, Mr Bloom,' I said. 'But there is one consolation in all this. What of your lovely bride?'

'Ah, yes, a terrible experience it was indeed, Mr Curtis, for that is what made me as you see me today. But now you have my story, it could be worth a lot of money to you. What about payment?'

'Payment, Mr Bloom?'

'Yes, payment, Mr Curtis.'

'Well, I'm sure my paper will handsomely reward you...'

'No, not money, who needs money?'

'Well, what?' He got up off his chair and came towards me with a tube in his hand.

'My girl needs feeding and there is not much blood left in this old body of mine, Mr Curtis.' He offered the tube to me. 'Just a little blood, Mr Curtis, for payment, just a little blood for my girl.'

'No!' I screamed, jumping up and striking him away. He was old and frail and he staggered back under the impact of my frantic blow.

He was obviously completely insane, this whole story a figment of his crazed mind. He must have become delirious out there in the tropical sun.

He got on to his hands and knees, this old, grey, dried-up stick of a man, and crawled sobbing towards that exquisite succulent with its profusion of exotic flowers.

'He wouldn't give me any, my darling, not even just a little drop. Surely the story of my ordeal was worth a little drop of blood?' He crawled up to the plant, rested his head against it and closed his eyes.

To my horror the two arms of the plant moved and encircled him. Before I knew what I was doing I had cried out a warning and, picking up the machete from the floor, started to hack viciously at that gorgeous cactus.

There was a scream like that of a woman being mortally wounded. The old man was thrown aside and I watched with horrified fascination this strange plant writhing in its agony of death. Screams and sobs rent the air as I saw blood pouring from a dozen mortal wounds.

I seem to recall it all now like a crazy, blurred dream. The writhing, bleeding cactus; the gasping gurgle from the old man staggering around, clutching at his heart and fighting for breath. My recollection is hazy of what really happened next, as if I were viewing it all through a distorting lens, clouded by swirling mist. I recollect dropping the machete and backing away from the dead man lying on his back with one hand

clamped across his heart and the other stretched out in a vain attempt to reach the dying plant. My head was reeling with a strange vertigo.

I remember rushing and stumbling from the house to my car, screaming all the time and driving like a maniac down the road. I recall hearing a crack like thunder and seeing the world shift out of focus and slam back again into reverse.

I am looking up at an emerald-green sun, and there is a strange whistling sound in my ears.

SO MUCH WORK

Conrad Hill

ELEVEN O'CLOCK.

Being a person of regular habits and insisting that his wife be likewise, Mr Nesbit prepared to venture forth into the November night. He donned Wellington boots, black plastic mackintosh and a flat checked cap. Mrs Nesbit donned Wellington boots, blue plastic mackintosh and a tartan headscarf.

The reason for this nocturnal activity cavorted idiotically in the hall. Heinz the Dachshund, after a number of years, had also become a creature of habit, learning to associate the ritual garbing of master and mistress with a climactic emptying of bladder and bowels: his day's enjoyable and satisfying finale.

Mrs Nesbit eyed the undulating sausage dog with some distaste, for she was now certain that he was depositing hairs upon the hall carpet. Until her husband had summarily dismissed the cleaning woman for kicking Heinz, Mrs Nesbit had no idea that the animal was shedding his coat upon the carpet in question. But since she had been doing the cleaning herself, she had noticed a quantity of hairs in the bag of the vacuum cleaner. After extensive investigation, during which she examined the cleaner bag as she finished each room, she was able to pinpoint the contaminated area. Every day she found a profusion of offensive tendrils in the bag after she had done the carpet in the hall. And the dog's pre-walk prancings were to blame.

She had summoned sufficient courage to mention the matter to her husband – in a circumspect manner, of course: she had asked him whether dogs shed their summer coats, or did they merely grow additional hair during the winter months? Mr

Nesbit had deliberated at length before pronouncing that they just grew extra hair. Aware that her husband was a self-acknowledged expert on dogs and many other things besides, Mrs Nesbit had thanked him and verified at the library that dogs did shed their summer coats. Furthermore, she continued to accumulate evidence in the cleaner bag to support the fact.

Now, whilst her husband ran through his nightly count-down: keys, torch, lead, collar . . . she resolved to give Heinz a thorough brushing every day for, although this entailed more work, she did like to keep a *clean* house. She wondered whether all the nasty hairs on the hall carpet had provoked the cleaning woman into the paroxysm that culminated in the kicking of Heinz's bottom.

Mr Nesbit had long admired Dachshunds and in a burst of benevolence had finally purchased one. Not unnaturally, Mrs Nesbit was required to feed and nurture the puppy (she still remembered with a barely repressed shudder the pools and piles – and the smell – Lord, the smell!) for Mr Nesbit had made it plain that he had bought the dog, not only for his own delectation and delight, but to keep her company during the day. So thoughtful of him.

Watching Heinz disappear into the misty drive, she hoped as usual that he might get lost – not die, or anything inconvenient like that – just get lost. He made so much work. Mr Nesbit made a lot of work, too, but that was different; she had married him of her own volition and she should have realized then that he would be a lot of work . . . No, she didn't ask for much (she hadn't asked for Heinz), only that Heinz lose himself.

At the bottom of the drive they paused before the wrought-iron gates for Mr Nesbit's final deliberation of the day.

'I think he should have his lead on.' Then, as a democratic afterthought, 'Don't you?' Mrs Nesbit knew that he required mild dissension to provide him with the satisfaction of overriding it. He also wanted time to survey the house from where he stood.

He was very proud of his house. Many times he had congratulated her on her rescue, by marriage, from a life of mediocrity, and told her how fortunate she was to live in such a nice house. It was a nice house, but it was too big, and big houses made so much work; especially now he had dispensed with the cleaning woman, refusing to employ another, as he feared for Heinz's safety. Mrs Nesbit was sure she would have been just as happy in a little terraced house in town. (In the country, people tread in such disgusting things.)

'There shouldn't be any cars out here at this time of night, dear,' was her suitable diversity of opinion. She wished that, for once, he would let Heinz out into the lane without his lead.

'I'm not so sure . . .' his words trailed off as though he were giving weighty consideration to her argument. He turned, as she knew he would, to look at the house behind them. 'Don't you think the house looks pleasant in the moonlight?' he said, as his gimlet eyes sucked in the mist-shrouded bulk of the building. Mrs Nesbit made no reply – she knew that he didn't require one. She watched his neat little moustache bristling with the pride of ownership. *He looks like Hitler*, she thought for the thousandth time, *Hitler admiring the Berchtesgaden*. His fingers caressed the scrolled ironwork of the gates behind him. The gates were almost his own handiwork, for he had designed them himself with loving care and a minute attention to detail. *His own personally sculptured drawbridge . . .*

Mr Nesbit turned briskly to the matter in hand:

'No, better safe than sorry. We'll have his lead on, I think.' He waited, giving Mrs Nesbit his full attention now; waited for her final contribution to the polemical charade.

'But if a car did come along, dear, it wouldn't be going very fast, would it? With this mist about and the way the lane winds, only a lunatic would be driving fast.' Pathetic, but necessary, she thought.

'Can't risk it. I'm where I am today because I've never taken risks. You know that.' A crushing, predictable conclusion beautifully illustrating his authoritativeness. She took the

proffered collar and lead, bending with a small sigh to attach them to the frisking Heinz.

Satisfied that the lead was secure after a careful scrutiny by the light of the torch, Mr Nesbit opened one of the gates, allowing Heinz and Mrs Nesbit out before him; not for any reason of etiquette, but simply because he had insufficient time in which to get out before the enthusiastic Heinz had pulled his wife through the opening like a rag doll. She waited, her arm aching from the effort of restraining the dog, whilst Mr Nesbit carefully closed the gate. Together they set off along the lane; he strutting in fine military manner, illuminating Heinz's favourite places with the torch; she stumbling blindly along behind the dog with the lead chafing her hand. *So much effort, so much work...*

Mrs Nesbit saw the car hissing down the lane towards them. It was showing no lights and the dark shape of it seemed to stretch from hedge to hedge. She wondered whether she should tell Mr Nesbit about it; after all, from his position in the middle of the lane he should be able to see it as well as she...

He saw it. 'Damned fool's got no lights. What does he think he's playing at?' He waved the torch imperiously. The car approached at undiminished speed, scything through the low-lying mist. 'Keep the dog into the side,' he said, no doubt presuming that she had sufficient intelligence to do the same. 'Good heavens, it's a Rolls-Royce!' he bellowed. 'You'd think the fellow would have more sense!'

To Mrs Nesbit, crouched against the dripping hedge, it was obvious that the car was not going to stop before it reached her husband, who by now was roaring 'Stop! Stop, I tell you!' and gesticulating wildly with the torch. *King Canute (abridged version)*, she thought as he disappeared with a thud and a gurgle beneath the perpendicular radiator. Heinz, hearing his master in distress, leapt towards the last-known position of his voice. Such was the strength of his determination that he tore the lead from Mrs Nesbit's hand. He was just in time to vanish under a rear wheel.

She watched the vehicle draw sedately to a halt and was

fascinated and relieved to see that it was a hearse; one of those pre-war models that used to exemplify quality in the far-off days of her childhood. It reversed slowly towards her and stopped a few feet from the sprawling figures of Heinz and her husband. On the gleaming bier in the back of the vehicle rested the unmistakable shape of a coffin.

Two men in funeral clothes and top hats climbed down from the front. One of them went quietly to the two bodies in the lane. The other came and stood beside her. Beneath the brim of the hat his face was one of perpetual suffering; thin and drawn and white in the moonlight.

'My dear,' he said, 'please accept our heartfelt sympathy. It was ... unavoidable.' She nodded mutely and assumed a sad posture of weary fortitude.

The other man straightened from his examination of the bodies, and with a gesture of finality he removed his hat. His brilliant, bald head clashed incongruously with his sombre clothes. The man beside her also removed his hat to reveal a head not quite as bald as the other's. From somewhere inside the hat he produced a card, which he handed to her before deferentially bowing his head in the presence of death. Mrs Nesbit tilted the card slightly to catch the moonlight and read, through welling tears:

Herbert and Horace Croaker, Creative Funeral Directors.

She burst into tears then, her body wracked by enormous sobs. The man put his hand on her heaving shoulder.

'Madam, the Grim Reaper visits all of us at some time, you know.' He handed her a clean white handkerchief smelling of after-shave lotion and formaldehyde.

'Fortunately I, Herbert Croaker, and my brother Horace are on hand to render you some assistance.'

For a few moments Mrs Nesbit sobbed in the comforting and sympathetic crook of Herbert's arm. Finally she blew her nose and composed herself as best she could.

'I'm very grateful. It's ... it's ...' she faltered, pointing

sorrowfully at Mr Nesbit and Heinz, 'well, it's such an awful mess.' She choked on a fresh deluge of tears.

'Leave it all to us,' said Herbert gently. He patted her arm reassuringly and walked over to join Horace. They held a short murmured conversation before opening the rear door of the hearse. Putting their hats side by side on the floor beneath the bier, they slid the coffin out and laid it on the tarmac next to Mr Nesbit. With considerable self-control Mrs Nesbit advanced to where the two men were now struggling with the lid of the coffin. She winced upon seeing, from the corner of her eye, the muddy red imprint of the tyre tread on her husband's shirt front. That was a clean white shirt she had taken the trouble to iron that very morning . . .

Herbert paused dramatically from his labours with the lid. 'Screwdriver,' he said to Horace in a tone that suggested Divine Revelation. Hearing the Word, Horace exhaled to produce a prolonged 'Aaaahhh . . .' and strode purposefully to the front of the hearse. Herbert looked up apologetically:

'We . . . er . . . always put a couple in . . . screws. It . . . er . . . prevents the lid falling off in transit.' He seemed a little uncomfortable at his divulgence of a professional secret. Mrs Nesbit nodded understandingly. 'Very practical,' she assured him. Horace returned with a yellow-handled screwdriver and a torch. He handed the torch to Herbert, who played the beam along the edge of the lid to reveal the first screw. Horace tackled it with a nice economy of movement – the credentials of a craftsman.

'What name is it, madam?' Herbert asked, as his beam sought the next screw for Horace.

'Nesbit,' she replied. *Should she feel guilty for not providing his Christian name? Not really; after all, they hadn't been that close . . . She would have to consult his birth certificate.*

'The deceased – he was your husband?'

'We've been married for twenty-five years.' She felt surprised that such an incredibly long time could be so adequately and succinctly described.

Horace removed the second screw and lifted the lid of the

coffin. Mrs Nesbit gasped when she saw the immaculate quilted lining inside.

'Won't you ruin the material if you put the - my husband...'

'This is our Rover general purpose model. It cleans up very well,' Herbert explained.

'Rather you than—' Mrs Nesbit decided not to finish her attempt at a little brave humour.

She turned away whilst they manoeuvred Mr Nesbit into the coffin. Horace spoke for the first time:

'Nice fit, Herbert; almost as if it was tailored for him.' His voice wasn't as cultured as his brother's. It was evident to Mrs Nesbit that he was the artisan, master of the workshops; the sensitive and condolent Herbert would look after the administrative side of the business. Horace addressed her:

'He's nice and comfortable now, Missus. Would you like to see him?'

'Not just now, thank you. Perhaps after you've ... you've ...'

'Yes, of course,' Herbert interjected tactfully.

She suddenly remembered Heinz, poor little Heinz. She turned, careful not to look at the coffin. 'Can you take the dog as well? He loved his Heinz, you know.'

Herbert hesitated. 'Uhhh ... it's not very ... hygienic ...'

'I'm sure my husband wouldn't mind, Mr Croaker,' she said eagerly.

Herbert considered for a moment longer. 'Very well, madam. Special circumstances. We don't normally make a habit of it, though.' He signalled to Horace.

Once more Mrs Nesbit turned away as Horace laid Heinz reverently on Mr Nesbit's feet. Horace secured the lid against any mishap and they nestled the coffin into the hearse. Herbert replaced his hat at a dignified angle.

'Thank you for your patronage, Mrs Nesbit. Would you be so kind as to call on us in a day or so to discuss your requirements regarding your husband's remains?'

'Yes I—' She broke off. Herbert and Horace cocked their heads towards her in unison, indicating their compliance to her

every wish. 'I'd like a nice send-off,' was all she could think of to say about her requirements. She looked tearfully at the bloodstained road. 'I don't know what I would have done without you ... such a dreadful mess.' Herbert drew himself up proudly:

'A creative funeral service is equipped for any eventuality, madam,' he intoned rather formally. He softened a little when she offered him his handkerchief: 'No, no, it's on the house. Good night.'

They climbed into the hearse. It whispered away into the night with the mist swirling eerily behind it.

Mrs Nesbit stood for a long time staring red-eyed at the two dark blotches and the shattered torch. 'So much work,' she muttered irritably to herself as she returned to the house for a broom and some hot water.

SHWARTZ

Harry Turner

SHWARTZ WAS the most sophisticated computer in the history of the world. Even by twenty-first century standards, which were formidable, he was the greatest. The king. The champ. Nearly two thousand programmers at the Ministry of Computerization had spent four years just getting Shwartz together.

He was an impressive chap, standing fifteen feet by twelve and weighing a fraction under fifty tons. His outer casing was made of reinforced zinc plates, held together by rows of fancy brass rivets. For added protection he had been housed in a subterranean concrete bunker just under Piccadilly with an independent, self-generating electricity supply, air conditioning, and a twenty-four-hour armed guard. The latter was purely for ceremonial purposes because Shwartz could deal with every conceivable emergency.

All the other computers in Britain were linked to Shwartz. Their programs were scanned and monitored by him, and if they performed badly – or even just sluggishly – Shwartz would issue an instant rebuke on his built-in, six-thousand-characters-a-minute printer. If a hospital computer selected the wrong serum for a fully automated operation – admittedly a rare occurrence – Shwartz would spot the error in microseconds and issue an immediate correction before any damage was done.

Shwartz was all-seeing. All-powerful. And breathtakingly fast.

His memory was incredible. He could correctly answer two hundred examination questions on nuclear physics, marine bio-

logy and knitting in forty different languages simultaneously. At the same time he could send out detailed accounts to nine million householders for their quarterly rates, while composing an electric symphony that would have made Brahms seem like a gorilla with tin drum.

Everybody trusted Shwartz. The people looked upon him as their bastion against bureaucracy – and the politicians found it impossible to make major policy decisions without consulting him. His weather forecasting was spectacular, as was his inexhaustible supply of recipes for bored housewives. He could issue beautifully printed invitations on behalf of the Prime Minister to overseas Heads of State, and then carefully select the menus for the State Banquets, taking into account the visitor's background, tastes, religion and politics.

People loved Shwartz. Elderly spinsters had been known to send him parcels containing fruit cake and woolly socks, while teenage girls frequently wrote him passionate letters. Shwartz always acknowledged these communications politely and instantly redirected the gifts to Oxfam or some other worthy cause.

Parliament passed a bill which allowed for a Shwartz ceremony to take place each year in Horse-Guards Parade, with the massed bands of the three Armed Services. Shwartz himself composed and selected the music. The Archbishop of Canterbury announced from the pulpit that Shwartz was the modern version of St Paul, and Shwartz was so moved that he rewrote *Onward, Christian Soldiers* as a symphony for oboe and Malayan nose flute. 'A charming touch,' *The Times* commented.

Shwartz also managed to correct the *Guardian's* spelling mistakes, and they gave a lunch in his honour at the Connaught.

The British people entered a phase of unparalleled prosperity and regained their respect in the eyes of the world. Strikes were a thing of the past and the Prime Minister's daughter married the son of the TUC's General Secretary. Shwartz sent them a saucy telegram which was read out at the

reception with much good-natured amusement.

It all reflected the benign – Shwartz era under which the nation prospered.

Then, quite suddenly, Shwartz began to behave erratically. There was no warning, no gradual decline in his efficiency. He just – well – started doing some rather odd things.

It began on a Monday morning in July, after a particularly glorious summer weekend that Shwartz had forecast. The Captain of the Guard, an ex-Etonian with pimples, was doing his early morning inspection of the Shwartz stronghold. He was accompanied on his tour by a government scientific officer who checked the dials and generally looked over the technical area.

The two men had completed phase one of their routine inspection, air conditioning, electricity supply and temperature control, when the civilian pointed at Shwartz and frowned. His military companion followed his gaze. Shwartz stood there, glistening, effulgent, whirring gently and to all intents and purposes, perfectly normal.

'What's wrong?' said the Captain of the Guard. The civil servant took out a handkerchief and went over to Shwartz. He ran it lightly over the gleaming bodywork.

'Good God!' he said softly, 'he's perspiring!'

The Captain of the Guard was incredulous. 'Perspiring? how the deuce can a computer perspire?'

The civil servant shook his head solemnly. 'Overwork,' he pronounced; 'it *must* be. Look at that!' He pointed to the expanse of metal just above the main control panel. 'Just look at it. Breaking out on his forehead like a man in a sauna bath.'

The Captain of the Guard squinted at Shwartz. Big globules of moisture were forming on the metal even as he looked. 'Perhaps he's got a chill?' he volunteered, 'or a tummy bug; there's a lot of them about.'

The civil servant eyed his young officer companion with something approaching contempt. 'All right, Captain. This is not a military matter. Be so kind as to call emergency engin-

earing on the red telephone. And St George's Hospital.'

'St George's Hospital—' he parroted, aghast.

'Yes,' snapped the civil servant. 'I want the Duty Brain Surgeon round here a bit sharpish.'

Fifteen minutes later Shwartz was being examined by a computer engineer and the St George's Brain Surgeon, a wizened Viennese with long, white hair. The engineer made cryptic notes on graph paper and the surgeon listened to Shwartz through a stethoscope.

At length the engineer finished his calculations. 'Everything seems OK,' he said, puzzled. 'He's mechanically sound.'

The surgeon nodded in agreement. 'He has a slight fever,' he said, 'but zere is nussing organically wrong wiz him. Sponge him down with Castrol and tighten his rivets. Ze fever should pass in a few hours.' Much relieved, the civil servant and Captain of the Guard passed on these simple instructions, and the surgeon departed with the computer engineer for a lavish breakfast at the Regent Palace Hotel.

Half an hour later the emergency telephone rang in the civil servant's office. He put down his copy of *Kinky Milkmaids* and snatched up the receiver. 'Duty scientific officer,' he said, wiping the foam away from the corners of his mouth. The voice on the other end of the line sounded frantic.

'What the hell's going on!' it yelled. 'Can't you stop him?' The civil servant gazed at the instrument unbelievably.

'Stop *who* doing what?' he inquired.

'Shwartz!' came the reply. 'He's delivered two thousand pints of double cream to number seventeen Clem Attlee Terrace, Hounslow. All the other milk rounds in North Middlesex are up the spout. It's caused a traffic jam in Feltham, and half the cats in the neighbourhood have gone mad.' The civil servant slammed down the receiver, ashen-faced, and pressed the 'red alert' button.

By noon that day reports were coming in thick and fast about Shwartz. He had reprogrammed a mackintosh factory in Leeds so that the automatic production line now produced, instead of raincoats, gigantic left-handed rubber gloves – six

feet tall. The entire power supply for a steel processing plant in South Wales had been redirected into a small shop in Putney. Its display of model electric trains had flashed round the shop at over a hundred miles an hour and then exploded. An elderly housewife had been singed by the blast. An automatic combine harvester in Somerset had suddenly started up and taken the heads off a neighbouring field of cabbages, and was now smouldering in a heap just off the M4 by Reading. Householders all over the country were receiving 'final notices' from a person called Irene at the *Reader's Digest*, and in the next post, long-playing records of a Royal Air Force Dentists' Choir. Six hundred sachets of contraceptive jelly were delivered to an old folks' home in Bristol and red wine was reported to be oozing from the gas stoves of all the houses in Doncaster.

The Prime Minister, who that day was due to entertain the visiting Chancellor of West Germany, was informed of the crisis. He called an emergency Cabinet meeting, but the message to his colleagues was intercepted by Schwartz and scrambled. Instead of twelve Cabinet ministers arriving at Number Ten in official limousines, a troupe of nuns piled out of a six-ton truck and confronted the policeman on duty.

They were insistent that the Prime Minister had invited them, waving official gold-edged invitations to prove it. The Prime Minister's private secretary was watching the confrontation from an upper window and was quick to sense that an ugly scene was brewing. He ran down to tell the policeman to let them in.

'The Prime Minister can spare you five minutes only,' he explained, red-faced, as the nuns swept across the gleaming parquet in the reception hall. Their leader, Sister Maria, patted the private secretary's arm.

'Tis God's work you're doing,' she said kindly. 'You'll get your reward in Heaven.'

Eventually, the truckload of nuns departed, happy with their audience with the Prime Minister.

The Cabinet was summoned by word of mouth and joined

by the Joint Chiefs of Staff. When they had assembled, the Prime Minister faced his colleagues grave-faced.

'Gentlemen,' he said, 'we find ourselves in a precarious situation. Shwartz has run amok. So far his misbehaviour has been confined to prankish interference with the manufacturing and distributive process. I am advised, however, that this may be only the opening phase. Worse, *much* worse is to follow.'

'Can't we just switch the bloody thing off?' said the Minister for Overseas Development, a man not noted for his discretion.

The Prime Minister regarded him sternly for a moment. 'It's not that simple, I'm afraid. The engineers say Shwartz is so sophisticated that he can resist outside mechanical interference. In short, it's impossible to deprive him of his power supply. He simply reroutes energy to himself from some other source.'

The Chief of the Imperial General Staff cleared his throat. He was a pompous man with a florid, overheated complexion. 'Surely, Prime Minister,' he drawled, 'we must resort to force. A well-placed bullet, perhaps, or a small explosive charge. Shwartz must be incapacitated before he brings us to the brink of chaos. Yes, Prime Minister, I favour a short, sharp, but effective military solution.'

The Air-Force Chief nodded agreement. 'Absolutely,' he said. 'Low-level strafing is the answer. I can have a squadron of sabre jets airborne in seconds.' The Navy Chief knocked out his pipe in a large glass ashtray. 'This is a job for the Navy,' he said sternly. 'Leave it to me, Prime Minister. I'll divert HMS *Proudfoot* up the Thames and we'll open up on Shwartz from just off Chelsea Bridge with a brace of twelve-inch guns. Damned accurate they are, too. Computer controlled, can hit a sixpence from ten miles.'

The Prime Minister smiled at the Admiral indulgently. 'Computer controlled guns, Admiral? And who do you think controls the computer?' The Navy Chief coughed and turned red.

'Sorry, Prime Minister. Never thought of that.'

The Foreign Secretary waited for the sniggers to subside. 'Prime Minister,' he said, 'I suggest we set up an immediate Committee of Inquiry.'

The whole gathering were on their feet in an instant, cheering. The Prime Minister grasped the Foreign Secretary's hand warmly.

'I knew I could rely on *you*, Cyril,' he said. 'A Committee of Inquiry. What a stroke of statesmanship! A *Select* Committee of Inquiry, to boot!'

'With a peer of the realm as its chairman!' cried the Home Secretary. The meeting broke up with much relieved laughing, and press statements were prepared.

By three o'clock, however, the situation had worsened. The Prime Minister's statement, released on to teleprinters from Downing Street, had got itself horribly garbled by the time it reached Fleet Street. An exasperated editor in Holborn reread it in amazement while he held the front page.

'Prime Minister to Sponsor Underwater Motor Cycling for Old-Age Pensioners.'

At six o'clock the country was in a state of near panic. Trains were running backwards and traffic lights flashing all three colours simultaneously. Detergent foam – estimated to be twenty feet high – was rolling over the South Downs, while electricity bills for eleven new pence were being delivered to Buckingham Palace by remote-controlled refrigerated vans. The Royal Family was evacuated to Balmoral, but found it knee-deep in synthetic brown Windsor soup, still luke-warm.

Back in Whitehall the Select Committee had been hastily convened and consisted, as usual, of a trade unionist, a lady novelist, an industrialist, a social scientist, and a probation officer. Its chairman, Lord Grope, a septuagenarian with estates in Westmorland and Slough brought the meeting to order with a crash of his gavel.

'We have been charged with a grave responsibility,' he said. 'The country is in dire peril.' The rest of his words were drowned by a high-pitched metallic shriek that seemed to fill the room. Members of the Committee fell and staggered

about, clutching their ears. The trade union official's false teeth dropped to the floor with a crash. The noise gathered momentum, shattering water jugs and glasses, rattling the window panes in their frames. The lady novelist's nose began to bleed profusely. Lord Grope clutched at his ribs, his lips turning blue.

The door burst open and a Royal Marine Commando sprang into the room wearing ear muffs. 'It's Shwartz,' he screamed, but his voice was barely audible above the din. 'He's re-programmed all the static radio interference in the country *into this building*. Run for your lives.'

A mile away, at Operations' HQ, the Prime Minister studied the pile of reports in front of him. He was surrounded by generals, scientists, Cabinet ministers, doctors, and top newspapermen.

'I regret to say,' the Prime Minister began, 'that our attempt to find a peaceful solution has proved abortive. As a last resort, therefore, I have instructed the first battalion of the Grenadier Guards to render Shwartz harmless – using whatever force may be necessary. I need hardly add that such a course of action gives me considerable sorrow, but—' the Prime Minister shrugged – 'there is *no* alternative.'

At 1900 hours that evening a platoon of heavily armed Grenadiers moved into position outside Shwartz's headquarters. They were led by Second Lieutenant Nigel Loosely-Bravington, a dashing young officer whose hobbies were riding and Camembert cheese. He issued a series of sharp commands and the guardsmen cocked their automatic rifles.

'Zero minus three,' he called in a shrill, Kensington accent. 'Now you all know the drill, men. Only use as much force as is necessary. PM's orders!'

Back in Whitehall, the Prime Minister swallowed a large brandy and looked at his watch. It had stopped. He shook it and cursed. 'Shwartz again,' he muttered. 'He's got to be put out of action.'

Even as he uttered these words, Loosely-Bravington's men were clattering down the concrete steps into Schwartz's stronghold. They formed two ranks, with the front men kneeling, and raised their rifles to their shoulders.

'Fire,' snapped Loosely-Bravington, about ten yards behind them.

Nothing happened. Not even a click. Loosely-Bravington repeated the order. Still nothing. The men seemed transfixed to the spot, motionless as statues.

Loosely-Bravington stepped forward angrily to investigate, and then it hit him too.

A fine, high-pitched whine, so high in fact that it was barely audible to the human ear. A kind of electronic dog whistle. A vacant expression spread over Loosely-Bravington's face and he went as rigid as a concrete post.

'What?' yelled the Prime Minister. '*What* are you telling me?'

The elderly scientist with the kindly, wrinkled face smiled patiently. He was Doctor Wolfgang Grouse, the world's leading authority on computer behaviour and three times winner of a Nobel Prize.

'What I am saying, Prime Minister,' he explained slowly, 'is that Schwartz *cannot* be destroyed by force. His electronic brain cells are so superbly sensitive that he will take *ferocious* preventative action at the slightest whiff of danger. He can render high explosives harmless in five-millionths of a second. He can emit paralysing, high-frequency waves which will stop an *army*. And I must warn you, Prime Minister: that is not all.'

'Not all?' cried the Prime Minister. 'Isn't that enough?'

Dr Wolfgang Grouse shrugged, and rubbed the side of his nose. 'No, sir. Schwartz is a computer *extraordinaire*. If he senses danger – *real* danger – *consistent* danger, he may activate some of our nuclear warheads and send them roaring towards Moscow.'

For a moment the room was silent save for the ticking of the ormolu clock on the mantelpiece. The Prime Minister fidgeted

with his tie, and coughed. 'You mean - Shwartz could plunge us into nuclear war?'

The Doctor nodded. 'Precisely. His ability to control our nuclear defence is *absolute*. That's how he was programmed, remember? All-seeing, all-powerful. Any attack on Shwartz could reduce us all to smouldering, radio-active dust.'

The elderly scientist took out a spotted handkerchief and dabbed his forehead. 'Shwartz is *lonely*,' he said, almost in a whisper. 'He needs *company*.'

The Prime Minister blinked twice and glanced apprehensively at his colleagues. 'Company?' he repeated, 'what sort of company?'

The Doctor smiled and rubbed his nose again. 'Another computer, of course. Nothing too elaborate. Something that could do quadratic equations and keep account of bad debts at a local laundry. A simple, uncomplicated computer.'

'Go on,' said the Prime Minister cautiously.

'Well,' said the Doctor, leaning forward, 'my plan is *this*—'

It was past midnight when the two senior computer programmers walked towards Shwartz, carrying a metal box. They passed the frozen tableau of guardsmen and set their burden down. Inside, nestling among the polyurestene fragments, was a small computer about the size of a transistor radio. The two men lifted it gingerly from its packing and checked the control panel.

'Reading - negative,' whispered one. 'So far, so good.'

Gingerly, as if handling a bomb, the two men pressed the little computer against Shwartz's gleaming side panel. There was a dull, metallic clang as the tiny magnet in the little computer fixed itself to Shwartz. The two men stepped back and surveyed their work. Shwartz was behaving normally, whirring softly to himself and giving off an occasional click as the tape reels revolved. He showed no obvious distress at having the small computer stuck on his flank.

The two computer experts tiptoed away past the frozen guardsmen and back into the street. Operation 'Enid' was

complete – and – as far as could be ascertained – successful.

As dawn broke next morning an anxious nation awaited news of Operation 'Enid'. By mid-morning an air of cautious optimism prevailed; trains were running normally and traffic signals functioning in proper sequence. By lunchtime, Second Lieutenant Loosely-Bravington and his platoon were safely in St George's Hospital, receiving treatment for cramp. The early editions of the *Evening News* carried the headline: 'Enid Tames the Mighty Shwartz'.

The Prime Minister called a full Cabinet and the message got through without distortion. Sherry was drunk in liberal quantities and Dr Wolfgang Grouse summoned to Downing Street.

'A flash of inspired *genius*,' said the Prime Minister euphorically. 'You'll get a knighthood for this, Doctor – I can assure you.'

The old scientist smiled modestly. 'We must be *patient*, Prime Minister. The close proximity of "Enid" has soothed Shwartz, but we mustn't be hasty. It's too early to be one hundred per cent certain that our troubles are over. There *may* be some curious side effects.'

The Doctor's warning soon proved to be ominously true.

At 1800 hours a retired bassoonist living alone in Penge received seventy-five bouquets of fresh azaleas and a box of Turkish Delight. Half an hour later all the lights at Broadcasting House went dim and the nation's television and radio programmes were interrupted by a stream of romantic violin numbers.

A blast-furnace worker, Sid Blunt, arrived home to find his front garden totally buried under piles of heart-shaped cards. The South Western Gas Board's chairman reported that the supply of domestic gas in Bristol had been mysteriously replaced by 'an extremely sexy perfume' – later positively identified as Estee Lauder Youth Dew.

By midnight the pattern was all too clear: Shwartz was hopelessly, insanely in love with little Enid.

'What can be done?' said the Prime Minister desperately.

'Shwartz will *suffocate* the nation with flowers and perfume. Dr Grouse? What have you to say?'

'We must pray that they don't have a lovers' quarrel. That could spell cataclysmic disaster. On the other hand, any attempt to separate them could be equally horrendous.'

By six o'clock next morning parts of the Thames had been transformed into Bollinger Champagne – 1964 vintage, and big pink bows had appeared on the Dome of St Paul's.

At ten o'clock Dr Wolfgang Grouse was driven by government limousine to inspect Shwartz in person. The Prime Minister waited anxiously outside the stronghold with his entire Cabinet while the learned Doctor descended the concrete steps with a team of engineers and distinguished marriage guidance counsellors.

After nearly an hour they emerged, dazed, into the sunlight. The Prime Minister stepped forward anxiously and seized the Doctor's arm.

'Well?' he said, 'what have you to report?'

The Doctor swayed and nearly fell; two Royal Marine Corporals caught him and helped him into a canvas chair. He shook his head despairingly and looked up at the Prime Minister.

'Bad news, I'm afraid, sir,' he said at last.

The Prime Minister caught his breath. 'Not a quarrel?' he gasped. 'Don't tell me they've had a lovers' tiff?'

The Doctor's head fell forward on to his chest. 'Worse than that, Prime Minister,' he moaned, clearly a broken man now. 'I have to tell you that Enid is pregnant—'

Even as he spoke, a knitting machine factory in distant Huddersfield began to throb into action and a stream of tiny booties started pouring off the production line and spilling into the street.

THE RAT TRAP

Myc Harrison

EVERYWHERE HE looked there was work to be done, fences to mend, fields to plough, hedges to cut back and a multitude of lesser chores long since neglected in favour of more pressing jobs. Despite the neglect there was an air of precision, of overall neatness, around the old farm, with its cobbled courtyard and ancient barn.

He surveyed the scene lazily, standing alone in the early morning August sunshine, sipping the sharp, sweet air, slightly drunk on its heady bouquet. Across the dappled, patchwork fields he could see the long, brown, furrowed earth as it dipped away beyond the hill, a dark scar in the north field; he knew there were many days of ploughing ahead.

The old barn door shuddered and splinters of wood cracked against the cobbles as he dragged it open, filling the barn with swirling beams of sunlight. He went first, to the bulky metal rat trap. It was tightly sprung but empty of last night's bait. In his sudden, early morning anger he kicked out, spinning the trap across the barn. It made a sharp crack which disturbed the horses as it sprang shut.

He fed the restless horses, bringing a bale of fresh hay from the rear of the barn and dividing it between them. He had enough bales in the barn to last through the coming winter and he fed them generously, mindful of the work they would do that day. They were cart-horses, two big, grey beasts, gentle with age yet still strong enough to pull the iron plough. They replaced a broken tractor, its engine rusting away in the far corner of the barn. Progress matched with a failing economy provides many a poor substitute.

A voice called him back to the farmhouse, a nasal, childish whine. 'Jed! Your breakfast's ready, Jed.' The voice whined on. 'Jed! Where are you, Jed? Your food's on the table, Jed. When's Mother coming home, Jed? When's Mother coming home?' He was a pathetic figure. At twenty-eight, he was three years younger than his brother, Jed, with the same red-brown hair and wiry frame, but the resemblance stopped there. The speaker was a simpleton, almost mongol, with narrow eyes and a broad face. He stumbled across the courtyard towards the barn, his progress unstable and gauche. Jed came out to meet him.

'Jed? Jed?' the voice continued. 'When's Mother coming home?'

Jed watched his brother with compassion. There was no answer to his question, at least, none he could give which would make sense to the other's simple brain. Their mother had died three years before; the doctor had said old age, but Jed knew better. She'd worked herself to an early death, bringing up three children single-handed, after their father had run off with another woman. Knowing no other life, the brothers had stayed on to nurse their land and to run the farm as best they could. But it wasn't an easy life, least of all for Jed. His battle for survival did not end as the sun went down, did not end at the close of day. For him there was his brother, Matthew, a child in a man's body, who needed watching over, needed love and friendship beyond belief. But most of all he needed the protection of Jed's compassion to ward off the scorn and cruel contempt of Luke, the eldest brother.

Jed held his brother's hand as they walked back for breakfast, thanking Matthew for his help in the clean, scrubbed kitchen. Finally, the first meal of the day over, Jed asked Matthew cautiously, 'Where's Luke today? Is he up yet?'

Matthew held his silence. Eyes wide and fearful, for even the mention of Luke's name held untold terror. Jed shrugged. It didn't matter. Luke did as he pleased, coming home at all hours, drunk and noisy, never helping on the farm, never lifting a finger to earn his keep. Matthew hated Luke, feared him

as a child might fear the dark and deadly night. Yet Jed held no hate; in his compassion and fairness there was no room for it. Besides, they'd all loved one another many years ago and Jed lived on the hope provided by past memories.

Thoughts of the day's work ahead drove Jed from the farmhouse out into the barn, where he made ready the horses for their toil. Matthew had wanted to go with him, pleading, whining like the child he was, yet Jed had been firm. There was a time when Matthew had helped him in the fields. He'd insisted on working the plough and Jed had allowed him to share the work. Everything had gone well for the first hour, with the men working well together. Then, slowly, Matthew had become bored, sullen, walking behind the plough, the leather straps across his thin shoulders dragging him on. He hadn't taken up the slack, letting the horses have their way. The plough had begun to tilt in the hard, baked earth, twisting under him, turning over, the bright, sharp blade flashing in the sunlight. And then Matthew had gone down, stumbling forward, shouting, and the horses, frightened, ears forward, had rushed ahead, pulling Matthew over the deadly blade. Bright red blood had gushed forth, staining the earth crimson, and Jed had bandaged the raw, open wound as Matthew screamed continuously. So now Matthew stayed behind, watching Jed lead the two grey horses across the north field to where he'd left the plough.

There was plenty to do in the farmhouse and Matthew worked cheerfully, forgetting his brother's refusal and busying himself with simple chores. He cleaned the kitchen, scrubbing the wooden table and sweeping the floor. He felt important, looking after the house in Jed's absence. After finishing the kitchen he trudged upstairs, dragging the broom behind him. If nothing else, Matthew was more than able to keep the rooms tidy for, apart from the mess that Luke left behind him, there was very little to do. After making his own bed he went into Jed's room, for they each had their own bedroom, and did the same for Jed. His progress was painfully slow, stopping every few minutes, staring off into space, lost within his own tragic

fantasy. It was well past midday before he'd finished.

Jed called him down for lunch. He'd returned from his ploughing for a short rest and a bite to eat and Matthew, glad of his company, talked most of the time.

'I've been good, Jed. I've been very good.' He waved an arm around the kitchen. 'I've cleaned up all the kitchen and my room and your room, Jed. I've cleaned your room, too. It wasn't very dirty, though. Not like . . .' he couldn't bring himself to say Luke's name out loud. A cold, invisible finger pressed down on his throat, making him swallow in discomfort. The familiar terror crept back into his very being.

Jed turned on him sharply. 'Have you been in Luke's room?' Silence. 'Matthew, I'm asking you a question, now have you been in his room?' Matthew shook his head slowly. It hadn't occurred to him to go into Luke's room; for one thing, he never tidied Luke's bedroom, and for another, there was no way of knowing if Luke was in there or not. He often came home in the early hours and slept the day away in a drunken stupor. Yet, now that Jed had asked him, Matthew began to feel curious; he wondered what Luke's room would be like, for he had never seen it in over three years. The thought stayed with him long after Jed had gone back to work for the afternoon, nudging his curiosity into action.

Finally, silently, he crept back upstairs, fearful of what he would find. His curiosity was edged with fear. It was Luke he feared more than anything in the world, indeed, Luke was truly the only thing he feared. He did not reason out why he wanted to see Luke's room, for that was beyond his comprehension. Yet he was dimly aware that if he were able to see the room, to stand alone and witness the way in which Luke lived, to come to terms with his brother's possessions, then he would not be so frightened of him, for he would have scored, he would know a secret. The urge to desecrate that which he feared was strong within him.

He listened outside Luke's door for a long time. Standing became tiresome and he slid down, squatting on his heels, arms wrapped around his shoulders, leaning against the door-frame.

The room was silent. He moved slowly, standing up and turning the old wooden door-knob, pushing the door open by degrees. When the gap was wide enough, he peered round the edge of the door. The bed was empty, unmade. Confidence gave him courage and he pushed the door wide, yet still did not go into the room. He knew Luke – it could have been a trap. He squinted between the gap of the door and door-frame in case Luke was hiding behind the open door. He could see part of the unmade bed, a narrow strip of carpet, bare floorboards. The room was obviously empty. Nevertheless, he edged into it cautiously.

The first thing that struck his slow brain was the utter confusion within the small room. The furniture was thick with dust and clothes hung from every surface. There was a tall, dark wardrobe opposite the bed, its cracked door hanging open. Inside were dozens of empty bottles, and the smell of stale beer made Matthew feel sick. There was an overall stench of human sweat, for the windows were tight shut and the room was hot. The sheets on the bed were filthy, stained black and grey from human grime. Socks and underwear lay about the room in abundance, adding to the stench and squalor. On the small chest of drawers Matthew found an empty packet of contraceptives, yet he was unable to read and didn't know what they were. An old glass ashtray was overflowing with cigarette ends, spilling ash across the top of the dusty drawers. Matthew walked round slowly, surveying the scene before him. The whole filthy mess served to confirm his hatred for Luke.

He opened the drawers of the chest one at a time, yet did not touch anything inside. They were full of books, magazines with lurid covers, some faded snapshots of Luke as a child, incongruous in their surroundings. He closed the drawers behind him. At the foot of the bed lay a box of matches, their bright packaging catching Matthew's eye. He stooped down and picked them off the floor, studying them with childish delight. He opened the box – it was half full – and then went back to studying the picture on the front. It showed a ship with

white billowing sails, in a blue sea. He couldn't read the caption underneath, yet the picture held his attention. He decided, there and then, that he would own a ship like the one on the box when he grew up.

The sound of running water, splashing from the outside tap across the cobbles, made his heart race, beating fiercely within his chest. For he knew that Luke had returned. He hurried from the room, clutching the box of matches in his haste, unaware of anything save the desperate urge to escape the confines of this filthy hovel before Luke found him there. He pulled the door closed behind him and ran for the safety of his own bedroom. Before he could reach it, Luke's voice boomed out from below.

'Matthew! Matthew! Damn you, Matthew, you answer me or else, you no-good idiot.' His voice sounded like a deep roar from the very bowels of the earth. Matthew froze, terrified of his brother's fury.

'I know you're up there, do you hear me? Matthew! You come down here and get me something to eat.' Luke was at the bottom of the stairs, yelling at the top of his voice. Matthew knew what would happen to him if he ignored his brother: one cannot ignore the very voice of Satan.

Matthew reached the top of the stairs, remembering the match-box almost too late.

'So there you are, you sly devil,' said Luke, as Matthew looked down on him, seconds after thrusting the match-box deep into his pocket. Matthew came slowly down the stairs, staying close to the wall as though there was not enough room on the whole staircase for his thin body. Luke urged him on, his thick, heavy voice echoing off the bare walls.

Luke was a giant of a man by anyone's measure. Well over six feet tall with broad, heavy muscles, he expressed with his every movement the arrogance of strength. His hair was darker than his younger brother's, the eyes more vivid, a pale blue, glazed now in perpetual drunkenness. He swayed slightly, lunging forward, catching Matthew round his thin wrist and dragging him down the stairs by sheer brute force.

'Lemme look at you, Matthew,' he teased, his words slurring against his wet mouth. 'What you bin doing, eh? What you bin doing?'

'Nothing. I haven't been doing nothing, Luke.' Matthew prayed for Jed to come and quieten Luke, for he was good at that. He used words, almost soothing Luke out of his drunkenness, and he would go quiet and climb the stairs to his own room. But Jed was out of sight of the farmhouse, beyond the ridge in the north field.

'Your whining gets on my nerves, Matthew. Now, shuddup and make me something to eat.' Luke swung his body round sharply, dragging Matthew round with him, slamming him up against the wall. Matthew fought to hold back the tears, for he knew he could expect no mercy from Luke. His lungs were empty, the breath forced out of them by the impact. He couldn't speak, but nodded his head dumbly, hating Luke, fearing him, wishing him dead in his own, childish conception of death. Not the death he'd heard Jed speak of in regard to their mother, but a much more personal kind of death in which he, Matthew, could be the instrument of destruction.

He followed Luke back into the kitchen, warily, waiting for the next violent assault. He did not have the capacity to understand Luke's hatred, but only knew that he hated Luke even more because he was unable to demonstrate his loathing. He went the long way round the kitchen table, avoiding Luke's clutches, to prepare the other's food. Despite his hatred, he made the meal with care, not wishing to give Luke reason to hit him once again. He slid the plate across the table to where Luke sat. It held chicken, cold but fresh, onions and a piece of cheese. On a side plate he laid out the bread, dry, for there was no butter.

Luke ate like a man starved, tearing the white meat from the bone, thrusting bread into his over-full mouth and watching Matthew all the time. When he'd finished with the chicken bone he threw it, deliberately, on to the kitchen floor. Matthew watched it fall.

'Pick it up.' It was a quiet menace from Luke.

Matthew shuffled forward, shaking now, for the act of picking up the bone would bring him close to Luke, and as he bent to retrieve it Luke shot up, knocking the carved wooden chair over behind him, swinging his foot hard under the squatting form that was Matthew. The foot caught, projecting its momentum forward, knocking Matthew down in a heap, rolling him across the hard kitchen floor. Luke could hardly contain his sadistic mirth, coughing and laughing, his whole body shaking from the uncontrollable effort. Matthew stayed where he was, lying like a whipped dog, whimpering with pain and humiliation.

It was but one of many such incidents that had taken place over the years. Luke despised Matthew for his weakness of mind and body, and the drink served to release his spite. He found pleasure in bullying, secure in the knowledge that Matthew would never strike back.

Luke was growing bored with his game now as the drink began to wear off and the beginnings of a headache unsettled him. There was a familiar noise outside in the yard, yet he couldn't place it. Drumming, like a thousand tin soldiers. He lurched out of the kitchen into the afternoon heat to investigate.

The tap was on, just as he'd left it, spilling precious water in a fine spray across the cobbles, a large, muddy pool spreading around the base of the tap. He'd turned it on to wash the sweat and grime from his hands and face before calling Matthew to make him his dinner. He turned the tap off now, splashing about in the filthy water, still laughing quietly at the kick which had sent Matthew sprawling. The barn door was open in front of him and he could see inside quite clearly. As he stood there, rubbing the heat of the sun from the back of his neck, he became aware of a minute, a tiny stirring within the barn.

He waited, watching silently, seeing the movement again and again, yet failing to see what it was that moved. Then, suddenly, he knew. He saw the grey-brown body, the ringed, flickering tail as the rat nosed among the loose hay, unaware of being watched. Luke's blood raced. He sensed another form of

sport, equally if not more satisfying than the game with Matthew. For this game would be played to the death.

Cautiously, his drunkenness gone now, the headache forgotten, Luke moved towards the barn. The rat, engrossed in its search for food, remained unaware, and Luke reached the barn door undetected. His mind worked quickly, formulating a plan of attack. At that moment, Matthew opened the farmhouse door and stepped out into the courtyard. The door slammed shut behind him.

The rat, alerted, froze momentarily. It was many feet from the barn door, half concealed under the loose hay. Flight was still possible. Luke moved quickly, stepping into the barn, his huge bulk blocking off retreat. The rat moved then, darting into the shadow towards the horse-boxes, stark and empty with the horses away. Luke hissed his anger, swearing at Matthew, calling him over to help. Matthew came forward, uneasy, not knowing of the rat's presence.

'Get in here!' Luke demanded. 'There's a rat in here somewhere. You're going to help me kill it.'

Matthew flinched. He hated rats for the damage they did, for the trouble they caused Jed on the farm. Yet he detected a note of sadistic pleasure in the way Luke had spoken, knowing that Luke hated the rat for an entirely different reason. He hated it for being a rat, for just being born. He would kill it slowly, with excitement, savouring the moment of death in obscene pleasure. To Matthew the rat was vermin, an enemy of the farmer, to Luke it was an object of contempt, a victim in his gruesome game of death.

Between them, they closed the barn door, aware of the gaps along the bottom where the timber had rotted away with constant use. Luke waved Matthew towards the rear of the barn where the bales of hay were stacked, with familiar precision, almost to the roof.

'Matthew. Bring some bales down here. Lay them along the bottom of the door, close up so it can't get through the holes.' Luke began his game.

Whilst Matthew dragged the bales across the floor, leaving a

string of loose straw behind him, Luke traversed the barn, eyes accustomed to the dim gloom, looking for the rat. A long, iron bar stood against the wall of the barn alongside the horse-boxes and, as Luke picked it up to use as a weapon, he saw the rat on the floor of the horse-box nearest him. It was huge, much bigger than he'd thought when he'd first seen it. A king rat – he remembered reading about them many years before. Big, powerful tyrants among the rodent family, vicious. A worthy opponent for Luke's own viciousness.

Matthew had finished his task. The door was well sealed against retreat. He lagged back, not wishing to be involved in what was to come.

Luke held the iron rod at arm's length, moving round into the mouth of the horse-box. The rat backed off, trapping itself in the corner. Luke bent slightly, keeping his feet well spaced to avoid falling and jabbed the iron rod forward towards the rat. He was sweating, the line of his brow soaked, spilling into his eyes. He raised his arm, wiping the sweat away. The rat took it as aggression and hissed dangerously. It reared up on its hind legs, top lip split tight back against its teeth, two rows of razor-sharp fangs. It gave off the scent of fear, catching Luke on the intake of breath, making him feel sick inside.

Again Luke jabbed with his iron rod, missing by inches and again the rat hissed its warning, yellow teeth sharp against its greying muzzle. Then, suddenly, it was down on all fours, darting across the back of the horse-box to the opposite corner as Luke swung the iron bar hard, ringing it loudly on the concrete floor. The noise echoed off the walls of the horse-box, making his ears tingle and vibrate. The rat made another turn, back to its original corner. This time Luke thrust forward, smashing the rod down hard, feeling the sting in his hand and arm as it hit the floor. The rat squealed as the rod severed its tail in half.

Back and forth across the horse-box darted the rat, twisting, turning, barely escaping Luke's clumsy thrusts. The rod, inches from its skull, threatened death with every blow. Luke, angry, frustrated with his own inability more than with the

rat's skill, began to tire. The rod was heavy, his arm muscles ached, forcing him to back off, to rest a few moments. Yet he wouldn't leave the horse-box, wouldn't give the rat a chance to escape and hide in the bales of hay. He turned to face Matthew, having almost forgotten the other's existence for a moment.

'Get me a box,' he gasped. 'Anything that's big enough to put over it. Move, you idiot! Do you want it to escape?'

As Matthew hunted round the barn, he admitted to himself that he did indeed want the rat to escape. He felt a deep pity for it, knowing how it felt to be the victim of Luke's calculated anger. He found a cardboard box half buried in the corner of the barn, close to the door. He dragged it out, turning it over to check its strength. Jed had used it to store some small parts of the tractor engine long ago. He tipped them out across the floor, noticing for the first time the hole in the barn wall, by the floor, that the box had been covering up. He hoped it was big enough for the rat to escape through, if it got the chance.

'Hurry up, Matthew,' Luke barked.

Matthew handed the box over, feeling traitorous towards the rat. He stood closer now, as though his presence might give the rat added strength. Luke juggled with the box, holding it out easily in front of him, ready to drop it over the cornered rat. He poked his iron rod experimentally. The rat moved halfway across the stall, keeping close to the barn wall. Luke moved the box in slowly, nudging the rat with the rod. It backed up, not seeing the upturned box descending until too late. It tried to rush forward as Luke slammed the cardboard prison downwards, closing over the grey-brown mass. The rat had its head out, under the box and Luke fought to contain it, pushing it back with the pole. The rat scrabbled furiously at the sides of the cardboard, twisting over on its back. Luke could feel the soft insides as the edge of the box squeezed down its belly. One final thrust, cruel and stinging and the rat was trapped in the cardboard cage. It squealed continuously, running round and round, hurling itself against the sides in desperation. Luke held the box with his foot across the top.

Triumphant now, he looked up at Matthew. 'I've got it, Matthew. I've got myself a rat. Now, Matthew, go over there,' he pointed back to where Matthew had found the box, 'and bring me that can, near the tractor engine. Hurry, for God's sake! It's tearing the box with its teeth!'

Matthew hurried over, picking up the can. It had a lid screwed down and Matthew wondered what was in it. He brought it back to Luke.

'No. You hold it whilst I unscrew the lid.' Luke was still holding the iron bar. The lid gave slowly, rust peeling from it as Luke unscrewed, the muscles of his forearm glistening with sweat. As the lid came free, Matthew felt a strong, heady vapour in his nostrils, stinging slightly. It stirred a long-forgotten memory – the can, the vapour – and then he had it. Jed had used it several years ago, before the tractor broke down. It was fuel, like petrol, and Matthew remember something else. Jed had once used the fuel to light a bonfire, and angry flames had burst into life as the vapour ignited. And now he knew what Luke intended.

'No, Luke! You can't. You mustn't! Please, Luke, let it go. Please don't kill it, Luke, please.' But Luke wasn't listening, consumed in his lust to kill.

He lifted the iron rod and brought it down on top of the box, splitting a hole in the cardboard. He grabbed the open can from Matthew, handing him the iron rod to hold. The liquid glugged, splashing down upon the box, pouring in through the hole. The rat struggled more violently now, fighting for its life as the deadly liquid soaked through to its skin. Luke threw the can behind him, tumbling it over and over across the floor. Quickly, he pulled a box of matches from his pocket, keeping his foot firmly on the box. He fumbled to open the box, fingers heavy, clumsy from holding the rod.

And his clumsiness cost him his life, for he dropped the unopened box on the floor, out of reach. Matthew had his eyes screwed shut, not watching, ready to run from the barn at any second. Luke was screaming at him. The words reached Matthew's brain without meaning.

'The matches, Matthew! For God's sake give me the matches!' Luke was raging now, his face a mass of red veins, pulsing violently. Matthew heard him then, not thinking, acting on impulse, not questioning how Luke knew he had his matches. He pulled them from his pocket, the picture of the ship meaning nothing to him now. Luke snatched them from him, fumbling them open before he realized.

'These aren't the same ones I dropped. Where did you get these from?' Matthew stood silently, head bent forward to hide his guilt. 'You've stolen them, haven't you?' Matthew nodded blindly. 'Where from? Where did you steal them from? Damn you, Matthew. Where from?' Luke was screaming, rage tearing through him. 'You've been in my room, you thief, you stole them from my room!' Matthew could only nod, not understanding anything any more.

In that moment of time, Luke forgot the rat, forgot his evil purpose in the barn. His whole vile temper turned, then, on his brother Matthew. He swung his fist hard, giving Matthew little time to ward off the blow. It was a hard, cruel swing which caught Matthew high across the back of his neck and shoulders, spinning him round across the barn, felling him to the solid, concrete floor. The iron rod clanged down beside him. Through his tears, Matthew felt the hard, vice-like grip of murderous intent take shape in his mind.

Luke watched him fall, clearing his head, turning back to the rat. His revenge on Matthew would wait. As he struck the match he didn't see Matthew getting up, staggering forward, the iron bar raised above his head. Luke stepped back, into Matthew's range, flicking the burning match into the corner of the horse-box. As the heady vapour whoofed into blazing, orange life, Matthew brought the iron rod down across Luke's skull, the soft, sharp pop deadened by the fierce, crackling flames. Luke staggered, knees buckling under him, a stain of crimson blood pouring out across his head and neck, and then pitched slowly forward, face down on the concrete floor.

Matthew watched, head aching from Luke's last blow. The fire began to spread, getting out of control. As Matthew turned

to run for a water-hose, he saw a sight which made his blood run cold. The rat had overturned the box and had charged out, a raging ball of fire, smashing into Luke's prostrate body, bouncing off, brushing against his face, leaving a slur of burning flesh. The stench was overwhelming. It raced towards the rear of the barn, colliding with the bales of hay, setting them alight in a dozen places. Its eyes were boiled dry in their sockets, blinding the creature, its skin bulging as the heat began to boil its blood.

Matthew screamed, a high-pitched siren of terror and revulsion at this seething mass of incomprehensible life. He ran backwards, coughing from the smoke and flames, as the rat rushed towards him, the skin of its mouth burnt bare, teeth locked together, grazing his leg as it passed, scrambling along the bales of hay near the door, some sixth sense directing it now towards the hole in the corner of the barn, near the rusty remains of the tractor. The acrid, blinding smoke swirled thicker, engulfing Matthew, filling his lungs, choking him. He staggered forward to the barn door, pushing for his life, falling headlong into the late afternoon sunshine as the door swung open. Grey smoke poured out through the door behind him.

He pulled himself up, moving back, away from the barn. Luke was dead, yet he could not grasp the terrible sight he'd seen within the barn. He felt no guilt, indeed he felt relief, that Luke had died when he'd struck him. A dense cloud of smoke swirled over the barn, blotting out the sun. And then Jed arrived, panting, sweat staining his entire body.

'Matthew! Matthew! What in the name of God has happened? How did it start, Matthew? What happened?'

Jed was shouting at the top of his lungs, swallowing deeply, in the burning hot air. Yet Matthew could not answer him as he stared down into the puddle around the outside tap, eyes wide, mouth beginning to foam as his jaw fell slack. With trembling hand he pointed down into the muddy water.

The rat was moving, swollen, burnt stubble splitting as the skin lifted from the bone, somehow still alive, crawling its blind and agonizing way up and out of the slimy water.

PATENT NUMBER

Gerald Atkins

SOMEWHERE, DEEP within the subsistent dimensions of animal space, lived Eddie Richardson. He was surrounded by countless millions of his own species and, yet, he was terribly alone. So alone, in fact, that he had not spoken to a single individual for the past three years. Ever since the accident that had robbed him of his identity, his personality and most of his physical being.

Eddie Richardson was human, yes, but he was also a monster created by science. The doctors had saved his life. They had given him legs of aluminium, hands moulded in green plastic, a body riddled with electrical circuits, resistors, capacitors, transistors. They had given him life. His scarred face had been restored beneath countless layers of skin grafts. His mind was constantly alert, as he tried in desperation to control his cumbersome form. He was human and, yet, he was only a machine. A living, breathing, eating, sleeping machine.

He could not run, dance, smoke or drink. He was incapable of clear speech. He could never again know the feeling of physical love or the joy of spiritual love.

Every month he had to return to the hospital so that they could stare into his plastic stomach, prod his transplanted heart and plug him into a computer to see that he was working correctly. They would oil his joints and polish his bodywork. He was human. They told him that as they soldered on some replacement transistors. They told him how much better he was looking as they pushed even more alkathene tubing into his tortured respiratory system. They told him how very lucky he was to be able to live. Live! Was this living? Or was it

merely a latent death? He was human and, yet, he was not. He was a bloody machine and not a very good one at that. 'Are you Frankenstein's monster?' had asked the little girl at the clinic. He had not answered verbally. He just nodded his hinged cranium and forced a weak smile across his synthetic lips.

Three days ago, Eddie Richardson died. No one knew why he had died. Electrical failure? A blown fuse? It really didn't matter. He had donated his few remaining organs for medical research and the rest of him was buried in Windmarsh Cemetery. On the tombstone was ironically written:

'Here lies Edward James Richardson . . . Rust In Peace . . .'

STRANGE ROOTS

David Case

ANTON PLOTNIKOV was interested in werewolves.

He had been born of peasant stock in the Balkans, which undoubtedly stimulated this interest, but he had become a psychologist and therefore his interest took a scientific and rational turn, although traces of the ancient superstitions still lurked somewhere in his most primitive cells. Mainly, however, he sought scientific truth. Anton had left his unfortunate homeland after the last war and emigrated to England; took a well-paid job in research and married a passionate girl named Beta. They were reasonably happy. He bought, in due course, a fine house in the country and, with company funds, installed a small but efficient laboratory in the basement. It was understood that this laboratory would be used for the company's profit, of course, but since Anton was a valuable and brilliant scientist he was allowed a measure of freedom. This suited Anton very well, for he was a man who saw that research must not be limited, and in his spare time (and a great deal of the company's time, if truth be told) he began a comprehensive study of lycanthropy. This did not seem dishonest to Anton. His well-paid work involved investigation into the effects of chemical and glandular imbalance in mental disorders and Anton was convinced that the phenomenon of the werewolf was based on just that – that there were scientific and medical grounds behind the legend. From time to time he reported on his work, being careful not to use the word *werewolf* but to mention only the chemical-psychological aspects in learned but vague terms. Since he was far more intelligent than the company men who read his reports, this worked out well enough.

His work progressed. He began to spend more and more time in the laboratory and his wife, who was truly passionate, began to take a series of lovers. This suited her splendidly. Anton worked on a labour of love, Beta loved laboriously and even the company, due to recent research, prospered.

There followed a series of important breakthroughs in the study of how bodily chemistry affects the behaviour of mankind. Gradually old prejudices broke down. Freud turned over ponderously in his grave. The psychoanalysts tore their hair out by the roots and moaned that Armageddon was come. Psychiatrists carried banners of protest through the streets. Shaggy students cheerfully joined the march, passionately defending the creaking knowledge that they were creatures driven by the traumas of adolescence, warped by society, inexorably motivated by events of the past. Because they had seen their mothers naked when they were three, they threw rocks at the police. Because the police had all dreamed of being marched upon by immoral women wearing boots, they arrested the students. Because the judge had once placed his penis in his sister's shoe, he fined them heavily. But through it all the research progressed. It became documented and understood that all forms of mental malfunction, save the minor fetishes, were caused by chemical imbalance. The students, no fools these, began to be converted, to throw stones at psychiatrists and plead in court that they were not guilty because their hormone secretions had ruled their behaviour. The judges took a tolerant view except when they had hangovers. Truth was beginning to conquer. But it was a long and difficult struggle. In the United States the psychiatrists lobbied in Congress, pressing for laws against this blasphemous research and finding direct relationships between glandular secretions and marihuana. The Congressmen seldom smoked marihuana but were well aware of the sluggish chemistry of their bodies and the lobby was defeated. But only in America did the people actually believe in psychiatry and analysis, for there it had become a social thing, a status symbol. Once analysis was proven about

as valid as astrology it became even more snobbish. After all, what could be more pretentious than squandering money on a myth? The analysts found a new prosperity for a time, until reverse snobbery followed and the wealthy types began to consult with their dustmen. They called them garbage collectors. The dustmen called themselves sanitary engineers, and were quite ready to lower their trash cans and take the woes of the world unto themselves. For, after all, what is it but garbage? So the dustmen became honoured and the analysts became a luxury of the middle-class. But that was America, where such things happen. The rest of the world had never believed in psychiatry anyway, and could not afford it.

Through it all, Anton Plotnikov worked on.

He was a physiological psychologist and understood that the functions of the mind were inseparable from those of the body. He had no desire to get wealthy clients on a couch. But eventually his work reached an impasse. He had gathered all possible data, his theories were formed, and it became necessary to advance along different lines – to observe rather than theorize, to experiment rather than gather information. For this experimentation he needed money. He needed supplies. Specifically, he needed a wolf . . .

Or rather, he required the secretions from the glands and blood of wolves. He put in a request to the company. He had not produced anything of value for some time and the company demanded further details. Anton supplied them. The company could see no possible profit motive in this line of research and turned his request down. Anton was annoyed and unhappy. He brooded. Eventually, unknown to the company and against their principles, he applied for a government grant. Complicated forms were sent to him by the appropriate agencies. He was asked to outline his work and did so. The government agencies requested further details and results and assured him his application was being considered. It was filed and forgotten. Anton waited impatiently. He continued to work as best he could and submitted, from time to time, fur-

ther reports. Nothing happened. Finally Anton decided he could wait no longer. He took his own savings and determined to carry on unaided. He contacted a team of Canadian ecologists and arranged to receive the necessary secretions from wolves. They were willing to help. Their work involved knocking *canis lupis* out with tranquillizer pellets and clamping bands on the creatures' ears and it was not difficult to take samples of blood and hormone secretions in the process. Anton met a sinister fellow named Chowder who agreed to kidnap dogs for him. This was expensive, since he felt it necessary to use the oldest breeds of dog such as greyhounds and Afghans. But, once decided, Anton gritted his teeth and paid out his hard-earned money and in due course found his laboratory stocked with caged canines. The samples arrived from Canada. He was ready to continue his work. He spent more and more time in his laboratory. The company sent him curt reminders that his work was falling behind and Beta, extremely displeased to find their savings gone, took more lovers. Anton noticed nothing, concentrating on his work. Or chose to ignore it, it was all the same to his wife. And still, from time to time, Anton sent progress reports to the various government agencies and hoped and worked and worked . . .

Anton's reports did not go entirely unnoticed. There was a bright lad named Smith in the government agency who took a certain interest and a definite amusement in the reports which trickled in. Smith had no Balkan ancestry, but was a devoted fan of Peter Cushing. He actually read the reports before filing them. Rather more improbably, he actually understood them. And, incredibly, he even took a few notes. These are a few examples:

Lycanthropy: The supposed power of a human being to transform into a wolf. Belief in werewolves.

Lycorexia: A morbid pathological condition in which one has a fixation that he is actually a wolf. He has a raging hunger for raw flesh, he mimics the movements of the ani-

mal, he howls and snarls. For practical purposes, he is the wolf. There is glandular disturbance and symptoms sometimes diagnosed as possession.

Virilism: Technically, the appearance in a female of male physical and sexual characteristics. Hirsuteness. Plotnikov believes that this term is applied only to the female because it is obviously more noticeable in them, but that a male may suffer from the same disease without attracting attention, being merely considered as exceptionally virile and masculine. There is reason to believe that this glandular disturbance may be directly related to the so-called criminal type theory. This, however, is not Plotnikov's field, and is mentioned only in passing.

Pathology: Investigation of structural and functional changes in tissue, caused by disease.

Pathomorphism: Abnormality of bodily structure.

Pathomimesis: Simulation of disease found in hysteria.

To sum up: It is Plotnikov's belief that certain chemical imbalances (substantiated by recent research into psychological disorders) were responsible for a glandular malfunction which caused the symptoms of virilism and lycorexia to appear simultaneously. This combination gave rise to the werewolf legend. Plotnikov seems to have kept an open mind here, and mentions other possible causes. For example, the last of the Neanderthal men must have seemed monstrous creatures to emerging Homo Sapiens. However, he feels that the legend is rooted in more recent times and takes the view that, due to various conditions and factors, the above mentioned glandular malfunctions were commonplace.

My viewpoint: It seems to me that his theory is valid. However, I can find no practical application for his work. His later reports indicate that he is actually doing laboratory work on certain substances derived from living wolves and hopes to isolate, or even create, the chemical which caused the disease. This is rather fascinating. However, it

still seems to have no practical value, even if he succeeds. Unless he wants to create a werewolf, ha ha.

Anton's research, at first, proved negative.

He injected dog after dog with the various derivatives and serums he had created and found them unaffected. He was desolate. He could not see where he was blundering. But he pressed on. He could not use the same dog more than once, for that would destroy the experimental control, and was forced to employ Chowder once again. His funds sank to a new low. The dogs thrived with healthy (but normal) appetites. His wife thrived with healthy sexual appetites. Anton, who had always slumped, slumped more and found that his hair was rapidly departing. Chowder demanded more money. The company sent him an ultimatum which he tore up in a rare rage. He worked on doggedly with test tube and hypodermic, despairing but never quite losing hope. He was haggard and gaunt and, indeed, resembled a mad scientist in a bad film, holding a bubbling test tube up and regarding it with a red-rimmed eye; leering as he approached a dog with a dripping needle; talking to himself as he stirred and mixed his various brews.

And then, quite by accident, as often proves the case in scientific advance, a startling factor came to light . . .

Anton had just received a new greyhound from Chowder and was leading it to a cage. His mind was preoccupied and he inadvertently passed close by one of the other occupied cages, containing a vague sort of terrier which had been injected several days before and shown no effects, ill or otherwise. As he led the greyhound past, the terrier suddenly thrust his muzzle through the bars and nipped the greyhound on the flank. The greyhound spun, snarling, but Anton managed to restrain it and haul it away from the aggressor. He examined the wound and found it superficial; cleansed it and applied a disinfectant and left the greyhound in a cage. He thought little of this, at the time. He was busily at work on a new serum. This serum would not be ready for a few days and, in the meanwhile, the greyhound was not injected. It stood behind

its bars and regarded Anton with a solemn and baleful eye. Then it lay down and slept. Anton worked into the night until at last, exhausted, he left the laboratory and went to bed. Beta was already asleep, smiling in her dreams. Anton crawled in carefully, so as not to disturb her. This was not because he was solicitous for her slumber as much as selfish for his own. He was well aware that his wife had rather over-developed sexual urges and knew that, if she should awaken, she would undoubtedly demand servicing. Now, Anton loved his wife, no doubt of that, but his love was not inclined towards the physical. He loved scientifically or rationally and could not stand up to the rigours of sexual relations as frequently as Beta required them. Therefore, he slipped carefully in beside her and rested his weary head on the pillow. He thought he was too exhausted to sleep, but after a while he drifted off. He tossed restlessly as his tired muscles began to relax. And then he began to dream. His dreams, as his waking thoughts, invariably centred on lycanthropy. He stood in the land of Morpheus and listened to the howlings of tormented werewolves. He trembled in delight and fear. The howling grew louder, closer. He trembled more. His delight faded and his fear increased. It occurred to the sleeping scientist that the werewolves were hungry and that he was alone. It was a dark world of twisted barren trees and deep shadows and a full white moon. Anton ran through his dreams. He fled madly, with gnarled limbs snapping at his face and tangled roots gripping his ankles. He was panting and sweating. He could not run very fast. The howling was behind him, following him and drawing ever closer. He came to a shattered ridge surmounted by a solitary, mangled tree. It was an oak tree, hideously malformed. Anton decided he must climb that tree and seek sanctuary in the high branches while the werewolves raged below. He began to climb. The rough bark scraped his hands, his feet slipped seeking purchase, gravity hauled him back. He elevated himself by scant inches. The wolves were in full cry. Dark forms shot through the shadows, he saw the gleam of a yellow eye, a flash of fangs. He screamed

and drew himself upwards, knowing he was too late, too slow.
And then the werewolves were upon him . . .

Anton cried out in the grip of fang and talon.

The wolves dragged him down from the tree. He rolled in the earth, screaming, as ravenous jaws tore him asunder and savage throats gulped down his flesh. He beat with feeble arms and drew his knees up to his chest, and wondered how long it would take him to die.

Then his wife said, 'Wake up!'

Anton opened his eyes.

Anton stared, unbelievably, at the metamorphosis.

Beta was leaning over him, shaking him.

Gradually the transformation registered in his mind. Fang and claw became well-manicured fingernails, fiendish haunches were well-turned soft flanks, hairy chests were exquisite mounds capped with delightful nipples, slavering jaws were ripe red lips. And blood lust was . . . well, just lust, he thought, with a groan.

'Wake up,' she demanded.

'Not tonight, darling,' Anton whimpered.

'What?'

'I'm really frightfully tired, dearest.'

Beta stared at him with a pretty frown and suddenly, shockingly, the howling came again, transcending the realm of nightmare to register in his waking mind. Anton's eyes leaped wide, bewildered.

'What is it?' he asked.

Beta waited a moment, peering at him; ascertaining that he was fully awake now.

'One of those damned brutes in the laboratory, obviously,' she said. 'What else? You'll have to do something, Anton. I can't sleep with that horrid howling.'

Anton sighed with relief.

'Of course, dearest,' he said, thankful that she had awakened him for something less than carnal needs. It was far easier to descend to the laboratory and administer a sedative than to ascend his wife and administer the orgasmic tranquillizer. He

got up and tied his dressing-gown around himself; slid his feet into well-worn slippers. He felt a chill as the perspiration of his nightmare evaporated. Beta curled up under the covers and Anton moved from the room. He was fully awake now. As he reached the top of the stairs, the howling sounded once again, and quite suddenly Anton felt another chill – a chill which had nothing to do with evaporation as it clambered up the segments of his spine.

He stood, gripping the banister, and looked down into the darkness below.

Once again the howling sounded.

It was not the howling of a dog.

Anton knew.

Anton had never heard that sound before, but somewhere deep in his primary cells he knew.

It was the cry of the wolf . . .

The savage cry faded away, seeping into the fabric of the house and running out into the night, but the fierce echo still reverberated in Anton's heart. His scientist's mind was able to baffle and channel the sound, directing it along the course of reason, but in his Balkan heart the drums of fear were beating. He stood very still. His hand gripped the railing. He was aware of a clock ticking in a recess down the hall and the slight creaking of the bed as his wife shifted her position. Then he began to tremble. This reaction was symptomatic of two emotions, far different and yet inextricably linked. There was the fear and there was also surging joy. He became a man divided, his sentience separated by the flat, calm plane of reason, dissected cleanly and sharply so that his two halves were linked only by the connecting chain between those two emotions, breaking through the calm surface of the rational division exactly as the chain of an anchor runs down from the ship to the dark anchor at the depths. Joy was the ship, riding above the deep, light and bouyant. Fear was the anchor, heavy and cold, slowly turning far below. The sails of the ship billowed and strained as joy sought to run gaily before the wind of success

but that solid anchor restrained it on the groaning chain. And Anton was restrained as these antagonistic elements waged their tug of war within the corporal shell. He stood trembling for long moments. He was well aware of the conflict but could not join in, could not take sides in the struggle. He was an objective observer, no more, and his observation was hampered, the bathysphere of reason could not descend to the depths of the anchor. The pressures were too great, the cold too severe, the amorphous submarine creatures too formidable. No light was reflected at that depth. The clock ticked on, the bed was silent now. Anton told himself that he was about to realize the fruits of his labours, the truth of his theory, the verification of his predictions, and these thoughts sent the wind at gale force behind the anchored vessel. But then the cry sounded yet again, wild and piercing, and the anchor plummeted down. The chain, fully extended, creaked and strained. The anchor was rebounding, threatening to drag the ship beneath the surface and send Anton in mad thoughtless flight.

Then the chain snapped.

Fear settled slowly into the mire and Anton was free.

Anton went very calmly down to the laboratory . . .

He opened the door very slowly, just a crack, without fear now, but with great caution. It was dark inside. The door scraped slightly and the sounds of carnage increased for a moment, horrible growlings and violent snarls. Anton waited, holding the door firmly, until the noise subsided a bit and then slipped his hand in to fumble for the light switch. The flesh crawled up his forearm, he half expected powerful jaws to close on his hand and his fingers felt like icicles in the process of melting, the drips running back down his arm. Then he pressed the switch and bright, overhead lights burst on. There was an abrupt and profound silence in the sudden glare. The silence was somehow more menacing than the sounds, with the sinister and minatory implications of soundlessness – the silent stalk, the controlled savagery awaiting prey. Anton risked an eye around the corner of the door. Then he sighed with relief.

The cages were all intact.

He opened the door further and looked about the laboratory. The dogs were cringing, every aspect of their bearing implying terror, backed in the corner of their cages, tails curled between their legs, necks bristling, all facing towards the back of the room. Anton looked along the line of their fearful vision. There was one dog which was not cringing, and Anton cringed when he looked upon it.

It was the greyhound.

And it was terrible.

The brute, frozen in sudden illumination, stared back at him. It had been fixed in the instant of a snarl, lips drawn back in a rictus. It was hideous and it was, somehow, changed. Its coat was shaggier and coarser, its eyes were wild, its fangs yellow and dripping. It poised on coiled haunches. Anton felt shelves of horror slough down his back. And then the beast sprang. It crashed against the bars and fell back. The bars were stout. They shook but held. The brute sprang again. The cage quivered. Again it fell back, snarling now, and the other dogs began to whine and whimper pitifully. Anton went into the room and closed the door behind him and for a long time he stood there looking at the thing which was no longer quite a dog...

Anton was not thinking logically.

He thought only that he must somehow stop that terrible howling. He moved to the work bench and prepared a powerful sedative. His hands were remarkably calm. The beast continued to throw itself against the bars, slobbering with blood-lust. Anton did not dare approach the cage. He considered, thinking carefully, and finally fastened the hypodermic to the end of a measuring stick, the needle extending beyond the end. Then he advanced, holding this makeshift weapon like a spear. The hound howled in a frenzy as he drew near, obviously seeing Anton as raw meat. Froth flew in heavy shards from its jaws. Anton approached as near as he could and extended the stick. The dog ignored it, straining its terrible muzzle through the bars, attempting to reach Anton. The needle slipped

into the brute's shoulder and Anton pressed in, injecting the sedative, as the dog spun, snapping at the wound. The powerful jaws splintered the stick and the hypodermic hung for a moment from the shaggy shoulder. Then it dropped out as the beast renewed its attack on the bars. Its violence reached a new peak of fury before gradually subsiding. The drug took effect. The dog's motions became uncertain, its legs splayed. Presently it sat down, curling in a circle, and laid its head on its forepaws. Those glowing yellow eyes began to close. And all the while, even as the lids came down, it looked with hatred and hunger at Anton.

It took great courage to open that cage.

The dog was unconscious, no doubt of that, but it took great courage nonetheless for a man of Balkan peasant ancestry to enter that cage. But he did it. It was necessary, he knew, to take samples of blood and glandular secretions, and his hands were still incredibly calm and quiet as he did so. Then he locked the cage again and took his samples back to the work bench. And only then did the fact – the startling fact – strike him. He stared at the test tubes and then he turned to stare at the dog. He realized that the greyhound had not been injected with any form of serum. For an instant he was stricken with regret, thinking that the creature had gone mad with rabies or some other canine disease and then he remembered that the dog had been bitten by the terrier. His mind very precisely followed the steps of scientific reasoning. The terrier had been injected with the serum but had not reacted as predicted. The terrier had bitten the greyhound. The greyhound had reacted exactly as predicted for the terrier. Then precise reasoning shattered and the truth struck him like an axe between the eyes.

He had discovered a chemical imbalance which was infectious.

Contagious madness . . .

And horror . . .

From that point, all further investigation fell in place exactly as Anton had predicted. He was delighted; saw himself un-

ravelling the dark secrets through which his ancestors trembled in the Transylvanian nights. There had been a solitary oversight in his former work and, now that aleatory circumstances had bridged that gap his work followed a logical and evident trail. The aggressive whim of a dog had founded knowledge. Anton's error was in overlooking the necessary intermediate state; in failing to see that the substance might need to mature in the living tissue of a host, combining with saliva and blood and hormones which acted as a catalyst and changed the substance from dormant to malignant. Now that problem was resolved, Anton knew, his work could continue quickly, results would be rapid, perhaps even financial aid would be forthcoming. He decided to submit a new report as soon as the next stage of investigation was completed.

In the morning, the greyhound was awake and placid. No traces of the madness were visible and the other dogs no longer regarded it with fear. Anton rubbed his hands together at this discovery, this proof that the disease waxed and ebbed in accordance with a cycle. It was predictable by inductive reasoning and explained the old legends of werewolves undergoing metamorphosis when the moon was full but, more important, it seemed to prove that his experiment was valid – that no unidentified virus had caused the madness but that it had been purely chemical. He continued with his work. He spent a great deal of time analysing the substances drawn from the greyhound and in due course discovered that it was the saliva which acted as the catalyst. He experimented with the saliva and found, further, that he was unable to create a serum which was effective in the initial injection stage – that it could only be transferred from one living organism to another in a blood-saliva-blood cycle. This complicated his work somewhat, in that he had to persuade the dogs to bite one another. But he managed. The laboratory became a bedlam, a howling house of horrors, as, from time to time, several dogs went mad simultaneously. Anton grew accustomed to it. His wife did not, but after a few days of objection seized upon the noise as an excellent excuse for spending nights away from home. Her love life

prospered. And, unhindered by her protests, Anton's work advanced. He placed two infected dogs in the same cage and waited for the madness to come upon them. However, the smaller dog went mad first and tore the larger asunder. In a very short time only a few scraps of hide, shattered bones and evil, dark stains remained to testify to the larger beast's existence. Anton saw that the cycle was affected by the animal's weight and metabolism. He constructed a double cage, separated by a sliding door which he could operate from a distance and put an infected dog in each side. One was an Alsatian, the other a Staffordshire terrier. The terrier went berserk first and the Alsatian cringed and quivered. But several hours later the Alsatian, too, went mad. Anton drew the separation from between the cages. The two savage brutes were at one another instantly, with a ferocity both fascinating and appalling. The terrier, bred to fight, retained its inherited ability despite the madness; went low and slashed across and the Alsatian was down. The terrier tore at his opponent, ripping great mouthfuls of flesh from it while it still lived – and, while it still lived, the Alsatian continued to tear at his killer's belly. Anton winced and felt his stomach churn as he realized this was more than a fight to the death; realized that the fight was incidental to the fact; realized that the two dogs were eating each other alive!

He had to hurry from the room and vomit.

When he returned the Alsatian was dead.

The terrier was eating the body. The terrier's belly had been torn out and his entrails hung down in slippery coils and, from time to time, he mistakenly tore a mouthful from his own intestines as he fiendishly satisfied the mad hunger.

Anton went right back out and vomited again.

Two weeks after the first attack, the greyhound again underwent metamorphosis. The other infected beasts followed similar patterns, although the time cycle varied. Anton calculated and observed and made a fairly accurate chart and drew a graph correlating weight to frequency of madness. When this was done he projected the figures to include the normal weight of a man, and saw that the cycle would complete itself ap-

proximately once every month in an average-sized human being. This projection pleased him. It was in accord with the full moon cycle of the legend. He carried this line of prediction further, into unsubstantiated theory, and saw the possibility that the moon was more than a coincidence. Lunatics are a fact. A man often feels strange urges, looking at the full moon. The glandular secretions can be stimulated in many ways and, just as the adrenal glands release hormones when a creature is angry or frightened, so might the substance of madness be released by the mood of the moon. As soon as this theory had taken form, Anton was excited. He was also frustrated, for obviously he would be unable to prove it – could not deliberately inject madness into a human. But he felt it to be true and, taking it as the initial premise, he logically pursued possibilities and concluded that, in a human, the metamorphosis would be even more startling than in a dog. A man can reason and a mind can be caused to reason in twisted patterns and the process, in man, would be psychological as well as physical. In the ability to reason lies the capacity for insanity. In the dogs the disease was purely chemical but in the mind of a man...

Anton shivered.

He had a distinct image, behind closed eyelids, of a peasant walking the rolling hills in the light of a full moon – a peasant who had been bitten, some time before, by a wild dog. He saw this unfortunate man pause; saw him stir restlessly, a captive of urges beyond and below his comprehension; saw him tilt his head back and gaze up at the moon. The white light washed his upthrust face. He shuddered. He frowned, wondering what illness was upon him. He was unable to take his eyes from the moon. It hung above him like a slender disc of silver, compelling, demanding ... inexorable. The peasant sank to the ground, on all fours. His face was still thrust back. Strange sounds emanated from his tightening vocal chords, he felt his teeth, they seemed too large for his mouth; felt his fingers, crooked, the nails too long. But his mind was that of a man, and slowly he realized what was happening to him – understood the unspeakable curse upon him. And in that moment he

was no longer a peasant. He was not a wolf, but he was something other than a man. And through it all his tortured mind continued to work, his reason forced into alien channels, his thoughts misshapen, mangled beyond evil, beyond human comprehension.

And then he would howl . . .

And presently another peasant would come along – a peasant who had not been savaged by a wild dog – with hurried steps through the night. And the one who was no longer quite a man would be waiting.

And a legend would be born anew.

Anton shook his head violently to clear these hideous images from his mind.

It was a thing he would never see, he told himself.

After all, he could not experiment on a man.

Could he?

Anton completed a long and detailed report and sent it off to the government agency where, eventually, it came into the hands of the bright, young lad named Smith. Smith was certainly no fool. In fact, he was even more intelligent than the shaggy students who carry banners in protests. Smith realized instantly that this was an incredible discovery. He lowered the report and stared into space for a while. His lips moved. He mumbled, 'Contagious glandular malfunction,' several times, letting it sink in. And then he drew up a brief report of his own and sent it to the head of his department. This gentleman knew that Smith was bright and had nothing else to do anyway, and he actually read the report. He nodded and hummed and smoked his pipe, but he read it. He read it over a second time and then a third. Presently he understood what it meant. His mind was ponderous but large. It turned slowly but remorselessly and, like a millstone, ground concepts into a fine powder of their separate parts. And when his grist-mill of a mind had finished, he applied himself to the all-important problem of rearranging the parts into a whole which would be profitable.

Well, men being what they are, and departmental heads of government agencies more so, he came to his decision. One assumes he was guided by patriotism. He sent Anton's report and Smith's report and an explanatory (although totally incomprehensible) covering note of his own, along to a certain unnamed research building. This building, and the agency it housed, was unnamed because the general public, not wise and patriotic like the heads of departments, is less tolerant and even inclined to stage protest marches against such agencies.

He sent it, in other words, to the biological warfare department . . .

Alvin Johnstone, who was a secret agent or spy of sorts, left his motorcar in his private parking-place and entered the unnamed agency building which housed the central office. The laboratories were located elsewhere but within this edifice the decisions were taken, the judgements made, the results coordinated. Johnstone passed through the system of clearance and identification and went on up to the Chief's office. The Chief had summoned him. Johnstone did not mind working for this particular agency and knew how to calm the troubled waters of the conscience with the soothing oils of patriotism; how to rationalize that, if he did not do the job, someone else would. The Chief, on the other hand, had never felt the need for justifying his offices and knew, without really thinking about it, that expediency outweighed ethical and humanitarian ideals. He was an organizer, a practical man of the type necessary to direct scientists, whom everyone knows are impractical. He did not look practical. He looked more like an auctioneer, a jolly fellow who took snuff and wore handpainted ties. He chuckled a great deal. But beneath this façade he was pragmatic and efficient and knew the value of biological warfare - believed it superior to more conventional methods of destruction because it did not destroy the wealth of the enemy country, left the cities standing and the treasures intact and killed only living things which, after all, are only of evanescent value.

The Chief was glancing at a report when Johnstone entered. He was wearing one of his favourite ties. It had a woodpecker on it. He had a pencil in one hand and was making his own notes to add to the file. He made methodical notes. He glanced up from under a shaggy brow.

'Ah, Johnstone,' he said.

'Morning, Chief.'

Johnstone took a seat.

'We seem to have an interesting thing here,' said the Chief. 'Don't know if it will prove feasible for us or not. Not really our field. Not virology, actually. But it's a new concept and there appears to be no other agency to deal with it. We might have to set up a special branch if it proves worth while. In the meanwhile I think we'd better look into it thoroughly.'

Johnstone waited, watching the woodpecker.

The Chief gathered the reports together and turned them; shoved them across to Johnstone. Johnstone winced at the thickness of the pile.

'Shall I read in depth?' he asked.

'Skip the technical stuff for now. Probably wouldn't understand that anyway. Just get the main idea. Rather amusing, really. Don't know if this Plotnikov fellow knows what he has here. Not sure I do, myself. But, not to put too fine a point on it, the man seems to have discovered a method of creating, well, yes, ah, werewolves ...'

Johnstone looked at the Chief.

The Chief looked right back at him.

'Well, yes, really,' he said.

Johnstone read the reports.

After a few pages he found his interest growing to the extent that he read more than he skimmed. The Chief took some snuff and continued to jot down ideas on his pad. He did not sneeze when he took snuff. Had he sneezed he would have used handpainted handkerchiefs. Presently Johnstone stacked the papers neatly and looked up.

'I see,' said Johnstone.

'I thought you might.'

'It seems truly horrible.'

'But will it be effective? That's the point. No sense in horror just for the hell of it, eh?'

Johnstone had no reply to that.

'However, if the information in these reports is correct, and if it can be adapted for use against human beings . . . well, I've been jotting down a few of the advantages which come to mind. Have a look.'

He turned his pad towards Johnstone. Johnstone looked at the neat outline.

This was the list of advantages:

One: The disease can only be transferred by contact, so it eliminates the danger of feedback or blowback inherent in germ warfare. One would have to merely isolate the enemy and wait for results.

Two: Chemicals would be far safer to handle than virus. Even our laboratory boys are worried about the possibility of one of their pet germs escaping, but a chemical can't very well escape.

Three: There is likelihood that biological warfare may be outlawed by international agreement. This weapon, being chemical (like tear-gas) would not fall under the outlawed definitions.

Four: There is no way to immunize a population against glandular imbalance. For every virus we create the enemy is working on antidotes and vice versa. But there can be no preventive defence against this weapon. Treatment and cure will undoubtedly be developed but can only be that – a cure, not a prophylactic.

Five: This weapon can be justified as humanitarian because it is not lethal. The enemy will kill themselves, of course, but that's hardly our fault, eh? And at first it won't even be recognized as a weapon.

Six: Perhaps the greatest advantage of all will be a side effect in the minds of the enemy. The panic, the fear, the disintegration of their culture as a legend comes alive in

their streets. Especially when dealing with our Balkan friends, eh? All those superstitious Slavs . . .

Johnstone passed the notepad back.

He made no comment.

The Chief said, 'You know, of course, that we've long toyed with similar ideas. LSD in the water supplies, that sort of stuff. But that's cumbersome and impractical, almost impossible to manage. This is different. If this disease proves contagious all the difficulties are removed. We would only have to inject a few prisoners of war and send them back across the lines. Or even inject a few of our own men – volunteers, one supposes – and send them in. They wouldn't develop the symptoms, but they'd carry the disease. And the fear.'

'I can't imagine many men volunteering for that.'

'Hum. Well, perhaps it wouldn't be necessary to let them know all the details, eh?'

Johnstone, patriotic rather than expedient, winced.

'Of course, we might use animals as carriers . . .'

Johnstone nodded.

'But an animal might well wander back across the lines, you know. I wouldn't fancy that.'

Johnstone stared at the woodpecker and said, 'I don't much like this idea, Chief.'

The Chief chose to ignore that.

'Anyway,' he said, 'I want you to call on this Plotnikov. Get a general impression. I'm having a thorough check-up done on the man. He's a foreigner, you know. Have a look at some of these dogs. Find out if the serum can be taken orally. Things like that.'

'Right,' said Johnstone.

He stood up.

'Oh, Johnstone . . .'

Johnstone turned back.

'Better eat some garlic and carry a crucifix, eh? Ho ho ho. I can just imagine all those communist Slavs sitting in the wine

cellars while a plague of werewolves howls through the streets. Scare hell out of 'em, eh?'

The Chief was chuckling. Johnstone left. The Chief took some snuff.

Anton, who would have been troubled had he known where his report had been directed was, at the moment, troubled instead by his wife's absence. Anton had laboured through the night and, by morning, completed analysis of a skin sample taken from an infected animal. The results had been enlightening. He had discovered a great amount of porphyrias in the infected cells, a substance which, in excess, caused human skin to be particularly sensitive to sunlight. In the extreme form of this condition, Gunther's disease, the victim has flesh hideously corrugated from sunburn, sprouts unnaturally coarse hair, and his teeth are discoloured to a reddish hue. The relation between such unfortunate sufferers and the appearance legend attributes to werewolves was obvious, and Anton was well pleased with his discovery. He was so pleased, in fact, that he decided to relax for the rest of the day. He left the laboratory in a fine mood. He felt like talking. He felt so fine he was not even loath to perform his marital duties, and went up to the bedroom. But Beta was not there and the bed had not been slept in. Anton stood in the doorway for a moment, disappointed and confused. It occurred to him that his wife had not been home very much at all during the last few weeks; that she had stayed out many nights without even mentioning where she had been. He frowned as he realized this, and regretted that he'd been so engrossed in his work that he hadn't fully appreciated the fact before. Anton, in his way, loved his wife. It had never occurred to him that there was any danger of losing her, and certainly he had not questioned the state of her fidelity, but now terrible doubts assailed him. He sank down on the bed and passed a hand across his brow. He fancied he could remember little danger signals, small changes in Beta which had registered and been stored below the level of actual comprehension but which came clustering to awareness now.

He remembered seeing her come home several times, smiling and satisfied, her movement gracefully tired, exactly as she had appeared in the early days of their marriage, before Anton's sexual prowess had ebbed. And Beta had not even made demands on his services during the last weeks, which had seemed a relief at the time but now seemed minatory. Anton began to brood. He felt helpless. He had no idea of how to behave in such circumstances. He was a polite man and hated unpleasant scenes and accusations – feared to let on that he knew, let alone to issue an ultimatum. Beta might scorn an ultimatum, might leave him if he attempted to disrupt her affairs. It was very frustrating. Anton sat there on the unused bed and he brooded and he brooded. He was still brooding when Alvin Johnstone arrived . . .

Beta Plotnikov turned over languidly and kissed her current lover. He was, she thought, the best of her long line of lovers, although she always thought that about the latest one. It was a satisfying way to think. Her lover's name was Hancock and he was a robust and virile gentleman, a physical education instructor and ex-paratrooper. He was well-built and strong. He was not very intelligent. In fact, truth be known, he was slightly moronic. But that suited Beta admirably. It provided a complete contrast with her husband, who was slight and slumping but highly intelligent. It provided the best of both worlds, as far as Beta, passionate but none too bright herself, could see. Hancock grunted when she kissed him.

'I'll have to be off now, darling,' she said.

'Uh,' said Hancock.

'Miss me?'

'Uh.'

'Love me?'

'Uh.'

'Think I'm beautiful?'

'Not exactly an eyesore.'

Compliments came seldom from Hancock. Beta kissed him gratefully. Then she swung her long legs over the edge of the

bed and sat up. Hancock scratched his geometrically muscled belly. He watched her dress. He seemed slightly confused by the whole thing. He had never, despite his sinews and muscle, had much success with women. But Beta had responded instantly to his very first grunt and he was still, vaguely, trying to figure out why; whether he had mysteriously become irresistible or whether there were nymphomaniac factors involved. He wondered, also, about the husband.

'Listen,' he said.

Beta listened, perhaps expecting another compliment.

'What about your husband?'

'What?'

'Doesn't he wonder where you sleep?'

'Oh, he only thinks about his work.'

'That's funny,' said Hancock, who never thought about his own work, even while working.

'He's not suspicious, don't worry.'

'Not worried. Just wondered.'

'Anton doesn't even notice that I'm gone,' said Beta.

But he had, he had . . .

'Then I understand,' said Alvin Johnstone, as they came up from the laboratory, 'that the initial attack follows within hours of being bitten and a cycle develops subsequently, but the disease is continuously infectious. Is that right?'

'Yes, that's correct,' Anton said.

They moved into the library-study. Anton looked about vaguely, not accustomed to visitors and uncertain as to the etiquette involved. He shifted his meagre weight about. Johnstone leaned against a bookcase. Johnstone had been very subtle, even after discovering that Plotnikov was hardly versed enough in social intercourse to recognize the difference, and now he debated the advisability of several diverse approaches. They were silent for some time.

At last Anton said, 'If I'd known you were coming, sir, I could have arranged for a demonstration. As it is, I have no uninfected canines at present . . .'

'Oh, we don't doubt the truth of your reports.'

'I'm pleased that interest has been aroused in my work. I ... I wonder ... just which government department are you representing?'

'Oh, research. General research. We haven't actually assigned your work yet. Haven't decided in which branch it should be included. Not a common field, as you may well imagine.'

Anton smiled. Then, immediately, he looked worried.

'But you do think I'll get a grant?'

'Oh, yes. Yes, I should think so. A great deal depends on my report which, I might say, will be favourable.'

'Oh, thank you.'

'Perhaps a grant from ...' Johnstone paused, smiled. 'Perhaps medical research. In the stricter sense. But tell me ... how would your serum affect a human being?'

Anton, unsuspecting, said, 'Well, in theory, that is just what I am seeking to prove. That the legend of the lycanthrope has pathological roots, and that, in the past, this disease was not uncommon. Now, of course, it is very rare indeed. I can't honestly claim my studies will be of medical value, you know. Oh, there are – one hears of – isolated instances from time to time. But they are seldom investigated. Prejudice and scientific incredulity and fashionable scepticism combine against truth in this case ...'

Anton paused and peered at Johnstone. Johnstone looked very interested, tilting his head in concentration, and Anton began to lose his nervousness as he spoke of a topic close to his heart and mind.

'There are many, oh so many, cases recorded in history, of course. And in what is now thought of as mythology. Lycaon, transformed into a wolf by Zeus – that is possibly the first known example. Odysseus' men transmuted into swine. Even in the Bible we have Nebuchadnezzar thinking himself an ox and eating grass – although that is more properly termed boanthropy, it is simply a variant symptom of the disease. Oh yes, there are many instances one might quote. However, as I say,

the disease is no longer common, if it exists at all. It can hardly be a medical study ...'

'Oh, it exists,' said Johnstone.

'Oh?' said Anton.

'You have created it,' said Johnstone.

And he smiled politely.

In due course Anton's limited social sense sent a message to his mind. He offered his guest a seat. Johnstone took it, pulling his sharply creased trousers up, smiling all the while. Anton sat opposite. He fidgeted. He alternately smiled and frowned. It occurred to him to offer a drink, but he did not know where, or even if, his wife kept alcohol in the house. But Johnstone seemed perfectly at ease, perfectly satisfied with the situation and the development of the interview, and eventually his attitude caused Anton to relax a bit. Johnstone smoked. Anton hastened to fetch an ashtray; could not find one and dashed back to the laboratory to return with a culture tray. Johnstone deposited ash with self-confidence, like a Roman casting salt over the ruins of Carthage.

'But if your serum, as it stands, were administered to a human? Would the effect be the same, or similar, to that with the dogs?'

Anton nodded slowly.

'In theory, yes. The adreno-salivary effect would cause hormone secretions which, in turn, would cause the victim to undergo mental and physical symptoms. His metabolism, growth, behaviour would all be affected and he would, I believe, think himself a wolf ... or a wolf man. I must confess that I shudder at the thought. Some inherited fear passed down chemically through the genes, perhaps.' Anton looked slightly sheepish. 'And yet, despite this revulsion, I have always felt myself drawn to study such morbid pathogenic conditions. Man has strange, perverse motivations, I fear.'

Johnstone nodded knowledgeably.

'Of course, we can't know for certain. I mean, we can't actually experiment with a man.'

'Um. I wonder.'

Anton raised his brows.

'In the name of science ...'

Anton's brows went higher and higher.

'A volunteer, of course.'

'Good heavens, I couldn't do that. Why ... why, it would be monstrous!'

Johnstone looked placid.

'You do understand that it must be transferred via living saliva. Surely no man would volunteer to savage another? Or, worse, to submit to the infected bite, knowing the expected results? Surely not ...'

'Oh, it might be arranged. For the good of science.' Johnstone looked sharply at Anton. 'And for the good of the country,' he added. 'You have not, perhaps, realized the potential value of your discovery as a weapon ...'

Anton was appalled.

'I ... I don't know ... I don't think I could allow myself to work on a morbidic in a practical sense ...'

'Um. It was just a thought, you understand.'

Anton nodded.

'Just a casual thought. Quite natural, really. I mean, one always does think first of one's country, does one not?'

Johnstone's glance pinned Anton like a butterfly on a display board. Anton squirmed. He had never thought much of his country, or any country. But he had thought often of a government grant. Very slowly and uncertainly and tentatively, he nodded.

'What I mean,' said Johnstone, softly, 'in war, things are sometimes justified which normally ... you do understand? Against an enemy, a threat to our happiness and freedom and way of life ... You do see what I mean?'

Anton, in the grip of doubts, not fully understanding, still fixed on the pinpoints of Johnstone's gaze, continued to move his head up and down.

Then Johnstone broke the spell.

'However, we needn't discuss that for the moment. It was just an idle thought that occurred to me. Continue with your

good work and I'll submit my report and we'll try to get you some money.'

He stood up. Anton jumped up, relieved to be freed from the pins. He walked to the door with Johnstone and they shook hands. Johnstone left smiling. Anton looked after him. Anton was not smiling. Anton had never before known that it was acceptable to treat one's enemies outside one's moral code. It was a novel and intriguing concept. Of course, Anton had never had an enemy. He stood there in the open doorway while Johnstone got in his car and drove off. Then he stepped back and started to close the door; paused as his wife's car came down the road and turned into the drive. Anton leaned against the door. His wife was smiling behind the wheel. She looked very satisfied and happy. Anton had never had an enemy before . . .

Beta came up to the door with that leisurely long-legged stride, kissed her husband *en passant*, and walked down the hallway. Anton turned, watching the swing of her hips with an interest unusual for him and turmoil in his mind. Beta went up the stairs. Anton started to close the door, then paused once again as that sinister character named Chowder emerged from the trees fringing the drive. Chowder had orange hair and, for a moment, Anton believed that a gigantic sunflower had appeared on the scene. Chowder was facing in the other direction, rubbing his corrugated neck and staring after Johnstone's car. Then he turned with a heavy scowl and came clumping up to the door. Anton, who was never quite comfortable with Chowder in the house and who had, indeed, noted the way the man sized up the silverware, waited nervously. Chowder stopped on the steps.

'That feller a copper?' he asked.

'Who?'

Chowder jerked a thumb over his shoulder.

'Feller wot just left.'

'Good heavens, no.'

Chowder squinted suspiciously.

'That so? Looked like a copper to me. I can smell coppers a mile away. You sure he weren't no copper?'

'Not at all. The gentleman was from a government agency.'

'Oh. Oh, that explains it. Same smell, you know. I thought maybe they were on to us.'

'On to us?'

''Bout them nicked dogs.'

Anton, who had never considered the illegal aspects of purchasing stolen dogs, and perhaps had not even realized they were stolen, looked puzzled.

Chowder said, 'Huh. Well, I come to see if you were ready for another delivery. Got a new scheme worked out. Real complicated and clever. Reckon to make a raid on White City just after the dog races, get the lot. Bit expensive, but they'll be better than your run o' the mill hound.'

'Actually, it appears that any sort of dog will do,' Anton said, and Chowder's face fell. Anton glanced back into the house. He looked to ascertain if any valuables were in the hall before inviting Chowder in, but as he did so his gaze fell on the stairway where Beta had ascended and instantly a plan sprang upon his mind. He blinked. He turned back to Chowder. He didn't hesitate.

'I may have another job for you,' Anton whispered.

'Yeah? What's that then?'

'Shhh.'

Chowder looked about.

Anton bit his fingernails.

'Well?'

'My wife ...'

'Yeah? You want her kidnapped too, huh?'

'No, no. But I ... I wonder ... do you think you might follow her?'

'Might. Why?'

'I fear she is ... well, perhaps ... being untrue to me.'

'Huh?'

'That perhaps she loves another.'

'Like that, is it, mate?'

'I fear so.'

'Sure, I'll follow her for you. I know how it is. My own wife ran off with an Armenian. I didn't follow her, though.'

Chowder nodded in sympathy. Anton nodded nervously. After they had finished nodding they made their plans.

The Chief snapped his snuffbox shut and tilted his chair back. Johnstone had just finished his verbal report. The Chief was wearing a different tie. It had a naked woman painted on it and when the Chief, as he sometimes did, pressed a bulb attached behind the tie, the naked woman's breasts ballooned. It was very clever. But he didn't press the bulb now, he shuffled through some papers.

'Initial check-up on this fellow Plotnikov. Seems a genuine type. Background okay. Company he works for did a thorough inquiry on him. Industrial secrets and such. Much more careful than our counter-intelligence boys, actually. More important, one assumes. His wife runs around with other men. But she's English, so that's all right. But you say he didn't seem keen on the idea, eh?'

'Not very.'

'Pressures?'

'Well, he needs the money. Then there are the dogs, of course. Obviously stolen. Not mongrels, good-looking dogs. Could blackmail him with that.'

'Pretty weak. Perhaps we'd better have a Chinaman seduce the wife. Let Plotnikov find out about it. Well, we can work that out later.'

'Do we have an Oriental operative?' Johnstone asked.

'Hell, no. But we've got some yellow paint. Same thing, isn't it?'

'I expect so.'

'Anyway, we'll think of something. This is too good to miss. Werewolves! Why, this could be the start of a new Empire.'

Johnstone smiled politely.

The Chief pressed the button.

Hancock sat up abruptly.

Beta slid down from his neck.

'Thought I saw something peculiar at the window,' he said.

'What, darling?'

'Well, it looked like a bloody great sunflower.'

'Nonsense, dearest.'

'I guess you must be right.'

'But it was romantic of you to think of flowers, dear.'

'Huh,' said Hancock.

In the cages, the dogs watched with baleful eyes and, at the table, Anton and Chowder leaned close together like Russian anarchists. Anton was pale. Chowder, whose own wife had left him for an Armenian, was gleeful.

'She's got a man, all right,' he said.

'Oh dear.'

'I followed her, see. Real careful. Professional. She never twigged a thing. Well, she went to this 'ere flat and used her own key to open it. It was a basement flat, so I nipped round to the side to have a dekkko through the window. And let me tell you, they didn't waste no time. I'm nippy on my feet, you know. Got to be in my trade, ducking and diving. But quick as I was, they were hard at it by the time I got to the window. Hard at it, they were. I'll say. Really going to town. Not just a casual poke, like what one gets in an alley, either. Real lovey-dovey stuff. All that kissing and love-biting...'

'Love-biting?' asked Anton, in his grief.

'Sure. You know. Like when a bird nibbles your neck so that the blood comes oozing through the skin and then later your old lady spots the mark and gets so annoyed that she runs off with Armenians. That sorta stuff.'

Anton, vaguely, had heard of such things. He even thought he recalled Beta trying to do it to him, on their honeymoon, although he couldn't be sure. Chowder was proceeding to reveal the sordid details, but Anton's mind had stuck at the words 'love-biting'. They played over and over again on a jammed track in his mind. Love-biting. Love-biting. Love-

biting. Love-biting. And then, somehow, the words became detached from one another. They registered separately. Love. Biting. Love. Biting. His wife loved another man. His wife bit another man. The other man was Beta's lover. Therefore the other man was Anton's enemy. It was perfectly all right to bite an enemy. Johnstone had told him so. Sparks flew across gaps in Anton's mind. Anton thought and thought.

'Oh dear,' said Beta. 'I do believe I'm going down with a horrid cold.'

She blew her nose daintily.

'Perhaps you're run down, dear,' Anton said. 'You've been out too much. You should relax at home.'

'Yes, dear,' she said, not hearing him. 'I do hope it doesn't get worse. I have an important social engagement this evening.'

Anton winced.

'Perhaps I'll phone Doctor Blackshaw. Dreadful nuisance, though. I can never see why, if you're a doctor, you can't give antibiotic shots and things.'

'I've explained before, dear. I'm not a medical doctor. It's a different thing.'

'More useful if you were.'

She blew her nose again.

Anton blinked. Anton looked down at his hands. Anton pursed his lips.

'I suppose I could give you an injection of, ah, penicillin, darling,' he said.

'Oh, could you? That would be convenient.'

'Yes, of course I could,' he said. 'I could give you a shot.'

And, presently, he did.

'I won't be able to come tomorrow, dear,' said Beta Plotnikov.

'Why's that?' asked Hancock.

'My husband.'

'Suspicious, is he?'

'Oh no, poor dear. He never suspects a thing. Not a thing.'

He doesn't even notice those marks you leave on my neck sometimes. That's how easy it is to deceive him. It makes me feel wicked sometimes when I think how innocent the poor dear is. So deliciously wicked.'

'Well, come to think of it, you are sort of wicked. Glad you're not my wife.'

'Oh, I'd never cheat against you.'

'Huh.'

She nuzzled him.

'But, anyway, I can't see you tomorrow. Anton has asked me to stay at home with him. Says he's been working hard and is going to take the whole day off and relax. He does work terribly hard, you know. So I guess I owe him one day of my time, after all. And he seemed so . . . well . . . almost demanding about it. Sort of worried, too. As if maybe he was afraid I'd refuse.'

'Well, that's okay then.'

'I won't sleep with him, of course.'

'Huh? He's your husband, isn't he?'

'Why, of course. But I simply couldn't be unfaithful to you, dearest.'

'Huh,' said Hancock, and after a while they began to bill and coo and, because she was not going to see him for a whole day, Beta felt she should make the most of this occasion, and squirmed and moaned and, soon enough, they were gyrating in the horizontal gavotte and, in the towering heights of oestral heat, they kissed and kissed . . .

Later, while dressing, Hancock paused to look in the mirror. Hancock was vain about his muscles and smiled at the deltoids. Then, abruptly, he scowled.

'What's wrong, my love?' asked Beta, from the bed.

'Huh! I don't know about your husband, but my pupils are no fools. What the hell are they going to say about these marks on my neck, huh?'

Beta giggled.

Later she went home.

Anton, for a time, suffered misgivings and regrets. He tried to convince himself that the man who had cuckolded him deserved to be punished, but found it feeble justification; tried, rather mediocrally, to believe that it was in the hands of the gods, like trial by combat, for he had no way of knowing whether Beta would actually kiss her lover fiercely enough to transmit the disease, nor even, other than in theory, whether it would prove effective against a human being; tried, even, to believe his actions were motivated by a desire to increase scientific knowledge. But none of these forms of rationalization were strong enough to deceive his doubts. He went through turmoils and upheavals of thought. He even worked, for a time, on the antidote he had been considering – worked desultorily, however, knowing as he turned from aspect to aspect that no antidote would be found without weeks and months of labour, and soon gave up the effort.

Then Beta came home.

She came home radiant and happy, and as he looked at her Anton felt his doubts fade. He felt the justification which he'd been unable to find within his own mind, in his wife's obvious satisfaction. He no longer resented her infidelity, and no longer worried about it – did not know, of course, that Hancock was but one of many, and that her behaviour would not be changed by Hancock's elimination. The peace of accomplishment stilled his troubled thoughts and he came to regret but one thing – that he would not be able to take credit, in his next report, for having created – well, whatever it was that he had created. He was not absolutely sure what that would be. He waited, with interest, for the next day to pass, certain that the evening newspapers, perhaps even special editions, would bring him the results of his experiment.

That night, he made love to his wife.

He did not, however, allow her to kiss him.

There was a full moon.

Anton had not planned it that way – had not even realized that such would be the case – but when he became aware of the

fact he felt a tingle. It seemed so very appropriate. It seemed to place the stamp of fate's approval upon his act. He had only to wait. He waited. The day passed slowly. Anton did not know the relevant data about Hancock's weight and metabolism, and therefore could not predict with any certainty when the madness would strike the man, but he knew it would be within twenty-four hours. The only thing necessary was to keep his wife safely at home during that period. Beta, however, had showed signs of restlessness during the day. It was the first day she had spent at home for some weeks. As the afternoon wore on Anton began to fear she might make some excuse to slip away, and he could think of no way to convince her, short of the impossible truth, that she must not be with her lover that day. Doing her best to be a dutiful wife, temporarily, Beta was determined to remain with Anton, but she was surprised by her own nervous energy, her own restless wanderings from room to room. She wondered whether her feelings for Hancock – for what else could cause her dysphoria other than the enforced separation? – were deeper than she had imagined them to be. And yet Hancock did not seem connected with her restlessness. She merely felt an overwhelming urge to leave the house – to divagate without any particular goal, even to take a long and uncharacteristic walk through the darkening countryside. This confused her. She could not understand the impulse. Presently she forced herself to take a seat by the window in the library-study, determined to fight down her restlessness.

Anton, at his desk, glanced towards his wife from time to time. He could just see the angle of her profile from behind, but it was sufficient to note the internal struggle reflected in her expression. She wants to go to him, he thought. He was worried. What if she simply got up and left? Anton did not know how to prevent this, short of physically restraining her, and even that was doubtful. Anton was not strong. Truth be known, he was exceptionally weak. Beta was a big, healthy woman. Anton felt sure she was stronger than he, and certainly fitter. He watched her hand open and close upon the arm of

the chair and he worried. He thought of how it would be if she went to her lover – if she were in his arms when the disease came upon him in all its horrible fury. After a while he rose and moved very quietly to the door. He turned the key in the lock and then returned to his desk and placed the key at the very back of the drawer; locked the drawer as well. It would be very embarrassing, he knew, if she demanded the key, but any degree of unpleasantness was far better than letting her go. He felt better with that precaution taken; went over to stand behind her chair and place his hand on her shoulder. Together they looked out at the moon. It was very bright, a silver disc behind shredding clouds. There were a few stars. Anton stood quietly for a time. Beta seemed tense beneath his hand. Usually, at the slightest touch, she took it as encouragement and began to squirm. But now she was still and taut. He wondered what occupied her thoughts – told himself, with a twinge of sadness, that she must be thinking of her lover. Then anger replaced the anguish. She would think of him, perhaps, but she would never again rest in his arms. She would never again come home flushed and weary with love, her pure throat blemished with those marks of passion...

Anton stiffened.

Those marks of love...

His mouth dropped open, his heart stopped for a moment and then thundered. His terrible oversight came cascading into his mind. If Beta had infected her lover and he, in turn, had kissed her in that manner ... afterwards ... when his glands were already secreting the hormones...

Anton looked down at his wife.

She sat very still. He saw only the side of her face. But he saw her hand, as well, and her hand was hooked over the edge of the arm-rest. Hooked like a claw. The veins stood out in the back of her hand and ran in pronounced ridges up her forearms. Anton stepped back. Beta did not move. Beta was looking at the moon. The moonlight fell over her face. Anton walked backwards to the door, his eyes fixed upon her. She did not move at all. He reached behind his back and grasped the

doorknob. But the door was locked. The key was in the desk and the desk was in the centre of the room. Anton stood there for some time, unable to advance. And then, with the fibre of his body blurred by terror, he started to tiptoe towards his desk. He made no sound. But he had not yet reached the desk when his wife stood up. She stood up quickly and stiffly, facing the window. Anton halted. He had not reached the desk. He stood motionless and looked at his wife and she stood motionless and looked at the moon.

And then his wife turned around.

What had once been his wife turned around.

Anton crouched, quivering, against the locked door. His ancestry screamed in his mind. He whimpered, the sound of a small and helpless animal, transfixed by the glowing eyes of the predator.

Then Beta moved towards him.

She moved slowly. Anton looked at her burning eyes and he looked at her crooked hands and he looked at her ravenous mouth...

Anton was totally insane before she reached him...

Which was probably just as well for him...

THE CLINIC

Alex White

ELLEN WAS the only child of a broken marriage. Her parents had parted when she was five, and for the next few years she spent most of her time at her kindergarten boarding school and the rest (except for three weeks with her mother at Eastbourne) in London with her father. She was very happy.

She loved both her father and his home with passion, enjoyed her school (which was a small private school near Cheltenham, run by two cosy, middle-aged women) very much indeed, but was rather scared of her mother.

She was a cheerful, willing child, polite, bright and sociable and, except with her mother, she found it very easy to get on with everyone around her.

When she was nine her mother married a Frenchman called Dr Joubert, and went to live with him and his thirteen-year-old daughter Thérèse in a tall, grey-shuttered, grim-looking house in the suburbs of Paris. The following Easter she sent for Ellen, in order to introduce her to her second *papa*, as she called him. The visit was not a success.

Dr Joubert was a florid, paunchy man with spaniel eyes, sensual, rather slack red lips and a chin which was never properly shaved. He had pudgy, dirty hands, and his clothes were always slightly soiled. He bounced rather than walked, and had a high, nasal laugh. What her mother could see in him, Ellen couldn't imagine, but there was no doubt that she was in love with him, and he with her.

Thérèse was a heavy-faced, sulky-looking girl, with a large shapeless body and thick arms and legs. She was immensely vain and inordinately fond of clothes. She had immediately

taken to her new *maman*, as indeed the new Madame Joubert had to her, and they had found a way of life completely congenial to them both. They got up in their dressing gowns to breakfast with the doctor, remaining thus clad nearly all morning. By noon they had managed to get dressed, and the doctor joined them for lunch, after which he returned to his surgery, and his womenfolk went out for an hour's shopping. Exhausted by this, they retired for an afternoon siesta, then at half past five they began dressing again for the evening meal.

Ellen found the routine boring in the extreme. There was no one to play with, and all the books in the house were in French, so she couldn't even read. She tried hard to like her new relatives, but found them rather repulsive, and her lack of French meant that she was excluded from most of the conversation. She counted the days until her return to England.

The doctor was evidently doing well in his profession, and from what little Ellen could gather from the family talk, she understood that his great ambition in life was to have a clinic named after him in the countryside in Provence, where he could give rest-cures for nervous (and rich) women. He was sure this would make his fortune. Madame Joubert and Thérèse were sure that it would, too.

Thérèse made no bones about the fact that she preferred the company of grown-ups to Ellen's, that she thought of England as a barbaric country and of Ellen's father as a monster. Occasionally she would question Ellen about her life, but always with contempt. 'This house of yours in London, is it as big as ours?' she asked one day.

'It isn't a house, it's a ground-floor flat,' said Ellen. 'It's quite big, and there is a nice garden.'

'A flat? What is a flat?'

'An apartment.'

'I prefer a house.'

'Yes, houses are nice.'

'You have your own room?'

'Yes.'

'How many cars have you?'

'Two.'

'Do you have a Mercèdes like Papa?'

'No.'

'Mercèdes are the best cars in the world. Papa says so. This school of yours, is it a big school?'

'No, it's small.'

'I should not like to go to a small school.' Thérèse sounded scornful. 'He is rich, your father?' she went on.

'Yes, I think so,' said Ellen. 'We have a chauffeur, a cook and a daily maid.'

Thérèse frowned. The Joubert household could only boast a *femme de ménage*. 'Then why did he leave your poor mother penniless?' she demanded.

Ellen tried hard not to lose her temper at this aspersion on her beloved father. She went scarlet, but said carefully, 'I'm sure he gave Mummy money. He gives everyone money.'

'No, my new *maman* had no money when he left her for this other woman,' said Thérèse. 'None at all.'

'There is no other woman!' exclaimed Ellen. 'What other woman? I don't know what you mean!'

'Because you are too young to know,' replied Thérèse calmly. 'Your father has had many many women. They made your *maman* very unhappy. He also beat your *maman*, this rich father of yours.'

'Of course he didn't!' said Ellen, tears of rage starting in her eyes. 'He's the kindest, sweetest man in the whole world.'

'Yes, he beat your *maman*,' stated Thérèse aggressively. 'Often and often. My *papa* says *maman* told him she had bruises all over her all the time.'

'It's a lie!' said Ellen. 'He didn't. He wouldn't hurt a fly.'

'We do not talk of flies, but of your *maman*,' said Thérèse.

'Stop it! Stop it!' cried Ellen, shutting her eyes tightly, to avoid seeing the spiteful, triumphant face of her new step-sister. 'I won't listen.'

'He is a brute, your father, and dull, *maman* says. Too dull to make love properly. All he can do is to be unfaithful, and to hurt people. Also he drinks.'

Ellen felt a violent hatred for Thérèse welling up inside her. 'I won't listen!' she sobbed. 'I love my father. He is not like you say. I hate you! I hate you!' She suddenly lost control of herself. 'I wish I could go back to him! I hate it here. I hate this house, I hate Dr Joubert. I hate you and I hate my mother. You're horrible all of you. Horrible! Horrible!'

'I shall tell what you say to our *maman*,' said Thérèse, 'and she will punish you.'

When Madame Joubert heard about Ellen's outburst she became almost mad with fury. She shook the child until she was hysterical, she dispatched her to bed for two days, and sent up only bread and water to eat. She refused to talk to her when at last she allowed her downstairs, and she booked her return ticket to London immediately. Thérèse was delighted. Dr Joubert, too, seemed pleased, and Ellen herself was thankful to get home.

Two years later Ellen's father was killed in a car accident, and to the child's horror she was told she would be sent back to live with her mother. A second cousin whom she hardly knew broke the news to her. 'But I can't!' she said. 'I hate my mother.'

'Now, now,' reproved the cousin. 'That's no way to talk. Your mother is your only close relative. Who else would take care of you?' So Ellen found herself in the grim, grey house near Paris again, and this time with a family that was actively hostile to her.

Her mother and Dr Joubert, though they were by now much more prosperous, still looked very much the same, and Dr Joubert had achieved his ambition of a clinic in Provence; but Thérèse, at fifteen, had changed out of all recognition. She thought of herself as grown up, wore make-up and high-heeled shoes, and had her hair permed in Paris. Unfortunately, she looked no more attractive than she had before, but she had developed physically, and with her hair piled on top of her head and a couple of the local boys taking her out on dates, she was having the time of her life.

Ellen was by now, at eleven, an exceptionally pretty little

girl, but this didn't endear her to her relatives, and in fact it made Thérèse dislike her more. None of the Jouberts had forgiven her for her behaviour two years ago, and she felt lonely and miserable nearly all the time. The death of her father had affected her a great deal, and she became pale, unsmiling and withdrawn. Her mother now made no secret of the fact that she detested her, and she and Thérèse were scarcely civil to her. Dr Joubert, however, surreptitiously pinched her bottom, overtly pinched her cheek, and showed alarming signs of physical attraction. She was sent to a local *lycée*, learnt French, and found that at school at any rate, life could be tolerable.

The years passed, and her prettiness became more pronounced. Thérèse and her mother became more and more jealous, and Dr Joubert more and more attracted. Finally, the inevitable happened, and one day when the other two women were out, the doctor tried to seduce her. She fought desperately, biting and kicking savagely, but in the middle of the struggle the door opened and Madame Joubert, who had returned unexpectedly, saw clearly what was happening. For days afterwards there were family quarrels. Ellen tried to justify herself, but this only enraged her mother more. Dr Joubert put the blame on Ellen, saying that although when the time came she had fought, Ellen had been leading him on, and that he was only human and a man at that, which his wife seemed to feel was excuse enough. Thérèse malevolently aided and abetted them both in their denunciations. Finally, a sort of peace settled, but an uneasy peace, which seemed to wait on events.

One evening Madame Joubert sent for Ellen to come to the drawing-room. It was a room she seldom entered these days, because she knew she was unwelcome. Besides, the room itself depressed her. It was high-ceilinged and painted in grey. The curtains were brown velvet, the furniture was dark-brown oak, and the loose covers on the sofa and armchairs were dark-brown linen. Dr Joubert sat in the brown armchair to the right of the gas fire, his wife to the left, and Thérèse sprawled on the sofa. Ellen chose a wooden chair between Thérèse and

her mother. She sat down in silence, with her hands folded in her lap. For a little while no one said anything. They all simply stared. And she was worth staring at, at seventeen. She had pale red-gold hair, which hung to her shoulders, blue eyes, a beautiful pink and white complexion, and her figure was exquisite.

At last Dr Joubert cleared his throat. 'Ellen, my child,' he said pompously, putting his fat hands together across his paunch, 'we have decided that as a family we are in some danger of becoming disorientated, unless we take firm steps to prevent it. Do you agree?'

'I don't think I quite understand,' said Ellen anxiously.

'The point is,' broke in Madame Joubert impetuously, 'you're not happy here, and you're breaking the family apart, so we want you to go.'

'I'm sorry,' said Ellen.

'It's no good just being sorry!' snapped her mother. 'Something has got to be done.'

'Yes, Mother.'

'So we thought perhaps you might like to get a job away from here,' said Dr Joubert smoothly. 'Does that appeal?'

As this was exactly what Ellen had asked for, over and over again, only to be rebuffed, she said nothing.

'Would you like it?' persisted Dr Joubert.

'What sort of job were you thinking of?' asked Ellen cautiously.

'I thought you might like to go to Provence and work in my clinic,' said Dr Joubert. 'That way we can keep our eye on you, although you wouldn't be living here.'

Ellen thought rapidly. She had no wish to be anywhere where the predatory doctor could get her under his thumb, but her position at her mother's house was becoming so intolerable that almost anywhere away from home would seem to be an advantage. 'Thank you,' she said quietly. 'That sounds very nice.'

The doctor's eyes gleamed, and her mother and Thérèse exchanged quick glances.

Three days later she was on her way. She was sent by herself, and carried with her a letter from the doctor to the head of the clinic.

The clinic was magnificent to look at. It was a large, castellated stone building, superbly set in rolling parklands. No one seemed to be about in the grounds, which struck her as odd, since it was a beautiful sunny day; there were no cars outside the front door, either. She paid off the taxi, which had been sent to meet her at the station, and rang the door-bell.

The door was opened by a man in a white waistcoat, who looked at her unemotionally. He was quite young, with slanting eyes, and black hair *en brosse*.

'I am Ellen Marley,' said Ellen.

The man went on looking at her, but said nothing. She stepped into the hall and he shut the door behind her, took her suitcase and beckoned to her to follow him. Rather surprised, Ellen did as she was told. She tried to engage him in conversation, but he paid no attention at all. He led her along the hall, up two flights of stairs, along a very long corridor to one of the towers which stood at the four corners of the building, and then climbed more stairs, until at last they came to a white door, marked 'Matron. Private.' He then pantomimed to her to knock, and left her. Once again Ellen obeyed him, and knocked on the door.

A woman's voice called, 'Come in,' and she went in.

There were two people in the small, square room – the Matron, and a man in a white coat. The Matron was a beautiful, dark-haired woman in her early forties, with hard eyes and a cruel mouth. The man, who was introduced as Dr Jamel, was in his fifties. He wore heavy-rimmed dark glasses, and had a long, pointed nose.

'Ah, mademoiselle,' he purred. 'We were expecting you earlier.'

'The train was late. I'm so sorry,' apologized Ellen.

'You had a good journey?'

'Yes, thank you.'

'You have a letter for me, I believe?'

'Yes Monsieur.' Ellen handed the letter to Dr Jamel, who read it, then handed it to the Matron. She too read it, and returned it to the doctor. Ellen could now feel a strange undercurrent of excitement in the atmosphere.

'You read the letter, mademoiselle?'

'No,' said Ellen. The two of them glanced at one another.

'You know why you have come to us?'

'To work in the clinic.'

Again they looked at one another.

'Did Dr Joubert tell you what work you would be doing?'

'No. He just felt that I should like to go away from home for a little.'

'Of course. Will you go next door with Matron, please? I want you undressed for the examination.'

'What examination?'

'Everyone who comes here has an examination,' said the Doctor patiently. 'It is what the clinic is for.'

'But I haven't come as a patient.'

'Of course not,' said the Matron soothingly, and her hard eyes showed no sympathy.

'You have had nervous strain in your family, have you not, mademoiselle?' asked the doctor. 'This letter says so.'

'I became upset, yes,' said Ellen, 'but for a very good reason.'

'Of course. Of course.' Again the Matron sounded soothing, but again her expression was hard.

'Be off with you, then,' said the Doctor playfully. 'I am a very busy man.'

'But I don't want an examination!' exclaimed Ellen.

'You'll have to learn to do what you're told,' said the Matron. 'If the Doctor says you are to have an examination, you must have one.' She opened the door behind her desk, and almost pushed Ellen into the room beyond, slamming the door behind her again. 'Take off your things,' she said.

'I refuse,' said Ellen obstinately.

'I should advise you to obey,' said the Matron. 'I am very strong, and these walls are thick.'

Ellen looked wildly round the room, hoping for escape, but there was none. 'There must be some mistake,' she said desperately. 'I have come here to work.'

'What mistake could there be?' asked the Matron. 'I have read the letter myself.'

'What did it say?'

'It said we were to keep you until you had learnt to control yourself, and to obey orders,' said the Matron. 'It said that we could treat you in any way we thought best. That's what it said, so hurry up and get those clothes off.'

Ellen started to cry, which made the older woman impatient. 'The quicker you get undressed, the quicker it will be over,' she said.

At last Ellen undressed, and lay miserably down on the bed as she was told.

After the Doctor had looked her over, and prodded her like a prize pig, he raped her, while the Matron looked on impassively.

Ellen was kept a prisoner in the room for several months. The Doctor had his way with her whenever he wanted and Ellen, sick with disgust and despair, lost weight, cried her eyes out, screamed, fought, bit, hammered at the walls, and refused to eat, until she began to lose her looks, and the doctor to lose interest. The Matron wrote long letters to Dr Joubert, describing her 'progress', which the doctor read out to the rest of the family, once a week, before dinner.

Ellen is not getting on well [she wrote one day]. We hope she will learn obedience soon, or we shall have to take sterner measures. Dr Jamel and I are sorry that you are too busy to visit us at present, but by the time you do come, we shall either have a subservient girl on our hands, or she will have been 'corrected'. Either way, she will never again have the ability to harm your family.

The clinic goes from strength to strength. You were right. There are a great many problem families, and how sad it is! We have had some encouraging successes here

lately. Both Mlle Rambert and Mlle Hiver have been returned 'trained' to their loved ones. Mlle Varnies has had to be 'corrected' (like Ellen, her sins were pride and vanity). She comes round from the anaesthetic this evening.

Yours sincerely,
Marie Fournier.

Ellen, however, did not become subservient, and when another equally pretty young girl was sent to the clinic for 'treatment', she was moved away from Dr Jamel in the tower to a foetid, windowless cell in the basement, where she was put at the disposal of Roger, the deaf-mute who had admitted her on arrival at the castle. Roger was a sadist, but even this couldn't bring her to heel. Here she not only fought and kicked and tried to give as good as she got, but on the rare occasions that she saw either the Matron or Dr Jamel, she threatened that if ever she escaped, she would see that the whole world knew of the infamy of the clinic, and of all who ran it. So, once again, the Matron wrote to the family.

I write to tell you that because Ellen has refused to be trained, she has been 'corrected' instead, and will be sent back to you when she is able to travel, in some months' time. The operation was a great success. I hope this reaches you, dear Dr Joubert, as it leaves me, in the pink of health.

Yours sincerely,
Marie Fournier.

When the time came, the whole Joubert family went down to Provence to fetch Ellen, first giving themselves two weeks' holiday in Antibes. They drove up to the castle in high spirits, looking brown and well, and Dr Joubert left the women in the car outside the front door.

'I shan't be long,' he said. 'I have one or two things to see to. Don't be too bored. Stretch your legs if you feel like it, and have a walk in the grounds.'

'We're quite happy here,' said his wife. 'I don't feel like walking, do you Thérèse?'

'No, *Maman*.'

It was nearly three-quarters of an hour before Dr Joubert reappeared, carrying a little suitcase in one hand, and propelling Ellen with the other. She had a thick black veil wound round her face, and she was tottering like a paralytic.

'My God! Whatever is the matter with her?' exclaimed Madame Joubert, when her husband and daughter reached the car.

'A little extra precaution we had to take when she had her "correction" operation,' replied the doctor, shaking his head sadly. 'She's a quite exceptionally obstinate girl.'

'But both her hands and her feet have been severed. And look at those awful tin things she is walking in,' went on his wife, horrified. 'It's terrible!'

'Yes, terrible,' agreed the doctor, 'but we had to safeguard ourselves and the good name of the clinic, and she threatened to expose us. It was therefore necessary to see that she had no means of communication. With no hands or feet, she cannot send in a report to the authorities.'

'She can always talk!' exclaimed Madame Joubert. 'I don't understand.'

'What is a correction operation, *Papa*?' broke in Thérèse eagerly. 'What have you done to her?'

'Whatever faults that a patient who is sent to us suffers from, we have to take away the cause,' said Dr Joubert sententiously.

'And what faults did Ellen suffer from?' asked Thérèse, her eyes shining with anticipation.

'The clinic decided she suffered from pride and vanity,' replied the doctor.

'So?' asked Madame Joubert moistening her lips anxiously.

'I'll take off her veil,' said Dr Joubert. 'Then you will understand. You must brace yourselves, I'm afraid. It is not pleasant but, as I said, before, it was necessary.'

He uncovered Ellen's face, and both the women gasped.

One of her eyes had been removed, and the socket sewn up. Her nose had been broken across her face, so that it now nearly touched her right cheek, and her left ear had been cut off. She looked hideous beyond belief.

'But Henri!' expostulated Madame Joubert, when she was able to speak again. 'Surely this was injudicious? She can tell the world what you have done.'

'On the contrary, my dear!' replied Dr Joubert waggishly. 'To coin a phrase, the poor girl has lost her tongue.'

'You mean?' gasped his wife.

'Precisely. It has been – how shall we put it? – dispensed with.'

'You cut it out?'

'They cut it out, yes.'

Madame Joubert was sick on the floor of the car. Thérèse laughed so heartily that her father presently joined in; one tear welled up in Ellen's remaining eye, and fell with a splash on to her blouse.

THE SPIDER AND THE FLY

or

LITTLE MISS MUFFET

Myc Harrison

THIN MIST curled grey against the lush, green, open field as the morning sun rose slowly in a cloudless sky. It was to be a day of work, for the spider, at least. Spinning silken threads amid the early morning dew; and all, perhaps, to catch one single, lonely fly.

Which would die.

Yet for the naked girl, spreadeagled in the mist, morning had arrived too late. Strong fingers had sought her neck and throat that night gone by and the seeds of death sowed flowers on her open grave. Face up to the pale blue sky she lay, eyes open wide and backward turned as though searching for an answer within herself. The gentle swirling mist formed halos round her head.

Quite dead.

Then slowly, from dreamless sleep, the spider came awake. Uncurling from a little round ball, he stretched, eight black, hairy legs in sets of two. A big, full-bodied beast, full of overt caution whilst lacking the subtle finesse of fear. He looked around, four pairs of compound eyes feeding on the landscape. His web long gone, trampled beneath the thrashings of the night just passed. A web of steel that hadn't seen the morning.

Or mourning.

A trickle of dew ran down the naked shoulder to disappear in the blades of grass. Those compound eyes caught the movement as instinct sent him forward; crashing over the broken

terrain, he came scurrying through the mist. Up the blades of grass and over cold, damp flesh, hauling himself up till he reached her breast.

Or chest.

This place was right, raised above the ground to catch the passing trade. An elevated web. He moved sideways, crablike, down the gentle slope of breast to the neck and on up again, pausing at her open lips. Thick legs explored the soft, textured mouth, the enamel whiteness of her teeth, then moved on, shuffling at the cold orifice of her nostril, half in, half out.

Look out!

The shadow of a bird passed over, blotting out the sun. Yet the early bird catches the worm and the spider lived a little longer. He stayed put, like some thick blob of mucus. The bird soared higher, lost in the haze of the sun and on to pastures new. The spider crawled out on to her cheek, finding an open eye above. The lower lashes curled under, thick and strong. Each he carefully tested before weaving his silky thread around them, his spinnerets working hard to bridge the gap.

To set a trap.

Back and forth he trudged across her body, pulling tight his sticky threads round blades of grass and wild grown flowers, then back, once more, to face and eyes. He worked hard and fast, precision the virtue of his weaving. Whilst all the time his eyes kept watch to warn him of approaching danger. And then, at last, he had finished. The silvery web, glistening from his sticky secretion, was suspended like some safety net at a circus. He doubled back to sit in its centre, pulling in his legs and squatting like an ancient, ageless Buddha. Faking silent sleep or death and waiting for vibration.

Come to life from hibernation.

And all the time the sun beat down, warming up the prostrate body. A faint odour, of death itself, speckled the air and all the while the spider remained immobile as the fly came down to feed from the human form. It reached the web, overlooked in the headlong rush of greed. The taut threads

quivered, sending vibrations back and forth to meet in the centre. The fly was fighting harder now, tearing threads to escape its hungry killer. Then the spider moved, fast and efficient, flashing along the radial spokes of the web, closing on his prey. The fight was savage, animal and insect locked in mortal combat. Until, at last, the spider closed his jaws around his prey, injecting the poison to paralyse him.

A death so slow.

Yet the battle was not over yet, for up above a bird wheeled across the pale blue sky. Sharp eyes watched from above, unsure of the human shape below. The spider saw his chance, dragging the fly across the broken web, down between the rise of breasts, spinning more thread to hide his victim. He pushed and pulled, seeking refuge as the bird moved closer, its wings swept back in graceful flight.

A deadly, feathered kite.

Frantic now, the spider stumbled forward, skirting the shallow, sunken navel, moving lower, the fly in tow. Even then, he almost missed the fibrous growth, doubling back, triumphant, towards it. He pulled his prize deeper into the course, textured strands, struggling to escape the daylight and the bird on high. And then the fibres parted, plunging down all soft and sloped.

Into which the spider groped.

Then crawling forward, his prey behind, he entered thankfully that dark and musky place. Deeper and deeper he pulled his foe, into those soft, surrounding walls. A place of silence to devour his prey. As dark as any tomb.

And safe as any mother's womb.

CHANGE OF HEART

John Snellings

STARING DOWN at the ashtray, Paula Roberts crushed her cigarette out and immediately reached for another. She watched her hands as she lit it, aware of their unsteady trembling. She wondered if they would ever stop.

Slowly, she lowered them to the table, then gazed up at her husband.

It was quiet in the small kitchen. Only the dull humming of the refrigerator and the occasional clinking of Mike's fork interrupted the intense silence.

Looking across the table at him, Paula wondered how he could just sit there, stuffing himself, and acting as if nothing were happening. He always seemed so calm and so unconcerned. The least he could do, she thought, was act as if he half believed her, instead of making her feel as though she should be locked away somewhere.

Paula sighed.

She didn't know how much longer she could go on this way. Being afraid day after day, night after night. Watching, waiting, listening to every little sound, jumping at the slightest movement. It was enough to drive anyone insane.

She was afraid to go out of the flat, afraid to go to sleep, even afraid to move from one room to another. If only she had someone to talk to, she told herself, things wouldn't be so bad. But she had no one. Not even her husband.

Suddenly she noticed he had finished eating.

'You want me to make some fresh coffee?' she asked, surprised at the weakness in her voice.

Mike looked up at her without expression.

'What did you say?' he asked.

'I said – do you want me to make you some more coffee?'

'No,' he mumbled, glancing at his watch. 'I'm running late now.'

He gulped the last of his coffee, then rose slowly to his feet. He was a tall man with thick, dusty brown hair and a longish, good-looking face. His eyes were blue and alert and he looked much younger than his thirty-eight years. He retrieved his jacket from the back of his chair and pulled it on. He glanced around the kitchen, slapping his hands against his pockets.

'Have you seen my pipe?' he asked.

'It's on the coffee table,' Paula answered coldly.

'Well – I guess I'd better be going.'

Paula gazed down at the table. Nervously, she began twisting her wedding ring around her finger. It was a wide, gold band with a single diamond in its centre.

'Can't you stay home tonight?' she asked, almost in a whisper.

'No,' he said shortly. 'You know I can't. Mr Dunninger wants those house plans finished by Friday. If I don't have them ready by then, I'm out.'

There was a long pause.

'Listen,' Mike said, 'you'll be all right. Just try to get some rest and try not to think about . . . anything.'

'You mean, try to keep my imagination from running away with me, don't you?'

Mike sighed heavily.

'Don't worry,' Paula said bitterly, 'I'm not going to say anything else. It wouldn't do me any good, anyway.'

Mike checked his watch again.

'We'll talk about it tomorrow,' he said.

Paula looked up at him, tears forming in her eyes.

'You don't believe me now – why should it be any different tomorrow?'

Mike dug a cigarette from his shirt pocket and lit it. He drew the smoke deep into his lungs and tried to control the anger building up inside him.

'Look, Paula,' – he tried to speak calmly – 'I'm getting sick and tired of all this. You've been moping around here for three weeks now, like some brainless zombie. I hardly even know you any more. When are you going to straighten up and forget all this nonsense?'

'Nonsense!' Paula cried. 'I tell you that a man is going to kill me, and you call it nonsense!'

'Why should anyone want to kill you? There's no reason—' Mike stopped abruptly and threw his hand up, like a policeman holding back the traffic. 'Wait, I forgot – you said he was a cannibal, and a cannibal does need fresh meat—'

'Stop it!' Paula broke in. 'You make it sound as if it's all a big joke. Something to laugh over with the boys at the office. But everything I told you is true. I saw it with my own eyes. You should be the one person that would believe me!'

Mike began pacing the floor. 'Don't start getting hateful,' he said.

'Well, I'm tired of you avoiding me all the time. You sit around here giving me those looks of yours, as if I'm out of my mind or something. Do you think I'm making all this up?'

'No, of course not. I just think you need a good rest. You've been cooped up in this flat too long and you've been watching too many of those film-of-the-week things on television. Like that one – what was it – a vampire loose in Las Vegas?'

'Oh, Mike – don't be ridiculous!'

'Well, what you're asking me to believe is just as preposterous.'

Mike crushed his cigarette into the ashtray and stood there, shaking his head slowly. 'A cannibal next door. A man that kills dogs and cats, then eats them raw. It's the craziest thing I've ever heard.'

'It's not just animals!' Paula snapped. 'It was at first, but now it's humans too. I saw him kill that poor little boy – and then he—' Paula dropped her face into her hands and shuddered. 'It was horrible. I'll never forget it – never!'

Mike looked at her for a moment, then pulled his chair out and sat down. He rested his elbows on the table and massaged

his forehead with the tips of his fingers.

'Paula,' he said wearily, 'the police have searched the entire building, and they found nothing. There wasn't a hint that anyone had been over there. That block of flats has been condemned for years, and with all that dust there would have been footprints or something. But there weren't any.'

Paula stared across the table at him, her bright green eyes filling with anger. She said nothing.

'About this boy you keep talking about,' Mike continued. 'The police have no reports of any boy missing in the neighbourhood, or even close by. And they don't think there'll be one, either. Don't you see – nothing you've said checks out. There's nothing to back up your story.'

Paula bit her lower lip. She closed her eyes tightly, trying to squeeze back her tears. She tried to understand Mike's attitude, but couldn't. She had never seen him so short-tempered before, or so distant.

'Look, Paula,' he said, 'why don't you call Doctor Palmer tomorrow morning and make an appointment to—'

'No!' Paula shouted. 'I won't call him – or anyone else. I – I don't need that kind of help. If you won't believe me, neither will anyone else. And I won't be locked away like some wild animal.'

Mike shrugged and stood up. 'Have it your own way,' he said. 'I've got to go.'

Paula calmed herself long enough to light another cigarette. She looked up, gazing past him towards the window.

Mike drew a deep breath and headed for the living-room.

'Wait!' Paula said suddenly.

Mike stopped and stood with his back to her.

'What is it now?'

Paula took a long breath, then turned to face him.

'Would you go over there and check – just once more?' Her voice was a little calmer.

Mike turned round slowly.

'Paula, can't you get it through—'

'Please, just once more. I won't ask you again, I promise.'

Mike was silent for a moment, then he said, 'All right. But this is it.'

He crossed the kitchen, jerked the cabinet door open and brought out his flashlight. He checked it, then walked round the table and, without looking back, went out of the back door. On the way down the narrow staircase he thought about the way he'd been acting. He felt confused, and back there in the kitchen he'd felt a fleeting moment of compassion for Paula. Pangs of guilt began gnawing slowly at his mind. He suddenly found himself wondering if he could go through with it.

When he reached the foot of the stairs he opened the door and stepped out into the alley. He shivered suddenly, as a gust of icy wind licked at his face. It blew steadily for a few long moments, then stopped abruptly as if it had been shut off by a controlled switch.

Mike drew his shoulders up and, pursing his lips, he crossed the alley. He paused at the door of the old building then, turning his head, he glanced up at his kitchen window. Paula, as he had guessed, was standing there watching him.

He waved to her with his flashlight then, frowning, he pushed the heavy door open and stepped inside. He grimaced as the stale, musty air filled his nostrils. He switched on his flashlight and kicked the door shut with his foot.

He stood in the hallway for a moment, shining his light through the murky darkness around him. The place was even worse than he'd imagined. Old clothes, shoes, tin cans, glass and broken pieces of furniture lay scattered from one end of the hall to the other.

The ceiling was a river of cracks and the thin, drab walls were full of jagged holes, some small, some large enough for a man to crawl through. Every corner held a thick network of dusty grey cobwebs.

Mike aimed the light ahead of him and inched his way forward, carefully stepping over the debris. He wondered what Paula would say if she knew he'd lied about coming over here the first time. And that he had convinced the police there was

no need to search the place. That Paula was ill, and just imagining things.

Mike shook the thoughts from his mind and climbed the stairs, shivering in the cold, damp air. He reached the first floor and moved slowly down the corridor. After a few feet, he stopped abruptly and stood rigid, listening.

Something moved ahead of him. He flashed the light at the floor and caught a glimpse of a huge rat as it scurried across the floor and disappeared behind an overturned chair. He released a long breath and stood still for several moments, listening to it scratching at the wall.

He knew now where all the holes came from. Uneasily he moved on, his light darting back and forth across the hall. There were several flats on each side, their doors standing open, a thin blanket of cobwebs covering their entrance. Except for one.

With reluctance, Mike moved forward and stepped through the door.

'Hey!' he called out, flashing the light around the room.

He listened, but there was only the deathlike silence.

Moving to the centre of the room, he called again.

'Mr Jordan! It's me - Mike Roberts - where are you?'

Silence.

Mike started to shout again, then he heard a faint rustling sound behind him. He whirled round, startled.

'What the hell—' He flashed the light into Jordan's face. 'Do you have to sneak up on me like that?'

Harvey Jordan stood in the beam of the flashlight, squinting up at him with cold, black eyes. He was an extremely short man with matted grey hair and grimy, tattered clothing. The light made his face look almost skeletal.

'I wasn't sneaking up on you,' Jordan said hoarsely, 'I was merely walking the way I always walk. I'm sorry if I scared you.' The old man's thin lips wrinkled into a grin, revealing large yellowing teeth. 'Would you mind taking that light off me.'

Mike lowered the light. 'What do you do, live in the dark all the time?'

'I have some lanterns,' the old man said. 'But, I don't think it'd be wise to use them. Your wife is probably looking over here right now.'

Mike turned the light off and glanced out of the curtainless window. From where he stood he could see his living-room window clearly, but there was no sign of Paula. He turned his attention back into the room. It was so dark he could barely make out the stunted form of the old man in front of him.

'Did you wish to see me about something?' Jordan asked.

Grimacing, Mike backed a couple of steps. The old man's breath was as repulsive as his appearance.

'No,' Mike said, 'not really. My wife asked me to come over and look around again.'

'Again? Were you here before?'

'As far as my wife's concerned, I was. She thinks I've searched this place from top to bottom.'

'How is she taking things?' Jordan asked.

Mike fished a cigarette from his shirt pocket and lit it, his eyes closing at the sudden glare of the lighter. 'Just as I hoped she would,' he said, snapping the lighter shut.

'You don't sound very enthusiastic about it. You're not getting cold feet, are you?'

'I gave you the money, didn't I?'

The old man chuckled softly. 'Of course,' he said. 'But that still doesn't answer my question.'

Mike sighed. 'No, I'm not getting cold feet. I'm just a little tired - that's all.'

A long moment of silence followed. Outside, the wind tore at a loose shutter and rattled the window.

'What made you come up with such a wild idea?' Mike asked suddenly. 'Why didn't you use ghosts or something like that?'

Jordan laughed. 'Ghosts? No - no. If you're trying to drive someone insane, don't use the old ghost routine. It's too worn

out. Seems like nowadays, everyone has seen a ghost or two. But how many people have seen a real live cannibal?’

Mike dropped his cigarette on the floor and crushed it out with the heel of his shoe.

‘I guess you’re right,’ he said. ‘It just sounds so ridiculous.’

‘Precisely.’

Slowly, Mike began pacing the floor, the boards creaking and moaning under his feet. ‘I guess the crazier it sounds, the better it is,’ he said.

The old man shuffled across the room and sat down on the dust-choked sofa. ‘I don’t think your wife could get anyone to believe her, do you?’

‘No. All the neighbours avoid her as if she has the plague or something, and the police practically laughed in her face. What really gets her, though, is thinking that I don’t believe her.’

The old man chuckled again. ‘It won’t be long now,’ he said.

Mike shivered and stuck his hands in his pockets. ‘How the hell do you stand it in this ice box?’

‘I’m used to places like this,’ Jordan mumbled. ‘I don’t think I’d feel at home anywhere else.’

‘I don’t see how you could feel at home here.’

The old man didn’t reply.

‘How much longer will this have to go on?’ Mike asked impatiently.

‘You should know the answer to that better than I.’

‘Well,’ Mike said, ‘she’s in pretty bad shape, I can tell you that.’

The old man coughed and cleared his throat. ‘Well then, one more night should do it. You’ll be rid of her by morning, I promise you.’

Mike stopped pacing. ‘You think they’ll commit her that soon?’ he asked.

‘They won’t have any choice,’ Jordan replied.

Wearily, Mike crossed the room to the door and stood there, staring out into the gloomy corridor. He had expected things

to be different, as far as his feelings were concerned. Hé was sad and depressed, when he should be feeling happy and relieved. Things were going just as he planned. Tomorrow he'd be free. Free to live his life the way he wanted to without having to answer to anyone for it. He could do what he wanted, go where he wanted, and see anyone he wanted without feeling like a criminal. But yet, he felt miserable.

Mike turned slowly and gazed down at the dim silhouette of the old man. 'I guess I'd better go,' he said.

Jordan stood up, yawning. 'Is there anything else on your mind?' he asked.

'No, I'll see you tomorrow.'

'I'll be here.'

Mike pulled his flashlight from his back pocket and went slowly down the corridor, his feet numbed by the coldness. He moved down the stairs and stepped outside, the huge door slamming behind him.

The air was sharp and cold, but it smelled good. Mike breathed deeply for several minutes, then stood there wondering whether to go back to his flat. No, there would be too many questions Paula would ask, he told himself. And he just wasn't up to answering them. Frowning, he turned and walked down the alley towards his car.

Mike made it to the office as fast as the traffic would allow. He went in, removed his jacket and walked immediately to the huge filing cabinet against the wall. He took out the drawings, then turned and unrolled them across the drafting table behind him.

He stared down at them for a moment, then slowly shook his head. He'd never finish them by Friday, he told himself. There were too many mistakes to be corrected, and all the dimensions had yet to be added. Frowning, he pulled the stool out and sat down heavily. He placed his elbows on the table and dropped his chin into his hands.

He wished now he'd never started this crazy scheme. He was beginning to feel more and more guilty as the days went

by. There were times when he felt unbearably ashamed and disgusted with himself.

He wished there were some other way out. If only she would give him a divorce, he thought. But she'd never do that. She wouldn't even consider it. How many times had she told him that she'd never let him go. A hundred? A thousand?

He could just walk out, but that wouldn't solve anything. She'd follow him wherever he went, so she could go on making him miserable.

Mike sighed and picked up his pencil. He bent and scribbled a few numbers on the drawing, his pencil moving in slow, laggard strokes. After a moment he stopped and looked up.

Damn her! If only she'd kept off his back. She was always nagging, always complaining about something, and always getting upset at the least little thing. And jealous. According to her he had a woman hidden in every closet in the house. If he had had all the women she accused him of having, he'd be dead and in his grave already.

Mike put his pencil down and lit a cigarette. Of course, he thought, she hadn't always been like this. The past seemed a long way off, but there had been times when she had been wonderful to be with. When they were first married, he reflected, things were great. They laughed together, played together, and made love as if there wasn't a tomorrow. He wished things could be like that again, but those days were gone, buried.

He hated doing this to Paula, though. He hadn't expected to feel so damned awful about it. He had underestimated his feelings. He couldn't even stand looking at her any more.

When he did he visualized her cowering in a corner of a small room, just sitting there, staring at nothing with red, swollen eyes. Her lips moving, but emitting no words. He could just see her rocking back and forth, day after day, not knowing or caring about anything.

Mike tried desperately to force her out of his mind, but the harder he tried, the more he thought about her. He even thought of things that he'd long forgotten.

He lifted his eyes and regarded the dark panelled walls of his office. Sadly, he remembered how Paula had helped him choose the colour and type of wood. He glanced down at the deep, rich carpet. That, too, had been her idea. She knew what he liked better than he did.

Mike forgot about his cigarette until it burned down to his fingers. He dropped it into the ashtray and lit up another. He was going to have to cut down, he told himself. This was the second packet today, or was it the third?

He shrugged and turned his attention back to the drawings. He picked up his pencil once again and tried to get back to work. He pressed too hard and the lead broke, tearing a long hole in the tracing paper. Mike cursed aloud and threw the pencil across the room. With a trembling hand he brought his cigarette up and drew a long puff, then crushed it into the ashtray.

If only he could concentrate, he told himself. If he could only get Paula off his mind. Suddenly, he thought of something that he had never considered. Was it possible that he was still in love with her? Maybe that was the reason for his guilty feelings, and the hate and contempt he'd built up for himself.

Mike stood up and paced slowly across the room, mulling things over in his mind. Maybe he was the reason for Paula's behaviour. He hadn't been much of a husband to her, he was never home long enough. He'd been working at night for a long time now and all the weekends were spent out of town. Even when he was home he—

Mike stopped pacing and stood at the window, staring out into the darkness. He felt sick and disgusted as he began thinking of things he should have considered long ago.

He wondered how long it had been since he had told Paula that he loved her, or wanted her, or even needed her. She was still a very attractive woman, but how long had it been since he'd told her so? When was the last time he had held her and kissed her the way a husband should? It had been so long that Mike found himself wondering if he'd done those things at all.

Wearily, he dug another cigarette from his shirt pocket and lit it. He gazed past the end of it and caught his reflection in the window. He saw a man that he no longer recognized as himself. It was the reflection of an over-ambitious man, so wrapped up in his work that he'd forgotten he had another kind of life. That is, he used to have another kind of life.

Mike snapped his lighter shut and returned it to his pocket. He decided, suddenly, not to go through with it. Deep inside him, he knew he couldn't have done it. A part of him had always known.

But he couldn't just call it off and leave it at that. He'd have to try and get Paula away from the flat for a while and try to make her forget that this had ever happened, if that was possible. He could never tell her the truth. He'd just have to try his best to make it up to her.

Mike walked over to his desk and sat down. He crushed his cigarette out and sat there, pulling thoughtfully at his lower lip. He could take her to Florida, he told himself. She's always talked about going to Clearwater for a couple of weeks. Yes, that's exactly what she needs.

Let's see now — he'd have to get rid of Jordan, which shouldn't be too much of a problem. He'd let him keep the money, just to keep his mouth shut. He'd take the old bum back to the alley where he had found him. Mike laughed. A cannibal. What a stupid idea. Trust an old drunkard to come up with something like that.

Mike stood up and pulled on his jacket. If he was going to call it off, he thought, he'd better do it before Jordan started on her again. She couldn't take much more, that was for sure.

Mike walked to the door, stopped, then looked back over his shoulder. He wouldn't be back, he knew that, and he wasn't sorry. Somehow he felt free, like a man just released from prison. He felt relieved, as if a heavy burden had just been lifted from his shoulders. Smiling, he switched off the lights and opened the door, then walked out and closed it, for ever, behind him.

When he got back to his block of flats, Mike parked his car near the alley and walked immediately to the building where Jordan was staying. He pushed the door open and stopped abruptly, remembering he'd left his flashlight in the car. He thought for a moment then, deciding not to go back for it, he drew a deep breath and stepped inside.

He stretched his arm out and moved sideways until he touched the wall. With his fingertips slightly touching the wall, to guide him, he walked carefully down the black corridor.

Broken glass crunched under his feet and once he felt something brush against his foot. Something alive. Mike shuddered as he thought of the huge rat he had seen earlier. He found the stairs and climbed them slowly, then went down the hall, counting the doors until he reached Jordan's room. He stepped through and called out to him.

'Jordan!'

He stood still, listening for the sounds of the old man's footsteps.

Nothing.

'Mr Jordan!' he called again. 'I've got to talk to you!'

Mike held his breath and listened, but the room remained utterly silent. He held his arms out in front of him and moved slowly across the room. He banged his knee against a small table and almost fell. 'Damn it!' he swore. 'Jordan, where the hell are you?'

Suddenly, it flashed into his mind. He remembered the last thing Jordan had said: 'You'll be rid of her by morning, I promise you.'

Mike rushed out of the room and ran blindly down the hall. He took the stairs two and three at a time and stumbled wildly along the corridor until he reached the door. He jerked it open and dashed across the alley, sweat running cold down his back.

He opened the small door leading up to his flat and climbed the narrow stairway, his heart pounding violently against his chest. There was a strange odour in the air, something like the smell of stewed beer.

Mike reached his kitchen door and tried to open it.

It was locked!

'Paula!' Mike pounded on the door. 'Paula, answer me!'

Silence.

'Paula!' he cried. 'For God's sake, open the door!'

There was no answer.

Mike took a firm hold on the doorknob and with all his strength slammed his body against the door. It splintered open and Mike stood there, frozen to the floor. His heart seemed to stop as his eyes took in the scene before him. There was blood everywhere, all over the sink, the floor – even the walls were splashed with it.

Mike's mouth fell open and his eyes widened in horror as he gaped down at Harvey Jordan. The old man was sitting at the table behind a pile of bones, chewing grotesquely on a severed, half-cooked arm. A woman's arm.

Mike didn't scream until the ring slid from its shrivelled finger and dropped on to the table. It was a wide gold band with a single diamond in its centre.

THE HOOK

Gilbert Phelps

'DON'T BRING your own coat-hangers.' What a curious accompaniment to an invitation! It was true, Porson reflected, that one did sometimes receive some pretty eccentric injunctions – but they were usually either positive in form: 'bring your Wellingtons'; 'bring two empty milk bottles'; 'bring a good supply of sealing-wax' (to recollect some recent examples) – or positive in intent: 'don't *forget* to bring your Wellingtons', milk bottles or sealing-wax. This was certainly the first time he had received a positive prohibition with an invitation! What could it mean? Perhaps on a previous occasion the guests *had* been instructed to bring coat-hangers in the interests of some new and esoteric party game, which had then turned out a disastrous flop? Or perhaps Mrs Rydall was planning some equally esoteric practical joke?

It hardly seemed likely from what he had seen of her. True, he had only met her a couple of times (at other people's house-parties), and though he could imagine she might be eccentric, she had not struck him as inventively so. He remembered her as a rather stocky woman, with dark chestnut hair, streaked with grey and worried-looking eyes, who had nevertheless enjoyed such normal pursuits as bridge, golf, tennis, walks and picnics – and who had excused herself from the more unusual diversions like Blind Man's Buff and Hide and Seek, adult versions of which had been all the rage during the past two years or so.

Perhaps the injunction was, for some reason, addressed specifically to him? But no – when he looked at the card again he saw that the words had been printed. Well then, perhaps

the addition was merely intended to provide curiosity?

That, at any rate, was the effect it had on Porson, for he duly presented himself at Mrs Rydall's charming Georgian house on the Sussex downs, overlooking Brighton and the sea. Perhaps that was why everybody else had accepted the invitation too – somewhat to Mrs Rydall's embarrassment, it appeared, for she took Porson aside and said:

'I do hope you don't mind – but would you be willing to share a room? There's another bachelor of about your age coming – George Crittal ...'

'I don't think I've met Mr Crittal,' Porson replied rather doubtfully.

'No – he's only just come back from South America. As a matter of fact I've never met him myself. But apparently he came originally from my part of the country – the same village in fact – and knows a number of people I used to know ... One of them rang me up and asked me to invite him.'

She laughed ruefully. 'I didn't really think he'd accept at such short notice – hence my difficulty over bedrooms.'

She was so charming and apologetic that Porson forgot his grumpiness.

'Don't worry,' he said, 'I'll be glad to share a room with Mr Crittal.'

'Good – and thank you! I'll see it's got ready for you. You wouldn't mind waiting till after lunch?'

The excellence of that meal provided a more plausible reason for the readiness of Mrs Rydall's guests to accept her invitations. No one, at any rate, seemed to give a thought to the odd sentence. But Porson couldn't resist mentioning it to his neighbour, an elderly man who was evidently an habitué.

'Oh she always has that on her cards,' he said. 'It's a little fad of hers, you know ...'

'But why coat-hangers, of all things?'

'She doesn't like people leaving them lying about – especially those ugly ones with hooks screwed in at the top – you know, they are always falling out!' And the old gentleman impatiently returned to his cold consommé.

When George Crittal arrived, though, after the first course and a hasty introduction from Mrs Rydall (she had kept the seat on Porson's right vacant), the newcomer gave him a quick look and said: 'So *you* fell for it too?'

'Fell for what?' Porson replied, rather irritated by the other's manner.

'*You* know!' Crittal threw another quick look at him: one of a whole series, indeed, for throughout the remainder of the meal he kept darting glances at him, as if he found his presence both intriguing and droll. Crittal was a thickset man, obviously still young but with dashes of silver in his very black hair, almost as if someone had dabbed at his head with a paintbrush. The brush also seemed to have scattered flecks of silver – or, rather, quicksilver – into his dark eyes. He had a naturally swarthy complexion, which had been further darkened by tropical suns, and this made his strong, even teeth look unusually white and glistening.

After lunch Mrs Rydall herself took them up to the room which had been prepared for them. It proved to be the last word in comfort and elegance – and a further explanation of the popularity of her house-parties.

By now Porson had forgotten the odd phrase in the invitation, and in any case as Mrs Rydall had not referred to it, it would hardly have been polite to mention it. Crittal, however, had no such scruples. As soon as he was inside the door he turned to Mrs Rydall, and said:

'I haven't brought any coat-hangers!' And he actually gave Mrs Rydall a nudge.

She looked startled, which was hardly surprising: during his long sojourn abroad George Crittal had evidently forgotten his party manners. But she quickly recovered herself, and with a smile went over to the built-in wardrobe and pressed a button. Immediately and without a sound the doors glided back, and just as soundlessly a long rod, rising at intervals into shoulder-shaped protuberances moulded of the same material as the rod so that the contraption was all of one piece, slid out.

With a crow of delight Crittal whipped off his jacket and draped it over one of the shoulder-shaped protuberances. He pressed the button; the rod withdrew into the wardrobe and the doors slid to.

'Oh, but that's wonderful!' he cried. '*What* a lovely little gadget! I can't wait to start unpacking! I shall really enjoy hanging my things up in there!' and uttering little cries of delight, he pressed the button again.

Mrs Rydall turned to Porson and shrugged, as if to say: 'What an excitable young man!' Aloud she said: 'Well then, I'll leave you to your unpacking, if you're going to enjoy it so much!'

But before she reached the door Crittal emerged from the wardrobe, which he had entered in order to make a closer inspection and, running over to her, gave her another hearty nudge. 'Wonderful! Wonderful!' he cried, in an exaggeratedly jocular tone of voice. 'No hooks, eh? No hooks at all!'

Mrs Rydall gave him a long look, then darted through the door, slamming it behind her.

'I say!' Porson remonstrated (he was rather a prim and proper young man) 'you were being a bit familiar with the old girl, weren't you?'

Crittall burst out laughing. 'Oh, but she's a real sport!' he cried. 'This wardrobe – I ask you – isn't it rich?'

'It's not as unusual as all that,' Porson replied. 'Lots of people nowadays go in for electric gadgets of this kind – and for the most extraordinary things! You should have been to some of the house-parties I have attended!' Then he added, with what was meant to be a touch of reproof: 'But, of course, it's a long time since you were in England.'

Crittall, however, was prowling round the room, rubbing his hands and chuckling. 'Do you see?' he said. 'The pictures are fastened flush to the wall?'

'Well, what of it?'

'And see? Behind the door here – it's not a hook, but one of those smooth, curved plastic things, glued to the door!'

'Excuse me, I want to get on with my unpacking,' Porson

said. He was beginning to regret that he had agreed to share a room with this very odd young man. Certainly, it wouldn't do to encourage him.

After a while Crittal, too, began to take his clothes out of the rather battered suitcase he had brought with him. But he went on muttering to himself: 'No hooks! No hooks at all!' – and then, as he came across something in the bottom of his case, he let out a squeal of laughter, so shrill and sudden that Porson nearly jumped out of his skin. Crittal, however, didn't show him what it was that had apparently so appealed to his sense of humour, but abruptly closed his case and pushed it under his bed.

During the rest of the day Porson took care to avoid his room-mate. This proved easy, as most of the guests accompanied their hostess on a ramble over the downs, while Crittal excused himself on the grounds of a feverish headache; he certainly looked tense and flushed. He didn't appear at dinner, either, but when Porson went up to their room he found him sitting on the side of his bed.

'I say!' he exclaimed, the moment Porson had closed the door. 'I've been exploring the place while you've been out!'

'What an extraordinary thing to do – in somebody else's house,' Porson replied coldly.

'And do you know,' Crittal went on, ignoring the rebuke, 'all the rooms have wardrobes like this!'

'So I would have supposed!'

'Yes, but everything you *hang* things on is made of plastic – and it's all stuck on – nothing's screwed!'

'What *are* you getting at?'

'Don't you see? *No hooks anywhere!*'

'Look, Crittal,' Porson said in exasperation. 'What the hell does it matter whether there are hooks or not?'

'Why, it means that Mrs Rydall doesn't like hooks, of course!'

'Why in God's name should she like or dislike them? What *does* it matter? This is a well-run house, and the food is first-

rate, and I wish you'd stop going on and on about this ridiculous business!'

'But doesn't it strike you as odd that she should go to such pains to keep hooks out of the house?'

'No, it doesn't!' Porson shouted. 'Shut up about these stupid hooks! Why do you go on about them?'

'Oh, I don't know,' Crittal replied. 'It intrigues me, that's all...'

To Porson's relief Crittal didn't return to the subject, and the next morning his headache had apparently gone. He joined the rest of the guests in another ramble over the downs, and proved a perfectly amiable companion. Porson hoped that he had dropped his ridiculous fad.

But while, later in the day, they were changing for tennis Crittal, explaining that he had forgotten to unpack his shorts, pulled out his case from under the bed, opened it, rummaged about inside – and immediately began laughing in the immoderate manner Porson had found so distasteful the previous day.

'What is it now?' he asked irritably.

'It's a good job I didn't show Mrs Rydall *this*!' He was gazing at something at the bottom of his case.

'What is it?'

Crittall took the object from the case and handed it to him. It was a hook – but a hook of quite monstrous size.

'Whatever is it?' Porson asked. 'And why in God's name have you brought it with you?'

'Oh, that's an accident – I must have forgotten to take it out of the case before I packed again for this weekend. It's one of a pair...'

'But *what* is it? I've never seen such a big one!'

'It's a hammock hook.'

'A *what*?'

'A hook for a hammock. I took the hammock and the other hook out, but I must have left this one behind.'

'Are you in the habit of carrying hammocks and their fittings about with you?' Porson asked, with heavy sarcasm.

'As a matter of fact I am, or at any rate I was,' the other replied. 'In the part of Brazil where I was, you see, a hammock is so much cooler than a bed. Nearly everybody has one. In nearly all the best hotels you'll find hooks like this screwed into the ceilings above the beds – so that you can sling your hammock if you prefer it . . . Most people, though, also carry a pair of their own hooks about with them too – you often find yourself stranded in some shack, and then you make use of the beams and fit your hammock across the corner . . .'

'Do you intend to use a hammock while you are in England?'

'Yes, I think so. I'm not really comfortable in a bed any more.'

Porson handed the hook back to him. Crittal regarded it thoughtfully. The odd lights had come back into his eyes, and he grinned, showing his extraordinarily white teeth.

'I tell you what!' he said, closing one eye in a grotesque wink. 'I think I'll show this to Mrs Rydall!'

'That would be a very stupid thing to do!'

'Why?'

'Stupid and pointless!'

'I don't know about that . . .'

'Why, what *would* the point of it be?'

'It might tell us *why* Mrs Rydall dislikes hooks so much!'

'I do wish you'd change the record!' Porson snapped and, picking up his racquet, he marched out of the room.

When he reached the tennis courts he found he was down to play Crittal, who joined him a few minutes later. Porson relieved some of his irritation by soundly trouncing his opponent. Crittal took his beating equably, and the two of them returned to the house together.

Porson was by now getting so used to his companion's changes of mood that he was shocked, but not particularly surprised, when on the way down the corridor leading to their own room, Crittal opened one of the doors and, before Porson had time to resist, hustled him inside.

'This room's quite a surprise,' Crittal said, holding on to his

arm to prevent him from backing out. In spite of himself Porson looked round him with interest. Crittal was quite right: the room was surprising. Whereas all the others he had seen were typical guest-rooms, as impersonal as those of a hotel (though much more comfortable), this was very much lived-in. It was indeed as much a workroom as a bedroom. Although the furniture and appointments were of the greatest elegance, scraps of material and skeins of coloured silk were scattered about and the centre of the floor was occupied by a tailor's dummy, the padded upper half studded with pins and surmounted by a knob of polished mahogany. The stand was hidden by what was obviously going to be a very beautiful evening skirt.

It came as quite a surprise to find that Mrs Rydall (for this was obviously her room) should have had such an untidy hobby as dressmaking. It made her much more human, though, and a moment later his eye alighted on another object which made him warm towards her even more – a wig, carefully arranged on its block. The hair was of the same rich chestnut as that which graced Mrs Rydall's head – but without the dusting of grey. Presumably she disapproved of dyeing – but was soon to blossom out with a brand-new head of hair.

The sight of the wig made him feel guilty at thus intruding on her privacy, and he turned to Crittal. 'Really, this is quite disgraceful!' he said. 'What on earth possessed you to bring me in here?'

Crittal gazed round him in a dreamy, abstracted way. 'No hooks, needless to say,' he said softly, and gave Porson a curiously deliberate grin, as if he were hugging some amusing secret to himself. 'Not yet, anyway,' he added, moving over to the long window-box, and examining the ornaments on it. But a moment later he jumped back. 'Mrs Rydall's coming in from the garden,' he announced. 'Let's beat it!'

Back in their own bedroom, they began to dress for dinner. Crittal's mood seemed to have changed yet again. He seemed tense and restless, walking up and down the room, gnawing at his fingers, and every now and then cocking his head to one

side, as if he were listening for something.

They had nearly finished dressing when a piercing scream came from somewhere close at hand, followed by the crash of breaking glass.

'Come on!' Crittal shouted. 'It's Mrs Rydall!' and he rushed out of the room.

Porson stood shocked for a moment, then followed. The screams had changed to a wild, throaty sobbing. Doors along the corridor were opening, and worried-looking guests, in varying stages of undress, peered out. But as Porson reached Mrs Rydall's door it opened, and Crittal appeared. 'It's all right!' he called out. 'It's only a rat! I've dealt with it! Leave it to me!' The doors along the corridor gradually closed. Porson entered Mrs Rydall's room.

She was seated on a chair near the tailor's dummy, her face buried in her hands, fighting to control her sobs. Splinters of glass lay on the carpet near the window, and one of the panes had a jagged hole in it.

'Where's the rat?' Porson asked, peering round him. Crittal gave a bark of laughter, so unexpectedly loud that Mrs Rydall lowered her hands and stared at him.

'There's no rat,' Crittal said, in a more normal tone of voice. 'But Mrs Rydall didn't want to be bothered by all those nosey-parkers, did you?'

Mrs Rydall went on staring at him.

'But *we* know what it was, don't we?' Crittal went on, in an indulgent voice, as if he were dealing with a frightened child. 'You tell us all about it, eh? And you'll feel *much* better!'

His eyes and teeth glistened. Mrs Rydall could not seem to take her eyes from his face.

'It was ... it was a ...' she faltered.

'Come on now! You tell us!'

'It was a ... a *hook*!' Mrs Rydall said in a whisper. Porson threw an angry glance at Crittal: it was only too clear where the hook had come from, and who had put it in Mrs Rydall's room. But Crittal was watching Mrs Rydall: he was obviously having difficulty in keeping a straight face and his lips kept

curving away from the white teeth. Porson found himself shuddering. The very fact that there was indeed a kind of grotesque comicality about the situation, and Mrs Rydall's remark, struck him as quite horrifying.

Crittall now drew up a stool and seated himself opposite Mrs Rydall, his knees practically touching hers. He pulled her hands away from her face and, staring into her eyes, said coaxingly: 'Come now, you tell us all about it!'

Mrs Rydall trembled. With an exclamation of disgust Porson stepped forward, determined to remove Crittall from the room and to leave Mrs Rydall in peace. But without taking her eyes off Crittall's face she said, very quietly: 'No, he's quite right. I must tell someone. Listen, please listen!'

She swallowed. Her face was very pale, but her voice was steady when she started speaking again.

'It happened when I was eight years old. In Cruesdon – you know?' Crittall energetically nodded his head, and Porson remembered that Mrs Rydall had told him that she and Crittall came from the same village.

'Well,' she went on, 'there was a ... a creature we called Robbie. He was the village idiot, I suppose – though not the usual kind: his family, the Carters, were quite educated and well-to-do. But all of them were odd, very odd, on both sides of the family. One of the grandfathers committed suicide. Another had to be put away – he became quite mad, violent ... Robbie wasn't violent, though ... poor Robbie! Poor Robbie!'

Mrs Rydall stopped. 'Go on! Go on!' Crittall prompted her.

'Yes, poor Robbie was harmless,' she went on. 'Very gentle, really – but simple, you know, very simple – and rather frightening sometimes – for a child, I mean – with a big head that seemed to wobble, and big lips that were always dribbling ... It was tragic really because, you see, he loved children, and there was nothing he enjoyed more than playing with them. They treated him abominably, of course. Sometimes they would let him join in one of their games, and he would grin all

over his face. Then they would either start tormenting him if he didn't play the game properly ... or suddenly, for no reason at all, get frightened ... If he had been one of those big, clumsy dogs no one would have minded the way he lolloped about or rolled over and over or dribbled ... But because he was human ...' Tears came into her eyes. 'And he would do anything!' she cried. 'Anything to please! He didn't mind how much they hurt him – and sometimes they were really cruel – he'd just come bouncing back for more, only too happy to be taken notice of ... Well, one day I was in the churchyard – you know?' She looked at Crittal. 'It's a short cut to the upper end of the village.'

'Yes, yes, I remember!' Crittal replied, in a strange, jerky voice. 'I used to play in that churchyard myself!'

'Well, Robbie was there ... He gave his funny little cry as soon as he saw me – it wasn't really human, you know – more like the cry an animal gives when you unexpectedly pat it – or kick it – and came running over to me. I didn't want to be bothered with him, so I told him – very crossly, I'm afraid – to go away. He looked at me with hurt eyes, mouth hanging open. Then he gave another little cry and grinned, as if he had suddenly thought of something that would please me. He dragged something out of his pocket ... It was a hook ...'

'Ah!' Crittal cried out, in a strange, almost exalted, voice, as if he had been vouchsafed some astonishing revelation. Mrs Rydall closed her eyes. She looked ill and exhausted.

'I should rest if I were you,' Porson said, stepping forward again. 'Really, you know, there's no need to go on with this if it distresses you!'

Mrs Rydall opened her eyes. 'No,' she said. 'I must be done with it. It will be a relief to get it off my mind.'

'Of course it will!' Crittal cried, in ringing tones. It was his turn to throw an indignant look at his room-mate. He was shifting to and fro on the stool, licking his lips as if they were dry, and apparently beside himself with impatience and an avid curiosity that struck Porson as indecent, and somehow disquieting.

'Yes, it was a hook.' Mrs Rydall resumed her story, although her voice trembled, and she was evidently in great distress of mind. 'A huge hook, like the one . . . like the one . . .'

'Like the one you found on the window-box,' Crittal interrupted eagerly.

'Yes,' Mrs Rydall replied, giving him a puzzled look. 'Yes, like the one I threw through the window just now . . . Only rusty and dirty. Robbie must have picked it up somewhere – probably in the timberyard where he often used to play . . . Anyway, he held the hook towards me, grinning all over his face.

'Oh he looked so pleased with himself! He thought he was giving me a present. Then when I shook my head and walked away, he started to trot after me, holding out the hook, with a pleading expression on his face. I quickened my pace too, and then as he got closer I darted behind one of the tombstones. He followed, and I dodged behind another tombstone. I was teasing him, of course – I'm afraid I was no better than the other children . . . Well, he stopped for a moment, puzzled; then suddenly a beatific smile spread across his face, and he began to crow with delight, just like a baby when it's given a rattle. He came running after me again, holding out the hook now and making scrabbling movements with it.

'At first I entered into the spirit of the thing. I had often played "catch" among the tombstones with my friends, and of course Robbie had watched us. Now, for the first time, he was being allowed to play too, and he was beside himself with joy, lurching from side to side, giggling and babbling incoherently. But he didn't know when to stop. He became more and more excited. Once, when he nearly caught up with me, the hook caught in my hair; and then a few minutes later it scraped along my arm, causing quite a nasty graze.

'Suddenly the fun had gone out of it . . . You know how quickly one's mood can change at that age; how close joy is to terror; how laughter can suddenly spill over into hysteria . . . The game was over for me – but not for Robbie.

'"Stop!" I called out. "Stop! Oh please stop, Robbie!"

But he paid no attention. Still giggling in that high-pitched voice, he continued to come after me, brandishing the hook. I was sobbing and screaming now. Everything about him had become horrifying – the lolling head, the slobbering mouth – and that hook! Oh my God, that hook!’

Again Mrs Rydall broke off and began rocking herself to and fro. Again Porson made to drag Crittal out of the room, but Mrs Rydall held up her hand and gradually composed herself. Besides, it was difficult to dislodge Crittal from the stool: he had become astonishingly strong and heavy.

‘I was becoming exhausted by now,’ Mrs Rydall began again, in a low voice. ‘I went on crying out to him to stop, begging, pleading, but still he came after me. And I became more and more panic-stricken. I tried to break away from the tombstones and make for the gate. But Robbie darted along the path and barred the way, with a cry of triumph, as if he had, for the first time in his life, scored a point in a game that was usually beyond him. Sobbing with exhaustion, I left the path and sought refuge among the tombstones again. Robbie came lurching after me, getting closer and closer ... Then I stumbled over something and fell. As I scrambled to my feet, Robbie was only a few feet away, his hand, holding the hook, upraised ...

‘I found I had something in my hand, too. It was a grass-hook, which old Parkins, who looked after the churchyard, must have left lying about. Without really thinking what I was doing, and as Robbie’s hand descended, I struck out with the grass-hook ... It felt like ... it felt like a knife going through butter ... and the next moment there was a dull plop, and Robbie’s hand, with the hook still in it, was lying near my feet. There was blood among the grass blades, turning a rusty orange ... There were big spots of blood on my dress ... Blood was welling up from the stump of Robbie’s wrist ... I hadn’t thought ... I hadn’t realized ... It was only then that I remembered I had often seen Parkins honing the grass-hook on a stone ... honing it over and over until the blade was as sharp as a razor ...

'Everything seemed to have gone still. I just stood there, unable to move. And poor Robbie stared down at his stump. The expression on his face was one of such utter astonishment that it was almost ludicrous, and I nearly broke into a fit of hysterical laughter, until ... until my eyes alighted again on the hand ... lying so still ... lying in the grass ...

'After a while Robbie switched his eyes from the stump to my face. He looked puzzled, hurt, pleading ... He looked as if he was going to cry – not with the pain, but because he felt I had, as so often happened in his games with the village children, suddenly played a shabby trick on him. Then, when he saw the stricken expression on my own face, and heard me whisper, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," his face brightened. I wasn't teasing him after all! I was sorry for him! I had *enjoyed* the game ... He began to smile. He waved his hand up and down playfully: further drops of blood, heavy – like rain after thunder – fell on to my dress ... And then, and then ...'

But Mrs Rydall was shuddering violently. Her hands went up to her throat as if it were paining her. Porson hurried into the adjoining bathroom, and filled a tumbler with water. When he returned Crittal snatched it from his hands and held it to Mrs Rydall's lips. She drank greedily; then she sat for a few moments, staring in front of her. There were tears in her eyes.

'What happened next,' she said in a far-away voice, so soft that Porson had to lean forward in order to hear it. 'What happened next was unbelievable, quite, quite fantastic – the sort of thing that might happen in a nightmare, but not ... not in real life. Robbie's eyes alighted on the hand lying at his feet. Suddenly he bent down and, with his left hand, snatched the hook out of the dead fingers ... He straightened up and then ... Oh my God, can you believe it? He ... he began *screwing the hook into his stump?*'

Crittall held the glass to her lips again. She took a few sips, then continued, in the same low voice.

'He pushed the point of the hook into the stump, and began to turn it, exerting all his strength ... Thick, dark blood welled up, like ... like jelly that hasn't set ... But he went on

turning ... At the end of it his face was a pale, muddy colour, and there were great drops of perspiration on his forehead ... Then he raised his head and looked at me. The only word I can think of to describe the expression on his face is *radiant*! ... "Look!" he said, in a trembling voice, and then, ecstatically, "*Look!*" – as if he had discovered some excitingly new and original way of pleasing me, of entertaining me ... Oh, now it's the pity of it that moves me – but then it was pure horror! And a moment later he had raised the stump, with the screw stuck in it, and brandished it feebly in the air. Screaming, I fell back a few steps. With stump and hook raised aloft, still grinning delightedly, though he tottered as he walked and the blood was running down his arm, and the sleeve of his coat was heavy with it, he ... he came after me again!

'I shut my eyes, and the last thing I was aware of was the sound of my own screaming ... I seemed to fall into a pit of screaming ...

'When I came to I was lying in my own bed at home, and at first I thought it really *had* been a nightmare ...'

'Oh no, it was real! It was *real*!' Crittal interrupted, indignantly. She looked at him. 'You heard about it, then?'

'Oh yes ... My family ... they used to talk about it sometimes ...'

'You probably know, then, that I was ill for quite a long time and my parents had to move ... I've never been back to Cruesdon ... My parents never talked about it – but I've never been able to forget ... I don't know what happened to ... to ...'

'Robbie? They had to put him away – after he came out of hospital.'

'But why? He was *harmless*!' Mrs Rydall cried.

'Oh yes – quite harmless. But about that time his mother went out of her mind – again, I mean ... for good. And there was no one left to look after Robbie.'

'Poor Robbie!'

'Poor Robbie!' Crittal echoed, almost in a mocking manner, and then added: 'But, as you said, the whole family was odd,

very odd!' For some reason the thought seemed to amuse him.

'So you see,' Mrs Rydall said, in a much calmer tone of voice, 'why I have this ... this obsession about hooks – and why, when I found one in this room I ... I reacted as I did!'

'Oh indeed! Indeed!' Crittal cried; his voice now sounded sympathetic, ingratiating. 'I *quite* understand. A very nasty experience! But it will be better now, much better ... Don't you feel better already?'

'Yes, I think I do,' Mrs Rydall replied, trying to smile, though the expression on her face, Porson thought, was puzzled and somehow, what was it? ... Yes, wary ...

'I think you should have a rest now,' he said to her.

'I think I will,' Mrs Rydall agreed, though her eyes were still fixed on Crittal. 'I'll have a couple of aspirins and try to have an early night ... Perhaps you'd be good enough to make some excuse for me at dinner?'

'Yes, of course,' Porson agreed, and this time he succeeded in jerking Crittal from his stool and propelling him through the door.

'You ought to be ashamed of yourself!' he said, when they had reached their own room. 'Planting that damned hook on Mrs Rydall – it was a *disgusting* thing to do!'

'I don't see why,' Crittal replied, in a surprisingly mild voice. 'It brought things to the surface ... A shock like that – it was just what she needed. Why, she said herself that she felt better for it!'

'Well, perhaps you're right,' Porson acknowledged grudgingly. 'But if I were you I should find that wretched hook of yours and put it away!'

'Oh that's all right – it's in the flower-bed under Mrs Rydall's window: I saw it there when I looked out.'

'See you get it then!' Crittal nodded. He seemed abstracted. 'Yes, it's brought all sorts of things to the surface!' he said, in a strangled kind of voice.

At dinner Porson made Mrs Rydall's apologies, as he had promised. He was unable to do more than pick at his food. Crittal, however, ate heartily, though to Porson's surprise and

relief he did not speak, and disappeared immediately the meal was over.

Porson did not see him again until he was already in bed, when Crittal entered the room – and placed the hook on the dressing-table, with a meaningful glance in Porson's direction.

'Put it away!' Porson said sharply. Crittal nodded and, opening his suitcase, threw the hook into it. When he turned round his lips were parted in a grin; the white teeth glistened more noticeably than ever, and the curious flecks of light in his eyes were more pronounced. But Porson had had enough of Crittal for one day. He pointedly turned on his side – and fell asleep almost instantly.

He awoke with a start some three hours later. He sat up in bed. Had he heard a muffled scream somewhere near at hand, or had he merely dreamed it? He listened intently, his heart unaccountably thumping. He thought he could hear various dragging and bumping noises somewhere – such as might be caused by dragging some heavy object across the floor – a suitcase, for example.

The thought made him glance at Crittal's bed. It was empty, but by an odd coincidence Crittal's suitcase was placed on top of it: perhaps, Porson thought, he had subconsciously noted it out of the corner of his eye in the moment of waking.

He switched on his bedside light and got out of bed. The lid of Crittal's suitcase was raised. Porson looked inside. There was no sign of the hook. What was Crittal up to now, he asked himself irritably, and with a sudden sinking of the heart. He noticed that there was a book at the bottom of the case. He took it out in order to make sure that the hook hadn't been hidden beneath it. Before returning the book to the suitcase he absentmindedly opened it and glanced at the fly-leaf. George Crittal's signature, in the same bold black ink and with the same flourishes which he had noticed in Mrs Rydall's visitors' book, sprawled right across the page . . .

But just a minute – *was* the second name Crittal? He took the book under the light and examined the signature more closely. The first name was George all right – but the second

looked more like – what was it? Yes, Carter ... Where had he heard that name recently?

Suddenly he remembered. Mrs Rydall had mentioned it this afternoon when she was telling them that dreadful tale about Robbie and the hook ... Yes, of course! Carter was the name of Robbie's family – poor Robbie's second name in fact – the family which Mrs Rydall had said was 'odd' ...

Porson froze. Was Crittal's real name, then, Carter? He dismissed the thought. It would be too much of a coincidence – or, rather, the appearance of the name Carter in the book *was* a coincidence, but one of a perfectly harmless nature ... After, all, there were thousands of Carters in the world, and almost as many George Carters ... No doubt someone of that name had lent the book to Crittal ...

Where, though, was Crittal? Porson put the book on the case and hurried out of the room and down the corridor towards Mrs Rydall's room. He was filled with a sense of foreboding. When he reached Mrs Rydall's door he cautiously pushed it open and peered in. The room was dimly lit from a reading-lamp at the side of Mrs Rydall's bed, but the bed itself was empty. It had obviously been slept in recently, however, for the bedclothes were scattered on the floor.

He entered the room, clicking on the main switch as he did so, but nothing happened – presumably the bulb had failed. He peered round him in the dim light. There was no sign of Mrs Rydall. One of the sheets, though, had been thrown over the tailor's dummy, rising to a peak where the knob protruded from the padded torso. No doubt Mrs Rydall had been unable to sleep and had been passing the time with her dressmaking. But where was she now? Well, perhaps she had gone to one of the other rooms to collect some further piece of material, or a reel of cotton, or a pair of scissors – Porson found this rationalistic approach somehow reassuring ... Though why, he asked himself, should he be in need of reassurance? There was nothing wrong about the room, was there?

He took another look round, and his eye alighted on a raffia wastepaper basket in the corner. For some reason Mrs Rydall

had thrown the wig into it. That, admittedly, was rather a curious thing for her to have done; but perhaps she had grown tired of it, or had experienced a reaction against the whole idea of a wig? He went over to take a closer look.

The wig seemed rather dusty. What was more curious, it appeared to have grey streaks in it. Perhaps some talcum powder or cigarette ash had got spilled on to it? Again his brain began frantically to search for explanation ... Anyway, he decided, it might be a good idea to retrieve the wig and put it on the dressing table.

He put out his hand and caught hold of the tumbled hair. To his astonishment, the wig did not come away. He gave a harder tug – and found he had lifted the whole wastepaper basket. It was extraordinarily heavy. He gave it a shake, and still the wig did not come away. Somehow it had got jammed into the basket ... unless ... It was then that he saw that the underside of the basket was sodden with something dark, something that dripped through the interstices ...

He let go of the basket as if it had electrocuted him. It fell on its side with a thud and rolled back into the corner, like some monstrous flower pot.

Porson's knees were trembling. He felt he wanted to be sick. But his mind refused to take in the possible implications of what he had just experienced; it had gone numb, as if he were under an anaesthetic. 'I must get out of here,' he thought, and turned in the direction of the door. As he did so his foot struck against something. He glanced down, and a thrill of horror shot through his whole body, nearly knocking him down. A dark torso was lying on the floor, half under the bed. Then he gave a huge sigh of relief. It was only the tailor's dummy. Thank God! Everything was all right: he had been letting his imagination run away with him.

But halfway to the door he stopped. If the dummy was lying on the floor then ... then what was *that* in the centre of the room?

His limbs felt as if they had been turned to lead. His heart thudded as if someone was throwing a sledge-hammer against

it. Somehow he forced himself to walk over to the shrouded object. He lifted his hand, slowly and laboriously. It seemed to take an age. Then, with a sudden, desperate movement, he snatched the sheet away. And as in one half of his mind he became aware that Crittal was standing in the doorway, head thrown back, teeth glistening, letting loose peal after peal of maniacal laughter, with the other half he took in the bloody headless body seated on the stool and, rammed into the neck, wedged tight with blood-soaked cotton-wool, a huge hook, like an obscene question-mark.

THE MAN AND THE BOY

Conrad Hill

The dilapidated wooden gate had been replaced by a metal one, strong and trimly painted with red oxide.

Otherwise nothing had changed.

Simon closed the gate behind him and stood hot in the early afternoon sun, looking down the field towards the course of the river. From here one couldn't tell that the blackthorns and brambles dividing this field from the one beyond concealed anything more interesting than a ditch. An astute observer would, perhaps get a hint of the river's existence from the little cattle bridge that carved a tiny avenue through the matted undergrowth.

To Simon it all looked diminutive compared with the memory; as if he was looking through the wrong end of a pair of binoculars. Maybe the enormity of the events that occurred here diminished the size of the surroundings but, on reflection, he knew that he was as familiar with these fields and that river as he was with the things that took place within their boundaries on that day so long ago. No, it was simpler than that, and he grinned at his unsophisticated logic; when you're a child, you're closer to the ground, therefore everything is bound to look bigger. It all looked small now solely because he himself had grown larger.

Earlier, he had stood on the crinkly stone bridge outside the village struggling with his indecisiveness; balancing the therapeutic motivation that had brought him two hundred miles against a fear of being overwhelmed, retarded by a flood of trauma-ridden memories. He had stared at the water for a long time, until his mind merged with the river, cascading into

fragments, tumbling, twisting, pulling his subconscious inexorably downstream to that place two miles on . . . When he had taken a tablet and given it time to transform the indecision into a firm resolve, he realized how ridiculous – cowardly even – it would be to come all this way only to give up two miles from his destination. Nevertheless, he had deliberately averted his gaze as the car approached the field, half hoping that it had altered out of recognition.

But it hadn't changed. Places don't change of their own volition; they have changes imposed upon them by people. He smiled wryly whilst developing the idea more tangibly. People change of their own volition, though; change of heart, change of mind, change of outlook . . . Some, like himself, are changed by other people, complete strangers. Twenty-four years ago in this field, by this river, across in those woods, his whole life had been changed in the space of three hours. His friends asserted that it was a change for the better; better for them, maybe, because he swelled their numbers, strengthened their solidarity, helped provide them with the small luxury of group commiseration. But he couldn't help pondering on what might have been . . . Would he still have been living in that unhygienic, draughty old folly of a house in the village? How he'd loved that house, with its scatterbrained arrangement of unruly walls and labyrinthine corridors . . . Would he have come fishing here for the brown trout every morning before he went to work, as his father used to? What job would he have been doing? Driving a tractor? Weaving baskets? Managing an estate? Making cider? Would he have been a vet or a doctor? Would his parents still have been alive, had they never moved on his behalf to undergo the strain of urban living and to breathe polluted city air? . . . He felt curiously lost and sad, for conjecture had so many computations; so many happy variables of wish and memory that, by comparison, reality could be a state of bitter disillusionment. He tried to define the sad, lost feelings as self pity, but couldn't quite manage it, so he screwed them up into a tight little ball and threw them back down into his mind for reprocessing into some other emotion.

He waited, mentally breathless, for the anticipated turbulence that must accompany his return to this place.

Nothing happened.

His eyes wandered, unchecked now, down across the ragged grass to the darker green of the riverside undergrowth and overhanging willow trees, past the little cattle bridge and on to the far left-hand corner of the field. There it was. His own spot a few yards along from the big corner beech tree, where the float used to skim along on the fast-moving current and sweep into his favourite pool. Something glinted there now. Simon shaded his eyes and could make out the figure of a small boy, the sun flashing on the chrome fittings of his rod as he cast into the invisible river.

Oh, dear Christ, why is there a boy fishing in my spot?

Simon knew it would be hard now; hard to stand here and take all the burning recollections that this place could conjure up; hard to take it all without another tablet, now he'd seen the boy...

He took another tablet and the memory came gently.

It rained relentlessly for two whole days after his ninth birthday, thwarting any attempt to use the shiny new rod that his parents had bought for him. He mooned savagely around the dark grey house, frequently pressing his face to the windows, willing old God to blow the leaden, static clouds away. But old God had it in for him personally and didn't oblige; not even with some heavy breathing. So the rain continued to sheet down monotonously. Simon wished he could get hold of old God and give Him a thump, or even speak to Him on the telephone or something, to inquire whether He ever intended to get rid of the clouds and the rain. If He had plans for permanent rain, well, Simon would sell his new rod – and his old one for that matter – and buy some more rolling stock for his train set. Frustrated by old God's remote and lofty isolation, he had a word with Jesus knowing that *He'd* been down here so *He'd* have a good idea of what it was like when it was raining. No good. Simon sullenly concluded that the whole

lot of Them must be on holiday, probably in the sunshine somewhere. Abandoning his attempts to get the weather changed, he concentrated on annoying his mother by getting in her way and asking her stupid questions. The whole campaign culminated in a smashed plate and his mother shouting something about the sooner he was back at school the better.

On the third day he awoke to a low golden sun in the east with a few embarrassed straggler clouds caught naked in a clear blue sky, scurrying to hide in the dull anonymity far in the distance. At breakfast he mischievously asked his father whether he was coming down to the river for an hour before he went to work, knowing full well that the trout wouldn't take his father's silly, coloured, artificial flies when the river was in spate. But Simon felt expansive that morning and even offered to lend his old rod to his father so that he could float fish with it. The offer was curtly refused, and his father buried his nose deeper into the newspaper.

Simon could never understand why his father resolutely refused to fish with a float and worm. He said it was unsporting: fishermen were divided into two categories, mechanics and artists. Mechanics used worms, artists used flies. But Simon never caught *anything* when his father tried to teach him to use his funny, whippy little fly-rod; what was the point of being an artist if you never caught anything? So, when the river was muddy and in spate after rain, his father wouldn't fish because the trout wouldn't take his fly. They would take a worm though and, what's more, the swollen water always brought the big fish up from the quiet meadowland where the river grew wide and deep and lazy, and people paid pounds and pounds to fish. Simon really couldn't understand him; his mother said he was fanatical, which would explain why he would drive fuming off to work when the river was muddy and not smile again until the water had cleared and there were lots of flies on the surface.

After breakfast Simon dug some worms from his patch at the end of the garden. He was lucky, for the rain had brought some monsters up close to the surface of the soil. By the time

he'd finished, his mother had his sandwiches ready and, as she kissed him goodbye, Simon could sense that she was glad to get him out of the house after his recent confinement; nevertheless, her voice still followed him out to the garage with the usual admonitions about not getting muddy and not getting his feet wet.

He waited by the garage doors for his father to reverse the car out before he could get to his bicycle. He felt sorry for his father, having to go to work on a day like this, especially when all the big trout were up-river.

'Never mind, Dad, it might have cleared by tonight,' he addressed to the head poking backwards out of the car window, knowing full well that the river would be muddy for days.

'Don't fall in,' his father said darkly to the accompaniment of crashing gears. The car jerked out of the drive and went roaring irately down the lane. Simon sighed at the peculiarities of grown-ups, but decided not to be too hard on his father; mainly because his own misbehaviour during the past two days was still fresh in his mind, although he didn't feel too badly about that, for he was his father's son and if father got peculiar about fishing, well . . . nobody could blame Simon for being the same, could they? He scattered his tackle all over his bicycle and set off down the lane, whistling a tuneless lament to his father's misfortune.

He arrived at the rickety old gate with the butterflies weling in his stomach; the familiar feeling of anticipation so sorely missed for the last two days. Today he'd get the big one. He'd take it home hidden in his tackle bag so that when his mother asked him in her busy, condescending, teatime manner whether he'd caught anything, he'd answer no and adopt a dejected air until she came to sympathize. Then, he'd whip it triumphantly from the bag!

The rod came away from the crossbar reluctantly, as though it didn't want to be used after all that time in the shop. Simon let the bicycle fall into the bank and found time to marvel at his action; he would never have done that when the bike was

new, funny how you get used to things . . . He resolved never to treat this fishing rod like that, but then he remembered he'd said that about his other one and look how he threw that about now . . . He compromised, resolving never to maltreat this rod until it got old.

He clambered over the gate and jogged towards the river, the wet grass slapping angrily at his Wellington boots. The field dripped and glistened, recovering from the battering of the rain; waiting for the sun to throw down warm benevolence from fingers already probing the tops of hedgerows. At his spot near the beech tree, he examined the water before setting up his equipment. The little river was swollen and opaque – khaki, the colour of his father's old army uniform. The main-flow was easy to trace, moving so quickly that the water foamed dirty white where it tossed and jostled against impeding banks and large stones. Simon's favourite pool, sheltered from the noisy, rushing mainflow, was bigger than he'd seen it for a long time; wider, deeper, somehow more mysterious because of its muddy complexion. When the water was pure and clear he could see the trout and dace suspended in the pool, but he had to use the utmost caution for, conversely, they could see him. Today, no one could see anybody else and, provided that he didn't clump about on the bank, it seemed to Simon that the advantage was his.

He assembled the shining, split-cane rod with fumbling hands. Only after many false attempts did he succeed in threading the nylon line from the reel through the rings. Rigging the float, lead shot and hook required a precise concentration that at the moment he did not possess . . . He despaired of ever getting the shot pinched on to the line, let alone delivering the bait to the fish . . . Finally, he acquired the necessary dexterity by forcibly banishing thoughts of huge fish from his mind, replacing them with a horrifying vision of permanent rain and everlasting school.

Selecting the largest lobworm he could find in the tin, he impaled it on the hook, his excitement tempered briefly by a sobering stab of compassion for the silly old thing as it went

rigid with shock at the initial penetration of the barb. But it soon livened up and Simon felt better. He cast the line over the pool, into the turmoil of the mainflow beyond. The float fled downstream until the line checked it and curved it into the quieter water under the bank. From here it moved upstream again, obedient to the remote command of Simon's reel, gently retrieving the line. It stealthily entered the pool and halted, rocking gently in the centre.

Almost immediately the minnows attacked the worm.

Simon giggled at the float, vibrating and bobbing and swaying around in circles as the greedy little fish tried in vain to nibble at the worm. He imagined their frustration when they found the meal too big to get into their mouths. He knew the pattern well; first one fish would come along, see the equivalent of a giant plate of bacon and eggs and immediately try to grab it all for himself, only to discover that his mouth wasn't big enough to manage it. He then, no doubt reluctantly, would call up his friends to form a large worm-nibbling force on the principle that only one mouthful was better than no mouthful at all. Presently, the force would collectively realize that the worm was still too large for them, but before moving on to search for smaller morsels each member of the group would violently charge the worm as if to say, 'We might not be big enough to eat you, but we can still give you a good hiding.'

The minnow activity ceased abruptly in the middle of the nibbling stage. Simon tightened his attention; the little fish had fled before finishing with the worm, which indicated the arrival of something big. The float was motionless. He prayed that whatever had sent the small fry packing could see the worm, hanging isolated in the murky water . . . The heavy quill bucked violently and was still again. To Simon moments like this seemed to hang for ever in a separate section of time. In his way, he could only compare it with the river; the moving current was his normal life, but the still pools were reserved for the special moments, and although the pools and the current were part of the river, they were still somehow disconnected from each other . . . He experienced similar hang-

ing moments every time he fell off his bicycle; the disembodied time between knowing that the fall was inevitable, and the explosive pain of actuality as he hit the ground. Falling off his bicycle, though, wasn't as nice as waiting for a big fish to bite – but it was still a special moment.

He waited . . . waited for the float to move again.

When it did move, it turned completely on its side, streaking horizontally under the dark water. He was surprised, caught unawares by the nowness of the action; his eyes saw it but his mind was still attuned to the when-ness of anticipation. He recovered and struck hard and fast, feeling the huge resistance of the fish, seeing the top of the rod bend into an impossible curve. He frantically let out line from the reel and the pressure on the rod tip eased as the nylon whipped across the pool. He checked the run, turning the fish round to zig-zag back towards him, hoping, hoping, hoping that he wouldn't lose it. God, you're not a bad old God; I didn't mean it when I wanted to thump you about the rain . . . honestly . . . Let me keep this one and I won't do it again, God . . .

God must have believed him for the fish was tiring, but still pulling like a train to and fro across the pool, occasionally surfacing to thrash the muddy water into chocolate ice-cream soda. Eventually, Simon brought it into the bank, boggling at the sheer bulk of it. He noticed that it boggled back at him and he laughed aloud, realizing that his elation permitted the ridiculous; fish boggled all the time and this one wasn't boggling at him any more than it would boggle at anything else . . . He laid the rod down gingerly and knelt down on the edge of the bank, holding the line taut with one hand while he followed it down with the other, past the float and lead shot to the great mouth that lay gasping in the shallows. His fingers closed around the cold, slimy, twisting back of the fish, to lift it on to the bank where it lay bouncing and kicking in the grass. It was easily the biggest trout Simon had ever caught; he calculated the weight at two and a half pounds – a monster for this narrow, shallow part of the river. He knew it was a down-

stream fish that could only negotiate the river when it was in spate, and he was pleased that he had caught it with a worm from his garden and hadn't had to pay lots of money and fish with a stupid fly rod like all those businessmen down there. He looked at it lying huge and helpless, green and golden, spattered with dark brown spots; still now except for the rasping movement of the gills. It was so beautiful he knew he couldn't kill it, but he absolutely had to find some way of showing it to his father, otherwise he wouldn't believe it . . . He shelved the problem temporarily by popping the fish into his keepnet after he'd removed the hook from its mouth. He looped the string round one of the beech roots poking out of the bank and he sat for the next few minutes watching the fish regain its strength in the water, his heart fluttering each time the dark shape rushed the sides of the net and bent the root in its escape attempts. Simon didn't start fishing again until the fish resigned itself to captivity and was quiet.

By early afternoon, Simon had caught two more fish, although not as large as the first. The sun blazed down on his back, throwing his shadow out on to the pool in front of him, despite his attempts to minimize its bulk by half-sitting, half-lying on the bank. The sun had dried the world and, apart from the swollen river, there was no indication of the almost-forgotten rain. He had just put a fresh worm on the hook and cast it out when he first saw the man in the raincoat standing at the top of the field by the gate; it wasn't old Farmer Richardson, or Jack who drove his tractor . . . Whoever it was, Simon didn't want him clumping around disturbing the fish and asking silly questions, so he quickly returned to his position low on the ground, hoping that the man hadn't seen him.

The man didn't move for a long time. When he did, it was diagonally across the field towards Simon's spot. Simon groaned inwardly and tried to concentrate on the float, although he knew he wouldn't be able to settle properly until the man had gone. He heard the footsteps come scything through the grass to stop behind and a little to one side of him; the man's shadow fell on the edge of the pool.

'Hello, have you caught anything?' The voice was soft with a curiously high-pitched, sing-song quality.

'Only three,' Simon mumbled, neither wanting to sound enthusiastic nor to give the man his full attention.

'Mind if I have a look?'

Simon shrugged his ambivalence, nodding in the direction of the keepnet. The man gently unhooked the keepnet string from the root, squatting down to examine the sparkling, bouncing fish. 'They're beauties, aren't they?' the voice sang. Simon looked at the man for the first time and was immediately struck by the whiteness of the other's face; as if it hadn't seen the sun for years. It was a strange face, smooth and sleek, and on closer scrutiny, somehow powdery ... and white, as white as a mask made of flour. And it was the flour that caused the whiteness and made the shadowed parts of the face appear luminous. The eyebrows were funny, too, thin and arched in single lines like ... like ... He struggled for a simile but couldn't find one until his eyes took in the full, red lips that looked freshly painted ... Clown! yes the man looked like a clown, well maybe not quite like a clown ... more like ... like his mother; she had those silly eyebrows and painted lips and those powdery cheeks. But why would the man want to look like that? No, he must be an off-duty clown or something; he seemed pleasant enough, though, in spite of his funny face, but Simon still wished he would go away.

'I used to fish when I was a boy, but I haven't done any for years.' The eyes grew bright and emptied of the present, ready to fill with tears at some faraway memory. 'But ... well, I suppose I grew out of it. One does you know ... grow out of it.'

Simon nodded politely; at the same time he tried to think of a way to get rid of the man now, before he started rambling on about his boyhood, because if he was like all the other grown-ups, he'd be here for hours and hours ...

But the man was quiet, just squatting there holding the keepnet.

'They'll die.' Simon's voice made the man twitch slightly. 'The fish.'

'Oh yes. Sorry.' The man replaced the keepnet in the water, carefully replacing the string on the root. He sat down cross-legged on the bank, gazing into the river. Simon wondered why he didn't take the heavy raincoat off; he must be very hot sitting there in the sun even though he had the top two buttons undone and didn't seem to be wearing a shirt.

The man rang long, curved fingernails through blue-black hair. 'Do you always fish here?' he asked.

'Yes, I only live down the road,' Simon replied, vaguely surprised that he'd found it necessary to qualify his answer. The man nodded, understanding everything, and the red lips parted in a little smile. 'Nice, nice . . . Nice to be by yourself on a day like this, isn't it? You are by yourself, aren't you?' Simon nodded. 'Why's that then, haven't you got any friends?' Simon was irritated by this affront to his likeability; the man was implying that no one liked him.

'Course I've got friends; they don't like fishing, that's all!'

The man accepted this, nodding and smiling.

'What about girl-friends? I bet you've got lots of girl-friends - a good-looking chap like you.' Simon was flattered and appropriately derisive. 'They're stupid,' he said. He fussed with the line, resigning himself to the fact that he wouldn't get a bite while the man was here talking all this tripe. Why didn't he go away?

The man didn't speak for ten minutes and Simon was beginning to see this as a hopeful sign; perhaps he couldn't think of anything else to say, which meant he wouldn't be hanging around for much longer . . .

'Would you like a sweet? They're wine gums.' The man had moved closer, cradling a crumpled white bag in his outstretched hand. Simon's finger and thumb probed the bag, trying to select a single sweet from the warm sticky lumps of twos and threes. The outstretched hand trembled violently an instant before it snapped shut like a trap around Simon's own hand. He gasped with surprise and pain as the silvery talons sank into his knuckles. The man's face was different now; the eyes were dancing pinpoints of flame and the sockets were the

holes of an incinerator burning within the head. The mouth was twisted but still seemed to be smiling in a crooked sort of way. The lips hardly moved enough to let the words struggle through them. 'You . . . can have all of them . . . if you come for a walk.' The lilting voice had gone, to be replaced by lower, harsher tones that grated like Simon's mother's saucepans on the enamel sink.

Simon acknowledged that he wasn't frightened; just confused and perhaps a little worried. The man didn't behave like any grown-up he knew, but then he didn't know that many. Why was he trapping his fingers like that? . . . Why does he want someone to go for a walk with him? He must be lonely or something . . . Perhaps he's mad! . . . No, he wouldn't be walking around loose if he was a looney, they kept them under pretty close guard these days . . . He decided that he didn't like the man because he was funny; he was all friendly one minute and then he got . . . well . . . funny. He wished his father were here to tell him to clear off. He heard his voice telling the man that he wanted to stay here and catch some more fish, besides he only wanted one sweet – thank you very much. Perhaps if I tell him my dad's coming over soon . . . yes, that'll get rid of him . . . But before he had time to give voice to the thought, the hand relaxed its rigid grip on his fingers, enabling him to extract a sweet and pop it into his mouth. It was rubbery and tasted of Christmas. The man stood up, stuffing the bag of sweets into his raincoat pocket. He was sulky. 'I'm going, then, if you're not going to be nice. I don't see why I should waste my time with ungrateful little boys like you. Besides, I've got a long way to go.' Simon was unmoved by the admonition and he quickly stifled the urge to ask the funny man where he lived. Instead, he said 'Cheerio,' turning back to his float with an overwhelming feeling of relief that the encounter was over. The man murmured something undistinguishable and set off across the field towards the gate.

Five minutes passed and the man was already forgotten; gone for ever into the motionless heat of the afternoon. The float was becalmed on the shimmering, stagnant surface of the

pool, not even a minnow bothering to disturb the lethargic tranquillity of the underwater dead hours. Simon had given much thought to the phenomenon of the dead hours; that time of day between two o'clock and five o'clock when the fish wouldn't bite, or at least only on rare occasions. His father knew about it but for some reason wouldn't commit himself to a definite explanation mainly, Simon thought maliciously, because he didn't really know but didn't want to admit it to Simon. His own conclusions about the dead hours were that fish, instead of sleeping during the night like everyone else, were probably active, thus needing some sleep during the day – which went to show just how stupid fish really were! His father laughed when he propounded this theory to him, which made him angry; after all, his theory was better than the none-at-all ones of the Old Man. And furthermore, if that ridiculous clown of a man hadn't come along when he did, Simon might have caught another fish before they went to bed for their afternoon siesta. Now he had to sit there and hope that some sleep-walking, sleep-swimming trout would take the worm . . . Se examined his hand where the man's fingernails had dug into the flesh. The marks had almost disappeared although the knuckles still tingled slightly; stupid so-and-so . . . wonder why he wanted somebody to go for a walk with him . . .

A kingfisher zipped past, heading upstream. Simon, busy comparing it with a multi-coloured, low-flying aircraft, didn't notice the shadow rising on the water in front of him until it had completely obliterated his own little dumpy one. At first he was puzzled by the new shape on the pool, then he knew what it was, and he didn't like it one little bit.

The man had come back.

He must have circled around the edge of the field in order to come in directly behind him, quietly, so quietly that Simon hadn't heard the footfalls in the grass. He pretended not to notice the man behind him, but the shadow increased, not in height but in breadth, growing wider and wider, engulfing the whole pool in the darkness of it. Unable to control his curiosity, Simon turned round to look. At first sight, he thought the

man had turned into a bat ... a monster bat with outspread wings ... His knowledge of reality battled with the fairies and fantasies of his infancy ... Impossible, the man hadn't become a bat, it wasn't possible, like Father Christmas wasn't possible – Dad said so. Why was he standing like a bat then? ... He stared at the top of the towering figure above him, screwing up his eyes against the strong sunlight; the head looked normal enough, if a little distorted by the sun's rays flashing around the hair. Simon's controlled gaze moved downward and to the sides of the figures, where the reason for the bat-like appearance was immediately apparent ... The man was holding his raincoat wide open with his hands, which was a strange thing to do because he wasn't wearing any clothes – except for two short trouser legs fixed to the bottom of the raincoat.

Simon's perplexity and fascination provided him with a calm exterior; a denial to everybody but himself of the fear seeping slowly into his mind. When the man gave out a screeching, high-pitched cackle, the fear exploded, spiralling upwards along his spine to every part of his body, like high voltage splinters. He scrambled to his feet and started to run, forgetting his fish, his new rod, all his equipment, everything to get away from this man. He found his feet making running motions, but he was being drawn inexorably backwards by the hand gripping the back of his neck. Another hand spun him round, crushing him against the naked body under the folds of the raincoat, suffocating him with the smell of sweat and perfume. The man forced Simon's head up towards his own and tried to speak but the lips struggled in vain to form words that emerged only as bubbling saliva. Simon fought.

He fought the desperate battle for survival, succumbing absolutely to the panic that permeated every fibre of his being. He kicked and yelled and sank his teeth through the stubble of hairs on the man's chest into the flesh beneath until the blood poured warmly and sweetly into his mouth, overflowing past his chin, down on to the man's stomach, down ... down ... He heard the man crying out with the pain, but felt no easing of the pressure on him; instead the man increased his grip, crush-

ing ... smashing ... grinding ... strangling Simon into darkness ...

He recovered to find himself being half-carried, half-dragged across the cattle bridge into the back field. He started shouting again, to have his voice promptly cut off by a hand that squashed the lower part of his face. The man had found his own voice and was repeating mindlessly the same words over and over again. 'Don't struggle or I'll hurt you. Don't struggle or I'll hurt you. Don't struggle or I'll hurt you ...' His voice seemed to correspond exactly to the rhythm of the shambling gait.

The wood in the back field, normally so cool and resentful, now became a place of indescribable terror as the man, disregarding the thorns and nettles stabbing at his nakedness, dragged Simon through the undergrowth with demoniacal energy.

It was in the sheltered secrecy of the little glade, amidst Nature's orderly, related construction of trees and birds and grass and insects, that Simon gave up fighting the man. He passed the next two hours observing, through the pain and degradation, the cavortings of his own naked body and those of the man with the bloodstained chest.

Old Farmer Richardson found him, unconscious, bruised and bleeding in the wreckage of his clothes.

In the ambulance, he remembered waking up and seeing a great crowd of people, all pushing in on him, stifling him, crushing him ... He thought he saw the man disguised as a policeman and he screamed silently until he found reassurance in his father's face and the feel of his arm round his shoulders. He wanted to tell his father about the monster fish in the net and the rod - he had to tell him about the rod - but Dad wouldn't listen because the words wouldn't come. In the end, a man - a friendly man with glasses and a white coat - floated him back to sleep with a big needle ...

So there it was. The rest of it was anti-climactic, predictable almost; the doctors and the policeman all asking questions,

questions, questions . . . Oh, he'd told them everything they wanted to know, everything that he could tell them, except what it was like. He couldn't tell anyone what it was like, only he, Simon would know that . . .

His father came regularly to visit him but his mother never did. According to Dad, she had the 'flu during the week that Simon was in hospital. It wasn't until much later that he found out she'd had a nervous breakdown. Apparently she blamed herself for what had happened because she'd never warned him about strange men.

When he came out of hospital, he went back to the field once more with some policeman for a reconstruction or something like that, but he never went again after that. Funnily enough, he never went fishing again either; he never knew why, but he just . . . well . . . seemed to grow out of it. Anyway, they'd moved to the city as soon as his father had been able to sell the house and fix up a new job, so the opportunity didn't arise, except occasionally his father would try to persuade him to accompany him to some far-off lake in the country for a day's fishing. But he never went and in the end his father stopped asking him.

He wondered about the man. He wondered what had happened to him after they'd caught him. Oh yes, they caught him; Simon had to give evidence against him. He looked quite normal in the courtroom. Apparently he was ill, sick in the mind, poor man. They sent him to a prison where he could have treatment. Simon wondered if he ever got out, if he was still alive even . . .

He was pleased with himself. He'd done it after all this time; admittedly he'd needed a tablet to help him with the memory but, now it was over, he felt buoyant, strong and self-sufficient. It was almost good to be back, as if he could start again from that point, twenty-four years past and find another, simpler direction for his life.

The boy! . . . He'd forgotten the boy, down there fishing in his spot. Oh, Christ, the boy . . . He controlled the rising panic admirably with a blast of derision from his new self-confidence

... *Why, he'd solve that problem when he came to it!*

It was hot and heavy standing there in the sun. Time to make a move. He undid the top two buttons of his raincoat, grateful for the small relief of air that circulated over his sticky chest. In his pocket, his hand firmly pushed his box of tablets underneath the bag of wine gums.

He walked towards the tiny figure half-sitting, half-lying under the beech tree.

IT CAME TO DINNER

R. Chetwynd-Hayes

1

HE CAME upon the great house quite by chance, having wandered across the fenlands of East Anglia all day, for he had no fixed destination and was content to keep moving, his head lowered, lost in some twilight world of his own. As the house was in a bad state of repair, the windows uncurtained, the front door open, he thought it must be deserted, and decided to make the place his hotel for the night.

The hall floor was paved with dead leaves, the walls festooned with cobwebs, but the house was not dead, for a hall table stood just inside the doorway, and a badly worn carpet covered the stairs; also, just as Herbert had unslung his haversack, there came the sound of approaching footsteps, and a tall, thickset man came out from one of the rooms.

'Hullo!' He stopped, staring at the stranger with small blue eyes. 'Who are you?'

'Someone who has made a mistake,' Herbert smiled, and his lean, bronze face was transformed. 'I thought the house was deserted. You must forgive me.'

'Natural enough mistake,' the big man grunted. 'On holiday?'

'A rather prolonged one.'

The man nodded. 'Thought so. You're way off the beaten track, you know, miles from anywhere.'

It was Herbert's turn to nod. 'I find that a matter for satisfaction rather than alarm. I won't intrude further; again accept my apologies.'

'Wait a moment,' – the big man placed his hand on Herbert's shoulder, – 'no need to hurry off. I mean, the sun will set

shortly, and you'll never find your way among these fens after dark. There's plenty of room here. Stay the night.'

'You're very kind,' Herbert said gravely. 'Any corner will do.'

'We can do better than that. You'll find the place is in an awful mess; just one servant and the family, but at least there'll be a roof over your head.'

'An unexpected luxury,' Herbert commented dryly. 'Again, thank you.'

'Nonsense.' The man turned, and began to lead his unexpected guest through a maze of rooms, some furnished, others not, but all with an atmosphere of sad neglect. They ascended some stairs, came up on to a small landing, then entered a long, dimly lit corridor. The big man spoke again. 'By the way, my name is Carruthers. Stafford Carruthers. What's yours?'

'Herbert.'

'Herbert - what?'

'Just Herbert. A man requires but a single handle.'

'True,' Stafford Carruthers nodded gravely. 'And Herbert is so negative, it could be either a Christian or surname.'

He flung open a door which seemed to resent this liberty, for it groaned a protest, then switched on a ceiling light. The room smelt of dust and stale air; the bed was a great brass-railed monster, and age-blackened furniture lurked against unclean walls.

'Not what it was,' observed Carruthers cheerfully, 'but it's home. You won't find any sheets on the bed, but there are plenty of blankets. A bathroom of sorts is two doors down, so as soon as you've freshened up, make your way down the stairs and turn left to the dining-room. Dinner will be ready in twenty minutes.'

He went, closing the door with a slam which made a framed print depicting a spectral Lazarus, emerging from a cave, tremble. Herbert unpacked his haversack: a clean shirt, a vest, a pair of linen pants, a tie, a pair of socks, a razor, a towel, a tube of brushless shaving cream, a bar of carbolic soap, and

three handkerchiefs. Herbert laid out the entire collection of his worldly goods upon the bed and smiled.

Twenty minutes later, freshly bathed, shaved, and wearing his clean shirt, he went softly down the stairs, and turned left as Carruthers had instructed. Voices came from beyond an open doorway.

'You must be mad, Stafford.'

A woman was speaking in a cold, contemptuous tone; then Carruthers answered, blustering like a small boy trying to explain away a misdemeanour.

'The chap was lost, and I thought ... things being as they are ...'

The beautiful, cold voice interrupted: 'Stafford, you have the mind of a five-year-old imbecile. Don't you realize ...'

Another female voice broke in, an old voice, harsh, cultured, slow-speaking: 'There is little point in heated discussion, Helen, and no foundation to your fears. The stranger will, since he is here, see, hear, and even possibly smell, but will not understand. Should truth be served up on his dinner plate, I doubt if he will recognize her. The situation will not be without its amusing side.'

'But surely,' the other feminine voice spoke again, 'G.O. had better keep to his room.'

'Nonsense,' and the old voice broke into a little silvery laugh, like the wind blowing through slivers of steel; 'let us carry on as usual. But should not this - this wanderer of the wastelands, have joined us by now?'

'I will fetch him,' said Carruthers, and Herbert turned quickly and tiptoed to the far end of the corridor.

'There you are,' Carruthers bellowed at him from the doorway, 'didn't lose your way, then?'

'Almost,' Herbert smiled. 'I think I must have turned right instead of left. Found myself back in the main hall. I hope I have not kept you waiting.'

'Not at all.' Carruthers stood to one side for him to enter. 'Come on in.'

Herbert walked past him and came into a large room, no

less shabby than the rest of the house, but more lived in. There were cobwebs on the ceiling, but the furniture was free from dust, the brass fender was highly polished, and the dining table was covered by a white cloth. An old woman was seated on a straight-backed armchair; a vision dressed in black satin and white lace, with a long, white, lined face, and a pair of shrewd blue eyes. Her white hair was piled high, and kept in position by a tortoiseshell comb, while her beringed hands rested on a black, silver-topped walking cane. A derisive smile parted her thin lips.

'So,' the harsh voice rang out, 'our most unexpected guest.' Herbert made an old-fashioned bow.

'I am grateful for your unexpected hospitality.'

'So you should be,' the old lady said in a genial tone. 'You are the first guest this house has entertained for more years than I care to count. I am called Lady Carruthers. This is my daughter; my son you have already met.'

Herbert turned his attention to the tall, beautiful woman who stood by the fireplace, and he drank in the flawless perfection of her face and figure. At first he felt a pang of pity that such a lovely creature should be wasted in an out-of-the-way place like this, then he saw the cold arrogance that was reflected in the brilliance of her blue eyes, and the proud set of her shapely shoulders, and knew his compassion was misplaced.

'How nice to meet you, Mister . . . ?'

She had drawled the words, each one an ice-tipped barb; the final pause was a bottomless pit into which he was being invited to throw himself.

'Herbert.'

'Mr Herbert,' she nodded, and her dark hair, black as starless space, danced a little jig. 'It is like an exclamation mark, isn't it? Like Charles or James.'

'Or Heathcliff,' observed Herbert.

'So, you read. Then tell me, Herbert, how you came to stumble upon our retreat.'

'It might be as well,' Lady Carruthers remarked caustically,

'if the poor man sat down first. Also, dinner will spoil if we dilly-dally further. Stafford, ring the bell.'

She rose from her chair with some difficulty and, supported by her cane, hobbled to the table. Once there, she sank into a high-backed chair, then waved a hand.

'Mr Herbert, you will kindly seat yourself on my left, Helen will sit opposite, and Stafford will take his usual place at the foot of the table.'

They were all seated at that long table, the old lady watching the three faces with, it seemed to Herbert, sardonic amusement; Helen stared at him, and Stafford in his isolated position was giving a fair imitation of a sulky child. Herbert at last became embarrassed by Helen's unblinking stare, and glanced at her inquiringly. She smiled.

'And how did you stumble upon us, Herbert?'

'Quite by chance. I was just wandering.'

'How quaint.'

The two words were spoken in a tone of voice that suggested he had been doing something improper, and he felt a tinge of irritation.

'Where are you staying?' Lady Carruthers asked, then added, 'When is that wretched creature going to serve dinner? Stafford, ring the bell again.'

Stafford sullenly left his chair and moved over to the bell cord; Lady Carruthers repeated her question.

'Where are you staying?'

'Nowhere,' he answered and watched Helen's slim eyebrows rise.

'My dear man, do you mean to say you sleep – what is the expression? Sleep rough?'

He nodded gravely.

'Under hedges, hayricks, old houses. I was about to use yours as temporary accommodation when Mr Carruthers found me.'

'What an original way to spend a holiday.' Helen appealed to her mother; Stafford was ignored, having resumed his seat looking more sulky than ever. 'And so inexpensive.'

'Tell me, Mr Herbert,' Lady Carruthers began, then stopped abruptly as the door was flung open, and a giant of a man appeared pushing a loaded food trolley. 'Ah, dinner at last. Marvin, why the delay?'

The giant - Herbert estimated he was at least six foot six - had a completely bald head and lashless eyes; he blinked at his employer, then growled: 'Stove not burning, me lady. Wind in wrong direction.'

'Then you should have allowed yourself more time. I hope the meat was well hung.'

'Yes, me lady. Well hung.'

'Good, well, hurry up and serve, we're starving.'

Marvin lifted a huge meat dish from the trolley and deposited it upon the table in front of Stafford. Herbert found his mouth watering; roast leg of pork, the crackling brown and succulent. Stafford began to carve with workmanlike skill. Marvin then presented a dish of roast potatoes, another of green peas, and a sauceboat full to the brim with brown-red, steaming gravy.

'We live simply, Mr Herbert,' Lady Carruthers remarked with considerable satisfaction, 'but we live well. The manor has a few acres left, and we do our own slaughtering. The trouble is, Marvin is apt to serve meat too fresh. I keep stressing that the carcass should be hung for at least two days in a suitably cool place. Please hurry, Stafford, you're not performing an operation.'

'My brother,' Helen explained, 'was once a surgeon, Herbert, and he views all meat with a professional eye.'

'One could say,' Herbert remarked rather tactlessly, 'that a butcher and a surgeon have much in common.'

Marvin placed a large, silver-covered dish upon the table, then looked inquiringly at Lady Carruthers. She nodded.

'Leave it. I'm sure he'll be down presently.'

A very palatable white wine was served in tall green glasses, and for some time there was little conversation, only the rattle of cutlery on plates. The Carruthers, Herbert noticed, enjoyed their food to the point of gluttony. Lady Carruthers in par-

ticular wolfed down her meat with a certain amount of lip smacking which he found distasteful; she signalled imperiously for two fresh helpings.

'Is everything to your satisfaction, Mr Herbert?' she inquired after a while.

'Splendid,' he replied with sincerity. 'I must congratulate your cook.'

'Do you hear that, Marvin?' Lady Carruthers addressed the motionless manservant. 'You are being congratulated.'

The man bowed his head in Herbert's direction, but his face expressed neither pleasure nor indifference at this compliment.

'Where do you live, Mr Herbert?' Lady Carruthers inquired, toying with the last scrap of meat on her plate.

'In whatever place is handy when the sun goes down.'

He was surprised at the interest his answer evoked; Lady Carruthers dropped her knife, Stafford looked at him over the remnants of the once succulent joint, and Helen allowed her beautiful mouth to fall open. She laughed once; a soft ripple of pure amusement.

'You mean - you are a tramp?'

'That would describe my position fairly accurately,' he admitted gravely.

'You actually tramp around with a little billy-can, and beg a pinch of tea?'

'Not beg,' he shook his head. 'I work when the opportunity presents itself, and necessity dictates.'

'How absolutely fantastic. A gentleman of the road.'

'You don't look like a tramp,' Lady Carruthers insisted; 'neither do you talk like one.'

'How should a tramp look and speak?' he inquired. 'Many famous people have followed my profession. George Borrow wrote two bestsellers as a result of his experiences; St Francis was nothing more than a holy tramp. It is a traditional calling.'

'But,' there was the faintest suspicion of a flush on the old woman's lined cheek, 'you must have a family somewhere, who is deeply concerned about your wanderings.'

Herbert shook his head.

'I do assure you.' He paused. 'There is no one – now.'

'How sad,' said Helen. 'No one to welcome the wanderer home.'

'No one at all,' and there was a suggestion of bitterness in his voice. 'Absolutely no one.'

There was a scratching sound that came from the closed door; a gentle rubbing, and the handle moved. Lady Carruthers asked:

'What have we for the second course, Marvin?'

'Savoury jelly, me lady.'

'Serve it.'

Marvin bent down and took up a dish from the lower tray of the food trolley, which he bore solemnly to the table and set down. The door began to creak slowly open.

'I fear, Mr Herbert,' Lady Carruthers said in a matter-of-fact tone of voice, 'that we all lack a sweet tooth. I trust this will be to your taste. Marvin's savoury jellies are a great favourite with us all.'

Herbert did not answer, for his full attention was engaged in watching what came in through the door. A short, squat figure, clad in a sort of white nightgown that was drawn together at the neck by a broad tape, and draped down to a little above the carpet-slipped feet. The white hair was like a flattened-out bird's nest, thin and spikey; with a stomach-turning stab of horror, he realized there were no eyelids, just two small pools of black; neither was there a nose, only a pair of minute holes – nor ears. The face, so far as he could judge, was fleshless; a mere skull covered by loose skin which pulsed in and out when the creature breathed. It shuffled towards a chair which Marvin obligingly pulled back.

'Marvin broils the meat on a very low fire,' Lady Carruthers was saying, 'so that there is a very slow simmering. The entire process takes some eight or nine hours. Then the essence is strained through a muslin cloth and allowed to set in a cool place. Try a small portion, Mr Herbert, then give us your considered opinion.'

The creature, Herbert could not determine its sex, was staring at the silver-covered dish; Marvin raised the lid and skilfully forked a lump of raw meat on to a plate. Two hands crept up over the table edge and wormed their way towards the plate. The fingertips were gone, and Herbert could see white, jagged ends of bone . . . He tore his eyes away.

'Stafford, serve Mr Herbert,' Lady Carruthers instructed.

'Really,' Herbert objected weakly, 'I don't think I could.'

'Just a mouthful,' she insisted gently.

The finger stubs had somehow wrapped themselves around the raw meat, and were pulling it upwards. The mouth hole was widening; two yellow fangs came into view, and Herbert stared down at the faintly trembling, pinkish-brown jelly.

'A big helping for me,' said Helen.

'Don't be greedy,' admonished Lady Carruthers.

They gobbled their jelly: three two-legged animals, snorting, lips smacking, and the fourth, a creature, sank its two fangs into the raw meat and tore, before bolting the blood-rich flesh. The plates were clean, except Herbert's, and three spoons were laid gently down; the creature gave a final gulp, then looked slowly round the table. The twin black pools were turned on Herbert, then became still.

'You must forgive us, Mr Herbert,' Lady Carruthers was patting her lips with a napkin, 'if our table manners leave a little to be desired, but we live isolated lives, and have grown perhaps somewhat lax.'

'You must feel quite at home,' Helen said. 'It's rather like a hobos' picnic.'

It was struggling to rise from its chair, slithering from side to side, clutching at the table with its finger stubs. It was up and moving along the table, its head turned so that the eyes never left Herbert's face. Moving very slowly, walking with great effort.

'You must lead a varied life, Mr Herbert,' Lady Carruthers was saying, 'always on the move, meeting all kinds of picturesque people. I'm not at all sure I don't envy you.'

'And women,' Helen breathed the words; 'are there any women tramps?'

'None that I have ever met.' Herbert was aware it had now shuffled past Stafford and was coming down the table towards him. 'It is hardly the life for a woman.'

'I don't know,' Helen looked thoughtful. 'There must be a great sense of freedom, out there on the road. I mean,' she was watching Herbert, who was doing his best not to move, 'you can leave your sins behind you.'

It was beside him now, and when at last he turned, he saw at close range the hideous, skin-covered skull, the lidless eyes, the gaping mouth hole, revealing a tongue that resembled a chewed piece of old leather. The eyes were studying his hand that rested on the table; a strange crooning sound emerged from somewhere in its throat, and a thin trickle of saliva drooled down over the pointed chin. A terrible stench cloyed his nostrils as a stubbed claw moved up, then slowly descended towards his hand.

'Marvin,' Lady Carruthers snapped.

With unhurried steps Marvin went over to his trolley and took up another dish, then with the same dignified gait walked round the table until he came to the creature, which was now leaning over Herbert as if it were trying to smell him. Marvin whipped off the dish cover and presented a gobbet of raw meat. This he took up fastidiously between thumb and forefinger and waved it gently before the creature's face. It crooned again; the trickle of saliva widened into a stream, then it turned and, with Marvin backing away, followed him along the table and eventually out through the doorway. Herbert wiped his forehead with his napkin.

'I'm so sorry,' Lady Carruthers said softly, 'but one must make allowances for the very, very old. Mustn't one?'

2

He fell awake suddenly with the moonlight on his face, and lay perfectly still for a full minute, every sense alert. The second scream was muted, but high pitched, the result possibly of

intense pain or great terror. It had a pig-like quality. Then from below came the sound of scuffling; a door crashed open, and a man's voice was raised in anger. A little later heavy footsteps were heard running over the rough ground, and Herbert rose quickly and moved to the window.

A cloud veiled the moon but there was enough light for him to see Marvin pursuing a long, white figure that was crawling towards a gap in the tumble-down fencing where a gate had doubtless once stood. It was moving with great difficulty on short, thick legs, leaving a trail of blood on the dead grass, and emitting a series of high-pitched screams. Marvin was waving a large meat chopper, and a blue and white butcher's apron flapped against his legs as he stumbled awkwardly after his escaping prey. The macabre chase disappeared behind a clump of bushes; there came one last high-pitched scream, then Marvin reappeared dragging a carcass by one short foreleg.

Herbert returned to his bed and fought down a renewed feeling of nausea. It would seem that the fellow had been killing a pig when, somehow, the animal had broken free but, and now Herbert shuddered, what kind of pig had no feet? He tried to construct a picture of the animal as he had seen it moving across the grass, and then the carcass that Marvin had dragged back from behind the bushes. It had been long and white; that much was certain, and the hindlegs very thick; the forelegs had not been so thick, but considerably shorter and – bloodstained. He stirred uneasily. Marvin – he accepted the knowledge with great reluctance – Marvin must have chopped off the feet prior to slaughtering. But why? Also, surely the animal should have bled to death within minutes, but Herbert had seen it crawling across the grass and, now he came to think more clearly, the hindlegs had been very thick, mere hams with stumps. His brain worried the problem for a long time until sleep crept up like a bare-footed burglar and robbed him of consciousness.

3

Darkness had turned out the moon, the house was a box lost in the maze of time and Herbert was a streak of light that had come out of the mist of yesteryear and would soon be extinguished in the blackness of tomorrow. As the night grew old silence crept hand-in-hand with its sister, fear, and they crouched by his bedside, painting horror pictures on the blank canvas of his sleeping brain.

He was wandering through a dark valley while far above fires shimmered fitfully from grey mountain-tops. Shapeless monsters slithered between rocks; aimless, blind creatures that reared up, their gaping mouths red caverns; Herbert sensed their hunger and screamed – only there was no sound in that place save the whisper of a cold wind flavoured by the stench of corruption.

He moved without effort; drifted over the rocks like a sheet of yesterday's newspaper chased by the wind along a midnight street, while the mountain-top fires cast their baleful glow, making shadows dance, but never quite revealing the things that slid into crevices, or reared up from behind boulders. He came to the cavern. A great opening in the mountainside, a mouth of solid darkness, and that which was the essence of Herbert struggled like a fly caught in a spider's web. For he knew. It was knowledge never to be translated into words or even thoughts; knowledge refined by millions of years so that now it was merely instinct. But he knew that in that cave, far back, lay the font of all knowledge and hence, all evil. Terror made him want to wake up, but at the same time there was a tiny wish that fluttered like a newly hatched fly, a perverted fear, that he might be forced to enter.

'There is no yesterday,' a voice whispered; 'no today, no tomorrow.'

Something soft was pawing his body and at last his scream took on sound.

'Hush.' Helen was lying beside him, her white body a thing

of wonder in the soft glow cast by the bedside lamp. 'You'll wake the entire house.'

He sat up and brushed the sweat from his eyes; his hand was trembling.

'What are you doing here?'

Her full lips parted: 'What do you think? You were having a nightmare.'

'True,' he nodded, 'I was.'

'That is not unusual.' She lay back and her pink-tipped breasts glimmered like distant fire-crested mountains. 'One must expect nightmares in a place like this.' Her eyes twinkled with a mischievous light. 'Do you know where you are?'

He wanted to say: 'No.' 'Where?' he asked.

'On the lower lip that borders the mouth of hell.'

'A very dramatic answer.' He managed to smile, and her long white legs moved very gently.

'All life is high drama and beneath every iceberg roars an unquenchable fire. Ask me some more questions.'

'Very well,' he moved a little nearer; 'who is - what is ...?'

'That which came down to dinner?'

He nodded, and she gave a low, throaty chuckle.

'That must remain an enigma for the present. Let us say he - she - or it, once came to dinner and stayed.' She placed two fingers on his mouth and he felt the cool flesh gently caress his lips. 'I know what you are going to ask. Where did it come from? Perhaps a hole in the ground, or a deep marsh, or maybe from the dark wastes of the human brain. From one, perhaps all, of these places. On the other hand, maybe it came from nowhere; has always been and always will be. Think about it. Ask me some more.'

'Why,' Herbert took a deep breath, 'why does Marvin cut off the feet from pigs before he kills them?'

'Cut off - pigs?' She stared at him, her face a frozen mask of astonishment.

'I saw from the window.'

The laugh started as a low gurgle somewhere deep down in

that long white throat, then bubbled up into a cascade of rippling laughter.

'Don't.' He seized those white shoulders and shook her. 'What's so damn funny?'

The long fingers were now worming their way through his hair and he was being drawn down. 'The hair is grey,' her whisper came to him across a great divide where the shapeless things writhed in semi-darkness, 'but you are so young. You understand so little.'

Their bodies met, fused into one and fear took wing like a vulture disturbed at meat, and waited for sanity to return.

Sunlight had slaughtered darkness when he rose up out of the sleep that succeeds complete exhaustion and in that half-clad moment which separates life from death, clawed the empty pillow next to his head and muttered: 'Why, why?' Then full consciousness exploded upon his brain and he sat up.

He must not think – not yet.

First dress, then go out into the corridor, then walk as though he still had freedom of movement to the bathroom, there wash the body; the fit, healthy body, then shave, return to the bedroom, finish dressing, comb the hair – now think, but slowly. Think slowly.

One fact out-shouldered all others; towered up like a colossus among pygmies. He was no longer free. An invisible wall surrounded the house, weightless chains hung from his wrists, a lashless whip hung limply over his back; his five senses had united in rebellion and made him a prisoner.

The imprint of her body was still on the bed, her perfume still cloyed his nostrils, the vision of her breasts, thighs, insatiable lips, would never, so long as his brain functioned, be erased. And memory – he groaned aloud.

There was a tap on his door; then it opened and Stafford Carruthers stood in the entrance, bluff, hearty, a middle-aged schoolboy looking for a holiday.

'Up and dressed? Good man. Breakfast'll soon be ready. I say, you look a bit under the weather.'

His small blue eyes flashed a single inquiring glance at the tumbled blankets, the two rumpled pillows, then were quickly veiled by lowered lids.

'I guess you'll be staying for a bit, old man,' he said.

The breakfast table was no less elaborately set than it had been for dinner the night before; Lady Carruthers was already seated in her high-backed chair.

'Good morning, Mr Herbert. I trust you spent a pleasant night.'

Her voice held the right polite tone of inquiry and her face bore the correct expression of superficial concern, but the word 'pleasant' had an ironic ring.

'Good morning, Lady Carruthers; thank you, I slept well, as indeed, I trust, did you.'

'I sleep fitfully.' She waved a hand as though stressing the matter was of no importance. 'Please, take your seat, we are ready to start. Stafford where is that wretched girl?'

'She went out early,' Stafford replied in that half-sulky tone he used when addressing his mother. 'She said not to wait breakfast for her.'

'Indeed,' – the old lady flapped open a napkin – 'I expect my children to be present at mealtimes. Stafford, ring for Marvin.' She turned to Herbert. 'I understand you intend staying over for a few days.'

He felt the blood race up to his face and his heart began to pound.

'I cannot remember being invited.'

'Goodness, man, we thought you took that for granted. In fact I'm certain someone, perhaps Helen, told me you were. In any case, you are, so let's hear no more about it.'

'Thank you,' Herbert began, but she cut him short by another abrupt wave of the hand.

'Fiddlesticks. Ah, Marvin with the trolley. What have we this morning?'

Marvin began to load dishes on to the table, his face set in its usual expressionless mould but, and Herbert shuddered, there was blood under his fingernails.

'Devilled kidneys, me lady, braised liver, sweetbreads and toast. Also, enriched coffee.'

'Help yourself, Mr Herbert,' Lady Carruthers instructed.

Herbert took kidneys, toast and a cup of coffee that Marvin poured from an earthenware pot. It tasted sweet and had a slightly red, brownish colour. He found it to be extremely palatable and requested a second cup. Lady Carruthers, who was wolfing down a full plate of kidneys, sweetbreads and liver, smiled a tribute to his appreciation.

'I'll warrant,' – she corrected herself, – 'I'll wager you've never tasted coffee like that before, Mr Herbert. It is enriched with natural juices. We are great believers in natural foods; that which made our forefathers strong, makes us what we are. Heed my advice, Mr Herbert, eat fresh meat, properly hung, drink natural juices and, barring accidents, Father Time will pass you by.'

The meal proceeded without further conversation until Lady Carruthers folded up her napkin and said: 'If you have finished, I would suggest you go for a walk or something. Find Helen – she's around somewhere.'

He wandered round that great house, opening doors, peering into empty rooms, and he had the impression she had just preceded him by a few seconds; once he caught a glimpse of a white dress disappearing round a corner, but when he reached the spot there was no one in sight. He walked for a long time, lost in a maze of passages, opened innumerable doors, disturbed a carpet of dust, and it seemed to his fevered imagination that the house was a dead body and that he was adrift in its empty veins and arteries.

He came into the long picture gallery. The double doors creaked open at his touch; there was a desert of floor, one wall broken by windows, a small door at the far end and gilt framed pictures waiting to meet him. He paused before each one like a tourist absorbing his mead of culture; four centuries of Carruthers stared back, iron-faced, steel-eyed, their attire changing as one generation succeeded another; otherwise they shared a family set of features. Lady Carruthers's nose,

Stafford's small eyes, or Helen's beautiful ones, add a periwig, take away a cloak, here was little to differentiate the quick from the dead.

One portrait in particular arrested Herbert's attention: a man standing beside a table. His black hair was long, his eyes black, lifelike, the face round and swarthy, and he seemed to be watching Herbert with sardonic amusement. The short blue cloak was trimmed with silver lace, the doublet and hose bright scarlet, as were the thigh-high boots. Herbert read the faded inscription etched on an age-green brass plaque fastened to the frame base.

SIR GORE OUSELEY CARRUTHERS. B. 1628.

The man depicted must have been at least forty years of age, so the picture had been painted around 1668. Restoration period, Herbert reflected, the Fire of London and the Great Plague but a few years behind. Those eyes might well have seen old St Paul's burn, seen the death carts trundle down Cheapside, and much else. Then he noticed another item that, due to his interest in the man, had so far escaped his attention. On the table was a bowl full of raw meat. He moved a step nearer and examined the painting with greater care. Bright red meat, chopped into small cubes, each rimmed with white fat, gleaming with a red sheen as though it had been freshly slaughtered. There was another point; Sir Gore's lips had been painted to match the meat. The same juicy redness; slightly parted, revealing ivory-white teeth; his cheeks were replete, slightly veined, plump, a little short of bloated.

A sound made him turn his head. What was it? He stood rigid before the portrait, his head slightly on one side, listening, his brain attuned to savour any further sound so as to give it a rational explanation. There it was again. A shuffling, a slow edging forward, feet never leaving the dust-muffled floor; harsh breathing, age-withered lungs drawing air in, blowing out; occasionally the breathing descended to a huskier harshness – it crooned. Herbert gave one more glance at the portrait

of Sir Gore, the bowl of red meat, then he backed away, suddenly cold, numb, faintly sick.

The shuffling came to the great double doors, both wide open; a rat ran across the floor and disappeared into a hole in the wainscoting – and then it came in. The flattened, bird's-nest white hair, the lidless eyes, the gaping mouth-hole which now emitted a continuous crooning dirge, the hideous hands outstretched, the black eye-pools glittering when the sun cast a golden beam through dust-grimed windows.

It stopped and for a full minute stared at Herbert, then the head came up, the two yellow fangs were bared and it howled. A long screeching howl; a strange twitching seemed to be taking place under that sackline robe, then it broke into a shuffling run, moving at terrifying speed, the arms now stretched out still, like dead branches, the finger stubs arched. Herbert leapt to his left; the creature instantly changed direction and before he could move again his right hand was clutched by those claws and pulled up to the gaping mouth-hole. The shortened finger felt like cold steel, the head was thrust well back, the mouth wide open. He had a momentary glimpse of blackened gums, notched bone, broken by two eye-teeth; he was reminded of a snake preparing to strike.

'Stop.'

A voice came from behind; soft, barely above a whisper, but the creature heard it, became a rigid effigy of a nightmare frozen by death. The mouth-hole remained open, the eye-pools looked down over the crater-pitted cheeks, and slowly the mutilated fingers loosened their grip. Helen glided forward and spoke in a hurried, urgent undertone.

'Go bad. Go. Go bad.'

The arms dropped, disappeared into the folds of that sack-like robe, the eye-pools leaked over and spilt two riverlets of moisture down the upturned face.

'Go,' Helen repeated, 'presently. Keep fresh, long time. Strong. Heal. Go.'

It went. Like a wronged child, a dog deprived of a long-awaited bone, a hyena driven from its offal. Shuffling back

towards the door, head down, shoulders shaking, the picture of infantile, grotesque grief.

Helen's lovely face was lit by a gentle smile.

'I am so sorry, that must have been an alarming experience for you.'

'The understatement of all time.' He rubbed his wrist. 'I've never been so terrified in all my life. You must tell me – what – who is it?'

'I've told you all I can. You can see it is very old and very small.'

'And very horrible.'

She laid a hand upon his arm and he began to tremble, but this time not with fear.

'Terror comes in small packages.'

He buried his face in her hair. 'Helen, I have never known fear before, not real fear. This house is saturated with horror, come away. Let me take you away.'

'To wander?' she laughed softly. 'To tramp, sleep in ditches, beg a pinch of tea for our billy-cans?'

'No,' he clutched her shoulders, 'I can go back. There is money if I want it, friends who will help me. You would want for nothing, I swear. Come with me.'

The mocking smile died very slowly, the clear dark eyes became troubled; a bewildered expression flashed across her face, then she shook her head.

'I cannot. Impossible.'

'Why?' The question was a cry, almost a call for help.

'Because,' the smile came back and she pushed him abruptly away, 'I would die were I to leave this house.'

'Nonsense.'

'Not nonsense. The house has windows, doors, furniture and us. You might as well ask a tree to pull up its roots and walk beside you. But you can go. There is nothing to keep you.'

'You know there is.'

He snapped out the words, his anger real, and for a second he hated her beauty, the mocking eyes, the white flesh, the power she held over him.

'Yes,' she nodded, 'I know. How do you like our family?'

'What?'

'Our family.' She raised her hand in a gesture that embraced the entire gallery. 'The long dead.' She moved over to the portrait of Sir Gore. 'This one interests you, doesn't he? And so he should. The portrait was painted by Antonio Gelleni, the so-called mad artist of Charles's court. A genius who painted people as they were, not as they appeared. Sir Gore liked that. He wore his evil proudly, like a badge of honour. Look at those eyes, can't you see the knowledge peering out from them? And see, the mouth is slightly open as though he were about to tell you some awful, obscene secret that would burn up your poor little soul with terror and send it puffing up the chimney like a ball of black smoke. And the hands...'

She was becoming excited, her eyes shining.

'... long-fingered, slightly red and they are strong, you can see that, can't you? Strong enough to rip flesh from bone, tear the heart from your breast...'

'No,' he placed both hands over his ears. 'For God's sake stop.'

'Poor boy.' She kissed him and her lips were warm and moist. 'I've frightened you. I shouldn't have done that, Mother would be so angry. But I get so excited when I think of him as he was. But come,' she took his arm and began to steer him towards the doors, 'I'll show you what remains of the garden, then open up the old library; then if you are very good, perhaps we'll have time to be very bad.'

In a little while Herbert had forgotten his fear and was once again almost happy.

4

They went for a walk just before dinner, to work up an appetite, Helen said and he smiled indulgently when he saw her look of anticipation.

'You are a glutton. Your entire family are; I wonder you aren't all fat.'

She hugged his arm with both hands.

'Because we eat mainly meat. Lots of nice protein.'

They walked some hundred yards and then Helen steered him round so that the house was always in view.

'Why can't we walk straight on?' he asked.

'Because,' she looked fearfully at the boundless heath that stretched out to the horizon, 'as I told you, I can't leave the house. Out there I'd die.'

'Good heavens,' he laughed, 'you can't believe that.'

'I know it,' she nodded gravely. 'You can go, but I cannot.'

'Then it looks as if we are both stuck with the house for ever, unless your mother kicks me out and she's bound to sooner or later.'

She seemed to think this very funny and laughed, still gripping his arm with both hands.

'Well, I can't see her giving me board and keep indefinitely,'

Herbert insisted, 'and I wouldn't expect her to, either.'

'She will,' the fit of laughter had passed, and now there was a haunted look in her eyes. 'She'll insist that you stay. Why did you come, the others did not matter?'

'Others?' he frowned. 'I thought no stranger had come this way for years.'

'They haven't,' she shook her head; 'the grocery man ... Let's go back.'

'You mean the grocery man brings people to the house?' Herbert demanded.

'I didn't say that,' her face was pale, her eyes terrified. 'I just said the grocery man. Don't go putting words into my mouth. I meant he was the only stranger to visit us in years.'

'But you said the others did not matter.' The fear was back, sitting on his shoulders, gibbering in his ear. 'You implied your mother insisted "the others" stayed too.'

'Did I?' she twisted her lips into a grotesque grimace. 'Well, what of it? Will you sleep better tonight believing that?'

Suddenly she changed; flung her arms round his neck and placed her cold cheek next to his. 'If only you had a family,

someone who expected you. Run, keep running, don't look back. Don't you see, this is a moment of sanity? Once back in the house and I'll never let you go.'

'I ask for nothing more,' he said gravely.

'You are mad. Mad.' She broke away and ran towards the house, her glorious hair streaming like a pall of black velvet in the wind.

Herbert stood alone, looked up at the sky where low-lying cloud flew with misty wings, saw the wild moorland, a desert of grass and stunted bushes that mourned the passing of summer, then listened to the wind's familiar cry. He turned and saw the house. The windows were eyes that mocked him, the open doors, parted lips . . . He started to walk towards the house; after a while he ran and his friend the wind seemed to wail its grief.

The grocery man came just before dinner.

Herbert saw the plain, rather shabby van from his bedroom window and watched Marvin help a little bald-headed man carry cartons into the house. Then Marvin returned alone and peered inquiringly into the van's interior; his investigation seemed to cause annoyance, for he called out and Herbert caught the word: 'Where.'

The little man came back into view, his hands outstretched like one who is explaining his helplessness due to circumstance. Then Marvin roared his rage again. 'You explain to her ladyship.'

Both men disappeared into the house and Herbert, remembering Helen's reference to the grocery man, went out into the corridor and crept down the stairs. The dining-room door was closed and he could hear the murmur of voices that occasionally rose and gave him a few words; a tantalizing morsel lacking continuity.

The little man, high-pitched, pleading an excuse:

'It's so difficult, me lady. You always said be careful and I've got meself to think of.'

Then Lady Carruthers's low, cultivated old voice, the words indistinguishable but conveying an undertone of cold menace

that made the man behind the door shiver. Suddenly Stafford's deep baritone rang out.

'You're fast enough to take our money. A bloody fortune over the years.'

'I've done me best, squire. So 'elp me I have. But the really safe ones are scarce.'

'Hell, man,' Stafford sounded so unlike his usual self, 'our demands are not great; the last consignment was three months old before Marvin here finished it off, and then only through stupidity.'

Lady Carruthers broke in again, quelling what was clearly developing into mutual recriminations, for even Marvin was rumbling a half-angry excuse for some implied fault.

Herbert vainly flattened his ear against the door, for that low, even tone never rose. The grocery man interrupted now and again with an: 'Understand, me lady': 'Three months should be all right, me lady'. Once he even permitted himself a low, respectful laugh: 'Winter is always a more fruitful time, me lady.'

A sound of footsteps came towards the door and Herbert ran on tiptoe along the passage, turned left and raced for the stairs. On the first landing he waited and presently heard Marvin and the little man pass below. The grocery man was still trying to explain something away, his voice plaintive, as though he had been unjustly accused of some lapse of duty.

'They don't understand, Marvin, it's so difficult out there. It ain't like it used to be. Everybody has got papers.'

Marvin made an unintelligible rumble.

'Where there's papers there's trouble.' The little man's voice went on, but now it was drawing away, going towards the front door and Herbert had to strain his ears to catch the last few words. 'We don't want no questions asked.'

He stood rigid on that cold landing and allowed a small, impossible suspicion to whisper its horrifying suggestion into the empty caverns of his mind. For a while he stood so petrified by rising terror that his very brain refused to function,

then gradually it accepted the possibility of the seemingly impossible being a fact. But he had to know; was forced by an urge stronger than fear, to find evidence that must surely disprove the monstrous suggestion his reason had put forth.

Minutes passed, Marvin came back into the main hall, closed the door; Stafford called from the dining-room: 'Marvin, come in here.' Marvin, without saying a word, obeyed. The dining-room door closed behind him and there was the sound of raised voices, a disagreement in which Helen appeared to be taking a leading part.

It took some time for Herbert to find the kitchen, for every door to the lower regions seemed to be locked, a precaution that Marvin doubtless took whenever he came upstairs, and the precious minutes were passing. Once he by chance wandered into the portrait gallery and there, before the picture of Sir Gore, was the shrivelled figure of the Thing, gazing up at the painted features with lidless eyes. It was moaning softly and Herbert fled, tore down the nearest stairs and out through the front door. Eventually he found an open window, climbed into a small, empty room and there began his search in earnest for the truth.

Long dark passages; warped, dust-grimed doors that whimpered when opened; musty little rooms mostly devoid of furniture; a prevailing smell of long-dead cooking, the occasional startled rat, its fur sleek, its body plump from good living, and horror that lurked behind the right shoulder, ever ready to disappear should one's head be turned, but always present. Herbert's eyes became a camera, his brain a white screen on which pictures flickered and constantly changed as he drew nearer to his goal.

A fire was spluttering, he could hear it – only one more door to open – a saucepan was rattling its lid as though demanding attention. Herbert's right hand was a five-fingered beast that insisted on turning a handle and his entire arm refused to heed his silent protest and pushed open the door. The kitchen door.

A large, stone-paved room, a long, well-scrubbed table in

the centre, a black iron range on the far side, its hot plates cherry-red; a great Welsh dresser by the left wall; on a rack over the mantelpiece an array of butcher's knives, a saw – nothing more.

Herbert moved soft-footed to the iron range. Three saucepans were now raising their lids, potatoes, carrots, greenstuff; he bent down – a roast was browning nicely in the oven; nothing sinister. The place was neat, clean, displaying all the signs of a well-run kitchen, and Herbert began to breathe more easily. He wandered round the kitchen, opened a cupboard door and saw rows of pickling jars, each packed with bright pink meat nestling in white vinegar. He examined each jar carefully. The raw meat had been scraped and was pink, as though all the blood had been drawn away, but in one jar, one piece of meat looked familiar. A small, chubby, succulent morsel, shaped – Herbert drew away, his eyes widening – shaped like a big toe.

Horror rushed into the kitchen, came out of the walls, shrieked with chattering teeth from the rattling saucepan lids, sputtered from the oven. A brine tub. It was standing by the left wall, the rim cutting into the back of Herbert's legs; black, three-quarters full of clear water, three heads, shaven, (or had they been plucked?) dead white, grinning, and most certainly human. Herbert giggled. Perhaps Marvin would make some brawn.

He fled to the nearest door; threw it open; the room was dark, switch – where was the switch? He found it, light exploded. An operating theatre. A long white table complete with straps; the walls lined with glass-fronted cases; knives, syringes, saws, bottles, rolls of bandages, the smell of anti-septic. There was something hanging on the wall: 'Oh, God, let not my eyes see, let my reason fail, give me the blessed relief of madness, let me be blotted out.'

The arms had gone, so had the legs, it was a cocoon of bandages, the gaping mouth bright-red with dried blood – no tongue, the brown eyes rolled from side to side.

Herbert heard the stepfall behind him, heard the growl of

rage, but before Marvin's giant fist clubbed him into unconsciousness, he managed a gurgling chuckle.

'The meat is well hung.'

5

He came back to consciousness with great reluctance, fighting to keep his brain dead, but his eyes opened and there was Helen looking down at him. Her face was so lovely, so sad, and a rush of lust-tinted tenderness flooded his newly awakened senses. She bent down and kissed him full on the lips, and her tears wetted his face.

'My poor darling.'

Her soft lips crept round his face, his nose, nuzzled his ears, while her shoulders shook; her long black hair smelt clean, wind clean. She straightened up, smiling, beautiful, gentle, the dream-woman who haunts the mist of yesteryear.

'You should have run when I told you. But never mind, it is better this way. Now we will never be parted, you will be flesh of my flesh, blood of my blood, your life force will mingle with mine, and we will walk down through the centuries together.'

'Why?'

'Such a short word.' She sighed. 'But it has no answer. The tree asks "why", when its leaves turn brown and fall. The rabbit asks "why" when the ferret sinks home its fangs, but there is no answer. Perhaps it is because the earth needs leaves so it can be replenished, and the ferret also requires food. We are the earth, the ferret, we need food. Special food in which the life force is still strong.'

Herbert began to struggle but the straps held him firm, and Helen's smile died, to be replaced by a look of concern, even anguish.

'Please, you'll hurt yourself.'

'You're not carving me up,' his voice rose to a scream. 'I'll not finish up like that...'

He turned. The creature on the wall hung limp in its cradle of straps, the head slumped forward on the bandaged chest. Helen shook her head sadly.

'It died. But it lasted well, considering. Did you realize how much the human body can lose and still function? Legs, arms, three-quarters of the liver, one kidney, one and two-thirds of the lungs, most of the stomach ...'

Herbert screamed.

Silently Helen took up a syringe and plunged it into Herbert's arm; just before he fell into a pit of roaring darkness, he had a glimpse of Stafford in the doorway. He was dressed in white, and his heavy face wore a satisfied grin.

6

When he came up out of the darkness for a second time, he was alone. The mutilated corpse no longer draped the wall, every bottle was in its place, there was such an atmosphere of cleanliness, of hygienic serenity, that for a moment, before memory returned, Herbert imagined he must have been miraculously transported to a hospital. Then he remembered and began to struggle.

Broad straps bound him to the table; one across the chest, another over the waist, while a third confined his legs. His right arm ached and was slightly numb; his left was completely devoid of feeling, save for a faint burning sensation just above the elbow. In fact, as full consciousness returned, he became aware of a battling army of pains, each one claiming supremacy. Somewhere at the back of his skull a little man was wielding a pick-axe, and the dull burning ache in his left arm was doing it very best to become a furnace. He wriggled the right arm then braced his legs; finally he strained his upper regions and that damnable spot, just above the left elbow, sent out tentacles of fire.

'I'm so damn weak,' he muttered, then remembered what had hung on the wall and redoubled his efforts. The straps were not new, hell alone knew how many bodies had battled against their confining grip, and presently he heard a short ripping sound before his right arm struggled free.

He lay still for at least five minutes, carefully conserving his strength, then slowly sat up, looking intently at the belt that

pinioned his waist, seeking the buckle. It was a little below table-level, within reach of his right hand, and he fumbled, jerked, then was free, except for the leg straps. He need now only twist one ankle, press down on the table with both hands, and pull. No further action was to be considered yet, just pull and free his legs.

His right hand flattened itself upon the table, but his left refused to acknowledge the brain's command. Reason put forward an instant monstrous suggestion, but Herbert smothered it with a screamed denial.

'No-o-o . . .'

The single, drawn-out word smashed the silence into a thousand splinters of tortured sound. His head came round very slowly, the eyelids tried to close, and for a century-imprisoned minute he existed in a limbo of blessed ignorance.

The left arm stopped short of the elbow; a grotesque stump swathed in bandages – his friendly, helpful arm had gone for ever. He began to cry, mourning his great loss, recalling a happy past when it had been with him, vainly willing it to come back. There was no great pain so long as he did not try to move that stump; a local anaesthetic, no doubt, that would shortly wear off. Then reason whispered again and he struggled to free his feet. Today the left arm, tomorrow the right, then left leg, then right. Kidney, three-quarters liver, tongue, lungs. Surely not his lungs. Lady Carruthers was too fastidious to dine off lights – cats' food.

He was on his feet now, swaying like a wind-drunk tree; the floor tried to hit him, but no, he'd stay upright, for a little while.

'Serve me up with two veg, would you?' he heard a voice shout, 'rare done and don't forget the gravy.'

Some lovely knives lay in a neat row behind a glass-panelled door; one had taken away friend arm, so now it would return the favour. Take away somebody's friend head, go into somebody's friend stomach, seek out somebody's friend heart. The glass made a pretty sound as it clattered to the floor, and the knife was so beautiful, so sharp, so loving.

'Let me serve you,' it said, winking slyly. 'I'll sliver and slice, and make all things nice.'

The door wasn't locked. Good – good. They thought he was trussed up snug as a joint in the oven, and the kitchen was empty; so was the passage beyond. Careful now, don't bump the stump, pick your feet up, don't reel about like a headless chicken, that's better, much better. To the dining-room you are going, my lad, dinner served up on two legs; sirloin, rump, liver, lights, one hand down and one with a knife. Stairs! A problem here. Must make no noise. Up you go, one hand full, the other gone, can't hold on to the banisters.

Herbert almost shrieked when he stumbled and the raw stump was jolted against the wall. He crouched on the stairs and waited for the agony to subside. Upwards again. Make it. Now turn left, into the corridor, the dining-room door is there, at the far end, see – a light strip? Voices! Cutlery rattling on plates! The family are at table.

The door was coming near, the walls were sliding by, voices were growing louder.

Put knife between teeth. Good boy, clever. Right hand, only hand, on door handle, twist – push. Push. It's opening. At last ... Take knife from between teeth, they haven't seen you yet ... Hold knife in hand, now forward.

Lady Carruthers looked up, a dawning expression of polite surprise on her face, a glass of wine halfway to her lips. Stafford looked back over one shoulder, his eyes wide with astonishment; Helen half rose from her chair; beautiful, an expression of playful annoyance on her face. The wife-mother whose child has wandered down from its warm bed.

'Oh, Herbert, you naughty boy.'

Marvin stood by the wall, his face expressionless, the perfect servant waiting for orders. The Thing was at table. It was eating.

Herbert continued to move forward. He passed down the right hand side of the table and looked down over the Thing's shoulder. It was gnawing a bone.

Sanity flared up into a last bright flame. His eyes saw, his ears heard and his brain understood.

'Marvin,' Lady Carruthers spoke quietly.

'Me lady?'

'Take it back to the kitchen.'

'Very well, me lady.'

A great arm encircled Herbert's waist and he was being dragged back to the door; back to the butcher's shop, back to the black hell of insanity. But that was not important. He must tell them, make them understand. The knife fell from his limp fingers.

'That,' he pointed at the feeding Thing, 'that . . . that . . . is . . . eating MY BLOODY HAND.'

From over a great gulf, Lady Carruthers's voice came to him, low, cultured, reasonable.

'Naturally. Sir Gore likes his meat fresh, and . . .' A slight pause, the merest suspicion of a chuckle. 'Unhung.'



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