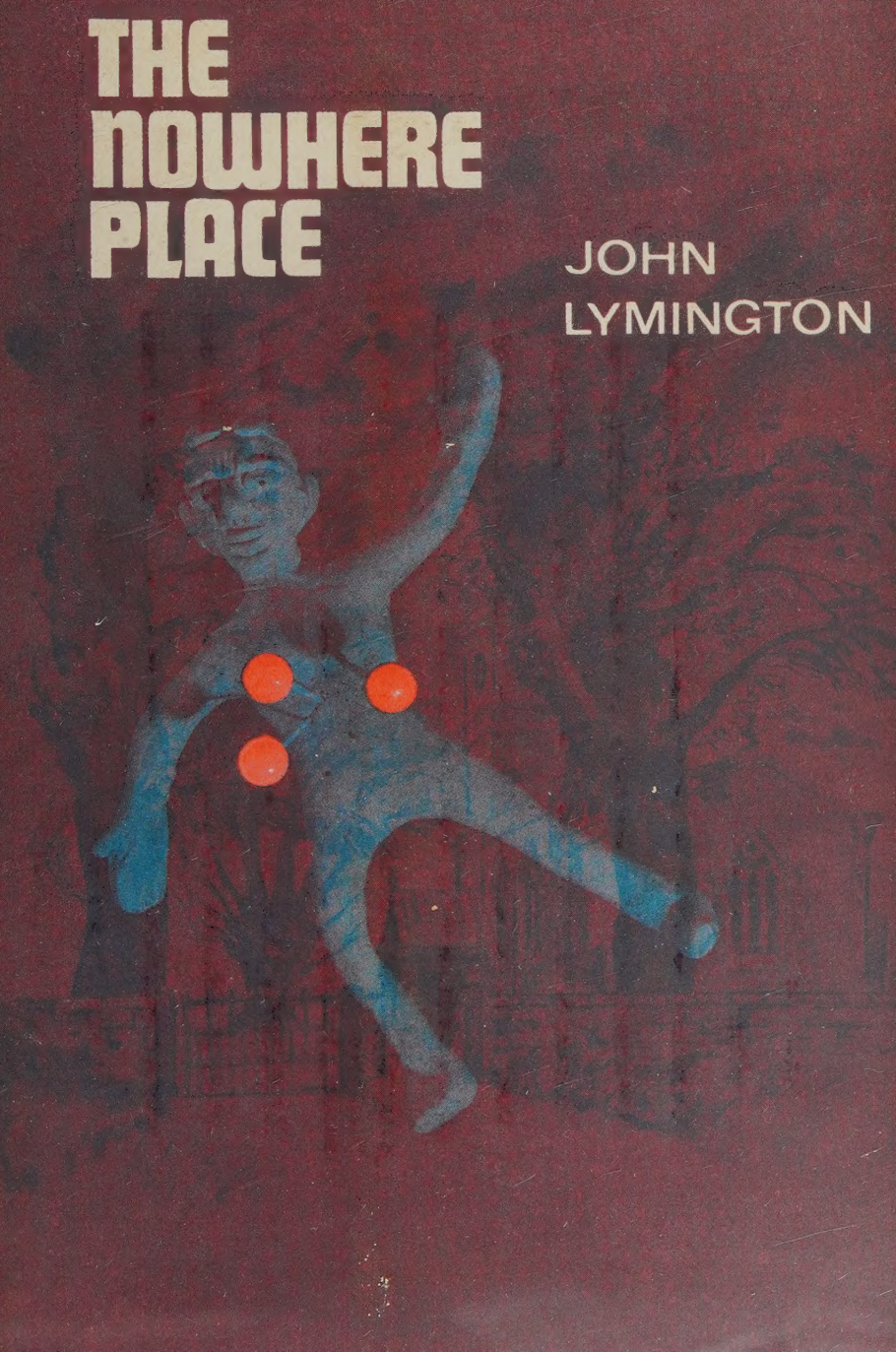
THE NOWHERE PLACE

JOHN LYMINGTON



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Why does part of an English village suddenly disappear, accompanied by tremors and a strange whistling noise? What is the secret of the poison pen letters and of the villagers' guilty pasts? And who is the man Trent?

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By the same author

NIGHT OF THE BIG HEAT
THE GIANT STUMBLES
THE GREY ONES
THE COMING OF THE STRANGERS
SWORD ABOVE THE NIGHT
THE SLEEP-EATERS
THE SCREAMING FACE
THE STAR WITCHES
FROOMB!
THE GREEN DRIFT
TEN MILLION YEARS TO FRIDAY

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by

JOHN LYMINGTON

HODDER AND STOUGHTON

The characters in this book are entirely imaginary and bear no relation to any living person.

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1

At seven twenty-eight am on the morning of Saturday, June 24th, Jobey Miles drove up the hill. There was a thump in the engine which worried him. He worried anyhow. He was glad to get to the top and lift his foot, so that the thump faded. From the crest of the hill he looked at Weston Abbas, a pool of grey stone buildings with high elms for sentinels, all forming an island in the rich fields. There was a heat haze on the country, so that Abbas seemed to float on a misty sea, and the multicolour of the Cotswold stone was rich, like pearl. The heat was on for the fifth day.

Jobey sighed with relief when the thump stopped. He had a feeling Mail Van 601 was going to strand him somewhere soon. He had driven her in snow and fog, in rain and gales: he had seen Abbas with the trees stripped, with the roads awash, with no roads at all beneath snow as high as the hedges. He had delivered mail to Weston Abbas two thousand and fifteen times counting the morning of June 24th. He didn't come back from that one for two days.

The road ran shallowly down from the little hill to the S bend, flanked on one side by a wall of trees which cut off the view of the village. The first turn was right, then a wide curve left at the end of the trees, and then the church tower poked out from amongst the trees of the village.

Only that morning, it didn't.

Jobey rounded the second bend, following the black road between the well kept road edges in a slow left turn. It went on turning left a little longer than usual, it seemed, and then straightened. Jobey braked so the wheels screamed.

"What the bloody hell!" said Jobey. He stared back through the barred rear windows, then forward through the windscreen. Startled, he got out on to the road and looked

each way of the bend.

He was on the bend leading out of the village on the South side. The ingoing bend on the North had continued right into the bend outgoing on the South. With no village in between.

Jobey closed his eyes. It was hot, but his sudden stickiness was not due to the heatwave. He looked all round. It was the bend going out all right. Frightened now that his head was coming loose he ran back down the road to where normally one could see the village. He saw it, standing there, with the church on the far side beyond the cottages, the pub, the two big houses and the Manor park.

Jobey wiped his face. He had had a blackout. It was a frightening thing, suddenly to go blank like that and not know what you had done.

"Driven right through the bloody village and never seen a sausage!" he said. "Phew!"

He went back to his van, turned in the road and headed back on the South bend. The road ran round normally and then came out on the S bend on the North side, one unmistakably continuous bend.

Jobey stopped by a lane, leant on the wheel and stared ahead of him. "Jesus!" he said.

But anger began to tinge his bewilderment. He drove into the lane, turned and then stopped, heading back to where the village wasn't. He closed his eyes and then, above the mumble of his engine, he heard a tractor approaching.

Perched up on the iron camel he saw one of the Dribbles grinning perpetually through a mask of mud. It was this mud masking that made it hard to tell one Dribble from his brother.

Jobey got out. Dribble pulled up the tractor.

"Where yer to, then?" Dribble said.

Jobey opened his mouth to speak, saw the wondering grin and swallowed.

"I'll follow you in," he said. "Engine's knocking a bit."

"Wants some watter, praps," Dribble said. He cured all machinery by putting water into any hole that offered. Nothing ever seemed to happen but a lot of steam. The only

reason he never put it in the petrol was because the filler was usually up the other end.

Jobey got back in the van, and with his teeth set tight followed the big tree-trunk wheels. They flung dried mud back at him, but he hardly noticed the rattle on the screen. His eyes grew dry and hot with the strain of watching the bend unfold around the tractor.

When he saw the church tower beyond Dribble's straw-stuck head he felt so weak he almost stopped. Dribble saw him slow in his crab's eye mirror, eased off and looked back.

"Okay, okay!" Jobey shouted.

Dribble nodded and thundered off again. Jobey wiped his face.

"I'd better see the quack," he muttered.

But as soon as he said it, out loud, it seemed like somebody else advising him.

"But why?" he said, gorge rising in challenge. "I feel all right. I've never had a blackout in my life."

Perhaps it was the heat. Heat did funny things. Mirages and that. Mirages, things that weren't there but looked like it. Only this wasn't there. Don't kid yourself, matey. You don't get a mirage half a mile long so it goes flick! and you're out the other side with nothing in between.

He thought of the trip recorder, but he hadn't zeroed it for three days or more. He couldn't even remember how many days. He kept meaning to. They checked it up at the Office anyway, so what. But it would have been useful now, just to see if there was any distance for that flick! bit. Where the village hadn't been—

"Jesus!" he said. He pushed his cap back and wiped his face. "It wasn't there twice. I had two blackouts, one after the bloody other!"

He closed his eyes a moment and the van crawled almost into the ditch. The fear that his mind had let go—not once, but twice with a lucid bit between—struck him through the vitals like an ice lance.

"Gosh, no! It must be the heat. Dizzy making. You know, the heat. That's it. The bloody village is here, isn't it? What's

this then, Scotch Mist?"

He saw the church tower showing between the yews of the churchyard and felt glad for it.

2

On the outskirts of the village he turned right into a lane over a wooden bridge which spanned the stream with a twenty foot arch. The water rippled with rainbows in the sun, soft hued in the haze. He stopped a moment on the bridge and looked down, watching the bottom weeds wave and trail in the stream and the trout dart and nose up suddenly for flies. It made him feel better.

"Must have been me," he muttered. "Fell asleep praps. Yes, that musta bin it. Dropped off."

He felt altogether better for that idea. People could fall asleep without being mad or anything, and hot weather made you sleepy. But not twice, he thought and felt uneasy again.

He got back into the van, almost his old self, buoyant, cheeky, alert, anxious, like a dog. He turned at the end of the lane where a neglected drive fanned out in front of a red brick farmhouse. You could hardly read the signboard: Mill Farm. The house windows and doors and shutters peeled and flaked like a disease. The sheds and barns around lurched and leant on each other, ready to collapse at the knees. Jobey had seen the stock go, the machines go, had watched the fields grow rough and wild, and the gates reel open, not even tied with rope any longer.

When he pulled the old wire bell the thing broke at last and came out like a drooping sword in his hand. Mrs Habbut opened the door.

"One to sign for, Maggie," said Jobey. "And what shall I do with this?" He waved the bell pull.

"Stick it in the bed," Maggie said, drying her hands on her apron. She took the book and Jobey's pencil. "What's the good? He's got a desk full. I've seen 'em. He don't open 'em."

"I don't think this is one of them," Jobey said. "There's a lot

of these, for right through the village, all come from the same place."

She signed the book with her tongue sticking out.

"Why don't they go?" Jobey said, looking up at the house.

"It corsts money to go," she said.

"Why do you stay?" he said.

She gave the book back. "I feel sorry for *her*. She gets it all. He just goes ridin' and ridin' like there's nothing wrong at all, and he's never here when *they* come."

"Bound to come to an end, Maggie," Jobey said.

"Ah, but it's what kind of end," Maggie Habbut said. "That's what I can't help thinkin'. I'll hang on, still. And it's not so bad now the kid's gone back. A bad tongue that one. Wicked. You don't know the things she makes up on folk. Awful it is. Funny, though. She han't written this week, did she?"

"I han't seen one from Wales, no."

"Went last Satdy, too. Ah, well, praps she's found somethink for her idle hands to do instead of writing to her Mum. More bills, is there? I wonder they bothers to send 'em."

Jobey reached out for his pencil. "There was something queer just now—" he began in a rush, then felt a flush of heat. "Just sort of queer feeling down on the road."

"Well, nothin' queer about that, then," she said. "'Tis Midsummer. I wouldn't be surprised at nothin'."

She pointed for a moment across the fields to the trees and the church and Manor house showing in patches amongst them. "Ah, that!" said Jobey, looking that way. "I han't thought o' that." Then he laughed. "Ah well. Press on. I got some of these for them, too." He nodded at the envelope she held. "Invitations, praps."

"Not to this house," said Maggie, and took the broken bell pull from the flower bed. "Don't spose he'll want it mended."

Jobey shrugged and went back to his van. Back on the road he ran a hundred yards towards the village then turned left into the private road to the Council Estate, Flushdene. Its six houses were arranged in a crescent, backing on to the Dribbles'

farm. Twenty-six cars were parked around the houses, in the road, up the garden paths, on the gardens. They were new, off-new, old down to shattered bangers. Gardens once neatly lined with vegetables were scattered with old bicycles, motor bikes and scooters, all partially decaying. Jobey delivered every free offer catalogue, football pool coupon, betting guide and sports form published throughout the country. No matter what round Jobey called on, morning or afternoon, the whole estate was belting out music at full power and people screaming at each other in a form of conversation.

At eight every morning, smoking, banging and screeching, all the cars and scooters went, and when the smoke settled, the houses looked suddenly undressed and forlorn. Only the grandmothers remained, looking after the smallest children, irritated by the music but frightened of loneliness if they turned it off.

Jobey heard the usual oncoming roar and pulled into the side of the private road to let the flood of outgoing vehicles go streaming by. It made him feel better, because this belligerent cavalcade must go somewhere out of the place, so it had to be there to get out of. Hadn't it?

He put coupons, free offer lists and a couple of summonses through the letterboxes up to number six. There he brought out his book, the yellow stamped letter and his pencil.

Grandma Dollflower came to the door, holding some knitting in her hands. She was always knitting Things. Long, tubular, straggly Things. She talked to them. They were almost the only things that did not answer her back and tell her to belt up.

"To sign for, Grandma," said Jobey.

"Oh Christ, another summings," said Grandma. "Who's it for? Bert? It's usually Bert."

"It's Bert's, but not a summons," Jobey said. "A lot have got 'em."

"I better sign," said Grandma. "They've all gone to work. I dunno why we aint rich. Like Shakespeare says about riding them camels to 'eaven. I supposes they're savin' up for God, or somethink. Gimme the book."

She signed with skill and practice. As her progeny were usually at work she signed for everything, letters, hire purchase, rentals, and almost any guarantees to cover not paying for what you were soon going to get.

"It was funny this mornin'—you don't mind me sitting, Jobey," she said, lowering herself on to the top step. "Sort of floatin'. I says to them, 'I feel's I'm floatin',' I says, and they says, 'You're always floatin', yer old bag,' but Bert says, 'No, don' go on at the old cow, I felt a bit light meself just now; sorta squizzy.'"

"Now that's funny, Grandma," Jobey said. "Just down the road, I ... Just back there I got that sort of feeling. Just bout arf seven, it was. Just then."

"Now that's funny you says that," Grandma said, pointing at him with her Thing. "Right then, about then it was, and I says, 'It's Clara,' I says, 'by the suckin' of me thumbs something awful comes,' like the witches Macbeth had, you know them. She's a witch, Clara. They lives in hovels, witches, thirteen to a hovel, and there's this Macbeth—"

"I must get on," said Jobey.

As a girl Grandma Dollflower had been maid in a big house and all there was to do in the evenings was get books out of the library that weren't valuable, which was Shakespeare, Adam Bede, and a lot of peculiar and very rude books which she had found stuck in behind the set of Shakespeare.

"It was when the pips went on the wireless," said Grandma, casting another interest hook at Jobey. "That's arparst, and then, when we was going to get the weather it juss screamed, and it's a new one, only got on the rental larss week—"

"Screamed?" said Jobey, arrested.

"Bert says, 'That's wanderin', that's what that's doin', driftin' orff the signal, that is.' Clever, Bert is, and knows things, but when he goes an' tries it on a couple o' the old ones they was jussa same, jussa same, all driftin' orff the signal, Bert says—"

"Well, I must get on," Jobey interrupted.

Grandma went on talking while he walked away back to the van, turning up her volume the farther off he got. When he drove away she went on, talking to her Thing.

Then she remembered the strange letter in her lap. She looked at it a while, then got up, went in and steamed it open on the new rented electric kettle.

When she read what the letter said, she dropped her Thing and knocked the kettle over and pulled out the plug Bert had fixed not too well in the wall. The letter dropped in the spilt water and started curling up and plaster from the hole in the wall got mixed up in it. Grandma straightened.

"It's all that bloody floatin'," she said, and lit a cigarette with a shaking hand. "It come orff the ground. That's what it did. It all come orff the ground, like the palast in Aladdin. I'll ave a cuppertea."

She picked up the kettle, but it was still joined in the plug and wires pulled out of the wall, so she went and got another electric kettle and after taking out plugs and adaptors and wires and bits stuck in with matchsticks which disconnected the record player, toaster, radio, television, alarm clock and a few lamps, she plugged the kettle into the free socket. After a while there was a smell.

"Oh cripes, I forgot the water agen," she said, and burnt herself. "Ought to ave safety devices, them."

In the end she put some water in and felt more settled. She went and picked the letter out of the plastery water, and looked at it again.

"Incest?" she said. "Well, so what? What about Hamlet, then? What about him and his Mum, then?" She folded the soggy paper and crammed it into her skirt pocket.

Down the road beyond the Flushdene turn, there was another track to the right; a small, private road leading to the church, the vicarage, and the Manor house. The church was grey, like pearl stone in the heat haze, the stained glass windows sparkling like insects' wings as Jobey went along by the yew hedge of the graveyard. Beyond the hedge lay the mounds and stones, the memorials to man's forgetfulness, untidy—overgrown.

The lane to the church and Manor bent, and on the bend, out of sight of the two main buildings, and specially the

vicarage, was Elsie, the vicar's daughter. Elsie was twenty-four, tall and with a magnificent figure, bursting with riches, they said roundabout. She had straight golden hair to her shoulders, and a curiously attractive ugly face, which she painted, deliberately, as if she had done it without a mirror and missed slightly.

She smiled and waved Jobey to stop. Then she leant at the van window.

"Anything for me, Jobey, sweet?" she said.

"Yes, there is—one of these," Jobey said, bringing out a letter and his book. He was not surprised to see Elsie. She often met the post if she was expecting something she did not want her parents to see. Her father was eighty and her mother sixty, so that the trio lived in a permanent state of warring prejudice and misunderstanding.

"That?" said Elsie, flipping it over to look at the back. "What is it?"

"If you sign here, then you can open it," said Jobey and handed out his pencil. "Lovely morning." He watched her scribble, then took his book. "Something funny happened on the way here."

Elsie looked up very sharply, and lifted her hair aside so she could look at him with two very bright, blue eyes.

"What?" she said.

Jobey got the sharp impression that Elsie was frightened, almost as if, he thought, she'd had something to do with it.

"The village disappeared in the haze," he said, getting it out quickly in case he stopped himself half way.

She stared at him, and the brightness in her eyes faded into a more comfortable light. She let her hair fall.

"So early in the morning, Jobey," she chided, and laughed. She ripped the envelope with her little finger under the flap. "I'm surprised, really!" She laughed again, pulled out the letter, unfolded it and started to read. "My God!" she said. She looked up towards the vicarage, refolded the letter and pushed it down between the richest breasts in Weston.

"Not bad news, I hope?" said Jobey, curiosity rising fast.

"Bad?" she said. "Bloody disastrous!"

She turned and walked away down towards the road, going quickly, obviously thinking hard. Jobey turned and watched her bottom wiggle through his back window, and as she turned out into the road, he started off again. As he came to the vicarage, the vicar walked out carrying his small suitcase, his black trilby crammed down on his head, his yellow linen jacket stained with snuff. He had a mouth like a wiped cut, and the hatbrim, being down almost on his nose, let his eyes peer in the shadow like luminous marbles.

The vicar stopped and watched Jobey pull up and get out, with his letter and book. Richard Wilde nodded and took the articles. Jobey watched, his curiosity now rising to a point of near tension. Richard handed the book back and stared at the envelope. Then he got a knife from his pocket, put his case down and ripped the envelope while watching Jobey from under the pulled down brim of his black hat.

"Well?" said Richard.

Jobey was startled.

"My p-pencil," he said.

Richard handed it over. Jobey went back to the van, took out the letter for the Manor, and walked on.

As he went he heard a curse and looked back. The vicar was ripping the letter into shreds, which he suddenly threw up into the bright morning air. Then he stamped on them. Then he looked over his shoulder at his gloomy residence, bent quickly, and began to gather all the pieces up again.

"It must be me," Jobey said, closing his eyes a moment. "It can't be everybody else."

He rounded the tall yew hedge and came in sight of the Manor house. A splendid place of stone mullions, leaded windows and great oak doors with pointed tops, its stones soft in the early sun. The lawns around it were smooth and striped from the mower.

As he came within sight of it, and the lily pond and fountain on the lawn before the open main door, Jobey felt his hand holding the letter growing sticky.

"Phew!" he murmured. "Damn hot."

But it wasn't the weather. It was tension, the sense of some-

thing strange in the air, and the odd, frightening thought that he, by his own hands, was spreading some kind of disaster through the village.

Clara Trevelyan was mistress of the Manor, a widow who did things; which meant things nobody else dared do. Nobody could remember what her age was, but age was nothing to do with Clara. She brushed it off. She was a most beautiful woman, her skin and figure as lovely as thirty years before, her hair still as yellow, and her hairdresser assured all it was not tinted. Because of her form of eternal youth and other oddities, some women were certain she was a witch. The rest, not so superstitious, just thought she was nutty, and nutty people don't grow old because they don't worry about anything.

Up until that morning almost all of life's mysteries could find a ready explanation somewhere in the earthy mind of Weston Abbas.

Clara made hats out of odd things, like baskets and flowers, and had a peculiar skill at getting long rolls of fine material and somehow draping it on herself so that she looked like some Grecian goddess. Which is what Jobey was reminded of as he saw her, clad in drapes, standing in the lily pond, balancing a lily leaf on her head and watching the water for the effect.

"It won't keep still," she said, without looking up. "The water, I mean. It keeps rippling. What have you brought me this morning? Wonderful gifts? Love letters?"

"It's a Recorded Delivery," said Jobey.

"Do you like my hat?" she said, and looked up at him and smiled.

That smile always affected Jobey with a strange warmth that crept over him, enfolded him and made him feel very happy and non-resistant.

"Handsome," he said hoarsely. "You sign here."

She stepped out of the water on to the grass, but her hat dripped on the book and she threw it back in the pond.

"Oh dear, I've made an awful smudge," she said, and laughed. "Now I wonder why people want me to sign things? I love doing it," she added, ripping the envelope with Jobey's

pencil. "It makes me feel important, wanted. And I do think, don't you, that..." She started to read the letter. The lovely violet eyes darkened with a kind of puzzlement, and then a tinge of anger.

"Not—not bad news, I hope?" said Jobey, desperately.

She stared at him, and the dark beautiful eyes seemed to grow bigger and look right into him. He looked away.

"Not bad, no," she said, in an odd tone. She turned to go into the house, then stopped and looked back. "Oh, would you mind calling on your way back, Jobey, dear? We have something for the Post Office, the head one, I mean..." Her voice faded, her eyes drifted beyond him and she frowned at something far beyond the horizon. "It's a bad day. Bad. Do you know what I mean, Jobey?"

Jobey's pulse quickened.

"No. Not exactly."

She focused on him. "There's an *influence*. You have an aura, today, and it's not a good one. You must be very careful, Jobey. Don't, for goodness' sake, don't get lost."

She turned and went in, her drapes flowing behind her.

"Great crumbs!" said Jobey. He took his flat cap off and fanned his face with it. "Damn! She's got the book." He went to the main door to get it.

He felt a pang of disappointment when Judith, the housekeeper, came to the door with the book. She was a fine, big woman, so tightly dressed she looked like a ship's figurehead, and Jobey sometimes felt that if you pushed that great bust it wouldn't give any more than the figurehead's. If madness was catching, Judith, after twelve years, had caught it. Jobey was continually bringing her parcels of Do-It-Yourself kits ranging from carpets to cupboards. The last had been from a war surplus stores and contained a barrage balloon with which Judith intended to make her nephew a car cover.

"You've upset her," Judith said, angrily. "What did you do?"

"Me? I didn't do anything," Jobey said.

"Perhaps it was that damn man again," Judith said, looking back over her shoulder. "I wish to God he'd go!"

"The nephew chap?" said Jobey.

"Been here a month already, and everything's been wrong since. He does things to scare you. This morning, there was an awful screaming all of a sudden. Terrible. It sawed right through my head. I didn't hear the weather—"

"Arparst seven?" said Jobey quickly.

"Yes. Did you hear it, then?"

"Had a feeling of something funny."

"Funny! That's a word! Why the whole house was shaking with it. I felt it was going to take off!"

"What happened?"

"It just stopped again. It was awful. It sort of made you feel you were losing your grip of everything, nothing was real any more. It was dead queer. Oh, there she is calling. I must go."

She hurried off, her black hair, scraped back to a bun, catching the light. Like boot polish, Jobey thought.

The nephew, Jobey went on thinking, Trenton Forbes Esq. M.A. B.Sc., and most of the letters were redirected from a place called Hardinge Court, in Kent. Must be a month since these letters first started coming.

Then he stopped thinking escapism through his job and faced the memory of the morning since seven twenty-nine. He stopped walking. He just stood by the end of the yew hedge and looked at poor old overworked van 601 as if he had never seen such a monster. He felt his hot, wet face.

"It's me," he said again. But strength of character rose against the decision. "And everybody else," he added, and without trying to work it out, walked on.

3

The next stop, Bank House, lay beyond the Manor park, had a couple of meadows, then a spacious garden. A fine house of stone, shaped L, very long and thin, white painted windows and doors, and a fuel bill of constantly queried vastness for central heating. But Mr and Mrs Garfield, seventy and seventy-one, had made much money from Basil's father having made bul-

lets. Garfields still made bullets. In the Battle of Britain Garfield's father felt that gold had showered down from the eject chutes of the Spitfires. And it had.

Jobey liked rich people and he liked people to be rich, because that way, he argued, they must be happy, and Jobey liked people to be happy and hated grit. Jobey's father said Jobey was a clunk.

Basil Garfield was always genial and loved his Irish Setter and never lost his temper except when he couldn't get his own way. He often wished his wife would die. Daisy was often drunk and cried for the life she had wasted on Basil and because she had to die. She had fallen over the dog in December and had a leg in plaster. She liked that because it annoyed Basil and made him do things for her, which enraged him.

Basil was in the garden swearing at his dog when Jobey came in. The postman was surprised to see Garfield flushed and agitated.

"King woman!" said Basil. "You know what she says? She says she was hanging from the ceiling by her heels. King daft. There she was in bed and saying she was hanging from the king ceiling...' He made an explosive noise. "Some king day this is. And Flyn started running round like an oozlum bird and barking some king mad. Made my head spin, the lot of 'em. Hanging from the ceiling! For God's sake! What would you say?"

He pointed at Jobey. The dog suddenly tore off, as in a panic, and ploughed through a bed of flowers, spraying up fountains of petals and leaves and stalks.

"Off his nut!" said Basil. "They're all off their king nuts! What's gone wrong with the world? Some damn day this is." He looked round. Flyn was crouching, panting under the hedge, looking scared stiff. "Here, precious boy! Come here! What's the matter with you? For God's sake, what's going on?"

"When did Mrs Garfield feel funny?" Jobey said.

"When? Oh—er—oh, Mrs Parson just came. My wife started screaming and she rushed up. Yes. When does she come?"

"About half seven," said Jobey. "I often sees her on the road."

"She complained of a ruddy headache. I tell you the women are round the bend this morning."

"You didn't feel anything?"

"Me?" Garfield's eyes popped. "How could I feel anything with that old woman screaming the place down and the dog barking his king head off? Shot under the ruddy bed, he did. Not surprised either."

He evened out somewhat and took the book and five or six letters.

"What's this?" Garfield said. "Looks like my brokers. They've gone barmy on this yellow sticker business. Who do they think is going to pinch my letters . . . ?"

Jobey watched Garfield's face. It sagged, eyes fell open, jaws dropped, then a bloody redness rushed up into the whole mask and the muscle tightened up into a startled fury.

"Great stinking fish!" he hissed. He stared at Jobey, suddenly realised it was a human being, turned and lumbered away towards the open french windows. The dog barked from under the hedge, but stayed there. Jobey heard Garfield shouting for Daisy somewhere in the house, then he turned and went back to the van waiting in the road.

He took a letter from the seat and walked to the new bungalow on the corner. Fred Entwistle, junior partner in a firm of solicitors in town, was in the garden watching him approach. There was nothing odd there. Fred Entwistle had a beautiful young wife, and Fred was suspicious of the milkman, the coalman, the postman, the butcher boy and almost everything male for miles around. He simmered with baleful jealousy so that everyone could see it, so he was a cruel joke.

But this morning, it was different. Tall, thin, anxious and painfully sincere, Fred took Jobey's wrist in a shaky grip.

"Have you just come through?" he asked in a whisper.

"Well, not just, 'bout a half hour."

Fred let go and felt his head.

"Everything was quite normal?" he said.

Jobey was quick on the ball. "No," he said. "There was something queer down there. A sort of mirage, it was."

Fred's glasses were misting. He took them off and polished

them on his tie while watching Jobey with strangely nude eyes.

"I went for a walk," he said. "Down there." He pointed down the lane. "I went as far as Old Huck's Hovel, and turned round. When I—" he swallowed—"when I walked towards here, I—it *seemed*—you understand me—it *seemed* as if I had gone right through the village and was out there." He pointed across the end of Garfield's land, where a footpath led to the railway and up over in a level crossing. "Out there—on the other side of the railway but—" he bent close—"I don't remember walking through the village at all. It was very, very odd."

Jobey fanned his face with his hat.

"What did you do?" he said.

"I walked back here," Fred said. "Though I have no recollection at all of having walked *there*. This may sound quite mad, but I tell you—"

Jobey jumped in and told him.

"Good God!" said Fred, watching him with eyes shrunk by the spectacle lenses. "What was it, then? A mirage? Is that possible? A mirage of *nothing*? That is the reverse of what mirages are, isn't it? Usually they show something that isn't there. This showed nothing was there."

"Well, no," Jobey argued. "It was like one bend up there joined right on to the other one down there, five tenths' mile apart."

"This lane is unmade and the track on the far side of the railway line is unmade," Fred said, looking across to the line. "Yes, there is a similarity."

"It was half past seven," Jobey said.

"Yes, yes! It would be about then!"

"But when I turned round and came back, I hadn't been there at all," Jobey said. Not understanding it himself he added, "Sort of."

"It's some kind of hallucination," Fred said. "The old people round here are very superstitious about Midsummer Day. And there is always this constant undertone of witch talk, which seems to increase at Midsummer and Hallowe'en . . ."

"Some witch!" said Jobey. "It was all solid, not like a dream at all."

"I'm very glad that somebody else . . ." Fred began and lacked courage to go on.

"So am I!" said Jobey.

Mrs Entwistle came to the glass door.

"Basil Garfield on the phone," she called.

"Bit early, isn't it?" Fred said, then gave Jobey a meaning look and went into the house.

The girl smiled at Jobey. Fred just glanced round in time to catch it and looked hard at Jobey. But Jobey had turned by then, and headed for the gate.

Next along was a village shop, Len Battock's Stores where Len boasted, "We sell everything, cornplasters, corn flakes, cornucopias, the whole corny lot." He had a heart complaint. At the drop of a hat he flew into screaming rages that even in Weston, hit bottom. It made part of an entertainment of suspense wondering when he would blow up or die. James, at the pub, said, "He does it for a gimmick, to keep the customers looking, waiting for the big drop." His wife usually leant upon the counter in an ecstasy of relaxed thought, some said working out how much to milk the till, others calculating the blow-ups to the big Life Insurance payout.

When Jobey came, Len was screaming the place into a high pitched resonance from biscuit tins because he had upset a column of tinned beans which rolled all over the floor.

"Bastards!" Len shrieked, kicking the tins in all directions.

"You've broken that special offer teapot," his wife said, placidly watching the outburst. "Why don't you ever stop and think? Oh, here's Jobey. Morning, Jobey. Anything 'sides bills?"

"Most catalogues and offers," Jobey said. "And a Recorded." He put the pile on the counter with the letter on top.

"Recorded?" Len shouted, reddening. "I don't owe a sou! I don't owe a glass of water! I don't—"

She took the letter, slit it with a knife and opened it. Jobey watched and saw her eyes widen.

"Goodness!" she said.

Len snatched it from her and strode up and down swearing and waving his fist and going redder until the message he was reading sank in. He came to a slow stop, stunned. His bloodshot eyes bulged like red-veined porcelain. He looked up at his wife, moved his mouth, couldn't make anything come out, swallowed, then looked at Jobey. Then he sat down in the customer's chair by the counter, wiped his sweating face with an open hand and read the letter again. He let out a hiss and that was all.

Vera nodded at Jobey, and the postman went out, black conviction of dimly understood doom spreading like a cloud over his mind.

There was one more letter to go, the pub on the corner at the end of the village, where a narrow road led off to the rail halt. It was a low white building with chimneys striking up from unlikely places in the slate roof. It was surrounded at the rear by a piling mass of assorted rubbish, old doors, beds, radios, TVs, cookers, even a couple of old cars filled with chickens who kicked up a great clucking when Jobey drove up.

The landlord was Ben James, who had with him his wife Beth, from Cork, and a twenty year old daughter born Shirley and moved through various fashions to Sherree. These three conversed all the time, from one end of the house to the other, at the tops of their voices and usually all together. Nothing stopped this continuous barrage of information, argument and contumely, not even the doors of the private places, from which issued uninterrupted streams of communication.

When Jobey brought the letter in, Ben James was standing in the middle of the bar room staring at some of the full colour nudes on the calendars round the walls.

"Special for you, Ben," said Jobey.

He felt a kind of shock run through his arm at this, the last of the bomb letters. Somewhere beyond the bar Beth and Sherree were screaming some argument about who played what in some film, the title of which neither could remember. Ben signed the book and put Jobey's pencil, thoughtfully, into his own shirt pocket.

"I was thinking about improving the premises," said Ben. "Shove that wall down, push that out there, brick up that door, shove the fireplace back there, bring the bar round this way, brick up that window, bash another one out there by the door which won't be there, and have the door right there. Get me?"

"Roughly," Jobey said. He watched Ben rip the envelope with his thumb while still keeping his eyes on the walls.

"Push it right into the stables, you see. Shove it right out there. Make more room. Double the space."

"Sure," said Jobey, watching the landlord opening the letter but still with his eyes sweeping the walls. "It certainly would."

"Still, that all takes cash," said Ben. "As my dear daft wife is always dreaming of planting a quid note and growing a tree covered in paper, I should leave it to her."

He looked at the letter at last. His big, loose face tightened right up and for a moment he looked ugly. Then he relaxed and burst into a loud laugh.

"Well, just let 'em try it!" he said. "Beth! Beth! Here! There's a letter!" He slapped it on the counter. "Take a mug of ale, Jobey. It's good news."

"Good news?" said Jobey, his feelings suddenly all churned up inside him like a lottery drum.

"Sure, sure," said Ben, bending to fill a mug at a barrel. "When you've been dead scared of something happening for months, years even, and suddenly it does, well, that's a relief. It's like being let out of jug, solitary confinement. Fresh air again. Ah!" He put the mug on the counter and breathed deeply. "Boy, and it smells good."

Beth came in busty and bustling, with arms full of freshly washed glass cloths. She peered over them at the letter lying on the counter. She clicked her tongue.

"I said she would, sooner or later, I said she bloody would, the old cow," Beth said. "Well, there we are, aren't we?"

He grabbed hold of her and gave her a big, fat kiss.

"Yes," he said. "So that's that. Let's have a party tonight!"

They both laughed but Jobey noticed that before they broke apart, their hands met a moment under the towels and

squeezed.

Jobey drank some ale. It was cool and the strange day was getting hotter. That little hand squeeze made Jobey feel bad, sick almost. In all his time on the post he had never had such a feeling of guilt, and almost a kind of terror spreading behind him, and even catching up on him. Perhaps it was the weird sensations of the village that hadn't been there.

"The Nowhere Place," said Jobey to himself, and then shivered. It was an odd feeling, that shiver. Goosey. As when someone walks over your grave, he thought.

"You all right?" Ben said. "You look a bit off."

"It's the heat," Jobey said. "It's going to be a scorcher." He put the mug down. "I had a bit of a funny turn, coming in today. Village sort of seemed to vanish. Mirage, kind of."

"It's the mist," said Ben. "There's a heat haze out. Very pretty in the haze, this village. Makes the old stones shine a lot of colours you don't see usually. I wish I could paint, sometimes," he added, staring at the ripest calendar. "Great deal of satisfaction in that."

They both looked round, as if something unusual was in the air of the pub. So it was. Sherree and Beth had stopped shouting. Ben went to the door behind the counter.

"You all right, you two?" he shouted.

Nobody answered.

Jobey felt almost a panic. He shut his eyes.

"I'm going off my nut," he muttered.

Ben came back. "They're in the garden," he said.

Jobey opened his eyes and felt a fool.

4

In the Manor house the carved oak doors lurched in their unsquare frames and the brass ring handles all felt so easy as to be loose; yet all worked smoothly and without noise.

Clara swung the big door open and marched into the bedroom. The morning sun shone through the mullioned windows and shone on the foot wide, polished floorboards. Thick rugs

were scattered around, modern stickers underneath to save the unwary from tobogganing. She turned to the great four poster bed where, amid a tossed sea of luxurious bedclothes, a young man lounged, staring idly up at the canopy.

"I know you've been up already," she said, quietly angry. "And up to heaven knows what as well. What's the game, Trent? What's this?"

She wagged the letter like a flag. He looked at it idly with black eyes, then looked at her.

"It's a letter," he said. "It says you're a witch."

"You wrote it!"

"Why don't you get crosser?" he said, almost petulantly. "It's supposed to make you boil." He looked towards the sunny windows.

"Why did you write it?"

"I didn't write it."

"Then how do you know what it says?"

"You just showed it to me. Remember?" He sat up in bed. "And to save you further thinking, obviously the only reason anyone would accuse you of witchery is to make you boil. Well?" He laughed.

"You couldn't have read it in that time. It's got all things about covens and the dates and heaven knows."

"I just read the top bit," he said, pushing the clothes aside and swinging out of bed. "Hallo, witch." He wandered across the room in his pyjamas and got a cigarette from a packet on the windowsill. He was very tense.

"Nobody but you could have made all this up," she said, firmly. "It has to be somebody who knows the place. It—it just wouldn't connect otherwise."

"Oh, it does connect, does it?" he said, looking round. "I always suspected it. But you're definitely with it, Aunt. Nothing more up to date than the old Salem hop. God was all right when you could scald their livers with fire and threats of reprisals, but now they've made Him a Socialist it just doesn't go any more."

"Did you write this?"

"Why on earth should I write to you? It costs money, and

talking of money, Auntie dear . . ."

"You wrote it," she said angrily. "What's the idea of writing things like this? What's the matter with you, Trent? You seem to have this horrid idea of stirring things up all the time. Making people unhappy. What's happened to you?"

"Nothing's happened to me, Aunt. Not like that, anyway."

"What do you mean, not like that?"

He turned towards her.

"I'm in love with you," he said, grimly. "In love in an awful, sexy sort of way. You must be a witch, or I wouldn't. You've put a spell on me . . ."

He walked to her. She backed around the room. He followed.

"Don't be a fool, Trent!"

"But you know, don't you? Women are always supposed to know."

She reached the door, felt behind her, took the handle.

"There's something wrong with you, Trent. You ought to do something about it."

"That's what I'm—"

She opened the door, twisted out and slammed it. In the corridor she started to run, then stopped, put a hand to her bosom and breathed hard, trying to be calm.

"There's something wrong, something dreadfully wrong. Me, too. Oh, dear, what's the matter?"

She met Judith at the head of the stairs.

"You all right?" Judith said. "Look as if you've run a mile."

Clara fanned herself with the letter.

"No, I'm not all right. I'm all to pieces. There's something awfully funny about this morning. The sort of feeling you've just got to do something you don't want to do. That you must do it because you know it will ruin you. . . ."

"Goodness!" Judith said, staring. "You'd better watch out!"

"Yes, yes, well, all right," Clara said quickly and fanning herself still, walked off down the stairs. "It's such a beautiful, calm morning. Why can't I be like it? Calm, calm, calm."

Halfway down the stairs she stopped and looked back over her shoulder. "He hadn't got the door locked," she murmured. "The first time for days. It wasn't locked. What on earth's the

matter with him? Writing that stuff. In Heaven's name, what for? He's ill. He must be ill. But what with? What's the matter with him? Or with us all?"

She shrugged and went on down. She stopped in the hall and fiddled with a burst of flowers in a brass bowl on a black wooden chest. She took out a blood peony, rich as velvet, and put it in her hair. She watched the effect on a wall mirror.

"You look a sight," she said, staring at her image. "Why don't you relax?"

She took the flower and put it on the chest, then looked up the broad, black stairs and went into the small telephone room by the main door.

Clara took up the phone and held it close, watching the gilt mirror in case anyone came in by the door.

"It's quite all right, dear," she said, very quietly. "But do you know if anyone was working this morning? ... No, I know it isn't usual, but there was an atmosphere ... You did? Yes, it would have been about half past seven. About then ... What? ... Disappeared? ... *The church?* Do say a little more, dear. No! You just stay where you are. I'll come over very soon. Get me some eggs ready. It really is very odd this morning."

She put the phone down and looked back at the door as if the mirror might have lied. She went out into the hall, took a big cartwheel straw hat from the cloak room, stuck a few flowers in it from a bowl on the chest by the door and went out to the barns.

In the great barn the Rolls-Royce gleamed at her, as it had gleamed at her father, thirty-five years back. In the vast, lush back of his vehicle Clara had been seduced by Claud Trevelyan when fifteen, and this, resulting in a minor Trevelyan, had caused her early marriage. It was all forgotten now. That was just Clara, people said. She didn't care.

She got in and started up, but for some minutes just sat there, staring at the rear of Nellie Peabody, who spread her silver wings from the radiator top.

"An illusion, obviously, yet Sall's hardly the one to imagine things, or not imagine things, as the case may be."

She saw Trent walk past the barn door, heading away. A feeling of imperative self-destruction surged in her like a thrill, and she remembered the weird passion in his words an hour ago. She drove out quickly, to get away from it. But she almost turned back in a U on the drive circle and went after him.

It was just that Judith happened to be standing at the door. Clara half swerved, then went on.

5

Basil Garfield walked up and down the bedroom. Daisy lay in bed watching the progress like someone watching a pendulum.

"What in hell's the matter?" she shouted. "Stand still. Give me a gin." She pointed to the table beside her where stood a bottle of gin, a bowl of melting ice, a saucer of sliced lemon and nothing else. She did not like it with anything else.

He went and poured a gin, his hands trembling.

"It's only ten o'clock," he said, looking up.

"You jazzing about like that just reamed the nerves out of me." She held out her hand. "What's the matter?"

"I had a letter," said Basil, and gave her the drink.

"Well, what about?" Daisy could not imagine anyone being upset about a letter. Their tax problems were dealt with by an expensive accountant they hadn't paid for three years, and nobody would dare threaten about bills. They were too large.

"I can't tell you," he said, turning away.

"You can't tell me?" she shrilled. "You work me up in a state of frenzy and then can't tell me?" She got out of the bed, plaster and all, with a great shattering thump.

"It's not the sort of thing!" he shouted from the other end of the long bedroom.

"For Christ's sake!" said Daisy. "What is it? What did it say?"

He brought in a great breath of decision that pushed his chest out like a diva's. "It accuses me of poking Althea. Our daughter!" he thundered.

"Yes, I know Althea's our daughter," said Daisy, cocking her

head. "But when did you?"

All the breath went.

"What? When?" he said, blankly. "When what?"

"Well, I mean, was it often or just on the spur of the moment?" she said reasonably. "You know what you are. Or were."

Basil drew his hands down his red face as if clawing his eyes out and spreading the orbs down his cheeks.

"I don't know what's come over you, Daisy!" he shouted. "Surely you don't—? Don't you think it's a pooping thing for somebody to write? Don't you?"

"Well, you know, you get a lot of these cranks about biology, and thingology. The trouble is they send them all to universities, boys and girls, and then if they don't do it there they think about it there, and make thesis—"

"Theses, you uneducated old chorus girl!" Basil wailed.

"Oh, that's where we begin, is it?" said Daisy and stood up on one leg and a great white pillar. She held out her hand. "Let me see the letter. Is this why Althea went to New Zealand, or wherever it is she is?"

"It was that crab—I forget his name—turned her down—"

"Well, no wonder after all that, you uneducated old Eton boy. Still, it's nice to know you—well, never mind."

"Mind? Mind? You always had the filthiest mind in the chorus."

"Pity it never crawled down to yours. Let me see that letter."

"I'll eat it first!" Basil shouted.

"So it's true, then," she said, with a smile.

He gave her the letter.

"I'm staggered you could believe it!" he shouted.

"You've staggered all your life," she said, taking the letter.

"It's appalling!" Basil cried, marching up and down.

"But it's got dates on it!" Daisy said. "Dates!"

"I can't think! I can't think!" Basil said. "Who could have—done such a thing? My God, my God!"

"Stop blubbering," Daisy said. She folded the letter and put it in her bosom. "The thing is, who knows about this? That's what worries me."

Basil stared incredulously.

"That's what worries you?" he said.

"Do be calm, Baz! I'm trying to help!"

"You stupid old cow!" he shouted and rushed out of the room.

Daisy sat on the bed again.

"What it could cost," she said. "Good heavens! What it could cost!"

When Basil got downstairs, Fred Entwistle was waiting there in the hall.

"You called me over, Baz," Fred said. "Nothing serious, I hope?"

Basil goggled at him.

"Nothing. Nothing at all. It was about some golf. I've forgotten. Daisy's been playing up."

"I'm sorry," Fred said.

"You know what she is. Since that leg."

"When?"

"When what?" said Basil.

"Golf. You said golf."

"Oh that. Well, next week."

Basil went to the door with him. As he was walking away down the drive Fred turned and looked back at Basil. It was a terrifying look. Basil wished he hadn't been fool enough to phone in the first heat of his fury.

Basil was always cursing his impulses. As a Colonel once said to him: "Remember to look behind before you advance." But Basil only remembered it afterwards.

Fred hurried across the road back to his house. He saw his wife talking to the young milkman, and his feet and heart quickened up together. The milkman turned and went back to his van in the sideroad. Fred came up to her on the doorstep.

"What were you talking about?" he said breathlessly.

"Ordering cream," she said. She gave him a look of half-

smiling contempt and went indoors.

More uneasy still, Fred followed.

"Cream?" he called.

She walked into the bathroom and slammed the door at him. Insecurity grabbed him by the throat. The milkman, he thought, of all people!

The phone rang. He went back into the lounge and answered but he stared through the window, watching the whistling milkman swinging his bottle crates around, splitting his mind between the hot horror of his sexual imagination and his secretary.

"Can you come in this morning, Mr Entwistle?" she said.

"Why? What's happened?"

"I can't say it over the phone. That is—I think you ought to come in right away if you can."

"You sound serious."

"I'm very serious. Please come."

"All right. Will do."

But he did not go out for the car until the milkman had driven right away through the village. Then he went back to the bathroom door on his way to the garage.

"I've got to go in to town," he shouted. "Do you want to come?"

"No."

He hesitated, wiped his face and felt panic rising again.

"You sure?"

She switched on a radio, loud. He hesitated, trying to think of something, failed and went.

At the shop it was busy. Len Battock and his wife had no opportunity to discuss their private bombshell. Now and again, in moments of calm, Len went into the parlour and read the letter again. Then he stamped around, shouted things in a strangled voice at the ceiling, shook his fists and got so that he had to sit down to stop his heart beats choking him. But when he passed his wife in the course of business at a shelf, or a box, or reaching for a packet, or bending into the freezer, he hissed from the side of his mouth: "How in hell

did they know? How did they bloody find out, for Christ's sake?"

She just made faces at him which broke into smiles for a customer.

At the inn, Sherree had gone off into town on the bus. There were two early customers in the bar, talking together. Ben James and Beth went into the kitchen for a few words over a cup of tea.

"Funny to think we did it for the kid. Now it's a bloody sight worse for her." Ben shrugged. "There you are. You can't tell. I thought she was dead, anyway."

"Don't let it get you, darlin'. It's probably a try at some blackmail. Well, they're not lucky. We haven't got onnythin' to give 'em."

"Yeah! That's a consolation!"

They both laughed. Beth's laughter changed into tears.

"Holy Mother o' God!" she said, and fell into his arms.

"Don't go religious on me," he said, hugging her. "We shall just have to fight it. Like you say. What I don't get is how this sod found out. It was a London postmark."

She pushed him away and wiped her eyes on her apron.

"No. It was local. It was somebody knows us, for sure it was that. Somebody here. Roundabout the village."

"But how? We never said a dicky bird. We never talked about it since we found out. Nobody could have heard."

"Well, you talked in your sleep to some tartie," she said, and laughed and dug him in the ribs. "Go on. Somebody at the counter bangin'."

6

There were two brothers Dribble. They were so filthy no one could tell which was which. They were the richest men in all those parts. As their banker grudgingly remarked to an impoverished professional man: 'Even their bloody dung turns into gold." They slept in their gumboots, stayed up with

calving cows, farrowing sows, lambing ewes. There was no finer stock in the county. Their animals were as sleek and spotless and fine as their breeders were dirty. The fields were perfectly tilled and students from a distant Agricultural College were officially conducted over the Dribbles' farm lands. The farm was run on the minimum of employed labour, the brothers Dribble tractor driving, combine operating, haybaling, marketing, driving their own cattle trucks to market, and using every possible device to save the last farthing on expenses. They even grew their own tobacco, which killed their own smell but made it as impossible to be approached. It was said the corn salesmen used invisible nose plugs when they came about their business.

Nobody knew which Dribble's wife Sarah Dribble was. They said at the start she hadn't known either, but after a while she withdrew from intimate cohabitation and used the farmhouse scullery for distillations of herbs, with which she cured a lot of people of local ailments. She could also effect certain cures by laying her hands on rheumatic limbs. She had the gift of charming, that is she could transmit faith to sufferers so that they cured themselves.

Her end of the house was reasonably clean but always smelt of simmering herbs. Clara came in that morning with no nose for aromatics. "What's this, Sarah?" she said. "About the church vanishing?"

"'T weren't only that," Sarah said, with dead level eyes. "I sensed visitors."

Clara looked quickly round, out of the open doorway. A couple of fowls ran off.

"You don't mean trippers?" Clara said quietly.

"I mean visitors," said Sarah, unblinking. "You know what I mean."

Clara fiddled uneasily with her pearl necklace.

"When did you have this message?" she said.

"It's been several days. They've been about several days." Her eyes grew luminous with fixity. "Didn't you feel it?"

"I felt something this morning."

"They was here then. All round and about the village. I

was out over to the geese. My two dogs been queer. They know. Whining. Barking at nothing, anybody'd think. But it aint that, you know. This morning, they bunked. No squawking. Just tails down and go. I could feel the visitors then. Moving around in the village. And then it went. It was all dead quiet and the birds stopped and it was all gone, church and all. There's something very strong around us, Clara. Much stronger than anything I ever had before."

"What happened? How did the church come back?"

"There was a screaming, like. You couldn't hear it, but 'twas there. And I couldn't see quite right, like my eyes wouldn't focus, and there was a queer feeling like something moving inside of me and filling me up so I wanted to scream. Then suddenly the church was back. It was like I'd been with a man."

"Why didn't you ring me?" Clara said.

"I was too scairt. I still feels trembly." She pushed her untidy yellow hair back from her childlike forehead. She was fat and pretty but her big, sad eyes that always looked slightly outward were dark with fear.

"It wasn't like anything that—has happened with us before?"

"Yes, but stronger, stronger, like the devil was actually inside of me. There must be someone new. Someone outside, doing this."

"Why do you think that?" Clara said, flushing slightly from guilt.

"I feel that this isn't like us. Not like us. It feels new, strange. I'm frightened."

"Do you think it's my nephew?" said Clara.

"Yes. Him. He's new. He has a bad aura."

"He carries out experiments. Science things. Do you think it was that?"

"Science is only Nature," Sarah said. "Can't be any difference, one way or t'other. They can't do anything but isn't there already."

"But you might jazz it up, Sarah. You might do that. You know how things get all excited—"

"This is visitors," Sarah interrupted. "Visitors. My dog Caldy went. Haven't seen him since. Just went. It's visitors. All round."

"Not here now, Sarah?" Clara looked about her with quick flicks of her eyes.

"No. Not now. But sometimes. The last few days."

"You haven't had—a letter or anything?" Clara was suddenly flustered.

"What about?"

"About us. You know."

"Somebody outside sent you one? When did you get it?"

"I wish you hadn't got that telepathy," Clara said. "I got one this morning. I wondered—"

"Did it know? The letter. Did it know?"

"It knew about me. That wasn't visitors, Sarah. Just a human. Very human. Horrid things. You know how they can be..."

"Give me the letter, Clara."

Clara hesitated, then took the letter out of her bosom and handed it over. Sarah took it, but did not look at it. She closed her eyes and felt the letter as if testing the texture. She shook her head.

"No. It was a woman."

"Are you sure? Quite sure?"

"A woman did this letter. No one here. No, no one here. It's a long way away."

"I felt it was Trent," Clara said.

Sarah shook her head and handed the letter back.

"What does it say about?" she asked.

"Just about me. None of the others."

Sarah stared through her.

"There was a man came," she said. "Years ago. I was a girl. I saw it through a chink in the church door. He made things disappear. I saw them go."

"A magician?"

"No. A man. One of us."

"But not a village. He couldn't vanish a village!"

"It was just in the church there. He made things so you

couldn't see them. I don't know if they went. You just couldn't see them."

"Illusions are very different things to get on with," Clara said, uneasily. "Are you sure it was a woman? The letter, I mean."

"It was a woman. Yes. Your man may be outside it, but he didn't write it. It was a woman."

"Outside! Whoever wrote this couldn't be outside! She knows everything about us, this woman."

"Yet it comes from far away."

"Only a hundred miles, dear. Just a hundred." She stared around the room, then back at Sarah. "These visitors. Where?"

"From underneath," Sarah said, pointing to the floor. "They lifted the church right up till it was gone."

Clara watched her a moment.

"You frighten me," she said, brusquely. "In fact, it's a frightening kind of morning." She went to the door and the sunshine.

"The eggs," Sarah said, picking up a box.

"Oh yes," Clara said, and took it. She went back to the door.

"Tonight," said Sarah, watchfully.

Clara nodded quickly and went.

7

Jobey came to the open main door of the Manor. He went to ring, but Trent came up behind him, silently treading the lawn. He wore dark glasses.

"It's upstairs," he said. He glanced round at the van stopped under the great yew hedge guarding the churchyard. "Come on up."

Jobey followed his back into the hall and up the staircase, along a passage at the top and into a room so dark he was stunned.

"Have a glass of sherry," Trent said. "Sorry it's so dark. Photography. Here."

"Ta," Jobey said, fumbling for the glass.

"Cheers," Trent said. "I'll just get the parcel."

The door fell quietly to behind Jobey. He drank some sherry, half frightened not to. There was a queer atmosphere in this room. Something like the frustrating menace of the Nowhere Place that morning. He even heard a kind of high pitched hum, and for the first time he realised he had heard it before, on the bend which hadn't gone anywhere. He had been listening for his engine, and now he remembered the other sound, soft, hardly a sound at all. More a feeling.

He felt very hot. The air of the room seemed to press round his head and into his ears, so that he could hear the humming getting nearer. Trent was rustling stiff paper over in a corner. The sound became less distinct, drawing away down a tunnel. Jobey shut his eyes and opened them again. There was sweat on his lids. He wiped his face with his hand. It was very hot. Getting worse. The sound was getting into his head. Right in. Like a worm in his brains. He eased his collar with his finger. He was starting to float. The paper rustling stopped, faded right away, too far away to hear any more. He just saw a lot of greenish lights floating around in black space, they were a few feet or a million miles away. He let the glass drop.

As he fell back against the door, Trent caught him, dragged him across the floor and put him on the bed. Trent stood, breathing very hard, looking round in the gloom as if someone might be watching. Then he undid Jobey's collar and felt his pulse. "Gone," he said aloud.

He went to the door, opened it and looked out into the empty corridor. He put on the dark glasses, went out and locked the door. Then he ran silently to the stairhead and looked down in the hall.

It seemed empty. He caught sight of something moving through the landing window. Judith was cutting lettuce in the garden. He wiped his face with his handkerchief and ran down the stairs and out into the sunlight. He got into the mail van and drove it away to the largest barn, the old tithe barn that was. He drove it into the farthest gloom of the place,

behind haybales. He got out and dragged a green tarpaulin from a corner and slung it over the van. Then he went out, sweating, into the sunshine. His heart beat fast, hammering. Sudden fear weakened him like a sickness.

"Christ!" he murmured. "If it goes wrong!"

8

Elsie Wilde walked quickly, angrily, despite the heat. She stared ahead under the trees that overhung the narrow road and moved in on to the grass verge when she heard a car whisper up behind her. It stopped. She was not unused to cars that came up and stopped by her. She did not look round.

"Elsie, darling," Clara called.

Elsie stopped and looked back, some kind of bright relief flashing into the only eye visible under the swinging liana of golden hair.

"Clara, the very woman I wanted to nudge," she said, and got into the car. "Clara, I've had a letter. Don't drive on, I want to concentrate. An awful, knocking, stinking letter."

Clara tapped the wheel spokes and watched Elsie.

"Not about—The Movement?" Clara said.

"No..." Elsie looked at Clara suddenly. "Why? Have you, too?"

"Yes, dear. It just says I'm a witch and member number and something of the Coven and giving dates of—meetings I have attended." She sounded calm and yet tense. "What was yours about?"

"About what I do and how father thinks I'm a part time secretary in Bristol—oh, the lot! It makes it seem awful, dirty, obscene. It's that bloody nephew of yours. You know that, don't you?"

Clara's hand gripped the wheel tightly. She looked ahead under the trees.

"Why do you say that, dear?" she said quietly.

"This thing came from London—an office somewhere—but it was somebody here who had to know. There are other letters,

too. Did you know that?"

"Jobey said—possibly, yes."

"It's a circular blackmail service," Elsie said furiously. "It has to be someone who is here..."

"But how did they find out? I have been most careful. So have you. After all, one has to take the greatest care in personal matters..." She looked at Elsie again. "What makes you think of Trent?"

"He did something that made me think things were crawling over me." She grimaced disgust. "Look, I'll tell you. You know I met him a couple of times?"

"I'm not surprised," Clara said. "But I am that he had such an effect on you."

"He's twisted," Elsie said. "What with all his talk about his study of obscure sexual practices and then trying it on me ... No, forget that. That came after the normal approach, and it developed into a tussle. In the course of which, Clara darling, I found he had a tape in his pocket. It was going. He was taping the lot. I just threw it at him and walked off home. You see what I mean, do you? He's walking around with this minitape lining up everything anybody says, and they're not always careful, are they?"

"But how could a tape take down what people are thinking, dear?" Clara said. "I've never said anything of what is in that letter. What about yours?"

"Well, I'm not so careful—of my own affairs, I mean, but I'm sure I never said to anyone what's in that letter—not to anyone but a—close friend."

"Of course. As a matter of fact, I shouldn't take the tape too seriously. He's always experimenting with these radios and bugs and things. It's like a drug to him."

"I should imagine it is, if this is the sort of joy he's getting out of it."

"I did think it was Trent," said Clara, "so I asked him, point blank. Absolutely. And, honestly, I don't think it is."

"You're defending him," Elsie said, petulant.

"Why should I?"

Elsie lifted her hair aside to look directly at Clara with

both eyes. Clara smiled and looked away.

"Yes. Why should you?" said Elsie and looked ahead again. "Are you going back?"

"Of course, dear. That's why I picked you up."

Clara started and they slid along the leafy lanes.

"Where were you going?" Clara said.

"I was just walking. Actually I saw Jobey had several of these letters with the yellow stamp. I did think of finding out who had them."

"I think your father had one," Clara said.

"My God, no!" Elsie cried. "Did he?"

"I happened to be by the fountain," Clara said, "and I saw him read a letter, then tear it up and throw it about, but then he picked the pieces up again and put them in his pocket."

"Father!" said Elsie, aghast.

"You shouldn't stand so much in awe of your father, dear. After all, you are twenty-four and entitled to do as you like."

"That's all very well, but when you're the only one, and they're so old. He is, specially. Eighty-two. It's a bloody marvel I'm here."

"Not if you could have known that beautiful Wing Commander," Clara thought. "And what a terrible time your poor mother had trying to make your father so that he would believe what he has believed ever since. Oh, what a time it was! There's always something rather exhilarating about tensions and suspense."

"What?" Elsie said.

"I was thinking, dear," Clara said. "I'd very much like to know who these others are who got the letters. It might help to find out who sent them."

"Do you think they're all the same—I mean, opening up people's cupboards?"

"It's really rather odd," said Clara. "It's blackmail material, but mine didn't have any threat or demand for money. Did yours?"

"No. It was just a bare statement. Extremely bare. It's funny there was no push at the end. Perhaps it's meant to leave us

in suspense, waiting for the next one. I wonder what the hell was in Father's letter?"

"Well, yours is about you, and mine is about me and nobody else, so perhaps his is about him."

"What, about the Sunday school? The little girls, do you mean?"

"The trouble, dear," said Clara, watching the unwinding road, "is that the human creature has this sex motivation and we really can't do enough about it, and there are ways where it has to get out, somehow, some way. And it's no good saying when it ends, because you couldn't live without it, as that man said—the scientist man who always sounds like a fried pudding—"

"Freud," said Elsie. "You think all these letters are about sex?"

"I don't know what's in the others."

"Well, that points to your nephew. He's dead mad about sex in all forms. That's what he studies."

"But why, dear, why? You surely don't suggest he's frussed, do you? I can't imagine it."

"Fruss comes in different packets. You never know. They say lying about with lots of women is the sign of a man's sexual immaturity."

"They do come up with some things, don't they?" Clara sighed. "I would never have thought of that one. Jobey had a bad aura this morning. I told him to be careful. There was a shadow over him."

"He said the village disappeared," Elsie said. "What the hell did he mean?"

"He wasn't the only one," said Clara. "Did you notice anything?"

"I had what felt like a small patch of unreality when I got up. A kind of ephemeral hangover. You know, that horrid feeling of living in a floating lace curtain. I just thought it was me. What happened?"

"There was some kind of illusion. I don't understand what, but it seems that some people's senses were affected so that they didn't see the village."

"Like fog?"

"No. Sarah D says she could see that the place wasn't there. The church. It seems she could see what is always beyond it, you know, the hills in the north, but the church just wasn't there."

"She must have taken too much of her own herbal cure for short sight."

"She says, dear, that there are visitors and have been for some days past. She said it was like having been with a man when the illusion was on."

Elsie stared at the overhanging trees gliding slowly past overhead.

"She said that before," Elsie said, after a while of remembering. "When that bum came in that night and tried to raise the Prince."

"I wish you would not talk quite so flippantly about things, Elsie dear. It makes some a little apprehensive. I don't care for myself, but others take things more seriously than we do. Where there is no sense of humour one must take especial care to speak only in half truths. Religion is a very desperate thing, no matter what colour it is."

Elsie shrugged and looked out of the window.

"I must have walked miles," she said. "I was dead mad."

"You won't think of persuading Sarah to put the Eye on Trent?" Clara said, and then smiled.

"Oh no. In case it missed and got your cows," said Elsie.

They went past the end of the Manor house lane.

"Aren't you going home?" Elsie said, surprised.

"Oh. I'd rather forgotten," Clara said, slowing. "It's the day. I've had the feeling all day that something's happening. A direct sensation."

"It's midsummer," Elsie said. "It works you up. Our polt has been working overtime these last few days."

"It has?" Clara said.

"Ringing bells, throwing things about. Awfully restless, Albert is these last few days. It still makes me a bit nervous, even after all this time. What do you mean—this feeling?"

"Something imminent, going to happen, or is actually

happening and we can't see it yet."

"It could be all that wireless stuff Trent brought in," Elsie said. "Electricity can give you weird feelings when it's let loose like that."

"It's something more subtle," Clara said, increasing speed. "Much more subtle."

"Why are you going faster?"

"I was thinking of Trent," said Clara, thinking aloud. "Absurd, isn't it, but I've got a bit frightened of him!"

"The village!" Elsie cried out.

"What . . . ?" Clara braked to a standstill on the bend going out.

"We were just coming up to the Entwistles'! It's gone! The bungalow, the cottages, the shop, the pub—they weren't there!"

They sat staring at each other, only the whisper of the big engine making any sound. Suddenly Clara rammed in reverse, backed up on to the grass in a wild sweep round, then surged forward on the other lock and accelerated back round the bend.

The pub came in sight, and the meadows beyond, and the trees round the Manor and the church, and Garfields' house and the cottages and the shop. All there.

Clara laughed breathlessly.

"Midsummer! My word!" she hissed.

9

At about that time Bert Dollflower, twenty-two, drove towards the village with one hand, his other being in a sling. He braked suddenly, almost coming to a screaming halt. The roofs of the village had disappeared. He blinked, then saw them again, all as usual in the soft summer haze.

"It's me injury," he muttered, shifting the gear. "Made me dizzy."

He swung round into the private road of Flushdene, lurched through the open gates of the last house, then got out.

Grandma came to the door, knitting furiously and watching him with anxious, frightened eyes.

"What's the matter with you?" Bert said, detecting signs of guilt in the hurried knitting.

"What you done to yer and?"

"Cut it. Fell through the skylight of the women's lav. Mendin' it. Got three stitches."

"They ought not to ave men going about on top of women's lavs," said Grandma.

"Look, if I'm on mayntaynance I got to mayntayn if it's the women's lav or anywhere else," said Bert crossly. "Doc's give me a fortnight off. I reckon I'll decoke the motor."

"You're always doing something to that damn motor," said Grandma. "Can't remember the last time you asked me to have a ride in the country."

"In the country, you old twit?" said Bert, staring. "You're in the bloody country."

"It's not the same. It's the idea of it."

"What you keep fiddling with your pinny for? What you got in that pocket?"

"Nothing," Grandma said hastily. "I got something nice for yer dinner. Boof Stroggynoff."

"What the hell's Boof Stroggynoff?"

"I dunno. It don't say on the tin, but it cost me five bob, special offer."

"Cor beggar, you'd buy a bloody coffin if it was a special offer. What *have* you got in that pocket?"

"Nothing. I keep telling yer."

"Well, don't keep fiddling with it, then," he said, going into the house. "I'm going to have a glass of beer. I got a bit funny in the head just now. Coming along."

"Well, you can't open a bottle with one hand," said Grandma. "I'll do it. I got nothing else to do, stuck here by meself, morning noon and night, day in, day out . . ."

"Well, why don't you get an old job, then, like Mum, doing that patent dung stuff? All she does is smooth it over in the box with a bit o' wood when it comes by on the belt. Even an old twit like you could do that."

"I wouldn't get me pension," said Grandma, pouring out beer. "There, you drink that. It'll make you feel better. I went all funny again just now. That whistlin'—"

Bert drank deep. His nerves were shaken by his accident and he was very dry. "Funny," he said. "I just couldn't see the village all of a sudden."

"Well, these shocks make yer eyes go funny," said Grandma, fiddling in her apron pocket again. "I was swingin' about—"

"I saw everything else," said Bert, frowning. "Yeh, I did. I saw everything else."

"Twice today," said Grandma, "I got the feeling I was hanging off the ceiling by me heels. If I hadn't held on tight to me knitting I'd have fell down and broke me neck."

"It's time you saw a quack," said Bert. "You've got 'em . . ."

Grandma went to sneeze and pulled a small ball of handkerchief from her apron pocket. The letter came out as well and fell on the floor. She sneezed.

"Beer makes me sneeze," she said, eyes watering. "It's the bubbles gets up me nose."

Bert bent and picked up the sorry letter.

"Is this what's bin burning you up?" he said. "What is it, then . . . Hey! It's for me! What the hell are you doing with my mail, then? What's on?"

"I din't rightly see who it was for. Opened it without thinking." She looked terrified as she watched him unfold the dreadful missive.

Bert read slowly, three times, then stuffed the crumpled paper into his pocket.

"Great Christ!" he said hoarsely, and turned to the door.

"Where are you going?" Grandma screamed.

"I'm going in to see Janey."

"You aven't finished yer beer."

He walked on to the open front door.

"Yer can't see her till dinner time!" she called after him.

He walked on out, across the garden of weeds to his car. Grandma stayed in the kitchen, a spread hand over her closed eyes.

10

The trouble with Fred Entwistle was his mother. Though dead three years her big, commanding presence and suffocating bosom still haunted and filled him with pressurised guilt. She had taught him the dangers of drink, women, self-abuse, money, smoking, other men and drugs; from all of which a man could save himself only by stern self-control and love for his mother. His father had inexplicably run away. His mother's enveloping ever watchful care had driven Fred to secrecy and furtive reactions like getting drunk and feeling ladies' bottoms at parties. Early he had found that ladies did not like to complain but either moved away or let him go on. This so emboldened him that once, after much reading of odd books and getting plastered, he got a prostitute. She quickly discerned Fred's trouble.

"You're new to this sort of thing, aren't you?"

"Yes. I don't really want to do that."

"What do you want me to do, then?"

"I want to be tied up in a bag."

After that he had boiled with shame, guilt and confusion every time his mother had looked at him.

It was around that time that she had bought him a junior partnership in a firm of country solicitors which, though rich in names on the door, had one other partner, Bill Jeeves. Jeeves was fat, jolly, bold, extravagant, a rugger blue and a good, bullying, losing advocate in the Courts. He, too, had been bought in by an indulgent parent.

That morning, Fred, his painful lack of confidence boiling in jealousy for Rowena and the milkman, made worse by his early feeling that his brain, and not the village, had started to disappear, was heavily preoccupied. Twice he came to in time to swing away from oncoming gravel trucks and almost hit the ditch from excessive reaction.

When nearly into town, he saw Jeeves' Bentley coming out. Fred slowed.

"I wonder if he's coming out to see me?" he said aloud.

But so close to town he decided to go on and find out what was amiss from their secretary.

The secretary, Dulcie Jones, was fair, plump, pretty, thirty and untidy. Her untidiness made men warm to her, as if they might be able to help somehow, even if only themselves.

She was sister to the Inspector of Police, through whom she often got clients indicted on drunken driving and other anti-social offences. If any such asked for legal aid she got a black mark from Jeeves. He liked only clients who could afford to be arrested.

That morning, Dulcie looked worried, as if she had not quite her usual grasp of affairs.

"Oh, Mr Fred!" she said, getting up from her desk and brightening. "I'm glad you came in."

"What's wrong?" said Fred, alarmed by the smallest slide from normality.

"There's been a man here, inquiring after some investments of Gordon Rowe," she said. "I can't find the file anywhere."

"Perhaps Bill's got it. Where's the man?"

"He went away, and said it wasn't urgent, he'd come again. It's worrying about the file, though. Mr Bill said he hadn't seen it."

"It's a big account, isn't it? I don't remember exactly."

"It's about forty thousand pounds, I think."

"Who was the man?"

"I don't know. It's rather odd, isn't it? He said he came in Mr Rowes interests, but that's our job, isn't it? I mean, we're the man's solicitors."

"That's queer," said Fred, heating up again. "Where's his card?"

"He didn't leave one. He said his name was Burkins, but it wasn't important as he was acting as agent only on Mr Rowe's behalf."

"Perhaps he'll come back."

"Will you wait till twelve thirty then?"

"Yes, yes. Of course I will. Just in case."

"What's been going on in your village?"

"What do you mean?" Fred was jolted. Through his mind

flashed the mirage, Rowena, the milkman, coalman, paperman, electrician and others who had appeared on the carnal screen of his mind.

"My brother had several calls from there last night. Some people dancing naked in the park."

"What?" Fred stared. "Who in hell said that?"

"Some village people. The phone box must have been quite busy."

Naked in the park! Not Rowena? What had happened after that party at the Chances? He couldn't remember driving home, going to bed ... No, it couldn't have been Rowena.

"I've not heard of it," said Fred. "Wait a minute! Wasn't there something like this in some place in Wiltshire? Sliding down roofs and prancing about? Poltergeists and UFOs?"

"I don't remember. Anyhow, they sent the patrol car out and of course, there wasn't anything. People imagine things so, don't they?"

"They do," said Fred. "It's damn mad, really."

The village store was empty when the stranger went in. Len Battock turned behind the counter, and when he saw a stranger, his eyes shot wide open, white all round the marbles, his mouth dropped and he stuffed a letter into his white jacket pocket. He swallowed, then coloured in bright red patches on his yellow cheeks.

"Snuff?" asked the stranger.

"Ger, gurk, gik—snuff? Snuff, yes. Try to keep everything." Len turned to find the snuff and knocked a lot of boxes of sweets off a shelf with his elbow. Bending to catch one he hit his head on the shelf above and knocked a can of soup off. It ran down his spine as if doing a trick.

"Christ!" Len said, choking.

The stranger watched the show of shattered nerves with little interest.

"Snuff, snuff, yes, snuff," said Len, rushing away behind a pile of soap powders. "I—I'll show you what I have."

He came back, red faced, with a box full of assorted snuff packets.

"Hot travelling?" said Len, watching.
"Very."
"Come far?" Len was getting eager.
"No."
"I'd have put you as a Londoner."
"You'd be wrong."
"You're a southerner, though."
The stranger picked through the packets.
"Staying long or just going through?" Len was getting tense.
"I don't know yet."
"I didn't see a car."
"Nor I."
"Ah, you come on the train!"
"I don't know. I suffer from blackouts. Do you? There were quite a few about this morning. Is this usual here?"
"It's bin a damn funny morning," Len said. "There's bin a mirage, from all accounts."
"Did you see it?"
"No, but I got a weird feeling. Very weird. I was reading last night's paper on the throne, and suddenly I had the feeling I was floating around."
"Not much room to float far, I should imagine."
"I got hold of the bath. It's by the bath, see."
"Did you hear whistling?"
"I thought it was me ears. Sometimes I gets whistling in me ears. They say it's because somebody's thinking of you ..." Len stopped suddenly and looked at the stranger with widening eyes of alarm. He recovered, reddened again. "Actually, it's blood pressure. I got heart."
"I'll take this," said the stranger, and put a note on the counter.
"If you want anything while you're here, we can always get it for you, Mr ... Mr..."
The stranger stared at Len's desperation.
"Darke," he said.
"Mr Darke," said Len shovelling change. "Thank you, Mr Darke, thank you."
The stranger nodded, turned and went to the door. Two

small children were arguing by the window.

"She said sammon, you buggerin' nit!" said the small boy to his smaller sister.

"Don't speak like that," the stranger said, and explained that such words were ugly, unnecessary, unwanted.

The children watched him wide-eyed with alarm and incomprehension as he went on his way.

Len Battock went into the parlour behind the shop where his wife sat at table, ruminating with a steady, quiet movement.

"They've sent a man!" he hissed. "That fellow! He's come to investigate! My God! Darke, he says his name is. That's a false one if ever I heard it. My name's Darke! Who ever heard of a name like that?"

"My uncle's cousin was called Darke," said the wife, reminiscently.

"You would have a bloody monkey's uncle's cousin's nephew or somebody to show I'm a bloody twit!" he shouted and threw the box of snuff packets at the wall.

She watched, ruminating still.

"What's the wall done?" she said quietly. "Why don't you throw 'em at me?"

Len went very red, lost his breath, collapsed into a chair grabbing the tablecloth into folds, then held his chest and started gasping.

She stopped chewing and watched with interest. But he got his breath back and started to cry with it, so she went on chewing. She got up when she heard a child's piping voice by the shop counter.

"E's juss a mad old bugger don't know English, you twit."

11

Basil Garfield told his dog to wait at the vicarage gate. This took some time. Every time he went in the gate, the dog shoved his way past Basil's legs and looked up, pleased with his faithfulness. Basil shouted and pushed him back outside.

This happened so many times that Richard Wilde was brought to the door to stare out from under his deep hatbrim.

"King dog!" shouted Basil in exasperation. "Sit, sit, sit!"

The Irishness in the setter was almost exhausted by this game. He turned suddenly and walked away. Basil repeated his order from the gate.

"Don't start again, for heaven's sake!" Richard bawled.

Basil turned back, then came in.

"I didn't see you," he said, breathlessly.

"I don't see you often, either," said Richard. "In fact the last time I saw you in church was when my Elsie was born."

"Not true, but I subscribe, that's the thing. Practical religion. That's the thing."

"You wish to increase your contribution to the funds?" said Richard, interest screwing up tighter.

"I came to have a talk, man to man, I need counsel," said Basil. "I am in sore need . . ." He had rehearsed a considerable and tragic speech but the dog episode had made him forget it. He wiped his face with his splendid handkerchief. It was very hot. "Can I come in?"

Richard shrugged, turned and wandered into the stone hall and into a room on the right. It was some room. Basil made an instinctive movement to hold his nose. He was slightly bronchial and dust brought it on.

The room was a mass of books, papers, bibles, pipes and a two foot high oak and brass crucifix in use as a doorstop.

"Clear yourself a seat over there," said Richard, pointing. "Just throw all those books on the floor."

"There's a plate here, too," said Basil, aghast.

"Oh yes, breakfast," said Richard. "Clear the other chair then."

Basil cleared a hundred and twenty dogeared paperbacks and magazines off the seat and stared.

"Who reads all this muck?" he said blankly.

"I am upon a committee considering the decline of moral values," said Richard, "and I am referring to that selection of popular pornography as a guide." He sat behind his desk, peered at Basil with small bright eyes and then slowly took his

hat off and put it carefully on the telephone. "What do you want, Basil?"

"It's—" Basil took an enormous breath, then hadn't the courage to let it go and looked about to explode.

"Come now!" said Richard crossly. "What's the matter with you?"

"I've had a letter! A king awful letter!" Basil shouted.

"Shut the door," advised Richard.

Basil got up, pushed the cross aside and shut the door. He was horrified that the cross was there, and couldn't look at it when he pushed it.

"Well?" said Richard.

"It accuses me of having relations with my daughter, Althea!" said Basil, real horror coming upon him as he saw Richard's face.

"When?" said Richard, keenly.

"What do you mean, when? Never!"

"Then what exactly is your problem?"

"Why, you old fool! It says in the letter I did!"

"Well, did you? If not, why be so heated? That is the point, Basil, did you? If you wish to confess, I am ready to comfort you."

Basil stood by the door, breathing hard and looking out of the window at the blazing, yard high weeds of the garden.

"No, Richard, I have not. Never!"

Richard sat back and tapped on the desk impatiently.

"If you did not, I cannot understand your torment." His left hand went into his jacket pocket and began to play with the pieces of letter still hidden there.

"Richard, you are the father of a daughter and you know as well as I do that sometimes one thinks— Thinks! Or feels, or something! Thoughts come. You fight them but you don't get rid of them."

"I see," said Richard slowly, leaving his letter alone and stroking his chin with the long nailed claw. "You have it in mind that he who lusteth after a woman hath committed adultery in his own mind? I'm not sure that is exactly right. It's so long since I read it, but the gist is infallible."

"Heavens! I hadn't remembered that for years! Yes, I suppose one gets these things ingrained when one is small. Why did they think we would commit adultery at that age?"

Richard picked up a pipe, his eyes very keen.

"This is rather interesting, Basil," he said. "May I see the letter?"

"I burnt it," Basil said, reddening. "Didn't want anyone in the house to see it."

"Quite," said Richard, nodding and scratching his jaw again. "Did it give any details?"

"It gave dates."

"Do you remember if at these dates you had this inner struggle with yourself?"

"It could be. I couldn't be sure of a thing like that."

"I remember you having treatment for alcoholism some time back," said Richard, his glance penetrating. "Alcohol, as you are aware, has aphrodisiac qualities, and inflames the passions. It also makes it harder for the fight to be won. You went away for a time, I recall."

"King expensive it was, too," said Basil, angrily.

"Was it about that time? Are the dates in the letter about that time?"

Basil suddenly deflated and nodded.

"Yes. It was all part of the same thing. That's what is so shattering about the dates. I mean, if I'd done it, somebody might have known, but as I didn't how did anyone know what I *thought* then?"

Richard sat right back so that his swivel chair tilted to the maximum.

"Help yourself to some of that port," he said, pointing to a corner table with his pipe. "Give me some, too."

Basil did so eagerly, standing in front of the table and surreptitiously polishing his own glass with his splendid handkerchief. As he carried the glasses to the desk, Richard watched him penetratingly.

"Basil," he said, "I agree with you that this is very alarming. I have taken your word for what you have said about your daughter. I ask you now to take my word on another matter

which has a direct bearing on the whole thing."

"What thing?"

"I, too, had a letter this morning," said Richard, and paused to drink port. "It accused me of feeling small girls on the bus which I use every morning to go into town. It says also that I reward them with sweets."

Basil gulped and his eyes popped like eggs. He had heard it before. In fact the whole village thought the same and warned and watched their little daughters with special care.

"Heavens! How appalling!" Basil gasped. "Do—er—do—"

"No. But I would like to," said Richard. "That is my battle, too."

The port fortified Basil, and he let out the question everybody had been wanting to ask for years.

"Why do you go on that bus every morning?" he said.

Richard drank more port.

"Let us regard this as a mutual confessional," Richard said. "As you said, man to man and in complete confidence."

"I'm not likely to squawl outside about what we've been gassing over," said Basil, horrified again.

"That's very likely," said Richard, leaning back in the chair again. "The fact is, Basil, I go on the bus every day because every day that I can I go and visit Mrs Tumely. I am, in my own way, in love with Mrs Tumely, and she with me."

"Good God!" said Basil. "How old is she?"

"Some seventy," said Richard. "A widow, you understand."

"Well, I'm—"

"Take some more port. I'll have some, too."

"I say," Basil said, at the port table, "everybody knows about you on the bus, but nobody knew about me and Althea."

"That is the interesting thing," Richard said. "Because the children on the bus is gossip. The sort of thing that springs up on stony ground. But the fact that I would like to do what they say can't be known as fact. But that's what the letter said. It knew my feelings, not the gossip."

"A thought reader, or have we been talking in our sleep?" Basil said. "Yet, wait a minute. What about your guilty secret with Mrs Tumely? They didn't guess that!"

"No. But my love with Mrs Tumely is a fine, warm and placid thing. It is perfect peace of mind."

"Couldn't well be anything else," Basil thought as they both drank.

"So it would seem to be the turmoil of mind and emotion that is being read. Not the tender, the peaceful, the true," said Richard.

Suddenly there was a clamour from out in the passage, a jangling of bells like a half dozen old time fire engines bolting to the flames.

"What's that?" Basil shouted.

The noise stopped abruptly, but its echoes rolled in, whispering through the house.

"It's the poltergeist," said Richard. "It's been particularly mischievous lately. In fact, ever since the Bishop was here its behaviour has been revolting."

"You mean it's actually true about this ghost?" Basil's eyes egged again.

"I've known it on and off for forty years, so I think it is." Richard drank more port. "When Jobey gave me that letter, I saw he had others in his hand."

"Well, I had one."

"They were all the same, and there was more than one. Half a dozen, I should say."

"What—all over the village? What the king hell's going on?"

"Tell me, why do you say king with everything?"

"It's short for Lady Chatterley's religion," said Basil, almost absently. "I started it as a gimmick, now I can't king stop it. I wonder who got those letters? Jobey! If we can catch Jobey on his way back..."

"What do you think people would tell us if the letters were all to do with dreadful secrets like ours?"

"They'd tell you," said Basil eagerly. "After all, you're the God-botherer— That is—"

"How long do you think it is since anybody here confided in me?" asked Richard placidly. "Except at Harvest festival, marriages and burials, my congregation numbers three. Including Mrs Bastaple, who plays the organ. You should come

one day just to hear her play. It is indescribably foul. A competitive soul, if she hears anyone singing above the din she increases the fortissimo until the unhappy voice is drowned out."

"What time does Jobey come back through?"

Richard consulted his silver hunter and began to wind it.

"I think he must have gone long before now."

Basil put his glass down.

"Well, I must go, and—" he coloured up and looked to the door—"thanks. I feel better about it."

Richard shrugged.

"Just leave the front door open as it is," he said.

Basil walked out and into the lane. To his astonishment, Flyn was lying there waiting for him.

"Mrs Tumely," muttered Basil as they walked away. "Aren't people queer?" Further along he stopped and looked at the dog, who turned back and looked at him. "Christ! What did I tell him all that for? He'll— Get down, you king fool! You'll knock me over one of these king days!"

The dog twisted in mid air and went to run on down the lane. The Rolls stopped abruptly. Flyn hit his head on the bumper and fell back in surprise. Clara looked out of the window.

"Basil, dear," she said, smiling.

Basil beamed back and went to the window.

"Lovely morning, Clara," he said. "Hallo, Elsie."

"We've been talking together, Elsie and I," said Clara. "It seems that some very odd sort of letters have been delivered around the village this morning."

"Oh?" said Basil, bending to grab Flyn's collar.

"Have you had one?"

Basil straightened as much as he could holding the dog, his face red from the exertion.

"No," he said.

"My love to Daisy," beamed Clara, and moved quietly on.

It was an appalling place. The sun shone into the stone passage in great whirling beams of dust. The smells rushed hot and steamy along it, boiling potatoes, swill, cabbage, clothes, porridge, pudding and cow plasters. Already three black and white dogs had harassed him to the door, and inside there seemed to be a parade of cats up and down the passage waiting for some horror to be served from the kitchen. On the walls there were faded pictures, once given away with Victorian patriotic tea, framed in split bamboo. A cat's head stuck up out of a great purple china umbrella stand. In at open doors he could see old, velvet Victorian chairs, sideboards, velvet covered tables with bobbles, all stained and dirty, covered in old Sunday newspapers, pictures of cows and invoices. From the furniture crammed into these rooms it might have been the Dribbles were storing up against a big Collector's Demand.

Darke stared at Ben Dribble. He assumed it was a Dribble, though he had a desire to spit on his face and run it over with his elbow to make sure. The Dribble had come out, munching, from the boiling kitchen. He finished munching, swallowed, wiped his nose with his finger and stared with bright, vacant little eyes like blue marbles.

"I understand that you have complained about interference in your reception of the 'Farming Today' programme," said Darke.

"The wireless, you means?" said Dribble. "Us doan listen. Sarah listens and writes the pig prices down. Ask her."

"Certainly. Where is she?"

"You goes out the yard, left, right, left, right and there's a door, usually with smells comin' out. You go in there."

"You don't actually know of any electrical interference happening, say, about seven in the morning?"

Dribble chewed solemnly. "Funny you said that," he said. "Electremetricity. It's them damn pylons across my land. You should er seen the cows smarnin'. Let 'em back in the field after milkin' and all of a sudden they starts rushin' round like mad, and the dogs ran and all bloody choss. Youder thought

the deval was after 'em you would then."

"After milking? What time?"

"Bout arpast seven. Bout then. Me brother was out to ten acre wi the tractor. Met Jobey postman. Jobey says suthink queer took on about then, but me brother was avin is breakfust—"

"On the tractor?"

"We aves our breakfust wherever us appens ter be. Tom was to the tractor."

"He noticed nothing?"

"He saw the steers up in ten acre kickin' up, but them bloody pylons runs crorss there too. It's that electremetricity. When they fust come acrorss here we chopped a couple of 'em down and some job it were too. Them things is steel, but we got 'em to fall over. Then we ad ter pay for 'em, so after that we let 'em stand."

"Did the postman come here this morning?"

"No. Never today."

"I'll find Mrs Dribble."

Darke went out, tracing the direction, left right left right, and found himself going round the barns and cowsheds and shallow houses where the pigs talked loudly like people. Finally he came to the house extension where Clara had gone before him.

Sarah regarded him rather tensely, her china blue eyes suspicious and uneasy. She kept wiping her hands on her apron. Darke repeated his query about the reception complaint.

"Yes, 'tis right, that," she said. "It gets worse now. At first it weren't much, now it sort er hisses like steam and the voices goes all to bits, like you put them through a grater."

"Any squeal?"

"Yes." She wiped her hands faster. "Only I don't think that comes from the wireless. That's in your ears more."

"Have you got music in the milking sheds?"

"Yes. That's wireless, too. They gives more milk, Dribble says."

She was very uneasy, frightened of him.

"Some unusual things happened this morning. Did you

notice anything?"

"No."

"About half past seven?"

"No." She shook her head quickly.

As he turned to go he heard her quick sigh of relief.

13

Daisy looked up from her writing bureau where she was scribbling out the day's menu. Baskin, the gardener, stood in the french windows surveying his domain critically.

"We shall have Eggs Florentine, Baskin," said Daisy.

"What's that?" said Baskin, looking round.

"Eggs on spinach."

"Well, why don't you say as much stead er this Eggs Florrybum business? You make me tired with all this gaff. That's all it is, gaff. Don't mean nothin'. If you wants spinach, you say you want some spinach and don't speck me ter guess what Eggs Florrybum is."

Daisy looked at her writing pad and kept her teeth tightly shut. Gardeners were very hard to come by.

"So please get some spinach for Mrs Parson," said Daisy, breathing hard to control her voice into a fine, steady edge. "And some blackcurrants for sweet."

"Blackcurrants," said Baskin, with a loud sigh. "I knew it was going ter be bloody blackcurrants. Takes arf the bloody day pickin' they do. Blackcurrants! Cor bugger."

He went out across the lawn, almost doubling up in evil merriment, tears squeezing from his eyes in the effort to keep his laughter secret.

As he dived to his secret lair between the laurel hedges, he came upon Basil.

"What's the matter? Got a bellyache?" said Basil.

This released Baskin's control and he started to snigger and puff and snort and cry, and finally fought himself to a standstill but still full of pressure.

"What are you laughing at?" Basil said.

"Just laughin," said Baskin, short of breath. "I often has ter laugh. It stops me screamin'."

"It must have been something," said Basil, sharply. He wondered whether the letter had been completely burnt on the bonfire ashes.

"It was people, probly," said Baskin. "People is like the immovable objeck and the inrefrutrable force, always smackin' theirselves in the nose."

"What were you laughing at?" Basil demanded, alarmed now.

"A laugh," said Baskin solemnly, "is privit a laugh is. It's like bein' with yer wife and even if you hears the bed rattle it's still privit. When I laughs it's because something in me privits tickles me sense of humour, and it's no bloody business of anybody's unless—I—tells—em. A man don't sell his soul or his laughs with his labour. His thinks and his laughs is all his own privits."

He turned away into the vegetable garden before he burst himself with joyous merriment and went to the spinach. Basil, casting a quick glance at the bonfire by the compost heap, followed him.

"Did you find anything, Baskin, over—?"

"Well, sod me!" said Baskin. "Look er that!"

He pointed to the lines of spinach towering like elongated pagodas.

"Gone ter seed!" The laughter had gone, shocked away. "Gone ter seed overnight! It ain't possible! It just ain't reasonable! Look er tit! Look!"

"What an extraordinary thing!" said Basil, for he himself had been through the vegetable garden the day before.

"Blimey!" gasped Baskin. "It's all gone on. Look over in the orchard. The bloody apples is ripe!"

Basil closed his eyes, then looked again.

"Look at them marrers!" Basil said, starting to walk like a guide in a dream. "They was flars yesterday! Flars! Them lettuce! They gone up, too!"

He stopped and looked round at Basil. Basil looked at Baskin, and then wiped his face.

Suddenly like a breath of sanity blowing through a heated dream, Daisy screamed out from the house.

"Basil! Baz! Where are you?"

As Basil turned to go Baskin caught his arm.

"Hey, what am I gonna do with this lot?" he said.

"I don't know anything about king gardening, you fool!"

"I don't know anythink about this kind, either. How am I gonna sort this lot out?"

Basil tore himself away before Daisy screamed herself into a fit. She was standing at the french windows, a tripod with one human leg, one plaster pillar and a walking stick.

"Basil! Althea rang!"

"Good God! Not all the way from Valparaiso! She always reverses the charges—"

"Don't be a fool! She's here. In London. She's coming down tonight."

Basil felt a sudden hot alarm run through him.

"She is? Why didn't she let us know? What's happened to the starving gonks in Venezuela?"

"She flew back yesterday."

"But why? What for?"

"Good heavens! Don't you want to see her? Your own daughter?" Then Daisy remembered something and went hard and stiff as her plaster leg. "Good lord!" she said.

She gave him a terrible look, then turned back into the room. Basil just stood on the grass, clenching and unclenching his fists. Then he took strength and went in after her as she stumped to the stairs.

"Daze, you know there's nothing in that! I told you, it's a lot of cock!"

"Judging from your face just now, I'm of a different opinion. You don't want her to come because I can ask her. That's it, isn't it? You old beast!"

"Daze—"

"Go away! I don't want to talk to you. I don't want to talk to you ever again! Mrs Parson!" She screamed towards the kitchen. "Help me upstairs!"

Mrs Parson, pushing her white hair into place, came

up from the kitchen and gave the cripple an elbow.

"Great king stink!" Basil muttered. "What in hell's happening today? Everything's gone off the king rails!"

The big red dog rushed in, crashed into the back of his knees and Basil collapsed to the floor as in prayer. He stayed like that some time, his knees paralysed by the crash. The dog, frightened because Basil did not curse him, ran out again, tail down.

He tore across the garden, behind Baskin's hedge. Baskin jumped in time. Flyn raced past, bashing through the green pagodas, scattering bits in all directions. He got to the orchard and then Baskin saw him stop amid the small trees. The dog stood still as a statue, staring ahead of him, the only moving things his hackles which rose in fright on his back.

Then he yelped, barked twice, turned and fled back past the staring gardener.

"What the hell's there, then?" Baskin said, slowly walking towards the orchard. "What the hell's anywhere?" He came to the hedge and looked over into the orchard. For some reason he would not go through the gate where the dog had gone.

He looked carefully around amid the trees, and the grass scattered now with inexplicably ripe apples.

"Dogs is physsic," he said, stroking his jaw uneasily. "They sees what we don't. Even that daft bloody broom. Even him."

He turned and went back to his shed where he spent a good part of every day smoking, ruminating and reading communist propaganda, which he sent for and read assiduously. It made him cry with laughter. This morning his tears of laughter were far behind. He sat on the table, on the latest edition, and looked out of the doorway at the vegetable garden.

"Overnight," he said. "A matter of hours!" He got up. "Anyhow, it looks as if we has to do without our heggs Florrybum." He felt better for that and went out to start clearing the seeding greenery.

Bill Jeeves pulled up his Bentley outside the Entwistle bungalow. As he went up the path he saw, through the large, shoplike lounge window, Rowena, watching.

She moved as he got to the door and met him in the glass hall.

"Bill!" she said, surprised. "But Fred's just gone in."

"That's why I've just come out," he said. He laughed, took her in his bearlike hug and kissed her.

"You're very intense this morning," she said, drawing her head back to take breath. "What's the matter?"

"You. You're the matter," he said, and started kissing her again on her neck and ears.

"Not now!" she said, struggling.

"Yes, now!" he said urgently and grinned in his successful boyish way.

She broke and got to the lounge, he rushed after, it got into a wrestle and a romp and ended up longitudinally on the ten foot sofa. He held her there, grinning still.

"Come away with me," he said very urgently.

"You know I can't," she said, turning her face to the sofa back.

He bit her ear and whispered into it.

"He's no use to you. Come away, now. Please, Ro. Now. I can't wait any longer, playing about. He'll get over it. As long as he's got a picture of his Mum—"

She started to struggle.

"Listen. He won't mind and he's used to the idea. It won't last long. Come away, Ro." He started kissing her neck and ear again, and felt her resistance grow less. "Get packed." He lifted himself.

She held him away, watching his eyes.

"What's happened, Bill?"

"Happened?" he said, his grin less sure.

"I know you. Why suddenly now, like this?"

"Well, you expected it sometime, didn't you?"

"Yes. I can't leave Fred."

"Fred will be all right," he said, faintly angry. "What's the matter with you this morning? Fred never got in our way before. Emotionally, that is."

She held him away by his shoulders.

"What has happened? Why do you suddenly want to go? It means giving up the partnership. What would we live on?"

"I've got a bit put by," he said quickly, almost cheerfully. "Don't worry about that, Ro. Do listen—"

"What's happened?" she said again. She struggled to get up but he wouldn't let her. "Tell me, Bill. I can see there's something."

He got up and put his hands to his ears. "Someone's thinking of me," he said, and grinned, but faintly now. She looked to the huge window. "It's something outside. I've heard it before," she said, getting up. "Bill, what's the matter?"

He showed his teeth suddenly and jammed his hands into his pockets. He looked more the big, handsome, boyish football player than ever.

"I've been rumbled," he said, watching her.

She said nothing for a while, thoughts rushing in strips through her head. Then, "What do you mean, Bill? Fred's found out? Is that it? He suspects everybody. Everybody but you. I shouldn't worry too much—"

"Not about you, Ro. There's been a man, a queer geezer, asking a lot of questions about capital invested." Then his eyes began to open, and he coloured. "Hell! What am I talking about?"

"What do you mean? Say that again!"

"I didn't mean to say it." He turned away to the window. "It came out—I didn't mean— Hell! My head's funny. It's that whistle—"

"It's stopped now," she said, going close to him. "Say that again, Bill. You might as well."

He turned round, made a dramatic gesture of hopelessness with his hands and frowned like a small boy about to burst into tears. "I spent their money," he said, hoarsely. "Most of it's gone. I don't know how they found out, but this chap knew. That's why he came."

"Does Fred know?"

He shook his head, as if unable to speak any more.

"Stop the drama, Bill. What's the truth about it? Tell me!"

"There was all this money, clients' money. I used it and paid them the interest. Nobody ever bothered. I always reckoned I could get it back. But the shares didn't rise. They went the other bloody way. That wasn't my fault, Ro. It always worked before. Then there was this takeover on the Exton Electric, and the shares went right up to the sky, but the bloody Government stepped in and stopped it, and the balloon just went off pop. I can't be blamed for that."

She turned away, went and got a cigarette.

"All the money's gone?" she said.

"Not all, but we couldn't balance it. There'll be thousands adrift. Bloody thousands."

"What's Fred got left, then?" She turned and looked at him.

Another hopeless dramatic gesture.

"These things get fixed these days," he said quickly. "The actual clients won't lose. The Society sees to that—"

"What's Fred got left?"

He just stood there.

"And you wanted to run and leave him to it," she said, curiously. "You wanted me to go, too. Poor Fred! What if I'd agreed and then found out?"

"We could have been away—right away—" There was almost a resurgence of hope in his rising voice.

Rowena was not listening. She was staring out to the distant clouds, the beautiful feathery white cumulus far away in the peace of the sky.

"Go back to the office," she said.

He stiffened, grew more than six feet tall.

"Hell, Ro! I can't do that!"

"Why did you tell me?"

"I didn't mean to. It just came out. I couldn't stop it. Like somebody pushing me..."

Again she did not listen, but sat down in a deep chair and smoked awhile, looking at him. He turned away, unable to stand her gaze.

"You'll have to go back," she said.

"You must be mad! They'll drag me off in bloody chains!"

"If you run away they'll drag you back in bloody chains."

She was very quiet. It frightened him. He turned back to look at her, but she still sat there, smoking, watching the distant galleons of the clouds.

"Ring him up. Ring Fred," she said.

"I can't, Ro. I can't!"

"Will they drag him off, too?" she said, looking back to him.

"Why aren't you angry? Why don't you get fluffed up?" he shouted. "How can you just sit there?"

She looked at him, then at the clouds again. She shrugged very slightly. "Is there anything that can be done?" she said.

"Not to save the mess." He started to pace the deep carpet. "Will they drag Fred off, too?"

He stopped, looking at the open door, wishing himself through it, wishing he had never come.

"I'll take all the blame," he said.

"Where from—Budapest?"

"What's the matter with you? Why this sudden care for Fred now? I don't seem to have noticed much during our fun and games."

"You're a crude swine, Bill. I used to like it, but I'm not so sure now. It seems to go all right when things don't matter much. When they do, it grinds."

"Didn't it matter much, then?" He stared incredulously.

"I don't think it did."

"That's ruddy immoral!"

She laughed very shortly, then got up and went towards the door. He caught hold of her arms and turned her to face him. "Didn't matter, then?"

"Yes. Because it was funny."

"Funny?" He was rigid.

"Like being in bed with the circus strong man, frightened to let his breath go in case his chest collapsed and his tummy came out. Look at me undressing, what a fine figure of a man. What a gift! What a—"

"You don't know what—" he shook her to make her stop.

"—what a hero, what a hero!" She shouted at him, tears starting in her eyes. "See me strut and parade and leave poor old Fred—poor old fool—poor old stooge, silly old fool—let him face the music! Stupid silly old Fred! Stupid silly old Fred! Jesus! Let me go!"

He let her go. She went out. He heard her sobbing, until a door slam stopped it. He felt his tie. It needed straightening after the tumble on the sofa.

He swallowed, looked round for the drinks to which he usually helped himself, then went out into the hall to the glass door. A man was coming up the path, a big, loose stranger. Bill felt his tie again and let his hand go up to feel his throat. He swallowed again, then went out down the drive.

The man's eyes were grey and sharp, it seemed.

"I don't know where you're going," he said, "but you have lipstick on your collar and under your left ear."

"Thank you." Bill pulled his handkerchief from his breast pocket and dropped it on the gravel. His face was hot. He stood there. Darke looked at him, then slowly down to the handkerchief, then up again.

"I take it Mr Entwistle is not in," Darke said.

Bill Jeeves nodded, bent and picked up the handkerchief like fielding a fast ball, then marched on out to the Bentley. The visitor did not look after him.

The Bentley drove off with a furious hiss. Darke went on to the glass door and stopped, looking into the modern hall. On a low table the morning letters lay unopened on a tray. He saw the yellow stamp on the top one, and stood awhile as if pondering whether or not to go in and open it.

15

Janey Dollflower worked assembling telephones at a factory in the town. At tea break, the girls sat in lines on the walls amid the flowering bushes grown to hide the building from the road. They sat in the sun, gossiping, giggling and watching the men go by.

Janey saw Bert's car a long way off. With all its flashing plated pieces it had the appearance of a bedraggled knight's charger done up for a hasty tourney. Bert waved from the window. Janey slid off the wall and went to the car.

"What's on, then?" Janey said. "What you done to your mitt?"

"Cut it. Get in," Bert said, shoving the door open.

"Cut it on what?" Janey said, getting in.

She was very fair and pretty and rather fat. Her hair, having just survived a period of being piled up like candy floss now hung to her shoulders.

"I've had a letter," said Bert.

"Big news," she said, looking at her nails. "Is that what you come for?"

"It's about—you know when we were kids something happened once—"

"What?" She looked blank, baby faced in surprise and puzzlement.

"You know."

"That!" She laughed suddenly. "Once? It kept on happening, didn't it? For a while."

"Somebody knows. That's what this letter's about."

She sat stiffly, angrily. "What's it to do with anybody, then? It was years ago. What do they expect leaving a couple of kids together morning, noon and night? You're bound to want to find out. God! What a nightmare that was, that place. Dad gone off, and Mum out every night—looking for him I suppose she was. I dunno. I've never been so frightened. Those blacks either side, drunk and yelling and banging on the walls—they meant to scare us. They used to grin sort of funny in the street. You know, if I found Dad now I think I'd kill the bastard."

"Okay. But what about this screed?"

"What's it to do with anybody?"

"You read it," he said, and pushed the stained and crumpled letter at her. She read it, mouthing the words.

"It's just one of those dirty minded people. They get kicks out of this sort of thing. I read about them."

"It's going to be blackmail."

"Be bloody lucky to get anything out of you, or me. It doesn't say that, anyway. It's like I said, somebody doing it for kicks. Dirty minds. What's in it, anyway? We were just kids."

"This chap's bound to do something, isn't he? Or he wouldn't write that."

"I tell you, he does it for kicks. They get sex out of it. Don't ask me how, but they do. Like writing on the walls. It's a way to let off steam. That's all that letter is. Hormones and that."

"It's meant to stir it up."

"What can it stir up? I've got my boy friends. You've got your girls. Who's interested?"

"Grandma had it open."

A few cars went by.

"Christ," said Janey. "Did she?"

"See what I mean?"

"Yeah, I see what you mean."

16

Judith came out of the orchard gate carrying a pan of apples. She started as she saw the man standing near.

"Aren't you rather early with the fruit?" he said.

"I was just taking them to Miss Clara," Judith said quickly. "It's very odd. They weren't ripe yesterday. Today they're falling. I don't remember that before."

He took one out of the pan. She watched him. He looked at it, then took a bite and spat it out.

"It's very odd," Judith said. "I don't know what's on this morning. One thing after another."

"What things?"

She told him about the ringing and the floating sensations, and how everybody had been up and down and very odd altogether. "I thought it was Mr Trent's electric things, but it can't be, can it?"

"What electric things?"

"Oh, a lot of that sort of stuff you see on television in

the children's serials. Lots of little lights and things going round and skipping ropes ... I don't know what it all is. Best left alone before we all get blown up, I say."

It was very hot and peaceful. Darke leant on the gate.

"Is Miss Clara in?" he said.

"She just came back. Do you want to see her, then?"

"Yes."

They went through the orchard into the garden proper and to the garden door into the hall. It was very hot, the air humming with the thousand sounds of summer. Judith left him in the hall. He stood and listened until she came back.

"Would you come up? She's doing a dress."

He followed her up the broad, black stairs, turned right along a wide panelled corridor of many doors, all gleaming black. Judith knocked and opened a door, standing back for the visitor.

It was a splendid room overlooking the lawn with three fine sash windows. Clara was standing by a full length Napoleon mirror, looking critically at a drape of material she had slung over herself with startling effect.

She looked very beautiful. Darke's eyes hooked on a large oil painting over the stone fireplace. A life sized nude reclining on crushed velvet. Clara to the life.

"Do come in," Clara said, smiling at him through the mirror. "No, that's great grandmama, not me. So fascinating to speculate on whether you come down from a past master of the estate or a past mistress, don't you think? Of course, as you see, he was a famous artist. She was most particular ..." She turned then, settling a fold of stuff over her shoulder.

"I am from the Station on Wey Hill."

"Oh, the place with all those enormous colanders," said Clara. "What do they do? They look as if they're waiting to catch something that's going to fall from Heaven."

"That is what they do," he said. "They catch the voices of stars."

"How fascinating," said Clara, and went to a table with drinks on. "You'll have a sherry? Whisky?"

"Sherry." He watched her movements and it seemed un-

likely that she could be the age in his file.

"Then why can you be here, from such an important, secret place?" she said, pouring.

"You had a certain experience this morning of whistling," he said.

"Oh yes," she said, carrying the glasses across. "It made me quite giddy. Twice it was. Most odd. And there are ripe apples in the orchard, Judith just brought some up. The gardener must be using some of that super seed what-ever-it-is."

"We have tracked radio interference to this village," Darke said. "Serious interference. I came to pinpoint it. It seems to be emanating from this house."

She laughed.

"You don't mean that my aura is upsetting your wire baskets up on the hill there?" she said.

"I mean the man staying with you," he said.

"Trent!" She laughed again, throwing the suggestion away, and walked lightly back to the mirror to see the effect of her drapes. "How absurd. Why he just plays with things. Always did. He was fascinated by my husband. My husband was mad, too. He built his own aeroplane and it flew so high and then burst. And all the time he could have bought one ready made. He just had to play about. And Trent, being a boy at the time, rather caught the fever, you know—"

"What does he do?"

"Do?" she said, turning slowly back to him in surprise. "What do you mean—do?"

"Has he a job?"

"Oh no. He rather wastes his time, in fact."

"Private means?"

"Well, no. He stays with relatives who are rather kind to him."

"A sponger," said Darke.

Clara's mouth closed rather sharply.

"I don't like that, Mr Darke," she said.

"You said it, not me," he said. "There are other words. Cadger, layabout..." He stopped and watched as if to see the effect.

Clara matched the look with a faint, sly look in her blue eyes. "Well, you scientific men are crude in all things," she said. "I suppose you have to be."

"Where is this man now?"

"In bed. He spends a long time in bed. He says he is thinking. I suppose he is—about something."

"He carries out experiments in his bedroom?"

"He plays," she said, shrugging. "There's no other word. He just has a lot of boxes and he joins them up one way, and then another way, and all you get is a smell of hot dust. He's a child, really."

"I'd like to see this equipment," said Darke.

"It's just a lot of rubbish," she said, smiling. "He has a big bedroom with double doors, so it's very quiet and there's a smaller room, once used as a dressing room, so you see he has almost a small flat with the bathroom tacked on the end, made out of one of the old listening rooms, you know about them? In the days of intrigue and civil war—"

"I would like to see it," said Darke, putting his glass down.

"I'm afraid he won't play," she said, airily. "He's one of these rebels, you know. Authority makes him violent."

"He is unbalanced," Darke said.

"I think you over-simplify," she said, and laughed tautly. "However, while he is my guest the rooms are his, and it is not for me to say you yay or nay. I'm so sorry."

"You're blocking me," said Darke.

"I suppose one should think of this directness as refreshing," said Clara, turning to the mirror again. "I find it just a bore. You won't bully your way in, you know."

"I want to be sure this radiation is coming from here—that bedroom, to be exact."

"Radiation?" she said, faintly startled. "You don't mean it will make us go green or luminous or something? Not that stuff?"

"I don't suggest radio-activity. It is a radiation which is extremely strong and I want to know more about it."

"Well, if your clever colanders have found out it is here, they should be able to find out what it is, too, shouldn't

they?"

"Machines are not infallible."

"I should have thought you would say fallible. Much more direct. The double negative—"

"Does he have visitors?"

"Not to my knowledge recently, but I am not always here. Bazaars, fêtes, cancer committee, the Institute, I always get dragged into committees. I am a born sucker."

"How old is this man?"

"Oh, I don't know for sure, thirty-five? Older than I always think of him as I knew him so well as a little boy. He stayed with us a lot because my sister died and his father can't stand him. Calls him a pansy. So out of date, don't you think? They have so many words now."

"Is he queer?"

"How can you ask a woman a question like that?"

"Women often find it easier to tell."

"I couldn't." The mirror took her attention again. "What really do you think is going on?"

"I have to wait until it happens again."

"The whistling?"

"Yes."

"It makes me shiver. It's as if you're suddenly losing your grip on everything..." She stopped and began to smile. "I hope it has that effect on you."

"Thank you," he said. "Won't you introduce me?"

"No."

"You will."

"Mr Darke, your wretched machines up on the hill there terrify me much more than some boy playing about in a room. It is you scientists who are continually losing control of your inventions. You who find out what effects things have, too late. I cannot see what chance a boy in a bedroom has to compete with your horrors."

"I am not a scientist. I represent them. Have you heard of telekenesis?"

"No. What's that?"

"The power of moving matter with the mind. A gravel truck

—alone on the road—came through here this morning after nine and found no village here at all. It was the time of the second screaming."

She turned back to the mirror again, rather breathless.

"I think these things are better left," she said. "Such talk could put a man out of his job and in a mental home."

"A lawyer, Fred Entwistle, told his brother-in-law, a police chief, that he walked from his house to the other side of the railway tracks without making any move but one step. That was at seven thirty."

"Fred, yes, well, Fred . . ." she said, rolling her shoulders expressively.

"What's wrong with Fred?"

"So emotional," Clara said, evasively. "He broods. You know how you can go somewhere while you're brooding and never remember going there?"

"Thank you."

"You're not going?" she said, surprised.

"You won't show me the rooms."

"You're not—going to get a warrant or something, are you?" she said, anxiously.

"It hardly justifies it, from what you say," he said, with a sharp irony.

"Really, it is quite true," she said, coming up and turning on charm as warm as sun. "He is just wasting time, playing about with wireless and things."

"But you are paying for it," Darke said briefly. "Have you never asked where your money goes?"

"He has some fantastic ideas about mind cures," she said.

"Mind cures?"

"Yes, of course you are surprised. I was at first and then I realised it was just a lot of rubbish. An electronic psychiatrist, of all things. Telepathy. You know, probing with the couch routine, as he puts it. Now how on earth can you do that in a bedroom with a few old things? It's so old fashioned, really, isn't it?"

"As you say, it doesn't sound very impressive. Thank you for your time."

"It has been almost a pleasure," she said.

He turned his back.

She went with him, talking about the history of the house. As they came to the end before the stairs he saw a flat yellow book lying just close to the reveal of the post. It had not been there when he had come through. "Careless," he said, bending and taking it up. "I must have dropped it."

"Something official, no doubt," said Clara.

"Quite," he said.

They went down the stairs. As they got to the hall Judith hurried up looking worried.

"Would you—when you've finished—come and see Robins? He's feeling queer. It's all the weeds out there. He thinks he's having a nightmare."

"In a moment, Judith."

They came to the door.

"Your lawn hasn't grown like the rest," he said.

"It's that special lawn grass. It only grows so much."

He walked away. She turned and went to see her gardener. He walked slowly and when beyond the yew hedge looked at the book he had picked up, stamped 'GPO'.

17

Darke walked from the yew hedge to the vicarage. Richard received him. As they went into the study there was a furious near scream from somewhere at the back of the house.

"My God! My God!"

"My wife has burnt the pudding again," said Richard. "Some port? I wish another myself. So difficult to drink alone in front of somebody."

Darke refused. Undeterred, Richard helped himself and they sat down. Richard studiously looked over his papers as if his visitor could be less important.

"Now, er, Mr—" he said, looking up vaguely.

"There have been a number of atmospheric disturbances in the village this morning. Can you tell me something about

them?"

"Witchcraft," said Richard and grinned to pick his fangs with a long fingernail.

"Witchcraft?" Darke said, stiffly.

"Certainly," said Richard, nodding at the window. "We have quite a deal of it. Growing much bolder. Frolics inside my church. Before they stopped at the door. Now they go in and fornicate upon the altar. You are, of course, aware of the trend of their service?"

"I have heard."

"It is quite simple. Like animals."

"You don't seem much perturbed about this sacrilege."

"At my age, perturbation is almost a memory. So, indeed, is a great deal else. It is not the sacrilege which bothers me but making a mess in my church. It's so expensive now to get a cleaner and my voluntary cleaners are always full of sickness and excuses. I've had this living for twenty-five years despite almost desperate efforts to unseat me."

Wilde laughed with big yellow teeth.

"I am so old I do not count any more," he went on. "Some years ago it suddenly occurred to me what Heaven would be like, all of us sitting at the right hand of God listening to His interminable discourses on His own glory. And the listeners! All these perfect people who have passed the test to get in. It suddenly came to me what kind of people these were. They would have no need of pity or compassion, kindness or understanding. All these great gifts would be atrophied, for none in that white, bright, hard, righteous lot of bastards would have need of such. I gave a sermon one day along these lines. It made them think, believe me."

"And now?" said Darke, curiously.

"Now I'm just looking forward to a good rest when I die. Their kind of Heaven is impossible. If you look forward to it, you would have great disappointment, only, mercifully, you would be too dead to feel it."

"So witchcraft does not go very far beyond what you now think?"

"What does it matter what a man thinks?" said Wilde, lean-

ing forward. "It's only another man who's going to listen. Only another man to say he's clever or a fool. He impresses no dog, or bee or fish or elephant. The only way he can do that is by force. That is not thinking. Do you think, Mr Darke? Or is your mind filled with the dross your teachers put into it when you were small? The old stuff I have spent a lifetime trying to teach blacks and yellows and browns and whites? To make them believe. In what? Did I teach them to believe in God, or did they, by sheer weight of numbers, convince me there was none? If the witches believe in the Devil they believe in more than I do.

"We are taught that God watches us and counts our hairs and the birds that fall, but He does nothing about it all. He just sits and remains as far off from the suffering as He can get. The picture of the Devil is the opposite. He is supposed to be always around, watching us, jogging our elbows, giving us another drink, laughing .One can see which character has the stronger pull.

"Hence witchcraft," Richard went on. "Nature worshipping. Worship of fact, not fiction. Do you know my lord Bishop strode out of here a few months ago never to return, he said, while I lived. His reason? Merely that I told him that the way the world is going in a few years time we should walk into any library and find the Bible under the classification of Science Fiction."

"Till now," said Darke, "the greater part of science fiction has come true."

Richard filled his pipe again.

"She burnt that pudding, you know," he said, staring out of the window at the weeds. "I hate burnt rice pudding. She will make them and always burns them. It's for her a penance, but why should I have to eat it?"

"Was the letter you had this morning on the matter of your beliefs, or lack of them?" said Darke.

"The letter—?" Richard began, then stopped and turned his head slowly to his guest. "I had no letter this morning."

"Would you actively oppose pagan rites being held in the village?"

Richard relaxed again and thought a while.

"I confess it depends who was concerned in it. I no longer think of right and wrong, but people I like and people I don't."

"Have you ever noticed any unnatural activity as a result of these rites?"

"I'd like to know how those weeds grew so long in the night," Richard said. "If you are interested, Mr Darke, you should stay a day. Tonight is Midsummer. It is also a Sunday after midnight."

"Various people have testified that the church vanished for several minutes this morning."

"We are blessed with fools," said Richard devoutly. "Ah, here comes my daughter. She will not be pleased." As the lovely blonde went by the open study door he called out, "Elsie dear, I have very bad news."

The girl stopped and swung round, her eyes flicking from her father to Darke.

"The very worst has happened," said Richard, smiling. "Your mother has burnt the rice pudding again."

She looked at him a moment. "Oh lord," she said. "We'll have to eat it because of the starving hordes of India."

"This is Mr Whatname," said Richard. "He asks a lot of questions."

"I get very few answers," said Darke.

In control after her first shock, Elsie came in.

"How do you do?" she said.

"Mr Thing," said Richard, keeping command of the air, "is asking questions about disturbances and such."

"Really," Elsie said.

"He has been asking—" said Richard.

"Do you mind?" said Darke.

"Do I mind what?" said Richard benignly.

"I am trying to make an investigation," said Darke shortly. "It is very difficult—"

"We all have our difficulties," said Richard. "In my long life I have found it most helpful and comforting to—"

"Father is eighty-two," said Elsie, beaming. "But he doesn't look anything like it, do you think?"

"Miss Wilde, did you experience any abnormal atmospheric sensations at seven thirty this morning?"

"Dear heaven, what a ghastly hour. I wasn't even conscious. Ask Father. He is always lecturing me about sloth and—"

"Thank you," said Darke, and walked out.

"There now," said Elsie ruefully. "So he couldn't be a policeman."

"Did you have a letter this morning, dear?" said Richard.

"No," said Elsie.

She walked out. But Mother was at one end of the corridor, hurrying up, wiping her hands on an apron, and Elsie, unable to face the rice pudding lament, turned and went out of the door into the lane again.

Darke, only paces away then, turned and saw her.

"Miss Wilde," he said.

She stopped, and turned very slowly to him.

"What?" she said, coldly.

"I have a list of the people who had special delivery letters this morning."

She held her breath a moment, watching him, then lifted a finger and held aside the golden lock of hair swinging over one eye.

"I see," she said. "Well, there's no use keeping it quiet, is there? I'll tell you. I'm a model. I do most in the nude for the men's glossies and things. My father thinks I am a part time secretary in Bristol. My mother would kill herself if she knew. She has an appalling guilt complex and blames herself for everything. Even the weather and our poltergeist. You don't know about him? He's been here years. When I was young I used to tell secrets to him. Now he gives me the chills a bit. He has been wild just lately. Ringing the bells and laughing up and down the stairs at night."

"Wild since when?"

"Oh—last night I think. And again this morning. He doesn't usually play around in the morning."

"Your father has a magazine on his chair which features you."

"Oh, you take that one, do you? He's on a committee in-

vestigating pornography. The other evening I was sitting with him and I saw him actually glance through those pages and never realise it was me. It was very odd."

"So it's your mother who worries you?"

"It's the bananas, you see. When they first married Father went off to the West Indies as a missionary, sort of, and the only paleskins in this part were bananas. They became like a symbol for Mother. She got to talking to them and that sort of jape. They had a peculiar effect. And then they came home and I arrived, which was all rather miraculous but notable, but the first thing I remember about her was she was always crying. Now it's got to a state of breast beating even over those damned rice puddings. Everything lights the flaming torch of guilt in her bosom. I'm frightened that one day she won't be able to pull out of these dives she gets into. That's why I don't like this letter."

"Have you destroyed it?"

"Yes."

"You can't remember any strange happenings this morning?"

Elsie looked up at the church over the lychgate.

"I had a dizzy. I thought it was a hangover, but I haven't had a wet-in for weeks. Yes, it was odd, I suppose."

"Did you notice anything in particular?"

She pointed between the church trees and the Manor house.

"The pylons weren't there."

He looked round to the steel giants motionless in their stride across the country, arms aloft, holding the loops of the high voltage lines against the morning sky.

"You're sure?"

"Would I say?" She pouted. "They weren't there."

"While the screaming was on?"

"Then."

"What time?"

"Sometime after nine."

He turned and looked down the lane.

"There are a lot of weeds," he said.

"So I see. Somebody must have planted them in the night. They weren't there yesterday evening." She watched him

slyly. "What is going on? Is it war or something?"

"No," he said. "Just a phenomenon. Such things happen every few hundred years."

"Is it dangerous?"

"No."

18

"There's a man at the door," Janey said.

"One of them for the payments?" said Grandma Dollflower.

"No. Looks a class type," said Janey.

"What's the matter with everybody?" said Bert, twisting in his chair. "It's a man. So what! Talk to the man! Chat him. See what. What else, for eff's sake?"

"Don't use that langwidge," said Grandma, flustered. "And don't you tell him anythink. And don't tell yer Mum."

Janey went out to answer the door. Grandma's needles clicked like a tiny typewriter.

"What about Hamlet then, and his Mum?" she said. "And the Pharosses. What about them, then? And Noah, eh? What about him, then?"

"You been making a study or somethin'?" Bert snapped. "What's it all about, then? Hamlet, Noah—what's this?"

"I was in a high family, in service with a big libry—"

"Oh, not that again, for God's sake!" groaned Bert.

"I'm tellin' yer it's all about—all about that letter and that. It's rife, that's what it is. It said it was rife!"

"What the hell's rife, then? Have I ett it? One of them bloody tins you get fourpence off and all bent?"

"I don't know why you went to school I don't know why," said Grandma, panting and trembling.

Janey came back. They both looked round at her as if she carried a ticking bomb. "He wants you," she said, nodding at Bert. "About the radio."

"It's all paid up," said Bert. "Tell him it's all paid up!"

"You tell him, then. Go on, you tell him."

Bert got up and thundered out, but when he saw the man

looking at him from the step a cold emptiness suddenly took over the false flare of heat in him.

"What's it then?" he said.

"We've had complaints about interference in reception of some programmes."

"Oh," said Bert. Relief let the air out of him and he sat down on the new hall chair, 'Send no money for one month and return if not the most comfortable hard seat chair ever'. "Oh. Oh, I see. Yes. Oh, I see." He thought. "Yes, there was some swingin' off the beam, come round news time 'smorning," Bert said, patting his hurt arm. "'Bout seven and a half—"

"Swingin' about I was, up there in me room, never should allow old folk up in them rooms, what if there's a fire, then?" Grandma said, knitting furiously and frowning at it as she wandered. "Swingin' about up there by me 'eels and the sea out there—"

"What are you doin' here?" cried Bert, looking round. "I'm talkin' to the man, aren't I? Get back in the kitchen—"

"*What* sea?" said the man at the door. "What sea?"

"She don't know—"

"What sea?"

"Out the winder," said Grandma, looking about to cry. "Out the winder. Sea. My Gawd!" She stared at the ceiling. "'Ow's that, then?"

"You were swinging about up there. Tell me about it," said the man.

"What's this gotta do with the BBC for eff's—" Bert began.

"Shut up," said the man without looking at him. "Madam. Just show me where the sea was."

It looked as if Grandma tried to curtsey. Bert sat there looking at the man in the doorway.

"Well, I don't know," Grandma said. "Me sight ain't bad. Specially long. I don't make mistakes long. It's for reading I needs me glasses. There weren't no fields out there to the back. No fields. Mustabin sea."

"Don't listen to her," Bert said, trying to stare her down. "She's done her nut, talking about Hamlet and Noah and Christ knows who out there. Now sea. Viking's coming up.

You dunno what you're talkin' about, Gran. Belt up."

"You idjit. My Gawd, you idjit!" Grandma said, actually crying then. "You can't take care, you can't!"

She stumbled back into the kitchen.

"Like I was sayin'," said Bert.

"It doesn't matter," said the man at the door. He turned and walked away.

19

Some time after noon Ben James could stand no more of it. With the heat of the bar, the roar of the customers. the constant, repetitive talk about things missing, missing things seen, swinging feelings and the rest, merely acted like a skewer going through his head.

"Hold on," he told Bess.

"Where you going, love?"

"Phone."

He looked down the counter to his sooty-eyed daughter, Sherree, chiding some laughing young drinker at the bar, then he went through to the phone under the stairs.

He rang Fred Entwistle at the office.

"Oh, hallo, Ben," Fred said, irritably. "What is it?"

"We've been having a bet—about the law," said Ben, adding quickly, "did they change it, I mean—"

"Change what? I'm rather busy, if you can quicken it up."

"Bigamy. You know. Did they change the law about so you don't go to quod now? Did they do that?"

"No, it's abortion you're thinking about. Or buggery. Not bigamy. No. There's no such thing as a first offender at that!" He laughed like a stuttering tin whistle.

"So you—you still get jug?" Ben swallowed. It hurt.

"Indeed you do."

"Ta." Ben rang off and stood there.

"Who're you ringin', love?"

Beth stood in the curtains of the bar opening.

"Fred Entwistle. I thought they changed the law. They've

changed it for every other bloody offence but not that one." He straightened up. "Makes you laugh to think, doesn't it? We did it for Sherree. Now, twenty years after, every film actress is parading about with a bastard and proud of it. Countesses, old tarts, they all got 'em."

"But you still have to have money to make the kid all right, darlin', even now," said Beth. "It still doesn't do to have a poor bastard."

"Who'd have thought she'd turn up?" he said, hitting the stair rail with his fist. "Twenty-two years! God! I always thought she was dead!"

"Don't go on," she said. "We must just wait and see."

"It might not happen," he said. "But it will ... What's all that din about in there?"

"They're still on about their beans and that. All gone rotten and weeds up all over. 'Tis some sight in the back-yards I'm thinkin'. Don't say you been so down you didn't even hear what they were sayin'?"

"I heard some of it. It's just some clumsy truck driver spilt a load of that seed fattener. They're always fattening up things now. Wonder they don't go at everything with bicycle pumps. For all the taste in them chemical fatted-up foods you might as well have air."

"Ah, that's better, darlin'," she said, slipping an arm through his. "Almost back to normal, then."

"I'm glad it wasn't anything to do with boys, though," said Daisy Garfield, pouring gin.

Basil almost choked in his efforts to drink gin and swallow his words and temper. His face went purple.

Daisy looked at him, saw the red flush of guilt, and nodded before she stumped away to the window.

Basil walked out the other door into the passage. His dog followed, watching him.

"What do you say, then?" Basil asked the dog. "What can you say when she twists it all? I shall go off bang!"

He ended with such a shout that Mrs Parson came out of the kitchen to look. "Just talking to the dog," said Basil, his head

sinking into his silk scarf.

"Baskin brought in basketfuls of apples," Mrs Parson said. "Where did he get 'em?"

"Off the trees," said Basil, gruffly.

"But it's only—"

"I know I know I know!" Basil shouted. "Everything's king wrong today! Everything! It's all gone mad!"

Darke went into the phone box on the grass verge near the pub. He made his call and waited, staring out through the glass down the curve of the road, the trees overhanging the stream on the side. He watched the sparkling rainbow waters passing down towards him and under the small bridge which supported the box. The answer came.

"Something big going on here," he said. "Do you remember an experiment speeding plant growth with UHF radio beams?"

"Vaguely. I'll have it investigated."

"Did you get a track on the second blast, after nine sometime?"

"No tracks. We just get jammed. Nothing but golden rain on the screens and mush on sound."

"Deliberate jamming?"

"We can't tell. It could be a side effect of the beam being used."

"Is it a beam?"

"Generic term. We can't hook on what it is."

"What about the transmission from the Manor house?"

"We plotted that last night, but not accurately. You saw. The frequency keeps wandering and we can't get our tuners to lock on it. It goes way out on the top range and too far down on the low."

"Could it develop into a big jammer?"

"Impossible. There's a vast power behind that one, though we can't measure without getting a hold on it. The power coming from the Manor house sending is low. A ham could stoke up the power of that transmission."

"There is an audible screaming here when invisibility comes. Do you get that?"

"We just get the mush and a jamming drone. Not the usual sound with jamming. Sort of wrap round drone, coming from all round. There is a hell of a thump being beamed down from somewhere."

"Why beamed down?"

"Well, it's the only way it can come, isn't it? Couldn't be horizontal or it would hit things getting there and they'd be affected, too."

"What about coming *up*?"

"From inside, do you mean? Where from?"

"I don't know. I've never been down there."

"Well, it's a queer thought."

"Think about it . . . I have a message for the police and GPO. Do nothing about postman Miles if he fails to turn up."

"You don't think the postman's mixed up in this, do you?"

"If your voice goes higher it will crack. Just give the message."

"Okay. I'll send the info re the vegetation speed on to your tape. And anything else that comes in relevant."

Darke went out into the sun. It was very hot. He wiped his face and looked through the trees towards the church tower. It looked serene, solid.

And yet it shimmered slightly in the heat.

Fred Entwistle threw his hat on to the chair in the all glass hall. Rowena stood at the lounge door, putting on lipstick, a mirror held close to her face.

"What the hell's Bill up to?" Fred said, angrily.

The mirror lowered slightly.

"What do you mean?" she said.

"I don't know. I get to the office. Some coon has been making inquiries about certain investments, and we can't find the file or any of the papers in re. He must have taken them home with him, but why?"

"Have you rung his home?" Rowena said, raising the mirror again.

"Dulcie rang everywhere, golf club, sailing club, home, heaven knows where. Funny he should take the damned things

just when some fellow comes along. Why did he come along? Dulcie never saw him before. He didn't leave his card. It's all very odd."

"Have a drink," she said. "You're hot."

"Yep. John Collins or something." He looked round to the letter tray. "Is that the mail?" He picked the letters up and shuffled through. "Wasn't there an RD? Didn't I sign for one this morning?"

He stared at her. She looked at the letters in his hand.

"There isn't one there, is there?"

"I thought I remembered signing." He stared at the wall and scratched his nose with the corner of an envelope. "It was that damn business this morning. That sort of dream. I can't remember anything for sure. I thought I signed something."

"I heard you talking with Jobey. Perhaps you thought you signed."

"I must be going daft," he said, fanning his face. "I'll get the ice." He stopped at the door. "I'm worried about Bill."

She did not look round from squeezing lemon. "Why?"

"It's a bit odd, isn't it?"

"What do you think has happened?" Then she looked up.

"I don't say that anything's happened, it's just odd. I passed him this morning, going in."

"Oh? Fetch the ice, Fred."

"Yes." He went out, frowning, half dreaming, not knowing what cloud was in his mind or why. "It's that damned business this morning. Like losing the grip on your brain. Queer. What's the matter with Bill? Couldn't be anything the matter with Bill. Couldn't be anything. Something he forgot and took home. Good old Bill. Reliable ... What the hell did I come out to the kitchen for?"

While he stood, trying to remember, she stood by the picture window, her hands covering her face.

Len Battock leant on the mantelpiece and pushed a hand through his thinning hair. His wife just sat at the table, hands relaxed in her lap, looking at nothing, placid, remote.

"All it was, I borrowed this money. It was private. We didn't tell anybody, and he didn't write anything down. Then he died, see, and—well, nobody knew. That's all it was."

"Sort of fraud," she said stonily.

"Fraud my arse!" he shouted. "We've got the shop, haven't we? It's good for money, isn't it? We can pay it all back."

Then she looked at him. "You never will," she said.

"Well, you never said a bloody word about it till now, anyway!"

"I didn't know anything about it. You told me you were paying interest on a loan. How? Did you bury it in the grave, or something? Where did the interest go?"

"It went into the business," he said, controlling himself and trembling with the strain. "It's there now. It hasn't been squandered, like you might like to think. It's still there, right there, solid money."

"What about them?" she said. "His wife and that?"

"She married again. She's all right."

"You just going to take it, like that? As if he left it you?"

"What the hell can you do after all this time? 'Sides, if it had meant anything to him he'd have written it down, said about it in his will!"

She stared at the wall, patience on a monument.

"Somebody's bound to find out. What about the auditors? Mr Barnacott, does our accounts. How didn't he know?"

"He knew the capital had come in. Of course he knew that. And the tax people and that. That's all right. You needn't worry about that."

She turned her head very slowly and stared at him. He seemed to shrink slightly.

"What did you say, then? What did you tell 'em?"

He looked out of the window, swallowed, began to go red in his heart-revealing parts of his face and then walked away waving his fists in sudden fury.

"What the bloody hell does that matter?"

"You had to tell 'em something. They want to know all about your savings book in the Post Office and everything else. So they must have wanted to know about that money.

What did you tell 'em?"

"I did it for us. So we could buy this shop. You benefited, didn't you? You been living on it with me for fifteen ruddy years. What have you got to bawl about?"

"What did you tell 'em?"

"Christ, I wish you'd lose your ruddy temper some time," he panted, fury gone into a kind of despair.

"What did you tell 'em?"

Like water dripping on a brain.

"I told 'em I won it."

"But you have to have papers to show that. They don't believe you, not for tax they don't. What did you tell 'em?"

"I got a bookie to give me chits. I paid him. They believed that."

She looked at him for only the second time.

"All above board. All honest. What did I marry?"

Then she got up and went to the stairs.

"Where are you going?" he said, panic gripping his throat.

"Just going." She started up the stairs.

"But you can't do that! You can't! It's Satdy afternoon. I'll be run off my feet! You can't go on a Satdy afternoon!" He went to the foot of the stairs. "What's dishonest, anyway? He did give me the money, didn't he? Of his own free will. And never told anybody. He meant me to have it, didn't he?"

"He must have died before he wrote anything down," she said. "That's all it could be." She went on up the stairs.

"What are all the people going to say?" he pleaded, gasping for breath. "What they going to say? They'll wonder why you've gone! They will. They'll wonder, won't they? Don't go. Don't go—not on a Satdy afternoon!"

20

Trent caught her in the hall by the open door looking out on the miniature grass lawn. It was very hot and still then. Clara turned suddenly and saw him there.

"You deliberately came up to frighten me!" she said,

catching her breath. "Creeping—"

"Who is that man? What did he want?" He spoke between his very white teeth and snatched her wrist, holding it tightly both to hold and hurt. "Where did he come from?"

"Let go, Trent! You frighten me!"

"Who was the man?" He shoved his face so close to hers she turned her head away.

"He—he came from the BBC. About the television."

"He didn't come from them, nor about television. Who is he? I want to know who he is, Aunt. You'll tell me or I'll hurt you."

"You wouldn't, Trent!"

"I will, Aunt. There'll be no secrets from me in this place. What did he want? What did he say to you about me?"

"It wasn't about you. It wasn't about you at all! Trent! Let me go, please!"

"If I don't, what will you do? Put a spell on me?"

Clara struggled to break the hard grip on her wrist. The more she fought the more it hurt and the harder he held on. He pressed her back against a chest. A vase of flowers—dead now—rocked behind her. She reached round, got the vase and brought it round right across his face. It struck him beside the eye, and water, dirty from the dead flowers, streamed over his face and down his white shirt. Stalks and rotten leaves stuck to his face and shoulders as he let her go and fell back, turning his head from more blows.

She stood there, breathing hard, still holding the heavy vase. Judith came into the hall.

"Been an accident?" she said, scared.

"Only slight," said Clara. "It's all right, Judith. Don't worry. Thanks."

Judith looked at Trent, leaning heavily against the stair rail, dazedly picking sodden bits of stalk off his shirt. He did not look at Judith. She went out again.

"You've got to leave here, Trent," Clara said, putting the vase on the chest. "If you don't, I think you'll be arrested."

He laughed but did not look up and went on picking bits off himself.

"How many of those filthy letters did you send?" she said.

He looked up. "There's nothing filthy in those letters, dearest Aunt. What is in them is only what was in each person's mind when I spoke to them."

"Don't be absurd. Do you put yourself down as a mind reader now? Amongst your other gifts."

"I have a machine which does it for me," he said. "Nobody arrests me or sends me away, Aunt. My machine looks into people's minds and tells me their black secrets. It uses them as they are of advantage or not as the case may be."

Clara was very stiff then, her hands fidgeting together clasped at her middle.

"What sort of machine? That mess upstairs?"

"That would hardly be convenient to cart around, would it?" he said.

"Don't snarl. You look like an ape."

"We are all apes, Aunt. My machine will tell you that." He laughed then felt his eye. A bruise was coming, making the skin shine.

Clara remembered. "Had you this—thing with you when you were with Elsie?"

"She thought it was a tape! There's a cold-hearted tart for you, feeling around a chap's pockets at a time like that!"

"You're foul, Trent. Quite foul."

"It's me, isn't it? I'm satisfied. I'm amused, too. You ride the high horse like this, but don't forget, I know what you really feel about me. I know you want me, you poor starved woman. I've got it all. Those hidden sexual urges of yours are all bubbling fighting electrons in a tape. I've got it. Shall I play back for you? Would you like to see how the emotions writhe and flash and spin in my electronic windows that look into people's souls? Would you like to see your lewd thoughts pounding out on a computer spool and making the lights flash? Would—?"

She went quickly out into the sunshine, walking fast out of his sight. He wiped his face and dabbed the gathering bruise. He waited by the stairs, then went into the silent dining room and poured brandy. He drank it in a single swallow so that it

gave momentary pain. He put the glass down and wiped his face again.

He went out and up the stairs, pausing halfway to look back. The hall stayed empty. He went up and into the room of the machines. He closed the door, locked it and leant against it, staring round him, his eyes quick, frightened, suspicious.

"Who's there?" he whispered. "Who's there, for God's sake?"

Nothing moved in the dead quiet.

Then through the partly open window he heard Judith, breathless, alarmed. "Are you all right?"

"Yes. Don't worry so, Judith."

"You're not. I can see. You're upset. You shouldn't be put upon like this. Make him go. Get rid of him. He's bad."

He crossed to the window and slammed it. Then he drew the heavy shutters. He turned back and looked round the darkened room, as if something hid there. Suddenly he had the feeling he had shut himself in with it, leaving no escape. He ran to the doors, unlocked and opened the inner one, changed his mind at the outer one and looked round the room again.

21

Major Jock Browne-Jones had farmed the Mill for five years. He was now flat broke. The assumption that the Officer must be obeyed did not go for Nature, God or Corn Merchants. Item by item, everything had failed. On this fine, hot day had come the last straw.

He lashed his horse to the broken gate and strode into the house. "Ella? Where are you? Ella!"

"Here."

The voice came from the open door of the study, even the single syllable sounding slurred. He went in. She was sitting, angular and painted like a scarecrow, on the arm of a chair, slowly swaying.

"What, again?" he said, furiously. "Can't you leave it

alone?"

"You started, in the Mess, remember? You must drink—you must drink—sociable. Sociable. I knew it would come like this ... They rang..." She looked up, trying to focus on him, trying to bring her scattered mind to order.

"It's bad news," he said, striding to the french windows. "The barley. The whole bloody field, gone rotten in the night. All that money, gone. The last ruddy thing we had to sell—burnt up in the night. It must have been poisoned somehow. I'll get the analysts down. I'll have them find out. All that! We were depending on it. You'll have to tap your father."

She shook her head in wide sweeps, like a doll.

"He said no more—rescue oprashions. No more. He means it. No more. They rang..."

"I don't want to hear about any tradesmen. I'm sick of the lot of them. Writs, summonses, bums at the door! Why can't they wait? What's the matter with them? They know the money's all right eventually, don't they?"

"No," she said, swaying again. "Not them. Alice—Alice. Mrs Blamey. Disappeared."

"Pull yourself together. What are you talking about? Mrs Blamey disappeared? Alice's landlady?"

"No, no. Alice."

"Good God! What do you mean?"

The Browne-Joneses had one daughter, Alice, nineteen, at College in Wales, reading Social Anthropology, a very sound subject for her, people said, because she was always making things up about people. Small, skinny, with small, sharp curranty eyes, they said when she smiled you knew something awful would happen to you. Elsie Wilde called her the wildest dungspreader in Gloucestershire. The things that Alice made up about people were staggering, coming from one presumed to be innocent. There had been trouble in the village, fathers complaining of stories spread about their families, but Alice always sat there with a quiet smile, infuriatingly untouchable.

Jock, half mad with financial worry—or rather, the feeling lesser people were pointing and laughing at him—was glad

to shift his mind to something else.

"Disappeared?" he roared. "What's she done now?"

"She done ... Disappeared. Din get there, Mrs Blamey says —din get there."

"Pull yourself together, Ella, and tell me what's happened. When did she disappear?"

"She din get there. I tole you she din get there. Mrs Blamey says. She said—"

"But she went last week!" said Jock. "Why didn't the woman let us know before?"

"She wrote. She said—she wrote."

Jock strode to the writing bureau and opened the sloping lid. It was stuffed with unopened letters from banks, tax offices, creditors. It had come to the state where he opened nothing at all unless he recognised a friend's hand. He closed the lid again.

"It must have been typed," he said hoarsely. "Since last—when was it exactly? Saturday. Yes, I remember. It was Saturday. She stayed back all that time at start of term with—"

"Mi—migraine." Ella was desperate to get an intelligible word in and justify something at the back of her muddled head.

"She put that on," Jock said, marching up and down. "She just didn't want to go back till it suited her. Skrimshanking. Dodging the column. Why?"

"She din feel well."

"And now she hasn't arrived. I suppose the Blamey woman thought she was still here." He was talking to himself. "What's she up to? There was a rumour going round she was seeing some chap. Did you know that? You're her mother. You must have heard something!"

"She din tell me—anything."

"Stop shaking your stupid head! It isn't loose, is it?"

"Don' shout at me. Don' shout."

"Listen to me. Try and surface. Listen. We must keep quiet about this till we hear from her. We don't want any scandal. If she's bolted with some fellow, we're bound to hear.

We must hang on. It's only a week, isn't it? Seven days. We must keep quiet."

History was repeating for Jock Browne-Jones. When young he had run away with a girl, and if she hadn't been fool enough to send a postcard to her mother, it might have been all right. As it was the girl's family, and his own lower middle class bunch of snobs, had closed in on him. He had been glad to escape to the wars, but it had forced him into a career which he had never thought of. He went hot again at the returning memory of those days. He was continually going hot now, about money, about the contempt of the solvent, about excuses made for borrowing more, about having lost what he had got, gratuity, pension, the lot.

"I think—it was 'cause she hant got her money yet," said Ella, burbling. "She mentioned it."

"I thought your father paid all that. You'd better ring him when you're sober and remind him of his undertaking."

Ella looked utterly blank and stupid.

"Where is she? Isshe?" she mumbled. "You muss—muss tell the pleece. Pleece. Case something happened—to her."

"You don't think I'm going to have the police digging my daughter out of some fellow's love nest, do you?"

Ella rocked, mentally and physically.

"She woon't do that!" she cried suddenly. "Alice woon't! You don' know Alice. She woont! She doesen like boys. She doesen like boys!"

"Come off it, Ella, pull yourself together for God's sake. What's the sense of getting drunk all the time, just because we're hard up?"

"They come and knock on the door and ask for you and you're never here—" her breath went right out with the effort and came back with a groan—"so they ask me, they pester me. Men in cars with bits of paper—paper and want to take away the candlesticks—my—my candlesticks to pay money—you owe. They come to me. You never stay in to see 'em—you never—"

"Don't start blubbing, Ella! I'm talking about Alice. Alice! Do you hear me?"

"She's run away," said Ella, suddenly, and stared at something a great way off. "She's run away because of these men always coming. Always coming. Bits of paper. Horrid men in bowler hats. I dream about them now. Coming in everywhere—"

"If you've got to that state it's time to get on to your father again!" He was savage then, furious with guilt.

"He said—" She bit her lip and tried to clear her mind. "He said no more. He said if I left you—and took Alice to—to him—divorce you for—for cruelty—" Her head fell and she started to sob.

"Well, why don't you go, then? If that's what he said it means the end of *your* troubles, anyway! Why don't you go?"

"I can't go and leave you like this. You're my husband. It's been a long time—" Her voice failed.

"Don't cry, for God's sake! Don't cry—"

The phone started to ring. He thought it was a marvel the service was still on. He had forgotten how long, how tangled the account had become. Mrs Blamey squeaked from a long way off in Wales.

"I thought I would ring again, look, because Mrs Browne-Jones did not seem to be quite sure, indeed."

"Very good of you, Mrs Blamey," said Jock, wiping sweat from his face. "Very good indeed. Yes, you needn't worry. She hasn't left yet in fact. Had a lot of head trouble—headaches and things. Not been at all well."

"When would I be expecting her, then?"

"I'll ring you as soon as she's fit, Mrs Blamey. Thank you so much for ringing." He rang off quickly, before she could get in anything about the lodging fees. "You'd think the College would have written..." Then he looked at the bureau again and turned to the window. "Everything's gone rotten, overnight. My God, that barley! Hundreds of quids. The last bloody chance. We could have saved everything with that. Now there's not a hope."

"No wonder—she went," Ella said. "She juss—juss went, that's all. Sick of the mess—rows—"

"I'm going to get something to eat," he said, going to the

door. "You'd better lie on the bed."

As he went out he felt one small gleam of relief. It was Saturday. The bailiffs didn't work weekends.

As far as Alice was concerned, he was sure she had run with a boy. In the Major's rules of behaviour, everyone conformed, including nonconformists.

22

Clara sat in the empty church, in the Trevelyan pew which had not been used for service in many a year. It was very quiet and cool. It was almost as near peace as one might get on earth, just stone and wood and heaven-like roof and the soft glow from the stained glass windows.

The confusion of the morning had eased, but the unnaturalness of the day remained.

"He must be lying," she said, and suddenly a bright light came into her head. "If he really had this foul thing he wouldn't have had to ask me what Darke came for. He would have known. He would have read what I was thinking. He would have read the man's thoughts. Of course he would!"

The fact that Trent had not got such a foul instrument but just pretended that he had seemed to make the thing fouler still.

She got up and went along the aisle to the open doors. Just outside amongst the overgrown gravestones she met Richard Wilde.

"Ah, Clara, we don't often see you within the Church," he said. "Most opportune, however." He led her back into the porch. "There is a man asking questions."

"He has been to me. He seems to be following up—those letters."

"Ah," Richard said, nodding. "But he seems some kind of science man, which I confess I don't understand. How could a dispersal of scurrilous letters be of scientific interest?"

"I have no idea. But then they connect everything with

science these days. Like everything else, it's roundabout."

"Perhaps, but I do not see the connection no matter how I try. He is after that odd business this morning when everything seemed to go off the rails for a little while. Yet he is seeing the people who got letters. Do you see what I mean?"

"Do go on."

"I have been visiting," said Richard piously. "I had a port at the inn, and called at the stores. Both parties revealed they had letters. This man called at both places, then on you, then on me."

"They told you they had these letters?" She looked surprised.

"They did. Not directly at first, but it came about eventually. And then he called on young Dollflower, who also had one. Then you, then me, and he tried to question Elsie, which makes six. All had letters. So far as I can tell from my visiting, he called nowhere else."

"Is that all there were?"

"No, but he hasn't got round to Basil Garfield yet. There could be others." He grinned like a death's head. "They are a bad thing, these letters. But worse when a stranger comes to follow them. I don't like it, Clara."

"Are you becoming defensive over your brood?"

"Someone has stirred up bad things. That isn't good. But when an unidentified investigator comes to follow these things I confess I don't like the smell of it."

"Or you just don't like the man."

"Do you?"

"No. He is rude and a bully."

"How is Trent?"

She looked up sharply.

"Quite well."

"I wondered. I have not seen him about the last few days and we saw such a lot of him before that."

"He is working."

"Good. Let us hope some benefits will accrue."

"I must get back."

"Of course."

The Station sat on Wey Hill. Inside the long, cool halls of the machines men and girls in white overall coats walked quietly, watching, checking, taking notes from the machines. Everybody in sight was appealing to some machine or other for the answer to a problem.

At three pm each day, weekends too, there was a conference dealing with anything unusual observed during the past twenty-four hours; incoming meteors, unusual radiations detected anywhere within the radius of the Station watch. Traversing satellites, space projects and other normal matters were tracked and left stored in the machine tapes, to be studied only if anyone asked for them.

The Chief, Sir John Clark, listened carefully to the information from Weston Abbas and drank water with a chill on it, which twisted his ulcers.

Thirty years ago, he had got himself appointed to set up a small laboratory to isolate the common cold germ aided by a small government grant. Year by year the buildings swelled, the staff grew more numerous, the grant grew richer, though the laboratory's sole production had been several tons of close written paper which had gone to the Ministry of Health and been kept in the vaults for the allotted span, when it was put in the incinerator. To prevent public spirited inquirers wondering where all the money was spent, Sir John invented a name for his establishment, G 14, which made it sound secret, military and exceptionally classified.

But some fidgety man at the Treasury had started in on finding out what G 14 actually did, and the Chancellor of the time had been forced to say, "I think we must wind it up, John. Not that we are not grateful for all the work you have done, but perhaps the difficulty has been all along that you alone of all the people in the country, have never been able to catch a common cold."

So G 14 had been handed over to Germ Warfare Division, where some wit said that all now necessary to win future wars was to manufacture all the types of common cold they had

found in vast quantities and spray them on the enemy.

Sir John had been offered the Directorship of the Research Station where his inability to create a firm situation for himself, such as he had enjoyed for thirty years, had given him the common ulcer.

"Darke must be drunk," he said, and the thought stretched his mouth and made him touch his midriff in supplication.

Bill ran back tapes and played them again in sound and picture on the wall.

"Joss says that, having regard to all that griff you've just heard, the only way you can cause a whole area to disappear is by mechanised trickery with time leaps."

"That's a clever way of getting out of it," Sir John said, mouth stretching again. "Who gave me this bloody iced water? Have we run short of tea? And not that automat stuff, either. Get somebody with a real pot and shovel the tea into it, like they did in the days of the Old King ... Now hear me, gentlemen, you know as I know that there is no mechanism on this earth that can organise time belt slip like that."

"Exactly!" said Bill. "So it must be alien, a beam-down from outside."

"But there is no track of any such transmissions," the Chief said, rubbing his middle with two strong fingers.

"Well, there isn't," somebody said. "But it doesn't mean to say nothing's there because we can't find it."

"In fact it isn't there, it makes nothing there, so it could be pretty well nothing itself? That's all right for the comics," said the Chief, muffling a break of wind. "Ah, that's better ... But let us suppose Darke is right. This is happening. It's the old puzzle of the invisible man. Is it that he doesn't reflect light, or that he transmits light that the eye can't see? If this place appears to vanish it's a big conjuring trick. A trick of light that somebody's found out how to place. For instance, nobody has tried to touch and see if it's there when it's vanished, have they?"

"A difficult sort of thing to get your hand on," said one.

"Has anyone been hurt?" demanded the Chief. "That's all the Minister will want to know."

"Nobody."

"Any property?"

"Nothing's been affected at all except this overgrowing of the vegetation."

"My dear chap, that could be anything. Think what happened outside that experimental food station up North. They made some food out of plastic, but every bit of vegetation for miles around went rotten. Perhaps somebody in the village is trying to grow a giant marrow with Arsybarsy's new King-sized fertiliser and spilt some."

"Radio does it, too. We checked. The paper's in the file."

The Chief belched once more, and flicked papers in the file.

"Look here, you say the only transmissions being checked down there are TV sets and this occasional sending from some dope Darke says is trying to do-it-yourself radio telepathy. So that, in fact, all our advanced equipment tells us that there is nothing happening in the village at all. Isn't that the fact? That is the fact. Right. So I get on to the Minister this afternoon and I say, 'Look, George, yokel type inhabitants numbering eleven testify that their village disappears from time to time. Nothing is happening there, and nobody and nothing has been affected in any way at all.' Okay? So what's he say? He says, 'What in hell did you ring me for? Nothing's happening, nobody's affected—damn, it adds up to nothing, doesn't it?' You see my point?"

"This postman chap disappeared, and hasn't returned."

"That could be anything normal, and finally a matter for the police, anyhow, not us."

"But this place does vanish."

"Tell me, Bill, has Darke actually been in the place when this has happened?"

"No."

"Then I suggest we wait until he has. At present, to stir the Ministry with this load of crap is for me to get myself replaced by someone close behind me. That one gives me more sleepless nights than ever Weston Abbas is likely to do."

A girl came in with tea.

"Right," said the Chief stirring, "we have no reason for taking official action, but don't think I'm unsympathetic, romantic as Darke can be. Let me see the tapes of this telepathic sending that made him go down there."

When he saw them on the wall and heard the strange, chittering mush that came with it, he wanted it run again.

"I never saw anything like that before," he said. "It's not pure radio. It looks a bit like an encephalograph, and yet not that either. What frequency is this?"

"We can't get up to it. It's over our range. This is the fringe reading," Bill said.

"Now, that is interesting," the Chief said. "Keep watch on that, try and get into the groove he's using."

"There hasn't been any sending since eight this morning," said Bill. "Not on that frequency."

At three pm the Dribble brothers finished a long discussion over a table covered in farm feed catalogues.

"Get the Ministry," said one.

The other lumbered up and spent a few minutes flicking the pages of the telephone book. Then both spent a while trying to find the card with the dialling code. Then one listened, as one checking the wards of a combination lock, while the other held the phone. When the answer finally came Tom Dribble said, "Come down here. Now." He went far enough to appease civilisation as to tell the situation of the farm. Then he waited.

"We can't just send anyone like that, Mr—er—not like that!"

"What you paid for then, you?" Tom asked.

"My dear Mr, er um, this is Saturday afternoon and the staff is er away. I'll make a note and someone will call on Monday morning."

The Dribbles looked at each other, nodded.

"Foot n' mouth," said Tom.

"My God! I'll have somebody there right away!"

"Beats me why they wastes all this bloody time," said Tom.

"You shouldn't have said that. It's tempting fate, that is, you awful men," Sarah said, standing in the doorway.

"Suppose it did, and the Jersey herd—"

"Shut," said Tom, and started to fill his pipe.

Sarah shut, turned and went out, back to the kitchen.

"You know what 'tis," Tom shouted after her. "You know what 'tis right nuff! 'Tiss Evil Eye. Best unlook it, some of yer!"

The Dribbles were not the only ones bewildered by the startling agricultural state of affairs. Through the village amateur gardeners hacked at weeds with billhooks and started to burn brown, withered beans from the drooping stalks. Compost heaps grew large with the rotted stuff and as they worked men muttered and guessed and wondered. And got nowhere.

There was a lot of talk about the inconvenience, the mystery, the intent to sue somebody or other for spilling poison somewhere—none knew where—for fallout—whatever that was after all these years—and pollution. Some said it was coming out of the river, whatever It was.

Twice in the previous twelve months the entire village had had its power cut off by breakdown. The first time for twenty-six hours, the second for twelve. In each case the Electricity Authority had been surprised to hear of it. In Weston Abbas it was always assumed there would be no need to ring up because some neighbour would do it.

Some callers in at the town told of this overnight rot, and were received with polite interest or ribald comment. Realising that it must all sound pretty feeble to a stranger, eager tale telling became localised that Saturday afternoon.

At this time, leaving rumour spreading, Darke issued instructions by telephone to the Station.

"So far what has happened has confused rather than scared. Get the local broadcast station to put out a news item about freak weather concentration over this part. They'll believe that, so long as it's weather. You might slip in a bit about thunderstorms upsetting stomachs, giving headaches; you know the sort of thing. I want the weather angle plastered all over this place. No fallout, radiation or bogey men stuff. Just weather. Get them to think one up that'll look as if it connects

with something that happened with weather somewhere before, even if it didn't. You know how to deal."

Clara knocked on Trent's door at three, four and five in the afternoon. She knocked, even kicked, but the door was locked and no answer came.

Until the last knocking, at five. Then Trent suddenly yelled "Go away for Christ's sake!"

"Trent! I must speak to you! I will speak to you! Open this door!"

No answer came to that, or anything else that Clara said. She went down to Judith almost in tears.

"For goodness' sake, don't let him get you like this!" Judith said. "He must go. He's got to go!"

"He won't answer. He won't open the door."

"Get that solicitor to throw him out."

"Who? Fred Entwistle? Heavens! I couldn't see much happening of that." She laughed tearfully. "Oh dear, I've let it upset me. I feel quite awful. I don't know whether I ought to protect him or—"

"Protect him!" Judith exploded. "Don't be so stupid, woman! Protect him! It's him doing all the damage. It's him that's wicked. He shouldn't ever have come here. If you ask me he only came because he'd been kicked out of everywhere else! You're too soft. Throw him out! If he won't go, then get that solicitor and give him a writ or a summons or something. Something that'll make him go!"

"What has he done wrong?" Clara suddenly protested. "What has he done? Nothing. Nothing at all!"

"He's wicked."

"Wicked, but what has he done that's wicked? Nothing! He only talks. That's all. He doesn't do anything."

"He hurt you, down in the hall. When you hit him."

"That was my fault."

"Oh God, what's the good?" Judith said, exasperated. "It's you, no matter what. You take on anybody's wickedness just to let them have another chance. You're always doing it. It's your fault, you say. It isn't your fault. It's your fault they have

the chance to go on being bad, that's all."

"Oh, don't be cross with me, Judith. Don't. Don't."

"That's right. You have a good cry. Come upstairs and have a lie down on the bed. You'll feel better directly."

Clara did as she was told.

"I'll call you for dinner," Judith said.

She went downstairs, bound a silk scarf round her head, tied it under her chin and went out to her bicycle in the shed. A sit-up-and-beg bicycle, once her mother's. She pedalled madly down to the Entwistles' house, half afraid some devil was following her.

Fred was watering the front lawn. He turned off the hose and listened in astonishment to Judith's tale.

"But you can't get rid of him like that," he said. "He's a relative. He was invited there. If he were a tenant one could but it would take a long time. The County Court, and the judge would be bound to give a month and so on. It's all very slow, Judith, and you can't always be sure that you'll win . . ."

His interest in the odd request began to shape up in front of worries—nebulous, frightening suspicions—that had nagged all day. His tortured mind was quick for relief.

"What's he done, this fellow?"

"Well, I don't know for certain . . ." Judith said, momentarily lost. Then, eagerly, "He makes screaming noises. It upsets people and the wireless. A man came about it, too. You see, so I'm right, aren't I? And poor Clara—Miss Trevelyan—it's upsetting her dreadfully."

"She's a Good Samaritan," said Fred, becoming distant again. "If that poor josser did the same for anyone this day and age, the man on the ground would pick his pocket while he was being saved. That's what happens to people like Miss Clara."

"Can't you do something?" Judith pleaded. "Isn't there any law?"

"Law isn't any good for things like that. It just pulls everybody down into the muck. If it hadn't been for my mother I wouldn't have gone in for it. I don't mind it when it's helping

somebody, but it never seems to be able to help without making a mess of somebody else. I hate it!"

Judith's eyes went very wide and she stepped back a pace. He was staring away into the distance beyond her shoulder. He had forgotten she was there.

When he remembered he took her arm suddenly.

"If I can think of something, I will," he said.

When he had seen her wobble away on her machine, he went back into the house. His wife sat in a deep, long chair, looking through a new glossy. Over the top of it she watched him go to the phone for the fortieth time that afternoon. A long time passed, of dialling, some answers, and sometimes nothing.

"Where did he go?" he said, sitting down at last. "Why did he suddenly go like that?"

"What's the matter?" she said, smacking the magazine down on her lap. "What do you think has happened?"

"I don't know. It's so bloody queer."

"Bill's been away before without telling you where."

"I know, I know. But there was that man this morning. I wasn't going in. It was Dulcie ringing like that, asking for me... He can't be far. I passed him going into town. He was coming out. I remember thinking he was coming to see me. I had an idea it was something very important—unexpected or I wouldn't have thought of him coming out here—"

"But you were upset this morning, by this—thing that happened to you."

He looked at her quickly.

"It happened to Jobey, too," he said defensively.

She shrugged and flicked the pages.

"There *was* a letter!" he said suddenly, looking round into the hallway. "I remember signing the book. Somebody must have taken it!"

"Who would take it?" she challenged.

"I don't know, but I'm sure I signed for one."

"A man did come, now I come to think."

He turned very quickly, jealousy peaking again.

"You didn't say anything about it," he said.

"There wasn't anything to say about it! He was asking

about interference with the radio or television. I thought he was from the Post Office."

"You don't suggest he stole my letter?"

"Do you suggest that I did?" She snapped out suddenly.

"Oh God, no! No, of course not." He turned away from her to the phone again. "I've just thought—Jim Glossop. Bill might be there."

She watched his back, and listened to the dial whirring. She listened to the whirr and sporadic enquiries for a long time after that.

24

Darke rang the Station about six-five after hearing an unsatisfactory report on his radio tape, which said:

"We have been on to a top Thinkman re the problem of radio-natural telepathy. He knows no present equipment capable of contacting brains with any certainty. It's been tried before, but either direct physical contact is needed—simple lie detector style—or you have to have a radio sender and a receiver, as usual. Said 'It's best if you want to find out if it's a dog or a bitch, to get another dog.'"

"What about Trent?" Darke said.

"Oh, Trent. Hang on ... Here we are. He read Social Anthropology and Physics at Cambridge. Failed."

"Odd mixture."

"The coppers and the PO are getting very edgy about that postman. Do you know anything?"

"Get somebody to look up hauntings, intensification of, in connection with certain dates of physical or electrical disturbances or change in the neighbourhood."

"Hauntings?"

"Poltergeists."

"That'll take a while, but we'll shove it on your tape when it comes in. Anything else? The Director's acting like a man bound hand and foot and a flea in his pants."

"This thing has got to go on to a certain point otherwise

it'll be warned off and happen again some other time, perhaps more evasively than now."

"This means somebody must be expendable?" Pause. "Hang on. Sir John's here."

"I've just been over to see the Minister and he gave me that Godawful sherry," Sir John said. "Enough to take the tripe out of a cow."

"Where is the Minister?"

"Over at his bird sanctuary."

"What bird is it this time?"

"I couldn't place her."

"Did you tell him about this village?"

"I fringed it round the sherry. He was too impatient to get his hands on the lady to take much notice. 'Do what you think best, John, if you have anything definite.'"

"I've got some ideas," Darke said, "but I can't fill in the credibility gap."

"On the memo here I see the police and the GPO are getting very edgy about a postman. You can't leave him much longer."

"Tread them down. No interference."

"Yes, but you know there's an election soon and if that bastard Tremble gets in I'll be practising writing letters of resignation. His boy friend wants this seat."

"I didn't know that," Darke said.

"It's to make you cautious," Sir John said. "I don't want any bad marks this side of Autumn."

"Which means do nothing."

"Well, you carry on there. When you get something right on the button, dead sure, let me know. Till then, I'd sooner not know."

"What did the Minister say?"

"Pedal it easy. We don't want any unpleasantness before the election. You know how dodgy things are, with the bloody Opinion Polls on the other side."

Silence.

"My view," Darke said, "is that if the police move in we shall lose our grip on this affair, and you might land yourself with the biggest pre-election torpedo you ever imagined in a

bad night."

"I said I leave it to you. Do what you think is best, but it's on you. After all, *you* don't want the police in. *You* want to keep the postman quiet. Not me, old boy."

"I have the drift. All right."

Darke rang off. He pondered on Sir John and all Sir Johns in official seats as he walked away. He was angry. Sir John was very like Darke's commander in a war when, by night, he had found himself in a favourable position, unsuspected and close to the enemy.

"Shall we attack, sir?" asked Darke, then eighteen.

"Good God no," said the commander. "Don't stir anything up."

So they crept by and four hours later got attacked in the rear. Darke spent the last few months of the war in The Bag. Ever since that night in the French wood Darke had been devoted to stirring things up. That evening was a time when his feeling grew very sharp.

He went into Battock's store, bought tobacco and said, "Do you know Mr Trent, at the Manor?"

"Who? Oh!" Len Battock looked unaccountably relieved. "Yes. Saw a good deal of him up till about a week back."

"He talked a lot?"

"Oh yes. Very friendly. Interested in trade and finance and that sort of thing. Very interesting gentleman altogether really. Good customer. Bought a lot of liquor."

"Did he?"

"Used to take a few bottles back in a basket. I sell cheaper than Ben, up at the pub. He can't buy so low there. Not fair really, but all right for me."

Darke went on to The Warning Bang and into the quiet side bar. Beth served, large, cushiony, beaming, but she got a quick glint into her laughing eyes when he said, "Do you know Mr Trent, up at the Manor?"

"Used to see a good deal of him. I think he was after me daughter Sherree. He would be talking the devil of a lot to me, and it did remind me of them fellers who get at the daughter by trying to get round the mother, the sort uv wiggly

kind, and I'm not too fond of such."

"Did he talk the same way to your husband?"

"This is a funny lot uv questions, sir." Beth became quite sharp then, and suspicious. "Has he done something he shouldn't then?"

"He might have done," Darke said.

"Well, he certainly disappeared right suddenly," Beth said, easier again. "Coming regular and then we don't see nothing of him again. We thought he had gone back home. Has he not, then?"

"No," said Darke.

He went back through the village and in at the gates of the Garfields' house. Basil was practising putting by himself on the lawn, a table covered in drinks and glasses standing under the chestnut overhanging the wall by the road.

He looked up.

"Good God!" said Basil.

"This is telepathy. I was thinking of you only a half hour ago," Darke said.

"Have a drink, by God! I'd know you anywhere, even after all this time."

"Yes, I'd know you, too," said Darke.

"Well, well! What is it? Gin, Scotch . . . ?"

The pour out and chatter session ended with the first toast and deep drink.

"And what brings you to the backwoods?" Basil said. He scratched the seat of his trousers and stared at the tree. "You had the rear platoon, I remember, when the Gerries came up behind. King bastards. Took us by surprise, I remember. I got shot in the arse. Flesh wound, sideways bullet. I must have bin turning to face the bastards, though I can't think why." He laughed.

"I got in the bag," said Darke. "Don't stir it up, you said."

"It was a king old mess," said Basil, staring at the sky. "Fools' game, war. I can never work out which side's the ruddy loser. You didn't say how you dropped in."

"It's something personal."

"Well, we're old friends—comrades, whatever the word

would be. What are you doing now?"

"I'm looking into the matter of a lot of letters sent round this village this morning."

Basil put his glass down. Slowly he began to go redder than usual and he fiddled his cravat as if it had come loose.

"In the police racket, are you?" he said throatily.

"No, I'm with the Government."

"I don't understand that. You never were civil." He laughed like a dog barking and stopped short. "I had one. Yes. I suppose you know that already?"

"I've got the list of them. If you tell me anything it stays with me."

"What's to lose?" Basil said. "I've told the bloody parson, anyway." So he told and went on, "I've had all day to think about it, and all I'm worried about is some swine might get at my daughter. Far as I'm concerned the bastard can stuff it. But for her—well, that's different. It's that kind of thing that's the reverse of a court martial. You have to prove you didn't. That's the trouble with this kind of filth. Then you get the old smoke without fire routine and then the whole thing blows up and can cause God's amount of king trouble."

"Do you know Trent, Clara's nephew?"

"He's a dead bugger."

"What do you mean, precisely?"

"What I say. He's a ladyboy. Always trying to needle in to your private business. What you feel about this, that, your wife even. Sort of way women do. You know how they always try to push you about little things? I can't explain it, really. Try to find out about—oh, sod it. I don't know. He's like that."

Darke took a slow drink. Basil's embarrassment seemed to be hotter over talking on Trent than over the morbid accusation he had had.

"Was the parson's letter the same sort of smut?" Darke asked.

"Well, yes. About him touching little girls. That sort of thing. Oh! I shouldn't have said that, praps. One runs on so, but you always were a kind of good listener, weren't you, I remember?"

"Did the vicar say what he thought about his letter?"

Basil had to think back and held his head as one consider-

ing a geometrical problem.

"He thought it funny, in the sense—and only in this sense—that that was what he often felt but never did. Sort of. Come in and meet the wife."

"I won't now. Tomorrow. I'm doing a job. You know how it is."

"Well, you top Government chaps—yes. I understand." He beamed in grateful understanding. "She needs rest. Not been the same since she broke her leg. More king one-sided than ever!" He laughed, stopped and mopped his face. "Damn queer day altogether. Can't make head nor tail of it. Makes you feel rotten. Get funny tummy when there's a storm coming. Like that—"

He turned as Baskin came tramping up, sullen, suspicious of the stranger. He handed Basil an old seed invoice, back side up.

"What's that?" said Basil.

"It's me notice," said Baskin. "I've had a-bloody-nuff of this place. Everything gone rotten on me."

"But that's not your fault, man!"

"I haves to clear up the muck, hasn't I, then?" bawled Baskin. "Why should I clear up a muck I dint make, then? It was all right this morning, too. I was out there at seven. Everything trim. Now it's all a bloody muck. Some bugger sprayed poison, that's what. I'm not standing for that. No. I've had a-bloody-nuff and there's me notice."

"You can't go like that, Baskin!" said Basil in alarm. "What will Mrs Garfield say?"

"I'm not goin' near enough to hear," said Baskin. "Anyways, she'll oney scream. Like a bloody cockatoo, she is, screaming."

"Baskin!"

"That's me notice." Baskin pointed to the paper then turned away.

"Don't go, Baskin! Please don't go! You can have more pay—"

"It wouldn't be pay I need, but bloody time! It'll take a week to clear that muck, and then I got to plant for—when? That's

what I mean. What's this bloody month, anyway? The apples are near ripe, falling. What am I supposed to plant for, then? What's the good, anyway? It's them bloody pestysides they's squirtin' around regardless. Poison, that's what."

"What would you say the month was, looking at the garden?" Darke asked.

"It wouldn't be any month I would have anything to do with, not in that bloody state. It looks like somewhere that's been exclusive in the hands of the Almighty, as the vicar says. Juss rotten."

"Supposing you looked at it all for the first time, what month would you say it was?"

"Near September, I s'pose. I don' know. It's all ruddy looney."

"Think about it," said Basil, trying to push the notice back into the gardener's unwilling hand. "Take your time. Don't bother to clear anything, just—"

"Oh, don't bother? Then supposin' I do changes me mind I got ten times the bloody mess to clear, then, haven't I? The trouble with you is you don't use your effing bonce."

"Well, just think it over," said Basil, urgent and very red. "Think it over, man."

"What's there to think over? You han't made an offer yet!"

Darke watched the cunning, slit-eyed look of the gardener's wizened face.

"Another couple," said Basil. "I'm sure Mrs Garfield will agree."

"All right," said Baskin, pushing Basil's hand away. "Tell Missus I'm thinkin' it over." And he walked away, looking as if he knew that the longer he thought, the higher his reward would be.

"My God, I hope he decides to stay," said Basil, pouring an elephantine gin. "What on earth will she say? Good God! She'll say it's my fault! What a king day! I feel I've been shouting since dawn." He drank a good gollop. "What are you going to do about these letters?"

"You destroyed yours?"

"I thought it was sensible then. I changed my mind since."

"Do you remember where it came from?"

"Not exactly. It was Finchley Place, Houndsditch."

"There was an address on it?" Darke looked surprised.

"It looked like a business letter. The Something-or-Other Bureau. That's why I read the damned thing. Thought it might be business."

25

When Elsie came to the vicarage gate she heard frantic snipping and muffled sobs and gasps coming from the wilderness of the garden. She pushed the gate and hurried through. Mrs Wilde was snatching at weeds and brambles with shears and talking to herself with such anxiety that her hat, perched forward, nearly fell down over her nose.

"Mother, what's the matter?" Elsie said.

"I mustn't let your father see it like this!" Mrs Wilde panted. "Oh my goodness, what will he say? I didn't realise I had let it get to such a state. Oh dear!"

"Mother," Elsie said, firmly taking the woman's arm, "put those things down. You could do with a few aspirins and a cup of tea. Here, give them to me. And the gloves."

Desperate with anxiety at being found in the wreck of the garden by her husband, Mrs Wilde tried to take the thick gloves and to keep her hold on the shears.

"Oh God, I can't—" she mumbled.

Elsie pulled the shears away and led her mother to the garden door.

"Something happened and everything grew all of a sudden," Elsie said as they got into the kitchen.

"What will your father say?" It was a moan.

"For heaven's sake, Mother! He never says anything. You know that. Do sit down. I'll make you some tea."

Mother sat down in a wheel armchair then sagged forward and buried her face in her hands. Her hat fell over her fingers and caught there. Her untidy grey hair sprouted hedgehoglike from the back of her head.

"He'll be so cross," she said.

"Mother, it's happened all over the village. It's a—sort of miracle. Now do calm down. It's nothing to do with you."

"But it's such a mess. It's always such a mess. I've let it go too long. I just can't do anything about it now. Oh God, what shall I do? He won't forgive me—"

"Mother! Please stop it!"

"I can't because it's—all my fault. You don't understand."

That was the trouble. Nobody could ever understand. Mother had to remain misunderstood to enjoy the frightful folds of unadulterated guilt alone.

"You shall not save me, I will drown," Elsie thought, plugging in the kettle.

There was a bang and a sharp smell of burning rubber.

"Blast it!" said Elsie. "These ruddy old wires—"

"Heavens! What will he say?" Mother wailed.

"It's only the fuse again, Mother. Do stop crying like that. I'll get Bert Dollflower if he's in. He's always willing to mend fuses. Now you sit there, here, take the aspirins and here's some water." She thought, "Thank heavens the taps haven't fallen off. Aren't the pipes supposed to be fixed to the wall? Other people's are. Oh lord. Give me patience." Aloud, "Here, Mother. Lift your head now and take these. That's better. I'll just run down the road and fetch Bert. Don't you worry about anything. It's a good thing it's happened now instead of when it's dark."

Mother did not think of anything as a good thing. She got indigestion as soon as the aspirins sank into her stomach and started to whimper again.

Elsie hurried off, swinging down the lane to the road and across into the council estate, where those young men who had not motored off were either doing work on their cars or sitting on the front wall looking at them.

Bert Dollflower was standing in the open doorway of his house shouting back over his shoulder.

"Ah, belt up for Christ's sake, Mum!"

Then he looked round and walked off the step hardly seeing Elsie till they almost bumped.

"Bert, could you be a dear and mend a fuse for us? It's Saturday and the electricians—"

"I'll be just bouncing with delight to get somewhere out of this madhouse," Bert said. "They're all going mad, Gran and Mum. Got any fuse wire?"

"That card thing you left last time. What have you done to your hand?"

"Caught it in the till," he said, as they started to walk away. "You ought to have that place rewired. It'll catch fire one of these days. Probly tonight. Just the ruddy job to finish off this flaming day."

"What's the matter, Bert?"

"Just about everything. One of those days. Fell out of bed, cut me throat shaving—that sort of day. Bloody mess right from one am. Everybody else is in a right mood, too."

"It's been like that for everybody," Elsie said. "Haven't you noticed?"

"I've noticed that some comedian's been spraying weed seeds around. Never saw so many. All of a sudden. Feel I've been asleep a month. What was his name? Winkle-breath?"

"Rip van Winkle," said Elsie, staring up the vicarage lane. "It couldn't be that, could it? No. Somebody would have noticed..."

Bert suddenly grabbed her arm with his good hand. They both stopped. The sky became an odd light, as if some gigantic filter passed across it, and then upon the air there was a groaning, a roaring that seemed to go right down into the heart of the earth under their feet. As if the world strained to tear itself apart.

Elsie looked aside over the graveyard wall and between the trees to where the pylons ran. They were not there any more.

She almost crushed Bert's hand against her side as the groaning grew more intense, shivering the hot air round them.

"Bloody earthquake!" Bert shouted. "What do you do? No good to run—Jesus!"

The sound eased, faded and went, and the sky was blue and serene. Elsie still kept his hand tight against her. He wiped his forehead with the back of his bandaged hand.

"What was it?" he said, shakily.

"The pylons have come back," she said, and let his hand free. "I'd better get back to Mother."

When they got to the vicarage the vicar was standing in the hall outside his study.

"Stop those damned bells!" he shouted.

"They've stopped, dear! They've stopped!" she pleaded desperately.

It was true. After the furious jangling of the old bells dancing against the wall, there was now an echo running away into the distance and the creaking of the bell springs, still jerking.

Sir John held his midriff and stared in disgust at the report on his desk.

"Poltergeists!" he said. "For God's sake, what's happening to Darke? Ghosts? Does he really think we dare send up a report claiming ghosts are responsible for this sudden decay? I'd be laughed out. Ghosts! Perhaps he's going the same as Harrison. Remember Harrison? He got himself cooked with radiation and his hair went green and he spent all day talking to Jesus and trying to pass on the messages to us. We kept him quiet until he went off bang."

"He was put down," the cool, tall blonde said. "If you remember, the side effects of the attempted treatment were such that he had to be. Before everyone else was contaminated."

"I don't recall the details," Sir John said shortly. "I was thinking of a possible collapse in Darke's brain." He got up and started walking about, both hands on his midriff.

"You shouldn't drink all that tea," his secretary said, calmly.

"Don't interfere, Isobel," he said. "I know what does it good—"

The intercom buzzed and Isobel pressed the button.

"We're getting an interference signal like this morning from the village. I'll put it through."

Isobel and the Director turned and looked at the blow-up screen which came alive with golden rain.

"What's that supposed to be?" Sir John said.

"There should be a radar flat of the village. Now there's just this," the operator answered. "The map's drenched out."

The rain ended abruptly and the map of the village came back.

"There were also signals from that ham at the Manor house," Bill said. "He started sending, but it got swamped with this shower."

"Looks more to me as if there's a couple of condenser banks on the blink," Sir John said, belching. "That's better."

She smiled, went into her office and rang duty man Bill.

"I'm in my office, Bill. Next time Joss rings, I want him."

A man came in from the Library Section, clutching a handful of typed sheets.

"It's the gen on this poltergeist stuff," he said. "Shall I push it in to his nibs?"

"No. Give them to me," Isobel said, and took the papers from his hand, almost snatching.

"We got on to Professor Urquart. He's the big Knowall on polts and things. I don't know if this is what Joss wants."

He shrugged and went out. Isobel read the typed notes.

Darke came on the phone fifteen minutes after the golden rain. Isobel cut in on the branch line.

"Joss," she said, "we've got this stuff about the poltergeists. I'm not showing it to the Top Dog. He's anti-polt, anti-Joss. He was with the Minister and had too much sherry, now he's a bit tight and ulcerous."

"What are you doing there this time Saturday?"

"I came in in case you called an emergency, but John's slopped it off and changed it into trying to get me into bed. But I'll hang on in case. I'll read this polt stuff—"

"Just give a précis. I have an appointment."

"Analysis of activity shows seventy percent in old houses, the rest in new; eighty percent of houses near churches. Mm ... mm ... mm ... Scientific coincidences not clear but some manifestations happen with phases of the moon; others have been noted to coincide with sunspot activity. Mm ... mm ... mm."

"Isn't there anything about man-made science working anything up?"

"There's a longish one here. Mrs Helen Bolitho, a widow, one time farmer's wife at Polperro, Cornwall. Known there as a charmer, healing aches, pains, shingles—"

"Yes," said Darke. "Quick it up!"

"When her husband died she went to live with her daughter at a new housing estate at Benfield, Essex. Got to be known for her charmer qualities. Three years ago there was bad TV reception in another area and a small UHF repeater station was set outside the housing estate. Mrs Bolitho began to complain that she was receiving fringe effects of the broadcasts in her head, confused picture and sound."

"There are records of this going back to 1936, even on low frequency."

"It got to a point where she had a near breakdown, went away and had treatment for nerves. Coming back she found that when the station was in operation, she could see into the future on occasions. Neighbours got to find out about it, and several items of fact show that she was certainly fey and could sometimes see what was going to happen.

"Then the polts arrived. First in Mrs Bolitho's house and then (subsequently found) in other houses on the estate which she visited. No one connected it with her, but the complaints to the Council multiplied as the manifestations got worse. All kinds of investigations were made, and it was found that the site of the estate was over an old plague pit."

"This was a UHF station that started her off, was it?"

"Correct. She and her daughter left not because of the haunting, but because she could not get the station transmissions out of her head. Since she has gone, the polts have stopped. Except for one occasion when a woman in a nearby house went off her head. They returned for a short time then."

"Any others?"

"Nothing like that. Back in 1900 there is a case of a small terrace house being haunted coincident with the building of an electricity station nearby. Manifestations came and went, sometimes in moon phases, sometimes not. Since the station closed

down there has been nothing . . . That was in 1913."

"If you rub a piece of glass with a silk cloth the paper dolls with wax feet start dancing underneath," Darke said.

"John won't have anything to do with this supernatural tie up, Joss. He's putting your village veg growing down to accelerated rot. It has happened before with dangerous effluent coming from factories."

"It's an effluent society," Darke said. "Thanks, Issy."

"Joss! A moment. Did the veg grow any more this evening when it happened?"

"As far as I can see, no."

"What do you really think is going on there?"

"I think somebody is trying to raise the Devil."

"Oh, Joss, dear! No! John won't wear it. If you really think— Never mind. No use telling you what to do, is it?" She sighed and rang off.

26

Clara stared. Mary Wilde looked so dishevelled, frightened, desperate, she almost ran into the room and then looked behind her as if somebody might follow her in from the Manor lawn.

"What ever is it? Mary! You look dreadful! What have you done? What happened to you? Was it The Noise just now?"

"Noise?" Mary looked bewildered. "The bells, you mean? He was angry about that. Yes, he was angry. 'Stop the bells!' he kept shouting. 'Stop the bells!' He knows you can't. Oh, Clara, what can I do? If he finds out—"

"Finds out!" Clara said, stiffening. "Here, have this sherry. I'll get another. You are in a state. Try and be easy now." She waited while Mary drank but remained staring at the windows looking out at the front of the house. "What has he to find out?"

"Oh my God, my God!" Mary moaned.

"What has he to find out, Mary? You didn't get a letter this

morning, did you? Mary! Did you get a letter today?"

Mary looked round blankly.

"Letter? Which letter?" she said, pressing a hand to her temple.

"Did you have one today? You know what I mean, Mary. Be quiet now, and try to remember. Did you have a letter this morning?"

"I don't think so. It's so hard to remember. Oh dear!"

"Then what has Richard to find out, Mary? Not about Elsie?"

"Oh God, no, don't, don't, don't—whatever you do. Don't, Clara!"

"You know I never would. But if it isn't that, what are you afraid he will find out?"

"The garden, Clara. The garden! It's terrible. He'll never forgive me—"

"Mary! For heaven's sake pull yourself together!" said Clara, angrily. "Garden? What on earth does that matter? Everyone's garden's gone! Do be sensible, dear. Sometimes you make me very cross..."

Mary started to cry a little. A bell rang somewhere in the house and she started a frenzied dabbing and sniffing over a balled up handkerchief.

"It's getting late," she said, breathless with urgency. "I must get Richard's supper."

She hurried out. Clara went after her as far as the hall, then stopped as Judith appeared in the kitchen passage. She was white and tense.

"What's going to happen?" Judith whispered.

"I don't know," Clara said. "That wasn't like this morning. I rang the police and they said it is due to sunspots. It's that wretched man. He's telling them what to say! They're hiding something. Just now—it was like the air being full of thousands of creatures out there, all trying to get in through the windows and the doors and up through the floorboards..." She covered her face with her hands and steadied herself. "I'm being silly."

"It's your nephew," Judith said, her voice steady with fatal-

ism. "Him up there."

"Trent is still a small boy who pulls the wings off flies, Judith. He couldn't do this. It's too big. It's the vastness of the whole sensation that frightens me. But then, so is a storm We've got used to storms. We will get used to this."

"Why did you ring the police, then?"

"I just hadn't got my senses about me. After all, what can the police do about storm and tempest? I was being silly."

"You ought to make him come out up there."

"He won't answer."

Elsie came to the door.

"I'll get your bed ready," Judith said, as if that might cure something. She went up the stairs.

"Did Mother come over?" Elsie said. "I thought she did. Do you know, she didn't even notice! Just the bells. Because the bells make Father mad. She didn't notice anything else."

"Your mother is ill," Clara said shortly.

"I know," the girl said, but her agitation showed on the next question. "What's Father doing?"

"What do you mean?"

"He's been about a lot today. Up and down the village. Visiting. But there's nobody sick. And he's writing a lot of stuff. Then just now—Bert Dollflower—I asked him down to mend a fuse. Father collared him. Took him in the study."

"It's possible they have something in common."

"Letters?"

"I suppose so."

"I don't understand why the letters and this—this Thing are tied up somehow."

"The letters give a relief from full concentration on the Thing," Clara said, and turned as Judith came quickly down the stairs. "What's the matter, Judith?"

"He—up there—" Judith said, stopping.

"Trent?" said Elsie.

"I knocked on the door and asked to turn down his bed, and he said—"

"What?" said Elsie.

"Something quite awful. The sort of thing some rough per-

son would say. I feel quite ashamed."

"But you didn't say it," Elsie said. "Perhaps I can get through." She went up the stairs. She knocked at Trent's door and began, "Trent—"

He shouted it again, twice, in some kind of desperate fury. Elsie backed a pace. Her face went hot. She had heard it before, but not in such a house nor with such violence.

"Trent!" she called angrily.

He said it again and again, shouting with fury amounting almost to hysteria. She turned, went along the corridor and down the stairs again to Clara and Judith.

"What are you going to do about dinner?" Judith said.

"Yes, indeed," said Clara, touching her head. "What? I'm so confused, almost sick with tensions. I must do something about Trent."

27

The Inspector from the Ministry of Ag. and Fish leaned on the gate and looked along the meadow, to a line of trees and a hedge dividing the nearest from the next. Both fields were high with grass and weed, so that a herd of Jersey cattle in the far corner of the meadow seemed to have no legs.

"And us cut that three days back," said one Dribble.

The other Dribble took off his cap, wiped his face with the lining and put it on again.

"Bluebell dropped her calf smarnin' two munce soon," he said. "But puffeck. Nought wrong with it. Puffeck, like a full time calf. We brought her in on the trailer but she'm puffeck."

"I confess I don't know what to make of this," the Inspector said. "There are a lot of fast grower chemicals being developed, but I don't know of one which could do this."

"Through the village there's the beans gone rotten," said Dribble one. "Rotten or gone like wood. I seed apples fallen, too. Like September."

The Inspector blew his nose, holding to his handkerchief overlong to mask the smell of Dribbles. He thought, but with

no result.

"I brought in two, Bluey and Gossamer Belle," Dribble two said, wiping his face with his cap lining again. "They was due come September but they both looks over close now."

"Yes, you'd best take precautions," the Inspector said. "You don't want to risk losing valuable stock."

"What else you'm thinkin' us ought to do for safety?" asked the first Dribble.

"I'll have to get advice," the Inspector said, foreseeably. "I'll get on to the research HQ first thing Monday morning. No good before then, you understand."

"What 'bout them Fresians up to ten-acre field then? They was runnin' mad buggers all over the auction. Had a job to get 'em in to milk. Might do theirselves a mischief, stampin' round like that."

"You'll just have to keep an eye on them," said the Inspector.

"Beats me you get paid for sayin' things like that," Dribble replied, wiping his face on his cap lining again.

"Good day to you," said the Inspector, shortly.

As he drove away in his shooting brake he passed a police patrol car coming through the village on ordinary duty. It came very slowly.

At the end of the church lane, Bert Dollflower saw it coming, stopped, leant against the hedge and picked a piece of grass to chew. The car went by. He threw the grass away and walked home.

At Battock's Stores, Len Battock watched it coming, his heart trouble thumping in his chest like a drunken drummer, making his eardrums creak, his cheeks flush hot, his breath grow less. When the car went by, he stood in great tension lest it turn round and come back.

The car stopped at the inn. Ben James saw it through the bar window, and when the sergeant and driver got out, he wiped his hands on a cloth, looked round to make sure Beth was not anywhere about, then opened the counter and went through amongst the few early customers to the door.

He went out to meet the police. The sergeant stopped, smiling. The driver grinned. Ben's stiff back slacked slightly.

"Everything all right, Mr James?" the sergeant said. "Just a routine look."

He went to the threshold of the bar and viewed the occupants, a smile and a nod here and there. He came out again.

Ben James began to feel his face sticky with relief and weakness.

"Seen anything of Jobey today?" the sergeant said.

"He was here 'smorning."

"His father was asking. He lives with the old man, you know. Nosey old tuppence he is, too. He doesn't approve of his son and that lady over to Weston."

"Probably frightened she'll marry him," said Ben, mopping his face with the bar cloth and laughing. "These old people gets pretty possessive, one way and another. I wonder he rang up. Jobey's been seeing the lady every Saturday now for a coupler months."

"That's it, then," said the sergeant. "Well, on again. Cheerioh, Mr James."

They drove on again away to the south. Ben wiped his face once more and went back into the house. Beth was standing behind the counter, staring at him.

"Routine visit," said Ben, going through to her.

"You look white and sick," she said. "Don't fret so. What good does it do?"

Ben turned away to meet a demand for service. Beth went into the kitchen at the back. Sherree was doing her eyes up at the mirror over the fireplace, but she stopped and looked round, brush in hand, one eye surprised, the other pale.

"What's the matter, Mum? Something happened?"

"Now, what could happen more than usual, for heaven's sake?" said Beth.

"You look sad and Dad keeps making a fuss of you and looking 'sif he had something stuck in his throat. Is somebody dead?"

"No. Somebody isn't."

From the picture window in the bungalow, Rowena Entwistle saw the police car and stood there, holding the curtain to

the side of her face, not breathing, in case they should hear. When the car went by she gasped, turned and stood looking at an armchair.

Outside she heard the steady running of the motor mower, where Fred was taking a break from telephoning.

She went to the armchair and took out the letter from under the cushion. She looked round for another place to hide it, then looked at it and half pulled the letter out again. But she shut her eyes and pushed it back into the torn envelope. She knew every word.

"Sir, Your partner William Jeeves is having sexual relations with your wife, Rowena. Further, your partner has embezzled clients' funds and we have today written Mr Burkins, an enquiry agent, to look into the matter. Yours, Fauntwell."

Outside, the mower stopped. She crammed the letter back under the cushion and tried to stop trembling in case Fred should notice.

Bert Dollflower called at the inn and spoke to Ben James.

"I been having a talk with the vicar."

"Blimey! What's come over you?"

"He's not a bad old sod. He's taken this all personal. Going to wipe it out. Fix the bastard. He told me."

Ben James looked thoughtful, but dark, then shook his head.

"How could he?"

"He could do more than most. After all, we don't want the coppers, now, do we? All right, don't bother to mention it. Better for the old cock to have a go for us than let it go on. Next thing's bound to be asking for a sub. You know that. People don't write that kind of letter for fun, spite of what some say."

"Yes. We've been thinking that. Beth and me. But I don't know what the parson could do. He's past it, for God's sake!"

"You'd be surprised. I'm backing him each way, anyhow. What can you lose? Give him a chance, then."

"How could he find out?"

"He knows. I know, too. The thing is, it's no good just knowing. You've got to know what to do. That's where the old geezer

comes in. He's used to handling things. What we got to do is get together with him and agree what to do. To do that we've all got to agree to meet. Get it?"

"I just can't get you and the parson, that's what I can't get."

"When you get chucked in a pond you take the first hand comes in that's strong enough to hang on to. No good catching one you're going to pull in on top of you. The old geezer's strong like that. Cool. That's the word. That's what you want. Cool. That's what we need. Not blow off. Cool. That's the substance."

Ben James got two drinks to help him think.

"Who do you reckon it is, then?" he said, coming back.

"That crab staying up at the Manor. Clara's nevvy."

"Him? Why?"

"It's got to be somebody who knows everybody. He spent a right time getting round chatting people up. Some chat it was, too. Then suddenly you don't see him any more. He's locked in there. Why? Because he's got what he wants."

"How did he get it? Nobody told him about the sort of thing that—that's in the letters."

"He's got a tape machine in his pocket," said Bert, watching Ben carefully.

"But you can't tape what somebody thinks! It's got to be said, spoken, belted out somehow."

"He's a bit of a science wallah, this crab. Got rooms full of Doctor Pisspot's radio for bringing mummies back to life. Full of X film gear. If you had a machine to look into people's minds you'd be bound to find something wrong, wouldn't you? Something you wake up in the middle of the night and want to scream about? Everybody's got something. Old Gran says that's why they get religion. Try and cover it up, or make up for, or whatever. So if you had this machine—"

"That's not possible!" Ben said, angrily. "Why, nothing wouldn't be secret any more. People wouldn't be let to be people. It would cock up everything. You just think!"

"Well, it *has* cocked up everything, hasn't it bloody well? I tell you what I think. I think he's got some machine that

can get in your head and see what's there, and that he wrote them letters to let us know he could do it."

"You're too bright. If he wants to show off why didn't he sign his name? Also, if it gets in yer head, there's a hell of a lot there besides what this letter is about."

"I didn't think of that," said Bert Dollflower slowly. "That's interesting, that is. 'Cause that means he gets in somebody's head and gets all the things out on a tape, all mixed up, the way they happen ... There you are drivin' along, thinking about your engine wanting a decoke, then you switch to a job you got to do, then to what the football's going to be Satterdy, then why the silly bugger stopped right in the middle of the ped. crossing, then what's happening with the oil pressure, then will I get over 'fore the lights crack, then that girl with the big tits over by Cox's shop, and then eff it! the bus is cuttin' in over the lights ... See? Like that. And a lot more praps you aren't even thinkin' about. Memories and that. All in there. It makes yer boggle to think of all that stuff in yer bonce. Like minnows swimmin' about."

"They sort things out with computers," said Ben. "That's why the bank statement's always wrong. Computers do it. Ten thousand overdrawn I was a month back, so I rang and the manager near had kittens. 'I wouldn't lend you ten thousand!' he shouts. 'It must be that bodgy machine again.'" He drank. "Still, it wouldn't be so difficult to sort things out that haven't got figures. Just choosing—"

"If it's just choosin', then he probly does it himself. Look, it's all sex things, innit? That shows it's somebody's mind what—"

"Hold on. Mine isn't."

The young man stopped, then made a face and shrugged.

"Oh? I thought they was all like that. Anyway, I'll come round the other bar now in case they start wonderin' what's up. You think what I said, though. The vicar said half eleven. In the vestry."

He turned to go to the door.

"Just a minute," said Ben.

The young man looked back.

"There's a lot of people been stirred up today, Dolly," Ben said. "How it was done I don't know and I don't much care, but look at Len. He's up the wall yelling from the top—she's walked out. I took the Garfields' booze order down this afternoon and May Parson says they're in a big state, the two of 'em, yelling and shouting I don't know what. They used to say in the war that when everything's boiling you can't see for steam, so you wait till it cools a bit, then you can see what to go for. Don't rush in. That's what I mean."

Bert Dollflower shrugged. Scared, that's what's the matter. Scared. That's what's the matter with 'em all. It's a bomb. That's what this is. An effing bomb, and here they all are trying to pretend it didn't come, because things were all right yesterday. Like Gran, always pretending she's a girl. Poor old twit.

28

Isobel left her office and went into Communications. Bill sat reading a paperback and smoking while the tape spools rolled silently in the glass cases, like aztec plates in a museum.

"Bill, I've been playing back everything Joss sent in," she said.

Bill looked askance. "Where's the Big Cheese? Is he staying on? I like to know where not to bang into him."

"He's gone to the golf club."

"He ought to do something with that tum. He's getting unlivable with. What about Joss?"

"What are ghosts, really?" Isobel said, sliding on to his desk. "What would you say?"

"Look, I'm just the earpiece. It's the big boys who say. I hear it going by."

"And you think. So what's a ghost?"

"Taking a quick analysis of what I've heard, it's an attempt at realisation by somebody on another time belt. Certain places seem more suitable than others, due either to natural physical conditions or conditions which create unusual frequencies."

"The stuff that came in for Joss indicates that people who receive them are usually in some way emotionally or mentally disturbed," she said.

"Well, that's frequency again. That's what this goon at the Manor house is working on, Joss says. People's minds getting into low gear over something. Plenty of revs and then he reckons to pick it up without a sender, just a head. Sort of instant telepathy."

"Joss said if there was a machine which could tell what people thought it would have to be able to think itself."

"You forget, Joss also once said that if we got a machine that could think like a man, it would be the final proof that man can't think at all."

"Why are they pushing Joss up the creek like this?"

"Because they don't want to get the paddle dirty. When it gets near election time they get pretty near irresponsible." He looked up suddenly. "I suppose it's not a possibility that Joss is in the running for the Chair?"

"For trying to find out, I've been slowly pushed back into being just plain secretary and anything I shouldn't see comes from John's home, in his pocket."

"Then it is a political joust. I had the thinks ever since Sir Throttlebottom started querying and—what do they call it?—denigrating? Is that it? Horrible even if it's wrong. Knocking's better ... If he's gone to the club, we could slice the incoming our way. Or would you play with me?"

"Dear Bill. If I thought Joss would get John a smack in the eye, I'd play the whole team."

"You're a callous cow, pretend."

"Well, it's women's equality, pretend."

"Pretend also you love Joss."

"You presume."

"That's a fib because he loves you."

She stiffened. "Who said?"

"Who could say? Everybody but Joss. And even Joss, pretend."

She got up and walked away, then stopped.

"Supposing he's right about this place disappearing."

"It does. They all say. The peasants."

"John says it's hallucination, mass, radio induced."

"He wants to say that. Look, sweetie, if this place vanishes for good—and that's what Joss thinks could happen—you know what? You'll never see him again. Nor will we."

"They wouldn't dare let it happen!"

"Don't burn on me. They would. All this frou-frou over at Weston is an embarrassment. After they've spent everybody's tax out on defence, this comes along. Something never thought of that can't be defended against. Part of the country vanishes and all the people with it, leaving virgin soil, or whatever it leaves. Once that gets about, panic, bewilderment, ring flutter en masse."

"But it's bound to get about!"

"It can be treated like these side effect errors where we've had to fence off a few square miles because it's contaminated. Nothing difficult about that. There's always a wriggle-through point these days. They don't think how to get in. They fall in and then spend all their brains trying to get out without being noticed."

"You're very slightly curved, Bill."

"I'll give you another arc. Joss is trying one of his leave-it-till-the-last-second-to-see-what-happens techniques. My guess is he's so soaked in this one he'll leave it till he goes up with the village."

"He wouldn't. It's full of people."

"You must be a romantic. People?" Bill laughed "I don't know how you've been here all this time and still think like a woman's magazine. People? For Christ's sake, Issy! People? What about amoebas and lesser poggerdiddle and all of them? People? Don't make me laugh. This is something new. Something fascinating. Something challenging. People? For God's sake! Don't clog it!"

"What do you think could happen?" Isobel said quickly.

"God knows, except that Joss will keep hold of the ruddy lot till the fuse burns right down."

She turned suddenly and went out.

Ella Browne-Jones felt bad, nervous, edgy and overhung. At seven pm she drank the last of the gin bottle in her bedroom cupboard, then made up to repair visual damage with a trembling hand. At the back of her mind kept coming in the black idea that something dreadful had happened. Now and again she could not think what, and then out of the boozy fuddlement came the clear idea of her daughter, Alice.

For a long time now gin had given her comfort and strength, fear and despair. But more always cleared the despair. Now there was no more. She could not face going to the pub for more credit, so she walked across the field, in between the barns and into the Manor house.

"I just had to come and speak to you," she said. "I'm so desperately worried."

Clara sympathetically poured the largest gin in the West country. Darke came in from the garden.

"This is Mr Darke, Ella dear, a kind of detective sort of. This is Mrs Browne-Jones. They have a farm—"

"A detective!" Ella burst out, eyes wide. "Could you find my daughter?" All of a sudden she looked pathetically urgent.

"That depends largely on where she is," Darke said.

"Alice?" said Clara, sharply. "Whatever's the matter with Alice?"

"She's gone off with a man—" Ella stopped there, and looked about to cry. "I don't know which one. I don't know anything about it! Oh my God! I'm her mother!"

She did cry then. Clara comforted. Darke went out into the hall. Judith was picking up a stalk from the stairs.

"Dry grass," she said, looking up. "He must have been out. There's more up by his door."

Darke turned back into the room. The storm was passing, the sobber dabbing.

"Mr Darke, isn't a policeman, dear. He's a kind of science man. They have lots of science these days, don't they?"

"Oh, yes, yes." Ella looked pink-eyed at Darke. "I'm so sorry. I thought she meant—Clara. Detectives, I mean—"

"Tell me about your daughter," Darke said, staying by the open door.

"Well, it's—er—she left for college—last week—Saturday—I think—but she didn't arrive. Didn't get there. You see . . . ?"

"You don't seem very certain as to when she left," he said.

"Well, I—I'm confused. I'm sorry. She should have gone on Saturday." Her voice rose. "I was drunk that day! I didn't know—" She would have cried again but stopped it, pressing her head between her hands, her eyes screwed shut. Clara touched her arm and she shook it off.

"He wasn't there, either. He was over to Pound with that bitch— Why doesn't he go? Why come back to me smelling of her—?" She drew in a long groaning breath. "So he didn't see her, either. Alice. He didn't see. Just came back. Has she gone? Yes, yes. She's gone. How do you know? You're drunk. Again, again, again. She wouldn't have gone with a man. Alice doesn't like men—"

"Do you mean she would have gone with a woman?" Darke said.

Ella caught up short. "No. No, I don't think so. No. I'm sure—she'd sooner be alone. Quite alone."

"Who said she went with a man?"

"My husband. He would think that."

"Have you reported her missing?"

"No, because he said, about the scandal—everybody looking stupid—you know—" She suddenly tumbled it all out, the phone call from the digs and the unopened letter from the landlady. "You don't think it—could be serious?" She looked terrified as if she had just thought of the possibility.

"Of course he doesn't, dear," said Clara. "Of course not. We all have our fling, some time or other. There are all sorts of reasons why young people suddenly rush off by themselves."

Smiling gently she took Ella's glass to refill it. She knew how many it took to bring Ella back to the surface.

Darke went out and started looking through the giant barns, but it was dark inside and the great cliffs of hay could have been changed around, tumbled into different shapes. No one but the original stacker would know, and he might be hard put to remember.

He came out of the tithe barn and stood there looking back

towards the Manor house and the rooms where Trent lived. The windows were black as dark glasses.

There was a sound in the air, a sensation to the nerves more than to hearing. To listen for it seemed to make it disappear, yet just to stand made it clear. It was no part of that still, hot evening but something from outside. Far outside. Something coming or was it all just in his head?

29

Althea turned up at her parents' house mid evening. She was tall, big in the figure, pale despite South American sun. Daisy was in the drawing room writing great scrawling things in her diary.

"Althea, dear," she said, looking up. She offered her cheek.

"Hallo, Mother," Althea said, ignoring it. She pulled her hat off and stuck it on the piano. "All alone?"

"Your father's out somewhere. It's been a hell of a day. Don't ask me what's happened. Just everything. Althea, do tell me something. About your father."

"What about Father?" Althea looked at herself in the overmantel mirror and pushed her untidy hair.

"Really, dear. Do take a bit of interest. After all, I haven't seen you for two years!"

"Oh, you do remember when?" said Althea. "I've got to see Weller. I've got a hole in my tooth."

"You are a selfish girl!" cried Daisy. "Look at me! My leg shattered to bits and you don't even ask what's happened!"

"You wrote and told me," Althea said. "You wrote six times. Each one was about your leg and what happened and what you had to have done and how you suffered. What is there left to ask?"

Daisy took a long breath and held it until it seemed she would burst.

"Well, what is it you want to know? What's the matter with Father?"

"Did he—was he—was he ever fond of you?" said Daisy,

balking at the fence.

"Are you crazy?" said Althea, looking round from tooth inspection in the mirror. "Of course he's fond of me."

"What I mean is, did he ever do anything he shouldn't have done?"

Althea watched a moment.

"Now how would I know?" she said, turning back to the mirror. "You never bothered to tell me what was wrong. Remember? I had to find out. I didn't like it, either."

"From your father?" cried Daisy, imperiously.

"Who else was there? The gardener?" The ghost of a smile reflected in the mirror.

"Oh my God!" said Daisy. Never in her days in the chorus had she ever been offered a dramatic part, but she knew the rules. "I can't bear it! I can't!"

"What on earth's the matter with you, Mother? Indigestion again? Haven't you got any of those special tablets? One belch and all's well."

Daisy started to cry, tears running down her face.

"My God, it's like Bette Davis in a drunk scene," said Althea. "Do stop it!"

"How can you? How dare you? Treat your mother like this?"

"It's only the fact you remind me that I ever knew you were my mother," said Althea, bitingly. "I don't remember being born, so I take your word for it. The rest of the time I had nurses you sacked for looking at father so I never got used to who the hell was who. Then I got bunged off to a convent at six. Whenever I came home on holiday you were at Cannes or horse racing or skiing or some damn thing. Then when I grew up you slammed me night and day because I wouldn't go horsing and the rest of it. Then you kept offering me to a crowd of horrible men like some bloody bundle they might buy to guess what's in it. So in the end I went. Remember? I ran away and for three years you were too damn busy to find out where I was. Well now, Mother. I've come back. Do you know why I've come back? I've come back to get money to set up a home for earthquake orphans. I like kids just as you hate them.

I'll get my money, though it'll take six months to get it out of him, I'll do it. Then I'll go back again."

Daisy sat quite still, her tears drying ruts in her makeup.

"It wasn't like that," she said hoarsely. "You've forgotten other times—little things I did—"

She stopped and grabbed the arms of her chair. Althea looked round towards the open windows, quick with alarm.

"My God!" she said. "Earthquake!"

"It happened before! Dozens of times!" Daisy screamed out above the tightening pulsations in the air. "All day! All day! Earthquake, oh my God!"

Althea went to her quickly, put her arm round her shoulders and cuddled her, trying not to let the tremors running in her frightened body transmit more fear to the frightened old woman.

"Don't panic," Althea said, desperately. "There's nothing you can do. Just try and be calm."

She clung tighter to her mother, trying to keep herself from floating in the room. She closed her eyes, opened them again and stared out of the windows at the steel pylons shining silver against the distant sky. The sky was turning to bronze over the hills, and suddenly the pylons were marching towards her over the fields, steel stick monsters of a nightmare. Then, as suddenly, they were gone and there was nothing beyond the near fields but a queer, purple darkness.

Then the sound, the pressure, the strange vibrations all faded and died. Vision came suddenly back to normal and the pylons were there against the sky in the distance. Althea could feel her feet on the ground again, but she still clung to her mother, fearful to let go in case she felt too dizzy to stand upright.

After a while she straightened. Daisy was crouched in the chair, as if she had returned to a wizened embryo, eyeballs staring like marbles at nothing. Slowly she straightened.

"I'm going to die," she croaked. "It's that. Hallucinations. It's me. There's nothing outside. It's me. My nerves are all going. Each one gets worse—"

"You're all right, Mother," Althea said. "I got it too—what-

ever in hell it is."

She went to the windows and looked out at the calm, hot evening.

Rowena got up from the chair and showed her teeth.

"Leave that damned phone alone!" she cried. "You won't find him. He's gone. Can't you grasp that? Gone!"

Fred Entwistle stood up and took his hand from the phone.

"Gone?" he said, staring. "Why should Bill go?"

"He came and told me. This morning."

Fred looked suddenly pale and strained.

"Told you? What do you mean, told *you*?" he said, incredulity and suspicion working against each other.

"He came and told me he would go. So leave that damn phone alone." She turned her back.

"But why should he tell you? Why *you*? When I passed him—this morning—he came to see you? Why? Ro! Why didn't you say so before?" The mists of shock and bewilderment were fading. "Why did you let me go on—?"

"I put it off, that's all. Just put it off. I couldn't. It was like that. I just couldn't."

He came slowly close up behind her, and stopped, his fists opening and shutting. "Why?" he said.

She turned round to him.

"Look, you've known all along something's wrong. That's why you kept on and on at that bloody phone. On and on, clubs and pubs and hotels and God knows— You knew he'd gone. You knew something was wrong. That's why you kept on and on—"

"Because that man came?" said Fred, blankly. "The man who wanted to know about the investments?"

"He's spent 'em, or so much that what's left doesn't matter. That's what's happened. Well? Aren't you going to swear or cry or something? Aren't you going to be surprised or crunched or throw up some drama about your loyal and trusted ruddy friend? Why don't you do something? Say something! Pray to your mother! Anything!"

Fred stood quite still, his fists closed, oddly calm.

"He embezzled funds," he said. "But why run away? You can't get away. Nobody can get away. The world's too small. Poor old Bill."

"Poor old Bill? For Christ's sake, Fred! Poor old Bill? What in hell's the matter with you? He's stolen clients' money. He's stolen our money! You'll have to pay it back, what you can. He's stolen it and ripped it up on Bentleys and birds. And you say poor old Bill! You're bloody mad!"

She smacked his white staring face and went to do it again. He flailed his arms suddenly and got her wrists, then held them across her chest with a strength that held her still and taut with fright.

"Why did he come to tell you?" he said, very quietly. "Why did he tell you?"

She struggled to get away. He was pulled forward several paces and they staggered until her back was against a chair, then she stopped.

"Let me go." She panted from effort and fear.

"Why did he tell *you*?"

She drew a noisy breath, then let it out. "There was a letter! You did sign. There was a letter. Under the cushion—that chair—"

He twisted as in a dance and flung her towards the Chesterfield. She staggered and fell kneeling, her arms and head on the seat. She stayed like that, gasping.

He pulled out the seat cushion from the chair and slung it across the room. He looked at the long envelope with its yellow special delivery stamp, and saw the rough-ripped edge. He read out his name as if it were something new.

He straightened and looked round at her. She knelt there staring up at him, real fear draining the blood from her face.

"I don't want to read it," he said. "I don't want to!"

He stood there, staring out of the window. There were three people out in the lane, pointing, shouting at each other.

"'Tint there!" one shouted. "It's bloody gone! Everything's bloody gone!"

He was conscious of the shouting and the whistling in the air, and the letter seemed to take him back to a time of many

days before. A time that wasn't anything to do with now.

"Do you know what's in that?" she said, her voice trembling.

He turned back from the window.

"Don't crawl on your knees!" he shouted above the penetrating whistle. "Don't crawl!"

He grabbed her hand and heaved her up towards him. She reached her feet and swung out of balance and went flat back against the wall. She stood there pressed against it, her mouth trembling in terror. Yet this was what she had always wanted. The death of Mother Entwistle.

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Darke came into the room where Clara was. "There's a hell of a tension working up," he said. "Can you feel it?"

"My dear, I've had tension all day. I've never been so frightened. It can't get worse." She laughed shortly. "I can't hear any whistle."

"Listen!"

She clutched his arm to support herself.

He snatched it off and went out to the stairs.

"Don't—" She stopped, the growing pressure in the air holding her head in a tightening clamp.

He started to go up the stairs, reeling from side to side, holding the handrail, so as almost to swing on it. At the top he fell across the corridor and stopped himself, chest against the wall. It was as if the whole house was rocking like a stormbound ship, but he knew it was himself losing balance. He shoved away from the wall. The pressure in his head was intense and his sight began to turn the black panelling and doors and the highlights and brass and white plaster above slowly, turning it inversely into a negative.

He reached the door and flattened up against it, banging on it, kicking, trying to tear the handle out of its fixing.

"Let me in! Let me in!"

In the distance like a whisper in the uproar of a bursting

volcano he heard the man beyond the panels screaming.

"Get away! Get away!"

The pressure suddenly ended. It was like a sudden fall, as a mountain collapsing beneath the feet. Darke closed his eyes and leant flat against the door.

A tense silence stayed behind. Darke came away from the panels and wiped his face. He turned and went back to the stairs. Clara stood there, very still.

"I think I shall make myself a new hat," she said, quietly. "One should have something constructive to do."

"Yes," Darke said, passing her. "Yes, that would be a good idea. At least you'd know it was real."

He went downstairs, touching the handrail. From an open door he heard Ella Browne-Jones telling an anecdote and laughing in a high pitch at what she said. She was alone in the room.

Darke went out into the evening sun. The Reverend Wilde came hurrying across the lawn, his cassock trailing the grass, his head down, grinning like a death's head moth. He almost charged into Darke.

"Oh, so glad!" he said, breathlessly. "I wished to see you. That din. And the bells, you know. A terrible clamour. I was on the point of going across to the church, and the bells— Quite deafening. My poor wife, distracted. Thinks she does it. Wickedness. Idiot. It is a manifestation. The poltergeist—" He looked up with his pale old eyes glinting as if amused at being able to scare somebody. "I saw him run out of the front door and over to the churchyard."

He grinned.

"You saw the polt?" said Darke.

"A grey shadow like a naked man, running. Running with no feet. Just legs. Out of the door. Down the path. Leapt the gate. I always understood they went through. Leapt the gate. Ran across the lane. Leapt the stile and went in amongst the gravestones. Extraordinary, is it not?"

"When did the bells stop?"

"After he had gone. The bells have a curious effect. One gets so worked up with the noise one really doesn't think or

hear properly, and my hearing, rather faded now—"

"Have you ever seen anything like this before?"

"Never cared to believe anything about it. Always thought there would be some physical explanation. For the bells." He gathered his failing breath. "You don't think that I have got too old?"

Darke shrugged.

"Faust was a scientist," Wilde said. "Sometimes I think everybody who plays with the Unknown must be a scientist. But it would have needed a degree. I did not get my degree, otherwise I might have been a Bishop now and gone about exorcising and playing the Fool Magnificent. I am a child, am I not, to grudge it after so long?"

Richard went on to the church.

Darke went back into the house and the small telephone room on the left of the hall, where he rang the Station.

"Bill? Joss. This thing is getting hot here. Are you tracking anything?"

"There's an almost continuous transmission somewhere there, but the frequency's changing from low down to way out. The computers can't keep it. It goes off the edge at the top of the range and doesn't come back for several seconds. There was a radar blank twenty-eight minutes back, lasted forty seconds."

"It seemed a lot longer from here."

"There's been hell's amount of phoning the police since. Some people are beginning to realise things are going off the beat. Do you think it will slip altogether?"

"What is the opinion as to what would happen if it did?"

"General opinion here is that it is an advanced form of electronically induced hallucination. Radio levering off the peasant's grip on his mind."

"Including me?"

"You're in Rome. What else can it be?"

"It could be some out force trying to operate a time shift. After all, we've never achieved it, so we don't know what the effect would be. If a lump of land and all on it was suddenly shifted into the future or the long past, what would be left?

A hole we would all fall into? Or what?"

"If it did happen it'd be like water, I suppose. You can't keep a hole in that stuff. It'd close over."

"That sounds too fleshy a way," Darke said. "The polt has been seen by the greatest unbeliever—the vicar himself. Seen in form, leaping a garden gate. Last night figures were seen dancing in the park. This is either one of two things: the radio agitation is disturbing the human mind to see anything, or making it abnormally sensitive so that it sees things that have always been there, on the parallel time belt. Either way, it's important.

"They're all going looney, it means. That's all."

Janey Dollflower left the boy friend in the front room and ran into the kitchen. Mum was there alone, ironing, a cigarette hanging from her lips.

"Oh, you're back," Mum said, and looked relieved.

"I've got news. I'm engaged!" Janey laughed quickly.

Her mother put the iron down and took out the cigarette.

"You're sure?" she said, watchfully.

"Sure, sure, sure, sure, sure!"

"It's the latest one?"

"Whatsisname. You remember Whatsisname? You get so confused, don't you? Danny."

"It's not because of this business, this letter?"

Janey's smile faded.

"Oh, poor old Gran," she said. "The more she tries to keep a secret the more it shines out of her eyeballs."

Mum stamped out her cigarette in a tray.

"I had to leave you alone then," she said. "I had no bloody choice."

They looked at each other.

"Sorry, kid," Mum said.

Janey's mouth trembled and wouldn't stop. She went forward and hugged her mother. They clung together tightly a long time. Then Janey broke away and turned her back.

"Don't go out, Janey. Not tonight."

Janey looked back, bright-eyed. "Why not?"

"I've got a sort of feeling. A feeling something's going to happen. Don't go."

"Okay," Janey said. "I'll tell Danny."

The pub was not so busy inside. Many people in the cottages were beginning to feel Mrs Dollflower's apprehension. In the kitchen, Ben James said, "Dolly says he reckons it's that bastard up at the Manor. You know, the one that went for Sherree."

"How in the world would he know about us?" Beth said, drying her hands nervously.

"There's a lot of these letters. How did anybody know what to put in 'em?"

"I wouldn't be surprised young Bert's right," Beth said, very slowly. "All the time that fellow talked to you he was trying to get in at you, trying to make you say things. And he was fiddling with something in his pocket all the time."

"Come to think on it, he did do that," Ben James said. "Remember that reporter feller that came once, with an itchy bit of pencil in his pocket, jotting down things on a pad there?"

"But he showed us what it was after. But why ever does Bert think it was him?"

"He was going by the girls. This feller went with the girls, Janey and Elsie Wilde and they got letters. And Len Battock. This feller was in there like he was here, chatting Len up and that. And then when this all starts, where is this goon? In the bloody Manor. Hiding!"

"You're working into a rage, darlin', now don't do that. You know what ye are when you get steamed up."

"I've a good mind to go down there and have a word with that bastard. That's all."

"It might just make things worse," Beth said.

Ben stood staring out of the open window, bunching his big fists.

"My wife's dead," he said. "She's been dead years. It couldn't be right, this! She nearly died from booze when I had her. Twice. Then she went with this feller. God! It makes you feel old. So long back. She died. I'm sure."

"But she din't die before we got married, darlin'. That's the point, is it?"

"You don't see the point, Beth. I want to know. And if he's the bugger that wrote these letters then he knows! I'm going to see him, Beth. I'm gonna know, one way or the other. Know. Not go on wondering!"

"Wait, darlin'. Wait!" She pulled his arm, as if to make him listen.

"All right," he said hoarsely. "I'll wait. But I'm going!"

"Holy Mother!" Beth said. "You're a fine old pudden stirrer, you!"

"When we close," he said. "Tonight."

Len Battock marched up and down his parlour behind the shop. The shop was empty. Most people had gone out into the street to wonder what was happening after the new upheaval.

"That bastard!" he kept saying. "The boy's right. It's that bastard. Talking, poking—but how the hell did he find out? How did he find out? The bastard!"

He picked up a big bacon carving knife and struck the edge of the door with it. Wood split out. He tried to stick it back again with the ball of his hand and spit, and then realised what he was doing.

The shop bell rang. He wiped his red face and went out holding the knife as if he would cut the caller through. Gran Dollflower's faded blue eyes opened wide.

"Jer think there'll be a storm then?" she said, seeing him put the knife down. "It feels ruddy funny. Everythink. The leaves is going brown. I dunno what comes on things these days. Bombs and pills and that, you don't, do you? Proper ruddy ole mess things is in."

"It's that atomic power station," said Battock, grinding out words. "Poisoning everything. Affluent coming out everywhere."

"Twenty fags," said Gran.

Battock turned to the shelves behind.

"I'll have that bastard," he muttered. "I'll have him!" He felt his heart beating in his hot face and felt weak with sudden

fear of his internal engine.

"You look 'ot," said Gran. "You oughter take it easy, with your trouble. How's missus?"

"Out!" shouted Battock, and with a sweep of his hand he flung the piles of cigarettes to the floor in a cardboard shower.

"You oughter watch it," said Gran. "You'll burst."

"What's the matter with her, then?" said Basil Garfield looking at the ceiling. "Why's that king doctor come again?"

"She thought she was dying," said Althea. "All this guffuff outside. She thinks it's her senses going."

"Silly old fool," said Basil, turning away.

"She had some very odd idea about you and me," said Althea. "I suppose you know."

Basil turned back.

"Yes, I know," he said. "There's some swine spreading lies about. Can't see the idea. Seems evil mad to me. She doesn't really think she's going off her nut, does she?"

"Don't look so worried, Daddy!" Althea laughed a little. "You know she isn't."

"Just had the sudden feeling what it would be like without her bawling me out every five minutes of the day. Dead quiet, it would be. I wouldn't like it. She's a funny woman ... We'll never get that gardener back. You seen the weeds since that last effort? King monsters..." He frowned out of the open windows. "I hope she *is* all right."

Bert Dollflower appeared at the window. He stared at Althea, then grinned briefly.

"Hallo," he said. "I don't mean to butt in. I've got a message from the vicar. He says about what you talked about this morning. He says to get everybody together at half eleven."

"Everybody?" said Basil blankly.

"Everybody who got a letter. In the vestry. Okay?"

"What's the matter with his phone?" said Basil.

"Something to do with a bill somebody forgot," said Bert. "Missus has locked herself in. She boiled it in the wash."

He grinned briefly and went away, head bent, changed.

Basil watched him go down the drive, then stop and look up at the coppery sky. Basil mopped his face with a big handkerchief.

"Are you thinking of a little thing like a letter because you're frightened to think of the big thing that's happening outside?" Althea said. "Are you facing the other way with your eyes shut, Daddy?"

"It's nature, isn't it? Something gone wrong with nature. What the hell can you do about that? If the king world's gone off its axis and everything's going rotten what can you do, Althy? Eh?"

"Surely one can do something!" the girl said angrily.

"What did you do in that earthquake you were in? What did you do when you felt the first tremor? There wasn't anything to do, was there?"

"We just didn't believe there would be another. We—shut our eyes and turned our backs. As you say, what else can you do?"

"Why's that ruddy doctor upstairs so long? You don't think she is going to—"

"No, Daddy. No, no, no!"

"I don't want anything to happen to the stupid old woman!" shouted Basil. "Sorry. Didn't mean to shout. It's today. Working me up. Same as her, I suppose."

Bert Dollflower called at the Entwistles', but there was no answer to his ringing though the car was still in the port.

He came away, wiping his face. It was getting very hot. There was a haze over the sun. He kept thinking he could hear the sky singing again, but when he stopped, everything was still.

The Chief Constable sat in his headquarters and cursed.

"It's getting impossible to run a bloody police force with these secret sods from every Ministry of Shit and Confusion overriding you ... Who's that? Darke again? Give him to me."

He listened while making jottings on a pad.

"What do you want—buses? We can't muster enough for eight hundred— No? Oh! Are you sure? Okay. Wilson, get the

compass, set it a half mile and then stick the point in the Manor house ... Yeah. Take them where the grass is green? When told? You sure? Hang on. We're scribing..."

He watched the sergeant make a circle on the wall map.

"It takes in damn near the whole village," the Chief said. "But it's all right outside. Okay. You give the signal. Look here, I'm being pressed hard about that postman— You know where he is? Sure? Alive? Sure of that? Well, that's a point in favour ... okay."

He replaced the phone, and looked at the sergeant.

"On receiving the signal we radio the cars to go in and get the people out of the village. Just out to where the grass is green. That's all."

"Is he cracked?" said the sergeant.

"They're all cracked, these officials. That's why they keep 'em secret."

"When does the signal come?"

"If there's another blackout."

Darke looked out into the garden of browning grass and weeds. "Why does he hate everybody?" he asked.

"Trent?" Clara shrugged. "Perhaps he reacted from his father. A fire-and-slaughter Chapel man. When the war came he wouldn't go and went to prison instead. They hated each other."

Hat on a wild grey haywire, Mary Wilde came in, breathless, urgent, staring, flushing.

"You're a detective, you forgive me then," she gobbled.

"Mary!" said Clara.

"Forgive me. I can't ask anyone. You won't punish me if I tell you. Not me—"

"Madam—"

"It's not his child. Not his!" she cried, beating her breast. "There was an officer, he came, it was—"

"Mary, Mary," said Clara, taking her round the shoulders. "You're not well. Come with me to Judith."

"You understand?" Mary said, to the wide air, and then burst into tears as she was led out.

Darke walked out through the hall and to the front grass. "Joss!"

He turned towards the church lane and saw Isobel.

"What in hell did you come here for?" he said.

"I pumped John out of the club bar," she said. "He can't be allowed to dodge this responsibility. It is his."

"And where is he being responsible at the moment?"

"Belching in the car."

"You're wrong. He must be following you."

Sir John slouched into view, his light loose suit rumpled where he kept his hands in his trouser pockets. He stared around him as if walking in a boring museum.

"Just gone rotten," he said, lurching to a stop. "We had this all before with that bloody whatchercallit stuff. The Minister's wound up over this." He eyed Joss morosely.

"I am also wound up," Joss said.

"You'd no need to come, anyway. Coulda sent a regular —burk—inspector. Why you? Need a holiday? Fishing?"

"In an alcoholic pond?" Joss said. "Go back. What in hell can you do like that?"

"Jesus!" Sir John said and put hands to his middle.

"Why don't you have that op?" Darke said. "What's the good of going on like this? You'll get a perforation and fizz out."

"Mind your bloody business. I know what I'm doing. It's my guts. I know what I feel."

"Let's just talk about this," said Isobel, coolly apprehensive.

"You're on his side, aren't you, duckie?" said Sir John. "Vicaress of Bray. Follow the throne, whatever side—" An eruption of wind improved his temper for a moment. "What is this, anyway?" He stared up at the house. "I've been told. And what have I been told! Some nut raising ghouls and polts with HF. It's been done before. Bring 'em back to life. Only with a polt he's got no envelope to get back into. Rotted off years ago."

"Think of our Universe as an explosion of atoms on a microscope slide," Darke said.

"We've thought of it like that, big bang and Christ knows

what else for years—"

"Okay. But this time that goon up there gets a form of signal that gets out of the Universe and it is noted by the investigator with his eye to the lens. 'Life!' he says. 'Life on a thing as small as that!' But he has vast powers of electronic magnification, he can pinpoint the signal to this spot on Earth. He can then apply some form of radio separation and lift this place right out for tests."

"God damn! You're drifting!" Sir John said. "Why don't you come down to earth?"

"You do it for me," Joss said. "This whole place keeps trying to separate from surrounding existence, slipping off our frequency. This man upstairs started it with a beam we can't hold. Go on. Explain."

"The Minister isn't going to stand for a lot of balls like that," Sir John said.

"He hardly matters, at this distance."

"He's going to look a poor bloody fool if you evacuate this village. He'll have to answer the questions in the House about spreading alarm, public mischief, God knows. Your trouble is you don't bother about the political values, the legal side. Evacuate! Ruddy laughing stock! Minister of Science, Cock and Bull. Dealing with the public like you do, you don't get the scene. The public don't matter a poke. One man one vote, the Thicks are in, electing their own slave masters—"

"For God's sake!"

"Since when have you been frightened of the dictatorship? You play with it. Get with it. Be in it. Now what have you got here, Darke? Rot. A whistle. People going barmy who imagine anything. You've seen it all in the looney bins. What's new, then? Who's special? Or have you caught it, too?

"Listen. Matter is matter. You can't get rid of it. You can disperse it, reorganise it, but it's still there. You can't get rid of it with a whistle and a roll of drums. It's got to be something big, new. Well, we don't recognise anything big, new. We can't afford to. We've got to play with what we've got, not what some other outer space bugger's got. Even worse is to play with what we think he's got. At the Station there's noth-

ing. Get it? Nothing. A jam on the screens. An encephalograph from this loon sending out his radio telepathy. That's all we've got. We could get that from an anarchist agent in a Birmingham backstreet. The yokels get swinging heads, lose their balance, fall over, go dizzy. Okay. You can get that in a fairground. I'm not playing you down. I'm telling you the official answer to what you're going to say. I'm pegging you down with paper clips and tape like a wild balloon. Get this, too. There's no you that's going to be there with the autocracy explaining all this. It's going to be me. Everything you say has got to be said by me. And it isn't going to be. Not by me."

"What are you scared of?" Darke said.

"The Dictatorship. Long ago, dear boy, we defended ourselves. We built battleships and fighters and armies and everything to fight back. Now we say everything's too big to fight back. That it's no good doing anything. Talk it out. The thing's got too big. Give me an idea. Give me that this influence is being beamed from out there—out there in the red shift beyond our ken. The preliminary invasion. It has to be. It always is. It's all war, isn't it? Everything's war. If you want to learn about it, shoot it first. So this is a big destroyer beam from out there. This is truth, God help me, and you get the Dictator in Downing Street to swallow it. So what's he do? He can't do anything, can he? There's nothing to do, is there? So what's the bloody fuss, then? Keep quiet. Let it come. The tide's got to come. The end's got to come some day.

"That's one way. But he isn't going to believe it. He doesn't want to. It doesn't fit in with anything. And if you press for a fuss he'll set up a Royal Commission to look into it. The terms of reference will be to find out why people go nuts in Weston Abbas ... But that's only if it gets publicity. And if it gets publicity, there'll be another Commission to find out why I'm nuts. I'm not having it. Let's get a drink somewhere and take this calmly."

The vicar came into Clara's room by a devious back way, cassock trailing the high grass. He came to the french windows and looked in, his grey eyes shining like marbles under the brim of his old hat.

"Alone, Clara. Good," he said, and went into the room. He crossed to the door and locked it. Clara watched as he went back, closed the french windows and locked them.

"I do hope there is nothing improper," Clara said, trying a strained smile.

"You're tired," Richard said, coming to her. "This is getting you down. Let us sit. We have a good deal to talk over."

She sat, blank. He sat down too, then remembered his hat, took it off and blew into it ruminatively as he watched her with bright little eyes.

"Clara," he said, putting the hat on his lap. "This has gone far enough, you know. We are the heads of this community, me by title and you by act. There is no one else who can deal with this matter."

"You mean Trent?" she said, tensely.

"Trent is mad," said Richard. "You are well aware of that. We will not press it. These happenings today—"

"I'm surprised you noticed them. Mary thought you heard only the bells."

"You will be surprised how much I notice, Clara," he said quietly. "For twenty-four years Mary has been trying to pretend that Elsie is my child. I have known all along that she isn't."

"You do? And you let your poor wife suffer these years—"

"I have enjoyed it," he said. "I am a torturer. Besides, she was off her head long before all that came about. Bananas, you know. Most odd. However, to return. Three or four times today there have been manifestations resulting in some sort of comparative disappearance of a whole village. This, of course, is not as impossible as it sounds. Nor is it new. We have cases in the Old Testament which must have been based on something more than just a tale."

"Folk legend," Clara said impatiently.

"Let us consider present writings," said Richard, watching her intently. "Today there were a number of scurrilous letters received about the village. This thing can happen anywhere, at any time. Poison pen. But it is unusual for several to come all at the same time. A deliberate design, Clara. I have spoken to Elsie. She knows about several of these things. The subject of these letters, who they went to. Guilt is one of the most powerful of human destroyers. I did read in some magazine about psychiatry that guilt is the most powerful of all mind motors because it is something we all want, the death wish, Clara. The lemming mentality."

"I never thought you read this stuff, Richard. Do-it-yourself brain surgery. One reads it every day in some paper or other—"

"The automatic reaction to sudden realisation of guilt is the urgent desire to escape. Spaced about the village are several powerful, burning fires of guilt. And since they began smouldering, the village has tried to disappear not once but several times."

"The first time was before the letters came. Before anything happened."

"You are wrong, Clara. Last night there was dancing in the park, but no one appears to have been missing, as far as my enquiries tell me."

"Who were they, then?" Clara said stiffly.

"Spirits."

"You can't be serious!"

"I was walking in the park. It was a beautiful night and I have so few to look forward to now. They danced naked over by the chestnuts. They were wraiths, visions."

"Why didn't you say anything?"

"I just told you, I like keeping things to myself. Twenty-four hours or twenty-four years makes little difference to me. My belief is that these nymphs were the first manifestation of something going wrong. Of reality lifting. Of figments of the mind coming into visible shape in familiar settings. To my mind this is some experiment in telepathy or telekenesis, of which perhaps you have read in the magazines. The power

of the mind can be greater than one thinks, and driven by strong emotions can achieve miracles.

"As one writer said, 'Faith can move mountains but Guilt can destroy the world.'"

Clara tapped on the arm of her chair quickly.

"What are you getting at, Richard?"

"Reverse your idea of this disappearance thing altogether. You have seen the three little cubes. You see them one way, and suddenly you see them another and can't realise how you saw them at first."

"Richard!"

"You think that Weston is disappearing," Richard persisted. "I don't think it is. I think it is human senses which are being made to disappear. After all, the human eye is a very stupid thing. Such inventions as the moving picture and television are based upon the very fact that the eye never sees the truth. And the senses behind the eye are so inefficient that they cannot sort out the deception either."

Clara looked at him quickly.

"I hadn't looked at it that way," she said. "But what of this floating sensation, dizziness, whistling?"

"Surely this is typical of human feelings when the person begins to feel he is losing his grip on things? Have you never fainted, or felt nervous to the point where things don't seem real any more? At such times I remember there are also confused noises in the head. All one's senses begin to drift away from the solid touch."

"And a man drives to the edge of the village and suddenly he is on the other side without going through?"

"Mental pause. He goes through perhaps, driving mechanically, reactions working, but the tape which works his sense does not record anything."

"I never thought you could think of things like this," she said.

"I spent many years working out how simply the miracles could be accomplished," he said, grinning. "With the assistance of elementary physics and certain basics of conjuring, I found it quite simple. I did think of writing a book about it, but even

I grew affear'd of the Bishop."

"You're an evil old man." She got up and walked to the window. "I wonder if you are right?"

"The other way up just could not be right, could it?" said Richard. "A vast transplant of actual material might be possible. It probably is. But it would be simpler to create the illusion. That is what I have in mind. A simplicity free from fear. I am too old to fear any more. Clara. That in itself makes things simple."

"Even if you are right, how does it affect our position? If this thing goes on we shall all go mad."

"The idiot is one who becomes lost in his own world, isolated in a plastic bag, the inside painted to his own design. No sound but his, no sight but his painting—"

"What can we do?" she cut in angrily. "You came saying we could do something. What?"

"I have told you I think this matter is an unseating of human senses by some means. Now one thing we do know is that fear and panic are infectious. I believe that those letters were sent around the village deliberately to create pools of fear, of alarm, of panic. This mental agitation is planned to jigsaw with the demonstrations which we are receiving. In fact, I think the motor force of this upset is the human mind. I thought some of the danger was in having the pools of agitation spread out over an area, Clara dear, so I am bringing them all here."

She grabbed the chair arms.

"What do you mean?"

"The Man from the Ministry told me this morning who those letters went to. I met most of them today. This evening, when I made my decision, I sent young Dollflower round to the victims and told them who is responsible."

"Richard!"

"I asked them all to meet me here at eleven-thirty tonight, when all the matters would be cleared up without any one knowing the truth about the other. Nearly all have agreed. They will be here at that time."

"Why at that time?" She sounded as if she strained to

keep her voice back from a scream.

"Because it is the time the coven should begin to meet, Clara. A good time to lay evil spirits."

"You're mad, Richard. It will achieve nothing. Nothing at all!"

"We shall find that out later, Clara. Thank you."

He got up and trailed across to the garden windows, unfastened them and went out across the grass, his cassock dragging, like a ghost himself.

Clara stood and watched him go.

"My God, Trent!" she said and unlocked the door.

She went out in the hall.

"The gentleman's called," Judith said.

Clara went white, but showed no other sign as Darke and Sir John came in. Darke introduced Sir John.

"How nice," Clara said, smiling. "Can I offer you a sherry?"

"Certainly," said Sir John, eyeing the beautiful form as if considering an offer. "A pleasure."

Clara turned smiling, but the smile went again. Darke was not there. A new alarm froze her. Sir John caught her expression and took it for surprise.

"He's gone to fetch Isobel," Sir John said. "The secretary. She got adrift somehow."

"Are you still—on this investigation?" Clara said, turning to the decanter.

"To be honest," he said, "I'm sick of it. I think some amateur inventor is trying a mass hallucination machine. Such accidental effects have happened before."

Isobel watched Darke very carefully in the growing dusk.

"What is this—honestly? Do you know?" she said.

"I'll tell you what I guess, Isobel, and if you tell John I'll cut your throat."

"You know I won't tell him if you say."

"Do you remember Project Blanket? In case not, it is a system of directing, by radio devices, a continuing and undetectable blanket of low frequency vibrations upon a large area. The result, you may remember, is that the populace re-

ceiving this frequency swell in their senses, become gradually unable to concentrate, to think properly, and finally become unhinged. It is a weapon of war."

"My God! You think somebody is trying that here?"

"It's a different version perhaps, UHF instead of LF, but it is intensely similar. Now the Station, and every other one in the country, is using every device to track its source. The weapon's major evil is that it remains so far undetectable, and so does this one which I believe is alien. But there must be a way of finding it, Isobel, and the boys have got to have whatever time they can to find it."

"At the risk of these people going permanently mad?"

"But what kind of madness is it? If it's caused by an alien force what will happen if we shift these folk out among other people? Will the beam follow? What if this hallucinatory madness spread? It makes you believe things that couldn't have happened. Yet it makes reality unreal. You see things that aren't there, hear them, feel them, yet at the back of your mind you doubt that anything happened. It's mind splitting. It's got to stay isolated—here."

"If they were killed outright it might not be so—so awful but to go screaming mad—"

"It won't last. The brains will burst."

She turned abruptly and walked away towards the church.

Darke went back into the house. Elsie had joined Sir John and Clara.

"I think Isobel took a walk," said Darke, and took an offered drink.

Judith appeared in the doorway. "Miss Clara, can I see you a minute?" Her hands were screwing up together and her eyes were bright with fear.

"Entertain, Elsie darling," Clara said.

She put down her glass and hurried out, closing the door behind her. Judith went to the foot of the stairs, then grabbed the newel and turned, breathless, terrified.

"He's up—in the corridor," she whispered. "He looks awful. He looks as if he's going to die!"

"Go back in your room and say nothing," Clara said very

quietly, very sharply.

Judith nodded and went. Clara hurried up the stairs, turned the corner into the great corridor and saw Trent sitting slumped against the wall behind his unfeeling back.

She saw the doors to his bedroom were open. There was an aura of heat coming from it, a kind of electric smell.

He turned his head quickly and jumped up. His face was haggard, filthy, the dirt streaked with sweat streams. He stared at her with the big eyes of a madman. She stopped. They looked at each other as if testing, then he took a sharp breath. "I can't stop it!" he breathed. "It keeps going on. I can't stop it!"

Clara looked back towards the stairs.

"What's the matter?" he said, coming close.

"Those men are downstairs."

"What men?" He grabbed her wrist and it hurt.

"The—the investigators," she said, wincing.

He held a moment then let go.

"My God! They can't come here! She's dead!"

He shoved his hands through the wild bush of his hair, then slumped and walked into the bedroom, hitting the inner door with his shoulder. She followed quickly and closed both doors, bolting them. He threw himself on the tossed bed. She saw the tubes around the room rolling like televisions where the hold has gone, but there was no picture, only jazz.

"Who's dead, Trent?" she said, her throat closing with fear of something already known.

"The girl. Alice. She couldn't last. Something burst. I don't understand. She died this morning."

He laid on the bed on his stomach, propped on his elbows, just staring down at the rumpled clothes.

"You killed her."

"She couldn't hold on. I don't understand it." He spoke like a puzzled child.

"You've got Jobey too?" She breathed the words as if they might penetrate the thick double doors.

"I had to have another!" He half turned on his elbow and

shouted at her. "I couldn't leave it half done. I wanted to know. It was worth a bloody fortune. Now I can't stop it! I can't stop it at all. Look!" He made a sweeping point round the rolling green eyes of the idling tubes. "I'm not doing that! There's no juice on! I pulled everything. It's coming from outside. I can't stop it!"

Clara leant against a post at the foot of the bed, her heart pounding.

"Jobey is dead too?" she said, terrified.

"No." He stared around as if wondering why. "I disconnected him. When it started to work on its own I cut everything! Jesus! I don't know what's gone wrong! It won't stop! Do you know what that means?"

He crawled across the bed to her on all fours.

"It means something is coming," he said. "It homed on me. It homed on my hook-up. I was excited. What a discovery! I'd brought it in, you see. In from right out, beyond anything you know. I brought it in!" He looked away and twisted over into a half lying position. "And now it won't go. It won't go back."

"For God's sake, Trent! What is it?"

"Power. God almighty power. It'll burn the bloody lot of us. This is the rope it's coming on." He flung his hand out at the tubes again. "The radio rope. The rope it can walk in on!"

He dropped face down on the bed and started to cry.

"Trent, please! Please try! Trent!" She reached down, grabbed his hair and pulled his filthy face up from the clothes. He rolled over on to his back.

"It was such a small thing to begin with—" He started up on one elbow again, staring wildly. "They're detectives are they? They want me. You're a witch! Why don't you bring her back to life? Save me. Jesus Christ! I need it."

"They're not detectives, Trent."

"It's a murder. It's following me. It's closing in all round. I wish I was a little boy again and could sit in church with Nanny on a Sunday and cover my face in my hands and say, 'I'm sorry I did that, God,' and be all right again. God forgave

me. Only my father didn't. It's like some bloody great terrifying father coming in from space, wading in amongst stars floating like bloody frogspawn, swilling against his legs, and he's bending, reaching out to pick me off here, and then punishment, by Christ the punishment!"

"Trent," she said softly, and stroked his hair. "Please try and not—let go. I can help. Tell me what you've done. There's nothing that can't be undone. Tell me what you did. Don't let go. That isn't you. Tell me what you did."

The calm penetrated his madness a moment. He raised his head and stared vaguely, looking into a dream. Clara looked towards the dressing room door, and a sickness spread through her when she thought only the door cut off the sight of the tortured, dead girl.

"Tell me, Trent," she said.

"Just telepathy, that's what it was. To start with. I thought I could sell it to some Government so they wouldn't be lost on any secrets again. Everything readable. It was a good idea. I'd have made a lot of money. I didn't think the idea would go this way. But—" he raised his voice—"once it started I wanted it to go on! I wanted it to! Now I can't stop it. Christ!"

"Go on, Trent. The telepathy." She spoke very softly, prompting, steering the frightened, wandering mind.

"I made it so that it was like a little tape recorder. So it was. One slow, one fast, running alongside. You asked the questions, you got the answers, but the fast tape got the actual variations in the frequencies that upset the mind when the questions touched something important.

"I tried to translate through a computer. It came out as graphs, depressions, peaks that could mean any of a hundred things in a man's mind. It was too crude. The best computer is the human brain. I got a method of connecting it into the circuit. I told the girl. I chose her because she knew something about everybody in this village. She was dead keen to help. The first readings we got from you. She was in an electric trance, you understand. What she read came out in words, sometimes pictures, sometimes just bloody skipping

ropes. We started to build up but it all seemed like old stuff. People had these things hardened over, locked in by time. What I wanted was *now*. The reactions now. The fears now."

"Fears of retribution," Clara said.

"Father image with a big stick. She went to London typed out the letters I wrote and sent them. She came back on the afternoon train and we sat to watch. But I couldn't leave it alone. We went through some of the things again. She was in circuit, in a trance. And then something began to come in. Something from way out. As if the human mind was suddenly able to see beyond the fringe to God, Almighty Power, Existence.

"That's what it felt like at first."

"At midnight?"

"About then."

"Then the image began to change?"

"As the hours went by the idea that it was almighty God started to change. It began to seem like some unthinkable monster gathering up there in the black sky, a mass of black stars forming into something—coming down on us—" He stretched his lips, his teeth hard shut together. "I started to get the idea there were things in this room. Ghosts. Space travellers. God knows, but some kind of moving power, only small, waiting to gather.

"And then this morning it came in strong. It filled this room until it almost burst, a pressure, a tension. I felt I would burst apart into atoms and disappear. My God! I went out. I couldn't stand the appalling strength of it in the room. When I came to, there was only fear left in here.

"But the letters had been delivered. The receiver—that one—the one that took all the stuff from my recorder, over the air had taped everything that happened up to nine am.

"But you see, I read from the distance. It got into those minds from in here. It didn't need me the roving reporter any more. I'd meant to call round, you see, with the box in my pocket, but something made it connect without me. I should have known then something had taken over. Somehow my hookup had signalled that this Thing outside could come

in. It was a side effect I'd never considered.

"I was terrified but I couldn't stop. I had to go on, to find out. I left her too long. Perhaps her brain burnt out. I don't know. It stopped working. I got in a panic in case I lost this connection with a Thing beyond the world. I had to replace the lost part."

There was a long pause. She listened for any sound from below, but heard only her heart.

"Jobey *is* still alive?"

"I cut him out of circuit. Not to save him, because I got too frightened of what was coming ... One murder—two—no difference. Same price—"

"They come from out there somewhere?"

"Not from here. They don't use me any more. They'll jug me for life, won't they? Then I shall never know—"

"It is easier to be frightened of that than this Thing?"

"You can understand ordinary, personal suffering. It's in you. It's small! What you can't understand is when it's too big. When you can't see it because you're looking in between the bloody atoms it's made of. When you're going to blow up that big yourself and just float away in atomic dust and the man, wading through the frogspawn, he'll blow the dust away, and you'll be a million million bits, all suffering the same as the big one would—"

"Trent. Trent!"

He had gone flat into the tossed clothes, clawing sheets, crying like a child. Clara turned to the bedside table, a clutter of muck, bottles, cartons, cigarettes, ends. She took a small handkerchief from her bracelet, shook two pills from it into a glass and poured water.

"Take these," she said.

He looked up, took the glass and looked down into it.

"They want me, those men," he said.

"No. They want this thing to happen."

He looked up, his plastic balloon suddenly penetrated.

"They told you that?" he said.

"No. But I know. I can feel." She watched the rolling eyes of the tubes, then looked back as he took the pills. "You

stay in here," she went on. "I won't let them in."

She went out, locked the doors and took the keys with her. She went along the corridor and down the back stairs to the garden, then round the house and through the barns to the vicarage. As usual, the main door was wide open and there was a light shining from the open door of Richard's study.

He looked up over a dam of tattered papers, then took his pipe out of his mouth as he watched her close the door.

"I've seen Trent," she said. "He's had a breakdown."

"Justice has struck," Richard said, and shrugged. "Did you call your doctor?"

"No. Listen to me, Richard." She told him what Trent had told her.

"I'm rather proud of myself," Richard said. "I was so near, wasn't I? So near." He puffed at his pipe and watched her. "It sounds to me that the fool has roused the devil."

"He's roused something." She shuddered. "You can feel it in the room. It's terrifying. Just a feeling of something prowling—I don't know, skulking—"

"Not like Albert?"

"No, Albert was friendly, wasn't he? He had been a man once. This Thing—isn't to do with us at all. It's like some gigantic, cold, awful *mind*. A mind with no human passions to make it feel, just a mind to dissect, to pull us apart, watch the pieces—"

"Carve up the unfortunate frog," said Richard. "Well, why not, Clara? Perhaps it's our turn to be the experimental frogs. Justice must come some day, you know."

He got up and started to shamble about the room. She sat, her hands clasped tightly together, watching his feet crossing the carpet, coming back, wandering. He stopped at last.

"I feel sure I was right about these pools of agitation over the village," he said. "This Thing has homed—as they curiously put it—on to the agitated minds of these few. Normally this would not happen. In this case I am sure that the recorder he used and which sent back the signals without being asked to, we might say, also sent them somewhere else.

"He has used a human brain as a frequency control. This

must have a far greater range than any known electronic device—"

He stopped by a chair, seat piled high with magazines. He shuffled through, throwing the discarded on to the floor with flat slaps, then came to a glossy.

He flicked the pages. Clara saw pages of nude Elsie in full colour flee by, and then the turning stopped at a printed page.

"The human brain is estimated to contain a hundred million cells ..." He mumbled over. "Call them radio valves and you have quite a piece of equipment ... Where was that? Ah. Yes." He put the magazine open into her lap. "Read it if you like."

"Tell me, quickly. Trent knows this Thing must come."

"For God's sake, surely we all know that by now?" Richard said with sudden irritation. "Trent has borrowed this idea from a Russian experiment. They used the brain of a human vegetable as a circuit booster in some computer."

"What on earth's a human vegetable?"

"Victim of an accident, brain damaged beyond repair, but sufficiently good, it appears, for some evil experiment. It did not work. But the writer concludes that it will some day."

"Richard, the time ... It's getting very late. The—officials are over in my house, deliberately waiting to see what happens. They mean to let it."

"How do they know they will survive it?" said Richard

"They believe they are immune."

"Your capacity for seeing people's thoughts is almost as great as Trent's machine," he said, and grinned like a skull. "If one considers this mathematically, then they will let it happen because they know they are immune, though the village will seem to disappear all round us. In short, they must think that only the receivers of the letters will suffer."

Clara stiffened.

"Then they know all about it? Trent...?"

"They must know a good deal. It is their job. Do stop tapping on the chair arm. I cannot concentrate."

"It's the time! We can't tell."

"We can be only in time or too late. That will be no

different from the rest of our lives. Do let me think. I am sure I am right to ask these people together—"

"So that we can all die together?"

"Don't be so dramatic. One dies, what of it? What we are trying to do is see that the sort of life we believe in goes on. Whether we die or not is immaterial, except insofar as it involves beating off this Thing. That is the only importance of our continuing to live."

"For God's sake hurry!"

"Hurry? Do you believe I can do something?" He looked up in mock surprise. "Don't say you are the only soul with belief in me? Clara, you almost fire me. After all these years—"

"Don't be a doddering idiot!" she cried out. "Do something if you can!"

"When they come," he said, and stared at the magazine she tapped on instead of the chair arm. "What do you think Elsie's letter was about?"

"About her posing. Really, this is drawing my nerves—"

"That's ridiculous," Richard said. "Why, she is plastered all over these magazines. There must be something more important than that."

"Not her parentage?" said Clara bitterly.

Richard laughed.

"That would be ironic, would it not? No, it could not be that. Something of importance, I think. It might help to know."

"She is keeping the Ministry men busy."

"It is now nearly ten. You will notice there has been no demonstration since about seven, so that one should be due fairly soon."

"The man said after dark."

"Dark takes so long to come with these added hours here and there, and the longest day, almost." He stared out at the dusk.

She stood up and looked at the scribbled pages on his littered desk.

"What were you doing when I came in?"

"Preparing a sermon," he said.

"What!" Her surprise gave way to a sudden, breathless

laugh. "Well, there's hope then?"

"Why speak like that? If you had none, you would have run away by now."

"But if this Thing is seeking our minds, what good will running do?"

"That is an interesting point," he said, nodding. "Quite fascinating, the picture of a man running from danger having his brains picked out of the open top of his skull."

"Horrid!" She went to the door.

"It's what they call surrealism, Clara," he said. "What will you do now?"

"Go back to the house. I will wait for word from you—if it comes in time."

"You won't run, Clara," he said, nodding. "You can't, you know. The only thing is to stand and fight the good fight. It should be very interesting."

Clara hurried back across the green to her house. Elsie was alone in the lounge. Clara stopped dead, panic rising.

"Where are they—the men?" she said.

"They went," Elsie said. "Apologies. There was much to do, they said."

"Where have they gone?"

"They went out the front. That's all I know. The man with the ulcers is drunk and is shortly going to be carted off with a punctured pimple in his tum, I'd guess."

"They didn't go upstairs?"

Elsie was surprised. "Of course not." She came nearer, head cocked. "What's happened up there?"

"Trent is ill," Clara said, turning away.

"Quite well deserved," said Elsie. "What's wrong?"

"He must rest. He's been under great strain."

"Haven't we all?" She grimaced. "Those men. They're going to let it happen for an experiment."

"Did they say so?" Clara was very quick.

"Darke more or less admitted it. Let it get as near the bone as possible, then pull out and watch. The point is, how will they know which is the big one? Surely it'll be too late when they know?"

"Did they ask where I was?"

"Don't be guilty. They're quite self-sufficient. They don't give a damn where anybody is."

"Stay in case they come back," Clara said.

She went out into the silent hall and hesitated at the bottom of the stairs, looking back to the open door and the gathering darkness. Somewhere she seemed to hear a sound, but it would not realise itself and stayed a shadow, a worry in her brain.

The upper corridor was empty. She hurried to Trent's doors and unlocked them. She closed them behind her, bolting one. The eyes of the tubes were rolling faster and now she could hear the sound, a kind of thin high whistling that seemed to come from everywhere at once, close to her ear, in the middle of the air in the room, and far out beyond the roof. She shook her head to try and get rid of it, then crossed the big room and went into the dressing room.

Trent's things, open trunks, clothes spilled as if he had dragged them out in some search. There were some pieces of equipment, but they did not seem activated as the ones in the big room. She went through into the bathroom, her hands tightly clasped at her bosom. She stopped there. Jobey was lying in the bath, eyes closed, pale under his sunbrowned skin. He looked old, worn and sick.

There were wires coiled about on the floor by the bath. She walked round them and came to Jobey. He was breathing steadily. His pulse was strong but slow.

She clasped her hands again and straightened, then slowly looked round. There was a long bundle by the basin, a crumpled blanket bundle lying up against the wall. Clara went to it and lifted one end. The girl was dead. She made sure, but the coldness of the flesh was of many hours.

She covered the face again and went back into the bedroom. She stood looking at Trent lying flat on his back across the tumbled bedclothes. She stood a long time, not hearing the thin unplaceable whistling.

When she went to the bed she took one wrist. There was no pulse. She closed her eyes and stood a full minute, then

went out of the death room and locked the doors again.

At the bottom of the stairs Judith and Elsie stood together. They looked up anxiously as Clara came down.

"The whistling's come again," Judith said breathlessly.

"I heard it," Clara said. "But it's not very loud. Not like it was."

"But it's coming," Elsie said tautly.

"Judith, would you like to go home?" Clara said.

Judith looked quickly at the open door, then at Clara and then shook her head in a terrified gesture.

"No, I— No."

"Don't stay for me," Clara said.

"I'd sooner be here. It's just the whistling. It gets in your head like."

"Make some tea, Judith. That would be a good thing."

Judith went quickly.

"It's coming now, isn't it?" Elsie said huskily.

"I've seen Jobey," Clara said tonelessly. "He's all right. Sleeping."

"Oh well," said Elsie, letting go a breath and laughing shortly, "that's something, I suppose."

"What was your letter about?" Clara said.

"About my job."

"What about it?" She shook her head slightly to rid it of the ghost whistling.

"Something's coming," Elsie said. "It isn't a vanishing trick. It's something coming. I can feel it."

"You know your father is getting everybody together—everybody who got the letters?"

"They'll come," Elsie said. "When things go wrong people get scared about God. They pray, too. You know what it was? There was a man pestering the girls at the studio. A commercial boy. Sort of blackmail artist as well. So I made a doll and stuck the pin right through his stomach. So he died."

Clara took a deep breath.

"But it couldn't have been your doing," she said.

"You don't know what it feels like when it happens."

"You don't really believe in—it, do you, Elsie?"

"It happened, Clara. It didn't wait. He died the night I did it."

"He must have had something wrong before." She turned her head and looked up the stairs.

"Aren't you getting a doctor for Trent?" Elsie said quickly.

Clara looked back at her. "Trent's dead," she said.

Elsie started back, then froze, eyes and mouth open. She put her hands over her mouth to stop a scream, then shuddered.

"Elsie, dear! What—"

Elsie moaned and then turned to the door and ran out. She bumped the panels as if she could not see. Clara started after her but Judith came in behind her.

"The leaves are falling," Judith said tersely.

Clara stopped and looked back at her.

"The leaves," Judith said urgently. "Off the trees. The apple trees. You can see in the back door light."

The whistling seemed to become more definite. Clara looked up the stairs again then jerked round as Darke spoke from the main doorway.

"It's beginning," he said, looking to the stairs.

She stood with her back to the flight, one hand on the newel as if defending the way.

Darke brought his detector out and consulted it. Then he put it back in his pocket.

"Nothing coming from here now," he said. "Have you noticed anything happening in the house?"

"The leaves are falling out there," Judith said, and shivered and went stiff.

"Anything in the house?" Darke repeated.

"Nothing," Clara said. "The whistling is coming from outside, isn't it?"

"Can't track where it's coming from. It's an aural cheat."

He turned and stood on the steps looking at the sky.

"Don't worry about him!" Judith whispered.

"I'm all right, dear."

"I think it's getting louder."

"No. It's still the same."

Basil Garfield stood in the road staring towards the glass bungalow on the corner. Bert Dollflower came quickly across from it, patting his wounded arm.

"Can't get a burp out of them," he said. "No lights. All dead quiet. Not even any radio parping off. She always has the radio. The motor's in the port, too. They must be in."

Basil shrugged and began to limp along the road towards the church. Bert walked alongside.

"Do you think it'll do some good, this?" Bert said.

"Dammee if I know," Basil said. "The thing is, Dollflower, if it gets the king sod who wrote them, it'll do all the good we need. That's it. You can't let bastards like this get away with it. Poison pen. Drive people to suicide."

"I s'pose it would, some," Bert said. "I hant thought of that."

They came to the church turning. At the lane mouth Jock Browne-Jones strode up from the direction of the Mill.

"That you, Baz?" he said, halting. "Ah. Dollflower. You got one of these bloody letters, too? Some swine must be queer in the head. About my daughter. A child! Queer! No, that's not the word for this brute. When I get him I'm going to thrash the hide off him, I promise you! Bloody bastard."

They began to walk together up the lane. It was very still and close. Cloud hid the moon, cloud that seemed to glow coppery in the dusk.

Ben James left the inn to his wife and daughter and walked as far as Battock's Stores. He banged on the door. After a while, the door opened and Len looked out.

"You coming?" Ben said.

Len swallowed. "I been thinking," he said. "I don't see as it could do any good."

"It's bound to do some good, isn't it?" Ben said. "If it gets on to this letter writer, it's bound to do us a favour!"

"I don't know."

"What's the matter then?"

"I've been thinking. Is it wise to stir things up? I mean, this chap could spread a lot of lies—worse lies—"

"You frightened of your evil secret?" said Ben, and laughed harshly. "So am I. But you've got to face up and stop this. You've got to have it cut out. If you don't you'll sicken and die. Beth says. You know her Irish whimsicals. Come on."

"It's asking for trouble," Len said. "I mean, supposing he spread a lot of stuff and the police—"

Ben swallowed and showed his teeth. "The police don't do anything when it's blackmail," he said gruffly.

"They never do. Everybody knows that."

"I think it's unwise to stir it up," Len croaked. "I mean, you know how everybody is—no smoke without fire—and, and that. It's asking for it—this—"

Battock slammed the door. Ben listened to the chain clanking inside.

"Silly devil," Ben said, and marched on down the road. "There's a fire under the lot of us."

Near the church he began to hear the high whistling. It was soft and came from a lot of directions at once. He stopped and turned round, trying to locate it, but couldn't.

"Here we go again," he said, and walked on.

Sarah Dribble went quietly out of the farm kissing gate beside the five bar. The Dribble brothers saw her from the Dutch barn.

"Where's she to, then?" Ben Dribble said.

"It's her night, I reckon. The bloody dogs is actin' like they keep hearin' things and the cows is gettin' all fretty."

"It's them, I reckons." Ben Dribble pointed after Sarah with a straw. "'Er fertility and that. The cows is dropping calves all over. It's that fertility stuff. I don't like it. Aint natural. Even that bloody fool from the Ministry didn't get what was goin' on. No, it's them. I'm goin' after."

"What for?"

"Look, we got three acres er barley fried up wi' something, and them cows calving like bloody cats. It's something annit? If I set me face against all them quick fattenin' buggerin' chemicals I ain't goin' ter let some buggerin' fertility business upset my cows nor the wheat neither. I'm festerin' wi' anger

and be gonna find what er's about."

He started for the gate with room for a horse between his legs. His brother hesitated, then started after. A pair of dogs began to follow, then stopped and crouched down. At the gate the Dribbles looked back.

"They got bloody ghosts," Ben said. "They bin queer all day. Leave 'em be."

"I don't like it when dogs is like that."

"Nor me neither, yer buggerin' idjit. It's this fertility I keep tellin' yer about. They don't like it neither."

Outside The Warning Bang a number of people gathered in the path of light streaming from the open inn door. It looked like the mouth of the fiery furnace.

"Well, there's some kind o' whistling anyways..."

"Not like the old one, though. Not like this mornin'."

"It's a whistlin' though, innit?"

"But nothing funny's on. You can see everything."

"Well, er course yer can see everything, yer twit."

"Well, yer couldn't sometimes, I mean. Sort er vanished."

"Bloody heat haze, that is. What you on about? You seen them afore."

"It smells funny, today does. Smells funny. I kep sayin' about how it was funny, all terday. Funny feelin'. Smells funny."

"Yer silly old nit. Look, here's the police come ter drive you 'ome. One way or the other. 'Night all. Come on Grandpa."

The white police car came slowly past. The crowd began to dissipate. The whistling was soft and in the distance.

"Sort of gets in your ears, like bugs or something," said the police driver. "Bugs buzzing in your ears."

"It could get so it made you imagine things," the sergeant said. "I've been reading about these experiments where you keep repeating a sound to some geezer and after a bit his brain loses its grip and you can put in anything you want."

"Yeh, but why?" asked the driver.

"That's it, isn't it?" said the sergeant. "That's it!"

"Sinister," said the driver.

"You know," the sergeant said, looking up from the map under the light, "there's only about thirty people inside this circle."

"Thanks be," said the driver. "The fewer the best. Do you think we will get a signal to shift 'em out?"

"Don't know. The whole thing sounds daft to me."

Darke used his radio and leaned against the barn wall to watch the church tower against the copper-black sky.

"You getting anything, Bill?" he said.

"Plenty now. I've got six operators on. Called them in. There's been no signal from the Manor for ninety-four minutes."

"There's none here now. What are you getting?"

"Nothing firm. I got Research in. They had a lot of guff for souping up the circuits, so I let 'em have a go on ours. It's certainly better."

"What are you getting?"

"A shade. No more. A cloud, you might say. Can't measure it anywise at all, but it's actually been giving echoes."

"Where is it coming from?"

"That too is X, so far. It seems, repeat seems, to be coming from the sky, but you know with anything so indefinite it could be coming from anywhere, even from below."

"It has no pattern you recognise?"

"Nothing we know of. You see, it won't form. We can't get hold of it."

"Then it could still be a jamming signal. Idling perhaps?"

"You guess. It's coming in from the astro scanners but it still comes in whether they're hitched to azimuth or under the horizon. It doesn't alter with the scene. It's just there."

"Just as it's been all along."

"No. The transmissions from the Manor seemed to make it more violent, madder. But, as you say, it could be free-wheeling."

"The whistle's on here. But it doesn't increase."

"It's thickening up on one fringe, but as I say, it's like mist all through. The Research boys are on all the time, trying something new. They might hit it before anything happens."

"You say freewheeling. It could be holding."

"Yeah. It could be. But I don't see what it's holding when there's no transmission from there now."

"Could be just a stay-tuned idling. Waiting for the sending to start up again."

"I don't know. There's something new on the circuit. I'll call you back. Listen out."

"Okay." Darke slung the set round his neck on a cord and moved away from the barn.

The radio called again.

"There was a sudden latch-on signal about ten fifty, number four says. Looked like a transmission from outside the front of the house there."

"I was there then. Nobody— A girl ran out. That's all."

"She wouldn't be sending?"

"No."

"There was something reflecting there."

"Well, it wasn't radio. Or laser. It must have been sheer sex."

"Stay tuned."

Richard carried a candle the length of the aisle, his old cassock dragging the stone floor. He heard a girl crying and walked on, not slower, nor faster. He came to the end and she looked up sharply from where she sat in the pew.

"Elsie child," he said, "don't be frightened. We have not lost yet."

She sat stiffly, hands clasped and writhing in her lap.

"I've killed two men," she said.

She was stiff and expressionless. Richard recognised the rigid penitence, the flaming certainty of guilt shining in self-torture. Like her mother.

"Oh God, no," he said quietly, and then louder, "that is impossible. You know that."

"I wished them dead and they died," she said.

"I'm so glad," said Richard, relieved. "For a moment I had the thought that all things are possible— No, child. Not that. No one can do that."

"They died," she said.

"Then they would have died in any case. You are saddled with your mother's guilt, child. We murder people every day in thought and speech. Some wish for it, some even pray for it. But it doesn't happen. You may wish someone dead but his wish to stay alive will always be the stronger. You are distraught. It is the day. The slow course of events."

"They died," she said again.

"A reason will be shown at the inquest," he said. "Come into the vestry with me."

She got up. He put his arm round her and they went together following the flickering candle through the gloom. In the vestry he put the candle down.

"Tell me about these men," he said. He let her go.

She told him about the man in Bristol. He lit his pipe. His eyes watched the mid distance. He was listening to the whistling.

"And Trent," she said.

"Ah," he said, nodding. "God's will, I should say. By night there are many who would have put an end to him."

She looked up then.

"Is that what you meant to do?" she said.

"That whistling," he said, stopping smoking, "is becoming most insistent." He wiped his face with a handkerchief. "I find it most trying. It makes the oppression somewhat more marked. So hot."

He opened the outer door of the vestry. The outside air was as hot and still as the inside. He watched the upper light in the vicarage shining between the yews.

"Your mother has gone to bed. She hears nothing but the voice of Doom. Inner Doom. Years ago she did something that she thought a sin. It is this which has grown into a madness with her. I left it too long to say that I knew. Beyond a certain point, one cannot say."

"Did it hurt you?" She was wide-eyed, and he remembered her as a child looking just that way.

"It gave me great pleasure," he said. "But if I had told your mother that she would have suffered worse than she does

now. There are some battles one cannot win."

In the thick, hot quiet they heard footsteps approaching in the lane. They were muddled, hesitant, as if some wished to come on, and others to hold back. There were no voices.

"How did you know Trent was dead?" he whispered.

"Clara said."

He picked up the candle and carried it to the open door.

"This way," he called out.

There was a muttering, the footfalls grew more confused and then came the groan of the lychgate. The steady, mid-atmospheric whistling accentuated the night sounds, even made the background of quiet more intense.

Richard wiped his face again.

Basil, Bert Dollflower and Browne-Jones came in.

"I'm glad you came," Richard said. "It is a very grave matter we have to discuss."

"So long as it's not going to be a king sermon," Basil said gruffly and tried to laugh. "That bloody whistling. It gets your nerves."

"Where the hell's it coming from?" Browne-Jones said. "It's like shells. You know how they used to scream?"

"King things," said Basil, cursing his own fortune.

"What time's the balloon go up?" said Bert Dollflower.

"It's getting louder," Elsie said. "Like it was before, almost."

Basil dropped into a chair and wiped his face.

"Daisy's not well," he said. "It's this shrieking business. Thinks she's going to die. Silly old girl. I hope she doesn't. Althea wanted to come. I said stay with your mother."

"Mine's drunk," Browne-Jones said, turning his back on the candle. "It was my bloody fault, all that. She can't stand the worry. Can't take a chance. You know how it is. Used to get men like that. You'd see they were going to break, and you just gave 'em a bottle and pushed 'em. They got knocked off, mostly. Death wish, praps. Don't know. Praps it's no good living if you're scared of the whole thing."

"When it happened this evening," Bert Dollflower said, "I got hold of Elsie, automatic like, but it wasn't so bad then. As if the ruddy shock got split between us. That's what it

seemed like."

"Yes," Elsie said. "Yes, it did."

"What is it going to be, padre?" Browne-Jones said. "Death? It's as well to know what to expect. It feels bloody grim."

"I can't tell what it's going to be," Richard said. "To an extent, what it's going to be depends on you."

There was a silence as they heard heavy, determined footfalls, approaching on the path. Bert Dollflower looked out then turned his head up.

"There's a kinder glow in the sky," he said. "Sort of red. It isn't up there, is it?"

No one answered. Ben James came to the step and stopped there as if uncertain at last.

"Come in," Richard said. He turned away as he saw Clara come silently in from the body of the church and stand away in the shadows beyond the candlelight, a ghost.

The innkeeper pushed his shirt collar down his thick neck and came in. He nodded.

"Evening, gentlemen." He stopped and swallowed. "Len wouldn't come. He—he wouldn't come."

Richard looked at the old clock on the wall. He had christened them, married them and buried them by that solemn guide, but he feared it now.

"I wish that king whistle would pack up or do something!" Basil said angrily. "It's like a bloody worm in your head."

Richard looked round at the faces, hot, shining in the flickering candlelight. Elsie's head was bent, her hair almost covering her face. Clara still stood at the back, a companion of the shadows.

"So we are all here, almost every one of us who got a letter this morning," Richard said. "We are not here to find what was in them. We are here to get rid of the evil that they brought. The first thing that we have to understand is that, given the preliminary investigation that was carried out on each one of us, such letters could have been sent to anyone, at any time, and with precisely the same effects that they have had on us.

"Everyone is frightened of at least one thing they have

done, or even wished to have done. Some stay frightened, others manage to stop it. When I was younger I used to pick up a pair of scissors and see the points and within me there came a definite wish to stick one in my eye, to ruin myself. I remember how fragile was the opposition that stopped me doing it. For a long time, I would not go near scissors. You must all have had wishes like that."

"I get the notion to put my hand flat on the red hot plate of the cooker," Browne-Jones said. "My God, yes! I have to turn my back."

"The investigation used against us," said Richard, "was mechanical and unable to distinguish between the wish and something that was actually done. Either way, it roused the guilt. It roused the fear, the alarm, then the feeling that disaster for us lay just ahead. It was no good to pray. We pray for the future. What burnt us at the stake was the past. The unalterable.

"This machine might have been used on a dozen others, but we were selected because in each case it recorded a conscience over something. So we became good subjects."

"What subjects?" said Dollflower. "For what? Was it that bastard up the Manor? Him?"

"It's out of his hands," Richard said, looking to the clock again. "This is something far beyond anything we can understand. Except for one thing."

"Don't stretch it, man, don't stretch it!" said the soldier, smacking his thigh nervously.

"One simple fact which the machine could not detect," said Richard. "It is this: that whatever we did in the past or wished to do has been conquered and conquered by ourselves alone. Remember, we have won already. And none of us is too old to get that strength to win again."

"But supposin' it didn't seem wrong?" Bert Dollflower said. "Supposin' you get pushed into a scene and it seems all right and only afterwards some twit tells you it's against the law or something. How can you fight something you don't bloody well know about?"

"One has to learn and having learnt apply the lesson.

Nothing is good. Nothing is evil. Without evil there can be no good."

"Hurting's evil," Elsie said. "Hurting, cruelty!"

Richard watched the clock. The whistling was steady but the heat was coming closer all round.

"I can't stand this king atmosphere!" Basil said, wiping his face again.

"The Entwistles didn't come," Bert Dollflower said. "I banged and banged. Suppose he did her in? He was mad jealous all the time. Mad jealous— It won't be long now. This is what it felt like, out in the lane this evening."

"But what's coming, man?" said the soldier. "What?"

"Judgment Day," said the innkeeper. "Beth's mad on Judgment Day. It's part of Ireland ... I should have brought some booze. This is no time for a dry judgment—"

"The wine," said Richard, and went to his cupboard. "You must pass the chalice. There are no glasses here."

"I don't give a bugger for that," said Basil, mopping his face. "Let's have something."

"That whistling," Elsie said. "It's louder. It's getting into me."

"It's a village," said Clara. "An ordinary village. It was ordinary this morning. It will be ordinary always. It is we who change. We who lose the hold on ourselves."

"Not ourselves, Clara," Richard said. "We have the hold there while we will it. Come. Take some. It isn't bad. I pay fifteen shillings a bottle. I have to sup it myself, remember."

Clara laughed suddenly, took the chalice and drank.

Elsie said, "You've broken." She sat a moment, puzzled. "Give me some."

Richard poured more. She drank thirstily and finished breathless. Basil watched, licking his lips, his eyes coming out. "It's damn hot," he said.

"Takes a long, thirsty time, getting it this way," the soldier said, and went to the doorway to look out. "Looks like storm. I don't know. Maybe it's storm anyhow."

"My wife died, I'm sure," the innkeeper said.

"It's easy to find out," Richard said. "Why didn't you?"

"Scared in case she wasn't."

Basil took a draught. "My God, it's foul!" he said, and drank some more. "I'm parched."

"Another three bottles," said Richard.

"I s'pose it's all right if you can't do anything else," Dollflower said, wiping the edge of the cup with his fingers. "It's right what you said, though. About it all being done with. That's it, after all, innit? Sort of stirrin' up old bones."

Richard watched him drink and grinned as he put his hand out to refill the cup.

"It's an attempt by the devil to tune into your brains, the first real scientific snatch by the Prince of all the Furnaces. You realise that, I suppose?" he said. "Let me explain to you what I mean..."

Some began to listen, but as Richard droned on the whistling became stronger, nearer, gathering round from a dozen different sources. Richard looked at the clock, then at Clara.

"It is nearly time," he said. "Don't forget. You have all beaten these sins already. You have won long before now. The Prince has lost his grip, the lever is too weak. Listen to this whistle calling now. It is lost, you see. Groping. You are not alarmed any more. There is nothing that can happen to you because what you have beaten once is easy to beat again."

The whistling became a scream, a pressure in the hot air. Basil clapped hands over his ears. Clara put her hand on Elsie's shoulder, and the girl clutched her hand over Clara's, holding it there in case it should go again. The soldier stood looking out at the glowing sky, his fists clenched.

"She died," the innkeeper said through his teeth. "She died!"

Bert Dollflower wiped his brow with his hand to stop the sweat running into his eyes.

"It's something up there," he said, taking a step. "Up there!"

"Don't go out!" Richard thundered.

Bert stopped, then clutched the edge of the door. The drift was beginning. He reached out with his free hand and took the soldier's shoulder. Browne-Jones looked back a moment,

his face wet, nodded, then grinned.

The screaming fluctuated, rising and falling, a wandering sound. Clara bent close to Elsie, her hand hurting from the girl's grip.

"He killed himself," she said in the girl's ear. "Poison. Not you. He killed himself."

Basil took up the wine bottle and swigged, staggering about from the drift, yet never spilling a drop.

Sarah Dribble came to the bottom of the church lane, stopped and looked at the sky. Nervously she rearranged the scarf over her head and looked round in the darkness. The whistling was everywhere, and yet not loud. Like a thousand things whistling very very quietly, she thought.

Like *them* come up from below.

She shivered slightly, took a few steps into the lane, then stopped again. She looked up at the high spears of the trees, black against the pinkish sky, like tall, black hooded men gathering round her to stop her going back.

Somewhere through the overgrown top of the hedge she saw a flickering light from the open vestry door.

The whistling was becoming a feel now, a feel getting stronger, deeper, gathering inside her. She put her hands to her middle and gasped but did not turn to go.

Instead she went on two paces and stopped again, still holding her middle. She turned quickly in alarm as she heard boots grating the dry lane behind her.

"What you doin' here, you?" her husband said. "'Tis no good place for you, this time o' night. What's with you, then?"

His voice was very quiet, croaking. His brother stood silent behind him, wiping his sweaty face with his cap lining.

"I had to come," she said, and trembled.

"Whyfore? What ye doin', then?" Dribble peered into her face.

"I must see Miss Clara. I must!"

"She'll be abed long back."

"No. Not this night."

"'Tis Midsummer. What's to that, then?" He got her arm

and shook her. "What are you at, Sarah? What you doin'? There's bloody Devil about somewheres the way things is goin'. Evil Eye."

"It isn't—not me—not us—don't be angry wi' me. 'Tis not—what you'm thinkin'—"

"What am I thinkin', then? Listen. Feel that noise goin' on? Bloody dogs is cowed. Crouchin' back there. Won't foller. The cows is all to buggery. The wheat's burnin' over this way. It's you bloody witches, and don't you 'tend it aint, neither."

"It is not! It *is* not!" She struggled. "Let me go. You hurt my arm."

"What's doin' here then, for Garser's sake? Fightin' or somethin'?" Baskin came up behind the Dribble brothers. "Some bloody row. I thought it was a riot breakin' out." He turned his head and looked back. "What you want? Why keep follerin' me?" Flyn, the Garfield dog, lay down with his eyes on the gardener. The dog shook all over and whined quietly.

"Allus follers me when 'e's ad trouble," Baskin said. "What's on up 'ere? Bloody whistlin' enough to bore yer ear'oles out—Blimey! Someone's to church! Light in there—"

Flyn got up suddenly and flashed past the group. He tore round and into the churchyard by leaping the lychgate. He rushed up the path towards the light, then stopped dead, tail down.

"That dog's got 'em," Baskin said. "Like the rest of the sufferin' family, all of a twit-twat."

"All the dogs has got 'em," Dribble said. "It's this goin'-on. You knows what I think it is, then?"

"I'm going to Manor!" Sarah said, and turned and hurried up the lane.

There was a momentary hesitation, then her husband started to follow, then, like a vehicle under tow on a slack rope, his brother paused and lurched forward in pursuit. Baskin tramped alongside.

"Might as well come," he said. "Not one for folk, me, but when you're bein' shot at they're none so bad. It eases you to think somebody's goin' to be blown to beggary alongside. I likes to share misfortunes. I'm a Commie at heart." He

laughed. "Everybody's rippin' their bloody ears off with nerves. You ought to hear the shindy in the house, what with her screamin' at him, and him bawlin' at the dog, and the dog bellowin' at me, you'd think somebody was shakin' out itch powder or somethink."

They came on to the lawn before the house. Judith was at the open door with Sarah.

"She went out," Judith said, hugging a coat about her despite the heat. "I don't know where."

Helpless and alarmed Sarah turned back as the men shambled to a stop on the grass. There was a natural silence and then, as if it had been hiding a while, the weird whistling came back again, coming nearer and nearer, like a phantom train rushing down through the sky.

Ben Dribble wiped his face on the cap again.

"It'll turn the herd wild," his brother said, hoarsely. "Kick enselves, they will. I best go back—"

"More like the old woman bawlin' at Basil the Goon," said Baskin, his voice grating. "The daughter says it's a bloody earthquake. She 'as earthquakes. Lots. Every bloody thing falls down—" He wiped his face with a flat hand. "You oughter see my garden! A crime, it is. Burnt up, gone to seed, weeds like bloody whiskers in the mornin'—the work! It don't bear thinkin' of, gettin' that up together again. 'There,' I says to him, 'is me notice and you can stuff it—'"

There was a sudden rattle from somewhere above, then a crash. Everyone stopped still and stared up to the first floor. The shutters had been flung back and the windows opened.

"Who's that?" Sarah hissed.

"'Tis Jobey postman," her husband said. "Hey, Jobey! What be doin' up to there, then?"

Jobey was looking at the sky. He stood in darkness. There was no light in the room behind him. He said nothing, but just stood still, looking up.

"Jobey!" Judith began to scream the name, but grew frightened of her own sound and ended in a whisper.

A man came walking quickly across the grass from the barns. Baskin turned and recognised Darke.

Then Jobey suddenly shouted.

"He is coming! He is coming! Great Christ!"

He fell back into the room. Darke passed the silent watchers and hesitated.

The whistling came back again, swelling, then fading, following a pattern of undulation but coming louder, nearer with each swell.

"If this be gonna turn my beans to black I'll tear it all apart!" Baskin shouted, looking round him. "Spoilt all me careful work. Roused it, towsed it, burnt it—"

"How can you talk 'bout ordinary things?" Sarah cried out.

"Where you going?" Judith half screamed.

Darke did not reply but ran on into the house. They heard him running up the stairs. Judith covered her face with her hands as if praying, but did no more.

Upstairs Darke came to the door he had shaken before. He banged on it. "Jobey! Open the door! Open the door!"

"What's it to?" Jobey's toneless voice came muffled through the double doors. "There's no keys!"

Darke brushed sweat from his eyes with his fingers.

"There must be some—somewhere! Look!"

Darke waited, hearing nothing but the undulating whistle and the pulsing of blood in his head. Excitement made him tense. He knew Trent could have no more effect in that room or the captive would not be free. He didn't care what had happened. He just had to get in.

"Jussa minute!" Jobey called. "There's some keys—I'll try—" The fumbling, clicking, clinking were like stings to Darke's brain.

"Hurry!" he shouted. "Hurry!"

There was a louder clack, then the outer door shuddered.

"Got one!" Jobey's gasping voice was louder then.

More clicks and clinks and grinding in the wards.

"Oh Christ! It's stuck in! It'll be here! It's coming—"

The heavy door shook.

"Don't force it! You'll break the key in the lock!"

Jobey went on struggling, making the door rattle uneasily, while he cursed and uttered alarming things about It com-

ing. As if there could be someone awful in the room behind him.

Darke wiped his face again. His hands trembled.

"Ease it back. Ease it!" he shouted. "Don't force—"

The door shook and thudded as Jobey struggled to unjam the key.

Darke turned suddenly as he saw someone standing at the head of the stairs. Sarah put out a hand.

"Don't go in there!" she said, desperately. "'Tis evil, I tell you. If you go there, you will die in sufferin' and torment. Leave it. Leave it be! It will be the end of you and all of us to go in there!"

Darke looked at the door, then back to her. He went slowly towards her and stopped and wiped sweat from his jaws.

"Why do you think that?"

"I have the feeling. I know. 'Tis bad tonight. Very bad. I have the feeling so that I know. I can feel your sickness, and it is so bad that if you go in that place you will die." She spoke in a very low voice, her big blue eyes apparently seeing right through him.

"What—is my sickness?" he said, huskily.

"It is a sickness of bitterness, of driving to wrong. It is in your face, in your hands. Something drives you. It is bad. Come away from here and the sickness will go. Do not tempt your fate. You think I am mad. But I know. I know there is an ache in your head now."

"How can you know that?" he challenged angrily.

"Because I feel it!" she said.

"It's the whistling—"

"No. It is you. It is the bad in you. I can feel. Still now." She reached out and touched his brow with a finger. "Now it is gone."

He stared, opened his mouth, then shook his head.

"Yes, it has gone," he said.

"You see, I know," she said. "There is that in this place which you must not try and reach."

The door opened at last. Darke turned and saw Jobey, dishevelled, dirty, shining with sweat and gasping as if he had run a mile.

"Don't go!" Sarah said.

He did not look back at her. "I must," he said.

"You will die," she said.

He walked on to the door and into the room. Jobey did not seem to see him, but came reeling down the corridor to Sarah. He fell against the wall there, panting. She touched his face in horror.

"Dear Jobey! What has happened to you? What have they done to you?"

"I saw God," he said. "I been with God. It's not a man at all. It's a big, black fog—all spread out—gigantic—bigger'n the sky. He's coming—here. I been with God. It was awful. It bursts your head!"

"Sit down in the chair," she whispered. "In the chair, Jobey. Agen the wall there. Sit down."

She guided him and he dropped into a chair.

"I can't touch me head," he said. "It's all in bits. It's all come apart. It was all over the room. All bits. Just me eyes floatin'—"

She stroked his brow. He just stared, bewildered, and then closed his eyes, his muscles eased, went flaccid and he slumped. She drew her hand away and looked towards the open door to Trent's room. The whistling was becoming intense.

Darke looked at the body sprawled on the bed, then went to it and searched the trouser pockets. He turned away, glanced at the rolling green eyes of the screens, saw every cable disconnected and lying on the floor and then began to search in the drawers and cupboards in the room.

He found papers, shovelled them out, read, cast aside. He kept wiping his face so that he could see. The heat in the room was burning and there was a pressure in the air such as he had felt in the proximity of powerful, very high frequency transmissions.

But nothing was transmitting.

The whistling steadily grew more intense. It quickened his desperate search, but he tried not to hear it. When he found the diagram he needed he sat down on a chest at the foot of the bed and studied it.

"God!" he said. "I didn't think it was *that*!"

The woman came to the door. "Don't try to match it," she said. "'Tis not for you. Leave it be."

He moved about the room, the paper in hand, plugging in the disconnected cables.

"You will die," she said.

He went on working. She turned and went away from the doors. When every cable seemed in position he checked with the diagram and then traced the outgoing lines to the bathroom. The whistling persisted, but there was a drone coming behind it, as if two different frequencies were now coming on the air.

He entered the bathroom and looked at the cables on the floor, the metal plate ends, the headband. He looked at the body by the washbasin, then picked up the loose wires and dragged them back into the bedroom.

The green eyes still rolled, jazzing. The feeling of intense pressure in the room made it hard for him to move his limbs. He dropped on to the chest again, the head fittings in his hands. The tubes were idling still, the current from the mains was off. He turned and saw the woman in the doorway again.

"Leave it be!" she cried out. "It is more than you!"

"What is it, then?" he shouted. "What is it?"

"It is The Power. If you bring it here it will destroy. It is bigger than anything. You will not—"

His radio signalled. He pulled it out and answered.

"The boffins have got a hookup clarifying a bit. But it's so big, like tracking a cloud from the middle."

"Direction?"

"Either above or right up through. Can't tell."

"Very strong?"

"Colossal. Blown three tubes here. If they really get on to it I think the rest'll go. Station too, I wouldn't be surprised. What are you getting?"

"Sick. I'm going to try this thing he did it with."

"What are conditions there?"

"Getting very hot. Unbreathable. Your transmission's lousy."

"Yours too. This thing's bunging the signal. Suppose you get cut off?"

The whole atmosphere suddenly pressurised, ringing with tension that threatened to burst in the eardrums. The woman screamed faintly in the frightful sound.

The pressure eased suddenly.

"What was that?" the radio called. "What was that?"

Darke's jaws were locked tight together. He could not answer. He heard the dead man groan on the bed as the pressure eased off more. The radio went on calling. Darke worked his jaws and when he spoke he lisped where the muscles would not work fully.

"I've got the tapes he used," he said. "I'm going to play—hang on—" His tongue hung out as he went through into the bathroom and soaked his mouth, slopping up water in his hands from a running tap. He went back.

"The tapes?"

"If I play them here on phone line—get me? Send to you on phone line—"

"Okay, yes. Then what?"

"Hang on. Make sure." He went out into the corridor and along to the door of the room where the lovely nude smiled down from her velvet nest. He bent and unplugged the telephone from the skirting and carried it back, trailing cable and tripping on it. He kept working his aching jaws. The whistling was intense, but there was heat and only faint pressure.

He plugged the phone in Trent's room, dialled and left the line open. He called the Station on radio.

"You get that call? Have it through to you and a by line into the transmitters. Cut yours when I say."

"Okay. Yeah. But what are you going to do?"

"Guess. These mind tracks transmitted a signal that was picked up way beyond, because the frequency control was a human brain. That's the guess. So I play them now, they go through you and transmit from the Downs aerials."

"What—lead the beam over to us?"

"Over to the aerials. They're isolated out there."

"I hope it doesn't burn as it goes through."

Darke rewound the tape on the deck, checking with the notes he had. The pressure started to come again. Darke clap-

ped his hands over his ears, locked his jaws tight and shut his eyes. But he could not cut himself from the gathering power that seemed to infect the marrow of his bones and radiate out through the flesh.

The Dribbles and Baskin kept together. No one now was anxious to go by himself. They went through the gate by the Manor and into the park to cut through to the road behind the church.

Ben Dribble stopped close to the avenue of chestnuts. Leaves were falling in the stillness. He looked up.

"Sky's afire or summat!" he said. "Look at en, then!"

"'Tis the ruddy moon!" said Baskin, very quickly.

"Never seed a moon that colour afore!"

"It's this whistlin' gettin'—"

"Jesus Christ!" shouted the second Dribble. "What's them, look? Who's them?"

"I dunno!" Baskin yelled. "Run! My Gawd! They're comin' out o' the bloody graveyard! Run!"

The big dog came by, running madly, yelping as he went. The men started to run, raggedly, bumping into each other. Baskin fell over and screamed before he got up again.

Behind them there was nothing, but over their shoulders the runners could see grey figures scampering from the churchyard, apparently in pursuit.

The sound came on hard, like some hammer coming down from the sky. One after the other the men fell to the grass and stayed there, hiding their faces in the earth.

Only the dog ran on.

In the vestry the people cowered, holding their heads, their eyes. Elsie cried. Bert Dollflower cursed. The soldier cried out with the pain. Garfield sat, hands over his ears, repeating "Earthquake, earthquake—"

Only Richard stood erect looking up at the ceiling.

"Good Lord deliver us!" he bellowed thinly in the awful sound. "From things that go bump in the night, God Almighty! Act, Man! They're stealing Your world. The one

You made! Act, you fool! Do You want them to win?"

Clara clung to his arm, head bent, eyes tightly shut.

When the pressure and the sound retreated again into the endless whistling, no one moved.

Then Basil Garfield stood up.

"We're not going to get out of this," he said hoarsely. "I'd better get back to Daisy. She won't want to be alone." He went to the door.

"Don't go out," Richard said. "You'll die if you do."

"For Christ's sake!" said Basil, turning back. "You don't mean God's got his shield over me, do you?"

"Yes. Sit down."

"Daisy—"

"Daisy has Althea there. Have more wine."

"I can't unlock me bloody teeth," Dollflower hissed.

"It's like being under fire," the soldier said. "Only you don't know who the enemy is."

"The enemy is you," Clara said, eyes still shut. "It always is. The Death Wish—"

"It's coming again," Bert Dollflower said. "You can feel—"

Basil took up the bottle.

"Why don't we pray or something?" the innkeeper said.

"That will save nobody," the soldier said.

"But it's not so bad if you're doing something," the innkeeper explained tensely.

"Have to keep on repeating 'Our Father chartin Heaven,'" Dollflower said. "I don't know another one. Can't even remember the middle of that— Christ! Look at the sky! It's burning, isn't it?"

Nobody looked. The pressure and the great sound came again, slowly. Dollflower turned his back on the door and crouched down to the floor, holding his ears tight.

"Father chartin Heaven!" he shouted, but his voice was a whisper in the gathering storm of sound.

He switched down the wall plug. The tape started rolling. The phone lay at the output speaker. He picked up the pocket radio and held it close to his mouth. His eyes were shut, the

sweat streaming unchecked from his face.

"You've got it now," he said. "It's rolling."

"Where's the frequency control? You said a brain."

"Okay. Mine. I shan't be able to talk any more. It's all yours then, Bill. Going in now."

He sat down on the chest, put the radio down and took up the headband with its festoon of cables. The screens were brilliant, blinding white now, likely to blow. Behind the dazzling white jazz there was a pattern as the impulses from the tape went through the circuits.

He put on the headband.

It was just a bet whether the Outsider picked up a new, very powerful signal from out on the Downs, or stayed with the old feeble one emanating from the Manor house.

MONDAY, JUNE 26th

Yesterday we all went to church. But everybody. Richard was so right and cut out a sermon. The general opinion is that God saved the guilty few in the vestry. Naturally, they would. The Devil was after them, everybody says, but they repented in time. Including me. But I am the only one to whom Richard confided his secret.

The vestry roof, you see, is covered with very thick, very old lead, and Richard tells me that lead is the effective shield against radiation, and radiation it seems is what killed poor Len Battock in the back of his shop. Burnt up with it, they say.

The man Darke let us run too much of a risk I think, for it seems that he did not get the idea of transferring the Force until it was just about to burn the middle out of the village. Burn? Well, take it somehow. Where the giant colanders and spiky things that spun round were up on the hill there just aren't any, they say. There's just a hole a mile deep and a mile across, cut right out. Only not cut, I hear. No. The edges and bottom of the hole are feet thick in dust and there is smoke still coming up and a smell of burning.

Of course, no one is allowed within miles...

The man Darke had some weird idea that we are a sort of atom—the universe, that is—setup and this sending of Trent's somehow got through to way beyond the limits. Like the universe being a piece of rotten cheese on the microscope slide, and suddenly one tiny particle shows a sign of life and the chemist, or whatever he is, tries to separate that little bit with his electronic separators.

It is a very odd thought, and makes one feel just too small to feel comfortable.

The other thing that makes one feel uneasy is that Trent —poor boy—found that it was the human mind that was achieving what the machines could not do alone. Now what will happen if, with training and meditation and that sort of thing, people get the mind to work so powerfully that it does the same thing without machines? I hope the mind boggles before it gets that far.

Trent's did. It burst, really. When you suddenly get something too big into it, I suppose it's bound to.

Daisy came to church, of all people, and such a fuss with that great elephant's leg of hers, like anything but a pillar of the temple—and Basil actually helped her! How these earthquakish things do alter people!

Mary, of course, cried through all that awful din in the vicarage, believing it to be her punishment. Oh dear, oh dear. One feels just a bit tweesy about Elsie tending to go along the same path, as if her wax dolls— I shall be glad when I find her a suitable husband. That should settle things...

Very odd about the Entwistles. They came to church, along with the rest, and she was crying all the time. Rowena! Though she sat at the back I was able to see, and also to hear him whispering at her to shut up and be quiet. Not like either of them...

Judith has just accepted a case of champagne at the door from innkeeper Ben James. Just for asking my cousin at Somerset House to find out if a woman called Pike died. Isn't that rather much, just in return for a phone call? Or did she leave them some money, or something? But it's rather a long time

coming, isn't it? She's been dead twenty-one years, it appears.

I will go away for a few days. It's so depressing to look out of the window and see all the burnt flowers and dead this and that—like autumn when you know it isn't. But still, one should be grateful for small mercies, or large ones—

Elsie on the phone. She sounds much brighter. Richard has had a visit from the Bishop this morning—how on earth could I have missed that?—but it was very brief, it seems. Richard does not like Bishops.

The police were very good yesterday. They made hardly any fuss or noise. We didn't even know when they took the—the *people* away.

Now Trent is dead my feelings are quite calm. But he did so agitate me that I wonder if he was really evil. Or just another Faust. I remember my dear sister saying he used to frighten her as a child. I laughed at her then...

Jock Browne-Jones called just now. He is cut up but means to put everything right, square things up, he says. Only he means to borrow to do it.

I rang the hospital and they say Jobey is fit to be let out, Sarah has bad shock, but Darke won't be out for some weeks. He is burnt and other things, but being such an important man he has a private room with a phone so that his awful Station can keep in touch with him. But instead of that he keeps ringing me.

He talks of all sorts of things, houses, gardens, paintings, people, our manners and the awful way we swear now and sex and Godmocking and witches and how we're all galloping back to the morality of eighteenth-century peasants. He only once said about why he left it so late, which was you don't know if you can return the ball until the other man serves. I'm afraid it's rather out of my court, anyway. He says he'll give up his job, but this seems a pity as I hear the man he calls Sir John Rumbleguts has been suspended over losing his aerials or something.

Either way, I rather hope he comes back.

JOHN LYMINGTON

lives in Cornwall which was the setting for his last book, *Ten Million Years to Friday,* a story in which the multiplication of the speed of light produced a plot both "exciting and all too plausible"—*Daily Telegraph.*

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