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THE ELEVENTH PAN BOOK OF

HORROR STORIES

**Selected by
Herbert van Thal**



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HORROR STORIES**

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THE ELEVENTH PAN BOOK OF HORROR STORIES

Edited by
HERBERT VAN THAL



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THE CELL

by

DAVID CASE

WHEN MY OLD Aunt Helen died I inherited her house. I was the only relative. I wasn't sad about her death because I hardly knew her, and I wasn't overjoyed about the house because it was an ancient thing, ugly and dilapidated and unpleasant. I suppose that it had been a decent enough house in its day, but Aunt Helen had lived there all alone for many years, ever since her husband disappeared. She was slightly crazy and never left the house. The house and the old woman sort of fell apart together. Sometimes she could be seen rocking on the front porch, cackling or laughing or moaning. It was a singular sound and rather hard to define. No one knows just how crazy she was, and no one cared. She seemed to be harmless enough and they left her alone and in the end she died quite peaceably of old age. So the house was mine.

I went there one miserable afternoon to look it over and see if there was anything that I wanted to keep before putting it up for auction. There was nothing. I would have left after the first ten minutes if the rain had not increased. But it increased. It came down very heavily and I had only a light coat with me. I decided to wait and see if it would let up presently. There was nothing else to do so I continued to poke around those damp and dirty rooms. Nothing seemed of the slightest value on the ground floor. I opened the basement door, thinking there might be something stored down there, but a gust of foul air belched out and I shut the door again. I was certain there would be nothing worth going down for. Instead, I went upstairs and looked through the bedrooms. They were all just skeletons of rooms, except the one that Aunt Helen must have used. There was some furniture there but it was broken and worthless. I was ready to leave and it was only some whim of chance that made me

open one of the bureau drawers. That was where I found the book.

It was mouldy with age. It had been torn and then repaired with tape. When I opened it the binding groaned stiffly and the pages crackled. They were dry and stained and creased, but I could still read the writing on them. It was in a man's hand, small and precise and neat and careful. The hand of a boring person, I thought. It appeared to be a diary or journal of some sort. I read a line or two, started to toss it back in the drawer, read another line. I opened it towards the middle and read a few more words. Then I closed the book and took it downstairs and sat in the front room, by the window. The light was dull and the pages brittle, but I began to read that extraordinary journal. I didn't stop . . . I didn't pause . . . until I had read it all. I couldn't. I was glued to the chair. My spine seemed fixed and my flesh fluid and creeping around it. The light grew dimmer but my eyes would not leave those pages. Beside my chair the rain was drumming against the glass, the sky was dark with clouds unbroken, and the wind rushed across the unkept lawn. It was the right day to read such a book.

This is the book:

MAY 4

God! It was horrible last night.

Last night it was the worst that it has been to date. I wish that I could remember the other times more clearly. I should have started keeping a record earlier, I know that now. But it took a great effort to begin this book that will show what I am, and I could not bring myself to do it before. At any rate, I am sure that last night was much worse than ever before. Perhaps that is why I feel that I must start this record now. Perhaps I must drain my feelings off in some way. It makes me wonder if I will be able to force myself to go down to my cell again next month . . .

But, of course I must. There can be no doubt of that, and I must never attempt to rationalize about it. No excuse will do. What I must do is to go down earlier next month. I can never leave it too late, or who knows what might happen? I

suppose I could control it, but . . . I left it just a bit too long last night, I think. I didn't mean to, but it is so difficult to tell. When I know that the thing is going to begin soon I get nervous and anticipate the first signs, and it is often impossible to tell the anticipation from the beginnings. The change starts with a certain nervous feeling and when I am already nervous it can begin before I realize it. That frightens me. I shall have to be more careful in the future.

I am in my room now. I am trying to remember all the details. This record will be useless if it is not completely accurate. It will be of no value to me, or to anyone else. I have not yet decided if anyone else will ever see it. Under the circumstances that is a terrible decision to be forced to make. I know that if I ever offer this record, I must also offer proof. That is the terrible part. I don't want anyone to think I am mad . . .

Last night my wife began to get agitated just after dinner. We were in the front room. She kept looking at her wrist-watch and then glancing sideways at me. I didn't like the way she let her eyes slide towards me without moving her head. I can't blame her, of course, and I pretended not to notice. I dreaded the thought of going down, and wanted to put it off as long as possible. It wasn't really very late and the sky was still light. I was sitting beside the window where I would be able to know when it was time. I pretended to be absorbed in the evening paper, but I was much too restless to read. I just saw the print as a blur. But I don't think that was a symptom. All the lights were on in the room and I was careful not to let Helen see me looking out of the window. I didn't want to make her any more troubled than she already was, poor thing. But, at the same time, I can remember feeling a strange sense of pleasure as I noticed the frightened look in her eyes. It was almost a sexual pleasure, I think. I don't know. Perhaps it was a preliminary sign of my disease, or perhaps it is a reaction normal to men. I can't tell, because I am not like other men. Still, I felt disgusted with myself as soon as I recognized that feeling, and so I knew that nothing had really started to take effect.

The bad part at that time was the contrast. Sitting there in that comfortable living-room with the bright lights and the

leather chairs and the new carpet and, at the same time, knowing what was coming in an hour or so . . . it was grotesque. Leading a completely normal life most of the time, and trying to pretend that it was normal, made the change so much more repulsive. It made me almost hate myself, even though I fully understand that it is a sickness and no fault of my own. Perhaps no fault of anyone's, possibly the fault of a distant ancestor, I don't know. But certainly I am not to blame. If I were I would kill myself, I think . . .

I kept stealing glances at the gilt-framed mirror on the wall and expecting to see some sign, although I knew that it was too early. It had to be too early, or else it would have been too late. Even if I were able to control myself in the first stages it would have been too horrible for my wife. I doubt that I could have borne it myself, if I saw it begin. If I looked in that normal, gilt-framed mirror, and actually saw it . . .

That is why there is no mirror in the cell.

At nine o'clock I stood up. The sky was darkening outside the window. The window was bordered by pretty lace curtains. My wife looked quickly at me, then looked away. I carefully folded the newspaper and put it down in the chair. I looked normal and calm.

'Well, it's time,' I said.

'Yes, I suppose so,' she said, and I could hear the struggle to keep relief out of her voice.

We went into the hallway and down the dark stairs to the basement. My wife went down first. They are old wooden stairs with the clammy basement wall on one side and a handrail on the other. This is an old house and although I have kept the upstairs in good repair the basement is ancient and gloomy. I cannot seem to force myself to go down there at normal times. But that is understandable enough, under the circumstances. And, in a way, it seems proper that it should be dank and unkept. It at least lessens the contrast at the last minute.

The stairs groaned underfoot. The dead air seemed to climb the steps to meet us, and suddenly I felt dizzy. I put one hand against the mouldy wall for support. My foot slipped and I had to clutch at the handrail. I caught myself, but my foot passed one step and banged down on the next.

My wife turned at the noise. Her face was terrible. Her eyes were white and wide. Her mouth was open. For a long instant she could not control that expression. I have seldom seen more fear and horror in a face. Never without cause, certainly. And certainly she had no cause. She must know that I would never hurt her. Still, I cannot blame her for being afraid. It was the horror that hurt me. I hated to see the horror that I could inspire in one I loved. And then the expression vanished and she smiled, a little lip-biting smile. I think that she was ashamed that she had shown her fear. I smiled back at her, and that was when I realized that I had left it to the very last moment. My mouth was stiff and my teeth felt too large. I knew that my control was going.

The cell is at the far end of the basement. I went ahead of her and opened the door myself. She stood back a bit, I walked in and looked out of the door and smiled again. Her face was very pale, almost illuminated, in the dark basement. She moved forward and it was as if her face were floating, disembodied. Her throat was the whitest part of all, and I could see the veins in her neck. I looked away from the veins in her neck. She tried her best to look as though she regretted having to close the door. I suppose she did, in a way. Then she closed it and I heard the key turn in the lock and the heavy bar slide into place. I listened behind the door and for a few moments there was no sound. I knew that she was waiting outside. I could picture her standing there, looking at the barred door with a mixture of relief and regret on that phosphorescent face. And then I heard her footsteps very faintly as she went back to the stairs, I heard the upstairs door close. I felt sorry for both of us.

I sat down in the bare corner and buried my face in my hands. It was still my face. But it was very stiff. I could tell that it would not be long. It seems to be getting quicker and easier for the change to come each month. It is not as painful. I wonder if that is a good sign or a bad sign?

But I can't really talk about that yet. It would be too hard to write about the details. It would be almost as hard as it is for me to go into that cell, knowing the agonies to come . . .

When my wife knocked at the door in the morning I was still very weak. But I was all right. I was surprised that it was

morning already. There is no way to tell time inside the cell, of course. I do not take my watch with me.

Helen did not hear me answer the first time, and knocked again before she opened the door. She opened it a crack and I saw one big eye peering in. Then she saw that everything was all right, and she opened the door wide. I am glad that she is cautious, of course, but still it hurts me. Damn this disease!

She didn't ask how I was. She knows that I can't talk about it. I wonder if she is curious? I suppose she must be. She doesn't know that I am keeping this journal. I am going to keep it locked in the desk in my study. I'm sitting at the desk now, looking out of the window at the trees. Everything is very peaceful today, and last night is more nightmare than memory. If it only were! It is strange the way that the memories come through to me, after I have become myself again. I must think about that and try to describe it later. I don't know why, though. I don't know why I feel compelled to keep this record. It must be some form of release. I feel more relaxed now, at any rate. I am going to rest now. My body suffers the damage that the other thing inflicts on itself. We share the same body and I am exhausted. I will write later.

MAY 6

I have been thinking about the disease. I thought about it all day yesterday. It is hard to do this clearly, because when I am . . . not myself . . . I seem to have no thoughts. Or, if I do, I don't remember them after I have become myself again. I suppose that, at those times, my mind must work much as an animal's does. I am left with only a vague, general impression of how I felt. How it felt. I do not know if I and it are the same, but we share the same body. Anyway, there is certainly no reasoning involved when I am changed. It must be purely instinct that motivates the thing, and instinct does not fit well into the pattern of the human brain. Or does my brain also change? The impressions are very strong. I can recall the impressions, almost to the point of summoning them up again. But this is simply a matter of remembering

what the other thing was feeling at that time, not what it was doing, or what it looked like. It is a matter of recalling an emotion without the circumstances that caused it. But what a powerful emotion! It is always hard to express a feeling in words, and this is a very complex feeling.

I think it was need, most of all. Need and frustration. But there is all that violence and hatred and lust mingled with it. I don't suppose any normal man could ever feel it in quite the same way. Perhaps emotion is always stronger when it is instinctive and when there is no rational force working on it. It all came from within and seemed to have nothing to do with the actual physical action. It burned like an inferno within the thing. That was what drove it to its wild ferocity. That was what it felt at the time.

As far as what actually happens . . . I see that objectively, divorced from the emotion and impressions, as though I were a separate person who had been in the cell and had witnessed the whole thing. (God help any person who ever had! It would surely drive him mad . . . although I doubt that there would be time for madness, locked in that cell with the thing that I became.)

I can clearly see the scene within that cell. It flings itself at those padded walls, tearing at them with talons and ripping with terrible fangs. It drops to the floor, crouches for a moment, snarling, then springs at the walls again. It is driven by that rage within, again and again, in a frenzied passion. It pauses only to summon renewed rage, and then springs again, more savagely than before, until at last its energy is spent and it grovels, panting and waiting. Last night it attempted to batter the door down, but the door is too strong.

I wonder if my wife can hear the sounds that it makes as it attacks the walls? Or worse, far worse, the sounds that come from its snarling lips? That would be ghastly. They are very revolting sounds.

At dinner yesterday I noticed the way that she looked at me as I ate. We had steak. I have always liked my steak rare. But she looked at me as though she expected I would tear at the meat like some wild beast. Perhaps she does hear . . . Thank heavens that she can never see it! It takes her several days to recover as it is . . . to become normal again.

I am quite normal now, of course.

MAY 7

I am completely sane.

It occurs to me that I have not yet stated that, and it is necessary. If anyone ever reads this, they must understand that I am not crazy. It is not a disease of the mind, it is a disease of the body. It is purely physical. It must be, to cause the physical change that it does. I haven't yet written about the change. That will be very hard, although I can see it objectively. I can see my hands and body, and feel my face. I cannot see my face, of course, because there is no mirror. I don't know if I could bear it if I had a memory of what my face must become. And I don't know if I can describe it honestly, or honestly describe it. Perhaps some night I shall bring this book into my cell with me and write as long as I can – describe the changes as they occur in my body, until my mind can no longer cope with the effort . . . until it is no longer my body.

The question that plagues me most in this is whether any other human being has ever suffered from the same disease. Somehow I think it would be easier to bear up to it, if I knew that I was not the only one. It is not a case of misery enjoying company; it is just that I want the reassurance that it is not peculiar to me, that it is in no way my fault that I suffer with it. I can be patient under this trial only so long as I know that it could not have been prevented.

I have tried to find a case similar to mine. I have done a great deal of research . . . enough to make the librarian suspicious, if she were of a superstitious nature. But she is not. She is an old maid and she is fat. I believe she thinks that lycanthropy is the study of butterflies. But the research has turned up nothing. The mouldy old volumes and the big, leather-bound psychological books record legends and myths on the one hand, and madness on the other. There are cases that are similar in the recorded details, but in each of these the subject was mentally ill. There were no physical changes, although sometimes the poor madman thought that there were. And yet . . . there must be a basis for the

legends. All legends have some anchor in the truth. I cling to that belief. I must cling to something.

My grandfather on my father's side came from the Balkans. Somewhere in the Transylvanian Alps. I don't know if that has any relevance, but most of the legends seem to have begun in that area. It is surely a diseased area. And, too, I feel sure that it must be an inherited disease. It is nothing that I could have caught. I have always been a temperate and clean-living man. I practise moderation in all things. I neither drink nor smoke nor womanize, and my health has always been good. So I am certain that the disease was congenital. I suffer for the sins of my forebears through some jest of fate – some terrible jest of a wicked fate that punishes the innocent for the crimes of the guilty.

The disease must be carried in the blood or, more likely, in the genes. I suppose that it is passed on to one's children in a recessive state, waiting, lurking latently in man after man down through the generations until, once every century . . . once every thousand years perhaps . . . there is the proper combination to turn it into a dominant trait. And then it becomes a malignant, raging disease, growing stronger as the victim grows older, gaining strength from the body that it shares, and tries to destroy . . .

I must believe this, and I do.

I must not think that I am unique, or that I could be in any way, no matter how indirectly and innocently, responsible for it. I must know that it was a curse born with me as surely as my brown hair or greenish eyes, and that it was predestined from the time – who knows how many generations ago? – when my ancestor committed some vile act that brought him into contact with the germs of the sickness. I hate my ancestors for this, but I am grateful that it is their sin and not my own. If I thought that any action of my life had brought about this affliction, the thought would surely drive me mad. It would destroy my mind. I have a great fear of that. It is a rational fear. This thing that I suffer from is enough to drive anyone to insanity . . .

Last week I thought seriously about going to a doctor. It is out of the question. I knew that all along, of course, but the fact that I even considered it shows how desperate I have become. I am ready to clutch at straws; to take any risk that has the slightest chance of saving me. But I know that I must cure myself; any salvation must come from within.

It was my wife who put the idea into my head; indirectly, of course. She mentioned something about psychiatrists – something that she had read in the newspaper, I think – just some vague statement so that she could use the term while talking with me, and suggest it without saying so. Well, her plan worked, because I did think about it, but it is quite impossible.

I was hurt that she mentioned a psychiatrist instead of a medical doctor. She knows as well as I that it is a physical affliction. I have told her that often enough. Still, she has a point. No doctor would believe me. They would think me insane, and refer me to a psychiatrist anyway. And the psychiatrist would be useless because he would try to cure a non-existent concept. The only way that I could prove that the disease is physical would be to have them actually witness the change, and that must never be.

That thought gave me the first laugh that I have had for a long, long time. I can picture myself in the psychiatrist's office. It is at night. The night. I am lying on my back on his leather couch and he is sitting in a chair beside me. I have just finished telling him all about my illness while he listened patiently, nodding from time to time. When I finish explaining he begins to talk in his low, confident tones. He is a very professional type with a bald head and gold-rimmed spectacles. He sits with his legs crossed, his notebook on his knee. He is not looking at me while he speaks, he is looking down at his notes. And I am not looking at him. I am looking at the window. I see the whole scene so clearly. I can even see his degrees framed on the wall. They are on the wall opposite the window, where the moonlight glitters on the gold seals. There are rows of huge and heavy books and a large desk. I see everything and then I look at the window again. The change always comes much more quickly and smoothly

when I can see the moon than when I am in the cell. I feel it begin. The doctor talks on, softly. Perhaps he tells me that it is all nonsense, that it is impossible; that it is merely a figment of my imagination, a delusion of a sick mind. He turns towards me to impress his point. He looks into my eyes. And his face . . . this is what makes me laugh . . . his face would break and shatter. That cold, scientific, intelligent face would plunge down through all the long aeons of time, and become the primitive and superstitious and terrified face of his ancestors. And then . . .

I don't suppose that it is really so funny, but it is pleasant to laugh again.

JUNE 3

Tonight I must go to the cell.

I dread it. So does my wife. Yesterday I detected signs of nervousness in her. She is getting worse. She hinted again that I should get help. Help! What help is there for me? But she doesn't seem to understand. Perhaps she is blocking the terrible truth from her mind. Perhaps she would prefer it if I were mad. But it is her sanity I worry about at these times, not my own. For myself I can only hope that it does not get worse, and that I shall be able to live my life out this way, normal but for that one night each month . . . But how I dread that night, that cell! Even when I am no longer myself, I am still me to the extent that we share the same body, and that the emotions and the impressions remain with me and hurt me. Even now, a month later, I can still recall the feeling, not objectively the way that I can remember the way that the thing moved and acted, but deep inside me as one recalls a great pain from the past. It is unbearable to think of a future like this. I can bear the present, but not the thought of the future. And if it should get worse . . .

But perhaps it may get better. That is possible. Diseases can cure themselves, bodies can develop tolerances and antibodies and immunity. I can only hope for that as I face the future - hope that some day the month will pass and it will not happen and I will know that I am on the way to recovery.

I must never have children, of course. Even if I recover there can be no children. The disease must never be passed on. My wife is sorry about this. She wants children. She doesn't seem to understand why it is impossible, why it would be a monstrous act. I think that she truly might prefer it if I were insane. Sometimes I even think that she doubts me . . . that she thinks that I am not quite right. Well, of course I am not all right. But I mean . . . sometimes she seems to think that I am insane. There! I have stated that for this record. But perhaps I am being overly sensitive.

I have a right to be.

I have neglected this record during the month. I meant to write every day, but I found it too oppressive to write about it when it was not imminent. I prefer to forget it as long and as often as I can. Thinking about it only reminds me that the night must come again. This night I intend to bring this notebook into the cell with me. I want to record as much as I can . . . perhaps the record will prove valuable. Perhaps it will only be disgusting. But I must try, I must gain all the possible knowledge that I can. It is my only hope that I may find a cure.

I must rest now. Tonight will be exhausting. It is a lovely clear day and I know that the sky will be sparkling. It will be an effort to go to the cell.

JUNE 3 (NIGHT)

Well, the door is locked and barred. I listened until her footsteps went up the stairs, and the door closed at the top. Now I am alone in the cell. I feel all right. I came down earlier tonight. I was afraid to wait any longer. It was a good idea to bring this book with me. It is something to do, something to occupy myself with while I wait. Anything is better than just sitting here and waiting for it to happen.

I keep watching my hands as I write; my fingernails. They are all right. Nothing has begun. My fingers are long and straight and my nails are clipped. I must watch carefully so that I can detect the very first signs. I want to be able to describe everything in complete detail.

There is no furniture here in the cell. Furniture would

only be destroyed. I am sitting in one corner with my knees drawn up and the notebook on them. The pages look slightly tinted, I should have thought to put a brighter bulb in the light. The light is in a recess in the ceiling and covered by a wire netting. The netting is a little twisted, but I don't remember doing that. I wouldn't, probably. It is light enough to observe the cell, anyway. I have never really noticed it before. I suppose that I was always too concerned with myself to notice my surroundings. But it is earlier tonight . . .

The cell is concrete. The walls are thick and the door is metal with large bolts. The walls are heavily padded on the inside. Helen and I did the padding ourselves, of course. It might have been difficult to explain to the contractor why we wanted a padded cell in our basement. I think that we told him the concrete structure was for our dog. He didn't seem curious about it. We don't have a dog really. Dogs don't like me. I frighten them. I suppose that they can sense my affliction even when I am normal. That is further proof that it is a physical disease. I killed a dog once, but it was a vicious dog and I had to.

The smell is stifling and musty, I expect that the walls are damp under the pads, and the stuffing has begun to moulder. We shall have to replace the padding soon. I must try to make the cell as bearable as possible. The pads are ripped in places and the stuffing is running out and curling to the floor. The cover of the padding is tough and thick and smooth, so I know that my . . . its . . . talons must be very powerful and sharp. They must be able to slice through those pads like a knife through butter. I wonder if I have ever broken a nail tearing at the walls? I should look in the ripped places to see. It would be evidence of an actual change. I will look later; it seems likely that I will find something. I know the terrible rage that drives the thing at those walls, the unbelievable strength that it possesses, and it seems that even those heavy nails would be splintered by the force that is behind them.

Those wicked claws! I shudder when I think of them, moving at the ends of constricted and hooked fingers. The way that they can rend and tear those heavy pads . . . think what they could do to the softness of flesh! Think what they

would do to a man's throat! It makes me tremble all over to imagine it. I can almost feel what it would be like and the feeling sickens me. But it persists. It wants to be recognized. I can see how those fingers would close, drawing the white skin up in little trails until the skin parted and the fingers sank into the bubbling, pulsing throat. I can see the talons disappear, the fingers themselves gouge in, feel the heat of the blood as it comes spurting out into my face. Taste the hot, salty blood, smell it until my head reels and everything fades away and there is only the stricken face beneath me. I can see that face change and hear the death that would gurgle in his throat as my fangs . . . as I bring myself . . . soft throat as my fangs . . . close . . . soft, hot flesh and they sink in . . . and . . . tear . . .

JUNE 4

I have just finished patching this book together. I had to use tape where it was torn. I must have ripped it last night, during the sickness. I don't remember doing it. I don't think that it was deliberate, it is just that anything within reach is destroyed in the blind fury. The book was not methodically torn in half or quarters, but just mutilated at random. The front cover was torn to shreds, but the pages are all still readable. My fountain pen had been snapped in two, like a twig. It is hard to imagine such unleashed energy and power. I have always been a strong man, and I have always kept myself in perfect fitness through exercise and moderation, but the strength that comes with the change is beyond comprehension. It seems that the very muscles and sinews of my body must change, that it must be internal as well as external. Perhaps we do not share the same body, but the same small part of the brain that remembers. That would be encouraging, to be able to think of the thing as a different entity. And yet my own body bears the bruises and the marks of the tortured flesh. The two bodies cannot exist at the same time. It is very confusing, it is beyond my powers of reasoning, and I am as rational as any man and more so than most. How many other men could face this thing that I struggle with and retain their sanity? I am proud of that. I

am not a vain man, but of that strength of mind I am proud.

I didn't write about the change. I remember feeling it start, and it seems that I was writing, but somehow it is not recorded. The last few lines of what I wrote are scribbled and blurred and do not look at all like my handwriting, and I suppose that was a symptom. I was writing about how strong the thing's hands were and then it just seems to come to an end, in the middle of a sentence. I imagine that my fingers had started to contract while I wrote, and that would account for the different style. But there is nothing there about the change.

The change seemed different last night. Not greater, but different somehow. I think that I have reached a new stage in the disease, and that the disease is changing . . . perhaps modifying.

The thing is beginning to think more. Or else I am beginning to remember more. Whichever it is, I can distinctly recall certain thoughts along with the impressions this time. I remember all that frustration and need and hatred, but I also remember snatches of vague thought. Not my thoughts. Its thoughts. They are closer to the human thoughts in that they would be. It is hard to envisage human thoughts in that monstrous body. Disturbing. I do not want to share my mind with it. But I remember that it was reasoning, trying to figure some way to get out of the cell. I remember a pause in the violence while it crouched and rolled its white eyes around, seeking some weak point in the walls, the door. Perhaps it was seeking some deception to get Helen to open the door. There was no escape, of course. We have taken all necessary precautions. Even if it were able to reason as well as I, it could figure no way to get out of the cell.

But that is the change in the disease, that reasoning power. It is possible that the thing is becoming more normal, more human. It is possible that I and the thing that I become are drawing closer together. But it is impossible to say which of us is moving towards that closer relationship, whether the disease is conquering me, or I am beginning to cure myself. I cannot decide if this new development is a good thing or a bad thing . . . It makes me tremble. I am sweating

profusely and my stomach is knotted with fright.

I am calmer now. I lay down for a few minutes. I can still taste the blood and foam on my lips, although I have brushed my teeth several times. I bit my lip last night. It is swollen and painful. I cannot get the taste from my mouth – I suppose that it is all in my mind. It was nauseating to awaken this morning and swallow and know that I could not brush my teeth and rinse my mouth until Helen came and let me out. It seemed as if I waited a very long time, but there was no way to tell. Time seems to stand still when it is enclosed in that cell. Time is surely a concrete dimension, and relative to the other dimensions. Perhaps it is affected by my disease. It would be interesting if there were some way to measure it.

I am sure that it lasted longer last night. It certainly seemed to. It may be that it seemed longer because there were more impressions and memories, but my wife said that when she knocked at the usual time this morning there was no answer from the cell. I always call out that everything is all right before she opens the door, and this morning I did not call at the usual hour. She said that she heard . . . certain sounds . . . but that there was no answer. She did not say what the sounds were like.

So she went back upstairs and waited another hour. I can imagine how frightened and worried she must have been during that time, wondering what had happened. Poor woman. She loves me so, and she cannot really understand. She did not know about the illness when she married me, and it was a terrible shock. I am grateful that she has stood up under the strain so well. She must worry and suffer as much as I, in a different, woman's way.

After another hour had elapsed she came down and knocked at the cell door again. I answered this time, and she opened the door. She opened it very slowly, and I could hear her intake of breath when she first looked in. She must have been half mad with fear for me. I don't think she would be afraid of me.

I don't remember her knocking the first time. I was surprised when she told me. I do have an indistinct impression of crouching beside the door with my thighs tensed and taut

and my hands open in front of me, as though I were waiting for something to open that door. But it is very vague. It could have been at any time. I know that I would never wait that way for my wife.

JUNE 6

I have been very worried, thinking about how it lasted longer than usual this month. Longer than it ever did before, I think. I am trying to get the history of my illness in context, from the beginning, so that I can follow the progress and the process. I feel that there is definitely a change coming, and pray that it may be the first step towards recovery. Up until now it has merely become worse time after time. It would seem that since it lasted longer the last time it is just another step in the same direction, but there was also the fact that I remembered the thing's thoughts this time. That has never happened before, not since I really began to change. That is much closer to how it was when it first began. It may be the first sign that I am on the way back, that a cure has begun. It may have taken longer this time because it was less intense. I don't really see how it can get any worse than it is now . . .

Thinking back on my life, I find that I cannot tell when it first began. It must have been very gradual. I surely would remember if it came on me suddenly, all at once. A weaker mind might block the memory out to save itself from the knowledge, but I am sure that I would have faced it.

Had I only known the truth in those days there might have been some way to prevent it. I doubt it, but there might have been. But how was I to know? I was never a superstitious child. I did not even believe in . . . the thing that I become. I did not believe in Santa Claus, or fairies, or witches, or the elves that leave money under a pillow and take away the baby teeth. My parents would have none of that nonsense, and told me the truth from the first. So how was I to believe in the existence of . . . I will not write the word. I know what I am doing, that I have a block about admitting what I know to be true, as though the admission

would condemn me more than the fact. But I cannot help that, and it is not the mental block of a weak man whose mind denies the truth, it is just that I rebel at putting the word on paper. I know the word. I think it. It dances in my thoughts, and I am strong enough to recognize it there, and make no effort to deny it. I live with the knowledge as best I can. I know that, all along, through all my life, the inherited sickness was there inside my blood, being carried to every capillary of my body, taking hold and growing stronger as I myself grew, waiting, lurking . . . I know that now, but how could anyone have predicted it? It was no fault of mine.

I was always a rather tempestuous child. I used to get angry, to throw tantrums. But many children do. It is common enough. There was never any physical change in me. No warnings. And yet . . . my bursts of violence, when I would fight with other children or break my favourite play-things . . . those outbursts did not seem to stem from any recognizable fact. They were not the result of something that angered or frustrated me; they seemed to come on for no reason, at any time, whether I was happy or unhappy at the moment they began. I can remember one time when a neighbour, a boy my own age but smaller, threw a rock and hit me over the eye. It hurt awfully. It broke the skin and a trickle of blood ran down the side of my face. The boy was frightened then, because he had hit me for no reason, and because I was much stronger and could have easily punished him. But I did not. I did not even get angry, which amazed him, because he knew my reputation for flaring up. I simply looked at him with the blood running down and I felt no anger at all. I can remember licking the blood from the corner of my mouth where it had gathered. I felt a bit dizzy, from the blow I suppose, and I just stood there and licked the blood away and did nothing. The other boy must have thought that I was afraid of him because I did not retaliate, because after that he persecuted me. He would wait for me after school and throw stones at me and push me and sometimes he would hit me with his fist. I never became angry with him. I never wanted to punish him or hurt him and I took his abuse without any resentment. He used to boast about how I was terrorized and all the other children used to make fun of me about this, but I didn't care. I have never

cared what other people thought. This was an example of how my temper was not aroused at times when it would have been fully justified.

And at other times . . . for no apparent reason . . . I can recall one evening, towards dusk, when I was playing with my favourite toy, a clockwork train. I had been playing with it for some time and was quite happy. And then, suddenly, I picked it up from the tracks and smashed it against the floor until it was broken to pieces. I continued to smash it, over and over again. My mother came into my room and was very angry that I had broken it, and threatened never to buy me another toy, but I didn't seem to care. Even later, the next day, I did not regret the loss of my train. When I thought of it I merely felt as though it had been a good thing to break it. I felt glad that I had done it. It seemed satisfying.

It was inconsistencies like those two that made me different from other temperamental children. I realize, now, that the outbursts must have followed the same cycle as the illness follows now, but at that time I had no reason to think about any regularity, or detect any rhythm. Neither did my parents. They must have supposed it was merely the storms of adolescence, and I don't think that it worried them unduly.

I don't remember very much about my mother. I suppose that she was overshadowed by my father. He was a big man, straight and broad shouldered and strict. He was religious and very moral, and I have him to thank for the fact that I was brought up right, and that I have always avoided all vices and corruption. Many a time he lectured me, in his deep voice, one forefinger pointing towards my heart, giving me the benefit of his age and experience and, more vital, of the experiences that he had avoided. I was overawed by him, by his knowledge and his goodness and his strength, and I always tried to live a life of which he would have been proud. And I believe that I have done that, except for the disease. It is almost impossible to realize that my father himself must have carried the disease in his blood – that that good and strict man had passed the curse on, unknowingly, to his son. It is further proof that it is no fault of my own, that even such a fine man as my father did not know, that he

could have been the one whom it affected as it does me.

Only once can I remember my father being unjust and unreasonable. It was the only time that he was ever angry with me. That was when I had to kill the neighbours' dog, and I have never been able to understand why my father did not see that it was necessary.

The dog belonged to my enemy, the boy who constantly persecuted me. I do not remember his name. He was an insignificant creature and hardly worth remembering. But I remember his dog. It was a large and vicious brute, a mongrel with a great deal of Alsatian in it. It was often with the boy when he tormented me, and it added its snarls to its master's jibes. It would watch with its yellow eyes while the boy plagued me. Its tongue hung out and its muzzle twitched as though it were very satisfied that I was being tormented. I never paid any attention to the dog at those times. I ignored it and its master, but of the two I believe I hated the dog more. I know it a fallacy to believe that dog is man's best friend. It is a stupid statement made by sentimental and ignorant people, who have been deceived by the brutes. And this dog was a particularly foul beast, with a filthy mottled hide and yellow teeth. It had never attacked me, but I could tell that it would have liked to.

One evening I was coming home from town rather late. Our house was in the country, a few miles from the town. I forget what I was doing out at that hour, but at any rate it was dark as I walked towards our house. It must have been a moonlit night, because everything was very clear. It was necessary to pass our neighbours' house on the way to my own, for we lived on the same road. To avoid passing their house I would have had to go through the woods, and I saw no reason for this.

Well, I was passing their house, minding my own business, when my enemy suddenly appeared. He began to throw stones at me as usual, and I ignored him. I walked on. He hit me in the back with one stone, and it hurt. I knew that it would leave a bruise. I walked on a little way and then I must have sat down beside the road. I know that I thought about the boy, and wondered why he hated me so, and after a while I began to hate him. I had never felt that way

towards him before, and it must have been the sum total of all his injustices and attacks that finally added up to the whole of hatred. The longer I sat there the more I hated him. I remembered everything that he had done to me. I remembered the first time, when he had cut my head and I had tasted my own blood. For some reason the taste of that blood came back to me more strongly then than it had seemed when it happened. I knew that he would torment me for ever, unless I put a stop to it, and I got up and walked back towards his house.

He was in the yard, by the woodshed. He saw me coming and picked up a stone and began to yell tauntingly, calling me unmentionable names. It enraged me to hear him use those foul words, and I knew for the first time how truly evil he was. I didn't understand why I had tolerated him before, how I could have let such a wicked person annoy me. I wanted to punish him for annoying me but, more strongly, I wanted to punish him for being a deplorable creature, a foul-mouthed and evil-minded creature. He had to be taught a lesson.

I walked right up to him. He continued to taunt me until I was quite close, and then he must have realized with his slow, dim mind that this was not the same as the other times, because he began to back away. I went after him, walking slowly. When he threw the stone it struck me in the face, but I hardly felt it. He ran backwards to the woodshed and I moved between him and the house. I remember how his eyes darted around as he looked for help, for a path to escape. I was much bigger and stronger than him – I was bigger than anyone else of my age at school – and he became very frightened. His fear did not satisfy me; for some reason it made me all the more anxious to punish him . . . I felt he realized that he must be punished, that he knew he was evil and, if he were not punished, he would think that it was all right to do as he did. I would not have that. I went at him and he tried to run, but I am very fast and nimble even now, and in those days I could move like a cat. I caught him with both hands. I caught him by the neck and threw him down on the ground. He tried to kick me but I brushed his feet aside and fell over him. He hit me in the face with his small fists but it was less than an insect sting. I got my hands very

firmly around his neck and began to punish him. I intended to punish him greatly, in proportion to his sins. I squeezed, and his eyes got very large and that made me feel satisfied. Or almost satisfied – as if satisfaction were on the way, and the harder I squeezed the more rapidly it came. It seemed to run up from my fingertips to my shoulders, and then diffuse throughout my body. He stopped hitting me. His small hands were wrapped around my wrists, but they could do nothing. I put all my weight into my arms and pressed.

It was then that the savage brute attacked me.

I had not seen it sneak up behind me. It was sly and vicious and the first that I was aware of it was when it pounced at me. I had to release the boy, and the dog and I rolled over. It was a powerful creature, but it was no match for me in an equal struggle. I got over it and got my hands under its collar and twisted. I turned the collar right round, choking the brute. It had torn my forearm with its teeth and the blood ran down my arm and splattered over the dog. The sight of the blood drove me in a frenzy. I realized then how dangerous that animal was, and how necessary it was that it should be destroyed. I twisted the collar around again and it bit into the hairy throat. The tongue slid from its muzzle and I banged its head against the ground so that its own teeth buried themselves in that laughing tongue that was no longer laughing so slyly. The look in the creatures eyes was delightful! It knew that it was going to die then. It knew that it was going to pay for its viciousness, and the eyes rolled and bulged out like two yellowish hard boiled eggs. It made me laugh to see that, but I did not laugh so much that I had to release my grip. I did not let the dog go until it was very dead.

When I stood up finally I saw that the boy had recovered and run away. He must have gone into his house. I would have followed him, but for some reason I no longer hated him. Perhaps I felt that he had been punished enough. I was sure that he would torment me no more. The dog was like a limp and oil-stained rag in the moonlight and I felt very good. A good job well done. I felt warm and satisfied and I turned and walked home. My arm did not begin to hurt until later.

In the morning the boy's father came to our house and

talked with my father. After he had gone my father spoke to me. He seemed angry. I explained to him that it had been self-defence, and that the beast had tried to kill me, but he had the strange idea that I had attacked the boy first, and that the dog had died protecting its master. Even my father was fooled by that common lie about dogs being faithful and true, and I could not make him understand. I showed him the slash in my forearm, but it made no difference. He seemed to really believe that I had tried to kill the boy, ridiculous though it seems. But that was the only time that my father was ever unjust, and he forgot about it after a while.

And no one ever taunted me or threw rocks at me again.

JUNE 7

I am up early today and intend to work on this journal until lunchtime. I read what I wrote yesterday, about the dog. I don't think that it is really relevant to the disease. I was, after all, forced into killing it to save myself, and any man would have done the same. But it does show a bit of the violence of which I am capable, and also the tolerant attitude that I take at normal times, so I will leave it in the record, for what it is worth, and continue with my efforts to get the beginnings of the illness sorted out clearly in my mind, in sequence and intensity, so that they can help me to foresee what the next change will be.

My strongest impression of those early years concerns the woods. We lived in a large old house in the country and the woods were behind it. The house was draughty and chilly and damp and I did not like it, but I was always happy in the woods – except when those feelings took possession of me. I liked to go into the woods alone. I always felt safer when there were no other people about. I can still picture just how it looked there. I always seem to picture it in the moonlight, however. The impression of it in the day is not strong. But this may be because there were more distractions in the daylight, and fixed memories yielded to immediate sensations. But at night! Is it one night that I remember, or many

nights so similar that they have blended into the same memory?

I was standing in a small clearing with the tall pine trees on every side. It was on a slight hill, and at the bottom of the hill our house nestled in the shadows. I could just see the top of the roof and the chimney against the sky because the land rose a little to the far side as well. It was dark in the clearing but the tops of the trees were white in the moonlight; silver needles under the wind. It was very quiet. A few fluffy cotton clouds avoided the moon. Standing in this place I felt a great yearning, a vague and indistinct need. It was very much the same as spring fever when one had to sit in school and could look out of the window at the flowers and grass, but it was much, much stronger. I had to do something, and there was nothing to do. I suppose that I thought it was a sexual need, at the time. That must have been why I took my clothing off. I took everything off, even my shoes and socks, and stood there completely naked in the trees. It wasn't cold, but I was shivering. One shaft of light penetrated straight down the side of a tree, and it seemed to give off a cold glow that turned me to ice. And I just stood there, with my head thrown back and my mouth wide open, staring up at the sky and trembling as though every vein and every nerve of my body had become charged with electric current. I don't know how long I stood like that. It must have been some time because the heavens had shifted position. And then, suddenly, it was over. Suddenly the need had left me, and I realized that I was shouting. Not shouting . . . it was more like a howl, a bay. I stopped. Everything was silent and dark and I felt very strange, very naked, and very much alone and slightly ashamed at what I had done. I still supposed that it had been sexual, I imagine. But I also felt a great relief. I dressed and walked back to the house and everything was all right for the rest of that month. Everything was fine. I was very much at peace. As I say, I don't know if this was a single memory or a combination of many months and many nights. I must have been quite young . . .

I have been pondering for a while over what I have just written. I think that it must have happened more than once.

I have glimpses of myself running through the woods naked, and crouching and hiding behind trees and rocks. These are very objective memories. They come back to me in the same way as the actions of the thing in the cell, as opposed to the impressions and emotions. I don't think that I was running from anyone, or hiding from anyone, however. I am sure that I was all alone in the woods. I am also sure that there was no physical change. Quite sure. And, strangely enough, I cannot remember the first time that I did change, or the first time that I became aware of changing. It must have come very gradually, so that there was no shock that would remain in my memory.

The first recollection that I have of changing took place in my own bedroom, not in the woods. This must have been later. I was sitting on my bed, bent over and watching my hands. The bed was beside the window and the moon was right there so that the bedroom was all black and white. My hands were in my lap, and a shaft of light passed over them. I was naked. My backbone felt more naked than the rest of me, as though even the skin had been peeled away. I watched my hands. This couldn't have been the first time, because I seemed to know exactly what I was looking for. And I remember how my fingernails began to grow, and my hands trembled and drew up . . .

I don't remember what I did after that.

JUNE 8

Helen is a good wife.

Few women would have put up with what she has. I must be honest, she is not a good-looking woman. Perhaps she married me as a last resort, but I don't think so. I believe that she loves me. Sometimes it annoys me when she cannot seem to understand about my sickness, but apart from that she is a good wife. And she must know that I would never hurt her. I don't think that I would ever hurt anyone. I go out of my way not to hurt anyone. I am basically a shy and gentle person, and that is what makes the contrast so hard to imagine when one doesn't realize that it is a physical disease, and that I actually become something different, something

dangerous. But I have managed to control it, and so I have never hurt anyone.

I have promised Helen that I will take her out for dinner this evening. She is very happy about it. We do not go out much, I do not care for a frivolous social life and prefer to stay at home, but once in a while it does no harm. Helen enjoys it, although she agrees that I am right in limiting such evenings to two or three times a year. She is dressing now. I may write more when we get home, if it is not too late.

Well, what a fiasco this night has been!

We have just returned and Helen has gone directly to her room. She appears to be annoyed with me. I should have known better than to go out, than to cater to the whims of a woman. Women do not understand much of life.

To begin with, to start the evening off on the wrong foot, Helen put on a dress that she knows I hate. It is an immodest dress that leaves her shoulders bare and makes her look like a tart. I tried to be pleasant about it, but she got annoyed when I told her the simple truth. Why do women get annoyed at the truth and not at deceptions? It is beyond me. Surely her own mirror would have told her the same thing that I did. She can't really think, after all this time, that I am a man who can be flattering without reason, or that I would care to have my wife dress like a tramp? But she put the dress on and we had a little argument even before we left the house. I finally let her wear it, but I should have known better; I should have known what an ill temper I would be in all night because of it.

When we got to the restaurant and got a table I could see several of the other patrons looking at Helen. She didn't seem to be aware of it. She sat, smiling happily and looking around the room. I'm sure that everyone thought that she was looking for someone to flirt with. What else would they think, the way she was dressed? I was mortified. I could just imagine their thoughts. She looked like some strumpet that I had just picked up off the street. She had too much lipstick on, and her knees were uncovered when she was seated. I would have got up and walked out right then if I had not been too embarrassed to leave my seat. I determined to destroy that dress as soon as we were home, so it would never

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disgrace me again. And, unbelievably, poor Helen seemed to have no idea what a stir she was causing. She is so innocent and inexperienced. She looked around as though she were really enjoying herself and I tried to pretend I did not notice anyone else. I did, though. Some of the other women in the room were dressed as bad, or worse, than my wife, and I realized then that it was not the proper place for us to be. We had never eaten there before, and it had a good reputation, and so I had been deceived. It was one of those gaudy places with plush walls and candles that pretend to be European and overcharge their customers for bad food. I hate any place or any person that pretends to be something other than they are.

When the waiter came he leaned over the table a little, from behind Helen. I'm sure that he was attempting to look down the front of her dress! It enrages me, even now, as I recall that greasy smile. He had a little moustache and wavy hair and he was some sort of foreigner, an Italian perhaps. He had an accent, or affected one. I was angry and miserable and it is little wonder that I lost my temper when he brought me the wrong order.

I hate fancy, foreign foods. I had ordered a plain steak with boiled potatoes and no salad. When my order arrived the steak was ruined with some slimy sauce and there were creamed potatoes and an oily salad. It was revolting. On top of all the other annoyances it was simply too much to take. Perhaps I should have controlled my temper, even though it was justified. Perhaps, as Helen says, I should not have thrown the plate at the waiter. But I don't regret it. These foreigners have to learn that they can't push everyone around. I acted on the spur of the moment, before I even thought about what I was doing. I lifted the plate on one open hand. The waiter was leaning towards me with that nasty smile, and I hurled the plate, food-first, directly into his face. I believe that I was as gentlemanly as possible under the circumstances. I did not shout or cause a scene or speak to him. I simply threw it in his face.

Well, we left after that. We weren't asked to leave, and I suppose that I was respected for sticking up for my rights, but we left anyway. Helen cried as we walked out and I kept my head up and looked about and saw that everyone in the

place was looking at us. Or, more precisely, they were looking at that lewd dress that she wore. Some of them were snickering and some looked angry. But I didn't let it bother me. I kept my dignity through the whole affair.

Helen doesn't seem to realize that it was all her fault, and she has gone directly to her room and locked the door. I heard her lock it. She made sure of that. It was just a bit of feminine dramatics, of course. I never go to her room.

Anyway, perhaps this evening will serve one good cause. It may convince my wife that it is not a good thing to go out so often.

JUNE 9

Helen was still angry this morning. For a while she did not speak to me. That was all right with me, I was still thinking about the wasted evening and that horrible restaurant that charged far too much and brought the wrong food. But then she mentioned how I had flared up for no reason! For no reason! She even suggested that it had been a symptom of my sickness! In the middle of the month! It shows that she still has no idea what it is. I had to grip the edge of the table to keep from shouting at her and I must have looked very angry because she went away without another word. She looked rather chastened.

I shall try to be more tolerant of her stupidity. It is, after all, a hard thing for a normal person to comprehend. And it was such a shock to her when I had to tell her about it. I often wonder if the shock did not unbalance her slightly? Not much, but enough to account for some of the things that she does that aren't reasonable . . . such as thinking that harlot's dress that she wore last night was attractive, and wanting to go out in the evenings like a teenager, and mistaking genuine and justified anger for a symptom of my disease. Yes, I must be more tolerant of her, poor thing.

It wasn't really bad when we were first married. It wasn't until afterwards that it got really bad, and the increase was slow enough so that I could see it coming and make plans to prevent any accidents. I didn't have the cell then - I didn't

need it. There was plenty of time to have it made when I saw the need.

Oh, I changed. I changed, all right, but not nearly as much as now. Never completely. I still looked human. I remember how I looked in those early stages, before I was afraid to look in a mirror. My face looked unshaven, nothing more. As if I had gone a week without a shave. My teeth were long, but I was able to keep them covered with my lips so that they looked as though they protruded. It was the eyes that were the worst. They were definitely animal eyes; at least they were definitely not human eyes. But there was nothing that was really out of the ordinary to the extent that anyone who did not know what I normally looked like would have noticed. They would simply have thought that I was a singularly ugly person.

I never lost control in those days. The disease never took over, it just raged in me like a fever, and I was always at least partly myself. That was before we needed the cell, and before I told Helen about it. I suppose that it was wrong to marry her without telling her, but I did not expect it to get worse. And I am sure that it would have made no difference; she would have married me regardless.

On those nights when it happened I would go to bed early and turn the lights out. We had separate rooms, of course. I would tell Helen that I did not feel well and she would not bother me. She must have eventually noticed the regularity of the attacks, because once she made a very crude joke about monthly sickness, and I had to give her a stern lecture on what women did, and did not, mention, even to their husbands.

But then it continued to get worse, and finally I decided it was better to take no chances. I began to go out of town once a month. I told her that it was a business trip, and I suppose she believed me. She didn't act suspiciously, and she made no vulgar jests about it. She knew that I was not the type of creature who would keep a mistress, or go away for a gay night once a month, and so she trusted me and asked no questions.

I would go to some small town thirty or forty miles away. I went to a different town each month. I would check into some cheap little hotel (cheap, because no one would notice

an unshaven man in a cheap hotel) and spend the long night in a dingy room. I would never leave that room, no matter how unpleasant it became through that night. And it certainly became unpleasant. I wanted so badly to go out. I needed . . . something. Perhaps it was the urge to run naked through the woods again. But I fought against it and conquered it and remained in the room. I always locked the door on the inside. It would have been better to have someone else lock me in, but I couldn't very well ask the clerk to do that. That would have been suspicious. So I had to rely on my willpower. Luckily I am a strong-minded man, and I managed. Although it was often very very bad, I managed.

Later, when I knew that it was getting progressively worse, it was necessary to have the cell constructed. It was a plan that I had long been considering. I had to tell my wife about the sickness then. That was the hardest part. Helen is not the most intelligent woman in the world, and at first she would not take me seriously. She would not believe me. She thought that I was joking. But then, when I had the contractor come in and build the cell and she realized that I was serious about it, she thought that I was losing my mind. Oh, she never said that, but I could tell by the way she looked at me. When we were putting the pads on the wall she kept shaking her head as though we were both being ridiculous and wasting our time. It is understandable; I cannot blame her for being dubious at first. She knows better now. She is beginning to realize, although she still makes stupid mistakes and cannot differentiate between the physical and the mental, the normal and the abnormal. It takes time.

We have had the cell for six months now. I have gone there every month and Helen has done her part without question. She is a good wife, all in all, and if she annoys me occasionally by her lack of intelligence and inability to grasp the facts, I suppose that that is only normal in most marriages when one partner is so vastly superior in mind.

I am satisfied with my wife. I shall try to be more tolerant of her faults. I would never hurt her in any way. I would never hurt anyone . . .

JUNE 9 (EVENING)

I have not been honest. It bothers me. I did not write anything untruthful, but I omitted writing about the drunkard in the hotel. I have to tell everything or else there is no point in keeping this journal, and so I must write about him. Anyway, nothing happened which I was to blame for.

It happened on the last night that I went out of town, before the cell was built. I had been thinking about making a cell, but had put it off because of Helen, because that would mean telling her all about my disease. I suppose that the episode with the drunkard was the thing that finally decided me about it. It did show me that I was liable to be dangerous, and that my control was weakening. All in all, it was just as well that it happened, since it turned out all right, as far as I was concerned. I was innocent and what happened to the drunkard was his own fault completely.

It was a very poor hotel. I remember it well, it was as poor as any I had stayed at. The entrance was just a narrow doorway on the street with a sign hanging over it. The sign was crooked. There was a maroon carpet in the corridor with all the threads showing, leading to the staircase. The reception desk was just an alcove in the hall. I had to ring a bell there and wait for the clerk to come out of a room under the stairs. It took him a long time and when he came he was rubbing his eyes, and his shirt was hanging out of his trousers. He went behind the desk and shoved the book at me and yawned right in my face. He was a horrid fellow. I tell these things to show what kind of a hotel it was, and what the people who stayed there must have been like; especially the drunkard. People like that are better off dead than alive.

The desk clerk did not look the least bit disgusted when he saw that I was unshaven. I always took the precaution of not shaving for a day or two before I went to a hotel, just in case someone were to see me when I was being ill. They might think it funny that a man's beard could grow so rapidly, grow in just a few hours. It was just one of the small details that I was so careful about. I am sure that no one

ever suspected. But then, it is not a thing that one tends to think about in this day and age. In the day of the psychiatrist, I am a legend.

The clerk in that place was unshaven himself, and he acted as if all the guests at the place went without a razor. Even though I had a suitcase he asked for the money in advance. I went up to my room and closed and locked the door and turned all the lights out and lay down on the bed. I kept my clothing on. The only window was small and greasy and looked out on a brick wall so that I could not see the moon. It was always harder and more painful to change when I could not see it and had to imagine it, big and yellow and round in that black sky. I wanted so much to leave that horrible little room. I remember how I waited, almost wishing for the change to come so that I could get it over with. I kept getting up and walking to the window, pacing the room, going to the filthy sink and splashing water on my face. And then I must have gone to the bed again, because the next thing I remember I had already changed. I was lying on my back, tossing and turning and groaning. I was soaked with sweat. The bed was soaked. The grey sheets were all twisted beneath me and I gripped the brass bedstead with one hand. One changed hand. It was bad. It was like having a high fever and hallucinations. But I was strong and I stuck it out and all the while I was thinking that it had never been so bad before.

And then I heard the drunkard come down the corridor. I have always despised drunkards – anyone who has to seek artificial aids to life and cannot be content and happy without stimulants and drugs. This drunkard was singing loudly and his footsteps were clumping. I lay very still as he came near the door to my room. And he must have got the rooms confused, because he stopped outside my door. He tried it. I heard the knob turn and rattle. And then he tried to fit his key into the lock and I heard it scraping and clanking. I did not move at all. I lay there with my eyes rolling and the froth on my lips. I could hear him cursing and swearing and I hated him. I have never hated anyone as much as I hated that drunkard. And I had a terrible thought . . . suppose, in this cheap hotel, his key could open my door? Suppose he were to come into the room and see me? Rage and fear

moved me. I leaped from the bed and was across the room, leaning with my ear against the door. I listened. I heard his laboured breathing and his muttered words. I pressed against the door so that he would not be able to open it. I am exceedingly strong when I have changed, and he could not have opened the door against me. The door felt hot and smooth against my bristly cheek and hands.

And then he began to pound on the door. He pounded very loudly, and I was afraid that he might awaken everyone, that there might be a dispute, that the night clerk might demand that I open up so that it could be settled. I waited, silently, while my insides boiled and bubbled, and he continued to bang on the door.

I think that I opened the door then.

I didn't really hurt him. But I will never forget the look on his face when he saw me! His eyes, his mouth, his skin . . . He took a step backwards, and I wanted to go after him but I knew that I must not. I possibly might have struck out at him, I do not remember. But he collapsed very suddenly. He was just a bundle of rags on the floor with the horrible smell of alcohol and the other smell of blood. I stared for a moment, my fingers hooking at the air, and then I controlled myself and slammed the door and locked it again. I remember leaning against the door and panting. I must have been very frightened. I was sure that when he awoke he would get help and they would break into my room, and I knew that I must change back to myself before they did. Perhaps the fear acted as a catalyst, because very shortly after that I lay down and when I opened my eyes I was all right once more.

In the morning the clerk was very excited. Apparently they had just taken the body away. He asked me if I had heard any noise in the night and I told him that I thought I had heard someone singing in the hall – someone intoxicated. He told me that one of the residents had been found dead in the corridor by my room. I was very surprised and asked about it. Apparently the man had died of a heart attack. That seemed the obvious solution. The clerk told me that he had been drinking and had walked up the stairs and it must have been too much for him. Drinking is very bad on the heart. The man had had a large bruise on his temple, but

that must have happened when he fell down. Anyway, that is what happened with the drunkard in the hotel, and so it wasn't really my fault. I didn't hurt him.

JUNE 11

I am afraid that the librarian is suspicious of me! It came as a terrible shock. I had never considered her intelligent enough to suspect anything, but I see now that that was my mistake . . . She is one of the types that are stupid enough to believe in the things that intelligent people laugh at. That makes her very dangerous. I don't know what I should do about her. I won't go back there, of course, but if she already suspects . . . I don't know. I would hate to suffer because of such a stupid woman.

I first began to distrust her when I went into the library today. I walked past her desk and nodded and she nodded back as usual, but I noticed that there was a calendar on her desk. It was right there in full view, as though she had been studying it. There had never been a calendar there before. Why should there be one now? If it was necessary in order to keep track of how long books had been out on loan she would have always had one. Anyway, the books are all stamped in the back or something. No, I am sure that she has the calendar to keep track of the full moons!

I thought that as soon as I saw it, but I wasn't sure. There was a chance that she might be innocent. I always give a person the benefit of the doubt. But then, when she followed me into the dark back room . . .

It is very silent and gloomy in the back, where the big research books are. No one seems to use that room much. I was looking through an old volume and suddenly the librarian came in. She had her arms full of books, and pretended that she had come to put them on the shelves, but she didn't fool me. She was watching me. When I turned and stared at her she blushed. She said something inane, and I kept staring, and she shoved the books in at random and hurried off. She has a disgusting way of walking, so that her bottom bounces suggestively. She is overweight and unclean looking. She is an old maid, although not really so old. I

have often seen young men talking to her at the desk, pretending that they are interested in some books and leaning towards her. I am sure that she has foul habits. It is no wonder that she has never married. She doesn't look like a virgin, either. But I am afraid of what she suspects. She is dangerous. I don't know what she might try to do . . .

When I left she tried to strike up a conversation. I had not stayed long and she mentioned that, just to get me talking. She was smiling and flushed, pretending to be interested in me in ways other than she is. I gave her a crisp nod and went right past the desk without saying anything. I could feel her looking at my back until I had left the building. I know that she wants to get me into a conversation so that she can find out more about me. She pretends to be flirting with me, but she has other motives. That is a pretence. But it is a mistake on her part to imagine that I am the type of man who would be interested in a flirtation.

Still, I must admit it is a possibility that she is genuinely trying to strike up an acquaintance. I know that I am appealing to women, and she is quite wretched and probably has few friends. She is much homelier than Helen. If that is the case then I have nothing to fear from her, although I must feel disgusted that any woman should attempt to start something with a happily married man. Any woman who would do that is better off dead. They are not fit to live, to corrupt our society.

Perhaps it would be better not to suddenly stop going to the library. That might simply arouse any suspicions that she has. It might be better to talk to her, and see just how much she suspects . . .

JUNE 15

I went back to the library today. She tried to strike up a conversation again. I talked to her for a few minutes this time, just to see how she reacted. It is hard to tell what she is thinking. I have never had much experience with women of that sort. She appeared to be trying to tempt me. It is monstrous, but I believe it may be true. I feel relieved that she did not ask me any questions that showed she was

suspicious of me, but it sickened me to see the way that she carried on. I had all I could do from letting her see how angry I was. It was hard to keep from screaming at her when she twitched her hips and looked coy and leaned over the desk towards me. She had a disgustingly tight sweater on. It makes a man wonder what could have happened to turn a woman out that way? The calendar was still on the desk but I had a chance to look at it and saw that the stages of the moon were not marked on it. So I no longer think that I have anything to fear from her. She is more stupid than I supposed.

Afterwards I went to the poetry section and pretended to be reading some poems so that it would throw her off the trail. I hate poetry. It seems so useless. But I fooled the girl. I just hope that no one saw me talking to her and got the wrong impression.

JUNE 24

Well, the librarian showed her hand today. It was just as I thought, she is an immoral woman. She suspected nothing of my disease, she merely lusted after me! I believe that she makes a practice of seducing men. She certainly seemed experienced.

She followed me into the back this afternoon. It was late and we were the only ones in the whole library. I didn't hear her approach, I was reading, concentrating because it was hard to see in the dim light between the high shelves, and all of a sudden she was right there beside me. When I moved, startled, she giggled. She asked if she had scared me, and then, before I could answer, she said that I needn't be frightened of her. She has very wicked eyes, they seem to reflect her soul. They gleam. I could not help but look into those terrible eyes. It was like staring at a flickering fire . . . it was hypnotic. Why is that? Why should a moral man be fascinated by evil and degradation and be unable to take his eyes away? Is the horror of seeing wickedness so strong? Try as I would I could not look away from her, and the creature mistook my loathing for interest. She moved closer to me. I forget what she said. It was meaningless, just something to

say as she smiled. I think that she asked me why I was so shy and timid. I couldn't answer, I couldn't force myself to speak to her. I remember opening my mouth to tell her how I despised her, but words failed me. And then she reached out and touched my arm. Her fingers brushed my arm and it was like the touch of the Devil himself. An icy hatred moved from my arm to my heart itself, and everything faded away, the shelves and the books and the walls all vanished into a red haze and all I could see was her gruesome countenance, drawing closer and closer to mine.

I believe that she would have actually kissed me, if I had not struck her! I don't remember telling myself to slap her, so it must have been a purely reflex movement. Self-preservation works for the soul as well as the mortal life, and I had to stop her. I slapped her as hard as I could, in the face. I have never struck a woman before, but I do not regret it. That creature was less than a woman, less than a human. She was an abomination on life itself, a bloated parasite feeding on men's bodies.

After I struck her, I turned and walked away. She didn't pursue me. She did not say a word. I suppose that she was stunned by my blow. Perhaps she fell down, I did not wait to see. I just walked out of that library and came home. My hands are still trembling. It was a dreadful experience and I know that I shall never forget it. I only hope that I may have done some good; that my strength and resolve will show her that not every man can be ruined by her perverted desires.

JUNE 24 (EVENING)

Well, I just had a shock. It was a remarkable coincidence, no doubt about that. I had just finished this afternoon's entry in this journal and gone downstairs to listen to the news on the radio. It appears that someone has murdered the librarian. The announcer said that she was found in the back room of the library, between two high bookshelves. Her neck had been broken by a tremendous blow to the side of the head. It must have happened in the very same place where she tried to work her evil designs on me. I expect that it was under much the same circumstances. She was

undoubtedly in the habit of following men back there and approaching them without the slightest trace of modesty. Well, after being rebuffed by me she was most likely feeling frustrated or desperate or whatever it is that lewd women feel when they come up against a man strong enough to resist them, and I imagine that she tried harder with the next man that she managed to trap. The great coincidence of it is this man, the murderer, must have been a very moral person, the same as I, and he reacted to her foul advances with uncontrolled anger. He probably did not mean to kill her, although surely she is better off dead, but he must have hit her the same way that I did, except he had less control over himself and struck her too hard. That is what I think has happened. I may be wrong. But whatever it was, I cannot feel sorry for that woman. I am sure that it is better she is dead.

My wife heard the broadcast too, and asked me if I had not been at the library at the approximate time of the murder. I said that it must have happened just after I left, but I didn't tell her that I was sure I knew how it had happened. That would have been too embarrassing, and I'm sure that Helen could not conceive of such a woman and would only be confused. She said that I should go to the police, that I might be able to help them. But I saw no one else, there is nothing that I can do. I don't want to get involved and, besides, I cannot help but feel sympathy for the man. Murder is a dreadful crime, of course, but under certain circumstances it is justified, and when one's morals are outraged it is very easy to lose control and to do something that would normally be out of the question. I couldn't explain this to Helen. She is not intelligent enough to understand that, in certain instances, the letter of the law is not necessarily correct. I just told her that I was sure I could not be of any assistance to the law and she agreed, although I cannot help but feel she thinks I am shirking my duty to society.

Well, the police will undoubtedly apprehend the man. It seems likely that he will give himself up after he has had time to consider and realize that it was justifiable homicide or self-defence or with extenuating circumstances, and the law should not be too harsh with him once he has told his story. I suppose he must be punished in some way, because

that is the law, but for myself I think that he is more to be admired than punished. His only crime was in failing to keep himself under control, as I did in similar circumstances. But, of course, I am a remarkable man and cannot expect everyone to be as strong-willed and restrained.

JUNE 27

I had a rather curious conversation with Helen while we were taking coffee this morning. For several minutes she seemed to want to say something, but kept hesitating. I presumed that it was about the time of month (it draws near again) or the cell or, perhaps, about seeing a doctor. But it wasn't.

'They haven't caught that murderer yet,' she said.

She meant the man who killed the librarian. The police had apparently found no clues. It must be difficult to solve an unpremeditated murder, since there is no motive, and in this case the man was most likely a complete stranger to the librarian. I find myself hoping that he will escape the written law, for his actions were ordained by the higher law of morality.

I said, 'Perhaps they won't.'

'Don't you think that you really should go to them and tell them that you were there?' she asked.

I asked her why.

'Well . . . you must have been there at almost the same time as the killer. She was murdered before you came home, apparently. There might be something you could tell them . . .'

'I've told you. I saw nothing.'

'You aren't . . . afraid to go to the police, are you?' she asked me. She looked away when she said it. I don't know what could have given her that idea. What would I be afraid of? I repeated that I knew nothing, and then I told her that I hoped the man would escape punishment because the librarian had obviously been a bad woman. I did not tell her that the woman had tried to work her ways on me, but maybe she guessed it, because she looked at me in a very strange way and then left the table and went to her room. It

was a funny way for her to behave. I suppose it is her upbringing. The middle classes have such a ridiculous idea that man-made laws have some higher right than man who is behind them. I cannot understand how people can be so dense, so easily led. How can they regard the rules of society as the rules of God? They make no distinction between descriptive laws and laws that are relative to the situation; between the eternal laws of nature and God and morality, and the fluctuating and often wrong laws that men create to hinder themselves and others. It truly bothers me that this is so, that prejudice has made it so. Just think how it applies to myself . . . I would be scorned and hated and punished if anyone knew of my affliction. The authorities would most likely pass a law to make it illegal to have this disease. But what good would that do? Diseases are not governed by the laws of governments, and I would be thought a criminal although powerless to help myself. That is why no one must ever know about it. The old, almost forgotten prejudices and fears and superstitions would join forces with the new power of the authorities and destroy me. It is a terrible thing. One sees it everywhere, and can do nothing to combat it. I feel very bitter about it. If I had lived three hundred years ago I would have at least been feared and acknowledged by anyone who knew. Now I would simply be legislated against. It is a good thing that I am a well-balanced man, or there is no telling what such stupidity would drive me to.

I often feel bitter like this when the time draws near. I hate that cell so much . . .

JULY 1

Tomorrow I must go to the cell once more.

I have tried to avoid thinking of it. I even neglected this journal in an attempt to think of other things, but it is quite impossible. I cannot avoid the thoughts, and the thoughts torment me. I feel that I shall not be able to bear it again. Even as I write this my hands tremble and I am perspiring. It seems so unjust to punish myself because I am ill. It seems so unfair to martyr myself for the sake of an

uncomprehending, uncaring society. I don't know if I am thinking this way because it is so near or because I am right. I know that my thoughts could change as the disease begins the cycle; I admit that. And yet, my reasoning is flawless.

I wonder if the cell is making the illness worse? I have not considered this before; I suppose it occurred to me, but it seemed too close to rationalization and I did not think about it. But the fact remains that it was never so bad before I started going into the cell. I always had control of myself then. Even the last time that I stayed out, the time when the drunkard had the heart attack, I was able to restrain myself. The drunkard's death was the prime factor in my decision to have the cell built, but as I look back and realize that his death had nothing to do with me I see that it was a false factor; that I acted without properly reasoning, without seeing that the cell might affect me and punish me instead of keeping me safe. Now I wonder if possibly the cell has aggravated the disease. It seems reasonable. It was always easier when I could see the sky, and since I have been shutting myself off completely it has become worse. I really don't know. I would like to see, however.

I wonder if I dare to stay out of the cell tomorrow night?

JULY 3 (MORNING)

Nothing that I can write can possibly describe my feelings. I am in despair. I despise myself. I know that it was not my fault, but the knowledge cannot diminish the shame, the horror. I feel that the human body cannot stand this much mortification; that my heart will burst, my brain melt so that all the memories run molten together and I will die. But I am still alive. I would rather be dead. I have thought of suicide. I actually took my razor out and looked at the big blue veins in my wrists, and I think that I would have done it if it were not that the blood would remind me of what happened, and even as I felt my life drain away I would be remembering that fiendish night . . . I cannot kill myself that way. If I had sleeping pills I know that I would use them,

but I have none. I have never used them. I do not approve of using drugs.

I feel a little better now. I have been lying down. I think that I see things more clearly now that I am rested. It wasn't as though I were responsible. Suicide would punish me, not the disease that turned me into the thing that committed the terrible crime. But I am still on fire with self-abasement, I hate myself. If only I had gone to the cell . . . but how was I to know? How could I have even imagined what was going to happen? I am a gentle person; it was impossible to know that my body could be used for . . . what happened. I feel as if I should take a cleaver and chop my hands off at the wrist; should have my teeth torn out at the roots. God knows, if it were possible to change the past there would be no question of it. I would surely destroy myself rather than let it happen. But there is no question of that. What is done is done. But I am so ashamed . . .

I tried to act normally when I came into the house this morning. I acted as though nothing had happened, although it was very hard. My wife didn't say anything, but I saw her look at me very closely. She didn't even ask where I had been all night, but I told her that I had been called away on business very suddenly. I don't know if she believed me. Neither of us mentioned that it had been . . . the night. Perhaps she thinks that nothing happened this month, or that I am beginning to control it better. Or perhaps . . . I hate to write this, but it is a possibility . . . perhaps she thinks that I forgot about it, and that it is my mind that causes it. I don't know. She acted as though she wanted to ask me, but she didn't. I will have to consider this . . . later, when I can think more clearly. My mind is still burning, and I can think of nothing except what happened last night . . . I keep seeing her face . . . all that I can do is to keep brushing my teeth and cleaning under my fingernails.

I have had to burn my shirt.

JULY 3 (AFTERNOON)

It was in all the newspapers!

It never occurred to me. I suppose that I was so concerned and confused, that I was thinking so much of myself, that I forgot the rest of the world. But naturally it was on the front page of all the papers, and they had it all wrong!

When I went down to lunch my wife had the papers on the table. They were all folded back so that the story about last night was on top. She did not look at me while I read them. That was a good thing, because I could not help but show my anger and pain. It was enough to make even a strong man lose restraint. I'm certain that Helen knows I am the one. I only hope that she realizes that the newspapers have it all wrong. They have made it out to be much worse than it really was, although it was certainly bad.

They called it the work of a madman! A madman! They used all the most lurid words and the worse type of sensationalism, all the most violent terms and expressions and the most ghoulish descriptions and details. And each and every paper referred to it as an insane act. Newspapers are supposed to keep to the objective facts, and not feel obligated to formulate theories about which they know nothing. But they are all so eager for sales that they must make everything sound as obscene as possible. What evil-minded fiends they must be! They have even implied that it was a sex crime! That is the worst of all. Every paper implied that the girl had been sexually assaulted! It sickens me to the very heart. They go so far as to say that her clothing was disarranged, that her thighs had been torn and bleeding and her stomach gouged and mutilated; that her blouse had been torn off and her underclothes shredded and her private parts mangled! All facts designed to make it appear that she had been sexually interfered with. Can't they see that clothing must become disarranged when one struggles as she did? Are they so sick that they can never see beyond a sexual motive for any act? Or do they ignore the truth in order to sell more papers?

I am furious! It enrages me to see that the newspapers can be so irresponsible! And the public . . . the terrible public . . .

to think that the way to increase circulation is to publish such complete lies, such sensationalism. What is wrong with our society that men and women actually enjoy reading such things? How can an ill person ever hope to be cured in such a society? It is so discouraging. It makes me lose hope.

I have the papers here in my room. They are all alike. The headlines differ but the lies are the same. The headlines range from *Madman Slays Girl in Woods* to *Sex Fiend Murder* to *Mangled Corpse in Lovers' Lane*. And nowhere in any of the stories is there any suggestion of a physical illness. Are they blind? Or do they fear to look at the truth? Do they prefer the mentally ill to the innocent? What can I do about it?

I have contemplated writing letters to each of the newspapers, explaining exactly how it was, and what the disease is. They would surely publish the letters, if only to increase sales, but who knows what alterations or omissions they would make? I am sure that they would destroy any truth that I wrote them. I have learned that they are not to be trusted. I would like to have the editors of those scandalous papers locked in a room with me . . . locked in the cell with me on the night that it happens. I would like to see the way their faces change as they look upon the truth, as they realize how wrong and wicked and libellous they have been. That would be the way to show them, to teach them the truth and to teach them how to suffer for their errors at the same time. It would not be corrective punishment, but they would deserve it. They would be . . .

I should not be thinking this way. I can feel my heart begin to drum, my blood is hurtling through my veins. I suppose it must be some reaction left by last night, some after-effect of the disease. It is probably not well to let myself feel this way. It is yielding to the emotions of the sickness instead of combating it. I must never let it gain control when it is not necessary. But it is understandable why I should feel that way. I have been outraged and slandered without cause by men who care nothing for truth; men who deserve to suffer; men who would be better off dead.

I am too disgusted and angry to write any more now.

Later I must write and cancel my subscriptions to those papers . . .

JULY 3 (NIGHT)

I feel obligated to tell what really happened, no matter how painful the effort is. I must write it all, objectively and truthfully. It may bring me relief to purge myself this way, or it may increase the despair . . . I can only do it and see, and do it regardless. I must show that it was the act of a sick person and not the disgusting crime of a pervert. That is what hurts me most, to be labelled a pervert. A sex pervert! I, of all people, to be so misunderstood.

I hope and pray that Helen does not believe the newspapers. She is not given to thinking for herself, she has a tendency to believe whatever she reads instead of forming her own opinions, and it drives me to frenzy to imagine that she might be thinking of me in that light, by that lie. What would she feel if she believed that I had raped a young woman? The possibility of being thought capable of such a fiendish act appals me. I would hate anyone who believed that I was capable of it, hate them terribly. I have always been very pure in mind and body. Even with my wife I have tried to limit our sexual relations to a minimum. I have never been guilty of feeling any great need for sex, and usually I do it simply to satisfy Helen. I believe that she is a bit over-sexed, but I have managed to regulate that, and to show her by my example that continence is the proper basis for health and purity. Over-indulgence in sexual acts is every bit as heinous as taking drugs, or drinking to excess.

Perhaps the fact that it happened in that lovers' lane gave those newspapers the wrong impression. But that was merely a coincidence. I swear that I did not touch her in any unclean manner. Even after I had changed, my moral code was strong enough to resist that temptation, even if it had occurred. But it did not. There was never the slightest urge towards it. It could just as well have been a man as a girl. The fact that it was a girl, and that she was young and rather pretty, in a cheap and painted fashion, had absolutely nothing to do with what happened. I swear that. I would

never, under any circumstances, interfere with a woman.

I suppose that, in one way, I should be thankful that they have got it all wrong. It will throw the police off the trail. They will be searching for a madman, a sex pervert. There is no way that I could come under suspicion. My life has always been beyond reproach. The more they investigate, the further from the truth they seem to move. In the late news broadcast it was hinted that there might be a link between this crime and the librarian's murder. The poor benighted fools! How could they imagine that? It is beyond me. I suppose they are desperate to solve one crime or the other and find it less compelling if they are able to lump them together. Well, they will never find the truth, that is definite.

I see that I am still unable to write objectively. I am still a bit annoyed at the newspapers, and a little shaken by last night. Tomorrow I will write exactly how it was.

JULY 6

I have waited until I feel that I can explain everything calmly. I could not trust myself before. But now I am ready, and I will describe what really happened on that night, and show how wrong the newspapers were.

That afternoon I went for a long walk. I left the house just after lunch and there was plenty of time before darkness would set in. Helen did not seem to realize what night it was, or else she thought that I would only be gone a short while. She didn't question me when I went out, at any rate. I had not the faintest idea where I should spend the night, but I knew that I had to get away from that cell. I could not bear the thought of going there again. And I knew that I must get away from the town, away from people. I intended to take no chances. I thought . . . I had convinced myself . . . I truly believed that it was the confinement of the cell that had made the change so much greater in the past months. Being shut off from the air and the sky and the moon I had felt the change violently, and I believed that, since the change had to be more powerful to occur in the stifling cell, it had also

been greater necessarily. I know now that that is not so, that the degree of change is not modified by the degree of struggle necessary to bring it about, but I firmly believed it then. I could not foresee any danger.

I walked around the streets aimlessly for some time, and then, in the late afternoon, I headed away from the populated areas. I walked west. I did not hurry, but I walked at a steady pace, and very soon the town was behind me and I was on the open road. It was a wide highway and motor cars roared by in clouds of dust and noise and it was very unpleasant. I have never cared for motor cars myself. I prefer to walk or to take a train. Perhaps I am somewhat old-fashioned, but I see no harm in that. I see it as a virtue in this day and age of idleness and laziness. Soon it began to grow dark and some of the cars had their headlights on. I knew that it was time to find seclusion then, and I turned up the first secondary road that I came to. This road was narrow and unpaved. It headed in a northerly direction. There were trees on both sides and I could see more trees ahead. The noise of the highway faded behind me. There was no traffic on the small road, although there were wheel tracks in the dust. I did not know that it was too early for traffic there, you see. And I certainly did not know that it led to the local lovers' lane. Such thoughts never occur to me, and I find them disgusting. I am not naïve; I know what goes on in parked cars before people are properly married. But I did not know that I was walking towards such a place.

It was uphill. The road turned and twisted as it rose and I suppose that I walked for an hour or more without seeing another human being. Several times I saw dogs. They snarled and yelped and when I made a quick motion they ran off with their tails tucked in between their legs, looking back over their shoulders at me. Dogs are always terrified of me. Even fierce dogs that attack postmen and delivery boys run from me. I find it amusing. Their owners can never understand why this is so. One very large mongrel stood its ground for a moment, in the centre of the road. It had very large teeth. I made a noise in my throat and moved quickly towards it and it went away very fast then, very chastened. It looked so humorous that I had to laugh.

Soon I had reached the top of the hill and the road ended

in a quarry or pit of some kind. I don't know much about such things, but I believe that this one was deserted. It was growing dark by this time and I paused to rest. I sat on a flat stone and loosened my necktie. I was sweating a little from the climb but it was relaxing to be there in the open, all alone. It brought back memories of childhood. I felt quite sure that the change would be slight and that I would be satisfied to run through the woods as I had in the past. It never occurred to me that I might meet another person. Everything was so deserted and so quiet. The sounds of the woods are not like the sounds of the cities, they are a pleasant background, almost like music. I was content to sit there with my eyes closed, and I believe that I would have stayed right there all night and nothing terrible would have happened, if the car hadn't come.

I heard it when it was still a long way away. At first I thought that it was down on the highway, but then it seemed to be getting closer. It annoyed me. I didn't want to be disturbed and I could not see why a car should be coming to the deserted sandpit. I waited until I was sure that it was coming and then I left my rock and went into the woods. I went a few yards back into the brush, where I was sure I could not be seen, and knelt down. The ground was crisp and dry under my knee and smelled very rich. There was still a little light and I could see the dirt road and the pit from where I crouched. After a while the automobile drove up in a great cloud of dust. It drove to the end of the road and stopped. I waited, expecting the driver to see that it was a dead end and turn around, but he did not. He turned off the motor. That made me very angry. I felt as though he were trespassing on my land. I stared at the car from beneath a large clump of bushes, and that was when I realized what was happening. There was a girl in the car. Two men and one girl. I could not really see what was going on, but I heard a great deal of giggling and rustling and soft voices. I knew what was going on then. It filled me with great anger. I dug my hands into the soft earth and made noises in my throat and hoped that they would go away. Why wouldn't they go away? But they did not. The darkness fell suddenly and there was the moon, shining right down on that motor car with all the lewd sounds coming from within. I wanted

to leave then, to run away as fast as I could, but something seemed to hold me there. I could not leave. I could not even look away from the motor car. I suppose that the change must have occurred at this time, but I was not even aware that it had started; even after I changed I did not realize it.

And then they got out of the car! The girl was laughing and flushed and her clothing was partially unfastened. She got out and stood beside the car and the two men got out. One of them had a blanket and he spread it on the ground. The other one kissed her. I saw his lips grind on hers, and I could tell that she liked it. She was not a good girl. I saw it all. I saw her take her undergarments off and lift her dress and lie down on the blanket, and then both of those men got down and they both . . . they took turns . . . Ah, I cannot write of that, there are some things that a normal man cannot face. But they did things to her and I crouched there in the woods and I saw everything that happened . . .

I controlled myself. Perhaps the horrible thing that I was witnessing had hypnotized me so that control was not hard. But I waited there, even though I wanted to spring at those execrable and detestable creatures, to punish them, to bring an end to their foul act. I waited and after a long time both men seemed to have sated their lust and they got up and put their clothing on. The girl was smiling. She remained on the blanket for a while. She actually seemed to be contented, as if she were satisfied with her wickedness! I looked at her, at that evil twisted smile on her mouth, at the way she lay with her head back and her knees raised. I looked at her throat and her arched back and her white thighs. Everything about her was flagitious and depraved. She was exposed in a beam of moonlight and made no attempt at all to cover her parts. Her legs were parted and her undergarments lay beside her on the ground. I have never imagined such base corruption.

A strange thing happened then. I do not pretend to understand it. The two men got in the motor car. They were laughing and one of them leaned out the window and said something to the girl. She looked startled and leaped to her feet. The car started and she tried to get in. She was very distressed and the men were looking pleased with themselves. They backed around and the car turned and she

pleaded with them. But they drove off. One of them waved at her from the window, and she hurled a curse at them which no gentleman could ever repeat. She stood there, looking down the road after the car and muttering to herself. She had her hands on her hips, and the words that she mumbled were such as I have never heard before; I scarcely know the meaning of them, and I am a full-grown man. But they all had sexual reference, for even in her anger she was depraved. I have never known a greater sinner than that woman was. I presume that the two men, their lust satiated, had been appalled at what they had done, and left her to punish her for her part in their crime against nature. That is the only explanation that occurs to me, although I do not understand why they laughed as they drove off. There are some things that I do not understand about the relationships between men and women. But I do understand what is wrong and that girl was wrong. That girl needed to be punished.

I didn't intend to hurt her. I don't know what I intended. I waited until she had walked back to the blanket and then I got to my feet and moved out into the open. She had bent down to pick up her panties. I walked very quietly up behind her. She raised one leg and started to draw the panties over her foot and then I must have made some slight sound, because she turned towards me.

I don't know if she screamed. Her mouth was open but I heard no sound. Perhaps she was too frightened to scream, or perhaps my ears were not functioning. She staggered backwards a few steps, her hands raised, palms out towards me. Her panties were bundled around her ankle. The fear in her face was indescribable. I slowly moved after her, with my hands clawed in front of me and my teeth bared. I moved closer and she fell to the ground. Her eyes never once left my face. Even when I crouched over her she looked directly into my face. Her fear seemed to inspire me. I had only meant to frighten her, I am sure. But there is something about fear . . . the smell of fear . . . it made me lose control. Fear and blood have much the same smell. I could not help myself then, it was her fault; she drove me to it just as she must have driven those two men to that foul act. I remem-

bered that as I saw her white thighs flash and her painted lips move and I wanted to rip and tear and destroy; to drive my talons into her flesh so that the blood jetted out and that evil life was ended.

That was when I sprang on her.

And all the while she looked directly into my eyes, until her own eyes clouded over. She seemed to remain conscious for an extraordinarily long time.

I don't remember what happened afterwards. I don't know how long I crouched over her corpse, or what I did to it. I must have been there for some time, if the newspapers have accurately reported the condition of her body. But then, they have reported nothing else correctly, and I am glad that I have been able to write this so that the truth is written somewhere.

This is the truth; this is exactly how it happened.

JULY 20

I have ignored this book for the past two weeks. I have not even read it. I think that I exhausted myself with my last entry, and it was a good thing to get my mind off the disease and to relax for a while. That is a serious trouble with modern civilization, it leaves so little time to relax. Luckily, I have never fallen into the habit of rushing madly after money and success and happiness. I am content to let it come to me if it will, or to do without it if it will not. I am stoical and reasonable and undoubtedly born several hundred years too late in history. But I do not complain. I have never been given to boasting, but I feel that eventually I shall be able to even reconcile myself to accepting my affliction on the same terms that I regard the other aspects of life. It is, after all, only one night per month, only twelve nights each year that I suffer. It could be so much worse. Many diseases are worse, it is just that they are common and taken for granted, whereas mine is unique and seems more horrible than it really is. It is not as bad, surely, as having cancer, or leprosy, or being blinded. Only vanity made me think it was so terrible, and I am happy to see that I have defeated

such thoughts and now look at it in its true perspective. If it is a trial sent to judge me, I shall not be found lacking. I am happier now than I have been in a long while, because I am thinking clearly for the first time, thinking as clearly about my illness as I am in the habit of thinking about other things. I accept my agony in the same way as I accept my pleasures and my mild happiness. I have learned to live with the sickness just as I have learned to live with the cruelty of society, with the lesser mentality of my wife.

I have read what I wrote about that night. It is all very objective and true, and I believe it helped me to see myself more perfectly. One thing I noticed, which would have disturbed me a short time ago, but which now makes me understand better . . . In writing about what happened, I continually referred to myself, as myself, instead of to the thing that I become, or to it. I see that those words were a defence, that I used them instead of facing the truth. For, of course, it and I are the same. We are the same being, with changes and differences but basically the same. I can even face up to that now, and it shows how well I am thinking. I don't know if this change in my writing happened because I was trying so hard to remember all the details, or because I am drawing nearer to it, and it to me, or purely for literary ease and convenience, but whichever caused it, I feel it is a good symptom, and shows truthfulness and lack of inhibition. It was, after all, an unusual night . . . an extraordinary night . . . it is hardly strange that I remembered it differently than I remembered those terrible nights in the cell. I will have to wait and see how things are this month, when I return to the cell again. I will bring this book with me again, and go down in plenty of time. I won't take any chances on staying outside again. I must never allow another accident to take place. But . . . I am not at all sure that, in this one instance, it was not rather a good thing. That may sound heartless, but many true thoughts do. And when one considers how many young men that woman would have debased, how many she would have led into sin and degradation and ruin . . . well, perhaps I have saved a good many. And surely the girl herself is better off dead. She had nothing whatsoever to live for. Young as she was, she

was already old with sin, and she could never have been happy in her depravity . . .

To think that I actually considered suicide the day after it happened! I was so emotional, so out of character. But everything is all right now, and I have felt better for the last two weeks than I have felt for a long, long time. It is hard to give the reasons, it is almost as though I accomplished something . . . as though I have suddenly achieved something or gained something that I have wanted for a long time, without knowing it. And yet, nothing is changed. I cannot see what it is. It must be something intangible, some frustration that I never realized I had must have been removed from my mind. It may be that the shock of what happened on that night broke up whatever was blocking my mind. It does seem to have something to do with it. I cannot trace the path through my thoughts and emotions, but it is there. It is not a new feeling, but it is a new depth of satisfaction. I can remember feeling this way when I was young. It is almost the way that I felt when I destroyed my favourite toy. It is close to how I felt when I destroyed that savage dog that had attacked me. It is a very curious phenomenon. It is very peculiar that three acts which were so completely different can give such a similar feeling. I find it quite interesting . . .

JULY 28

The day approaches. I am quite resigned. I am in perfect physical health and my mind is clear and I live a pure life and if I must suffer one night it is hardly anything to complain of. I wish my wife would stop acting so peculiarly, however. All this month she has seemed very distant. Perhaps she actually took some stock in those false newspaper accounts, and is angry with me, but she has not mentioned it. She has never said a word about that. It is no longer front page news, new scandals and lies have displaced it, but each day there is a small paragraph reporting the progress of the police. Each day they claim that an arrest is imminent. It makes me chuckle. I do hope that they do not arrest some innocent man. But, still, I am sure that if they do arrest

someone he will be a known pervert and will be guilty of far worse crimes than mine, and so I am not worried about it. Punishment for the wrong sin is quite just, if some other sin has been committed. As far as myself . . . and the man who struck the librarian down . . . I cannot feel any guilt.

JULY 29

When I was coming home from my afternoon stroll today I saw a workman leave our house. There was a lorry outside, and I believe he was from the same company that built the cell for us. I asked Helen about it, and she looked startled, and then she denied that he had been there. I was curious about that at first, and for a moment I actually wondered if she might have been unfaithful to me, she acted so strange and so nervous. But that was a terrible thought and I never should have had it for a moment. It was a sin to think such a thing. I have guessed what the truth is now. She has had something done to make the cell more comfortable for me. Perhaps she has had new padding put in, or a brighter light installed. I can't imagine what else it could be. She wanted to keep it as a surprise, of course. Something that she imagines will cheer me up when I have to go to the cell. Perhaps it will, at that. I do hope, however, that she was bright enough to give a logical reason for having the padding in the cell, if the workman saw the inside. Even unintelligent construction workers sometimes have imaginations . . . I suppose they sometimes read the newspapers, too. Still, we have a right to have a padded cell if we choose, and no one can question that.

I have just wondered if perhaps the man had come to install a stronger lock on the door. Helen has been strange . . . distant. It is possible that she is frightened. Poor thing. I can understand how it is. I must make an attempt to be more pleasant, and more tolerant of her weaknesses. I should give her some little token of my affection. Perhaps I should go to her bedroom this evening. She always seems very grateful when I do that, and I have not gone for some time now. But that is her fault. She does not give any indication that she wants me to, and I only do it for her. Perhaps

she has come to see that it is better to abstain as much as possible.

JULY 30

Helen has changed remarkably.

Who can understand the workings of the female mind? There are depths to even the simplest and most unimaginative of women that can never be probed. I feel that I have as much insight as any man, that my logic is capable of plumbing any logical depths, and yet I have no conception of what has brought about this difference in my wife. It has been coming on for some time now, I think, but last night it was the most noticeable that it has been yet. Perhaps it is simply that there is no reason for it, that the basic motions of the female atoms are erratic. I hate to think that. I prefer a well-ordered concept of life. But I am open-minded to other possibilities. I have had to be open-minded; a closed mind would not have the scope to deal with life as a man in my circumstances must do. I would not be in the least surprised to know that I am the only man who has ever suffered with my affliction and still kept his sanity. Perhaps that seems like a vain statement, but still a man must recognize his virtues in order to capitalize on them. I am humble in my pride.

Last night I went to her room. She had gone to bed early and after a while I decided to go to her. But everything was different. When I opened her bedroom door she sat up quickly, holding the covers up to her chin and looking at me with her eyes open wide. It was almost as though she had been lying there waiting, expecting me to come. That in itself is strange. And the way that she looked . . . well, it was very much like fear. She cringed when I touched her. She said nothing at all but she trembled under my hand and searched my face. I hated to see that expression, that look in her eyes. It was as though she thought last night was the night of the change. Perhaps she had lost track of the date. But surely she knows that I will never forget it? How can my own wife fear me? Is it all a result of those atrocious lies in the newspapers, or is she breaking down under the strain

– suffering, perhaps, in sympathy with me? It might be that. She does seem to be different when it is getting near the night when I must go to the cell. I have heard that often one suffers for a loved one. Men are reported to have labour pains when their wives are pregnant. It might possibly be something of that nature. I prefer to think that, because it is very unpleasant to think that she fears me.

When we were first married Helen used to be very affectionate. Even passionate. Far too much so, in fact, and several times I had to ask her to please exercise a bit of restraint. It is wrong for a woman to abandon herself to carnal pleasures. I am not sure if it is wrong to feel pleasure in a carnal act, but it certainly is wrong to give oneself up to it. Once Helen tried to take the initiative in the marriage act, and several times she came right out and asked me if I would not come to her bed. I had to lecture her quite firmly about that. She was not really to blame; she was innocent and had no experience and did not realize how wrong her behaviour was. She was undoubtedly trying to please me by her overt desire and undisguised lustings. It does seem that a proper young woman should know instinctively that it is wrong, but who am I to judge? I have never attempted to set myself up as a moralist, I am simply a moral man who tries to show others the proper way to live. I had to be a bit strict with Helen, of course, but that was for her own good.

Last night it was very different, however. She was not in the least demanding, and she seemed quite pleased when we had finished and I was ready to return to my own room. All through the act she had continued to stare up at me with that strange expression. It made me feel very uncomfortable. I am never quite comfortable while I am performing the marital duty, but this was worse. It was . . . uncomfortable is not the word, but I know no word to describe it. It was an exceedingly troubling emotion. I hope that she never looks at me that way again. There is something about fear . . . I don't know what it is . . . it always makes me feel . . . makes me imagine . . . indefinite things. This is very difficult to express correctly. Vague things seem to be lurking just below the surface of my mind, unclear, clouded and dark and unsavoury. Dangerous things, somehow. Shrouded images. I cannot define it more closely than this.

JULY 31

I am waiting for tomorrow with the usual dread and disgust, but also with a certain curiosity. I wonder how last month has affected the disease. I have been so much at peace all during July; have come to terms with myself so well, that I would not be in the least surprised to find a definite change in the sickness. Last month may have acted as a catalyst and change the chemistry of the thing . . . perhaps for the better. Whatever happens I feel that I will be able to accept it stoically.

I would tell Helen of my hopes if she did not seem so distant and unusual. But it is probably better not to, until I know. There is little benefit in raising false cheer. This morning she acted peculiarly again. I had gone out into the hall to fetch my gloves and when I turned around she was looking around the corner at me. Just her face was around the corner, and she ducked back. I went down and asked her if she wanted anything and, after mumbling for a moment, she said that she wondered whether I was going down to the basement. Why would she think that? She knows that I hate the basement, and that I never go down there until it is necessary. When I assured her of this she seemed relieved, so perhaps she is just overwrought as the day draws near. Perhaps she is afraid that it might begin sooner than usual, and that I shall have to spend more time, perhaps more than one night, in the cell. I can understand how that would bother her, and it shows her concern for me. But it also shows her complete lack of understanding of just what my disease is.

AUGUST 1

I am fairly bursting with energy today. I took a long, brisk walk after lunch. I stopped to watch some children playing in an empty lot. I seemed to share their enthusiasm for life. It made me regret the fact that I can never have children. They were so gay and carefree that I felt sorry they must grow up and face the troubles of life. My childhood was not happy; at least it does not seem happy in my memory,

except for a few outstanding occasions. But I do not envy others in this respect, because my beginnings have carried me on to a proper manhood and I am able to look back at my whole life and regret no single thing that I have ever done. Any regrets that I feel are for things not my fault, things ordained before I was created. It is surely the greatest peace that man can know when he can see his whole existence running in one continuous sequence and find that at no point has there been any shame, anything to mar his past; that his total life has been exactly as he would have willed it, considering those things in which he has a choice.

I am almost looking forward to the change tonight, I feel so certain that there will be an improvement . . . or is it that I know now that no improvement is necessary, that I understand my affliction is not nearly as bad as I believed it to be? I hope that the thing which I become can share my tranquillity.

AUGUST 1 (NIGHT)

Well, the door is barred now. Helen has gone upstairs and I am alone in the cell. Helen tried to be very pleasant today. She cooked my favourite dinner, simple wholesome food, and she chattered away self-consciously and tried to be gay and to take my mind off what would soon happen. I appreciate her pitiful little efforts against a thing she cannot grasp. I came down quite early so that she did not have to worry about it. I was afraid that she would begin to be nervous and frightened, and wanted to spare her that ordeal . . . and spare myself witnessing it, too.

I have not noticed anything different about the cell. I was sure that she had had some improvement made, but the lock is the same and the padding is still torn in places. Perhaps she had the workman come to make an estimate and intends to have the work done next month. I wish that I had thought to put a brighter light in, however. It is difficult to write, and the corners are in shadow. If . . .

I have just made a horrible discovery. I am at a loss to understand what it means. A cold sliver is knifing up my backbone and my flesh is like ice. I was writing before and I

glanced at the wall and . . . there is a hole through the wall! It is a small hole, and I didn't notice it immediately. It is in the corner by the door, and it is large enough for someone to look through . . . to look into the cell. The hole was not there before, and there is still some concrete dust on the floor, so I know that it was made recently. That must have been why the workman was here. But why did my wife have the hole made? Whatever has possessed her? Why would she do such a fiendish thing? She must be mad! She must intend to look into the cell after the change has occurred! But why would she want to? It is beyond belief, it is monstrous. The thought that she will see me . . . see me become . . . something other than a man. I am crouching against the wall with the hole and I cannot be observed from there, but I don't know what to do about later . . . after I change. The thing is not rational, or does not care about rationality. It will not remain here against the door where it cannot be seen. I have considered trying to plug the hole with my shirt, but I fear that the shirt will become torn loose when the disease is at its frenzied pitch. Or she might poke it free with a stick. There is nothing I can do. She is going to see me!

I am sick with dread. I feel that I shall vomit. My head is spinning. Why would Helen do this to me? Is it simply morbid curiosity? Has she some perverted twist to her nature that I have never before observed? Or is it that she still doubts me, and wants proof that I am not mad, that I do not imagine it all? I do not know. The thought that she will see the change is terrible, and God knows what effect it will have on her! I can only hope that she recognizes it as an illness, and that the truth will not drive her out of her mind. But her mind is not strong and I fear . . . I have seen the look on other faces when they see me changed. The drunkard . . . the girl . . . There was a look of madness on those faces, and Helen is not strong . . . I have seen the fear in her eyes even when I am normal. After she read those lies in the newspapers, those horrible tales of mutilation and dismemberment . . . the other night in bed . . . and that fear that makes her face glow white as the moon, makes it shift and tremble until I can see only that terror and everything else fades away and I look . . . I feel . . . I feel that such fear must

not be left to survive . . . How will I ever face her again after . . . when I am normal . . . when . . .

I heard the door close.

I think she is coming down . . .

AUGUST 2?

I presume it is morning. I am all right now, although I am exhausted. My clothing is torn to shreds. Helen will be down soon to open the door. How will she face me now, after last night? I begged her to go away and she would not even answer me, she just looked into the cell and waited. My agitation brought the sickness on sooner than it should have come, and I lost all control. She saw everything. I hate her. I hate her for what she has done to me. I am on fire with rage and shame and hatred! When she opens the door I shall have to exercise great control to keep from striking her. She deserves to be struck. She deserves worse. For what she has done to me there could be no punishment too great. She made it much much worse than it has ever been before. I can clearly remember raging against the wall, trying to tear my way out, trying to rip the hole apart, and all the while she was standing there, on the other side of that indestructible barrier, looking in at everything. She is a monster, a fiend, a devil! There are no words to describe her . . .

AUGUST

I don't know the date. There is no way to tell the time. It seems an eternity. I no longer care about this record. It seems futile now. And my pen is nearly out of ink. The light seems to be growing dim too, and soon I shall be in darkness. I might be able to write with my own blood, but it hardly seems worth the effort . . . I don't like blood, it reminds me of too much. Still, trying to record something occupies my mind. It is an ally against madness. I can bear the hunger and the thirst but I could not bear to lose my mind.

I cannot understand why she has done this to me. I no

longer hate her, I just cannot understand. She comes down and looks in once in a while. Once a day, once a week . . . I don't know. It is all the same here. She never says anything. She won't answer me when I speak to her. She makes a strange noise sometimes, a cackling sound. I suppose she is insane. When I plead with her she goes away . . .

?

I am so hungry.

I have tried to eat the padding from the walls, but it is no good. It makes my thirst greater. The light is nearly out now. Only by standing directly beneath it can I see to write. My vision is blurred as well. I am very weak and dizzy. I don't suppose that I will be able to write again.

I know now that I must die here. I am resigned to it. It seems proper that, if I must die, it is through no fault of my own. I have done nothing to bring this about. Like all the suffering of my life, I am innocent of the cause, I have suffered through the sins of my ancestors, and now I die through the madness of my wife. It is unjust, but proper. I must lie down now. I am sure that there will be nothing more to record.

I know it is night. I bit my arm . . .

That was the journal that I found in my aunt's drawer. There were some pages after the last entry that had been marked, but they were undecipherable. They may have been an attempt to write in the dark, or they may have been the heedless markings of something with the hand of a man. I did not look long at them. I closed the book slowly and stared out the window at the rain. A loud clap of thunder sounded and the big elm tree in the yard whipped under the wind and the wind rushed under the clouds. Somewhere a dog howled. I sat there for a long time and then I got up and put the journal in my pocket. It was getting late. I went into the hall and opened the door that led down to the basement. I had to go down there. I hesitated but I had to. The air was thick and foul and it was like walking into a grave, but I went down.

The cell was in the corner, as the book said. My footsteps were incredibly loud as I crossed the concrete floor. The door was barred and I lifted the bar quickly, without thinking about it. It groaned and rust flaked off. I tried the door but it would not move. It had been locked with a key as well. It was a large lock and the door was very strong. I stepped to the corner and after a moment found the hole. The edges had begun to crumble. I looked through it but I could see nothing within. It was black inside. I turned and walked very calmly across the basement and up the stairs. I had every intention of searching for the key to the cell. I knew that it must be somewhere in Aunt Helen's possessions. As I reached the top step it gave way under my weight. I had to leap to keep from falling. I landed off balance in the hallway and suddenly I was running. I went out of the front door and into the storm. I am as brave as the next man, I am fit and very strong, but that day I ran and kept on running until I was far away from the house and drenched with rain. I had forgotten my coat.

That was some time ago and I have never been back to the house that I inherited from Aunt Helen. Someday I shall. I am often curious as to what is in the cell now. Surely there could be nothing there that would harm me. It all happened long ago. And Aunt Helen must have been in herself at some time, because she had the book. I have checked the old newspapers carefully, and found a report of an unsolved murder that might have been the one he wrote about. Or it might not. He was surely mad, and perhaps it was all in his mind. Of course it was all in his mind. And yet . . . I cannot help but wonder what Aunt Helen saw when she looked into the cell that night. Did she realize then, for the first time, that he was insane, and leave him for that reason? Or did she see something else? Something that drove her mad?

I shall never know, at any rate. I don't expect that she kept a journal of her own. It doesn't really trouble me. Not really. I have never been a superstitious man. But I have determined that I must never have children. Because, you see, Aunt Helen was related to me by marriage. It was her husband who was related to me by blood. I have kept the book and sometimes I read it through again, trying to find

the truth. Sometimes I read it on those long white nights when the moon is bright and round and I have nothing at all to do but sit alone by my window. I live alone. I would like to have a pet, but animals don't like me. Dogs are afraid of me. It is rather boring and I shall have to start keeping a diary to occupy my time on those nights. As it is I just sit, watching the moon, watching my hands . . .

A QUESTION OF FEAR

by

BRYAN LEWIS

'I THINK I can honestly say that I have never been really afraid in my life.' Major Rupert Denny spoke with forgivable conceit. Had he not skipped boarding school to fight with the International Brigade in the Spanish Civil War, killing his first man at Teruel on his nineteenth birthday? After the outbreak of World War Two, was he not one of the last off the beaches at Dunkirk, hurling insults at the Hun all the way back to England?

For six months he kicked his heels in Blighty, desperately seeking a new front-line posting, and finally got his wish with the Army of the Nile, under General Wavell, collecting his first wound, a bullet through the shoulder, at Tobruk. Thereafter, his war record was dotted with mentions in dispatches and many other incidents not reported to his superiors. Like the time in 1943 when he was dropped into enemy-occupied France, fell foul of the Gestapo and was mercilessly interrogated without breathing a word of his mission. After three days he escaped and got back to Britain. He told the authorities his arms were broken in the jump, rather than have them change their plans against the chance of his having talked.

The DSM and bar he treated as a lucky charm, nothing more, and for ten years after the end of hostilities continued to court danger in counter-intelligence. Then his cover was blown by a colleague less immune to torture and Denny resigned rather than be saddled with routine assignments. Later, he spent a couple of years commanding mercenaries in the Congo before concluding there was no war worth fighting any more.

Now, pushing fifty, he was bored, broke, and disillusioned. Yet, between the bouts of boozing and the fits of depression, he still retained an unswerving belief in himself

and continued to invite challenge at every turn. That was why he found the present conversation so much to his liking.

He had only just met the tall, dark man sitting opposite him in the smoke room of the club, but already excitement and interest were beginning to mount as he listened to the other talking. They were discussing the question of fear and what it can do to a man. Denny tossed in his contribution and waited for a reaction. He was not disappointed.

'Would you say then that you are incapable of fear?' the stranger asked.

Denny shrugged. 'Let's just say that I've had plenty of opportunity to be afraid – and never was. On the other hand, I've known a good many yellow bellies in my time.'

'You don't think, for example, that you could be scared to death?'

Denny laughed and shook his head. 'I've known danger too long,' he replied with absolute sincerity.

The swarthy man settled himself lower in the big leather armchair and made a cat's cradle of his fingers. 'Are you by any chance a betting man, sir?'

'That depends on the odds,' said Denny shrewdly.

The other man paused, then looked Denny straight in the eye. 'Would you be interested in putting your courage to the test for a wager of, say, five hundred pounds?'

Denny had nowhere near enough to cover such a bet, but as casually as he could he replied: 'Yes, I'm interested.'

For the next half-hour he listened attentively to the dark man's plan. Denny would be driven to an address in the country, where he would spend the night alone. If he survived the events of the night, and returned to the club by 4 PM the next day, he would collect two cheques, his own and the other man's, which they would deposit with the secretary before they left. Denny decided he had nothing to lose and nodded his approval.

The two men left together and motored in silence for about an hour until his companion, who had meantime introduced himself as Vincent Smith, swerved the car off the road down a narrow lane to the gates of a high-walled mansion. Denny's buttocks tensed with excitement now that the operation was about to start. Smith handed him two large

keys, one to the gate and the other to the house, and something else, wrapped in oil cloth.

'What's this?'

'A revolver, you might need it.'

Denny chuckled. 'If you say so. See you at four tomorrow then.'

Smith drove off without replying.

Denny watched the car disappear round the bend and turned his attention to the mansion, looming dark and menacing in the moonlight. It looked totally deserted, if not actually derelict, and Denny couldn't help wondering what discomforts he would have to face for his five hundred. He slipped furtively through the trees, keeping a watchful eye open for booby traps. A couple of hundred yards from the house he stopped dead in his tracks as three enormous dogs came round the side of the building, sniffing the air suspiciously. Denny kept perfectly still, waiting to see in which direction they would move. A great baying told him they had got his scent. They hadn't spotted him yet, though, and would take a little while to pick up his trail, so he started to circle around, using the undergrowth for cover. He was now less than a hundred yards from the house, but the dogs were closing fast. He could hear their bodies brushing through the bushes not far behind. He decided to make a dash for it. Bending low he ran into the moonlight and sprinted for the porch. Immediately, a fierce barking and howling erupted, as the dogs broke from the trees in hot pursuit. Even as he leaped up the verandah steps he knew he could never make the inside of the building in time. Drawing the gun, he waited in the darkened porch for their attack. The lead hound came bounding up the steps, somersaulted, and lay still as the bullet caught him full in the throat. His mate leaped over the fallen body and straight at Denny. The gun roared and Denny was knocked flying as the mastiff collapsed in a heap on top of him. The gun slipped from his grasp, but even as he scrambled up he realized with relief that he had no need of it. The third dog pulled up, sniffed the first corpse suspiciously, then slunk away whining. In the light of the moon Denny studied the dead pack leader and noticed it was half starved. Then he looked closer and realized why. The animal had no teeth, nor had its mate.

However desperate they might have been for meat they couldn't possibly have harmed him. Denny felt bitter at the twisted dentistry that had made a mockery of such magnificent specimens. If this was Smith's work, Denny could see he was going to have to take the wager a lot more seriously from now on.

He listened at the heavy oak door for a second, slipped the key in the well-oiled lock and entered. The sight before him cheered him up immeasurably. The door opened directly on to an old baronial-style hall and in the massive fireplace some blazing logs lit a refectory table on which was laid a cold buffet and some wine. Propped against a candelabra was a note. It read: 'The dogs didn't get their supper so you enjoy yours.'

'Thanks, I will,' Denny muttered out loud, then rapidly changed his mind and decided to reconnoitre first. Smith had given no hint of what he might expect, but already he had received one example, and from now on he was taking no chances. He lit the candles and began a tour of the downstairs rooms. Without exception, he found them bare and musty. Retracing his steps he thought he detected a faint noise coming from below and discovered a flight of steps leading down to a basement. At the far end was a door through which came a strange whimpering sound. Denny patted the gun in his pocket and crept forward. The whimpering was joined by a heavy unpleasant smell as he reached the door. Denny made a face and pondered for a moment before deciding to take a look. 'Better a devil you know,' he muttered as he slowly turned the handle and pushed open the door. Denny relaxed as the flickering candlelight picked out a crestfallen terrier chained to the opposite wall. The terrier blinked and wagged its tail. 'So our animal lover has been at it again, has he,' snapped Denny angrily. 'Wonder if he's drawn your teeth, too.' He advanced into the room with the idea of releasing the pup. A fierce grunting from the far corner made him realize - too late - that the dog was just a decoy. Lifting the candelabra high, he drew a deep breath as the pale yellow light illuminated the great hairy hulk and dangling arms of a full-grown gorilla.

The ape regarded him balefully from beneath a high, black, rubbery forehead, and as it shifted position Denny

realized, with a start, that unlike the dog it was unchained.

Watching the beast closely, Denny sidled towards the door and watched helpless as it slammed shut. Denny tugged hard but nothing happened. Either it was locked or jammed. Keeping a careful eye on the great ape, which was beginning to grow restless, he slipped out the revolver and fired point blank at the lock. The blast echoed deafeningly around the stone-walled room, throwing the gorilla into a rage. It bared its ugly yellow fangs and roared. Again Denny tried the door, but still it resisted. He decided it must be bolted on the outside and, with the gorilla preparing to attack, made up his mind to waste no further ammunition on a possibly futile attempt to escape. The gorilla lurched in all directions, then suddenly turned and lunged straight at him. The gun roared and the bullet sang, but the beast kept on coming. Holding his ground, Denny fired again and this time the creature stopped dead in its tracks and fell over backwards. Denny's triumph was short-lived, however, as the gorilla rolled over and rose to its feet, red eyes glinting dangerously. The giant ape lumbered sideways in an effort to outflank the human. Realizing he was only one cartridge away from disaster, Denny concentrated on making the last shot tell and was still on second pressure when the hairy hulk was again sent flying. This time the beast had had enough and, scrambling on all fours, retired to the corner, sniffing and snorting. Denny began to comprehend. Stepping forward, his upraised hand touched a solid transparent wall of bullet-proof glass. The Major consoled himself that the light was too poor for him to have noticed it before. He turned to collect the terrier dog, which had suddenly stopped yapping, and was disappointed to see it stretched lifeless on the floor, evidently hit by one of the ricochets. When Denny tried the door again it opened easily and as he left he noticed for the first time the bolt on the outside. So there *was* someone else in the building, perhaps Smith himself? Paradoxically, the thought didn't worry him too much. For the first time in years he had found a worthy adversary, moreover a man of his word. It was clearer than ever now that he was going to have to earn his money, but equally obvious that while his nerve held no harm would befall him. The Major was beginning to enjoy himself and, meeting no

one on his way back to the great hall, he took enormous delight in putting on a show of unconcern by tucking into a chicken leg and a couple of glasses of wine. All the same, his eyes never strayed from the stairway and when the weird sound of piano music reached him from above he decided it was time to end the game of bluff. He mounted the stairs cautiously and moved silently along the corridor in the direction of the music, a gay Strauss waltz. This time Denny gripped the handle more aggressively and kicked the door open, darting to one side as he did so. The room was bare, apart from a grand piano set incongruously in the middle of the dusty floor. Seated at the keyboard, back to the door, was an astonishingly thin figure wearing full evening-dress. From the sleek black hair and upright pose it could almost have been Smith. The candelabra in Denny's hand was the only light in the room, yet the pianist seemed not to have noticed his entry. He tiptoed forward and was a few steps away when the tune changed dramatically to a crashing version of the 'Dead March' from *Saul*. Then everything happened at once. The figure swung round and beneath the shiny black wig and crisp white cuffs were exposed the grinning skull and bony talons of a human skeleton. Incredibly, the jaws opened and the ghoul started to shake with laughter. In the same instant a sudden draught blew out the candles, plunging the room into darkness. Denny cursed and fumbled for his lighter. As the flames rose and danced again, Denny strode purposefully round the back and ripped out the connecting wires. The piano and pianist lapsed into silence at once. Denny stood for a while in silent admiration of the contraption and promised himself a better look in daylight.

Denny continued his reconnaissance and was pleasantly surprised to discover on the second floor the only properly furnished room in the entire house. A fire burned in the grate and the crisp white sheets of an enormous four-poster were turned back invitingly. Another note wished him 'Pleasant dreams'. In spite of himself, Denny felt compelled to look under the bed, and check the latch on the window and door. There was no chair in the room so he sat on the edge of the bed and lit a small cigar. He felt unusually tired and walked around a bit to keep himself alert. After a while

his legs grew heavy and he again settled himself on the edge of the bed. Finally, the temptation grew too great and he lay back on the pillow. Instantly, twin bands of steel ensnared him, preventing him from moving. A whirring sound from above caused him to look up as the wicked blade of a guillotine emerged through the canopy. Then it stopped, poised six feet above the pillow. Denny moved his head from side to side, but try as he may he couldn't bring it out of range. This was the worst yet. He began to perspire. It was the utter helplessness he couldn't stand, like Dunkirk thirty years before. The minutes ticked by. Denny had to admit he was afraid at last. But what good was that to Smith? If he was going to continue to play the game, he couldn't let the guillotine fall. Denny's mind raced back to the many times he had been let down before. Colquhoun, who had ruined his career in Intelligence, the girl in the French Resistance who had talked too freely. Could he trust Smith any more than they? Denny prepared himself for a war of nerves. He tried to take his mind off the diabolical machine above and think instead of what he would do with the five hundred pounds, should he live to collect it. It was no good. Each time his eyes were drawn back to the diagonal razor edge glinting in the waning candlelight. His lids grew heavy. He wanted to sleep, but how could he with that thing poised above him? On second thoughts, perhaps it would be better to sleep, then he wouldn't have to worry about it. Denny closed his eyes and tried to count fivers . . .

He awoke with a start. It was morning. He tried to rise and found he could do so with ease. The steel bands had retracted into the bed frame. He glanced up. The guillotine was still hanging impotently above him. Good. Smith had played the white man after all. He went downstairs to find the table set for breakfast. Some kidneys and bacon sizzled in the grate, alongside a steaming pot of coffee. There was no one about, but yet another note was propped against a small battery tape-recorder on the table. Really, Smith's sense of the dramatic was becoming absurd, Denny told himself, as he read: 'Good morning. I hope you slept well. Have a hearty breakfast – the traditional meal of the condemned man I believe. Then perhaps you would care to turn on the tape-recorder and listen to what I have to say. PS

Don't play the tape before you eat your breakfast. It might spoil your appetite.'

Denny controlled his curiosity and also the faint doubts beginning to assail him. 'Don't worry, I won't,' he snapped out loud. The Major deliberately took a long time over his breakfast and only wished Smith was present so that he could keep him waiting in person. Eventually, he felt obliged to switch on. Smith's matter-of-fact voice came through thin but clear.

'My congratulations, Major, that you have come thus far without permanent shock to your nervous system. You must admit that I went to considerable trouble to provide tests that would do justice to your courage and fortitude. Electronics has always been a hobby of mine. The dogs, for example, were released by a radio signal from the car half a mile away. When you were saying hullo to King Kong in the basement, the bolt on the door was drawn and released electro-magnetically. A series of electrical impulses activated my musical soirée. Compared with these, the little contraption in the bedroom was almost child's play, though I suspect rather more unnerving. To be perfectly honest, I never really doubted your resource or your bravery. I have learned much about your capabilities in this direction. How you broke through the Italian lines at Sidi Barrani and led the attack on Tobruk, for instance. Do you remember the small command outpost you captured on the way? My father, a relatively junior officer in the Duce's army, had been left behind to destroy any papers likely to be of assistance to the British. Your advance column cut off his retreat. He surrendered at once. Somehow you got it into your head that he might have knowledge of when the threatened German invasion of Libya could be expected. He was not a brave man, my father. He told you tearfully that he was just a concert pianist in uniform who wanted nothing more than an end to the war so that he could get back to his piano and his music. You took a can from your jeep and, while your men held him down, poured petrol over both his hands. Then, when he failed to provide information that wasn't his to give, you set light to them. Even your own men didn't expect you to carry out the threat, but as they were accessories their lips were sealed. Thanks to you, those

hands that had given pleasure to countless thousands were reduced in minutes to blackened stumps. Needless to say, my father never played again. He often spoke of you; and before he died I swore to break you, as you broke him. I have lived in your country for a number of years now and, as you know, speak your language almost like a native. I changed my name and began to hunt you down. I have trailed you incessantly ever since, waiting my chance, and now it has come. Before you start congratulating yourself on surviving the terrors I so painstakingly engineered, you should know that your worst shock is still to come. Although electronics are my great passion, I am also an expert bio-chemist, working for the British Government* Research Establishment at Porton Down. Recently, my colleague and I discovered a way of converting a complex enzyme molecule in the human body until the structure is identical to that of an Annelide, better known as the common earthworm. The result is quite extraordinary. The bones of the body gradually disintegrate without affecting the nervous system or vital organs until the victim is, as near as damn it, a worm; able to move on its belly but, without vertebrae, unable to stand; able to feed and pass waste matter, but helpless to use its arms and legs except to assist with the slithering motion. If this strikes you as absurdly far fetched I suggest you pay another visit to the basement. I've substituted my colleague for King Kong. He's quite harmless. Just rather repulsive, that's all. Being a rather stout man his body has tended to metamorphose into that of a giant slug. Definitely not for the squeamish I would say. Why am I telling you all this? Well, if you roll up your left sleeve and examine the arm just below the elbow joint, you will discern a small puncture mark. While you were sleeping off the effects of the drug I put in your wine, I entered the bedroom through one of the maze of secret panels riddling this place and injected you with the same serum as my colleague. The pair of you should go down in medical history, although I rather suspect the authorities will try to hush it up. A bit too gruesome to unleash on the unsuspecting public, if you see what I mean. Of course, the transition doesn't happen overnight. My colleague was missing for six months before they finally dropped the search for him. So, you see, you will

have ample time to collect your winnings and enjoy the proceeds. Report me, too, if you like. My job is done, so I don't much care what happens to me. In any case, my escape route is well planned and pretty watertight. Oh, yes, and while you're at it do go and see a specialist. I should love to see his face as you try to explain what is wrong with you. He won't believe a word of it, of course, but even if he did he would be powerless to help you. You see, I'm afraid we never got round to researching a way of reversing the process. Between you and I, I doubt very much whether one exists. I mean, how can you put back what chemistry has destroyed? No, it's the life of a worm for you in future, Denny. The life of a worm – or nothing!

The message ended abruptly. Denny hadn't changed his posture from the moment the recording began, but his face had aged twenty years. It was another ten minutes before he could bring himself to examine his arm. His head and shoulders sagged as he saw the tell-tale blue puncture mark. For a while he turned over whether this could be another piece of ghastly melodramatic nonsense on the part of 'Smith'. He knew there was nothing false about the incident near Sidi Barrani, though. He remembered it was shortly after his twin brother was shot down over the Channel, and for a time his hatred of the enemy was nothing short of fanatical. It was more than that, though. All his life he had despised cowardice, and the way the Italian cringed and cowered had filled him with an ungovernable loathing.

For once, Denny shirked his fate. Though he still longed with every fibre of his being to expose Smith's words as the ravings of a lunatic, he couldn't bring himself to visit the basement. Instead, he checked that there was still one round left in the revolver, and with his last courageous gesture blew his brains out.

If the act was premature, who could blame him? What mortal would have dared to brave the cellar – to find it empty?

HELL'S BELLS

by

HARRY TURNER

ACTUALLY *being* dead wasn't as painful as Septimus Throgmorton-Duff had imagined it would be.

Dying itself, of course, was pretty nasty. Nobody with any respect for truth could pretend that getting thumped against a brick wall by an E-type was a 'Fun' thing to happen.

It was thoroughly unfunny in fact. Painful too.

At the moment of death he *knew* that Hell was his final destination. No other place could possibly take him after his life on Earth – of that he was quite certain.

Septimus Throgmorton-Duff had been a thoroughly bad lot. Blasphemer, fornicator, thief (this in a *mild* sort of way, his victims usually being British Rail, W. H. Smith and Tesco Supermarkets Ltd) and idolator.

So the prospect of Hell came as no surprise to him, indeed it filled him with a morbid curiosity.

Seconds after the E-type had severed him from his mortal coil he found himself in limbo – a sort of disembodied waiting-room, situated nowhere in particular.

Thin, wispy clouds scudded about his feet and dirge-like singing echoed tantalizingly in the background.

He sat uncomfortably on a tubular steel chair, surveying with cool disinterest a pile of last year's *Punch* magazines.

In all, it was not unlike a visit to the dentist's.

After a couple of hours a door, which Septimus had not previously noticed, sprang open and through it emerged a fussy little man in a white nightshirt carrying a clipboard and pencil.

'Mr Septimus Throgmorton-Duff?' he intoned.

'Yes,' said Septimus. 'I am he.'

'You'll have to wait another hour. Hell is very busy at the moment. The Governor seems to be sending everybody

there these days – and it's driving me *frantic* I can tell you.'

'Oh,' said Septimus, in what he hoped was a sympathetic tone.

'Yes,' said the little man, '*frantic*, now sit still and behave yourself – when they're ready for you they'll ring a bell and flash a red light above that door.' He pointed with his pencil, dramatically. 'That's when your worries *really* start. Cheerio now, must dash, got to catch up on my clerking.'

And then he was gone in a puff of cloud.

Hell, thought Septimus. At last. I wonder what it's actually like.

Pits of acid perhaps, with tortured souls writhing in pain. Long tongues of flame scorching and searing the flesh of the damned.

Moaning and weeping, the crack of the Devil's whip, the stench of brimstone and sulphur.

Ghastly implements of torture, thumbscrews, racks, all the nasty hardware of the Middle Ages sharpened and oiled to inflict agony for evermore non-stop.

Big hooks perhaps, dangling on endless chains from which the victims hang by their skewered bellies like the chap in Madame Tussauds.

There might even be red-hot coals, against which your naked buttocks sizzled like barbecued sausages at a beach jamboree.

Poisonous snakes, puncturing your throat every five minutes and making you swell up like a balloon.

Hairy spiders as big as footballs crawling over your face twenty-four hours a day.

Constipation. Pimples. Earache. Nosebleed. Double-vision and chilblains.

Pretty ghastly on the whole, more or less to be expected though.

He glanced at his watch. Time was not dragging as he feared it might. Only ten minutes to go.

He straightened his tie and combed his hair.

Not long now before the searing pain and relentless screaming began. Just a few more minutes in the little waiting room and then – POW.

The red light flashed and a bell pealed solemnly.

Septimus stood up and braced himself. Slowly the door opened – beyond it was dark and silent. He walked steadily towards it, his footsteps ringing on the stone.

Seconds more, he thought, and I'll see it.

A short staircase covered in tufted carpet led down into Hell.

There was no fire, no smoke, and no anguished howling.

Hell, as far as he could judge, consisted of a small, square room with book-lined walls, a record-player, and a couple of comfortable sofas. Over the tiled fireplace hung a print of a Chinese woman with a green face.

Curious, Septimus moved quickly to the bookshelves and took down one of the volumes.

It was a bound edition of the *Reader's Digest*. He replaced it and took another. This too was a bound edition of the *Reader's Digest*, and the next, and the next—

Septimus took a pace back and groaned. Nothing to read for the whole of eternity except the *Reader's Digest* – what absolute H—. He checked himself and grinned.

Music, he suddenly decided, might be the answer. The music of Hell – something Wagnerian and heroic.

He switched on the record-player and watched the unlabelled disc fall on to the turntable.

'And now,' said an American voice on the record, 'sixteen hours of non-stop entertainment from *The Sound of Music*.'

Septimus seized the disc and reversed it savagely.

'Sit back folks,' said the same American voice, 'and enjoy eleven hours of the wit of Tony Blackburn.'

Septimus switched off the record-player and flung himself onto a sofa.

Almost immediately a thin, stooping man of about forty-five materialized on the far side of the room. He wore the bland, unfashionable clothes of a provincial grocer and carried a copy of a prominent do-it-yourself magazine.

'Nice weather for the time of year,' he remarked in a Midlands accent.

Septimus glared sullenly.

'Mustn't grumble,' the grocer went on, smiling benignly, 'anyway a bit of rain does the garden good.'

Septimus pretended not to hear and looked away.

'It's colder than last Tuesday,' said the grocer, 'but there you are. Can't complain, really, because it could be worse. It's warmer than last Thursday fortnight. And it might be warmer than next Friday. It's been a pretty average summer. Mustn't grumble. Mustn't complain. If it's not one thing, it's another. Well I must be off. Be good. If you can't be good, be careful.'

And he vanished in a plume of smoke that smelt faintly of ledgers and bacon.

'Ugh,' commented Septimus, and opened a small cocktail cabinet that had sprung up by his right elbow.

Inside, jam-packed under pink strip-lighting were countless bottles of Babycham. A hidden tape played *Greensleeves* discreetly in the background.

Septimus recoiled in horror and tried the larder door – which by chance had appeared in the wall by the fireplace. It was bursting at the seams with individual fruit pies and jumbo-size packets of fish fingers.

Covering his face with his hands Septimus withdrew to the far corner of the room.

A trapdoor sprang open and up popped a middle-aged American tourist with blue-rinsed hair, Bermuda shorts, and seven assorted cameras.

'And now,' said the voice from the record-player, 'Mrs Mamie Washington will show you her 8,500 photographs of Paris, France, and follow this treat with a three-day symposium on varicose veins, their cause, effect, and cure.'

Septimus howled in anguish and tried to crawl under the sofa.

A hand fell on his shoulder and he turned to meet the gaze of an imposing gentleman with a pointed beard, horns, a tail, and a three-pronged trident.

'Are you the Devil?' gasped Septimus.

The Devil nodded.

'That's right, ducky – so watch your lip.'

'Does it go on like – *this* for ever?' moaned Septimus in a pleading voice.

The Devil placed a slender hand on his hip and grinned.

'Gets worse, dear. Never mind about going on like this for ever.'

'Worse?' he said, 'it *can't* do.'

'Oh, but it does,' said the Devil. 'Tomorrow when you wake up you'll be a traffic warden in Barnsley – *with* constipation. That will last for about six thousand years and by then we'll have thought up something else for you.'

Septimus collapsed weakly on to the sofa.

'But that's *ridiculous*,' he protested. 'Aren't you going to roast me in sulphur or flay me with red-hot chains?'

'Gracious me *no*,' said the Devil, polishing the prongs of his trident with a little silk hankie.

'Well I think it's an absolute fraud,' grumbled Septimus. 'It's nothing like I expected.'

The Devil smiled. 'It's nothing like anybody expects it to be – but it's *Hell* all right – believe you *me*, ducky.'

'And it's so *small*,' continued Septimus. 'Just this tiny room.'

The Devil sniffed enigmatically.

'This room is just one of many – we have rooms to suit everybody who comes down here.

'In fact – they have *exactly* the same type of rooms up *there* too.'

He pointed towards the ceiling with his trident.

'In *Heaven*?' gasped Septimus. 'You must be joking.'

'Not at all,' replied the Devil. 'This little room is *Hell* for you dearie, *absolute bloody Hell*. And its *yours* for eternity. Up *there* the identical room would be someone else's idea of Heaven.'

Septimus closed his eyes and groaned again.

The Devil turned swiftly and minced towards the fireplace.

'Bye now,' he said, over his shoulder, 'have fun.' Then he vanished up the chimney.

Septimus sat humbly for a few minutes and then went across to the bookshelf. He took down a volume of *Reader's Digest* stories and returned to the sofa.

As he turned the first page – 'How a Vladivostock Crane Driver Overcame Pimples'.

A celestial choir sprang up in the background, belting out the first verse of *I could have danced all night*.

THE LIFT

by

BRYAN LEWIS

THE SLEEK BLACK Rolls slid to a stop at the entrance to Norton Industries, and Leonard Norton sat watchfully while the chauffeur opened the nearside door and saluted. Short and balding, Norton stepped out and dropped a cigarette butt into the driver's hand. 'Is this all your job is worth?' he snapped. 'Get that car cleaned up at once. And be back here at twelve sharp.'

The commissionaire hastened to open the door as the chairman swept through. As usual, his private lift was ready and waiting to whisk him up to his twelfth-floor office. The doors glided shut and the lift purred into motion. Soon it stopped and Norton stepped out automatically, only to find he was on the wrong floor. His face purpled and he cursed loudly as the lift doors closed behind him. He put his finger on the button and left it there. When nothing happened he began stabbing at it with one thick forefinger. His patience exhausted, he went in vain search of the stairs. He looked around puzzled. No one had told him this floor was vacant. *Why* was it vacant when it could be earning him at least four pounds a square foot? He made a mental note to fire the people responsible and barged into several offices, all empty. Then someone emerged from the gloom at the end of the corridor.

'Hey, you,' yelled Norton, and his flesh turned to ice as a voice from the past answered him.

'Hullo, Father.'

'Stephen! But you're - you're dead.'

'You heard about it then?'

'Of course I heard about it,' Norton replied sarcastically. 'They do inform the parents, you know, if a damn fool boy goes and commits suicide. It caused me a lot of embarrassment, I can tell you.'

Norton broke off and mopped his brow. 'Obviously you didn't die, so let's forget all about it shall we?'

'Oh, but I did. Look.' The figure faded and re-appeared, faded and re-appeared, each time drawing closer. Finally, the wraith re-emerged at Norton's elbow, causing him to jump back, arms raised protectively in front of him.

The ghost of his son reached out and touched him. 'Shall we go?' it said.

'Where, where?' screeched Norton, as hidden forces bore him into the nearest empty office. Norton could see the outline of the window through the ephemeral shape standing, arms folded, in the centre of the room. He staggered over to a packing case and sat down. His mind was in a whirl.

'Do you know why I killed myself?' the phantom asked.

Norton refused to answer. He was thinking how to get away from this dreadful spectre.

The ghost went on: 'Patricia and I were deeply in love, but you had other plans. When I defied you and became engaged, you cut me off without a penny. Patricia changed after that and I realized for the first time that she was more interested in the money than me. Even so, I think we could have been happy. She might even have grown to love me as much as I loved her - if you hadn't cut me off, that is. Well, now I'm going to cut you off, or to be more precise I'm going to cut a part of you off. What part shall it be, Father? Come on, you've always been good at striking bargains.'

A broad-bladed knife appeared magically in the ghoul's hand. Norton tried to rise and run, but the unseen forces pressed him down again. 'I may be illusory, but the knife isn't. See?' The blade flashed as it spun through the air and thudded into the wooden door.

'I refuse to have any part in this. It's - it's macabre, revolting.' All the same, a note of pleading had crept into Norton's voice. 'I'm your father, how can you say such terrible things to me.'

The wraith's voice rose to a wail. 'If you only knew how much I hate you. Even as I lie rotting in my grave, my loathing for you and everything you stand for grows greater with every passing day.'

The phantom floated over to the door and retrieved the knife. The spectre advanced on Norton until the tip of the blade pricked his temple. A trickle of warm blood mingled with the sweat streaming down his face.

'Well?'

Norton trembled uncontrollably. He rested his hand on the edge of the box. 'A finger,' he sobbed, extending the smallest. The knife flashed and a searing pain shot up his arm. He broke down and wrapped his dripping hand in his breast-pocket handkerchief.

'It's not enough,' declared the ghoul.

'What!' screamed the tycoon. 'But you promised, you promised.'

'Like you, I promise nothing,' the phantom snapped in a perfect imitation of Norton's own clipped tones. 'I merely said I was ready to do a deal, but your offer wasn't good enough. You'll have to raise it.'

Norton cradled one aching arm in the other and rocked back and forth in desperation. 'Look, I'm already bleeding like a stuck pig,' he whined.

'Then let's have the rest of the hand and have done with it. You'll still have the other to count your stinking fortune with.'

Again Norton tried to fight the irresistible forces that held him down. Reluctantly, he extended his arm a second time and turned his head, covering his eyes with his free hand.

He felt the cold steel slice through the flesh. Then his screams rose louder and louder as the knife hacked through the wrist bone. He was near to collapse, held up only by unseen hands, by the time the ghoul had finished. His feet were sopping wet from the pool of gore on the floor.

His voice shook pathetically. 'Can I go now?' he begged. But when he looked up for an answer the phantom had gone.

He rose gingerly and without resistance, and staggered to the door. Half walking, half crawling, he made it to the lift and pressed the button with his one good hand. He laughed hysterically as the lift whined upwards. There was just time to drag himself inside before he passed out.

A few minutes later the lobby was thrown into turmoil. 'Quick, phone an ambulance,' the commissionaire called to the bewildered receptionist. 'His Nibs has had an accident. His hand's been clean torn off.'

THE MIDNIGHT LOVER

by

GERALD ATKINS

WOMEN JUST CAN'T resist me. It must be my special charm that does it, at least I've never had any complaints yet. I find myself embracing a different girl every night and pouring my warm passionate kisses over her with all the romance of Valentino and the cold, calculating seduction of Landru. They are at my mercy. God, I must be a handsome fellow. Success follows success as I leave behind me score upon score of contented female companions.

It all began last autumn with Clarissa. She was the first and truly the dearest in memory that I would recall. Oh Clarissa, my dearest, most affectionate love, what has become of you now? Her eyes glistened with the radiance of a thousand stars. Her lips were firm but sweet to taste and her skin was of the finest I have known. I loved her from the very first and my heart was heavy knowing that I must leave her for another. With her I learned the true meaning of love and that final goodbye almost broke my heart. But since that time there have been a thousand farewells and as many loves. Each one has offered eternal paradise but I have declined to seek the warmth of another. I cannot consider being selfish whilst there are so many who need my love and affection, a love that they would never find with another. I am their salvation, their only hope. Without me they would be just empty shells, unable to find satisfaction and contentment.

I love them all, each one as a complete individual from the rest, but I would never choose any one of them in favouritism to another. I have never given more time to one than any of the rest, nor have I rejected any who have called to me. I have always shared my love equally with each one as I know that some are capable of jealousy, and I believe that I am appreciated all the more for my fairness.

I have never actually attempted intercourse with any of them although I know that they would not object to it, and I have had several opportunities. My nature tells me that it would be wrong to take advantage of their love for me to indulge in this type of love. Anyway, in some cases members of their family are present and I would find it most embarrassing to attempt the seduction of a girl whilst under the constant surveillance of her dear mother.

Occasionally, I attempt to stay away from them for a couple of nights, but even as I sleep I can hear them calling me to their sides. I know I'm a fool and always give in to their pleas but I love them more than anything else in the world. Oh my little darlings I adore you all.

Perhaps the most confusing thing of all is that you never know who you will meet the following night, so I never under any circumstances make arrangements to see the same girl twice, and the thought of settling down with one of them has never entered my head.

There are certain setbacks however. Once or twice in the past some of my fellow males have become very jealous of my intimacies with these women. Perhaps it is because they do not have the charm and love that I have. For instance, last week they tried to put an end to our lovely acquaintance in a most primitive way. Fools that they are, don't they understand that their stupid methods cannot inhibit true love? I knew that it would have been useless trying to explain it to them as my words would never have pierced their thick skulls. So, instead, I waited until they had completed their futile retaliation against me and then under the cover of darkness I returned to my loved ones. Nothing could keep me from them. Oh my dear ones, my darlings. I have returned to give you my love!

The steel blade of my saw cut easily through the bars that had been placed over the windows of the morgue. Faster and still faster I cut, driven on by the thought of the glorious night that lay ahead. I'm here, my darlings. I'm here . . .

CASE OF INSANITY

by

BARRY MARTIN

IT SEEMS STRANGE to be sitting here writing, not having used pen and paper for twelve months. They don't usually allow you to have such things in here, but one of the warders, with whom I have made friends, said that as I have been exceptionally well-behaved he would see what he could do for me. I am writing this under supervision, however, for they fear that I may do something dangerous with the pen – such as gouging out one of my fellow-patient's eyes!

The doctors still think I'm insane and unfit for human society. They tell me that my treatment is progressing slowly but surely, and that very soon I will have my release.

They've been saying that ever since I've been here. I know that I'm not mad. I know, but they won't believe me. That's why I've asked for pen and paper – to write down exactly what happened and why. When they read it perhaps they will realize that I'm not the homicidal maniac they would have me believe.

Yes, I did murder my wife. I don't deny it. Why should I? The papers stated that fact too clearly for me to say anything to the contrary. But I do deny that it was a 'brutal killing. A killing perpetrated to satisfy a sadistic leaning,' as the magistrate described it.

I knew that I was going to kill my wife about a week before I actually did it. I had planned everything carefully. Right down to the last detail. No madman would have thought it out as carefully as I did!

She came home from shopping every Saturday afternoon, her arms full of parcels. She always went out spending on Saturday. Spending the house money I had given her the day before.

I used to go shopping with her, but every time we passed the shop with the prams and baby toys in the window she'd

start talking, in that high-pitched voice of hers, about how one day we might be buying something from that shop and that it was my fault we hadn't had occasion to before now. She could be very disgusting at times! It sickened me to hear her talk so.

It was just after I stopped going shopping with my wife that I decided to kill her.

I was even more determined after the advert came on the TV. It was advertising a brand of baby food and as soon as it appeared on the screen, my wife turned to me and said, 'Look at that dear little mite, George. Isn't it sweet?'

I nodded, silently, guessing the way the conversation was going to go.

'Of course when we have any children it'll be a bloody miracle,' she observed. 'But it's no use my talking to you. You just won't listen. You'd sooner make my life a misery.'

'But Clara—,' I began.

'Don't "but Clara" me,' she yelled. 'I've done my best to make our marriage a success, I'm sure. The least you can do is to do your part. How do you think I feel when Margaret asks me when we are going to start a family? She's got two lovely kids, but then of course Tom is so much more of a man than you are.'

'Shut up, Clara,' I said quietly. I didn't shout at her. I spoke as calmly as I could.

'Don't you tell me to shut up!' she cried. 'Tom never speaks to Margaret like that, and he's always perfectly sweet to the children.'

'I don't give a damn about Tom!' I yelled, getting up from the armchair.

'No, and you don't give a damn about me either,' she screamed. 'You don't even sit down and talk about it like any reasonable husband. Any other man would do all he could to make his wife happy. But of course, you're more of a mouse than a man, so what can I expect?'

She flinched as I struck her across the face. She didn't cry. Clara never did. Her pride wouldn't let her.

'You bloody ponce!' she shouted. 'That's what you are! If you can't do right by me, why don't you go out and get yourself some pretty, sweet little queer to have your sex

with? It would suit you down to the ground!

She walked out and slammed the door. I could have killed her then, but that would have meant that all my careful planning would have been wasted. It was all fixed for the following Friday evening, so it would have been silly to have done a rush job and messed everything up. It had to be next Friday, because on Saturday I had to take some papers up to London and I was going to make use of the trip to get rid of my wife's body.

The next seven days seemed an age. Clara didn't speak to me at all for the first three, but on the fourth she deigned to tell me that, from then on, she had decided to sleep in the spare bedroom, alone. I didn't object. There was no reason for me to. She wouldn't sleep there for very much longer. I even helped her to move her things into the other room.

At last, Friday evening arrived. We sat watching the television in silence. (I had to keep smoking, my hands were shaking so.)

Finally, Clara got up and went upstairs. After a few seconds I followed, after turning the volume of the television up – so as to hide any noise from the neighbours. On my way I went into the kitchen and took the scissors from the hook on the wall.

By the time I got upstairs Clara was in the bathroom, just as I had planned she would be, brushing her hair in the front of the mirror over the sink. Her hair, free of the innumerable pins and clips, reached down to her shoulders. Her breasts danced up and down with the movement of her arm, as she plied the brush vigorously.

A contemptuous look spread over her face as she saw my reflection in the mirror, and as she turned I plunged the scissors as deep as I could into her jugular. She gave a loud scream, followed by a rasping gurgle as the scissors went into her neck. She fell back with such a force that the scissors were wrenched from my hand, and she sank down with a sickening thud as her head struck the wash-basin.

Now I come to the most ingenious bit of thinking in the whole thing. I wasn't going to leave her body on the floor so that the blood would leave a tell-tale stain on the tiles. I lifted her up and put her in the bath, so that the wound lay directly beneath the tap, then I turned on the water. The

blood drained from her neck and ran down the plug-hole. She looked most uncomfortable – lying there with her head on one side and her eyes staring vacantly in front of her.

I removed all her clothing before I wrapped her body up in the large sheet of polythene. I lifted her up and slung her over my shoulder, like a sack of potatoes, and carried her downstairs. I smiled as I thought of how annoyed and disgusted she would be at anything so undignified.

I took her down to the shed at the bottom of the garden, laid her down on the bench and then unwrapped her body from the polythene, as one would unwrap sixpenny worth of chips. I left her lying on the polythene, to prevent any blood getting on to the bench, and I put on an old raincoat, to prevent any getting on to me. I then began to search through my tool box.

I used the tenon saw to cut off her right hand – the hand that had struck my face more times than I can remember. The saw moved quite easily through the flesh and bone. It was just like sawing wood really – only messier. At last the hand came off, allowing the blood to run freely from the severed arteries of the wrist.

I had some difficulty sawing through her legs as the blade kept getting clogged up with bits of flesh and gristle. Finally, I threw down the saw in disgust and picked up the axe. That made things much easier!

Her legs and left arm all came off with about six chops each. Her right arm, however, would not come off so easily. After about ten attempts it still hung there, on four stringy veins, from the shoulder blade. I gave one final, hefty hack. The veins snapped in a shower of red and the arm fell to the floor.

I left the head to the last. I raised the axe high and brought it down heavily. I missed my aim and the blade smashed into her upturned face, sending a shower of warm blood into my eyes. I tried once again. The blade crunched against the cartilage and the head came off. Blood poured from the neck, back down her face, into her mouth and up her nostrils. It wasn't a pretty sight!

My task completed, I wiped my face, hands, and tools on a piece of rag and stood back to admire my work. It had been a little harder and messier than I had expected, but that

was Clara all over. She liked to be awkward!

I put her trunk in the suitcase first and then her head, which was still oozing red pulp from the gash across her face. Her legs, arms, hands, and feet I packed in neatly and closed the lid.

Early the next morning, I put the polythene, the rag on which I had wiped my hands, and the blood-stained raincoat into the incinerator and burnt them.

I left the house about 8.30 with the two cases. One containing my wife and the other, the papers that I was taking to London. I put them both in the boot of the car and drove off.

As I drove through the wood, I was constantly looking for somewhere to bury the case. Finally, I found an ideal spot, surrounded by trees on all sides and began to dig with the spade I had, thoughtfully, brought with me.

I broke off a fern leaf and stuck it in the ground covering my wife – to commemorate her resting place. The spade I threw into the bushes, and I returned to the car whistling to myself. Clara had never liked me whistling. She said it got on her nerves!

I don't remember very much of what happened afterwards. I remember seeing the milk-float coming towards me on the other side of the road. I remember gripping the steering wheel tightly.

It seemed as if a voice came from somewhere at the back of me. From the direction of the boot. It was Clara's voice, mocking and jeering – 'Why don't you be more of a man? Why did you do it? What will your children say when they learn their father is a murderer? But they'll never know, will they? Because you'll never be a father! Never have any children!'

She gave a loud laugh which turned, almost immediately, to the screech of the tyres. I heard the smashing of glass and sank into oblivion.

I awoke in the casualty department of a hospital. A doctor, who, through my hazy vision, looked like a tall, white marble pillar, was standing over me. A nurse was feeling my pulse, holding my wrist in her delicate, pink hand.

'Open the case, nurse,' I heard the doctor say. 'See if there's anything in there that will tell us something about

him. Who his relations are, or whom we could contact.'

A scream made me turn my head. The nurse fainted and the doctor stared in horror.

I just laughed and laughed and laughed. Ha! Ha! I laugh, even now, when I think about it. It was quite funny really.

You see – I had buried the wrong case!

THE MARKET - GARDENERS

by

ROBERT DUNCAN

ABRAHAM was a market-gardener. He and Elizabeth, his wife, lived two miles from the town where he sold his produce. They had been market-gardeners for three years, after saving up the money to buy a place. They had been married for thirteen years, and both were now thirty-six. Elizabeth had been very fond of going dancing, and going to see film and theatre shows and sometimes plays, but now she contented herself with a weekly or fortnightly visit to the cinema or theatre. She helped Abraham in his work. Both enjoyed robust health, and the joint activity of growing things helped to soothe the ache in a hitherto childless marriage.

One February evening, when they had just finished tea, there came a knock at the front door. Abraham went to answer it and Elizabeth to straighten up one or two things in the living room. The knockers were two dark-haired, lean young men. One would be in his early twenties, the other a few years older.

'We were just driving by, saw your sign,' said the younger man. 'We wondered if you sold anything directly to customers. We could use some vegetables.'

'Well, not usually, but I think we have plenty handy just now. If you'd like to step in for a minute out of the cold.'

'Thank you. Fine.' The men stepped over the threshold.

'Come into the living-room just now.'

They followed him in, diffidently. Elizabeth was standing half smiling, half frowning, to greet them.

'These two chaps are looking for some vegetables, love. I told them we had some to spare.'

'Oh, I see,' Elizabeth said.

Abraham turned to the two men. 'Will you have a seat

just now? I'll only be two minutes getting what you want.'

'No,' answered the younger man. 'I think you'd better. Have a seat.'

He had stepped closer to Elizabeth, and he now brought out a knife from the back of his belt.

'Oh, look, I thought you just wanted some vegetables.'

'Sit.' He pointed the knife towards a chair.

Abraham sat down in despair. It was the old animal, the nastiness, seeking him out again in his peaceful retreat. It made him despair. Its seeming ineradicability.

He looked at Elizabeth. When the knife appeared, he had heard her catch her breath. Now she stood looking worried, holding her left hand in her right.

'Tie him,' said the man with the knife. His companion took some pieces of rope from a big pocket in his coat.

'Look, what do you want?' Abraham asked.

'Put your hands behind you.'

The rope man tied Abraham's hands together and to the back legs of the chair. Then he bound his ankles to the front legs of the chair.

'Right, now you take the knife. I'll tie her.'

The younger man roped Elizabeth to another chair. He squatted back and ran his eyes over her. He knelt and stroked her legs. She shut her knees tightly with a gasp and turned her head away, pulling back the corners of her mouth.

'Don't,' said Abraham.

There was no acknowledgement. The man put his hands over Elizabeth's breasts. She leaned her head back with a sob.

'Please don't,' Abraham repeated.

'I think I'll have her,' said the man.

'We didn't come for that.' His partner spoke for the first time.

'I think I'll have her.'

Elizabeth was making choking noises in her throat.

'Please don't,' said Abraham.

'Well, you go ahead. I'm not,' said the older man.

The younger took off his coat and jacket and laid them on the settee.

'What did you come here for?' Abraham asked desperately. 'Please take that and go.'

The man untied Elizabeth, first one foot, then the other, then her hands. She tried to run, but he seized her arms above the elbows and turned her round to face him. She pulled and writhed. He lifted his right hand and hit her with it open, on the side of the head. One of her legs buckled. She slumped on one foot, still gripped by his left hand. She was now crying.

'Don't struggle,' the man told her.

'Please,' Abraham said in his throat.

The man pushed her on to the rug beside the settee.

'Let's see if we can get some heat into this frosty ground,' he said.

'Don't,' stuck in Abraham's throat. He felt like a skinful of stone.

Elizabeth just moaned now. The young man ran his hands over her, easing and prising for an opening. Eventually he got it. Elizabeth whinnied faintly as he entered.

She grew stiff, but the young man kept working over the soil. After a few minutes she embraced him with her legs. When the climax came her hands were on his back. They held it for what seemed an unbearably long time. Then they sank down together in a heap of flesh.

Abraham was staring. The older man swallowed saliva.

The young man broke the tableau. He disentangled himself and rose. Elizabeth lay still, except for her heavy breathing. The man who had raped her tidied himself up.

'We'll take it and go,' said the other man.

He waited. 'Well?'

The younger man finished straightening out his clothes.

'No.'

'No what?'

'Let's just leave it.'

They left.

Abraham sat in the same position, staring. Elizabeth lay undignified, not knowing how to get up.

After a long time she rose and re-adjusted her clothes and untied Abraham. They were very quiet.

Nine months later Elizabeth bore a son. They called him Henry. From an early age he showed a talent for making things grow, so that when his parents became too old the business naturally fell to him.

SNOW IN THE CITY

by

JAMES WADE

WHEN I CAME out of the building, it was snowing.

Thin, ugly, runny snow that made grey and brown chunks in the gutter.

White in the air, showing up in the dusk; a pasty mud on the pavement.

Snow in the country is beautiful; snow in the city is wretched.

It was cold.

'Buy a flower, mister. Nice flower for yah girlfriend, huh?'

The old flower woman accosted me as I stood on the wet kerb waiting for a light to change. She thrust towards me her meagre basket of wilted violets, crisp carnations, gardenia corsages with their sick-sweet reek.

'Buy a flower for yah girlfriend.'

I looked at her: thin, wispy grey hair, under frayed dark shawl; mute, tired eyes; a slack mouth twisted with the fatigue of the past day. Her coat was an old, patched relic, her stockings of cheap cotton, her shoes split at the seams and with the edges of the soles worn away.

I smiled at her.

'What if I don't have a girlfriend, mother?'

'Ah, mister, a young feller like you's sure to have some lady friend. You're young and good looking, you got money, why not make some gal happy with a nice bo-kay?'

'I'm new in the city,' I lied. 'I don't have a girl.'

'Then buy a carnation for yah lapel. Give me a break, mister. I been selling here all day and only took in a dollar an' a half.'

'It's late, mother,' I said, raising my voice to cover the traffic noises, 'and I have no place to wear a boutonniere.'

I'm just going home, to my room, and read a book.' I prepared to cross the street, as the light had by that time changed.

'Jeez, can'tcha give me a break, mister? I'm tired and hungry, been selling here all day.'

'I know; I saw you when I went in. That was four hours ago, and it's a cold day. Are you cold, mother?'

Suspicion and anger gleamed in her eyes. 'Hey, what you giving me? If you ain't going to buy, say so. Why you wanta string a poor old woman along?'

I prepared to step off the kerb. 'I really don't care to buy anything, but I was about to suggest that you might like to take supper with me. There's a very good cafeteria down the block, and I'm sure you must be hungry after selling here all day.'

I peered ahead to make sure that the light was still green. I saw its bluish glow refracted among the scurrying snowflakes.

I stepped off the kerb. It had now become swiftly quite dark. I seemed to be ambulating in an island of blackness, fringed by a remote surf of headlights.

When I reached the middle of the street, I noticed that the old flower woman was with me, mincing hurriedly to keep up with my long strides.

'Did you mean that mister? About the meal?'

'Certainly,' I replied. 'Be careful of the slush, mother. It's beginning to freeze.'

After the meal, I inquired where she lived. She gave an address in the slum district to the west. The distance would have required a long ride by bus and street car, and, since it was snowing now even harder, I hinted that something warming which I had in my room might not be amiss before she commenced her journey. She had been friendly, even garrulous, during the meal, but now her wary eyes narrowed to suspicion again.

'Where do you live, mister?'

'Down the street: a walk-up hotel. Nothing luxurious, but a nice-size room. Do step up for a moment.'

She followed me in silence, still clutching the wicker basket of flowers. A few hundred feet farther on, we turned into

the entry of my hotel. As we climbed the dingy stairs to the third floor, I held the old woman's arm and helped her hobble clumsily up, step by step.

Out of the corner of my eye, I watched her impassive face and wondered what she was thinking. Did she really accept me as a charitable, lonely young man who had taken pity on her wretchedness, or was she alert for any possible, hypothetical danger?

At supper, she had told me quite a bit about herself: she had been a widow for thirty-two years, she had no close relatives, her father's family had come from Rumania, business was not good this time of year, you ran into all kinds being on the downtown streets every day. But had she really trusted me at all? Surely her slum-born cunning would stay instinctively alert longer than this? I must be cautious.

On the third floor, I hurried her down the hall and quickly unlocked the door of my room. Hustling her inside, I took her ragged old coat and shawl, seated her ceremoniously in an easy chair, and produced a half-full bottle of whisky. Her eyes lit up. I poured her some in a tumbler and she downed it straight. I took a few drops and murmured, 'To your health, mother.'

She seemed not to notice, but glanced covertly around the room: the absolutely nondescript walls, the absolutely nondescript furniture. Her gaze rested for a moment on the blank window, before which a few snowflakes swirled like a stage illusion.

I refilled her glass, while she cooed and murmured inarticulately in an attempt to limit the quantity I was pouring. Nevertheless, I was most generous.

When she was well along with that drink, she looked around again and said deliberately, 'Nice place you got here, mister. Nice of you to have me up.'

'The pleasure will be all mine,' I replied graciously from my seat on the bed (the room had but one chair).

'You know, I can't help but think,' she mumbled, apparently a little woozy already, 'you're just about the age my son Charlie woulda been if he hadn't died of croup. Just about the age.'

'Perhaps the age,' I admitted, 'but it is very likely that I

am quite a different person than your Charlie would have been.'

She tried again, futilely, to wave away the bottle.

'I got to get home tonight,' she said thickly.

'Never mind,' I reassured. 'We'll get you home.'

She drank in silence for a few moments and then said, with a return of the shrewd gleam to her eyes, 'You know, mister, you're a funny guy. What you wanta help me out for is more than I can see. You buys me food, gives me liquor, treats me like a lady, and I don't even know your name.'

'Have I asked yours?' I countered. 'As for mine, even the stars in the farthest spaces would hush their writhing fires to hear it.'

She was still engrossed in her own thoughts, now lapsed into the maudlinly drunken.

'My Charlie, he liked the stars. He tried to touch the big one on the Christmas tree the night before he died, just reached out his little hands for it, and next day he was dead, with his father not two months in the ground. Charlie . . .'

I saw that the time was right.

I lifted the old woman from where she sat, almost drowsing, in the chair. She was quite heavy, but I managed to place her gently at full length on the bed. She seemed to become aroused by the motion, for she blinked and moved her arms and legs incoherently.

'What? . . . What?' she murmured.

'Never mind, mother,' I soothed her, 'just lie quietly.'

I took off my jacket, rolled up my shirt sleeves past the elbow, and removed my wristwatch and signet ring. Reaching into a drawer of the bedside table, I took out the razor-sharp carving knife.

When I began to rip off her clothes, she struggled feebly, so I stunned her slightly with the bedside lamp. Then I finished removing the clothing from her wrinkled, old body. She recovered consciousness and began to scream faintly in a low, throaty voice. I stuffed my handkerchief into her mouth, but her wildly rolling eyes continued screaming at me.

With the knife I opened a long, deep slit in her abdomen, extending lengthwise down her body. By dint of patient en-

largement, I opened this incision to a width of some inches.

There were many interesting things in there.

By this time the old woman had ceased all movement, and the blood was flowing much less freely. I looked around, chuckling rather pointlessly, as if to receive the plaudits of some cosmic audience. Then, turning again to the work in progress, I made a number of complex excisions and alterations in my new treasure chest.

When I was perfectly satisfied with the job, I turned to leave. As I turned, I noticed the basketful of wilted violets, carnations, and gardenias sitting on the floor. As a final, decorative touch, I filled the old woman's abdomen with the limp, flaccid flowers. They seemed to be springing from her as if in some monstrous birth: here and there a green leaf or blossom was spotted with blood.

I removed the handkerchief from her mouth and surveyed the general effect.

I was well pleased.

I wiped my hands carefully on the handkerchief, gathered up my belongings, and left the room. Nobody saw me pass the desk, of that I am sure. The name under which I had registered that morning was false, of course.

Outside, it was still snowing. Traffic was less heavy and now the flakes had been able to unite, forming a smooth, white blanket over the cement.

It was beautiful, like in the country.

MRS MANIFOLD

by

STEPHEN GRENDON

I DON'T KNOW whether I would have gone into the Sailor's Rest if I had seen its proprietress before I saw the grimy card with its scrawled 'Clerk Wanted' in the window. But perhaps I would – a man with less than a shilling in his pocket, and little chance to add to that, can't hesitate too much. Still, there was something about Mrs Manifold, something you could feel but hardly put into words. I never saw anyone so fat; though she was a short woman, she weighed over three hundred pounds, and it was easy to understand why she preferred to keep to her own room on the fourth floor – a gable room.

'Ever been a clerk before, Mr Robinson?' she asked me.

Her voice was thin, high, almost piping; it was a small voice for so big a woman, and because it was so shrill and penetrating, the contrast was the more startling.

'No. But I can read and write; I can add figures, if it comes to that,' I said.

She gave me a sharp glance. 'It's plain to see you've had some schooling. Down on your luck, is it?'

I admitted that.

She sat looking at me, humming a queer little tune, which I came to recognize later when she sang it: a sea-chanty. In all that tremendous bulk, only her eyes seemed to move: small, black, with short-lashed eyelids; there was no evidence that she breathed, no tremor disturbed her flesh, clad in a dress of black satin, which, despite her great mass, was frilled and ruffled like a child's frock and looked almost obscene. Her eyes scrutinized me with a kind of bold furtiveness, her fat fingers resting on the arms of the chair which contained her strangely motionless body. There was something horrible, not in a bestial sense, but in a spiritual

way, about her – not in any one facet, but in everything – something that suggested terror and cold grue.

‘My clientele,’ she said in a voice suddenly subdued, but with a crafty smile, ‘might not always be a nice one, Mr Robinson. A rough lot, Mr Robinson. You wouldn’t expect anything else of Wapping, now, would you? Or of somebody like Mrs Ambrose Manifold?’

Then she tittered. A faint ripple disturbed that vast bulk, and the effect was wholly horrible.

‘I can hold my own,’ I said.

‘Perhaps. Perhaps. We shall see, Mr Robinson. Your duties will be simple. You know what an innkeeper’s clerk must do. Make them sign the register, Mr Robinson. Sometimes they have reason to avoid it. Once a week, you will bring the register up to me. I wish to examine it. The money will be deposited to my account at the Bridesley Bank whenever and as soon as it collects to fifty pounds. I am not at home to anyone. Begin now.’

Thereupon she rang a little bell, and the old man who had conducted me up the stairs led the way back down, having been instructed by Mrs Manifold that I was to begin my duties at once.

I lost no time acquainting myself with my surroundings. While the old man, whose name was Mr Claitor, removed the sign from the window and put it carefully away, with an air of doubtless needing it soon again, I took a look at the register. It was nothing but an old ledger, on the first page of which someone had written in a flowing hand, ‘*Sailors’ Rest* – Register’. There were two floors of rooms, which someone’s fancy had numbered, to make seven in all – four on the second, three on the third; the first floor being given over to the kitchen, the small lobby, and three closet-like rooms for the staff. One of these was occupied by Mr Claitor, another by Mr and Mrs Jeffers, and the third by the clerk of *Sailors’ Rest*. Six of the rooms were occupied at four shillings the night, six for day and night; evidently there were no rates by the week. The lobby had an appearance of genteel shabbiness; it was not exactly dirty, but it was certainly not clean, and it conveyed the impression of never having been quite clean within the memory of any living person. The glass in the window and the door facing

the street was fly-specked and dust-streaked, and there was about the entire building a faint but unmistakable odour of the river. The Thames flowed not far away, and at night its musk, rising with the fog, enclosed and permeated the old building.

Mr. Claitor, who was tall, thin, and grey, with the lugubrious expression of a very tired Great Dane, got around to instructing me, finally, that the lobby was to be closed promptly at nine o'clock every night, though, thereafter, I might expect to be summoned to open the door for one or more of our tenants come roistering home.

Probably there is nothing so tiring as the position as clerk in a shabby, hole-in-a-corner inn, which seems designed to attract only the dregs of mankind: the bitter, disillusioned old men of the sea – the hopeless wanderers haunting Limehouse and Whitechapel and Wapping – the hunted and the haunted and the lost. Yet, I suppose everyone in a position not especially to his liking is similarly convinced; the human being is essentially weak and insecure, no matter what his place in life, and if that place is not felicitous, that weakness makes itself manifest in dissatisfaction, out of which grows the conviction that anything at all is better than the present position. Work at the Sailors' Rest was monotonous, even when there were books to be read – which was not often, and it soon became a pattern.

But the weekly trip to Mrs Manifold's gable room was somehow never quite part of that pattern. There was something a little different every time, despite the fact that her position never seemed to have changed; for all her appearance, she need never have moved from one week to the next, and not at all since first I saw her. Every time she would take the register and examine the new entries.

'Roald Jensen,' she read out slowly. 'Now, what is he like? Is he a tall man or is he short?'

'Tall, thin, sandy-red hair, one wooden leg. He wears a moustache. Last sailed on the *Lofoten* out of Oslo.'

'Frederick Schwartz, then. What is he like?'

'Short, fat. Looks like a German burgomaster. Red cheeks, blue eyes. Very talkative. Heavy German accent. Last sailed on the *Stresemann* out of Hamburg.'

'Good gracious, Mr Robinson,' she said on occasion, 'you

should have been a policeman. I admire the quality of observation.'

But, each time she said it, I caught the unmistakable impression that she was laughing at me behind her small, dark eyes; and each time she finished her examination of the register, I could not escape the conviction that she did so with relief, so that I wondered often why she insisted on taking this trouble at all if she concluded it always with such manifest satisfaction at being done with it.

Once, she was talkative. She said comparatively little, but I learned from her that she had had some kind of place in Singapore half a dozen years ago or thereabouts; she and her husband had run it. Then she had come to England.

'And where is Mr Manifold now?' I asked her.

'Ah, nobody knows, nobody knows. Nobody, Mr Robinson.'

Thereafter she had given the unmistakable sign of having finished with me – closing her eyes and leaning back, inert, save for a trembling of her thick lips, as she hummed the chanty she sometimes sang.

*'Oh, the Captain's in the brig, Lads,
The First Mate's brains are blown;
We'll sail the Seven Seas, Lads,
And make them all our own . . .'*

But there were diversions, though they were out of the ordinary.

Sometimes gentlemen from the CID at Scotland Yard came around to look for somebody – on the average, once a fortnight. Sometimes one of our registrants walked out and never came back, leaving all his baggage behind to be stored against his return – which might not happen. Things could happen in the fogs; things could take place no one ever found out – robbery and sudden death, suicide sometimes. I never felt any inclination to go outside on a foggy night; daytime was dreary enough, for the Sailors' Rest was not in a good neighbourhood – oh, good enough, for what it was, I suppose, but not good enough for what it might have been. And there was something about Mrs Manifold, too, that

seemed to say she had known better days and a better business than this, even if in Singapore.

Singapore! Perhaps it had its holes like Sailors' Rest, its districts like Wapping, too – but, being far away, it was caught in a kind of magic aura, it took on colour and life and drama built up solely in imagination, as of all faraway places which are never, somehow, quite real, and always, always wonderfully exciting. Why had Mrs Manifold left Singapore to come to London? And why had she come down into Wapping, of all places? But here she was, and apparently content to be here, making no complaint, occasionally even making sly remarks about her reduced station in life. Yet she need not have been here, for her balance at the bank was always written in five figures – in ready funds alone, she was worth more than fifty thousand pounds.

But for all the signs of breeding which showed through, there was never anything which could dispel that feeling of terror she could induce. Did it arise out of her shocking obesity, or from some other, hidden source? All too often revulsion stimulates dislike and hatred; it is impossible sometimes to uncover the roots of fear or horror. Curiously, she had but one taboo, about which I heard from Mr Clairton, when he came to my room one night.

'Mrs Manifold says you are not to drink wine, Mr Robinson. No wine in the house, she says. It's the rule of Sailors' Rest.'

When I mentioned it to her, she confirmed it. 'Wine I cannot abide, Mr Robinson. Ale, yes. Whisky, yes. Gin, if you like. Vermouth, certainly. Whatever you wish – but no wine.'

She occupied her gable in lordly splendour. Splendour being relative, her self-denial did not diminish it. She ruled Sailor's Rest with an unchallenged and indomitable will. In a sense, she was Sailors' Rest, and Sailors' Rest was Mrs Manifold; sometimes at night, in that borderland between sleep and waking, I thought of the old building as somehow alive, squatting obscenely in its row of ancient buildings, with small black window-eyes, like Mrs Manifold's, and straight black hair, parted in the middle and drawn around back over invisible ears, and gold hoops for ear-rings; I

thought of the wide, fly-specked, dust-streaked window in front expanding briefly, fleetingly into a sly-lipped smile, something akin to a leer. Like the fog and the musk of the Thames, Mrs Manifold's presence permeated the very walls, made itself felt in every nook and cranny, and lingered in the quiet air.

In the middle of my eleventh week, early one hot summer night, there came an old sailor just in on HMS *Malaya*, out of Singapore. A Yankee, by the look of him, with a brush of short beard reaching around his chin from one ear to another: a Quaker cut, I think they call it. He was in his sixties, I judged, and did not like the look of the place, saying so, and adding that there was no other.

'I'll stay the night,' he said.

'American?' I asked.

'Born there. Spent most of my life in Singapore.'

Perhaps it was natural that I should ask whether he had ever heard of Mrs Ambrose Manifold. There was nothing to show that he was within shouting distance of her.

'Mrs Manifold,' he said, and grinned. 'Mister, there was a woman. Big enough for half a dozen women. Never been as good a house in Singapore since she lit out for parts unknown.'

'Why did she leave?'

'Who knows? Women don't do things sensible, Mister. She was making money faster'n they could spend it. Then Amby run out on her, and she closed up her place, and off she went. Biggest thing I ever seen to drop out of sight like that!'

'What happened to him?' I asked.

'Nobody knows that, Mister. They didn't get along too well sometimes. Amby liked to drink – but he was a wine drinker – in Singapore! He could get sick stewed on wine faster'n you could say Jack Robinson. Your name ain't Jack, is it?'

'No,' I said. 'It doesn't matter.'

'Well, Amby run out on her, though how he did it, God knows. And he took along the biggest cask of wine they had in the cellar. The way she watched him and all, he was sly and fast to get out – and with that wine, too! Nobody ever

saw him go – but the cask of wine he had hauled out bold as brass! He had his mind made up, Mister – and so would you, if you ever saw Mrs Manifold. What could a man do with a woman as fat as that, eh, Mister?’

He poked me in the ribs and said that he was tired.

In the morning he was gone, but he had paid in advance; so it was his privilege to go when he liked. It was necessary to get one-night payment in advance to guard against this method of departure.

And that weekend, when Mrs Manifold came upon his name, her eyes held to it, and she began to tremble – a strange sight, like the shaking of jelly, a shuddering and trembling that was unpleasant to behold.

‘Joshua Bennington. Mr Robinson – a well-built man with a brown beard, was he? From Singapore. One night, too! In midweek. Ah, too bad, too bad! Why didn’t you let me know?’

‘I had no idea you would want to know before now. I have my instructions.’

‘Yes, yes – that’s true. Singapore! I would have liked to talk to him.’

She said no more, but there was a strange expression in her eyes. I could not fathom it. Triumph, amusement, regret – all these were there – or were they only reflections from my own imagination? It was difficult to tell with Mrs Manifold. But the trembling in her body continued for a long time, and I was anxious to get away, to get out of that gable room, to escape the burden of her eyes.

Three days after that, something changed in that old inn.

The change was in Mrs Manifold, too, and it happened after the empty seventh room was filled. He came in just before closing time, a small man with a limp, with his hat pulled down low, and his face all muffled up against the fog which was so thick it had got into the lobby and was yellow in the light at the desk. He was wet with it, wet with fog – and inside wet – with wine. For he reeked of it – stronger than the room reeked of the fog and the river’s smell; the sickish smell of sweet wine hung about him like a cloud.

A strange man and a silent one.

'Good evening, sir,' I said.

No answer.

I turned the register towards him, holding out the pen. 'Number Seven left, sir,' I said. 'Will it be for the night or longer?'

What he said sounded like 'Longer', but his voice was so muffled I could not easily tell.

'A wet night, sir,' I said.

He signed the register in a crabbed hand, writing with difficulty, and without removing his tattered gloves.

'Third floor back, last door. It's standing open,' I said.

Without a word he left the lobby for the stairs, trailing that nauseating smell of wine.

I looked at the register.

The writing was difficult, but it could be read, after a fashion. Unless the fog and the addling sweetness of the wine smell and my imagination deceived me, I read there, '*Amb. Manifold, late of Singapore, out of Madeira.*'

I took the register and mounted to the fourth floor. The crack under the door showed a light, still. I knocked.

'It's Robinson, Mrs Manifold,' I said. 'You told me if we ever got anybody else from Singapore . . .'

'Come in.'

I went in. She was still sitting there in her black satin dress, like a queen in the middle of the room.

'Let me see,' she said eagerly.

I put the register before her.

And then she saw. Her dark-skinned face went pale, and if she had trembled before, she shook now – a great, obscene shaking animating that mass of flesh. She pushed the book away, and it fell to the floor. I bent and picked it up.

'Seems to be the same name as your own,' I said.

With some effort at control, she asked the familiar question. 'What is he like?'

'Short – a small man – with a limp.'

'Where is he?'

'In Number Seven—just under you.'

'I want to see him.'

'Now?'

'Now, Mr Robinson.'

I went down the stairs and knocked on the door of Number Seven. No answer. I knocked louder. Still no answer. A surly, unpleasant man, certainly. I knocked once more. Still no answer.

I tried the door. It was open.

I pushed it ajar and said softly into the darkness, 'Mr Manifold?'

No answer.

I opened the door all the way and turned up the light.

The room was empty. Empty, that is, of human occupation – it was alive with the rich headiness of wine, a sickening sweetness, cloying and repelling. There was no sign that the bed had been touched; yet the door of the room was closed, where it had been open before; so he had been there, since no one else had.

I went downstairs into the lobby, but no one was there, and the outer door was locked, as I had left it. Mr Manifold was nowhere to be seen.

I went back to the gable room where Mrs Manifold waited.

'Well?' she asked, seeing me alone.

'I can't find him,' I said. 'I tried his room, but he's gone.'

She was still shaking, but in the midst of her inner turmoil, she asked, 'Mr Robinson, have you been drinking wine?'

'No. That smell came in with him. He's been drinking, I suspect. Madeira, I think – or something equally heavy. A sweet port . . .'

But she was not listening. Or rather, she was not listening to me. Her little eyes had narrowed, and she was leaning a little to one side, with her massive head on her great shoulders cocked somewhat to the left and down, as if she were listening to something from below.

'Do you hear someone singing, Mr Robinson?' she asked in a harsh whisper.

'Can't say as I do,' I answered, after a moment of listening.

'It goes like this,' she said, and sang with horrible urgency the familiar lines of her own chanty—

*'Oh, the Captain's in the brig, Lads,
The First Mate's brains are blown;
We'll sail the Seven Seas, Lads,
And make them all our own . . .'*

'No,' I said.

She closed her eyes and leaned back. 'Let me know when you see him again, Mr Robinson.'

After that, Mrs Manifold's bell rang several times a day for me.

First it was, 'Get that smell of wine out of this house, Mr Robinson.'

But I couldn't. Open doors and windows as I would, I couldn't get that smell of wine out: there it was – rich, heady, nauseating; it had come in to stay, and there was nothing to do but live with it. I could imagine how it bothered her, what with her hatred for the stuff, but it was in her room, too, and she had to endure it as well as the rest of us.

Then, afterwards, it was about Mr Manifold. Had I seen him?

No, I had not. I never saw him again. He had gone without paying, but then, he never rightly used that room except to put the smell of wine into it, and there was no charge for that.

And did I hear that singing?

I never did.

But she did, and it bothered her. And it bothered her, too, to hear Mr Manifold the way she said she did. She knew his walk; there was a slight drag because of that limp. I never heard anything like that, and neither did anyone else, for she did ask Mr Claitor, who had not even seen Mr Manifold, as I had.

I used to ask myself, if it were indeed her husband, why had he come? And, having come, why had he gone without so much as saying hello or goodbye to his wife? It was strange – but Sailors' Rest was a place for strange things to happen even in the ordinary course of its monotonous existence.

Mrs Manifold was not the same.

If anything, she was more terrible. There was a greater furtiveness about her; there was less sly humour, almost

nothing of humour at all; there was an unmistakable grimness, a kind of terrible bravado; and there was above everything else something about her that made her far more horrible than she had ever seemed to me – something that made me think of death and fear of death, of violence and unimaginable horror, something eldritch and ineffably terrible, something that throbbed in the core of Mrs Manifold as the red blood coursed through the heart keeping life in that bulging mound of flesh.

And being with her even for the little while I had to be there was infinitely unpleasant, for she was always listening, catching her breath and listening, and hearing things when there was nothing to hear. And she was always asking questions I couldn't answer to please her, and scolding at me to clear the air of that wine smell, which was impossible – but I needn't ever have told her for all the impression it made on her. And she went on, sometimes, about her husband.

'Always the wine and never tending to business, that was Ambrose,' she said. 'And the women, too. Never could leave them alone. I gave him wine – more than he could drink, damn his black soul!'

I heard that over and over. If I heard it once, I heard it a score of times. It was better than that terrible listening. You can't imagine what it is until you go through such a thing by yourself. Even today, long after my short tenure at Sailor's Rest, I can see that horrible, obese woman with her flesh lapping out over the sides of her chair, pushing out between the slats, leaning that vast bulk over to listen with her black-haired head and the golden hooped ear-rings glistening in the feeble yellow light that was in the room, to listen for the sound of singing and the dragging limp; I can still hear her shrill, piping voice complain about the stench of wine, the nauseating sweetness of that cloying odour brought into the Sailors' Rest on that fateful night of fog.

And then, one night, the end came.

I woke out of my sleep, and that wine smell was thick enough to choke me. I got up and opened the door of my room, and then I heard the singing – something like she said, only a little different, and it went like this—

*'Oh, the Old Man's in the Deep, Lads,
The Madam's packed and flown—
I'll sail the Seven Seas, Lads,
Until I find her home . . .'*

It was coming from somewhere upstairs; so I went back and put something on. I came out again and started up the stairs, and I thought I could hear that dragging walk Mrs Manifold always said she heard, but I could not be sure.

I got up to the third flight of stairs when I heard her scream. It was Mrs Manifold's voice, shrill and awful, and she was screaming at her husband.

'Go away, Ambrose! Go back!' she cried in that horrible, piping voice that came so unnaturally from her obese body. 'Don't touch me!'

And then there was just a terrible, unnatural scream, diminishing into a choking, gurgling sound.

I was struck motionless with fright until Claitor came up behind me, agitated and scared; then I pulled myself together and ran up to the fourth floor. Claitor was right behind me, which turned out to be the best thing for me, since he could testify later on, and there was nothing the people at Scotland Yard could do to me.

Because Mrs Manifold was dead – choked to death. She lay there on the floor, with her black satin dress ripped down one side, and her white flesh pushing out from the tear, and her eyes turned up. All over the room there was a smell of sweet wine so thick that it seemed there was no air left – only that sickening smell.

And there was something else – something that shouldn't have been, something nobody could explain.

There were bones scattered in the room, human bones, a man's bones – and sharp, deep marks in Mrs Manifold's neck where she had been choked, and pieces of cloth and a battered old hat I had seen once before on a night when the fog was yellow in the light at the desk of the Sailor's Rest . . .

There was nothing Scotland Yard could say to explain all that.

But then, there was no reason why they should think of any

connexion between what happened up there in that gable room where Mrs Manifold was hiding and what they found up the Thames from its mouth, far up, in Wapping. An old wine cask out of Singapore, a cask that had once held Madeira and now was stove in at one end, and held nothing but the bones of two toes and a finger – nothing to tell them that Mrs Manifold had killed her husband and put his body in that cask of wine and had it carried far out to sea, weighted perhaps, to sink until time and the tide carried it far from Singapore – just as whatever it was came into the Sailors' Rest that foggy night put it down in the register—

'Amb. Manifold, late of Singapore, out of Madeira.'

Or was it somebody's ghoulish sense of humour? Out of Madeira indeed! I cannot abide the smell of it to this day!

DEAR JEFFY

by

BARBARA BENZIGER

DEAR JEFFY:

I am writing to you today because I feel sad. I wish you weren't in Africa. It seems so far away. How do you like being a vice-consul? It sounds very important. Nanny is leaving tomorrow. She is the nicest nurse anyone has ever had. I cried all last night and never went to sleep. Jeremy sneaked into my room to tell me he would always take care of me, but even though he is older than I am, I could tell he had been crying too. We talked about our life's dream – to live with Nanny on the Isle of Wight in her little cottage surrounded by hollyhocks and climbing roses. Jeremy and I hate this house. It is so big and dark and lonely. Ever since Mother died I am afraid to go through the long empty halls to Daddy's and Mother's room.

I seem to hear Mother calling to Jeremy and me. I wish I knew what she died of. She was always so quiet and sad. I wonder what made her that way. Daddy and his new wife arrive tomorrow. I'm going to hate her. Nanny says she is well-known in England in the 'Fast Set' and that she is very beautiful. Her name is Fiona. Phew – what a name! She is so much younger than Daddy. Why should she marry him? Nanny says it's the money. They're bringing a new governess with them. She's French. Nanny says she will probably teach us French songs, like *Au Clair de la Lune*, whatever that is. We all bet the French governess won't talk to Melissa's German nurse. Won't that be cosy! I wish Melissa didn't have to have a nurse of her own. Maybe if she outgrows her asthma, we can all be brought up together. We don't see much of Melissa this way, but at night I can hear her wheezing and breathing hard. Poor little thing – her arms and legs are like sticks.

It's a shame Daddy wasn't home for Jeremy's last day of

school. He won all the medals except one. When he came home he threw them all at my feet and said they weren't worth anything – that Mother and Daddy weren't around to see him get them. I picked them all up and gave them to Nanny. She says she'll have them framed and send them to me. Jeremy will want them some day I know, because I notice that you have kept all of your medals.

I guess brains run in this family, even though you are only a half-brother. I wish I had known your mother. Daddy has had bad luck losing two wives. I was looking at your mother's picture yesterday – the one you keep on your bureau. She looks pretty and happy. Nanny says she was very rich and that she left you all her money. Lucky you! I wish someone would leave me some money. But not if they have to die to do it.

I wish Daddy was coming back alone. Whenever he's in the house there is light all over. It even reflects off his riding boots. Now *she's* going to spoil all our life and happy times and games with Daddy. Thank God I have Jeremy.

Write soon. How is your monkey? Is he tame?

Love and kisses,
Pammy

Dear Jeffy:

Well, they are here – Daddy, Fiona, and the new governess. Fiona is sickly sweet with us. She pretended she liked joining in our games with Daddy the first night home. I could tell she was bored to death, especially with hide-and-seek. When Daddy was 'It', Jeremy told her to hide in the dumbwaiter. She did, and Jeremy lowered the dumbwaiter to the pantry. She must have felt stupid stepping out in front of all the servants. She bosses Daddy all over. 'Put out your cigarette, Jeffrey.' 'Let me sit on your lap, Jeffrey.' It's enough to make you sick. I don't see why Daddy is suddenly so weak.

You should see the new governess. She has a moustache and the biggest feet I've ever seen. Last night, Jeremy put the new footman's shoes outside Mademoiselle's door. He has colossal feet, too. Boy, was she mad! She doesn't speak English, so no one knows what she said, but she got all

excited and used her hands a lot. Jeremy is sort of making her life miserable, I guess, but he is so funny. At lunch time he puts his butter balls in his napkin and snaps the napkin, so the butter hits the ceiling and sticks there. Mademoiselle keeps asking the footman for more butter, then Jeremy says he's sick of pheasant hash, so he hides it all in his baked-potato skin and stuffs the whole thing in the pocket of his blazer while Mademoiselle isn't looking. We've learned one French word and that's 'Cochon'. I guess you know that means pig. Jeremy and I try to pronounce all of the French words wrong just to annoy Mademoiselle. Unfortunately, she is a tattle-teller – she repeats things to Fiona, who took our riding privileges away. I don't think it's Fiona's business to punish us. But I guess someone has to. Daddy is in sort of a trance.

Right now Fiona is trying to charm Jeremy by asking all about his interests. Jeremy isn't rude to her, he just answers questions with one or two words. Huh, she can't win him over. I must admit she is pretty, but not as pretty as my mother or yours.

Is *she* a fussy housekeeper! Jeremy and I put our dogs in the kennel at night, anyway, because of Melissa's allergy. Now she says our tank of fish is so dirty she will give it away unless we clean it up. Jeremy says we need more plants to balance the aquarium, but how are we to get the right plants when we are seven miles from the village and not allowed to borrow the chauffeur and the car, or bicycle there? – stupid woman!

Daddy and she gave a big dance. We listened down the dumbwaiter. I lowered Jeremy in the dumbwaiter to the pantry where he stole a bottle of scotch. We both drank a lot and had a good time copying Daddy and Fiona – like I'd boss Jeremy around and say everyone here tonight is out of the top drawer. I smoked through a long holder like *she* does. She came along to our rooms. We smelled her, luckily, before she stepped in the door. She wears some really heavy perfume – worse than a skunk. I had hiccups. She told me she wanted us to see how beautiful she was. What conceit! And then she said she was having a baby. I never thought of such a thing happening. Jeremy is more upset about it than I am. That's probably because she said 'It wouldn't do to

have you inherit too much, would it, dear boy? You've always been the favourite, fair-haired one, haven't you?' I guess you and Jeremy would get most everything, wouldn't you, if Daddy died? You're both boys, and Daddy went to school in England where they believe in boys getting almost everything. I don't think it's quite fair. I have a friend who says they don't do that sort of thing in this country.

Jeremy is worried the baby may be a boy. I hope it isn't anything. I just hope it never gets born. I am glad your monkey sleeps on your bed. He must be good company.

I miss you so much. You always took such good care of me and Jeremy.

Love and kisses,
Pammy

Dear Jeffy:

I am so upset I can hardly write. Fiona told Jeremy in front of me that he was going to be sent away to boarding school next month, like they do in England when a boy is very young. I don't know any other little boy that has been sent away at all. Jeremy told her that Daddy would never send him away so young, because he hated it when *he* was living in England. And he was sent away when he was little. Fiona laughed. She has a wicked laugh like a witch. I told Jeremy that Daddy would send him if *she* said to. Then she said something awful. She asked, 'You know how your mother died, don't you?' Jeremy said, 'Of course.' Before I could answer 'No', Fiona said 'I doubt you do. She died in an insane asylum. The red flag is showing for you children – you'd better watch out. Insanity runs in families.' Jeremy said 'You're a liar and I hate you', and he threw a book at her. It hit her on the arm.

Jeremy's pet turtle – the painted one he got at the circus – was out of its bowl on the floor and she stepped on it and crushed it. She said, 'It was nothing but an ugly reptile.' I am sure she did it on purpose. Daddy came in and saw Jeremy wrapping the turtle in a little box with cotton and Jeremy said, 'Look what your wife did'. His voice was shaking and he tried not to cry. Daddy said, 'Oh what a sad accident. I'm sure Fiona will get you another.' Jeremy said, 'I don't want

another one. This one was trained to come to me. Especially from *her* I don't want another one. I don't want *anything* from her.' He ran from the room and slammed the door. Daddy said, 'What is the matter with Jeremy, I wonder?' And I said, 'What is the matter with you?' and ran away to my room and locked the door. Daddy came and knocked on our doors. Neither Jeremy nor I would open up. Daddy said, 'Fiona is a lovely person, crazy about kids and you'll get to like her.' We didn't answer. Just as Daddy was going away. Jeremy yelled at him, 'Why are you sending me away to school?' There was a long silence and Daddy answered, 'I think it will be the best thing for you.' Jeremy said, 'You never thought that before.' Daddy mumbled, 'I know, I know,' and then he left. He is so different these days. Can't he see *anything*? Is he a slave or what? She doesn't want us around. I wonder where she'll send me.

Please write a letter. Not just postcards. They don't say anything.

Love and hugs,
Pammy

Dear Jeffy:

I helped Mademoiselle sew name tapes on Jeremy's clothes for school. Now he's gone to school. He didn't want to go. Before he left, he gave me a ring to show that we are blood brothers. Even though I'm a girl, I can be a blood brother. We promised to write each other every day. I am having trouble getting stamps because Fiona talked Daddy into reducing our allowances. She said we didn't earn them. How can you earn anything here when servants do everything? I am ashamed of this whole place. The other day someone thought the stable was the main house.

Mademoiselle isn't such a bad old thing. She's bought me the stamps. Now that I'm alone, I have to get along with Mademoiselle, so I do. I am even learning some French.

I don't see much of Melissa. Six years is such a difference and Mademoiselle and Melissa's nurse don't talk to each other.

You know all the shells I've collected ever since I can remember? Well, Fiona said I couldn't have them scattered

all around my room. I had to put them away in boxes. What sense is there in that? I collect them because I like to look at them. Shells bring me closer to God. They are a miracle, all the thousands of beautiful shapes and colours. You can't shut up something so beautiful in boxes.

When Daddy isn't here, she brings that damned English Labrador to my room. The other day she took the dog into Melissa's room. She pretended she'd forgotten that Melissa is so allergic to dogs. I heard Melissa struggling for breath all night. Fiona asked me what else Melissa was allergic to. I said feather pillows, lots of plants, and chocolate. Then I stopped telling her. I don't know why. I think I don't trust her at all. At night I miss Jeremy so terribly. He writes such homesick letters. He says he feels as if Daddy had abandoned him. I feel the same way.

Why can't you come home? We need you.

Love,
Pammy

Dear Jeffy:

Daddy is away on a business trip. Fiona can't travel any more on account of the baby, she says. The other day, just before she came to my room, I was stung by a bee. You remember the last time I was stung, I almost died, so I have that kit with pills and a shot? Well, I used it. I was very proud of myself. I put on a tourniquet and gave myself a shot – it was Mademoiselle's day off. My heart was pounding like a sledgehammer in my throat, but I felt all right. Unfortunately, Fiona came in my room just as I was giving myself the shot. She asked what I was doing so I had to tell her. She asked what Melissa took. I said she had white pills and a spray to help her breath in some emergency. Fiona laughed and said, 'You two would be pretty lost without these medicines and shots, wouldn't you?' I didn't like the way she laughed. She said that Melissa was getting a new nurse. I asked her why? She said she was getting a regular trained nurse because she didn't think Melissa's present nurse was trained enough for her job. The new nurse came today. She is all white and starchy and smells like a hospital.

Poor Melissa. I've been trying to cheer her up. She has been crying for her other nurse. I think she is a very lonely child.

Daddy will be gone quite a while. I feel sort of trapped here with this woman.

Goodnight. Love,
Pammy

Dear Jeffy:

Kim died. There will never be another little Scottie like him. The vet said he had been poisoned. Yesterday, all day, I couldn't find him. In the morning when I went out to fetch him in for breakfast, he wasn't at the door to greet me, like he usually is. I called and called until I was hoarse. This afternoon I found him. He had dug a hole under a bush and was lying in it. When I picked him up he opened his eyes and whimpered. Mademoiselle got the car and we drove him to the vet's. He threw up all the time and cried with pain. When we reached the vet's, he was dead. I asked the vet why he hadn't come to me when he felt so sick. The vet said dogs do that – they go off when they are sick because they want to be alone. I felt terrible he hadn't wanted me to help him and I hope he knew how much I loved him. I wanted to bury him at home. The vet said to leave him there, so he could try to find the poison. Then he'd cremate him and I could bury the ashes the next day.

Today Mademoiselle took me to the vet's, and he said the poison was something used to kill rats. He asked me if I noticed rat poison lying around the place. I said, 'No,' and I didn't think we had rats. He gave me the ashes, and Mademoiselle and I buried them under our favourite bush – that one with the orange berries, you know the one I mean. I wonder who put rat poison around. None of the servants did. Mademoiselle and I asked them. I am so lost without my dog and Jeremy. Who would do such a thing to my dog? – such an evil thing.

Please write oftener.

Love,
Pammy

Dear Jeffy:

Oh, please help! Today was Mademoiselle's day off. Fiona, whom I shall call 'she' from here on, brought a package into my room this morning. She said it was a present for before my birthday. You know I'll be eleven next week. That's really old. I unwrapped the present. It was one of those bee colonies you see in the Natural History Museum. They have ant colonies and bee colonies. They are behind glass, so you can watch how they work and live. I just held it - I thought I couldn't breathe. I kept thinking, 'Suppose more than one bee gets out if I break the glass by mistake.' Fiona said, 'We haven't replaced your bee-sting kit yet have we?' And I suddenly remembered, we hadn't. I said, 'I'll go to the doctor today to get another kit.' She laughed and asked, 'Are you going to walk eight miles to the village?' 'I'll bicycle,' I told her. 'You know your father doesn't let you bicycle alone to the village,' she said. 'I'll get Mademoiselle to go with me,' I said. *She* said, 'But Mademoiselle doesn't have a bicycle, does she?' 'I'll call the doctor,' I shouted. She said with a smile, 'I don't think he'll bring the kit way out here, do you? It's too bad you're not allowed to order one of the chauffeurs.' 'But Mademoiselle drives,' I screamed. She said, 'Ah, but it's too bad the car she is permitted to use is in being overhauled at the garage in town.' Then she left.

I ran around the room like a crazy person seeking a place to put the bee colony out of sight. I put it in the drawer of my bureau and got some binding tape and sealed up the drawer, but I could hear them buzzing. I sat on the bed and shivered, and my stomach felt funny. Then I prayed. After a while I decided I was only being stupid and I untaped the bureau drawer, took the bee colony out of the drawer *very* carefully and slowly I walked out of my room down the stairs and out of doors across the lawn to the woods. I put the horrible thing gently down under a log. Then I ran as fast as I could down to the beach. My heart was thumping in my throat and my hands were shaking. My mouth was dry and I was having trouble breathing. After a while I screwed up my courage and tried to enjoy the blue, blue sea, and the sky. I even picked up some shells. Then I thought, 'She makes me put them in boxes now', and I

threw them all in the water. I don't want them to be in captivity in a box. Because I always feel as if a shell was alive.

These enormous number of beautiful acres make me feel so alone. I have an imaginary companion called Petunia. I talk to her all the time. When I went back to my room I found a letter from Mademoiselle saying she wasn't coming back from her day off – not ever coming back. I ran to Melissa's room and asked the trained nurse if she was going to take care of me, too. She said, 'You're a pretty big girl, I imagine you don't require much care.' I asked, 'Can I stay in Melissa's room for a while?' The nurse, Mrs Todd is her name, said, 'Yes'. While she went down for supper, I read *Babar the Elephant* and all about his cousin Arthur, to Melissa. You know, Melissa is really cute now. She's very smart for her age. She knows when I skip a word in the story or put in a new one. I must get to know her better now that there are just the two of us.

The nurse told me to go to my room when the time came for Melissa to go to sleep. I'm afraid of my room and my closet. I pile chairs in front of the closet because I don't want things to come out of it at night. And I take a running leap into the bed because I don't dare look under it to see if anyone is there. I sit up in bed with a light on and try to read.

Last night Mrs Todd knocked on my door and said to put the light off, so I did. There was a bad storm with thunder and lightning. I put my light on again. Out of habit I started to run to Jeremy's room, but then I remembered he isn't here. I stuffed a towel under my door, so that Mrs Todd couldn't see that my light was on.

Now I'm writing you. Mademoiselle left me some stamps. I have hidden them all around the place – all separate. I am wondering if my mail is getting through to you. You haven't answered in a long time. If she comes in my room when I'm writing, I'll stick the letter down my front. She asked me the other day why I wrote to you and Jeremy so often. I said I was lonely. She said, 'Oh,' and then she said, 'Leave the letters on the downstairs front hall table.' I'm not going to do that. I am going to get Laurence to mail them for me. I ride every day and he's always at the stable. She might

question the servants in the house, but she doesn't like horses and I don't think she'd suspect Laurence. I can hear the night watchman on his rounds. He does something to a clock right outside my door. Do you realize I've never ever seen him? I imagine him as being very big – all dressed in black, loose clothes. If I had enough nerve I'd open my door to see what he really does look like. I might even speak to him and ask him to look under my bed. What a dirty trick to fire Mademoiselle. I really didn't like her, but she was better than no one. Please write me, Jeffy, and tell me what to do. I am frightened. I don't even have a dog any more to protect me.

Love,
Pammy

Dear Jeffy:

She has done the most awful, cruel thing. Jeremy ran away from school. He told me he might in his letters. He was picked up by the police at the Concord railway station. I think he must have been trying to come home, because I wrote him I was scared. *She* had him put in a sanatorium and then she went to visit him and took me with her. I never knew what a sanatorium was. It looked like a nice house with pretty flowers around it, but when you looked closer, you saw bars on the windows, and the big front door was kept locked. Jeremy was in a small building at the back of the big one. He was weaving a basket of different colours. All the other people in the room were grown-ups – he was the only child. I was frightened by the other people. One woman was looking into space with eyes that didn't see. A man was mumbling to himself while he hammered on some copper, and one old lady was laughing like a cackling hen. Fiona asked the teacher in the room how Jeremy was doing. She said he was no trouble and did what he was told. I asked Jeremy if he wanted to weave a basket. He said, 'No'. The teacher wouldn't let him have any sharp tools. All the tools were kept locked up when not in use. I saw the big case they were kept in.

Jeremy wanted to make a belt for Daddy. He didn't really

want to make anything he said, but you had to, or you were made to stay in solitary in your room.

I asked him if his room had bars and he said, 'Yes. Pammy,' he whispered to me, 'don't ever forget this place and what she's done to me. I sit at my window in the evening and listen to the children of the people who work here, laughing and playing. They are free and I am locked up. And I get such a feeling of being shut-in, I want to die. Perhaps they'll never let me out.' 'Is this what happens to you when you just break a rule, like running away from school?' I asked. Jeremy said he didn't think this sort of thing happened to everybody. 'Can you reach Daddy?' he asked me. I said I'd try. I knew he was on a business trip to Africa and that he was going to see *you*. 'Do you think Jeffy would tell Daddy how we feel about Fiona?' Jeremy asked. 'It depends if he believes us,' I answered. 'Are you writing him, too, Jeremy?' 'Your mail is opened,' he said. 'All you can write is what a nice place it is. Or else your letter is returned to you.' 'I'll tell Jeffy you are here,' I said. 'But first of all I must find Daddy. He'd never allow this.' I squeezed Jeremy's hand and showed him I was wearing his ring. Fiona came up to us and said, 'You know Jeremy, when you go back to school, all the boys and masters will make fun of you for being in this kind of place.' If I had one of those sharp tools, I would have stabbed her. I could see Jeremy's pain in his eyes. He's always been such a model boy in school. I know he can't bear to think that others will think he's queer or badly behaved. He followed me to the door of the room and said, 'Please don't leave me locked up in here.' Fiona laughed, and said she expected he'd be all right. I started to cry. Fiona took my hand and dragged me through the door, just as Jeremy was shouting, 'I'll go crazy'. She didn't even say goodbye to Jeremy. I ran away from Fiona with my hands over my ears to shut out Jeremy's pleading voice. I glared at her all the way home in the train, but she didn't mind. She just sat there looking smug about her tummy getting bigger. God I hate her. When I got home I tried to get the telephone operator to find Daddy. Fiona won't say where he is. I said, 'Please, operator, it's a matter of life and death,' and she told me she was sorry but Africa was a whole continent and she couldn't find

Daddy without knowing the name of the place he was in. Please, Jeffy, reach him immediately and tell him about Jeremy. I think this woman wants to get rid of us. She's always reminding me that Mother died insane. I don't even know if this is true. Daddy says, 'Not really insane, but sick mentally,' whatever that means. He never told us even this until he married Fiona. Do you know anything about it? Jeffy, find out and write to me right away. You mustn't lose a minute.

Love,
Pammy

Dear Jeffy:

My heart broke when you left to go back to your post after Jeremy's funeral. Now there is no one to turn to. I could tell that you didn't believe me. You were so nice and friendly to *her*. As for Daddy, he'd think I was crazy or just jealous if I told him the things I told you. The trouble is there is no proof of anything. But who'd believe Jeremy hung himself because of her? I have his last letter telling me he was going to kill himself because he couldn't bear to think of Daddy loving Fiona's child, and he said he'd never get over the shame of being in that sanatorium and he couldn't face coming home to a house so full of danger and hate and he couldn't go back to school. But nothing he said proves anything. She has managed to persuade the school to say that the sanatorium was a good idea – that's what the masters told Jeremy when he got back to school. And then, also, Jeremy never said what the danger and hate were. He did tell me, 'Get her before she gets you, and take care of Melissa.'

I don't know how I can live without Jeremy. I loved him better than anyone in the whole wide world. He always protected me even if he did tease me sometimes, but generally I deserved being teased because I knew how to aggravate him. He's the best brother anyone ever had. Jeremy's head master gave me a scrapbook he was making for me. He had cut out all the Katzenjammer kids because I'm not allowed to read the funnies and all the 'Campbell Soup' ads – those cute ones with fat children saying a rhyme. He must have looked

through all the magazines to find them. I sleep with the book under my pillow. She took away all his clothes and favourite possessions today. She left nothing that belonged to him. I suppose she'll give them away. It's as if she didn't want any trace of us around the house at all.

When I've been sitting in the living-room or library, when I get up to leave, she rings the bell and has the footman plump up the pillows. When she goes out, I go back and make another dent. I want to feel I belong in this house even though I hate her and it terrifies me. It's the only home I've got.

I would have kept all of Jeremy's treasures. I told Daddy, but he said Fiona did the right thing. If we'd kept Jeremy's things, they'd only keep reminding us of him. I said I wanted to be reminded of him, and he said, 'You don't want to be reminded by *things*, but by what you keep in your heart.'

This whole children's wing is a nightmare now. No Jeremy, no Mademoiselle, no dog – just Melissa wheezing badly. She's been much worse since the funeral. I had never been to a funeral before because Mother didn't have one that I know about, but I think it was a beautiful funeral. There were so many white flowers. When the minister said, 'In my Father's house are many mansions,' I thought, 'Please God, Jeremy's had enough mansions – please just let him go to join Nanny in her cottage on the Isle of Wight.' Do you think God will make this come to pass? I hope so. Jeremy deserves it. I stayed next to his coffin when everyone else had left. I put the ring he gave me on top of the coffin under the blanket of flowers. I wanted to touch Jeremy then and hug him, but I couldn't, of course. I told him how much I loved him and always would, so he'd never have to be lonely again. I'm afraid I'm the lonely one now. Daddy came back to the grave and said, 'Pammy, come along dear. You must leave him. You are a big girl now.' I said, 'No Daddy, I'm afraid I'm just a very little girl to have so much hurting me.' He picked me up in his arms and carried me to the car. I thought, 'Oh Daddy, how can you be so far away from me and know me so little, when here I am in your arms. I still can't understand why you don't believe me when I say she did this to Jeremy. And she is going to try to have

something bad happen to me and Melissa. How can you be so blind?’

I guess you agree with Daddy that I’m jealous and I imagine things. I swear by all that’s holy that everything I’ve told you is true. But it’s no good – you don’t *listen*. I only write to you because there is no one else anymore.

Love,
Pammy

Dear Jeffy:

They have gone away for the weekend and all the servants have a holiday. There is just Mrs Todd and Melissa and me. The cook left a lot of food for us. Fiona asked Mrs Todd and me to keep her dog and, in front of Daddy, I said, ‘We can’t keep a dog here – you know how allergic Melissa is. We’ve never had a dog on this floor anywhere near her.’ Do you know what Daddy said, ‘We think maybe some of this asthma is exaggerated by Melissa.’ I yelled, ‘You can’t say that Daddy. You know she turns blue when she gets near feathers or dogs or horses.’ ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘but she can get over it. She has her medicines and spray and shots. When she sees that she can be cured by these, she’ll stop being allergic to things. Some of it is in her mind.’ ‘What crackpot doctor has *she* taken you to who told you that?’ I asked him. He said, ‘Fiona’s doctor,’ and he said, ‘Don’t meddle, Pam, so much.’ What has come over this man? They left, and I felt so alone Friday night. Saturday, I heard a cock pheasant calling his mate. It was as lonely as a train whistle in the dark.

Today is Sunday. Wait a minute, I heard Melissa wheezing badly. I’ll finish later.

LATER:

Jeffy, you will have to listen now. I went into Melissa’s room and she was all blue in the face. The dog wasn’t in there, but I picked up her pillow to bolster her up, so that she could breathe better. I felt how soft her pillows were. I ripped one open and found it was stuffed with feathers. I rushed to find Mrs Todd. She was in the kitchen. I said, ‘Melissa needs her medicines quickly.’ Mrs Todd finished her cup of coffee and said, ‘Easy there now.’ I asked who

changed Melissa's pillows. 'Why your stepmother did. She came in and said, 'Here are two lovely dainty pillows for Melissa.' So I put the old ones away.' 'Idiot!' I shouted. We rushed to Melissa's room. When we got there, I could see she was worse. I said, 'Mrs Todd call the doctor.' She left the room. I thought I'd help her by giving Melissa the pills and spray and getting her shot ready. They weren't in the medicine cabinet. They weren't anywhere. I screamed for Mrs Todd but got no answer. I looked out the window and saw her putting her suitcase in the back of a strange car driven by someone I couldn't see. I rushed back to Melissa and tried to help her. She was choking. I got out the croup kettle and I got that going, but I could see she was getting worse. I ran to the phone and called the doctor. I asked his nurse why he hadn't arrived yet. She told me no one from our house had called him. I begged her to tell him to come in the biggest hurry of his life. I went back to Melissa who held her arms out to me begging for help. I took her in my arms and rocked and soothed her and kissed her. What else could I do? Suddenly, I felt she had left me. I looked at her. I knew she was dead. I laid her down gently and tried to do artificial respiration the way the swimming teacher taught us. It didn't do any good. I tried breathing in her mouth. I took her pulse and she didn't have any. She lay so still. Suddenly I was filled with panic. I was alone in the house with a dead person. I ran down the hall, down the stairs and out of the house into the sunshine. I sat on the front steps and covered my head with my sweater. I was shaking all over and my teeth were chattering. I thought the doctor would never come, but at last he did. I told him Melissa was dead and he asked me to take him to her. He listened with his stethoscope. He shook his head. He asked, 'Pammy, why wasn't I called sooner, and why didn't the medicines help as usual?' I told him Mrs Todd hadn't called him when she said she would and that there was no medicine. I took him in my bathroom and showed him I didn't have a bee kit either. 'Severe allergies run in families,' he said, 'you should always have more than one bee kit. But I don't understand about Melissa's medicine.' He shook his head back and forth like a puppet and asked where my parents were. I told him. And that I thought they would be

back tonight. I also said, 'She's not my parent.' The doctor made a phone call to a place that would fetch Melissa and make her pretty to be buried. He asked me to pick her favourite dress so I did. It's the pink and white one. You know it. I put her new patent leathers with the buckles with the dress. She never had a chance to wear them. Then I cried. The doctor sat down and took me on his lap and asked me what I thought had truly happened. I told him everything I told you from the start. When I finished, he said, 'Humph, this should all be looked into - it's most peculiar that Mrs Todd left when she did.'

An ambulance - or maybe it was a hearse - arrived at the front door. Two men came upstairs and took Melissa away. I gave them her dress and shoes. They said she would look pretty. The doctor said he had to go to another very sick patient, but that he would be back later. He asked, 'Do you mind being left alone for a while?' I was about to say yes, but I changed my mind. I had thought of something. So I said no. After the doctor left, I went down to the pantry and found some strong, thin string. I took it to the front door. Across the threshold of the door, I tied the string very securely to the hinges on one side, and the door knob to the coat room on the other side. I made it about ankle height. It was getting dark. I put some lights on in the living room but left the hall unlit. I stepped outside to look at the house. Usually lights in windows twinkle, but I got the feeling the windows were staring at me with blank faces. I went into the ladies' coat room and sat down in the dark. I bit my fingernails. I even tried a cigarette but it made me choke. *Her* dog found me. I thought of hanging it until it was dead, but then I thought, 'What good will that do. It isn't the dog's fault.' You know how I feel about animals. I thought about Melissa. She was so sweet and little and always looked so helpless. I didn't like the way she looked when she was dead. They say death brings peace, but she just looked tortured and terrified.

After hours of waiting, a car drove up to the door. I prayed it wasn't the doctor on account of the string. I heard Daddy, and *her* voice answering. I looked out the window. He opened the door of the car on her side and helped her to get out. Since the door was open, she came first. For a mo-

ment I wondered what she must be thinking and how she'd explain about Mrs Todd and Melissa. Then she tripped on the string. She made a loud thud as she spraddled all over the floor. She screamed for my father who was getting suitcases out of the car. 'Jeffrey, Jeffrey, the baby, the baby. Call the doctor.' She must have broken the string entirely because my father didn't trip. He ran to the library and called the doctor. At that moment the doctor drove up. He had come back. He took one look at Fiona, felt her tummy and said, 'You'd better come to the hospital with me. First I must talk to your husband.' He put Fiona in his car, then took Daddy's arm and steered him towards the library. I could hear my father crying. I never heard a man cry before. The door to the library opened and the doctor ran out. He yelled over his shoulder, 'Stay with Pammy. She needs you.' But Daddy said, 'But Fiona needs me, too.' And he jumped into his car and followed the doctor. This suited me fine. I picked up the broken string, took it to the library and burned it in the fireplace. I swept the ashes under the kindling wood and paper. So now I've written you.

When you come back for Melissa's funeral, you'd better take me away or you'll be coming to *my* funeral. I keep wondering how and *if* she'll get me. I try to be ready for anything she can think of, but it's hard.

Love,
Pammy

PS I don't think I'll mail this. There mightn't be time for you to get it. I'll save it and slip it to you when you come to the funeral. Please read it all and pay attention. Love and kisses. Pam.

Dear Jeffy:

Don't think I didn't hear you making up to her. While you were kissing her I heard little bits of what you were saying. What a dreadful thing to do behind Daddy's back, especially after all the things I've told you - it's disgusting. You told her you were sorry she'd lost the baby - how could you! And you lied to me about the school you brought me

to. It's for disturbed children, isn't it? The other kids have told me. And there's an isolation room with just a mattress in it and pads on the wall in case someone gets difficult. The rules are unbelievable. There are no holidays – well, that's good, I can't get home. You promised I'd be safe here. The psychologist asked this morning why I thought I'd be safe here. He listened to everything about Fiona and then he said, 'As soon as we've talked all this out, perhaps you will get a beter perspective on your stepmother.' So he, too, thinks I am making everything up. What a trapped miserable feeling I have. I asked how long I'd be here and he said that he agreed with you that I should stay until I'm well. You, too, eh! 'But I am well,' I shouted. 'Oh, no dear, you are not,' the psychologist said. Sure, I'm safe here, but what about my freedom and why do I have to pay such a price for safety? You told the psychiatrist I was paranoid. I looked that up. How cruel of you. Why didn't you take me with you? The only truth you told me was that they had horses here. Well, you can't ride them until you have earned a certain amount of points. If I stay here for six years, I can graduate and go to any college. Isn't that just bully! You are a traitor and I hate you.

Pamela

Dear Jeffy:

So you told the psychologist about the string across the front door, did you? Thanks a lot. I trusted you once. Now he'll probably tell Daddy and Fiona. They are coming to see me tomorrow. How nice of them. Daddy asked if I wanted anything from home. I asked him to bring the china coach with the lady leaning out of the window waving goodbye with a handkerchief. It seems to me that my whole life has been made up of goodbyes – to Mother, to Nanny, to Made-moiselle, to Jeremy, to Melissa, and now to you. That's why I want the china figure.

Pamela

Dear Jeffy:

I am writing you because there is no one else, even if you are a traitor. Well, they came. Daddy didn't say anything about the baby or the school. He was just nice. He went to talk with some wise apple around here, and I was left with *her*. She just stared at me without speaking. Finally, I said, 'Well, what have you brought me? Poisoned candies?' She laughed and said, 'I don't have to do anything to you. This place will make you break.' 'What do you mean, break?' I shouted at her. 'You'll go stark raving mad, my dear,' she said. 'I'm glad I killed your baby,' I said. She said, 'I can have many other babies, you know. I'm having another. You won't be able to destroy this one.' I wanted to butt her in the stomach with my head. 'I'll get out of here some day,' I said, 'and I'll get your child. I'll frighten you the way you frightened me. You'll have to watch and wait and wonder like I did, and you'll be terrified, too. By the time I leave here, I'll have had a long time to think and plan. Besides, you've taught me a lot about being wicked.' I left her sitting in the visiting room.

Now I suppose you'll fix it up so I'll never get out of here. You have deserted me and left me all alone with my sadness about Jeremy and Melissa. I thought you cared about us, but I guess just being a brother isn't enough. But I'm not going to break and go mad like she said, Jeffy. Not ever, ever – you hear that?

There's a huge medical library here and I'm looking under poisons right now. I could become an expert. I have to look ahead, you see. No one will ever know me the way I am, you hear me? Just the way no one ever knew the way she is and I didn't know how you were. That's a grown-up's world I guess. You hurt me so much – you will have helped to make me the adult I'll be. Goodbye.

Pamela

Dear Jeffy:

I can't take in your letter. You said you played up to her to get a tape-recording, so that you could show Daddy what she was? That I am to have a lawyer to show me my rights? Aren't I too *young* to have a lawyer of my own? You clever

you, to have bribed Mrs Todd to talk, and Mademoiselle and Melissa's German nurse. How did you track them all down? You wanted them here to believe I was sick, didn't you, so that they would keep me out of harm's way. Can I stick it for a while longer, you asked. Are you kidding? Where else could I go? I didn't know you had a hardship post, so that you couldn't have a woman or a child there. You say you'll have a decent post soon. How wonderful! And I can live with you. Anyway we signed a contract with the school. I'll wait until you say it's all right to leave here. Jeffy, thank God, for you. I'm sorry I said what I did about you. I love you. I'll even put away the book on poisons. A big hug and kiss. I can't wait.

Pammy – Love and kisses

PS Poor Daddy.

SPIDER WOMAN

by

SIMON JAY

THE STEADY DRIP of rain through the trees was all that disturbed the drone of the parson's prayers as they laid Maude Roxby to rest in the sodden little churchyard on the edge of the Yorkshire moors.

It was just as well the sky was weeping, for it would have been difficult to find another moist eye among the handful of mourners huddled beneath their umbrellas around the grave.

If Maude Roxby had a friend in the world it wasn't in this part of Yorkshire. As if her viper's tongue had not been enough to alienate the villagers, over the years her behaviour had grown progressively more strange, and since being invalided in a fall she had developed into a total recluse, with only her long-suffering husband, Tom, for company.

To the villagers, Tom was little short of a saint, quiet, selfless, uncomplaining. For more than a year he had struggled manfully to keep the farm going on his own, the last labourer having left in protest at Maude's outbursts, swearing she was a witch in disguise.

If so, it had never brought her or Tom much luck. In old Dan Roxby's time the farm where they lived had been one of the best run in the district, but over the years a strange blight had killed the crops and destroyed the cow herd, so that it was all Tom could do to raise a few vegetables.

Poor Tom. It was mostly for him that they had bothered to put their macs on at all that day.

Rose Hardcastle looked out smugly from beneath the brim of her brolly and secretly congratulated herself on seeing that a respectable number were present at the funeral.

Rose and Tom had courted in years gone by, but eventually he had married the boss's daughter and she had wed the

local smithy. Since the untimely death of her husband, Rose had gone as cook to Colonel Fortescue, but that wouldn't last much longer if she had anything to do with it. Although past her prime, Rose was still an impressive woman, with a large, generous figure and thick, sensual mouth, a vivid contrast to the thin lips and bony chassis of the late lamented Maude. She also rather fancied herself as a farmer's wife.

So far everything had gone to plan. After years of never a word and barely a glance, she had plucked up courage to visit the farm and offer her assistance during his wife's illness. Tom had received her with his customary coolness, but later the way he had flushed on seeing her bent buxomly over the sink made her think that her presence did not exactly leave him cold.

It came as something of a shock, therefore, when Tom gasped and visibly staggered as the coffin was lowered from view, and a faint doubt crossed her mind that perhaps there had been more between Tom and Maude than she realized. But Rose was a determined woman and quickly tossed the idea aside, so that by the time the cortège reached the farm she was her usual ebullient self, dispensing sherry and snacks, while Tom stared moodily out of the window. Every so often his glance would shift uneasily to a glass case lying on the sideboard.

Frank, a cousin of Tom's, sidled over curiously. 'What's this then, Tom,' he began, but the words stuck in his throat as he gazed through the glass lid at a monstrous spider, the size of a saucer, with eight long spindly legs covered in fine black hair. 'By gum, that's a big 'un, where did you find it?' Frank inquired. The fat round body rested on a piece of heavily embroidered silk, covered with strange signs and hieroglyphics. Tom, who was daydreaming, jerked back to consciousness. 'What did you say? Oh, that - it belonged to Maude. Here, why don't you take it?' So saying, he picked up the case and with some force tried to press it into his cousin's arms. Frank stepped back apace and threw up his hands in horror. 'Not me, thanks. Why, I'd never sleep at nights with a thing like that in't house. No offence, of course,' and he nervously shook off all Tom's entreaties to take it.

One by one the guests drifted away until only Rose and

Tom were left in the little whitewashed parlour. The widow woman was wearing a black fitted skirt and broderie anglaise blouse that flattered her ample figure. She smoothed her skirt, fluffed her hair and, taking Tom by the arm, led him to an armchair. 'I'm going to make you a nice hot cup of tea,' she announced.

'No!' The sharpness in Tom's voice caught her by surprise. He immediately softened his tone, but there was still an unexpectedly firm edge to his voice. 'Thanks, Rose, you've been very kind but, well, right now I'd like to be alone if you don't mind.'

Rose flushed, then relaxed. 'Very well,' she said with artificial calm. 'I'll drop back tomorrow then and give you a hand with the clearing up.'

For a long time after she had gone Tom stood staring at the monster insect seated like an Eastern potentate on its elaborate cushion. Then he bent and drew from the farthest corner of the sideboard a nearly full bottle of Scotch. He poured himself a stiff measure and sipped it meditatively. His eye traced every detail of the intricate needlework on which Maude had laboured so frantically during her illness. What did it mean? Where had the spider come from in the first place? Whenever he had asked Maude these questions she had smiled strangely to herself and carried on stitching.

The mystery didn't end there, though. He hoped the others hadn't spotted his shock at the graveside, but those coffin handles had given him quite a turn. Instead of plain brass they were made of wrought iron, roughly resembling the creature in the glass case. He shivered and poured himself another Scotch.

Next morning, when the undertaker arrived to open his funeral parlour, Tom Roxby was waiting for him. 'Dixon, I want a word with you.' Seeing the anger in his face, the undertaker quickly ushered him inside. Not until they were safely seated in his office did he allow Tom the opportunity to speak. 'Now, Mr Roxby,' he crooned soothingly, 'what seems to be the trouble?' Tom told him. Ernest Dixon's thick black eyebrows rose in amazement. 'But you sent me a note the day after your wife died, specifically ordering them.'

'Did I hell!'

Without another word, the undertaker took a letter from a sheaf of papers on his desk and handed it to the other man. Tom read it and blanched. He recognized the blue notepaper and the writing. On a separate sheet was a neatly drawn sketch of the spider's crest handles. The notepaper was his late wife's. And so was the writing.

Tom didn't tell Dixon that. He realized that the man would have thought him demented. He simply insisted that the letter was a forgery and left.

When Tom got back from the village Rose had already arrived and was preparing a stew. He started to protest, but this time she was ready for him and would have none of it. 'Yesterday I listened to you, now I'm going to have my say,' she told him. Tom was staggering slightly from the effects of the whisky drunk at the Barley Mow following the revelation at the undertakers. 'In that case,' he said slyly, 'you had better get used to some of my baser habits.' So saying, he grabbed her to him, pinning her arms to her sides, and pulled her dress above her waist. Then he rubbed himself against her corseted tummy. Rose squealed like a schoolgirl, but quickly relaxed and whispered something in his ear. He grinned and followed her upstairs to the bedroom.

That night, after Rose had gone, Tom's sleep was punctuated by the most frightful nightmare, all the more terrifying for its realism. He dreamed that the big black spider in the case downstairs stirred, arched its back and forced open the glass lid of its prison. From there it crawled, leg by leg, down the side of the furniture, dropping with a fat plop on the stone floor. The ghastly insect, which seemed twice as large in the open, made strange hissing sounds, and from every corner of the farmhouse, ants, slugs, spiders, and beetles scurried, squirmed, slithered, and crawled to the parlour, till the floor was seething with them.

Then - horror of horrors - they formed a repulsive creeping column and followed their new-found leader up the stairs and through the open door of Tom's bedroom, where they danced a devil's tango around his twisting, tormented form.

When Tom awoke, bleary-eyed, his pyjamas were soaked in sweat and he was shivering uncontrollably. The dream

was still vivid in his mind, but of the legion of insects there was no sign. The dawn was just breaking and he decided to go downstairs and make himself some tea. Half suspecting what he might find, Tom entered the parlour and saw instantly that the glass case was empty. He substituted Scotch for tea, uncertain whether to be glad or afraid that the fearsome thing had gone. All morning, wherever he went in the house or the yard, he kept searching the ground, walking with trepidation in case the hairy beast might suddenly appear under his foot. Once, when his boot squelched in some mud, his stomach reached into his mouth and he was sick on the spot. His relief when Rose arrived was unconcealed. He never left her side all day and insisted on making love several times, agreeing frantically to her every demand, including a promise to marry her 'as soon as was decent'. Only by losing himself in her arms was he able to escape the steadily worsening vision that confronted him. Long after nightfall he still begged her to stay, but Rose refused point blank, dressing for the last time and putting on her hat and coat with the cold composure of a daily whose work was done.

Tom resolved to stay awake as long as he could, but no sooner had Rose left than he fell into a sort of trance. Slowly, out of his subconscious, the spider grew to giant size. It was sitting on an unmarked grave which he recognized as his wife's. Between the two foremost legs the spider held something which looked unpleasantly like a mouse or a rabbit. Every so often, the head portion of the great bloated shape would bend and chew ferociously.

The clouds scudded across the moonlit sky, weaving strange patterns on the silent tombs. Suddenly, the gross black object stopped feeding, and seemed to strain to catch the sound of approaching footsteps. The enormous insect moved like lightning, running through the tall grass until it melted into the shadow of the cemetery wall. The footsteps continued firmly along the path that ran alongside the cemetery down to the village. As the moon broke from behind some clouds its pale light illuminated the advancing figure of - Rose Hardcastle. She was humming contentedly to herself, totally unaware of the terrible creature just a few feet away. As her footsteps receded, one hideous hairy leg inched

into view, followed by another, and another, and another until the dreadful mutation was astride the wall. It poised there for a second, tracking the footfalls, then crept stealthily down the wall and followed the helpless woman into the darkness. Tom woke up screaming his mistress's name. He was still fully clothed and sitting in the armchair where he had fallen asleep. He stalked around in an agony of indecision. He wanted to rush out and warn her, but every time he tried to take a step towards the door his legs refused to move. Finally, helped by some more whisky, he quietened down. Perhaps, after all, it had just been an awful dream. He would know soon enough. Meantime, he made up his mind not to sleep again despite the tiredness weighing him down. He stripped to his underclothes, put his feet in a bath of cold water, and awaited the daylight.

As soon as the sun was up he dressed, armed himself with a shotgun and set out along the path to the village. As he neared the place in his dream his step grew shorter and it was only with a supreme effort of will that he forced himself to peer over the cemetery wall, shotgun raised. There was nothing but the tall grass, the tombs and, in the distance, his wife's grave. He moved on down the path, glad that his knees had stopped shaking. The path passed through a copse and at the foot of a tree he found Rose. At least, he assumed it was Rose, from one shoeless foot sticking out of the end of a thick, grey, tightly wound cocoon that otherwise totally enveloped the body. There was no movement now from the sticky mass, but she had obviously put up a grim fight for life before succumbing. Her shoes and handbag were strewn around the ground, and the bark at the base of the tree was furrowed and bloodstained where the woman had struggled to drag herself free of the suffocating mass by her fingernails. Tom tremblingly took in the terrible scene, too frightened to move, then his nerve cells responded and he ran hell for leather for the farm.

He didn't stop till he reached the house and lay panting on the floor for half an hour until he had recovered his breath. Then, shouting wildly to himself, he went round all the windows, boarding them up with planks torn bodily from the old cow shed. Finally, he locked and barred all the doors. Soon they would find Rose's body and come inves-

tigating. Perhaps they wouldn't. It didn't really matter. Instinctively, Tom knew there was no point in running or asking for protection. There was no escape unless he could somehow face the horror and overcome it. Totally exhausted, he took himself and the remains of the whisky bottle to bed.

When he awoke he realized with immense relief that for the first time in two days he had slept without the terrible nightmare attacking him. He went into the bathroom and sloshed his face. This morning he was more rational. He would leave the farm, leave the country, if necessary. He would never return. He turned off the tap, and as he did so caught a sound from somewhere below. His heart missed a beat and his stomach turned over as he stood stock still, listening for confirmation that his ears had not deceived him. They had not. There it was again. Only one door in the house squeaked like that. The cellar! The one place he had forgotten to check! He rushed for the stairs. Perhaps there was still time. Holy Mother of God, there wasn't! As he reached the stair he could already see the monstrous shape moving along the hallway. He retreated, gibbering, into the bedroom and looked wildly around for protection. The candlestick? He grabbed it up and threw it down again in disgust. The shotgun? He'd left it by his bed. In heaven's name, where was it? He whirled around in puzzlement and dismay. Of course, he had taken it to the bathroom. Must get there first. He threw open the door and slammed it again, his scream vibrating through the rafters. There it was at the head of the stairs, barring his retreat, the great thick body perched on legs like stilts, the whole covered by a mass of black hair, and that head, that terrible brooding head, staring straight at him. He scrambled across to the old oak chest standing in the corner and strained to heave it across the door. Even as the chest began to move his strength dissolved with the gradual lifting of the latch. He could imagine the furry, stick-like legs, grappling with the strange human contraption – and slowly winning! Shrieking hysterically, he rushed for the window, preferring to die on the cobbles below rather than be the victim of such an abomination. The panes smashed beneath his fists and his hands grew bloodier and bloodier as he beat pathetically on the boards with

which he had so securely barred his own exit. He couldn't bear to look round. Even so, he sensed that the door was opening under the weight of the thing gathered on the other side, and a foul, indescribable smell filled the room and choked his nostrils. His hands were in ribbons but he felt no pain, only an unbearable revulsion for the thing crawling, stiff-legged, towards him. His loathing knew no bounds and his screams reached a crescendo as the voice of his wife, seeming to come from a great distance, spoke to him.

'You should have known better than to try and get rid of me, Tom Roxby,' the voice hissed. 'You thought you were clever lacing my food with just enough arsenic to make my death seem natural. I could have had you arrested any time I liked, but I wanted to die, so I let you do the job for me. You see, I belong with the powers of darkness, and so, very soon, will you, my poor unfortunate husband.'

Tom Roxby's cries died beneath the great hairy embrace and when the spider's work was done he was completely cloaked in a thick, grey shroud of death.

AU CLAIR DE LUNE

by

CHARLES BIRKIN

THELMA was a nuisance, a most devastating bore,
Who tried to blackmail Rodney, the silly scheming whore.
Her Gallant pressed his light-o'-love to picnic in a wood;
Left her there with rodents that were very short of food,
Trussed up like a mummy, all cocooned in rope and tape,
Defenceless as a dummy while he made good his escape.

Rats abounded in the thick scrub, weasels . . . errant
mink . . .

After a few days slid by the corpse began to stink.
Her pillow was an ants' nest beside a rush-fringed pond
Below a weeping willow of which she had grown fond.
Keen 'undertaker' beetles dragged hard at her remains,
Writhing maggots bored the skull, enjoying the lady's
brains.

Soon death-caps flaunted leprous gills and pallid fleshy
cones,
The loathsome toadstools flourishing, well-nourished by her
bones.
The girl, whose life had not been pure, quickly lost her fresh
allure.

She found for death there was no cure – but made the high-
est-class manure.

They never found the body, and Rodney's in the clear.
He told his wife about it – (sweet Ann was such a dear!)
Confessing his dark secret when he was very tight,
His understanding spouse declared that he had been quite
right.

Rod picked and cooked the fungi one sparkling autumn
day.
He made a stew, when Ann had flu. She swiftly passed
away.

(Miss Tilly Davies he had met, an heiress and a little pet,
Who was, by far, his best bet yet, and on a marriage he was
set.)

His new wife was perfection – apart from her gross greed,
She'd spoon each rich confection far more than she had
need.

Her appetite was shocking, creamed mushrooms she
adored.

Sly Rodney's smile was mocking as she guzzled at his
board.

A visit to the shallow grave when the moon rides high
Should fix his mate. (Kismet! Just fate! And surely worth a
try?)

A millionaire that boy will be, gay and healthy, young and
free,

And all of it due, between you and me, to the carrion's slime
'neath the mourning tree.

OYSTERS

by

CHRISTINE TROLLOPE

'I'M TOLD YOU are fond of oysters.'

I looked up from the contemplation of the glass of gleaming pale-golden sherry in my hand, and met the even more charming sight of Monique curled like a kitten on the sofa opposite me.

'Who,' I asked, a little startled, 'told you that?'

'Rebecca, of course,' she answered, smiling deliciously, 'who else could it have been?'

Of course. Rebecca knew my tastes. We had dined and wined for almost six months in all the better-class hostelries within a twenty-mile radius. Life in a provincial town, however pretty, can be dull; in fact the prettier, the duller. And both the prettiness and the dullness of Glenhurst were reflected in its young ladies. I should know – I think I must have tried them all. Rebecca was the last and the most passable. She was almost beautiful in her dark, sombre way, and she was a good listener, and intelligent. It might in the ordinary way have lasted as long as a year. But Rebecca sounded her own knell when she introduced me to Monique.

Monique Delafontaine. French by birth and English by adoption. Actress, artist, writer, with half a lifetime of travel and experience behind her, and still young and lovely. Small and soft as thistledown, with long blonde hair and laughing grey eyes. She had met Rebecca at some party in London, and had confided to her that she wanted somewhere quiet, without any possibility of distraction, to finish her latest book. What better place could there be, Rebecca had suggested, than our sleepy little town? You couldn't be distracted there if you wanted to be (I rather thought she was wrong in this case, but that was after I met Monique). She found her a flat over a shop in a steep little street in the

shadow of the Abbey, and took me along to help move furniture about. Furniture-moving is not my *métier*, but I was curious.

One look at the newcomer, and I would have moved five divans and seven wardrobes from one end of the town to the other, if she had asked me to. Actually, she didn't. Rebecca did most of the work, and when she ran out to buy some nails to hang Monique's pictures I seized the opportunity to ask Monique to dine with me that same night. I did not, after all, have any definite arrangement with Rebecca.

And now, scarcely a week later, I was sitting, at Monique's invitation, in a flat transformed not only by her taste but by the very glow of her presence, awaiting a dinner which my short acquaintance with this amazing woman told me would be exquisite. The future, both short-term and long-term, was star-studded.

'Well,' asked Monique, breaking into my reverie again, 'are you?'

'I'm sorry, I was just looking at you. Am I what?'

'Fond of oysters.'

'They're my favourite dish.'

'So Rebecca said. I've got a treat for you, then. You're going to start your dinner with a dozen of them. I had them specially sent up from the coast today, and I've had them on crushed ice for the past two hours.' She drained her sherry glass and stood up. 'Go and sit at the table, and I'll bring them.'

I did as she told me, admiring the snowy cloth and the sparkling glass and cutlery. In a moment she was back with a plate and a tall, slim bottle.

'Not champagne, you see. Dry white wine.'

I smiled approval, and she sat opposite me and filled my glass and hers from the delicately misted bottle. The fresh sea-scent of the oysters wooed my nostrils. There was thin brown bread and butter, and slices of lemon all ready to squeeze.

'Oysters,' I purred. 'The rich man's delight. And yet Dickens said – do you remember? – that oysters and poverty always seem to go together. Times have changed.'

She laughed, and the corners of her eyes crinkled impishly. 'If we're quoting I can give you an older one. I think

it's James I who's supposed to have said "He was a bold man who first swallowed an oyster".'

'Then he didn't know what he was talking about. There's nothing more natural or more delightful. Man was made for oysters and oysters were made for man.'

I took a shell reverently in my fingers, seasoned the contents lightly, squeezed a piece of lemon, and tilted back my head. The oyster slid cool and caressing down my throat. I waited a moment – too much haste would have been almost sacrilege – and then sipped my wine. It was perfect.

Then I noticed that she was not eating. 'Don't you like them?' I asked.

'Yes, I like them. But I won't have one now. I got them for you, Julian.'

It was the first time she had called me by my name, and the pleasure of it thrilled down my spine.

'Has Rebecca told you a lot about me?'

'Oh yes – we've talked about you for hours.'

Her grey eyes held a suspicion of mockery which made me feel slightly uncomfortable. To keep myself in countenance, I said, 'Of course she told me a lot about you, too.'

'Did she? What, for instance?' The mockery was still there.

'What stories you can tell. And that you'd tell me one if I asked you.' I paused with an oyster shell halfway to my mouth. 'Tell me a story, Monique.'

She laughed again. The mockery was gone, and it was the pure happy laughter of a child. But there was something else there too – the delighted triumph of a child that has been playing a game with itself and won.

'All right,' she answered, 'why not?'

She sat with the shaded lamp making a halo of her bright hair, and her light beautiful voice flowed like a stream over pebbles. I swallowed oysters and listened.

'I'll tell you a story,' she began, 'which I heard from my mother. It happened a long time ago, when she was quite a young woman, before I was born. And of course it's true.'

She raised her glass to her lips and looked at me over it for a moment.

'She lived at that time,' she went on, 'in an old, stone cottage in a small village hidden away among the mountains in the centre of France. There was another cottage just like it next door, and in this second cottage there lived a couple with one little girl, a charming child, perhaps eight years old, certainly no more. They were poor people, but very respectable; I think the man worked on one of the farms – a shepherd or something like that. My mother was poor, too. Life at that time, and in that part of France, was primitive.'

I put down the shell I had just picked up, and stared at the beautiful elegant creature opposite me.

'You don't believe me, do you?' She gave me a direct, suddenly unsmiling look. 'But remember I told you the story was true.'

I nodded, and she rewarded me with a smile.

'Because life was primitive, there was a lot of disease. Obscure wasting illnesses, infections, tuberculosis – I don't know. Those people were uncivilized by your standards and mine, and they didn't worry about germs, and it wouldn't have helped them much if they had. Anyway, the young woman next door to my mother fell suddenly ill with a high fever. My mother did her best, but the poor girl lay for two days, moaning and muttering and recognizing no one, not even her little daughter. And on the third day, when everyone had decided it was time to fetch the doctor from the other side of the mountain, she died.

'My mother had seen death before, and did not shrink from the sight of it. So while the unhappy husband made the long journey on foot to the town to arrange for the *pompes funèbres* – for that was of the first importance, however poor you were – she busied herself with laying her neighbour out. And when she had finished, the poor woman made a corpse worth seeing, lying there so still and peaceful, in her best white nightgown, with her hair neatly braided, and her rosary between her clasped hands. My mother was nothing if not an artist.

'Now the little girl – her name, I think, was Rozanne – had been under my mother's roof for two days. She was a quiet, good child, and no trouble at all. But now my mother – who, you must understand, was a pious woman – realized that it was time for Rozanne to return and pay her respects

to the dead. So she took the child by the hand and gently led her next door.

“Kneel, little one,” she said, “and pray that Our Lady and Saint Eloi may take your mother’s soul into Paradise. I shall come back and fetch you.”

Then, because she had a *pot au feu* that might burn if it were not stirred, she went back to her own house and left the girl to her devotions.

I could contain myself no longer. ‘Do you mean,’ I interrupted, ‘that she left that poor child alone with . . . with . . .’

‘My dear Julian,’ replied Monique, ‘we are not as squeamish as you. That child had seen her grandmother die, and had even helped to lay out the body. No, she was not afraid to approach her mother. In fact I suppose that was the main reason for what happened next.’

She paused. By now I was completely under the spell of that hypnotic voice. ‘And what *did* happen next?’ I whispered.

‘For most of this time, you understand, my mother was not in the room. But she heard it all, as you will see, from Rozanne herself, and there was no reason to suppose that the girl was not telling the truth.’

‘When my mother had gone out, Rozanne knelt obediently at the bedside and said a Paternoster and several Aves. Then she got to her feet and began to look about her. She had been told not to stir until she was fetched, and she was, as I have said, a good child. But she was bored, naturally, and because it was her Maman lying dead, and she was only eight, she cried a little. A tear fell on the corpse’s cold cheek, and without thinking she stooped and licked it off. It tasted quite pleasant. Then suddenly she thought she saw another of her tears at the corner of her mother’s eye. She licked and went on licking, and the cool salt taste continued for a long time. She liked it. She breathed deeply, and her mouth seemed to fill with the coolness and saltiness. It was delicious. Something glutinous and tough was lying against her teeth. She bit, ecstatically, and felt the cool salt taste slipping sweetly down her throat.’

‘At that moment my mother came in to fetch the child. But she came to a sudden halt just inside the door, crying

out despite herself with astonishment. One of the eyes of the corpse was missing.'

'Good . . . God.' I felt a little sick. Monique, as a storyteller, was more than convincing. 'What did she do – your mother? Did she scream, or faint, or what?'

'My mother? Never. She took Rozanne by the hand and asked her what had happened, and Rozanne told her what I have just told you.'

'How terrible. And I suppose then she hurried the child away and sent for help.'

'Oh no. My mother was like me – she believed that no chance of a new experience should be wasted. And there was still the other eye . . .'

Through a mist, I saw Monique's smiling face. She was holding out a plate to me.

'Dear Julian,' she was beseeching, '*do* have the last oyster.'

MINUKE

by

NIGEL KNEALE

THE ESTATE AGENT kept an uncomfortable silence until we reached his car. 'Frankly, I wish you hadn't got wind of that,' he said. 'Don't know how you did: I thought I had the whole thing carefully disposed of. Oh, please get in.'

He pulled his door shut and frowned. 'It puts me in a rather awkward spot. I suppose I'd better tell you all I know about that case, or you'd be suspecting me of heaven knows what kinds of chicanery in your own.'

As we set off to see the property I was interested in, he shifted the cigarette to the side of his mouth.

'It's quite a distance, so I can tell you on the way there,' he said. 'We'll pass the very spot, as a matter of fact, and you can see it for yourself. Such as there is to see.'

It was away back before the war (said the estate agent). At the height of the building boom. You remember how it was: ribbon development in full blast everywhere; speculative builders sticking things up almost overnight. Though at least you could get a house when you wanted it in those days.

I've always been careful in what I handle – I want you to understand that. Then one day I was handed a packet of coast-road bungalows, for letting. Put up by one of these gone tomorrow firms, and bought by a local man. I can't say I exactly jumped for joy, but for once the things looked all right, and – business is inclined to be business.

The desirable residence you heard about stood at the end of the row. Actually, it seemed to have the best site. On a sort of natural platform, as it were, raised above road level and looking straight out over the sea. Like all the rest, it had a simple two-bedroom, lounge, living-room, kitchen, bathroom layout. Red-tiled roof, roughcast walls. Ornamental

portico, garden-strip all round. Sufficiently far from town, but with all conveniences.

It was taken by a man named Pritchard. Cinema projectionist, I think he was. Wife, a boy of ten or so, and a rather younger daughter. Oh – and dog, one of those black, lop-eared animals. They christened the place ‘Minuke’, M-I-N-U-K-E. My Nook. Yes, that’s what I said too. And not even the miserable excuse of its being phonetically correct. Still hardly worse than most.

Well, at the start everything seemed quite jolly. The Pritchards settled in and busied themselves with rearing a privet hedge and shoving flowers in. They’d paid the first quarter in advance and, as far as I was concerned, were out of the picture for a bit.

Then, about a fortnight after they’d moved in, I had a telephone call from Mrs P. to say there was something odd about the kitchen tap. Apparently the thing had happened twice. The first time was when her sister was visiting them, and tried to fill the kettle: no water would come through for a long time, then suddenly it squirted violently and almost soaked the woman. I gather the Pritchards hadn’t really believed this – thought she was trying to find fault with their little nest – it had never happened before, and she couldn’t make it happen again. Then, about a week later, it did: with Mrs Pritchard this time. After her husband had examined the tap and could find nothing wrong with it, he decided the water supply must be faulty. So they got on to me.

I went round personally, as it was the first complaint from any of these bungalows. The tap seemed normal, and I remember asking if the schoolboy son could have been experimenting with their main stop, when Mrs Pritchard, who had been fiddling with the tap, suddenly said, ‘Quick, look at this! It’s off now!’ They were quite cocky about its happening when I was there.

It really was odd. I turned the tap to the limit, but – not a drop! Not even the sort of gasping gurgle you hear when the supply is turned off at the main. After a couple of minutes, though, it came on. Water shot out with, I should say, about ten times normal force, as if it had been held under pressure. Then gradually it died down and ran steadily.

Both children were in the room with us until we all dodged out of the door to escape a soaking – it had splashed all over the ceiling – so they couldn't have been up to any tricks. I promised the Pritchards to have the pipes checked. Before returning to town, I called at the next two bungalows in the row: neither of the tenants had had any trouble at all with the water. I thought, well, that localized it at least.

When I reached my office there was a telephone message waiting, from Pritchard. I rang him back and he was obviously annoyed. 'Look here,' he said, 'not ten minutes after you left, we've had something else happen! The wall of the large bedroom's cracked from top to bottom. Big pieces of plaster fell, and the bed's in a terrible mess.' And then he said, 'You wouldn't have got me in a jerry-built place like this if I'd known!'

I had plasterers on the job next morning, and the whole water supply to 'Minuke' under examination. For about three days there was peace. The tap behaved itself, and absolutely nothing was found to be wrong. I was annoyed at what seemed to have been unnecessary expenditure. It looked as if the Pritchards were going to be difficult – and I've had my share of that type: fault-finding cranks occasionally carry eccentricity to the extent of a little private destruction, to prove their points. I was on the watch from now on.

Then it came again.

Pritchard rang me at my home, before nine in the morning. His voice sounded a bit off. Shaky.

'For God's sake can you come round here right away,' he said. 'Tell you about it when you get here.' And then he said, almost fiercely, but quietly and close to the mouthpiece, 'There's something damned queer about this place!' Dramatizing is a typical feature of all cranks, I thought, but particularly the little mousy kind, like Pritchard.

I went to 'Minuke' and found that Mrs Pritchard was in bed, in a state of collapse. The doctor had given her a sleeping dose.

Pritchard told me a tale that was chiefly remarkable for the expression on his face as he told it.

I don't know if you're familiar with the layout of that type of bungalow? The living-room is in front of the

house, with the kitchen behind it. To get from one to the other you have to use the little hallway, through two doors. But for convenience at mealtimes, there's a serving-hatch in the wall between these rooms. A small wooden door slides up and down over the hatch opening.

'The wife was just passing a big plate of bacon and eggs through from the kitchen,' Pritchard told me, 'when the hatch door came down on her wrists. I saw it and I heard her yell. I thought the cord must've snapped, so I said, "All right, all right!" and went to pull it up because it's only a light wooden frame.'

Pritchard was a funny colour, and as far as I could judge, it was genuine.

'Do you know, it wouldn't come! I got my fingers under it and heaved, but it might have weighed two hundredweight. Once it gave an inch or so, and then pressed harder. That was it - it was *pressing* down! I heard the wife groan. I said, "Hold on!" and ripped round through the hall. When I got into the kitchen she was on the floor, fainted. And the hatch door was hitched up as right as ninepence. That gave me a turn!' He sat down, quite deflated: it didn't appear to be put on. Still, ordinary neurotics can be almost as troublesome as out-and-out cranks.

I tested the hatch, gingerly; and, of course, the cords were sound and it ran easily.

'Possibly a bit stiff at times, being new,' I said. 'They're apt to jam if you're rough with them.' And then, 'By the way, just what were you hinting on the phone?'

He looked at me. It was warm sunlight outside, with a bus passing. Normal enough to take the mike out of Frankenstein's monster. 'Never mind,' he said, and gave a sheepish half-grin. 'But of - well, funny construction in this house, though, eh?'

I'm afraid I was rather outspoken with him.

Let alone any twaddle about a month-old bungalow being haunted, I was determined to clamp down on this 'jerry-building' talk. Perhaps I was beginning to have doubts myself.

I wrote straight off to the building company when I'd managed to trace them, busy developing an arterial road about three counties away. I dare say my letter was on the

insinuating side: I think I asked if they had any record of difficulties in the construction of this bungalow. At any rate I got a sniffy reply by return, stating that the matter was out of their hands: in addition, their records were not available for discussion. Blind alley.

In the meantime, things at 'Minuke' had worsened to a really frightening degree. I dreaded the phone ringing. One morning the two Pritchards senior awoke to find that nearly all the furniture in their bedroom had been moved about, including the bed they had been sleeping in: they had felt absolutely nothing. Food became suddenly and revoltingly decomposed. All the chimney pots had come down, not just into the garden, but to the far side of the high road, except one which appeared, pulverized, on the living-room floor. The obvious attempts of the Pritchards to keep a rational outlook had underlined most of my suspicions by this time.

I managed to locate a local man who had been employed during the erection of the bungalows as an extra hand. He had worked only on the foundations of 'Minuke', but what he had to say was interesting.

They had found the going slow because of striking a layer of enormous flat stones, apparently trimmed slate, but as the site was otherwise excellent, they pressed on, using the stone as foundation where it fitted in with the plan, and laying down rubble where it didn't. The concrete skin over the rubble – my ears burned when I heard about that, I can tell you – this wretched so-called concrete had cracked, or shattered, several times. Which wasn't entirely surprising, if it had been laid as he described. The flat stones, he said, had not been seriously disturbed. A workmate had referred to them as 'a giant's grave', so it was possibly an old burial mound. Norse, perhaps – those are fairly common along this coast – or even very much older.

Apart from this – I'm no diehard skeptic, I may as well confess – I was beginning to admit modest theories about a poltergeist, in spite of a lack of corroborative knockings and ornament throwing. There were two young children in the house, and the lore has it that kids are often unconsciously connected with phenomena of that sort, though usually

adolescents. Still, in the real-estate profession you have to be careful, and if I could see the Pritchards safely off the premises without airing these possibilities, it might be kindest to the bungalow's future.

I went to 'Minuke' the same afternoon.

It was certainly turning out an odd nook. I found a departing policeman on the doorstep. That morning the back door had been burst in by a hundredweight or so of soil, and Mrs Pritchard was trying to convince herself that a practical joker had it in for them. The policeman had taken some notes, and was giving vague advice about 'civil action' which showed that he was out of his depth.

Pritchard looked very tired, almost ill. 'I've got leave from my job, to look after them,' he said, when we were alone. I thought he was wise. He had given his wife's illness as the reason, and I was glad of that.

'I don't believe in – unnatural happenings,' he said.

I agreed with him, non-committally.

'But I'm afraid of what ideas the kids might get. They're both at impressionable ages, y'know.'

I recognized the symptoms without disappointment. 'You mean, you'd rather move elsewhere,' I said.

He nodded. 'I like the district, mind you. But what I—'

There was a report like a gun in the very room.

I found myself with both arms up to cover my face. There were tiny splinters everywhere, and a dust of fibre in the air. The door had exploded. Literally.

To hark back to constructional details, it was one of those light, hollow frame-and-plywood jobs. As you'll know, it takes considerable force to splinter plywood; well, this was in tiny fragments. And the oddest thing was that we had felt no blast effect.

In the next room I heard their dog howling. Pritchard was as stiff as a poker.

'I felt it!' he said. 'I felt this lot coming. I've got to know-ing when something's likely to happen. It's all around!' Of course I began to imagine I'd sensed something too, but I doubt if I had really; my shock came with the crash. Mrs Pritchard was in the doorway by this time with the kids behind her. He motioned them out and grabbed my arm.

'The thing is,' he whispered, 'that I can still feel it! Stron-

ger than ever, by God! Look, will you stay at home tonight, in case I need – well, in case things get worse? I can phone you.'

On my way back I called at the town library and managed to get hold of a volume on supernatural possession and what-not. Yes, I was committed now. But the library didn't specialize in that line, and when I opened the book at home, I found it was very little help. 'Vampires of south-eastern Europe' type of stuff. I came across references to something the jargon called an 'elemental' which I took to be a good deal more vicious and destructive than any poltergeist. A thoroughly nasty form of manifestation, if it existed. Those Norse gravestones were fitting into the picture uncomfortably well; it was fashionable in those days to be buried with all the trimmings, human sacrifice, and even more unmentionable attractions.

But I read on. After half a chapter on zombis and Rumanian werewolves, the whole thing began to seem so fantastic that I turned seriously to working out methods of exploding somebody's door as a practical joke. Even a totally certifiable joker would be likelier than vampires. In no time I'd settled down with a whisky, doodling wiring diagrams, and only occasionally – like twinges of conscience – speculating on contacting the psychic investigation people.

When the phone rang I was hardly prepared for it.

It was a confused, distant voice, gabbling desperately, but I recognized it as Pritchard. 'For God's sake, don't lose a second! Get here – it's all hell on earth! Can't you hear it? My God, I'm going crazy!' And in the background I thought I was able to hear something. A sort of bubbling, shushing 'wah-wah' noise. Indescribable. But you hear some odd sounds on telephones at any time.

'Yes,' I said, 'I'll come immediately. Why don't you all leave—' But the line had gone dead.

Probably I've never moved faster. I scrambled out to the car with untied shoes flopping, though I remembered to grab a heavy stick in the hall – whatever use it was to be. I drove like fury, heart belting, straight to 'Minuke', expecting to see heaven knows what.

But everything looked still and normal there. The moon

was up and I could see the whole place clearly. Curtained lights in the windows. Not a sound. I rang. After a moment Pritchard opened the door. He was quiet and seemed almost surprised to see me.

I pushed inside. 'Well?' I said. 'What's happened?'

'Not a thing, so far,' he said. 'That's why I didn't expect—'

I felt suddenly angry. 'Look here,' I said, 'what are you playing at? Seems to me that any hoaxing around here begins a lot nearer home than you'd have me believe!' Then the penny dropped. I saw by the fright in his face that he knew something had gone wrong. That was the most horrible, sickening moment of the whole affair for me.

'Didn't you ring?' I said.

And he shook his head.

I've been in some tight spots. But there was always some concrete, actual business in hand to screw the mind safely down to. I suppose panic is when the subconscious breaks loose and everything in your head dashes screaming out. It was only just in time that I found a touch of the concrete and actual. A kiddie's paintbox on the floor, very watery.

'The children,' I said. 'Where are they?'

'Wife's just putting the little 'un to bed. She's been restless tonight: just wouldn't go, crying and difficult. Arthur's in the bathroom. Look here, what's happened?'

I told him, making it as short and matter of fact as I could. He turned ghastly.

'Better get them dressed and out of here right away,' I said. 'Make some excuse, not to alarm them.'

He'd gone before I finished speaking.

I smoked hard, trying to build up the idea of 'Hoax! Hoax!' in my mind. After all, it could have been. But I knew it wasn't.

Everything looked cosy and normal. Clock ticking. Fire red and mellow. Half-empty cocoa mug on the table. The sound of the sea from beyond the road. I went through to the kitchen. The dog was there, looking up from its sleeping-basket under the sink. 'Good dog,' I said, and it wriggled its tail.

Pritchard came in from the hall. He jumped when he saw me.

'Getting nervy!' he said. 'They won't be long, I don't know where we can go if we – well, if we have to – to leave tonight—'

'My car's outside,' I told him. 'I'll fix you up. Look here, did you ever "hear things"? Odd noises?' I hadn't told him that part of the telephone call.

He looked at me so oddly I thought he was going to collapse.

'I don't know,' he said. 'Can you?'

'At this moment?'

I listened.

'No,' I said. 'The clock on the shelf. The sea. Nothing else. No.'

'The sea,' he said, barely whispering. 'But you can't hear the sea in this kitchen!'

He was close to me in an instant. Absolutely terrified. 'Yes, I have heard this before! I think we all have. I said it was the sea: so as not to frighten them. But it isn't. And I recognized it when I came in here just now. That's what made me start. It's getting louder: it does that.'

He was right. Like slow breathing. It seemed to emanate from inside the walls, not at a particular spot, but everywhere. We went into the hall, then the front room: it was the same there. Mixed with it now was a sort of thin crying.

'That's Nellie,' Pritchard said. 'The dog: she always whimpers when it's on – too scared to howl. My God, I've never heard it as loud as this before!'

'Hurry them up, will you!' I almost shouted. He went.

The 'breathing' was ghastly. Slobbering. Stertorous, I think the term is. And faster. Oh, yes, I recognized it. The background music to the phone message. My skin was pure ice.

'Come along!' I yelled. I switched on the little radio to drown the noise. The old National Programme, as it was in those days, for late dance music. Believe it or not, what came through that loudspeaker was the same vile sighing noise, at double the volume. And when I tried to switch off, it stayed the same.

The whole bungalow was trembling. The Pritchards came running in, she carrying the little girl. 'Get them into the car,' I shouted. We heard glass smashing somewhere.

Above our heads there was an almighty thump. Plaster showered down.

Halfway out of the door the little girl screamed, 'Nellie! Where's Nellie? Nellie, Nellie!'

'The dog!' Pritchard moaned. 'Oh, curse it!' He dragged them outside. I dived for the kitchen, where I'd seen the animal, feeling a lunatic for doing it. Plaster was springing out of the walls in painful showers.

In the kitchen I found water everywhere. One tap was squirting like a fire hose. The other was missing, water belching across the window from a torn end of pipe.

'Nellie!' I called.

Then I saw the dog. It was lying near the oven, quite stiff. Round its neck was twisted a piece of painted piping with the other tap on the end.

Sheer funk got me then. The ground was moving under me. I bolted down the hall, nearly bumped into Pritchard. I yelled and shoved. I could actually feel the house at my back.

We got outside. The noise was like a dreadful snoring, with rumbles and crashes thrown in. One of the lights went out. 'Nellie's run away,' I said, and we all got into the car, the kids bawling. I started up. People were coming out of the other bungalows – they're pretty far apart and the din was just beginning to make itself felt. Pritchard mumbled, 'We can stop now. Think it'd be safe to go back and grab some of the furniture?' As if he was at a fire; but I don't think he knew what he was doing.

'Daddy – look!' screeched the boy.

We saw it. The chimney of 'Minuke' was going up in a horrible way. In the moonlight it seemed to grow, quite slowly, to about sixty feet, like a giant crooked finger. And then – burst. I heard bricks thumping down. Somewhere somebody screamed.

There was a glare like an ungodly great lightning flash. It lasted for a second or so.

Of course we were dazzled, but I thought I saw the whole of 'Minuke' fall suddenly and instantaneously flat, like a swatted fly. I probably did, because that's what happened, anyway.

There isn't much more to tell.

Nobody was really hurt, and we were able to put down the whole thing to a serious electrical fault. Main fuses had blown throughout the whole district, which helped this theory out. Perhaps it was unfortunate in another respect, because a lot of people changed over to gas.

There wasn't much recognizable left of 'Minuke'. But some of the bits were rather unusual. Knots in pipes, for instance – I buried what was left of the dog myself. Wood and brick cleanly sliced. Small quantities of completely powdered metal. The lath had been squashed flat, like tin foil. In fact, Pritchard was lucky to land the insurance money for his furniture.

My professional problem, of course, remained. The plot where the wretched place had stood. I managed to persuade the owner it wasn't ideal for building on. Incidentally, lifting those stones might reveal something to somebody some day – but not to me, thank you!

I think my eventual solution showed a touch of wit: I let it very cheaply as a scrap-metal dump.

Well? I know I've never been able to make any sense out of it. I hate telling you all this stuff, because it must make me seem either a simpleton or a charlatan. In so far as there's any circumstantial evidence in looking at the place, you can see it in a moment or two. Here's the coast road . . .

The car pulled up at a bare spot beyond a sparse line of bungalows. The space was marked by a straggling, tufty square of privet bushes. Inside I could see a tangle of rusting iron: springs, a car chassis, oil drums.

'The hedge keeps it from being too unsightly,' said the estate agent, as we crossed to it. 'See – the remains of the gate.'

A few half-rotten slats dangled from an upright. One still bore part of a chrome-plated name. 'MI—' and, a little farther on, 'K'.

'Nothing worth seeing now,' he said. I peered inside. 'Not that there ever was much – look out!' I felt a violent push. In the same instant something zipped past my head and crashed against the car behind. 'My God! Went right at you!' gasped the agent.

It had shattered a window of the car and gone through the open door opposite. We found it in the road beyond, sizzling on the tarmac. A heavy steel nut, white-hot.

'I don't know about you,' the estate agent said, 'but I'm rather in favour of getting out of here.'

And we did. Quickly.

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THE EASIEST THING IN THE WORLD

by

BARRY MARTIN

IT WAS VERY easy to kill the goldfish.

I stood watching the fish swimming lazily around for some time before I poured the sulphuric acid into the bowl. A few drops at first – which made it swim a little faster – and then, finally, the whole bottle. I wore gloves, just in case the acid got on to my hands and I stood back and watched as the acid mingled with the water, making the contents of the bowl rise to its rim.

The fish swam round and round and up and down, which reminded me of one of those horses on a roundabout at the fair. It then went quite mad as the acid gripped it spitefully, eating into it and devouring it completely.

Now the budgie will have nothing to torment. It used to perch on the edge of the bowl, with its head on one side, and eye the fish, as if it were about to dive in after it.

I looked from the budgie to the mincer in the kitchen.

It was very easy to kill the budgie.

It squawked as I put my hand inside the cage and grabbed hold of it. It was still squawking when I put it, head first, in the top of the mincer and began to turn the handle. It then went silent as the first part of its mashed body plopped on to the kitchen table in bloody red lumps. Its tiny bones cracked and snapped as the mincer ground away.

I scooped up its remains, which were now a thick, red pulp mixed with yellow entrails and feathers, placed them in a paper bag and deposited them in the dustbin.

Now the cat will have nothing to torment. It used to jump up on the chair beside the cage and vainly try to insert one of its paws in between the bars.

I looked from the cat to the fire in the grate.

It was very easy to kill the cat.

I picked it up and stroked it as I walked towards the fire,

and then I placed it – oh, so gently – into the flames. It at once tried to get out, but I held it in and pinned it down on to the coals with the poker. The smell of burning fur surged out into the room and nothing could be heard except a few pops and crackles in the embers.

I fetched in some coal, put it on the charred bones and stirred the fire, as it roared noisily up the chimney.

Now the dog will have nothing to torment. It used to chase the cat around the garden, barking and yelping at it, until it was forced to climb a tree, or jump up on top of the shed for safety.

I looked from the dog to the tin of paint.

It was very easy to kill the dog.

The dog struggled a bit more than the cat, for it never did like being picked up, and it looked at me with large, appealing eyes as I grasped it around the throat with one hand and raised the paint tin with the other. I poured half a tin of the bilious-blue paint into its mouth. It spluttered and retched and thrashed its legs about so much that I had difficulty in keeping its mouth open to receive the remainder of the tin.

Paint, mingled with vomit, fell on to the carpet and on to me. A daub of blue, mingled with a lump of mottled sputum, landed on my shoe, but finally the beast died and its blue-filled body slumped to the floor.

My wife will miss the dog – and the cat, and the fish, and the budgie. She loved them all. She will miss them. If I were to kill myself she would miss me. If I were to kill myself she would have no one to nag. No one to torment.

If she had loved me as she had loved the animals, things would have been better. Much better.

There goes the front door bell. That's my wife now. She's left her key upstairs on the dressing-table. I saw it there this morning. I open the door for her.

I look from my wife to the cement mixer in the road outside the house.

It will be very easy to kill my wife.

THE BABYSITTER

by

DULCIE GRAY

THERE WAS SOMETHING odd about her, but Mrs Levy couldn't make out what it was. She was monstrously fat, of course, with enormous legs and a pale, sulky face, but it was something more that made Mrs Levy hesitate. The girl had given her age as sixteen, and had produced an excellent reference from Lady Barlborough, who God knows was a pillar of respectability, but all the same—

Mrs Levy looked at her thoughtfully. Was it something about the eyes? A slight upward slant, which wasn't exactly oriental in its effect — unless perhaps Mongolian? They were, in fact, curious eyes. Brown, with green flecks in them, and had the sort of opaque look that wild animals sometimes have. Her mouth, too, was a little slack, and her fingernails were bitten to the quick, and yet Lady Barlborough had called her 'utterly trustworthy'.

Miss Courtney was checking on the reference now, but it was certainly puzzling.

The difficulty was that Mrs Levy didn't want to let Mrs Primrose down. Mrs Primrose was a dear little woman, and had been coming to the agency regularly for five years. She was extremely appreciative of Mrs Levy's efforts to help her, which you couldn't say for most of the clients, and tonight was a very important night for her. She'd had quite a struggle to keep going when her husband had decided to throw up his job as a schoolmaster and become a full-time writer, but he'd made good, and tonight his publishers were throwing a big party for him to celebrate the publication of his third novel (which must be because they thought it would be successful), and though Mrs Primrose had managed to park her two older children with friends for the evening, she couldn't get anyone to look after the baby, so she needed a babysitter urgently.

And every babysitter on Mrs Levy's books was busy.

Then this girl, Marlene Higgs, had walked into the office and said she wanted to be a babysitter, and that she was free this very evening, which would have been a wonderful coincidence, if only Mrs Levy hadn't got this unpleasant feeling about her.

Miss Courtney returned, and nodded briskly. So Lady Barlborough really did recommend the girl! She must be all right. Then that was settled, thank Heaven!

'We'd better arrange your terms,' said Mrs Levy brightly, 'after which I'll ring Mrs Primrose and let her know that you will be with her at 5.30 this evening. Don't be late, please. This is her address. 54 Regent's Avenue, NW1 which is not far from Regent's Park. You know the district?'

The girl nodded. She looked very pleased to have landed the job; indeed, really rather excited. Her cheeks were flushed and she was darting her tongue over her lips.

'I shouldn't like her to come and babysit for *me*,' thought Mrs Levy dubiously. However, it was probably only for this once, and if she didn't send her, Mrs Primrose wouldn't be able to go to the party.

Marlene Higgs went out of the office after putting Mrs Primrose's address carefully into a worn, black handbag, and both Mrs Levy and Miss Courtney watched her go.

'Did you notice anything odd about that girl, Courtney?' asked Mrs Levy, as soon as the door had shut behind her.

'Only that she was very fat,' said Miss Courtney.

'Nothing else?'

'No. Why?'

'Good,' said Mrs Levy. 'I'm glad. I was probably only imagining things.' She drew the telephone towards her, and dialled the number of the Primroses' flat.

Mrs Primrose answered the door herself. Marlene was standing slouched on the doorstep, but as soon as she saw the older woman she straightened her shoulders and smiled ingratiatingly.

'I'm Marlene Higgs, your babysitter,' she said, in her high, whining, slightly Cockney voice.

'Oh, yes! How very kind of you to come!' beamed Mrs

Primrose. 'I hear you've been working for Lady Barlbrough. Do come in.'

She led the girl through the hall and down a corridor, and opened a door on the left, which was a nursery. The room was decorated entirely in blue and white, and in a white heavily-draped cot a baby was lying asleep under a pale blue blanket. Mrs Primrose looked at him adoringly. 'This is Martin,' she said. 'He's four months old. He won't give you any trouble.'

He was a very beautiful baby.

Marlene looked down at the baby too, but with a blank expression. 'I'm sure he won't,' she said softly.

Something in her tone made Mrs Primrose glance at Marlene sharply, but the girl was smiling now and had a little colour in her cheeks.

'I've left you some chicken and ham sandwiches in case you get hungry,' went on Mrs Primrose, nodding towards a tray on a side table by the window, 'and a thermos of coffee. You'll find sugar on the tray if you need it. The television is left switched on to BBC 1, but you can have which channel you want, of course. Provided you have it on softly, Martin won't wake, and we shall be back in about three hours. If you need us we shall be at Arthur Munney's, the publishers. Here's the telephone number. The fire is an electric one as you see, and I've left some magazines and books on the chair by the cot. Is there anything else you want?'

'No thanks,' said Marlene.

'You're used to babies, of course?'

'Of course,' agreed Marlene.

'How long did you work for Lady Barlbrough?'

'For nearly a year,' said Marlene. 'I lived in.'

'Is she as charming as they say?' asked Mrs Primrose.

'She's very nice,' replied Marlene placidly.

'Well I'd better be going,' said Mrs Primrose. 'I don't want to be late. It's a very important evening for my husband. He's having his third novel published this week, and the publishers are so pleased with it that they are giving a party for him. Isn't that wonderful?' She spoke proudly.

'Very nice,' said Marlene unemotionally.

Mr Primrose opened the door. 'Come along, Janet,' he said. 'Time we were off.'

'This is Miss Higgs, who has so kindly come to look after Martin, darling,' said Mrs Primrose.

Marlene nodded and Mr Primrose said, 'How do you do,' politely, but impatiently.

'Sure you'll be all right?' Mrs Primrose asked Marlene. Like Mrs Levy, she felt extremely reluctant to leave the job in this girl's hands. Martin was the most treasured possession she had. But surely Lady Barlbrough couldn't have praised Miss Higgs so highly after a year, if she was no good at her work? And Mrs Levy had said that Miss Courtney had checked with Lady Barlbrough personally, too. She tried to dismiss her anxiety.

She looked inquiringly at her husband, but he was waiting for her by the door, nervous and tense.

Mrs Primrose kissed the baby several times, said goodbye to Marlene, and finally left the nursery with her husband. Marlene heard her say, 'You look very nice, James, very distinguished,' as she went down the passage, and Mr Primrose replying 'And you look very pretty, dear. Come along. We shall be late.' Marlene pulled a face.

The front door slammed, and Marlene wandered inquisitively round the room, finally coming to rest by the sandwiches and coffee. She lifted up the napkin and saw with approval that there were four rounds of chicken and ham, then after listening for a moment for any sound from the baby, she went on a slow tour of the entire flat. She wrinkled her nose in disgust at the other children's bedrooms, took no interest in the kitchen, the bathroom, or Mr Primrose's dressing room, then went into the drawing room. Here she tried all the sofas and chairs for comfort, bouncing on them all in turn. She peered at the pictures and photographs, helped herself to a whisky and soda from the side-board, which made her cough a little, and went into Mrs Primrose's bedroom.

She went right through all the drawers, trying on all the jewellery that she found, and examining the underclothes and sweaters. She sprayed herself with scent, put on some eye make-up, including a pair of false eyelashes, and was just about to try on a ponyskin coat from the wardrobe when she heard the baby cry. She hesitated for a moment, then shrugged her shoulders and put on the coat. It didn't fit

anywhere, being much too small, but she paraded in front of the long mirror in it for a while, then returned, still wearing the coat and false eyelashes, to the drawing-room, where she looked up a telephone number which was written on an envelope in her handbag. The baby had now fallen silent.

Marlene heard the ringing tone, then a girl's voice, well-educated and low-pitched, said quietly, 'Hello.'

'Hello,' said Marlene. 'May I speak to Lady Barlborough, please?'

'Who wants her?'

'My name is Marlene Higgs.'

The girl on the other end of the telephone dissolved into giggles. 'My Lord, Marlene!' she said. 'I didn't recognize your voice! I thought you might be a fuzz trap. Wow! Are you at the Flowers or whatever they're called, minding the goddam baby?'

'The Primroses. Yes.'

'What's it like?'

'Not bad. A bit crummy, but worth a workover. Sandwiches too, and plenty of drink. How long will it take you to get here? We've got about two and a half hours apparently. Say two hours, to be absolutely safe.'

'Ten minutes in a taxi.'

'Come on then.'

'OK.'

Marlene poured herself a second whisky and turned on the television. Suddenly the telephone shrilled. She picked up the receiver. 'Hello?'

'Is that you, Miss Higgs?'

'Yes, Mrs Primrose.' My God! What had happened? Was the silly little fool coming back? How on earth could she explain Alice's presence if she was?

'Is everything all right, Miss Higgs?'

'Yes, Mrs Primrose.'

'Martin still asleep?'

'Yes, Mrs Primrose.'

'Nothing worrying you?'

'No, Mrs Primrose.'

'Good. I just wanted to know.'

'Thank you, Mrs Primrose.'

'Thank you, Miss Higgs.'

Silly bitch, silly bitch. "Thank you Mrs Primrose. Thank you very much. And serve you bloody right that you're going to cop it tonight for giving me such a fright. What do you want to telephone for, you old cow? I'd like to see your face Mrs Primrose, when you and that distinguished husband of yours come home and find what me and Alice have done! The flat ransacked, and the place a bloody shambles. It'll be a laugh, Mrs Primrose. A real old giggle." Marlene turned up the volume on the television again. How stupid people were! They let absolute strangers into their houses, and then got excitable if things went wrong!

She and Alice had been making a real good job of the sort of work they were doing at the moment, and Marlene, for one, was having a ball. It had all started three months ago when she'd met Alice at the sandwich bar. They had had to share a table because the place was full and they'd got talking almost at once. Alice was as way-out as Marlene, and they had recognized each other for exactly what they were, immediately. Almost like telepathy. Alice was middle class, but she had a grudge against her parents, and her own kind, that went very, very deep. She'd had to leave two schools (expelled because of 'unsavoury behaviour', was how both headmistresses had described it), then she'd picked up an American boyfriend, who was a professional agitator, and whom her parents loathed. She'd refused to leave him, so she'd been kicked out of the house. The boyfriend had walked out on her when she became pregnant. She'd spent her savings on having an abortion, and now she was broke and bitter as hell, and hoping to get her revenge on the whole wide world in general, and the British middle class in particular.

Marlene didn't go for the class kick, although she herself was working class, but she understood the bitterness. She hated everyone everywhere. Except for Alice. Alice was OK. They were friends, and they were going to stay that way. Marlene had always been the odd one out, even in her family. Her father drank. Her mother was a slob, but to Marlene's brother and two sisters had been quite affectionate in a slap-dash sort of way. To Marlene, however, she was unloving and contemptuous. Marlene's looks made her feel embarrassed, and in some way guilty and resentful. So Marl-

ene had returned the resentment in good measure. But Alice was different.

Alice was the first person who had actually treated Marlene as an equal. No veiled repulsion, but no pity either. And Alice was beautiful. Long dark hair. Blue eyes. Fair skin, and a fabulous figure. It had all been Alice's idea, and they were cleaning up. Really piling up the money. Lovely.

The plan was this. Alice went to an agency posing as a babysitter – a different agency every time, naturally. She had a real gift for disguising herself, and with wigs, glasses, different coloured macintoshes and padding, she could fool you every time. She gave a different name too, each time, of course, and once 'in situ' as she called it, when the parents had gone out, she telephoned Marlene, and the two of them stole everything stealable in the place. They only babysat for real babies – ones that couldn't talk so that they couldn't give the two of them away. And it needed both of them to do the jobs, so that the circumstances could appear different each time; to put the police off the scent. They'd choose a district – Hampstead, Kensington, Canonbury, Fulham, Wimbledon, Finchley; anywhere as long as it was some way away from the place before, then Marlene would find a telephone kiosk where Alice could ring her when the coast was clear. And off they'd go, cleaning up. Fab!

One evening, a week ago, they'd seen in the evening papers that Sir Richard and Lady Barlborough and their family had left for the South of France on holiday, and Alice had suggested that with Lady Barlborough's name as a reference they couldn't go wrong. She'd pose as Lady B., and Marlene could do the babysitting. Privately she was getting worried that, as the front man so to speak, it was she who might be caught, if there were any danger of such a thing, and Marlene might go scot free. Also, it was a good idea that at least once the trick should be worked by someone who couldn't conceivably look anything like her, either as herself, or in disguise. Marlene had enthusiastically fallen in with the suggestion, as she for her part had privately envied Alice the time to look round 'them glossy pads' – as she described the houses and flats they burgled – before the job had to be done. So Alice had chosen a telephone kiosk in Chelsea. Marlene gave its number to the agency as Lady

Barlborough's number. Alice wrote the references, and Alice answered the telephone when Miss Courtney rang up to check on them. All too easy. But as a matter of fact, Alice was getting dead browned off with the whole business, easy or difficult. She'd made enough money to last her for a while, and she was beginning to find Marlene's company getting on her nerves. And she had picked up a new boyfriend. Besides she didn't want to chance her luck once too often. They'd had a good run, and like all gambles, you had to know when to stop. As far as she was concerned, tonight was the last job she'd be doing. Marlene would kick up a fuss when she told her she was quitting, of course, and Alice obviously wouldn't tell her this evening. But fuss or no fuss, Marlene could take a running jump, because Alice wouldn't be seeing her any more. She'd be having it off with Bill.

The television began to absorb Marlene's attention. There was a man for you! Patrick Mayhon! Brother, what a torso! Big, man, but big! She went quickly to the nursery to fetch the sandwiches, then taking off the coat, she settled herself down to watch the story. Would she ever get a boyfriend like that? Would her new found dough help her? She stretched luxuriously in the chair. She'd like a bit of sex – but not with some pimply youth – with a real man – and as yet she hadn't had any. Real men wouldn't look at her, not yet. There was plenty of time. She always gave her age as sixteen, but she was fifteen really. Sixteen was an adult. Fifteen was nothing. Too old to be babied. Too young to have fun. Well with the men anyway.

Boy, that Patrick Mayhon could kiss! And he could fight too! Wham! Bang! Down went his enemies like ninepins.

The baby began crying again but Marlene didn't hear him.

Where was Alice? She was taking one hell of a time.

One of the things she enjoyed most in this game was dividing the spoils. My God, if her parents knew what was in Marlene's cupboard at home they'd have a fit! But they'd never know. Her cupboard was the only bit of privacy she'd ever had in her life. She'd fought for it like a steer a couple of years ago, and the family had finally given in for the sake of peace. All the children had their own cupboards now, and

a lock and key of their own. Marlene's was a godsend these days.

The front door bell rang. Alice?

She got up warily, and went out into the hall.

'Who's that?' she called.

'Alice, you fool!' said Alice through the door.

'Thought you were never coming,' replied Marlene, letting her in. 'What you bin doing?'

'Getting here! Couldn't get a cab.'

'Welcome to Primrose Hall,' said Marlene. 'Wipe your feet on the mat, and do not grumble.'

Both girls laughed, and Alice slid into the flat.

'Well?' she asked. 'Where do we start? My God!' she continued, 'just listen to that baby yelling its head off! Little bastard! How long has he been doing that?'

'Dunno,' said Marlene. 'Not long.'

'Hadn't you better shut him up? Someone'll hear him.'

'Nuts,' said Marlene. 'Let's get going. Want a drink? No? OK. Work first. There's quite a bit of jewellery in the bedroom, and some underclothes. Nothing much anywhere else. There's some decent scent too. Miss Dior! Writing evidently pays! And there's a fur coat for you, Alice. Won't fit me worse luck, but you'll look fab in it. Come on.'

Alice unrolled two polythene bags she'd been carrying in a canvas holdall, and the two girls set to work. When they'd finished, Alice said, 'Where's the food?'

'Food and drink in the sitting-room,' said Marlene, 'and the fur coat. This is the life!' she continued enthusiastically. 'And Lady B. was a cinch as a reference.'

'Uh huh,' said Alice, vaguely.

'What's the matter?' demanded Marlene.

'What do you mean?'

'You don't sound too keen.'

'Of course I'm keen.'

'Fine,' said Marlene, but she still sounded suspicious. What's more, she sounded aggressive.

Drink doesn't suit her, thought Alice. But then what does? She looked at her distastefully. She'd be glad to be shot of her.

Marlene saw the look and said, 'What's up? We can't use her again can we? Is that it?'

'Who?' asked Alice.

'Lady B.'

'Why not?'

'Because they'll be on to me. It'd have to be you.'

'All right, me then.'

'I don't get it,' said Marlene abruptly.

'Get what?'

'You don't sound right,' said Marlene. 'You know we can't use her again. Or me. Are you trying to ditch me or what?'

Alice looked at her in astonishment. She had always made the running in their relationship, and she'd had no idea that Marlene had a particularly good brain. Yet here she was on to what Alice was thinking, almost immediately! What was the best way to play it? Should she soothe her and lie, or tell her to go to hell; in other words tell her the truth? She hesitated, then she said overbrightly, 'I think I was just relaxing. Not planning at all, you know: just content to be, and all that.' She flashed Marlene a brilliant smile. 'We've done our stuff for tonight, and I was just letting the future ride.'

'Good,' said Marlene flatly. 'Only don't change, will you? I wouldn't like it.'

'Change? In what way?'

'Don't try any funny stuff. I've liked you because you're the only person who's ever treated me right. Don't stop, or you'll find I don't ditch easily.'

'Who's trying to ditch you?' asked Alice. I'll have to go away for a bit, she thought. This is getting to be more than a bore. She's got nothing on me so she can't keep me. 'You drunk or what?'

'Could be,' said Marlene. Her mind was working overtime. She'd seen that look of contemptuous dislike far too often to be mistaken. Something was wrong here, and she'd better get to the bottom of it pretty quickly. She looked surreptitiously at her watch. They'd still got an hour, easy. 'As a matter of fact,' she said carefully, 'I'm beginning to wonder how long we can go on like this.'

Alice felt a surge of hope, and it showed in her eyes. 'Like what?' she asked.

'Doing these jobs.'

'Why?'

'Well, we might get caught.'

'Yes, we might, mightn't we?' In her relief Alice began almost to babble. 'I've been thinking that. After all, we've got enough for the time being haven't we? Why press our luck?'

'Have another drink,' urged Marlene.

Alice shook her head. 'I couldn't,' she said. 'The last one was terribly strong. We've got to keep a clear head.'

'What for? The job's done. All we've got to do is to go. Come on, have a drink.'

'Aren't we going to rough the place up?' asked Alice.

'Drinks first,' said Marlene gaily. 'Makes it more fun.' She poured two more drinks. 'Cheers,' she said, and put her glass on the table.

'Cheers,' said Alice, and took a gulp. 'Wow!' she exclaimed. 'That's quite a drink! Did you put in any soda?'

'Of course I did. You're chicken!'

What the hell! thought Alice. It's the last time. Might as well humour her. And she's right. All we've got to do is to take the stuff and go. 'That's it,' she laughed. 'I'm chicken. What's the time?'

'We've got an hour,' said Marlene. 'Relax.' They both slumped in the armchairs by the fire. 'You're used to this sort of luxury. I'm not,' continued Marlene. 'Wish you could see the family pad. You ought to drop in sometime. It'd be an eye-opener for you. It's a right mess. No one ever tidies the place properly, or even cleans it up. Day in and day out it's a mess. Too many kids. Too many people. And a noise fit to break your eardrums. The place even smells.'

'You told me,' said Alice.

Marlene pulled a face. 'Brother! How I long to get out of there! And once I do, they won't see me for dust.' She paused. 'If we do put a stop to all this, what'll we do Alice?'

'We?' asked Alice.

'Well of course,' said Marlene.

'As a matter of fact I thought of giving myself a little trip somewhere,' said Alice. 'You know. Away.'

'What sort of little trip?'

'Oh I dunno. Abroad or something.'

'That's fab!' exclaimed Marlene. 'Where'll we go?'

'I thought of being on my own for a while,' said Alice

slowly. 'You know, opting out of the rat race. Quite alone. The Garbo bit.'

'Quite alone?'

'Yeah.'

'Not with Bill?' asked Marlene shrewdly.

Alice looked at her in amazement a second time. 'What's Bill got to do with it?' she blustered.

So that's it! thought Marlene. It's over. She's going to beat it, like I want to beat it from the family, and she's hooked on Bill. The bitch! 'We can both opt out or whatever you call it,' she said. 'Bill too. It'd be great.'

'How can you?' expostulated Alice. 'You're only fifteen! Under age and all that.'

'So what?' demanded Marlene. 'Who's to stop me? Not my precious family I can tell you! They'll be only too glad to see the back of me! We can all team up.'

Oh, for Christ's sake! thought Alice. Would you believe it? 'If Bill came he mightn't like that too much,' she laughed. 'Two's company. You know how it is?'

'Then I was right,' said Marlene. 'You are going to ditch me!' To her dismay she was so hurt that she could hardly speak.

'I'm not ditching you,' said Alice. 'But let's face it, we can't spend the rest of our lives together, can we?'

'Why not?'

'Why not, for God's sake? I don't want to spend the rest of my life with anyone. I'm a loner. I've told you that a thousand times. Other people are a drag. Everyone. Even Bill.' She hesitated. 'Even you.'

Marlene's mouth went dry, and she felt her heart begin to pound. 'We haven't been together long,' she said. 'And you're all I've got.'

'Nuts!' said Alice. 'They're plenty more fish in the sea.'

'Not for me.'

'Oh come on!' said Alice. 'We've played this game. It's worked. It's over now. What have we got to cling to? It's been OK, but we're through.'

'I don't want it to be over.'

'Then you will have to lump it, won't you?'

'Will you ever want to see me again if you go?'

'Who knows?' said Alice indifferently.

Again Marlene was shocked. 'But why not?' she asked. 'We've been good friends, haven't we?'

'For Pete's sake!' exclaimed Alice. 'We've got along, so what?'

'Don't you like me at all?' asked Marlene. 'Really, I mean?'

Alice was drunk. She knew it, and she knew too that the feeling that was building up inside her against Marlene was dangerous, but at the moment she didn't care. 'Look Marlene,' she said unpleasantly, 'you're OK in your way. You've been useful to me, and I've been useful to you. We've both made money which we wanted, and our partnership has suited us, but I can't tote you around for the rest of time, can I? Let's face it, you're fat and not exactly pretty. In fact to be dead honest, you're repulsive.' Her voice hardened. 'You know it and I know it, and I couldn't cope with you for ever. I don't like to say these things, but it's the truth. And a girl has got to live her own life. I like the boys. I don't want you hanging around, and that's it.'

'Let me get this quite clear,' said Marlene deliberately. 'Did you know when we fixed this for tonight that it was to be our last job together?'

'Perhaps.'

'Is that why you changed the routine?'

'It might have been.'

'And after tonight you were going to do the disappearing act without telling me?'

'Could be.'

'I won't let you go,' said Marlene.

'You can't keep me,' said Alice.

'I'll find a way,' said Marlene.

Alice laughed. 'Go ahead!' she said. 'Just try.'

It was the laugh that did it. Marlene experienced a flash of rage so intense that her legs actually felt weak and her hands began to tremble. 'I won't let you go,' she repeated. 'Like they say, I'm going to keep you alive or dead.'

'Don't be so silly,' scoffed Alice. 'And they don't say anything of the sort. They say "Bring them back dead or alive".'

'You told me I was repulsive,' said Marlene. 'You shouldn't say them things.'

'Those things.'

'Them things,' said Marlene. 'Don't come the clever with me.'

'Christ Almighty!' said Alice. 'You expect me to tote you around, and you can't even speak properly!'

'That's not my fault.'

'Maybe not, but it doesn't make things easier.'

'You're a snob,' said Marlene.

'Maybe,' said Alice. She was slurring her words slightly. 'Anyway I'm bored with this conversation. I'm bored with this crummy flat, and if it comes down to it, I'm bloody bored with you. I'm off.'

Again Marlene was hurt but this time the hurt was combined with a feeling of enormous resentment. Again her brain began racing. She'd never felt so miserable in her life, and that was saying something. Humiliated and miserable. But, too, what she had thought of as her affection for Alice was rapidly turning into passionate hatred: a hatred that far transcended any feeling she had ever had before. Alice wasn't going to make a fool of her and get away with it. Alice had pretended she'd liked her. Alice was a cheat, and she'd have to cop it. Anyone who got in Marlene's way would cop it one day, but Alice was going to cop it now. But how? How?

She realized now that either on purpose, or because it hadn't been thought out properly, this particular job was going to be a very risky one for her. With Alice going to the agencies, she had been pretty safe and Alice, too, for that matter, because she had made herself practically unrecognizable. This time, however, it was Marlene who had shown herself, and there was no disguising Marlene. And so the sensible and safe thing was to tell Alice to beat it now, and to put back all the stuff they'd grabbed, so that when the Primroses returned they were both in the clear. But if they did that Alice would be free to do what she threatened, and leave Marlene high and dry. So somehow Marlene must think of a way to get a hold on her, and quickly too, before they left this flat.

As it happened, from the moment she had set eyes on the baby an idea had been slowly forming itself in the back of her mind. Could she use it? Marlene hated babies. She hated

the fact that they were weak and helpless. She hated them for always being the centre of attention, for blowing disgusting bubbles, for gurgling, for wetting their nappies, for crying, for kicking their silly little legs in the air and waving their fat little arms. She hated them for the way they stared unseeingly in front of them and then suddenly jerked their heads sideways as though they were ventriloquists' dummies. And most of all she hated them for the love they inspired. Martin was a particularly beautiful baby, and this had made her hate him even more than most. She'd always wanted to hurt a baby, to make it suffer because it was helpless. Now was her chance and if somehow she could involve Alice in what she did, Alice would be as helpless as the baby, Alice would be utterly dependent on her, and would have to stay with her for ever. Marlene's wild-animal eyes gleamed.

So what should she do? It must be something monstrous.

Suddenly she knew. Alice could never escape and Marlene would have her revenge on her, on Martin, and on the whole world. Just as she'd dreamed.

She got out of the chair and said casually, 'OK. I'm off too. Let's not rough up the place this time eh? Let's just beat it.'

'Suits me,' said Alice.

'One thing though,' said Marlene. 'I just want to go and have another gander at that baby. He's cute.'

'Whatever for, for heaven's sake.'

'I told you. I like him,' lied Marlene.

'Like him?' echoed Alice. 'Great mother of Crippen, what on earth has come over you?'

'I know,' Marlene sounded shamefaced, 'it does sound soppy but it's true. I won't be long, I promise.'

'I should hope not!' agreed Alice, laughing.

Marlene went down the corridor. Martin had stopped screaming, but he was still crying a little when she opened the door. He heard her, and stopped abruptly. She shut the door behind her, and walked over to the cot.

The baby's face was scarlet. There were tear marks on his cheeks, and he'd managed to get himself outside the blankets. He stared up at Marlene, and she stared down at him,

then she leaned over the cot and gave him a vicious slap across the face. Before he was able to protest she did it again and then a third time. She picked him up and hurled him to the floor. Now he managed to find his voice, and began yelling hard. Marlene picked him up again and threw him round the room; at the walls, at the ceiling, at the fireplace. He was moaning with pain and fright. His face and head were terribly cut, his clothes were torn. She picked him up a fourth time and twisted his arms, and with concentrated hatred she twisted his legs too. She heard a bone snap. She jerked his head down against the floor, over and over again, and each time she battered him, she had a feeling of triumph, of a kind of pure joy. She even laughed aloud. Now the baby's crying ceased and Marlene realized she had knocked him out. She carefully took him over to the arm-chair, and there with a lunatic deliberation she sat on his face. She thought she could feel him feebly struggling for one moment, but his struggles, if indeed he had struggled at all, stopped. She sat on, smiling.

The door opened and Alice appeared. 'What the devil gives?' she asked. 'You've been gone hours. I can't wait any longer. I'm off.'

'Oh no Alice dear, you're not. I'm afraid you're never going to leave me again,' said Marlene.

'What the hell are you talking about?' demanded Alice.

'I've killed the baby,' said Marlene. 'I've bashed him good and proper, and broken his legs, and I've killed him. And if you leave me, you'll get the blame.'

'I don't understand,' said Alice. 'Where is he? I can't see him.'

'You see, I'm under age,' continued Marlene. 'I'm only fifteen. What's more I'm good at looking silly. You thought I was silly yourself, so I won't get into trouble but you will.'

Alice was absolutely bewildered. 'I don't get it,' she said. 'I tell you I can't even see a baby. My God, the place looks a shambles.'

'He's dead,' said Marlene. 'And if you move a step out of this house or anywhere for that matter in future without my permission, I'm going to the police. I shall tell them all

about what we've been doing these last few weeks, and how you dreamed it up, and who you are and how you had me under your spell – and I'll describe you minutely. Then I'll say it was you who made me kill the baby. And you'll go to prison for years and years. I'll get off much more lightly than you. It'll serve you right, too, for being wicked to me. So you see we'd better stick together hadn't we? For always, Alice. For ever and ever. And you needn't think that I like you any more either, because I don't. I loathe you. What's more you won't see Bill again and we'll both be going away for that little trip, Alice. And fast. And don't try any funny stuff, because I'm pretty strong, and I've got nothing to lose if I lose you. Nothing at all.'

She got up off the chair and Alice gasped. 'Christ Almighty!' she said horrified.

'Quite,' said Marlene. She took the silent child in her arms, listened for its heart beat, then without a second glance she threw it into the corner of the room. 'Dead,' she said. 'Dead as a door nail. Come on Alice, let's scam.'

The baby lay where he'd been thrown like a broken doll. Like a ventriloquist's doll. His head, his arms and his legs were terribly twisted, and his face was puffy and covered with blood. His mouth was swollen and one eyeball was cut and nearly out of its socket. Alice groped her way out of the room to be sick.

'Together for always,' said Marlene softly. 'Till death us do part.' She looked after Alice. 'I'm strong,' she said. 'And you didn't know.'

HAND IN HAND

by

BRIAN MIDDLETON

FOR A LONG time, it must have been a year or more, I had known there was a difference. It is only now that I know what the difference is. We had walked a matter of two hundred yards from the coffee bar . . . But that is not the beginning of the story.

I had gone into the coffee bar, The Gondolier or something, as I did after the cinema every Saturday night. I was feeling low. I had become used to this feeling. It did not make it any better – I was just not quite so restless about it. It was more a part of me now. There was the usual Saturday-night crowd. Not that they were regulars in the normal sort of way. They were not the same people, just the same types; different faces. And then there was old Paddy, the newspaper seller. He was always there, sipping a cup of steaming coffee greedily, the greeny-grey cup grasped tightly in his small, mitten-covered hands, the protruding fingers a filthy blue-black. A combination of the effects of cold, newsprint, and plain ingrained grime. His pale, bright eyes flickered up from the cup as each newcomer entered the place. He peered at them until, it seemed, he had committed their faces to memory or had ascertained that they were not known to him. I got to the stage of nodding to him, but he never returned the greeting. He just turned his gaze down quickly into his cup. I knew, though, that my arrival had been registered. I imagined that he was a police spy. I thought he was an informer. I was quite wrong.

She was new. Quite pretty too. Sort of film-starrish, in a way. She sat alone. I glanced round to the counter to see if there was anybody there who might be with her. But no, there was only an old hag standing, stuffing a sandwich into her large, red mouth, as though there were only seconds left to eat before the end of the world. I looked back to the girl

and started. She was looking closely at me. She turned away as I caught her stare. I was surprised, I suppose, because I was not used to being regarded closely by anybody, not in a friendly sort of way, least of all by pretty young girls. People usually glanced and then looked away very quickly. I am very big. I am, in fact, extremely big. Over six feet seven and weighing twenty-two stones. I am not only big, but I am also a bit frightening – foreboding the police called it once. I had been picked up by a patrol car when a man complained that I had been threatening him. I explained to the sergeant that I was only trying to find out whether he had dropped a spectacle case, which I had picked up. Admittedly it was dark, it was rather late even. It was in a side street. But I never thought that anybody had any reason to be scared. I had never been scared of anything in my life. When the sergeant explained the circumstances to me though, I could see what he meant, could see why the little fellow had reason to be scared. That is, when the sergeant told me to be careful, when he said I looked ‘foreboding’.

That was why I was surprised, seeing this girl looking at me in a deep kind of way. I had hoped, somehow, on one of my Saturday nights out to . . . well, to meet someone. I had never had a girl. None of the girls at the warehouse would come out with me. They were not a very nice lot anyway. Two or three of them were passable and lately I would have been glad to take any of them out. But they only laughed and said I was much too big for them. They did not want crushing, thank you. I saw one woman looking at me strangely once when I picked up a box of gear wheels which it normally took three men to move. I had been at the warehouse for ten years. Ever since I left school at fifteen. Most of the men and women were used to my unusual size and strength. And they took advantage of it.

I looked across again at the girl, thinking deep down that she would not look back again. They never did. Then, my heart leapt. She turned her head slowly. It was a pretty head. Short, black hair, sort of curly. She looked over towards me. There was a soft smile on her lips. It disappeared as quickly as it came. It went from her mouth but stayed in her eyes. Still she looked. I glanced behind me to see if she was smiling at some other person. There was just a blank wall at my

back, and as I turned, seeing nothing, my shoulder slapped against the hard concrete. I looked back at her again. Her lips opened in a laugh. She knew of my confusion and giggled. I half grinned, she glanced down. I was sad. I thought that was going to be the end of it.

I thought she would leave now and I would never see her again. I must have looked sad, for when I glanced up again, she was looking at me. This time, though, she was concerned and questioning. I shrugged resignedly. She smiled encouragement. I brightened a bit. Perhaps it was going to be all right after all. Her gaze had now become a stare. She started collecting her bag and gloves off the table. Her eyes never left mine. Her stare became a challenge as she got up to go, very slowly. She walked across from her table towards me and the door, still staring straight into me. I realized suddenly that this was the chance I had been waiting for, the chance to 'meet someone'. I lifted my huge bulk as she came level with me. She halted, almost imperceptibly, and lifted her head to meet my eyes once more. I dwarfed her.

We walked out of the coffee bar together, side by side. Neither of us spoke. We just walked. I was bubbling with excitement. I could not believe it. From the corner of my eye I checked to see that she was still there, to see if my mirage had vanished. She was a neat little figure dressed in a smart, department-store coat in brown. I loved her. She felt me looking at her and looked up, smiling a little uncertainly. I did not speak. I was not sure what to say. We just walked.

At the corner, we stopped. There was a choice, on, up the road, or across the street into the park. I hesitated. She sensed my hesitation and made to cross the road into the park. I followed clumsily and put out my hand, taking her arm protectively. I guided her between the cars, stopped at the traffic lights, to the opposite pavement and the entrance to the park. We passed through it without plan. It just seemed to be the thing we both expected, both wanted.

Our steps slowed now, in unison. We wandered down the main pathway. It was a warm evening. The pathway was the dry greyness of well-walked tarmac, almost white in the blue lights which burned brightly over its length. As we walked and I thought desperately what to say, my hand brushed her arm. I wanted to make contact. She was quick to understand

that the moment had arrived and, slipping off her glove, took hold of my hand.

I was almost overcome with joy as I felt the soft, warm flesh. It was the most beautiful feeling I had ever known. I gasped my enjoyment and she heard it. I breathed deeply and wondered when I might kiss her. I pictured the moment in my mind's eye. It did not seem possible, and yet it was happening. I felt the pressure increase on my fingers. I squeezed back, gently. She playfully put on the pressure, I returned it. It was blissful, I had never been in such a perfect relationship with anybody. I was transported. The gentle pressure was now much firmer, continuous. I pressed and pressed and heard her gasp the way I had done at the sheer pleasure of it. She gasped and then moaned a little. Then, through the haze I could hear her screaming with ecstasy, like I had read about in the books. She was enjoying it as much as I. We walked on. She was a dead weight. I was dragging her along now, but still I could feel that soft, warm, moist, pulpy hand in mine. The drops of blood had stained deeply into the grey-white tarmac . . .

That was the difference. It was not only the size of me, I just lacked self-control.

GETTING RID

by

NORMAN P. KAUFMAN

PATSY STARED AT me with that fixed, stupid grin of hers, but this time it didn't annoy me so much: because she was good and dead, which was the best state for her, believe me I should know.

Three years I'd put up with her whining and her wheedling and her crass obtuseness, and I was just about up to here with it, you know what I mean. She was the leaking tap torture personified; in fact I think I'd rather have listened to water dripping on to stone floor than to her thin, banshee voice all those years. Yes, she had been the drip all right, in more ways than one; and it gave me huge pleasure to realize that the tap was silenced: locked and tightened for good and all.

How pathetic she looked, her colourless eyes peering at me and beyond me, the red, doll-like tints of her cheeks already ebbing into a dull grey pallor. With sudden distaste – I am a basically tidy fellow – I noticed she was leaking blood on to our fine carpet. As I watched, the dark hole between her breasts pulsed scarlet; and with less compunction than if she had been a dead rat, I hooked a toe under her ribs and prodded her over on to her stomach. There she could bleed to her heart's content, as long as I didn't have to watch the cumulative gore building up on the Axminster beneath her.

But even in death she managed to give me headaches: I had still to get rid of the rather skinny body, and it occurred to me then that I had made virtually no plans whatsoever for coping with this very necessary disposal problem. My initial instinct had been to put a stop to her incessant and inane chatter: it had got to the stage where I was feeling akin with the camel and its cargo of straw and its weakening spine. If I had planned Patsy's premature departure, I might

well have arranged a silencer for my revolver; but the gun is such a tiny thing, and the report had been little more than what a slap across the face would produce – hardly enough to arouse my immediate neighbours, who themselves must hold the world record for being the noisiest tenants of any block of flats.

So, she was gone; and the world – *my* world anyhow – was already a better place. But to leave her where she was was unthinkable. First there was that old dear who came in to clean for us every lousy day: she was due in the following morning. Likewise our maid would be back from her holidays the day after. Nice little thing, just eighteen, and we've had a lot of fun together these last few months; but, I think, the hysterical type, and hardly to be trusted with a secret, especially one that, if mentioned elsewhere, might well put me inside for twenty years.

No, it would just have to be the two of us: the husband who couldn't take any more, and the wife with her dead, witless face. I reached down, forced my hands under her armpits and heaved. Ye gods! Was this woman supposed to be eight stone? I let her flop back, and I stood upright, breathing heavily. It was close on eleven at night, pitch black outside, and I had to get her out now, *now* while the chances were that no one was about. I squatted beside her, reached once more into the cold dampness of her armpits and lifted her into a sitting position, her back against the armchair. From there I would get the necessary leverage to pull her upright, bend her over my shoulders and stand up straight.

And that's what I did; immediately I was aware of her weight crushing down on me. I had had no idea that a body, and such a small one at that, could feel as it did. Certainly I wouldn't get very far in this position. Quickly, reluctantly, I let her slide back on to the armchair, averting my eyes from her silly lifeless face.

This was no good at all, I thought: somehow I had to get her out of there. Once I'd dumped her, I could ditch the gun down a drain, clean up the carpet, or better still, replace it, and then welcome the police with their inevitable inquiries. But first things first . . .

One thing was for sure – my arms would never be strong

enough to carry her for more than a few yards. I am, after all, merely a slightly-built man; and it seemed that to support her across my back was the only other alternative. Carefully, I lowered myself into her lap, seized her dangling arms, pulled till she was balanced against my spine, and not without some difficulty, staggered to my feet. It was the most gruesome thing I had ever had to do in my life, and I could feel the physical sickness at the back of my throat.

I lurched over to the door, using my chin to flick out the lights before remembering that I would have to use one hand to open the door and close it behind me. Cursing fluently, I hitched her up higher, bending forward to keep her in position whilst I fumbled the door open, stepped into the passage, and closed the door behind me . . . gently.

As I stumbled on, her arms began to bother me, dangling in front of me as they did, and when I reached the entrance to the block of flats, I manoeuvred her so that her arms were folded loosely around me, akimbo fashion.

Sweat poured freely down my forehead and into my eyes, and I wondered if anyone could hear the beating of my heart. There were no lights in the forecourt, and I breathed a little easier. A little, but no more. The trouble with acting on the spur of the moment, I mused, was that one could never foresee—

A cat leapt at me from out of the darkness, and I should think that its howl, as I kicked instinctively at it, could have been heard halfway round the town. My breath rasped haltingly in my throat: I stood silently in the shadows, waiting for the panic to unfreeze from around my limbs. Another fright like that, I thought, and I would probably be joining Patsy.

I moved forward again, cursing, not for the first time, the garage employees who'd been working on my car for more than a fortnight under some pretext or other. Lack of transport was another joy I had to face.

Or was it?

The idea was like a blow in the face. Only two hundred yards away, the sea — the *sea*, I grimaced, fool that I am! — lapped lazily at the shore. Patsy's idea, of course, to live at a holiday resort, with trippers laughing their desperately hearty way along the promenades and the piers day after

day, and with the sideshows assaulting my eyes and ears . . . but for once I blessed her choice.

With my never-very-strong legs almost buckling beneath me, I made my way to the back of the apartment block, then on to the path that wound down to the rocks at the seashore. By the time I had reached a convenient cave, my clothes were saturated in perspiration, and I was almost out of my mind at the feel of Patsy's body swinging against me.

I moved cautiously into the cave, the very faint light of a token moon showing me the steps that had been hewn into the rock in countless centuries of battering and hammering by the endless waves. The steps descended into the blackness beneath the earth: I don't know how I forced myself on. Maybe it was the knowledge that if there were anywhere that Patsy would never be found, it was at the foot of these steep, natural stairs.

Like a skater fearing thin ice, I felt my way down, and it was a long haul. Finally there were no more steps – I leaned forward again to balance the body on my aching back, slipped my left hand into my jacket pocket, pulled out a lighter. The dull ochre gleam showed me the rock floor, the black dripping walls of the subterranean cavern, and the long row of steps leading back to freedom.

And that's the gist of the story so far: you're now fully bang up to date, because I'm right here now in this God-forsaken cavern, and I'm just about to dump Patsy and get the hell out of here. The trouble is, though, I'm having a bit of bother with her arms. I can't quite seem to get them from round my neck, don't ask me why. She's gone very cold, and very stiff, and as I told you, I'm not too muscular to start with.

But I can't get up those steps with this weight clinging to me: it'd be a struggle without it, so . . . It's just a matter of pulling at these hands like – this!

No. No, I can't do it. What's that word the doctors use, rigor something? Well, that's what's happened to Patsy; and if I don't do something about her soon, I don't think I'll—

I wonder what time the tide is due in.

THE LURKERS IN THE ABYSS

by

DAVID A. RILEY

RAIN POURED DISMALLY from the cloud-pocked sky upon the confused streets of cobbles and new, overshadowing, and often overlapping, tarmac, bizarrely like a patchwork quilt where council workmen had dug it up to get at faulty gas or water pipes, leaving shoddily repaired lumpy masses behind as signs of their blatant mis-skill. Alongside these old/new streets, besides the increasing number of sulphurous NO PARKING lines, were haphazardly raised pavements, reddish-brown in colour like autumnal leaves, mottled grey as though by fungi, contrasting with the metal-line and vaguely spectral pools of petrol being slowly washed away in the gutters.

Hurrying down the worn steps of the sole public library in Pire, Ian Redfern cast a tentative glance up and down the street to find that it was now quite deserted except for an elderly couple disappearing into the gloom of the distance, holding (or trying to hold) in the gusty wind an umbrella. With a look of fatalistic acceptance (and inwardly cursing the ever treacherous elements) he set off, pressing his hands deep into the pockets of his overcoat, beneath which, held by his elbow, were the two books he'd just borrowed – thrillers. Escapist fiction, he knew, but just what he needed at the moment, miserable as his work at the National Assistance Board was turning out to be.

Already about him the shadows were lengthening, blending slowly, almost imperceptibly into the encroaching gloom as several street lamps flickered, then burst into light, casting feebly glowing areas, like tiny islands amidst a vast sea of black, on the wet pavements, spotlights that moved erratically back and forth as the wind shook their question-mark stems. Shivering from the cold, Redfern gloomily stared before him at the ground as he quickly strode on past

the night-blackened houses, infrequently relieved by windows, behind which mellow-hued curtains were illumined by the almost radiantly warm lights within. From several, as he walked by, he could hear the murmurs of television sets, muffled though they were by stone walls.

Although the sky had been overcast, practically leaden all day, Redfern hadn't expected it to rain. He was glad now that, because of the icy east wind, he'd come out wearing his coat. Otherwise he wouldn't have been able to carry his books back to his digs without them getting soaked by the downpour – now thankfully reduced to a steady if miserable drizzle – and being spoilt. Although he didn't know what the library would have charged him if this had happened, he did know that he couldn't afford it. Saving for a car was hardship enough already: less beer, less night life, even less food. Of course, if he were willing to wait a long time, saving less each week, it would be easier, but he wanted his car for the summer. Besides, things could soon be improved when his pay went up on his birthday next month. Four blasted weeks.

Ahead of him through the twilight, and just before the sun, a ruby orb filmed over by the perpetual mist of smoke that plumed from the chimneys to float high over the town, disappeared beneath the purpled slates, he caught sight of several youths standing about a corner street lamp some three blocks away. From them, carried by the wind, he could make out several faint though obviously foul curses, apparently directed from their indistinct actions, against one of their own clustered number.

Worried but slightly though he was by them, Redfern wondered whether to turn off along another street, detouring cautiously around them. There was no one else on the street now but the youths, he thought, though because of the darkness masking most of it he couldn't be absolutely sure. Disconcertedly he could not but remember that, lately, quite a few people had been beaten up, even knifed, by roving gangs after nightfall, and especially in quiet areas like this. Even policemen had occasionally been attacked. Yet, he mentally added, still staring at the youths, they were taking no notice of him. Or was this because they hadn't seen him so far, although he'd passed beneath several

lamps? Apparently their whole attention was directed upon someone else, one of their own group . . . or was he?

The nearer he approached them, the more clearly he could make out their voices: angry, perhaps even threateningly malicious. One laughed. An echo made a brittle reply. Again he wondered whether to turn off along another street; he had only one more block to go along now. But it reeked so much of sheer cowardice, and though he knew himself to be no hero, he couldn't without a surfeit of abhorrence bring himself around to what was, virtually, to flee. Finally he decided to compromise; he'd merely cross to the other side of the street, out of their way, and leave the rest to fate.

And the voices grew louder, more malevolent. Like preternatural demons invoked by some ancient necromancer they stood around the lamp by a dowdy tobacconist's, four of them in donkey jackets, two in combat coats, and the last in leather and an ensemble of badges and gaudy brass studs. One feature allied all their attire: all was exceedingly dirty, tattered and baggy as though of the wrong size, or meant for different shapes to theirs. Dirt literally dripped from them in the rain.

Traversing the street he glanced at them as he passed, trying not to seem to be doing so, making his footsteps as silent as he could without actually walking any slower.

'HOY!' someone cried, and his heart thumped rapidly in mad oscillations.

'Hoy!' another repeated harshly. 'Stop!'

Alarmed, Redfern heard them laugh. Oh God, no! he thought, hearing their fiendish cackling.

Someone urged, 'Go on, go get him, Dag.'

Again he quickened his pace along the street, almost breaking into a trot as he hoped frantically, ignoring the cowardly implications, that they weren't talking of him, but of another, not having seen him. He prayed that a policeman would appear, a squad car. Anything.

Nothing.

From behind, he heard heavy footsteps rapidly approach him, running. For a moment he thought of running himself. He wanted to flee, to scream. A hand grasped his shoulder, dragging him round, off balance, to stare blankly into a

starkly white, pimply face bordered by a wispy beard that disappeared into a pair of tangled sideboards. A grin split the youth's heavy mouth, revealing a set of over-large teeth, yellowed and streaked with brown. His hot breath stank of damp rottenness, as though his stomach were foul. His features were repulsive in a batrachian kind of way. He was almost frog-like in his pulpy obesity.

'Hey, look what I've gone an' found,' he cried gutterally, savagely tightening his grip on Redfern's shoulder. Redfern winced, stunned by fear into a semblance of paralysis, standing before his malodorous aggressor in virtual immobility.

'What is it, Dag?' one of the others asked, sauntering towards them.

'I've a real creep for us here, a real bloody creep,' Dag called, and he grabbed a handful of Redfern's hair, tearing his head back with it so that his face was in the faint light of the nearby lamp. 'An' look at these books. Real *intellectual*.'

With fright burning through him Redfern tugged himself free, but Dag dived for him, grabbing his coat lapels. Snarling, he asked, 'Where d'you think you're goin', cock?' and he pulled the collar-ends together into a crude stranglehold. Again Redfern resisted but the youth retaliated by driving his head forward, striking Redfern between the eyes. As a streak of pain flashed visibly before him, he felt a sickness overwhelm his whole body, his legs almost buckling, till the nausea began to dissipate. Through his daze he still fought back, his two books falling neglected, forgotten, landing with a pair of loud claps. From instinct he drove a bent knee upwards into the groin of his foe whilst, with splayed fingers, aiming for his eyes. The youth reeled back, relinquishing his hold. Once free, Redfern kicked at the stumbling figure, already almost doubled up in agony, and ran for his freedom.

'Stop!' someone cried, and those previously strolling nonchalantly across the street, amused at what they had thought to be his meagre resistance, sprinted after him, swearing.

As he fled he heard one of them mutter, 'Hell Dag, you should ha' stopped him, he were only a—' Dag swore. 'Let's get him,' he called. 'I'll murder the flamin'—'

Without slowing one bit Redfern sped around the corner

and turned up a back street. An utter darkness swelled mad-deningly before him, and he ran into it blindly. He dared not stop, nor even slow down to make his way along it more carefully; behind him, not very far away, he could hear the youths still following. From one side of the back to the other he ran, stumbling over cartons and cobbles, tin cans and cats and God knew what else, grazing his shoulders repeatedly against the walls alongside. It was like running along an interminably long, deep trench, an old trench long littered with death and decay. Crates rattled as he trod on them. Creatures hissed.

Suddenly he left it, finding himself on another lamp-lit street. Turning to his right he tore along past a blank row of houses to the next, running along this, panting, his breath rasping harshly in his chest, his lungs burning from a stitch that seemed to cauterize the whole of his left side. It was agony. But so was being beaten up, and, at the end of the first block, he spun around the corner and leant against the wall on the other side, exhausted.

Once the violence of his breathing had subsided, enabling him to listen, he heard the youths coming up the street he'd just left.

'He's up 'ere so'where,' one of them muttered. It was like a cry in the silence. All there was besides his voice was the dripping of water from the drain pipes, plummeting down to the rain-shiny streets.

'Where is he then? I can't see him. It's useless, we'll never get him now. He'll be miles away.'

'We'll get him. Dag an' the rest 'ave gone up the next few streets. We'll surround 'im. An' then 'e'll fin' out . . .'

As Redfern pressed himself tighter against the house wall, hoping that his dark overcoat would blend with the shadows, camouflaging him, there was a loud and very shrill whistle. Turning he saw another of the youths dashing clumsily towards him. The nearer ones began to run up the street, but slower, uncertain as yet of exactly where he was.

Without pausing to think – knowing that bruises and broken ribs and worse would be the result if he did – he hurled himself for his discoverer. But two yards away when Redfern leapt at him the youth was taken by complete sur-

prise, and was instantly thrown roughly to the ground, winded and groaning in pain. As the cries of the others on seeing him broke out from all around, he ran up the next street, looking desperately for an alley, a pub, for refuge. In one wild moment he contemplated knocking at someone's door, any door . . . but he knew that if he chose wrongly, if there were no one in, then they would have time to reach him. Even if there was someone in would they answer the door at this time of the night? What time was it? Half nine? Something like that, he knew, since he remembered leaving the library about ten minutes after it officially closed on the hour. Half nine. And nowhere could he see anyone to help him. God, where were the police? Surely there should be some near, *some*?

He turned off along another street past a row of small shops: a hardware shop, a grocer's, then two now empty, with FOR SALE notices in their dusty windows, a launderette. God, had it to be closed too? And still behind him were the youths. Were they panting? he wondered. Were they also tiring, growing weary of this chase? Was there a chance they might give up? Or were they rejoicing, now gaining on him? At school he'd never gone in for sports. Always half ran, half walked on the cross-country. Lazy and infinitely bored by them all. Had they been also, by him?

He did not dare look back to see where the youths were, how near. All he could, dared do, was to listen, as he ran, to their loud footfalls as they pursued him through the clammy, blanketing drizzle. Perhaps, he thought, a storm would quell their anger, hatred or whatever was driving them after him like a pack of blood-crazed wolves. But, if anything, the rain was lessening. In a while it would, perhaps, become dry.

Again he turned along another street, running this time past a sprawling factory, surrounded fortress-like by a high red brick wall topped by slivers of glass that twinkled wickedly like crustings of diamond, a wall split only by a large iron gate coated with flaking red lead. On the other side of the road were the openings to other streets, but there was nowhere down them that he could run to for shelter; each was well lit by lamps and he could tell that the youths were

far too near for him to race down one of them unseen.

Within a few hundred yards the factory ended, to be replaced by Grange Park, its grounds barely visible in the wan light of the cloud-framed moon. All that he could make out was denuded trees and ugly black masses that were shrubs and tussocks of gorse. Without conjecturing what he would do within it, he vaulted the half-eroded wall, passed the metal railings, bent askew by rust around their bases, and threw himself down to the fragmentary grass and slimy mud beneath. Slithering, he dragged himself up the short but slippery incline to the first row of bushes. Knowing that escape was for the first time tangible enough to grasp at, he ran into the black shadows of the sycamores, elms, willows and rhododendrons, to race through their grasping, ice-brittle branches into the heart of the park.

Hands visor-like over his face, Redfern ran through a row of rhododendron bushes, stumbling over their groping roots till he'd passed them and was dashing across the muddied remains of a flower bed, finally reaching a mould-smearred suggestion of a meandering path. The moon had draped herself once more behind the bubbling clouds, and the park was plunged into darkness. Unseeing but still intensely afraid, Redfern sprinted onwards till he fell sprawling into some bushes. Scratched and enmeshed in vicious thorns, he tore himself free. Behind, he could still hear sounds of pursuit. Near.

Someone called, '*Follow me, I think I can 'ear 'im.*' And he ran even faster. Things fluttered from him in the gloom, dark leaves that were moths and daddy-longlegs, alarmed by his elephantine charge through the soaked undergrowth. Ahead partly obscured by gnarled, high-reaching tree boughs in the distance, he noticed a rectangle of saffron light. Barely thinking, he headed for it, worming his way haphazardly through the thickets and dripping wood, always keeping his objective in sight, an objective he soon made out to be a window, curtained and large, situated high on one of the many ancient houses that lurked oppressively about this part of Pire: old dwellings long since condemned for demolition, only reprieved so far because of the lack of new houses for their present inhabitants to move to. With only the frailest of hopes for refuge in these towering tenements,

almost Cyclopean in the height and alien in shape, night-marish and angular, he aimed for them.

Leaving the park he struggled through one of the tentacular outgrowths of the rambling cemetery. It was a hideous necropolis, ill-famed, ill-rumoured, especially since the days of the hellish Nineties, when outbursts of devil worship caused the movement from here to the present town-centre, and when the usually outspoken local newspapers voluntarily went along with the council's request for secrecy about certain things found malingering here. Redfern shuddered, remembering some of the rumours he'd heard.

Soon though, he'd crossed the graveyard and clambered over its tumbledown wall to scramble along an alley lined by dustbins and crates between the cliff-like walls of the tall houses. Upwards they reached on both sides, so high and near together that he felt trapped between them, and enmeshed by nagging claustrophobic fears. Before him in the half-light he saw an unpainted door, blackened by decay and rain, set deep in a crumbling doorway. Cautiously he tried its rusted handle. With a rasp it gave way and swung inwards, jamming half open to display a great, black cavern of a room. Slowly his eyes adjusted to the gloom inside, until he could partly make out the straw-covered floor, the mould-veined table in the centre, the gaping hearth, the curtainless windows at the far end – their frames blunted by folds of thick webs till they looked like the glazed eyes of a corpse, rheumy now with the rain dribbling down them – and the steps that led upwards between two walls. Walking to them he found that, though damp-riddled, they were sturdy, leading upwards steeply to a closed door two floors above. As he climbed, the walls alongside swelled inwards like two chest, scuffed by lichen and decay, large scabs of plaster slowly peeling off. The stairs creaked abominably and he felt sure that those youths would hear. He walked more slowly, more carefully, step by step. The atmosphere was stiflingly close and he found it increasingly hard to breathe. He unfastened his shirt collar as sweat ran stickily down his burning cheeks, dripping on the dust-swathed steps below.

By the time he'd reached the door that led off from a short landing at the top, given a ghostly appearance in the shreds

of light that scraped through the barred skylight above, he felt exhausted and dizzy, the whole world seeming to spin chaotically about him. Looking back, as he held the banister rail for support, the stairs looked immeasurably long like those of Jacob, shorn of their luminous cherubs.

Ignoring this vertiginous effect he turned his attention to the door, reaching for its leprous old knob. Inside all was in darkness, the floor being absolutely black like a placid yet Stygian pool, the roof above mere ribs of old beams, with no slates except a few around the edges, like a ragged fringe. He stepped inside.

As he did so he screamed. Echoes jeered him insanely. His feet met nothing, and he plummeted forwards into a gaping black void. As he fell he saw the moon spinning ludicrously across the sky. Down, down, down. He heard a long, forlorn scream. Felt the air beat his face. Then the wet, stringy mud that enveloped him.

His fall, though it seemed so long in duration, he supposed must have been relatively short, not really hurting him much, though the fact that he landed in soft, clinging filth must have been the cause of his harmless if jarring landing. For a while, however, he sat back, collecting his shattered nerves. His body trembled uncontrollably. Slowly he took in his surroundings. Up above between the spanning beams was the moon; about him, revealed in the bleaching moonlight, were the slimy, rotting walls of the hole he'd fallen into. They were of old brick, rough and pocked by many a hole, some small and some large, scattered around at ground level like giant rat holes. A miasmal stench choked him. It was palpably hideous, coming upon him in vaporous clouds that tainted the moonlight a sickly jaundiced yellow. After a while he became aware of some sounds like those of things moving. A racking nervousness tensed him as his eyes forged through the gloom. Slowly, though his mind at first refused to accept it, he saw something advancing out from one of the holes in the brick. It looked large, crawling like a man on his knees, hulking as though hunchbacked, and leprously white. With a sudden spasm of terror he jerked away, only just choking a scream that threatened to seize his whole consciousness. He had no doubts that something was moving; it was flabby, corpulent, heaving itself along labori-

ously, gasping at each tug forward. The sight of it in the vagueness of the gloom was enough to sicken him completely. It was so hideous; partly human in outline, but so distorted, so warped, so demoniacal. And still it dragged itself onwards, repulsively groaning and slobbering wetly.

Hastily he climbed to his feet and clambered over the liquescent ground away from it. But he could hear other groans, rasps, and hisses from all around him. From all the orifices in the quaking walls came shapes, some more upright than the first, some almost like snakes, squirming limblessly along the vile ground. What hellish things they were he could not conjecture, shuffling, writhing, creeping, stalking towards him; reptilian in some ways, human in others, blubbery and obscene and wretchedly evil. Great teeth filled what mouths they had. Sharp nails were splayed from their filth-scaled hands; those that had them!

Shrieking, Redfern ran from the part where most were massing and sprang for the wall, grasping at the outjutting bricks, kicking his feet into the cracks and socket-like holes. Crazy with hysteria and panic he climbed quickly with the speed of the mad, careless of falling, flaying onwards, onwards, ever higher, ever further from the shrieking, howling hell below. He felt claws graze his feet, tear at the legs of his trousers. He kicked them away, ever climbing, climbing with desperation and stark utter fear.

He stared up at the moon and the shadowy door as the monstrosities below scythed warped arms uselessly through the air. He grasped the base of the jagged remains of what had once been the floor of a room – now but several inches of a ledge about the chasm – and hauled himself up on to the landing.

Gasping from the exertion he sat on the steps, wiping his face dry. As yet he felt too weak to do any more. The things below couldn't reach him now, and if they could climb out he'd be able to see and hear them in time to fight back or run.

He heard the creak of something treading on the stairs below. Alarmed, he looked down to see the youths climbing them, bunched together into a repulsive black bulk.

The nearest was Dag; he continued a few feet before the rest.

'Wait, stop,' Redfern cried. 'See this.'

'See what?' the youth asked, and Redfern pulled him to the top to look down into the gaping abyss. 'Good God!' His voice was a tortured rasp as shudders passed through his body in violent spasms. Yet to Redfern, though manifestly showing all the symptoms of horror and disgust, the youth's actions seemed false as though he were an actor 'hamming it'. Nervously he looked back at the others, sniggering amongst themselves.

'Well, what are you going to do?' Redfern asked impatiently. 'Even you can't let those horrible things remain. They're blasphemous, evil.' In the translucent gloom below, weird shadow-like shapes of arms reached up yearningly, clawing at the vapours that drifted back and forth in diseased clouds.

'Do what, mister? Kill 'em? But why should we? They're not doing us any harm, are they? Now be reasonable, eh, we aren't inhuman.'

Anger and loathing welled up inside Redfern. 'Not dangerous? They're evil. Can't you tell? Evil. Do something decent in your lives. Do something. Or are you completely worthless?' He glared at the youth. He was devoid of all inhibitions, devoid of fear. He'd seen worse than Dag's kind now.

'Yai, we're worthless, mister,' Dag sneered. 'Dead worthless.'

With a bestial grunt Redfern lunged at him. '*Dead worthless!*' he spat, and he kicked and tore at the youth. Beneath his maniacal blows Dag fell back, toppling clumsily with a groan over the brink down into the writhing abyss.

'Any more of you?' Redfern asked, turning on the others, a tight smile, ironical yet grim, on his face. Soon it left. Insanely, the youths were sniggering even louder than before. 'What's wrong with you?' But his voice was a weak travesty that murmured self-consciously on the staircase. Slowly they advanced on him, forcing him back away from them. Desperately he struck the nearest, dragging him up, and pushed him after Dag into the horrendous cavern that yawned hungrily below. As the youth tumbled limply, silently downwards through the wavering vapours, Redfern saw the corpulent visages of the hell-beasts below, rubbery

and wet, so unnaturally white, and amongst them the grinning face of Dag, his now naked arms already grasping the rotting walls as he hauled himself up, climbing amidst a pulsating grey mass, a mounting legion of leprous horrors, all grinning and slobbering and glaring greedily up at him.

As he screamed Redfern felt the sharp fingers of the 'youths' behind pierce his shoulders, blood snaking down his back whilst they forced him to the edge of the smouldering abyss to see the clawing hands waiting below . . .

FRIED MAN

by

MARTIN WADDELL

OLD BUNTING GOT hisself fried. The way he dun it was this. Old Bunting reckons he can take his mob in over the back wall, bust the window of the potato store, and scoop all the ciggies in the Valentia Supper Saloon, easy. Over the wall he comes, in through the potato store; then he lets out a yell and starts rolling about on the floor.

His mob don't like the look of him.

Next minute he's copped it. Out cold, gone upstairs.

His mob finish stocking up with ciggies, then they reckon they've got to do something about old Bunting. So they bung him in the fryer, out of harm's way, and off they go.

That's it then. Ciggies is gone, old Bunting's in the fryer. Pimmy comes in, see's he's lost his ciggies, has the police, your actual law. Twelve o'clock is opening time, so he puts the fat on at a quarter to, then he goes out the back and gets his pre-packed chips, waiting to pitch 'em into the old bubble. In he comes, with his chips, lifts up the lid . . . and there's old Bunting swimming round in the fat, all brown and greasy, little bits of potato caught up in his hair, his mouth open and his eyes closed.

'Here, Ron,' says Pimmy. 'Have a look at this then.'

So I come over and take a look at old Bunting, who's fitted into our fryer neat as neat, as though he'd been made for the job.

'I know what happened to him, Pimmy,' I said, prodding his old brown tummy, beginning to swell a bit now. 'He got fried-end, didn't he?'

'That ain't funny, Ron,' says Pimmy.

'The trouble with Bunting,' I said, 'he always was chicken.'

'If he was chicken,' says Pimmy, 'we could use him, couldn't we?'

Pimmy is in a mess, because old Bunting is his uncle, and he can't let on about old Bunting getting in his fat on account of old Bunting being there in the first place to pinch his ciggies and the police being on to that. Say he fell in the fat and drowned hisself and the law won't believe you; leave him all fat and greasy, sitting on the pavement somewhere, and they're liable to trace him back where he come from. Once the law gets on to Bunting doing the ciggies they're liable to get on to Bunting's mob and Bunting's mob is doing the ciggies for Pimmy, on account of the insurance, and so Pimmy is in dead trouble, out of the frying . . . well, you know what I mean.

'What do you reckon we should do with him, Ron?' says Pimmy, scratching his hair so his dandruff goes all over the cod.

Old Bunting is doing very nicely, down there in the fat, so it seems a shame to disturb him. Just the same the customers is banging on the door, and the chips is still as pale as the day they was chipped, on account of Bunting taking up their room. So we lay down a lot of old newspaper on the floor and we take one end of old Bunting each and have him out of the fryer, which is no easy game, 'cause he's piping hot by this time, and slippery as a cod. 'Course we drops him, on account of his being hot, and the next thing he's skidding along the floor, leaving a greasy stain behind him. The more we try to lay hold on him, the more he slips out of our hands, it's like playing ice hockey with greasy old Bunting for a puck, but at last we gets him in underneath the counter, all wrapped up in the *News of the World*.

So far so good.

In come the customers, and they want to know why their chips aren't ready.

'We gotta change the fat,' says Pimmy.

'Oh no you ain't,' says Mrs Lever, who's on about her old man on account of the fact he gets home at a quarter past because of being on the early morning, and he wants his fish and chips then he does, and not half an hour later, when he's reckoning on being a-kip.

'Honest missus,' says Pimmy. 'You wouldn't like no chips done in that lot.'

'Any more of that guff, Pimmy,' says Mrs Lever, 'and I'll be round your house with the address of a certain young lady in Hackney, and you know what that'll do to your old lady.'

Pimmy goes pale.

'Missus,' he says.

'In with the chips,' says old Mrs Lever.

'Ron!' says Pimmy, appealing to me. 'You tell her her old man won't like his chips done in that, you tell her.'

'He wouldn't fancy it, luv, honest,' I says, doing my best to stick by Pimmy, because I reckon that fat may taste a bit odd, what with having old Bunting's corpse drifting around in it these last few hours.

'I don't care,' says Mrs Lever, and young Lily says the same, and they both look at us hostile.

'What do I do, Ron?' says Pimmy.

So I take the chips out of basket, and I drop them in the fat. I'm not going to eat 'em, and I reckon that old Lever's stomach must be proof against anything after the years he's been living with his missus.

We're open all day, and doing a good trade, without a chance to change the fat, or worry about old Bunting, who's lying beneath the counter smearing the *News of the World* . . . I always said he'd end up in it.

Closing time, and we pull old Bunting out from under the counter and have a look at him. He's all brown and fried of course, looking like he just swung down from the trees, and the fat has set in ripples on his clothes and turned his collar stud into melted plastic, and his old pin-stripe shirt is coming apart and he's stiff as a board, though luckily he ain't too big on account of we folded him up in the middle.

We're standing there looking at him, when in walks young Henry.

'Here,' says Henry. 'What's that?'

'Your Uncle Bunting, Henry,' says Pimmy, gentle as he can, in case young Henry takes it hard and breaks down in tears and cries out how he's been bad to his uncle all these years. Young Henry *has* been bad to his uncle all these years . . . he gave old Bunting them mushrooms and told him they

was mushrooms when they wasn't mushrooms they was puff balls and old Bunting didn't know any better and nearly spilled out his guts, and another time he says he didn't mean to put the mouse trap in his old uncle's bed and anyway it ain't his fault that his uncle gets the mouse trap where his uncle gets the mouse trap, and another time he doesn't exactly put frog-spawn in the rice pud and then again he doesn't exactly not put frog-spawn in the rice pud, and another time . . . young Henry doesn't do things your average run-of-the-mill citizen does, not when he's dealing with his Uncle Bunting. It's what his Uncle Bunting did to him when he was a little lad you see, turned the nephew against him. Old Bunting accidently puts his nephew in the old baking oven round Grainger's and they only get Henry out when he's begun to cry, on account of the dough old Bunting has stuffed down his throat, and the currants up his nose. Personally, I don't like the family, but maybe I'm prejudiced on account of hearing so much about them working for Pimmy. The only one they all love is their old mother Ethel what they keeps embalmed in the hall, so they can all wish her goodnight. She has this glass case and she sits inside it in a chair, only young Henry let his mouse inside and his mouse ate half her foot on account of liking the preservative. So they stuffed the mouse and put it where her foot used to be, and Pimmy says you can't hardly tell the difference, on account of her foot and the mouse being much the same colour. That's the sort of Pimmy's family, and his young nephew Henry.

Henry gives old Bunting a prod with his foot, which sinks quite a bit into old Bunting, and comes away coated with grease.

'Messy, ain't he?' says young Henry.

'Right,' says Pimmy.

'I come for my chips,' says Henry, who reckons he ought to be on free chips, on account of the Valentia being in the family. Old Ethel-in-the-glass-box-in-the-hall is the founder of the Valentia and when she's alive she sits by the fat spitting on the cod to see 'em sizzle and she's quite a character, only now she's dead she can't spit no more and Pimmy is particular about these things, and always licks

his fingers before he serves out a pastie, on account of hygiene.

'Chips ain't good today,' I tell young Henry.

'Why not?' says Henry.

'On account of your Uncle Bunting being fried in the fat,' I says.

'Doesn't matter,' says Henry, helping himself with the ladle to a ninepenny' worth.

Pimmy is standing there looking glum.

'Here,' says young Henry, 'have a chip.'

Pimmy doesn't.

'You have a chip, Ron,' says young Henry. 'Your actual Uncle Bunting special.'

'Don't Ron,' says Pimmy.

'Try anything once,' I tell him, and I have an Uncle Bunting chip.

It don't exactly taste of Uncle Bunting, but I won't say he's done nothing for the flavour. It's difficult to know somehow, and by the time I'm on my second ninepenny' worth I still haven't made up my mind whether the taste I'm tasting is chip taste or Uncle Bunting taste, on account of the chips is certainly different and meatier, with a dash of something which might just be Uncle Bunting's hair restorer.

'What you doing, Henry?' says Pimmy, to Henry who is bending over Uncle Bunting and tugging at him.

'Getting his teeth,' says Henry, holding 'em up in triumph. 'No sense in wasting 'em, is there?'

'They won't fit you, Henry,' I says.

But they do. They fit him a dream. He takes out his old National Health pair and slips in Uncle Bunting's and gleams at us, all gold.

'Here,' I says, 'where'd the old man get hold of 'em?'

'Easy,' says young Henry. 'Working up at the crematorium, wasn't he? Sets of teeth all over the house, he had. Only most of 'em are a bit melted, you know the way it is. This pair came from Rabberdale way, and he ain't been using 'em more 'an a month.'

'I don't know how you can wear 'em,' says Pimmy.

'You don't want to be too choosy,' says young Henry. 'Do you a good line in glass eyes or your new mechanical

limbs, he could. In they go through the curtains, and Uncle Bunting gets busy.'

'Got busy,' I said, because Uncle Bunting wouldn't be getting busy, not ever again.

'This is all very well,' said Pimmy, very formally. 'What we going to do with him, that's what I'd like to know?'

'Got a meat slice?' says young Henry, innocently.

We can see what's going on his head, and we don't like it. You got to draw the line somewhere. Uncle Bunting sliced, rolled up in buns, and served as Bunting Burgers is about it.

'With HP sauce,' says young Henry.

'No,' says Pimmy.

'Stick his eyes in a glass with vanilla and strawberry ice cream,' says young Henry.

Pimmy looks disgusted.

'How's about a nice joint for Sunday?' says Henry.

Henry takes another chip.

'Filletted Uncle Bunting?' he suggests.

We look at him with disgust and Uncle Bunting, bent double on the floor, no doubts shares our emotions.

'Sausages!' cries Henry. 'Anybody got a mincer?'

'Be serious, Henry,' said Pimmy. 'You know I'm on the fiddle, Ron knows I'm on the fiddle, Uncle Bunting knew I was on the fiddle, but the law don't and the insurance company don't. Uncle Bunting going and winding up dead in my fish fryer puts me right on the spot, specially as he's spent the day here. How can I dump him looking like that, I ask you? The law'd be round here in a minute.'

'Right then,' says Henry. 'Best thing we can do is to give him a bath.'

'Sounds sensible,' says Pimmy.

So we come down the chip shop in the middle of the night with young Henry's van, and we back it up against the potato store and we load doubled-up, greasy old Uncle Bunting into a potato sack and cart him out.

And the copper says, 'Now then gentlemen, now then. What's all this then?'

You can see what he thinks it is. He thinks it's the ciggies.

'It's only Uncle Bunting in the sack, officer,' says young Henry, quick as a flash.

'None of your lip, Henry Carter,' says the copper, and he undoes the top of the sack.

Course it *is* Uncle Bunting.

'What the hell!' says the copper, who's touched Uncle Bunting's head and come away with grease all over his hand.

'Well it ain't ciggies anyway,' says Pimmy.

Then Henry hits the copper over the head with the big steel pan, and the copper goes down in a bundle at our feet.

'What you done now, Henry?' cries Pimmy.

'Done for him,' says Henry, 'haven't I?'

So we puts the copper in the sack with greasy old Uncle Bunting.

This is a mistake, because when we get the sack round to the flats and into Mrs young Henry's postage-stamp bathroom we find that the fat and grease what was all over Uncle Bunting has got smeared on the law as well, so we end up with two in the bath, one at each end, all greasy and sticky, with the blood of the law mixing in with the grease from the chip fryer. Uncle Bunting is still stuck in his folded position, face down in the soap suds, and the law is beginning to stiffen up, and the pair of them is slippery as eels and very difficult to manage altogether, on account of the bathroom is so small and we keep losing the soap and the flannel. The third time the soap goes under Uncle Bunting it takes the three of us to get it out, and we're rapidly losing our tempers.

Then in walks Mrs Besant from the flat below.

Water is coming through her ceiling.

What do we think we're at, anyway?

Next moment she's through and into the bathroom.

Bang goes the frying-pan.

Three of 'em in the bath now, and a damn tight fit.

Next thing is we can't get the water to run out.

'What's the matter with that then?' says Pimmy.

We've no sooner finished discovering that the copper's foot is caught in the outlet when we find Uncle Bunting has his toe up the tap. Meanwhile the water has got cold, and the

grease and blood have set round the rim of the bath and it don't half look off-putting.

'Boil it up for stew,' says young Henry, who thinks he's funny.

Pimmy tells him he isn't funny, and young Henry stalks off, forgetting that he's done for two of the three.

'What the hell are we going to do now, Ron?' says Pimmy.

There we are, stuck in Mrs young Henry's flat while she's out at Bingo, three greasy corpses lying in the bath, and no inspiration.

'Get 'em back to the van,' I said.

So we have the copper out, and Mrs Besant out, and Uncle Bunting out, and we prop 'em up against the wall and start towelling them down.

Then the electricity goes.

We're skidding around in the darkness, searching through Mrs young Henry's flat looking for candles and the fuse box, and we can't find it and we keep tripping over corpses and getting excited.

'What we going to do, Ron?' cries Pimmy, in the darkness.

'I don't bleeding know,' I tell him.

The light goes on again, and young Henry is standing in the hall re-winding the fuse wire and saying how sorry he is that we were troubled. He's come back to help us, he says, on account of him having done for two of the three.

'Very nice of you, young Henry,' says Pimmy, and we troop back into the bathroom.

The copper is there, his head a mush, Uncle Bunting's fat all over him.

Old Mrs Besant is there with her cracked skull, Uncle Bunting's fat all over her.

Uncle Bunting has gone.

You can see his greasy footsteps leading to the window-sill, and the mess his hands have made up against the glass. We run out of the flat and on to the landing and you can see where he's got out of the window and walked over to the mat where he's taken off his old suede shoes, which are sitting there, and gone off in his wet stocking feet.

‘But Uncle Bunting was dead!’ says Pimmy.

‘Gone to haunt you, hasn’t he?’ says young Henry.

Poor old Pimmy, he doesn’t know what to make of it. We follow the feet marks down the stairs, and then we lose ’em in the courtyard, where it’s been raining anyway.

‘Maybe he’s out there in the dark waiting for you,’ says young Henry, enjoying himself.

I don’t say a thing.

Anyway, we don’t have time to worry about it. We have old Mrs Besant and the copper to dispose of, and this calls for a family conference. We go back up to Mrs young Henry’s flat and we have the two corpses out on the carpet and we sit there talking it over, and after a while Mrs young Henry comes in from her Bingo and joins us.

Then we’re getting hungry.

‘Eating Uncle Bunting in Bunting-burgers is one thing,’ says Pimmy, ‘on account of Uncle Bunting being family.’

‘And a dirty old man,’ I says.

‘Whereas,’ says young Henry, ‘Mrs Besant was a decent church-going woman, I know it for a fact.’

‘And the copper is clean living,’ says Mrs young Henry.

‘How do you know?’ says young Henry, who is always suspicious of his missus, on account of the things he gets up to hisself.

‘’Cause he wouldn’t,’ says Mrs young Henry.

‘How d’you know that?’

‘’Cause I asked him,’ says Mrs young Henry.

This is very impressive evidence, because Mrs young Henry is quite something, and any copper that turns her down must be good living.

‘They’re both good living,’ says Pimmy. ‘They’re both what you might call well fleshed, and neither one of them is family.’

‘I’ll get my drill,’ says young Henry.

Young Henry’s drill has a saw attachment and it goes through the copper and Mrs Besant like they was butter. It makes a bit of a mess on the carpet but we’re able to have a nice joint to take home a-piece, and the next week or two Pimmy and I are serving up steak and chips at the old Valentia on a profit margin we ain’t never seen before. Once

we have them cut apart young Henry puts the skeletons together again and takes 'em down the market all covered in gold paint and sells 'em to this old man they call The Beast From Aberdeen or Claw Hand, who reckons he is the seventh son of a seventh son of a seventh son and the nearest thing to old Nick.

So Mrs Besant and the copper ends happily. Mrs Besant turns out to be a bit tough, but the young copper is tender as you like and he ain't half got a lot of blood. We give his kidneys to the cat.

All this time, when we're selling bits of the other two in the Valentia and young Henry is making a profit on the skeletons, we are waiting for old Uncle Bunting to turn up again, and wondering what he'll have to say when he does come through the door.

Pimmy's waiting for it, anyway. Pimmy reckons he must have been alive all along, only in a coma.

Personally, I reckon if he was in a coma the frying would have finished him anyway, if only because all the fat getting into his lungs would have choked him. What I reckon happened, personally, was that young Henry, who is a bit of a lad, reckoned he had a grouse at Pimmy for telling him he isn't funny, and that young Henry has taken Uncle Bunting out of the bathroom after he deliberately blows the fuses, and has made footprints down the stairs and messed up the bathroom window to put us off the scent.

I am waiting for the other end of young Henry's joke.

Knowing young Henry, I reckon that he has got old Uncle Bunting round the place somewhere, rotting, and that we ain't meant to find him until he's in a nasty way.

I tried telling Pimmy, but he wouldn't believe me. He doesn't reckon young Henry holds grudges like that, but I say he doesn't know young Henry. Young Henry is nasty.

And I am proved right.

Pimmy is washing the chips, and I notice the water has a funny smell, and a sort of scum on it.

So I go up to the loft above the Valentia, and I take a look in the water tank, which is covered with a green-grey slime that washes right over the thing wedged inside it, decomposing all over the ballcock.

I go downstairs to tell Pimmy about it and I see he is just taking a drink of water from the tap, and wondering why it is this funny colour.

Maybe I will tell him later.

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THE SCIENTIST

by

GERALD ATKINS

IT SEEMS INCREDIBLE that over the last few weeks I have been reduced to a nervous wreck by something that I helped to create. I have never fully understood the workings of the human mind, and whether it is just strain or insanity that afflicts my conscious self I shall never be sure. What disaster have I unleashed into the world of the living? What enmity have I procured that threatens the very existence of life in our world? I must confess it all, and let you, the people who stand endangered, decide whether I stand innocent or guilty of the act that has been rendered by this thing that is now out of my control.

Many of you may not be aware at this moment that your lives are threatened. But it will come. Yes, it will come to claim you as it has already claimed others. What I have done is unforgivable, although at first it seemed like just another experiment, a simple day-to-day experiment. God forgive me. I lacked the interest in my work that others relished. I was bored. Each and every hour I toiled I was damnably bored. But then, when I realized the power within my grasp, I became obsessed with it. My life, yes, even my very soul, fed upon this dreadful knowledge. Oh, what would I give to have foreseen the outcome of it all. Each terrible day that comes brings with it's dawn new horrors on which none can turn their backs. Each drifting hour unfolds dreadful situations that previously appeared only in the minds of lunatics. But now, God help me, I have surpassed them all. The wildest dream of the ultimate sadist could never have conjured up a tenth of my vile creation. I have tampered with the very centre of life, that minute speck on which all life originated. I have tried the despicable, and succeeded. I have obtained a level with God himself, an

opposite level that is. He has the power to create life, and I have been cursed with the power to obliterate all that He created. I cannot redeem myself for my success which has meant a sentence of eternal damnation for my soul. My God, if only my apology would make things right, but it is too late, far, far too late. I should have realized what I was doing, falsified my reports to my superiors, anything. Yes, anything but this. They praised me for what I have done. Praised me for offering them the ultimate in destruction. God will never forgive me, and neither will you as you lie dying in the rubble of your fallen cities. 'Curse him,' you'll all say. 'Curse him. The man who created this fiendish monster. The man who created the ATOMIC BOMB!' Believe me, I'm truly sorry . . .

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