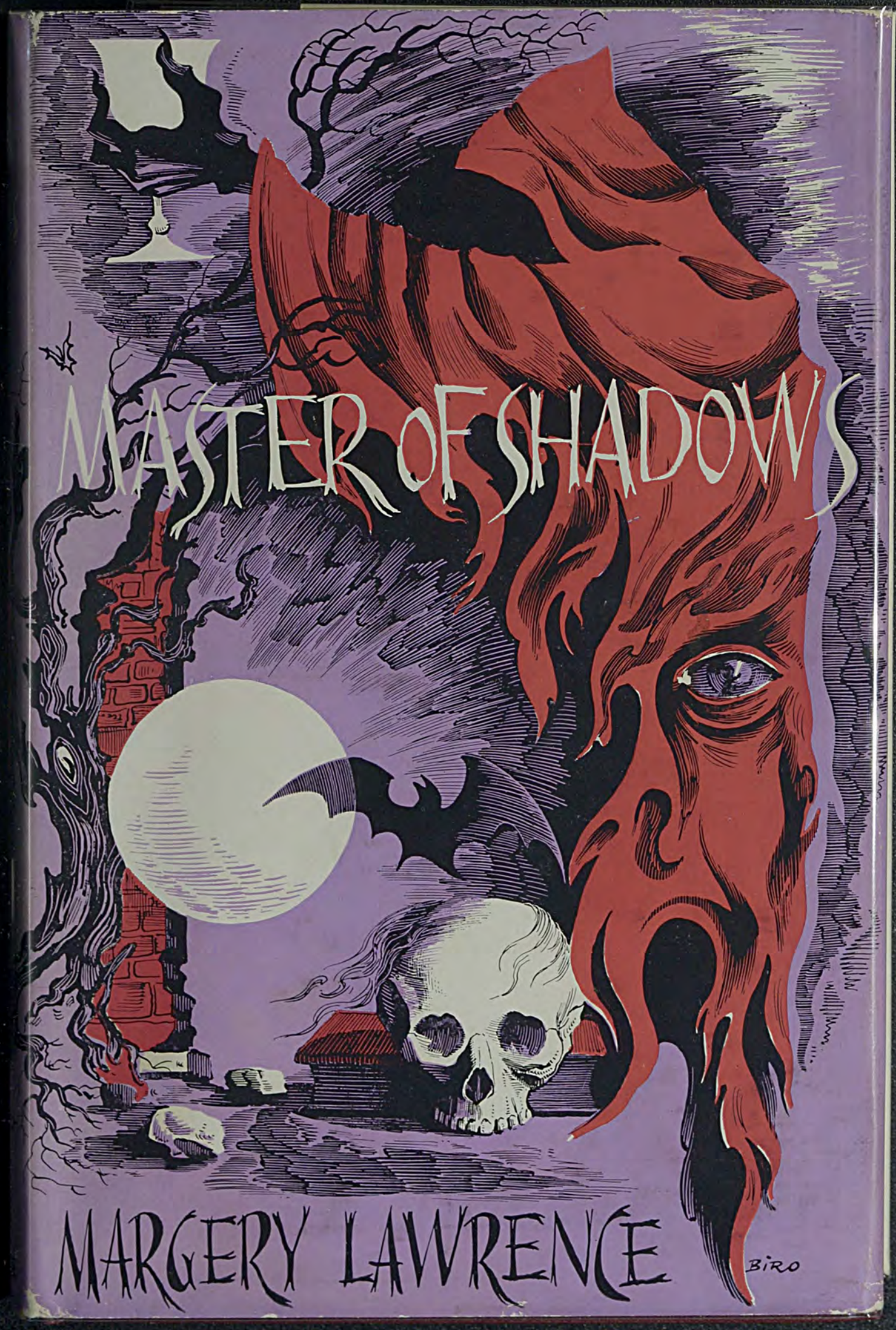
MASTER OF SHADOWS
MARGERY LAWRENCE
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HERE IS A QUARTETTE OF NEW adventures taken from the casebook of the mysterious doctor, Miles Pennoyer. A specialist in the investigation of the queer, the terrible, the uncanny, he was the central character of Miss Lawrence's remarkable earlier book, *Number Seven Queer Street*.

Circus Child tells of a girl haunted by the hate of the lover in whose hypnotic act she once appeared. *The Woman on the Stairs* is a tale of horror revealing how the old may batten on the life and vitality drawn from the young. *Saloozy* is the story of how a magician of ancient times still worked his evil will in the world of today; and *The Twisted Christ* more than lives up to its gruesome title.

Each story is a real thriller in every sense of the word. Miss Lawrence has a remarkable capacity for making the strange and the uncanny appear not only convincing but uncomfortably possible.

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MASTER OF SHADOWS

By

MARGERY LAWRENCE

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MASTER OF SHADOWS

Being four strange stories from the
casebook of Dr. Miles Pennoyer,
Psychic Doctor. Recorded by
his friend and occasional
assistant Jerome Latimer

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FOREWORD

by

JEROME LATIMER

SOME YEARS ago I published a book called *No. 7 Queer Street* that contained seven stories taken from the psychic case-book of my friend Miles Pennoyer. This book is now out of print, but at the time of its publication created considerable interest; and I still receive many inquiries as to what my gifted friend is doing and whether I can produce any other stories of his adventures in the debatable land that lies between this world and the next. So I have ventured herein to write up four more of his cases, which I hope will interest both readers to whom he is a familiar figure and those who are making his acquaintance for the first time. "Master of Shadows" he is indeed, as these tales will prove.

He lives in a roomy old-world top floor flat in Blackfriars overlooking the river; is unmarried since no wife, he avers, could possibly endure the erratic life he is obliged to lead; has a fat Bavarian cook-housekeeper, Friedl, who adores him, and an immense wolfhound called Hans, many acquaintances and a few close friends, of whom I am proud to be one. I am also proud that owing to my deep interest in the occult, I am privileged to accompany him when he needs an assistant, on some of these incredible adventures that he undertakes in his work for humanity. For though the practical everyday world would never accept it, there are many psychic ills that beset mankind with which the everyday doctor simply cannot cope —and it is in this field that my friend reigns supreme. How many people he has saved from madness, ruin or suicide I would not like to say; but readers of the four stories which

follow this foreword of mine will get some idea of the dark and dangerous work in which he specialises and of the courage and selflessness with which he undertakes it. So—I draw up the curtain on my first tale—an early experience of my friend's, and one in which his own sister was involved.

JEROME LATIMER.

SALOOZY

(Note.—This is an early adventure of Dr. Miles Pennoyer, told by himself to his friend Jerome Latimer).

WHEN I was a young man—which, I'm sorry to say, is quite a while ago!—I went down one summer to spend a couple of months with my young widowed sister, Clare Frant, at "Wichart's Farm", a small country house she had taken for herself, her two children—Michael, aged seven, and Susan, aged four—and Nannie, her faithful old maid, now turned nurse.

Clare had been widowed only a few months before Susan's birth—Naunton Frant, her husband and one of my best friends, had been lost with his ship somewhere in the China Seas almost eighteen months before this story opens. And in point of fact Clare's decision, as soon as his affairs were all tidied up, to move to Wichart's Farm, ultimately proved the luckiest of her life, as it was there she ran into Alan Hemingway, a brother of an old schoolmate and a first-class fellow, whom she married a few years later, a marriage that turned out extremely happily. But that is another story.

When I went down to stay with her she had only been at the farm a couple of months, and was still in the stage of settling down, getting acquainted with the countryside, the neighbours, the local village and its shops and all the rest of it.

I was several years older than Clare (who was still only twenty-eight) and was very tired after spending eighteen months in Egypt undergoing a course of special training there; so I was thankful to be back in England, and looked forward greatly to seeing Clare's new home, over which she had been positively lyrical in her letters. We were both country born and

bred, so the prospect of a month or six weeks spent amongst the green fields and rustic byways that I loved was more than pleasant after the dust, heat and smell of the East. So it was with a light heart that I set out from London one sunny day in June in my little Rover, arriving at Tanfield, the village nearest to Wichart's Farm, somewhere around six o'clock—but there I found myself bogged as to which way to turn.

I knew the farm lay some distance off, on the further side of the village, on a rather unfrequented side road. But that was all, and Clare's instructions as to how to find her new home had been vague in the extreme; so I pulled up at Tanfield's tiny Post Office, at the head of its single street, and dived in. There was a fat, apple-faced old body behind the little counter, which was piled with sweets, cigarettes, picture-postcards and various other oddments as well as telegram-forms and postage stamps—she looked at me quickly and rather oddly, I thought, as I put my question, and said:

"You'll be Mrs. Frant's brother, I'm thinking, sir. Dr. Pennoyer—the gentleman she's expecting?"

I nodded, and she paused a moment, then came out from behind the little counter and gave me short and lucid directions as to how to find my way to the farm. I thanked her and was climbing back into my seat behind the wheel, when she said with a rather curious abruptness.

"She's a nice young lady, Mrs. Frant—and them children are right sweet little things, bless 'em. I hope everything's all right down there?"

I looked at her, faintly surprised.

"Dear me, I think so. I certainly hope so!" I said, amused. "What should go wrong? I haven't heard of any difficulties?" The old lady looked at me uncertainly and her red-apple cheeks deepened in colour a trifle.

"Oh—I just asked," she said non-committally. "Sometimes a lady coming into a strange place finds things not everything she fancies . . . not that Mrs. Frant's the complaining sort. Indeed, she's as cheery as the day's long and ready to turn her hand to anything. I just wondered . . ." she hesitated and then evidently making up her mind she had said enough, finished her sentence on a different note. "Perhaps you'd tell her from me—Mrs. Pressing's, the name, sir, of

Tanfield Post Office—that there's some more of them peppermint humbugs come in that young Master Michael's so fond of, and I've taken the liberty of keeping some back for him? If I didn't they'd be all gone, maybe, before she comes down. And will you tell her too, sir, that . . . well, if anything should happen and she wants help, to telephone me at the Post Office and I'll be ready to do anything I can? She's not to hesitate? Thank you kindly sir, and I wish you a very good afternoon."

She retreated hastily into her lair, as I opened my mouth on another question, and letting out the clutch I resumed my drive—and as I went I ruminated, thoughtful and faintly puzzled, on the little conversation, yet could make nothing of it. It was plain that Mrs. Pressing, worthy body, was somehow uneasy as to whether my sister was comfortable or not in her new home—but the sentence about " if she wanted help " had an odd and faintly sinister ring, and I did not quite like it. What should Clare want " help " over?

The house had been tested for sound drains, pipes, water supply, all the rest and passed O.K., and though lack of domestic service was hitting the country as well as the town, Clare had told me she had managed to arrange for a daily girl to come in from the village, and with Nannie and her own capable hands, she was managing finely. What other difficulties were likely to crop up? My mind was still busy with the problem when I saw a break in the luxuriantly-flowering hedge on my right, and a white gate standing ajar—I had arrived at Wichart's Farm, and Clare, looking pink and blooming and better than I had seen her for years was running to meet me down the weedgrown drive from the white porch of a charming ivy-grown house that might have come straight out of a film set.

We hugged each other delightedly, and I parked the car in a dilapidated stable somewhere at the rear of the house—which had been originally, Clare told me later, the dower-house belonging to a once great mansion, now ruined and derelict. I lugged my suitcase out and we went arm-in-arm up to my room, a low-roofed little apartment with white-washed walls, a board floor innocent of rugs or carpet, and distinctly ramshackle furniture, as Clare had had to furnish her new abode with any oddments she could pick up cheaply at local

sales or beg from her friends and relatives. She possessed very little furniture of her own, as up to poor Naunton's death her life, like that of most naval wives, had been spent in furnished lodgings in Portsmouth, Chatham and similar places.

But if the room was bare and shabby, purple clematis and white-starred jasmine fringed the window frame; outside there was a cherry tree with great clusters of ruddy fruit shining between its glossy leaves, beyond the rambling wildness of the garden there were fields yellow with buttercups and studded with ruminating cows, and in the distance green hills rising against the blueness of the sky, so my spirits rose high as Clare helped me unpack my things, chattering like a monkey as she did so. Clare and I had lost our parents early, so we had grown up together more or less alone and were, I think, rather more to each other than are many brothers and sisters; and as she had made her move to the country in my absence I was all agog to know details.

Wichart's Farm had been the most amazing find—she struck it quite by chance, she told me, and couldn't believe her ears when she heard the low rental asked for it, thought there must be some catch somewhere! She had sent a friend, an expert in judging house property, down to spy out the land and find the "catch" before taking it; but he had found none, and advised her to jump at the chance at such a bargain—so she had taken it on a long lease and was delighted with it.

My things by this time unpacked, I had a wash in the bathroom at the far end of the passage—an amenity fortunately built in by a previous tenant—and proceeded to accompany my sister on a tour of the house; it still lacked half an hour to dinner-time, which he took early on account of the children, and at the moment, in the large sunny kitchen in lieu of the dining-room that was, some time in the near future, to be properly equipped.

I found the house considerably larger than I had anticipated, though Clare had described it as a "country cottage" and had certainly got it at a cottage rental—and it was sound and substantial enough, though badly in need of repairs, painting and papering and so on, which I privately resolved to have done at my own expense as soon as possible.

Clare's own bedroom I had peeped into on my way downstairs, and found it a larger edition of my own, but rather better furnished. Beyond Clare's room there was a third, rather larger room that was the night-nursery, where Nannie and the children slept; and across the narrow corridor were several deep cupboards and two more small rooms. At the moment these two were crowded with trunks, odd bits of unsorted furniture, cardboard boxes, newspapers and similar junk—but one would become a bedroom for Nannie in time, when sufficient furnishings could be collected; the second a room for Michael, when he reached an age and dignity that necessitated one.

On the ground floor, besides the kitchen and scullery, there were only three rooms. One small one leading off the kitchen —this Clare told me she meant some time to turn into a sewing-cum-sitting-room for herself and Nannie; another small one facing the front that would ultimately make a very nice little dining-room, and one large central lounge—originally two rooms, one at the front and another at the back of the house, that had been knocked into one. The result was a really handsome lounge with two windows, one at each end; one ordinary small one facing the drive and another at the back, this a double french window or pair of glass doors that led directly out upon the garden . . . where, Clare firmly informed me, any amount of work awaited my doing directly I should feel energetic enough to undertake it!

On this room Clare had concentrated her main furnishing efforts up to date. She had sent a frantic S.O.S. to all her relatives and friends to spare her what they could, and the results were both charming and homelike. The floor had been stained and polished—though the stain hadn't come off her hands for days, my sister ruefully said—there was a worn but colourful Indian rug before the deep red-brick fireplace and another before the french window; a low embroidered fire-seat that I remembered as belonging to an aged aunt of ours, and a sofa and two easy chairs covered with faded but pretty cretonne in delphinium blues and mauves, on a cream ground . . . these Clare had picked up cheaply, she said, at a local sale. There was a little oak gateleg table and one or two odd chairs from various cousins, a set of bookshelves from an old

admirer, a mirror in an old gilt frame from another, and an Italian "sunray" wall clock from a third—did I mention that my sister was very pretty?—and with a set of coffee-coloured "lustre" jugs gleaming on the mantelpiece and the windows draped with blue and cream striped linen curtains, it was a room that would have done credit to anybody, let alone a hard-up young naval officer's widow. And so I told Clare as I poured her out a glass of her own sherry—a dozen of that delectable *apéritif* having been contributed as their "share" towards Clare's new venture by three young naval lads who had served with Naunton some years earlier.

Clare flushed with gratification—flushed almost as pink as her pretty cotton frock—and slipping a hand through my arm, squeezed it affectionately.

"Bless you! I'm *so* glad you like it," she said. "I hoped you would. Now you've got to forget magic and mysteries and all the other weirds you're studying and loaf with me! I'm going to adore having you all to myself for at least a month, I hope, to help me weed and prune and dig and generally get the garden into shape. I'm going to have this place looking a picture sooner or later, and I think I'm going to be very happy here once I'm well settled in."

"Lucky we were both brought up in the country, so you don't mind loneliness," I said. Clare opened her eyes wide.

"Lonely? I'm too busy to think much about being lonely!" she said. "But anyway, I'm sure I shall have as many friends as I want very soon. I've met the Vicar and his wife and one or two others, and I've just discovered that Sybil Hemingway—d'you remember her, she was at Miss Crabbe's with me?—is married and living down here. She's Lady Curtis, of the Hall—imagine Sybil Lady Curtis!—we ran into each other at the Post Office in Tanfield only the other day, and she was simply delighted to see me and has promised to introduce everybody nice in the neighbourhood."

"That reminds me," I said, and proceeded to deliver old Mrs. Pressing's message, at which Clare raised her eyebrows.

"That's nice of the old soul," she commented. "But I don't quite see why I should send out any S.O.S.? Of course I'm having the usual minor troubles consequent on coming into a house that's been uninhabited for a good many years—an

occasional leak or gutters stopped up, mice and cockroaches all over the place, and so on—but I'm coping with them quite adequately. As you say, there's something in being country-bred, one takes this sort of thing in one's stride. But it's rather odd . . . Sybil Curtis said something of the same sort to me when she said goodbye the other day . . . something about my getting in touch with her immediately if I needed help." She brooded. "Funny! I wonder what . . ."

"Oh, I expect it's only an excess of neighbourly feeling," I said breezily. "Anyway it's good to know that you've got nice friendly people round you ready to rush to the rescue if you need 'em!" I looked round the room again appreciatively. "Really delightful room this is, Clare—but almost painfully tidy. I remember your quarters in Chatham always littered with toys and things for the kids . . ."

"Thank heaven I've got room enough here for them to have a proper playroom," said Clare. "Nice days, of course, they are always out in the garden, but when it's wet or chilly there's a huge empty attic on the top floor—the one above the bedrooms—that they use. Though sometimes I hope to be able to make a playroom out of the big loft above the old stable that you're using as a garage now. I'd like that better."

"Why?" I asked curiously. "If there's a good-sized room already for them *in* the house, I can't see the sense of throwing away money on making another room *outside* the house!"

Clare frowned.

"I can't say *why,*" she admitted, "and it sounds mad—but somehow I don't altogether *like* that attic!"

"What's it like?" I demanded.

"Well," said my sister, "it's certainly a fine big place. It's practically the whole top floor. It's light and sunny enough, and certainly it's dry and there's heaps of room, and the children love it, especially Mike—and yet, *somehow* I don't like it!"

"You should worry?" I said. "If the kids can't fall out of the window . . ." Clare shook her head, "and there aren't any fires for them to fall into, or ladders for them to fall down, I should think you'd be thankful for such a place to park them in while Nannie can get on with her work in the house."

"I know," nodded Clare. "But still . . ." She broke off her sentence as Nannie poked her head round the door and greeted me with a broad smile of welcome.

"Dinner's ready, m'am—and I'm glad to see you, sir!" she said all in one breath. "And could you come in at once, m'am, because it's hot, and baby's at the table and I don't like to leave her?" She vanished as we drank up the last of our drinks and moved towards the door.

"Thank goodness Nannie's cooked the dinner," said Clare contentedly. "We take it in turns as a rule, and I look forward to my evenings off. I *do* like dinner cooked for me, so that I can change and rest a bit and feel fresh for the evening."

"I thought you'd got a girl from the village working for you?" I said. "Can't she cook dinner for you?" Clare frowned.

"Well," she said, "she's not a bad cook, Ada, and she does the lunches, but the bore is she *won't* stay after seven o'clock —and I really can't eat before seven-thirty, it makes such a dreary long evening. Even that's late to have baby up, I know, but I really can't help it. This girl only lives just down the road, yet she insists on leaving at seven—won't stay a minute longer." I nodded—it was not until some time later on that the significance of this reluctance to stay late on the part of young Ada Price dawned on me, and by that time I had learned that her dislike of Wichart's Farm after dark extended to the entire village! But naturally at the moment it didn't strike me as at all unusual, though inconvenient for my sister, and we sat down to dinner.

The kitchen was a pleasant, old-fashioned place with a red tiled floor, an immense black kitchen range beside which the small modern gas stove used by Clare and Nannie looked an impertinent anachronism, and a large built-in dresser crowded with vari-coloured plates and dishes; it had huge black beams overhead that still retained the iron hooks from which in earlier, more opulent days, had swung hams and bacon, strings of onions, dried herbs, apple-rings and other luscious things, and in the middle was a square table spread with a blue and white checkered cloth, at which the baby Susan was already sitting in her high chair, her bib ruffled up to her ears, her fair hair on end, beating the table hungrily with her spoon. I

received from her a wet and sticky kiss and a coy smile—I was one of young Susan's favourites; she was already, at barely four years, distinctly choosey in her boy friends!—and Nannie was just placing a large brown casserole upon the table from whence was issuing a more than tempting savour, when Clare spoke.

"Why Nannie, where's Michael? Still in the garden?"

Nannie flushed a trifle and all but tossed her head as she turned to get the hot plates.

"I brought Master Michael in from the garden in plenty of time for his dinner, m'am—he was all washed and ready two minutes ago. And I'd only just put baby in her chair when he was out again and off! Down to that tree he's so fond of—playing, I'll bet, with that Saloozy! I called after him, but it wasn't no use—he was off like a streak, the naughty boy, and I suppose now I'll have to go and fetch him in and wash him all over again!"

She dumped a pair of vegetable dishes and a heaped salad-bowl before us and departed, via the far door, out into the garden, and we could hear her vexed voice calling as she went.

"Master Mike—Master Michael! Now you're late for dinner, and your uncle's come and why *must* you be such a naughty boy . . ."

I looked at my sister.

"'Saloozy'? What on earth's she talking about?"

Clare's smooth brow was creased by a faintly puzzled frown as she helped the stewed rabbit, shaking her head as I refused the meat—you know my vegetarian principles—but accepted the fresh green salad, delicious country peas and baked potatoes.

"I honestly don't know," she said. "Look here, Miles, would you ever have called Mike a specially imaginative child—more than any other normal child, I mean?" I shook my head and she went on thoughtfully. "Well, I can't say I'm *worried* exactly—but I'm puzzled that ever since we came to live here Mike keeps on talking about somebody he calls 'Saloozy' in *the* most peculiar way."

"'Saloozy'—sounds like an extension of Susan," I said with my mouth full. "Does he mean Susan? If not, perhaps there's some small local child he plays with that he calls that."

"Sue's always called 'Baby'—and anyway I asked him that, and he said no, that Saloozy was a 'he'," said Clare. "And there *aren't* any children living at all near. The only children handy are the Vicar's boy and girl, who are a good deal older than Mike, twelve and thirteen, I think, or something like that, and not in the least likely to come in voluntarily and play with a little boy like Mike."

I pondered, munching salad, while Clare spooned gravy over Susan's potatoes and rescued her rag doll from being plunged head foremost into the resultant savoury mess.

"I'm not an authority on children," I said at last. "But I believe a good many kids invent some sort of an invisible playmate, don't they? Sounds like something of that sort . . . after all, Susan's rather young to make a companion for Mike."

"I know," said Clare. "But surely the sort of child that invents invisible playmates is rather the—imaginative, dreamy sort of child? Whereas Mike's just a nice, normal, ordinary little boy."

He certainly looked normal enough just then as he was more or less dragged into the room by Nannie, his ears red with washing, his small face rebellious—he had been scrubbed afresh in the scullery sink before being allowed to come to table. But as he saw me sitting grinning at him he forgot his temper, rushed at me and hugged me like a small bear, clamouring a dozen questions, and when these were satisfied he climbed into his seat and fell upon his plate of stew with an appetite that certainly had nothing abnormal about it.

"Mike!" Clare's voice was reproachful. "You shouldn't have been late for dinner, you know—Nannie had washed you and got you ready, and you *knew* Uncle Miles was coming."

Michael paused in his eating and looked sideways at his mother—a look partly guilty, partly repentant and faintly defiant all at the same time.

"I know, Mummy—I'm sorry. But I tried to 'splain to Nannie. I *had* to go. I had to put somethin' back I'd been playing with."

"Now Master Michael!" Nannie's voice was severe as she changed the plates and placed stewed cherries and creamed rice on the table. "You *know* that isn't true! When we came

in from the garden to get ready for dinner you helped me carry *all* your toys in, and there wasn't a thing left outside! You only had your little horse and your bat and ball, and Baby her three dollies and some picture books anyway . . . how can you tell such a story?"

The small boy bent over his plate. His ears were suffused with a sullen flush but his lips were set stubbornly.

"It wasn't a story!" he muttered. Clare looked at him uncertainly.

"But Mike, *darling*," she said. "If everything was brought in from the garden, as Nannie says, how *can* you have gone back to put anything away? You must be telling a fib for some reason—and you know mother hates her little boy to tell fibs."

Michael looked at her appealingly.

"But Mummy," he began. "It wasn't . . . wasn't anything *ordinary*—I mean like my horse or any sort of toy. I . . . *had* to put it back. It wasn't mine. It was only lent to me."

By this time I was getting interested.

"What was it Mike?" I said. "And who did it belong to?" The child hesitated a moment, glanced round the table as though sizing up the atmosphere and then spoke half-defiantly.

"It was a stick. It was Saloozy's stick. I'd been playing with Saloozy."

"You see," said Clare, as we sat in the lounge discussing things later on that evening over our cigarettes, "that's how it goes . . . and Miles, I really don't know how to handle it! It's futile to take up Nannie's attitude and punish or lecture him for telling lies—that's the old-fashioned method, and I don't agree with it. I thought at first, as you did, that it was some sort of game he was playing with Susan, but I soon found it wasn't that. He wanders off by himself these days to play alone—which seems to mean playing, or *pretending* he's playing at least, with somebody called 'Saloozy', of all absurd names! He never *used* to be a fanciful sort of child—it's only since he came here, and I can't make it out." She frowned at her cigarette. "I'm rather afraid I took up the wrong attitude in the beginning—I tried to laugh him out of it, and now I wish I hadn't. He's sort of retreated into himself and evades

talking about it now, unless he's driven into a corner—and then he says as little as he can, but persists in saying he is telling the truth." She frowned. "I really can't make it out—and I refuse to believe that my jolly, ordinary, healthy little Mike is a potential medium, seeing and talking to a ghost-child!"

"Who and what *is* Saloozy, anyway?" I asked. Clare shook her head.

"I don't know. All he says is that he's just 'Saloozy' and that he plays with him. He says he won't come if anybody else is there, and that it doesn't happen every day, but quite often . . . and I don't know whether it's my imagination, but it seems to be happening more and more often this last week or two."

"Odd freak of the imagination," I said. "Doesn't seem like the kid as I remember him!"

My sister shook her head. "No! Mike's altered in a good many ways lately and I can't make it out. He's grown much quieter and more bookish—he never used to want to read, but now he closets himself for hours at a time with books, spelling out words that are too long for him and looking *so* absorbed. And he's absent-minded, and doesn't touch the toys he used to play with, except an old round pocket mirror he found somewhere—and what he wants with that I can't think, but he persists in carrying it about with him. Also he's not half as reliable as he used to be. When we came here first I used to be able to leave him to look after Baby in the garden while Nannie helped me in the house—he was quite proud of the responsibility and mounted guard over her in the most amusing way. But now he wanders off—generally down to an old ash tree, the tree Nannie spoke of, he seems to like playing there better than anywhere else in the garden—and leaves Baby alone. And it isn't *like* Mike to leave a job he's been asked to do! I can't make it out at all." She sighed. "Well, children are queer little cusses and I suppose it's simply some sort of a phase he's passing through. Shall we go to bed? And tomorrow if you feel strong enough we might try a little tidying up of the garden."

A peaceful week passed, luckily with lovely weather, and during that week Clare and I had really begun to make a

difference to the wildly overgrown garden and orchard. It was a sizeable garden and had endless possibilities, and as we worked Clare talked of keeping hens and rabbits and growing vegetables and fruit and flowers for the market, as though in her small energetic person she combined the strength of five men, all of which she would certainly have needed to carry out her full programme! I made up my mind to tell her before I left that I would stand the wages of a full-time gardener, which would be a great help to her—she could only afford, on her income, to pay Nannie and her " daily ", the local wench who was so anxious to get away home at seven.

In Clare's company I explored the place thoroughly, assuring her, to her delight, that she could put in hand as soon as she liked the repairing, painting and papering of the house, from the old-fashioned cellars to the attics—or rather the single attic, the room the children used as a wet-day playroom. This last place interested me considerably, though I had been at the farm some days before I exerted myself sufficiently to climb the stairs to the top floor. Clare had assured me that there was nothing to see—it was just an empty oblong attic—but somehow I was vaguely curious about the place, especially as Clare had said she " disliked " it.

I wondered, as I mounted the steep old stairs, dusty, uncarpeted and pitted with cracks and mouseholes here and there, what odd bee she had got in her bonnet—it was not like Clare to " take fancies " as Nannie would have said.

At the top of the attic flight a short narrow passage stretched before me, with a deep cupboard lined with shelves set into the wall on one side, and on the other, a door set ajar that gave onto a small shallow closet of some sort. The end of the passage was blocked by another door—obviously this passage was all that was left of an old corridor that had once run down the centre of the top floor, dividing it into front rooms and back. I walked down the passage, pushed open the door and found myself in the famous attic—a long shooting-gallery of a room that occupied the entire top storey.

My first impression was—curiously—one of gloom, although my second, astonished, told me that this was nonsense. The long room with its sloping black roof-beams, peeling walls and uneven wooden floor, was actually sunny enough . . .

indeed it was full of sunlight, thanks to the dormer windows, four on the front, three at the back, that let in light on both sides of its echoing length; and later on I realised that my impression of gloom was purely a psychic one—and well deserved!

It was quite empty, and seemed half-asleep and blinking in the dusty sunlight that slanted in through the small hooded windows—yet as I stood there surveying the room, I knew what Clare had meant when she talked about disliking it. Instantly—and quite irrationally—I knew that I also disliked it! Startled and curious, I stood still a moment, wondering at my own sensations, and staring down the room . . . it was plain, as Clare had said, that the walls of the passage and those of the small rooms on each side of it had been pulled down so as to turn the entire top floor, except the very short section at the top of the stairs, into one large room. Not only did the walls, roof-beams and floor show traces of brickwork having been removed, but sections of the wall right and left showed remains of several different wallpapers, and I scratched my head, puzzled. I could see the sense of throwing two ground floor rooms into one to make a good-sized lounge —but why spoil the attics? I should have thought, regarding the top storey, that several small rooms for use as spare rooms, servants' quarters or for storage purposes would have been vastly more convenient than the one immensely long low-roofed chamber? I walked thoughtfully round the walls, and noted that at the far end there had been a fireplace—quite a large, deep fireplace too, and well-used, if the blackened brickwork round the opening meant anything. And close beside it, from one side of the wall projected several odd pieces of rusted ironwork, broken off as though something that had once been built in there had been roughly torn away . . .

The chimney-breast where the fireplace was situated projected slightly into the room, and above the fireplace ran a shallow mantelshelf of brickwork. Above this was fixed to the wall an old carved and gilded frame containing a coloured print—much faded, and torn in one or two places—of a typical " Christmas Annual " painting of a small child, white-frilled and blue-ribboned, playing with a large St. Bernard dog. I walked up to examine it, wondering why such an

inanity should have been thought worthy of a handsome old frame, when a small voice spoke behind me.

" Saloozy lives in here ! "

I turned round, startled, to see Michael, whom I had only just left playing in the garden with the new scooter I had brought down from London for him as a present.

" What on earth brings you up here ? " I demanded.

" Oh, I knew ! " said the boy. " I knew you'd come up here. I always know when anybody comes into Saloozy's room. He tells me."

I stared at the child, suspicious, sceptical, yet oddly impressed. Standing there in the dusty slanting sunlight, in his crumpled blue cotton suit, with his rough fair hair on end, Michael was so obviously, as Clare had said, a jolly, ordinary little boy, that this hint of the uncanny, the inexplicable about him struck a most odd and alien note . . . and yet a note that one could not quite ignore. Whoever ' Saloozy ' was—or was not—it was plain that he was very real to this child . . .

There was a low seat built into the brickwork of the wall below each window, and sitting down on the nearest, I drew Michael to me. He came readily enough, and I wondered whether possibly I might, as somebody completely new, who had not yet thrown either doubt or derision upon his illusion, find out something definite about it.

" How do you mean ' tells ' you, Mike ? " I began. " And anyway—who *is* he ? "

" I don't know how he tells me," said the child frankly. " But . . . I just know. And he's—well, he's Saloozy. That's all I know. And he *is* real ! I don't care what Nannie and Mummy say ! " His small face was obstinate, and I hastened to agree.

" I'm sure he is, Mike, if you say so. But can't you tell me any more about him ? " An oddly cunning look crept into the childish face at my knee and he shook his head.

" He doesn't like being talked about," he said briefly. " He's just Saloozy, and he lives here and he's showing me how to do things . . . oh, wonderful things ! " His blue eyes suddenly blazed, bright, amazed. " You can't *think* what splendid things . . . and he's going to teach me lots more. Only . . . " his face clouded over. " He says I got to work hard and learn

things at school so as to make it easier . . ." He looked up at my face anxiously. "Uncle Miles, is it very hard to learn Latin?"

"Latin?" I stared, frankly confounded, and he nodded sagely and went on:

"Can't start training too early, Saloozy says. And Latin's terribly 'portant in learning about—about . . ." his voice sank oddly to an almost awed whisper, "about *Them* and how to make *Them* do what you want. There's books and books I got to read some day. Books in Latin an' Greek too, and specially the Big Book, when I know enough . . . and he wants me to start soon."

"But what *for*?" I asked incredulously. "And who are They? Are—er—They part of Saloozy's idea too?"

He evaded a direct answer but repeated his question—was it hard to learn Latin?—and when I pressed him further he slipped out of my arms and said he was hungry, he wanted his tea, couldn't we go down? There was plainly no more to be got out of him then; so I dropped the matter, told him that if he really wanted to try to learn Latin I would start him on the rudiments right away—needless to say, in my studies a pretty thorough knowledge of Greek and Latin is essential—upon which he threw his arms round me and hugged me ecstatically, and we went downstairs together.

I said nothing about the little encounter to Clare, as I didn't want to worry her—and though I stubbornly told myself there was nothing to worry over, "Saloozy" was simply an imaginary playmate that the boy had invented, yet I found myself oddly uneasy whenever I thought about it, as I did a good many times during the ensuing days. Clare was puzzled, I could see, but rather gratified when I told her I was going to start Michael in Latin, and I was astonished to see how quickly he seemed to grasp it, as he had not shown any marked ability or even interest in his lessons up to date. Now he was patently eager to learn—certainly, I told myself, Clare was right when she said that Michael had changed a good deal. Besides spending a great deal of time in reading any and everything he could lay hands on, especially old tales of fairy lore, magic, legend and that sort of thing, from being a rather noisy, romping, slap-dash little boy he had grown

markedly quiet, and showed a tendency to "sneak about and come up behind a body without making a sound", so Nannie vexedly averred. Also he now patently preferred his own company to that of others, and scarcely ever looked at the toys or games he used to love—things like lead soldiers, his airgun, bricks, Meccano and similar things usually dear to a small boys' heart now lay about unnoticed. How he amused himself now nobody seemed to know. When asked he merely said vaguely, "Oh, just messing about"; and by chance one day I came across him engaged on one form of "messing about" which was certainly a curious amusement for a little boy of seven to choose!

I was planting beansticks for some late-sown scarlet runners in the now largely cleared and weeded kitchen garden when I saw Michael and Nannie emerging from the back door of the kitchen. Nannie's face was scarlet with annoyance, Michael wriggling and squirming furiously as she held him firmly by the shoulder; and in her spare hand Nannie was gingerly carrying a little enamel saucepan. Catching sight of me she hailed me instantly.

"Oh, Mr. Miles, sir, where's madam? She *must* do something with this naughty boy! This is the third time I've caught him trying to boil up some nasty weeds on my stove—to get the juice, he says. Using my saucepan to do it in too, and I might have used it for Baby's milk after and poisoned her, poor child!" She looked down at Michael and shook him angrily. "You bad wicked boy! If ever I catch you doing such a thing again . . ."

"That's all right, Nannie," I said. "I'll take charge of Master Michael—I'm sure he didn't mean any harm. It isn't worth worrying madam over. Give me the saucepan. You run back to the kitchen and leave him to me."

Nannie looked doubtful, but released her captive and went into the house—and I looked curiously at Michael. He was looking after her, and the expression on his small face was so venomous that I was quite startled. He had always been a singularly sweet-tempered little boy, and I decided that children were evidently capable of stronger feeling than I had imagined as I poked a finger into the seaweed-like green mess in the saucepan.

"What *is* all this, Mike?" I said. "Go on, you can tell me —I won't be cross. What on earth were you trying to do with this green stuff, and what is it?"

He frowned, hesitated, and answered brusquely.

"It's . . . several things. I don't know their names. But Saloozy shows me what to pick. He wants me to try and learn to dis . . . dis . . ."

"Do you mean distilling?" I asked, amazed. Michael nodded eagerly.

"Oh yes—that's the word. I don't know how, but he was going to show me . . . only it's so *difficult*! I know there ought to be a special room to do it in . . . I can't remember, but I've seen it *somewhere*. I know! A long time ago . . . somewhere where there's a fire, that always had to be kept going with some old leather bellows that were awful heavy to blow, or *he* would get dreadfully cross. And there's a long sort of table with lots of funny glass things, tubes and bottles and pots . . . only they're not called that, somehow. I can't remember what they *are* called. Wait! Al—alumpics and . . . and 'torts an' matesses and cocoabits and . . . and a lot of other things. Saloozy used to be there dis . . . dis . . . what you said—making coloured juices out of flowers and plants and things, and he used to laugh and say,

> 'Some to cure and some to kill
> Some to make your brainbox ill.
> Some to bend you to my will . . .' "

He stopped, and I had an odd impression that he had *been* stopped, not stopped of his own accord . . . and suddenly, quite unaccountably, I felt a faint prickling as the hairs rose along the back of my neck! There, standing in the kitchen garden, in the serene rays of the afternoon sun, I felt the first real hint of "queerness" behind all this talk of Saloozy . . . a queerness that was not of this normal earth.

"Look here, old man," I said gently. "This friend of yours —this Saloozy—interests me very much. We talked about him the other day—don't you remember? Can't you tell me more about him?"

He slanted an oddly cunning look at me and shook his head.

" I can't," he said briefly. " I told you, he doesn't like being talked about . . . he says I talk too much as it is. He wants me not to waste time talking, but to listen and learn! And I *am* trying . . . I was trying to learn with this." He looked gloomily at the enamel saucepan.

" Well, experimenting by boiling odd weed in kitchen pots and pans that are used for cooking food in is dangerous, and you certainly mustn't do *that* again," I said decidedly. " If you want to, later on you can take up chemistry—which will teach you about such things as distilling essences and so on. Though what on earth's got into a small boy like you—only seven—to want to study things like Latin and chemistry I can't imagine, Mike! You aren't putting on some sort of an act, are you?" He said nothing, only compressed his lips and looked obstinate, and I gave it up—no use antagonising the child. I should get nothing out of him that way. I handed him over the saucepan.

" Now run along and wash that out nicely and give it back to Nannie, and say you're sorry for dirtying up her things."

He hesitated, taking the pan reluctantly.

" I don't like Nannie," he muttered. " She hurt my shoulder —she scolds me. I'd like to teach her . . ."

I looked at him, astonished. Mike and Nannie, in the old days had been the best of friends, and it was not like the sunny, good-natured little boy I knew to bear malice for a scolding or a shaking.

" Don't be silly, Mike," I said. " Forget it—and run and do as I said."

He turned on his heel without a word and went into the house, and I went back to my beansticks, pondering as I worked. I was distinctly disturbed. From whence had young Michael, aged seven, got his vivid mental picture of a medieval alchemist's laboratory?

" A fire always hot, that someone blew with bellows—never allowed to go out—a long table with funny-shaped glass things," and the obvious attempt to recall the words " alembic ", " retort ", " cucurbit ", and above all, the old word *matrass*—now called flask—that I would take my oath he could not possibly have come across, even in his sudden interest in reading? I was likewise doubtful if he had ever seen a pair

of bellows—what modern child has, unless they happen to have lived in some remote country place where such a thing is still used? Michael's young life had been spent in seaside lodgings, and his notion of fire was a gas-stove!

I was sufficiently interested, later on that night, to leaf through all the children's books Clare possessed, but found nothing beyond the usual classical fairy tales, Grimm, Hans Andersen, *Arabian Nights,* and so on, scattered among old volumes of *Little Folks, Our Darlings, Peter Rabbit, Christopher Robin,* and so on. There was nothing in any of them that could possibly have suggested such a scene to a small boy's mind. I was more puzzled than ever, but again said nothing to Clare. And on the following day I was lying still ruminating on it in the hammock that I had with Clare's help just slung between two stout trees outside the lounge windows, when I spied Michael stealing cautiously down the path beyond a belt of syringa bushes that led to his favourite corner of the garden, a sort of dell that was shaded by a fine old ash tree.

He plainly did not want me to see him, and I don't know by what impulse I suddenly slipped out of the hammock and followed him—luckily I had by this time cleared the garden paths, cut back the undergrowth and done a good deal of tidying-up in general, so could walk after him without tripping and blundering over sprawling outgrowths. I saw him dive into a shallow little hollow at the foot of the ash tree, and pausing behind a towering laurel bush that adequately screened me from his view, I watched him curiously. He was, as far as I could see, rigging up a queer little arrangement of two sticks with a long bit of string between them—thrusting the sticks into the earth at such a distance from each other that the string was drawn taut, as a washing-line is drawn. And as I watched he proceeded to pin to the string several odd scraps such as two or three dropped green leaves, a couple of bits of paper, a twig, a corner torn from his handkerchief, precisely as pieces of washing are strung along a line.

I stared, interested and curious, as the row of fragments being fixed to his satisfaction to the line of string, Michael sat back, surveyed the arrangement, then fumbled amongst the roots or the tree and brought out what looked to me like a

small dark stick of wood. Rising to his feet, he stood stock still for a moment, holding the stick directly over the line of string, stretched between its miniature wooden props. His small face was flushed, intent, and I could see that his lips were moving, though I was not near enough to hear what he was saying—and suddenly I felt a return of that queer and unpleasant sense of *grue* that had overtaken me in the garden the day before! It was a baking hot day, almost oppressive, yet a sensation as of icy water being poured down my spine seized me as I stood and stared—and lo and behold, without his touching it at all as far as I could see, the miniature washing line crumpled, staggered and fell to the ground . . . and from somewhere behind me I could hear Clare's light pretty voice calling.

"Miles, Miles! Here's Sybil come over to tea and she's brought her brother. Come and meet him."

We had a merry tea party, though after the fashion of women Clare was fussed because she had had no notice and so had not prepared any special cakes or sandwiches or things like that. But there was fresh crusty bread and good country butter from the farm down the lane, and a pot of honey and another of recently made red cherry jam, and lettuces and radishes. Sybil had brought with her a basket of the strawberries for which the Hall was famous, which we ate with lashings of cream, and I said—and Sybil agreed—that anybody who wanted a better tea than that didn't deserve to get any tea at all. Sybil's brother was a nice shy sort of chap of about thirty-eight or so, who had just been invalided out of the Army minus a leg, and was planning to come and live somewhere near his sister. I liked him on sight, and he plainly liked me and more than liked Clare, who was looking her prettiest in a new yellow linen frock that by sheer Providence—or so she assured me afterwards—she had just put on to see how it looked; and that meeting led to much, as I have already indicated.

Alan Hemingway was still too unused to his artificial leg to risk much moving about, so after tea Sybil and I left him comfortably planted in a lounge chair chatting to Clare while I went round the garden with Sybil, to show her—not without a certain amount of justifiable pride—the great improvement

that Clare and I had effected since my arrival a fortnight earlier.

I had forgotten Sybil Hemingway, ungallant as it sounds, I know, until I met her again, and then I remembered her . . . a sturdy red-haired little girl with a deep voice, a snub nose and lots of freckles, who could (to my boyish chagrin) bowl a far faster and straighter ball than I could ever do. She had altered very little—developed into a pleasant-looking, cheery woman of the traditional English country type. Wore tweeds and brogues superbly and probably looked hopeless in evening dress, went about hatless winter and summer, never moved without a stick and a couple of cocker spaniels at her heels; bullied the parson and the villagers, who all adored her, ruled her husband, her children and her domain in general with a kindly but iron hand, and won the local cup for flowers and vegetables grown at the Hall with almost monotonous regularity.

She was enthusiastic about the vastly improved appearance of the garden, though she admitted she had never actually been inside it, only looked at it from the outside as she drove past into Tanfield . . . the sleepy lane in which Wichart's Farm was situated was a short cut from the Hall into the village, and she occasionally used it to save time. Though never, she added with her brusque laugh, when her Nannie was in the car . . . I looked at her sharply and she caught herself up, but it was too late.

"Whatever do you mean, Sybil?" I asked. She paused a moment, then shrugged her shoulders.

"Sorry . . . that slipped out. Don't tell Clare, I don't want to upset her, and as it's plain she hasn't been . . . upset . . . since she came, Lord forbid that I should start anything with her! But the fact is, Miles, local people—and my Nannie's a local girl—don't like this place, and avoid it as much as possible. And . . ." she paused a moment then plunged bluntly on, "to be absolutely honest, if I'd known Clare was thinking of taking the house—which I didn't until she was actually in it, and then it was too late—I'd have done my best to put her off it myself. So there!"

"*No!*" I stared at her, yet even as I stared I knew that no pretend surprise would be . . . just plain pretence. There *was*

something odd about the Farm . . . I knew it. I had known it subconsciously ever since the moment I had walked into the Long Attic—and possibly before that, only I had not stopped to analyse my inner feelings. I pulled myself together. " Look here, Sybil, I'll be frank. I don't like admitting it . . . but several things have happened . . . *are* happening as far as that goes . . . here, that have set me thinking, and I want to try and get a fair slant on it. I won't tell Clare. Tell me what you know?"

Sybil shook her head, frowning.

" Sorry, Miles, but there's so little I can tell! All I know is that this place simply doesn't seem lucky in its letting. People pounce on it and settle in, and then, very soon, on one excuse or another they clear out—no reason given—and it's empty again. It's as though there were *something*—some ' influence ' I suppose the Spiritualists would call it—that prevents anybody settling down there." She paused. " I'm sorry I can't give you more details, but there it is."

" Aren't there any village stories going about?" I asked disappointedly. " Though they may be exaggerated, still sometimes they're useful on the no-smoke-without-fire principle."

Sybil shook her head again.

" Well, I've heard nothing *definite*," she said. " The place has simply vaguely got a bad name—you can't get a maid to sleep there, or even stay after dusk. As regards village talk in general—well, I'm not a native here, nor is Charlie; he only inherited the Hall and the title quite unexpectedly. We'd lived abroad for years before that and never seen this place at all, actually. If we'd been born and bred here we'd have soaked up the local traditions as we grew! But though they like us well enough we're still ' foreigners ', if you know what I mean; and village folk are awfully shy and secretive about discussing things like that with newcomers. I tried to pump some of 'em about it when I came here first, but they merely evade any direct reply—I've no doubt there *are* stories, but I can't get at 'em. They probably talk plenty amongst themselves, but they won't talk to us!"

" Know anything about the past history of the place?" I asked.

" I'll ask Charlie," said Sybil. " But all I know is prob-

ably what Clare knows herself—that Wichart's Farm is all that's left of an old estate. The Farm is the Dower House—the big house was burnt down several hundred years ago; it was never rebuilt. You can still see the ruins in the wood, half a mile away. The story goes that there was a curse on it—but again, I don't know the details."

"Blow!" I said. "I hoped you'd be able to put me onto something—there *is* something queer about the place, and I'm convinced it centres in the Long Attic, whatever it is. And there's another thing . . ." I paused. I did not want to mention Michael and "Saloozy", and yet in my bones I knew there was a connection. Had not Michael said, "Saloozy lives here?"

"Do tell me," began Sybil greedily, but I shook by head.

"Not until I've cleared it up—and then I'll tell you anything you like. But discussing a thing gives it added life and strength, you know, so we won't talk any more about it just now. I'll find a way of dealing with the thing somehow—but it *would* have been a help if you could have given me a line on it."

"I'll ask Charlie, to make sure, if he's come across anything, and get him to write you," said Sybil. "The Long Attic, you say—? Queer, Clare can't bear that room, she told me, and it's never used."

We both turned and looked back at the house, looking blandly picturesque, with its peaked gables and sloping roof mantled at one end by high-climbing clematis and pink rambler roses that made a cascade of foaming colour and scent almost from roof to ground . . . the four little dormer windows in the topmost storey seemed to watch us like hooded eyes, and Sybil gave an exclamation of surprise.

"Why, there's Michael! Look, up in that very attic, and he seems to be talking to somebody."

She was right!

There was Michael, sitting on the sill of one of the windows, plainly talking to somebody within the room—though from where we were standing it was impossible to see who it was. The child was patently explaining or describing something, his small hands waving, his head bobbing with excitement, and as we looked he brought both hands down upon his knees as

though in an ecstasy of amusement and burst into shrill laughter . . . the window was open and we could hear his laughter ringing faintly on the warm still air. Then he turned, saw us looking up at the window, and immediately slipped away—and we looked at each other uncertainly.

"That's odd—just as we were talking about him," said Sybil slowly. "What should Mike be doing in an empty room?"

"Oh, Nannie or the girl might be up there for some reason and he's followed them," I said, more casually than I felt, as we turned to walk back to the house. "Clare says the children use the attic as a playroom sometimes. And Mike in particular has a positive yen for the place."

Sybil looked doubtful.

"Well," she said, "if I felt the way Clare feels about that room I don't think I'd be very keen for my children to use it! But still, it's probably all imagination, and certainly it sounds useful as a playroom, as you say. Ah, here we are! Come on, Alan, if you've done flirting with Clare. We must be getting home . . . after Clare's fixed a date to come over and see us?"

The date for our return visit having been fixed, we waved our visitors goodbye, and the sound of the car drawing away down the sunny, dusty road had only just died when Nannie, her round red face mottled with tears—most surprisingly, for she was a cheerful soul—poked her head round the door and beckoned to Clare. With a resigned lift of her eyebrows my sister hastened away, and I sauntered into the house, through the lounge and out through the french windows to the lawn again. Sinking into a deck chair, I drew out my pipe and began to fill it when Clare came out of the drawing-room and I saw that there was a worried frown between her brows.

"What's up?" I demanded. Clare sighed as she began to stack up the tea things on the trolley preparatory to taking them into the kitchen quarters for washing up.

"Poor old Nannie," she said. "I *am* sorry for her, it's too bad. She'd just finished a big wash—we have to do a good deal of washing here, the children get through so much and the laundry only calls once a fortnight—and hung it up to dry on the line we always use outside the kitchen door, in the

vegetable garden. She says she simply can't *think* how it happened, but she supposes she didn't tie the rope securely—but suddenly she happened to glance out of the window and the line of washing had vanished! She rushed out, and there was the whole line of newly-washed things flat in the dirt . . . and now the wash has got to be done all over again!"

There was a sound in the room behind us and I glanced round quickly. Michael stood just within the french windows, listening—and as I glanced I caught a triumphantly malicious grin on his childish face. It vanished on the instant, even as I turned my head, but it *had* been there, of that I was certain, though he faced me innocently, never blinking an eyelid, and came sauntering out with the most *degagé* air. As Clare went round to the kitchen, wheeling her trolley-load of tea things, I beckoned the child over to me.

He came reluctantly, one cautious eye on me, and I studied him intently as he stood in the crook of my arm, his small body rigid, watchful . . . what had happened to the bouncing, happy, noisy little boy I used to know? Against my will, more and more I was being forced into realising that there was a great and fundamental change here . . .

"Mike," I said, "who were you laughing with up there in the attic just now?"

Now his glance at me was wary, startled as a wild thing surprised in its lair! He eyed me sharply, looked away and did not answer. I repeated my question and at last he spoke sullenly.

"I wasn't there. Don't know what you mean! I been playin' in the garden . . ."

"I know," I said, "but you *were* there, you know, in the attic. You went up there after you'd been playing in the garden. After Nannie's washing had tumbled down. Did you know about that?"

He hesitated, then nodded as I went on.

"I saw you sitting on the window—laughing and talking to somebody. Who was it?"

He looked at me with narrowed eyes, obviously undecided, then answered with a spurt of defiance.

"Why, I was talkin' to Saloozy! That's who I was talkin' to! And now can I go and play?"

I let him go in silence and watched him dive away into the bushes. Frankly, I didn't know what to say. Or think . . .

Well, that episode gave me, as the French say, " furiously to think "—and Sybil's note to me, received the following day, didn't help to clarify things. She said that she had sounded her husband about the past history of Wichart's Farm, but he knew little more than she did. He simply confirmed Sybil's statement that few people ever stayed long at the farm—no matter how long a lease they had taken, after a while they cut their losses and moved out, giving no definite reason. There had been (he said) since he and Sybil had come to the Hall, three " lets " only. An artist and his wife, then a pair of land-girls who meant to turn the place into a poultry farm, and finally an elderly professor of some sort who had planned to run a coaching establishment for selected pupils. This last tenant had plainly meant to spend the last of his days there, installed himself complete with furniture, cartloads of books, a cook-housekeeper, two maids and a secretary-assistant, as well as sixteen pupils, only two years before my sister took the house. But like the others, his tenancy came to an abrupt end and the place had been " to let " again until Clare took it.

Then I decided to go down to the village and try and pump Mrs. Pressing, of Tanfield Post Office. After her cryptic message to Clare I felt positive that she knew a great deal of the " queerness " at Wichart's Farm, if not the story behind it all. But though by this time the old lady and I were on very pleasant terms, as to save my sister I went daily down to the Post Office to post or fetch letters, I drew a blank here likewise.

Mrs. Pressing was politely non-committal—either she knew nothing, or she was determined to give nothing away!

Like Sybil, she admitted that Wichart's didn't seem to be a lucky house in its lettings—tenants wouldn't stay, complained of being disturbed at nights, though this, she was sure, must have been the rats or mice or something like that; old houses often had noises that were difficult to account for. But anything more I could not get out of her, though I was morally certain there was plenty more she *could* have said had she chosen; the guarded, wary nature of her answers gave that

away. Either it was, as Sybil had said, the dislike of the native to give away local secrets to a "foreigner"—or possibly a severe warning had been circulated, by the agents trying to let the place, to everybody in the neighbourhood who might repeat stories likely to hinder such letting.

So there we were—no further! And the days wound lazily on. Nothing else happened, and Michael behaved himself and worked very hard at his Latin—in which he was making really amazing progress—and then Nannie's old mother fell ill, and she had to rush to the rescue. It was only a question of her being away a few days, as Nannie's sister, who usually lived with her mother, was on holiday with a friend in Ireland, and would be returning within a week. However, until she returned there was nothing for Nannie to do but to pack her suitcase and go, and though Claire looked gloomy, I told her to cheer up. It would only be a few days. I promptly rang up Fortnum and Mason for a load of tinned foods so as to save Clare as much cooking as possible—Ada could cope with the rough work, and together we'd manage the children. Susan could sleep in Clare's room, and I would move Mike's bed into my room—he could sleep with me until Nannie got back.

So it was settled—but I wondered why, when during lunch that day the children were told of the altered sleeping arrangements, an odd little shadow seemed to cross Michael's face. He was, I knew, very fond of me—or had been at one time—and normally speaking, would have regarded a chance of sharing a room with me as the greatest possible adventure. But he said nothing and neither did I, and later on I saw him off with his mother and sister in my car to the Curtis' children's garden party—whither I had been bidden also. But children's parties are not much in my line, so I excused myself, and spent the afternoon in the garden with a book.

Some three hours later, from my deck chair outside the french windows of the lounge I heard the return of the party, and prepared myself for a tumultuous onslaught from two excited youngsters, each eager to be the first to tell me all about the party.

But they did not appear. I concluded that Clare had taken both her offspring upstairs to wash hands and faces and quite

possibly to change clothes torn or dirtied in the afternoon's romping, and returned to my book—and it was nearly dinner-time when Clare appeared alone, spruce in a fresh frock, but with a harassed frown on her pretty face. As I helped her prepare dinner, she told me—rather abruptly—that Michael had been so naughty at the party that she had forbidden him to come down to dinner as a punishment and sent him to bed, and that Sue being very tired, she had done the same with her. I could see that something was amiss but tactfully said nothing as we ate our meal . . . mainly consisting of cold Fortnum and Mason products helped out with fresh-cut salad and fruit afterwards . . . but later on, as we sat smoking and talking in the garden in the warm, sweet-scented dusk of a lovely June night, I put a tentative question. Clare hesitated, then spoke in a profoundly troubled voice.

" You know, Miles, if it wasn't idiotic, I'd be tempted sometimes to think that there was an odd sort of Fate following anybody who does anything to Mike? I know it *can* only be coincidence, of course . . . but I remember him saying to me once, soon after we came here, when I told him I would have to spank him for some flagrant disobedience, 'You shouldn't, Mummy! Saloozy doesn't like me being hurt.' Of course I told him not to talk nonsense and spanked him all the same. I hate hurting my babies, but Mike's a boy and he's got no father—and I won't have Naunton some day telling me that I've spoilt his son and made him soft because I hadn't the guts to punish him when he was naughty!" She laughed forlornly. " And would you believe it?—only a day or so afterwards I slipped and sprained my ankle and was hobbling about on a stick for a week at least! And though Mike didn't say, 'I told you so,' he went about with a smug smile a yard wide!"

" *Must* be coincidence—of course," I said.

" I know it must be—really," said Clare. " And if that had been the *only* time I wouldn't have thought again about it. But . . ." she brooded, " that's not the *only* time Miles! It's really rather odd how often it happens? Once, I remember, Mike fell foul of Ada. She was going out with her young man on her afternoon off, and she'd brought her best frock and hat here to change into after she'd done her morning's work.

She'd left the dress and the hat—a fearsome object with a huge red feather wing arrangement in it sticking up—lying in the scullery while she did her work. Mike and Sue were playing Red Indians and—rather naturally but unfortunately!—Mike made off with Ada's feather to make an Indian war bonnet. Naturally she was furious, and wept and scolded him and took away from him a toy boat she had given him only a day or so before as a punishment. And two nights later on she was drying her hair at the kitchen fire in her mother's cottage, and somehow her hair caught alight, though it was still wet—and she lost nearly half of it before her mother smothered her head with a wet towel and put it out! And another time little Hugh Lett persuaded Mrs. Pressing at the Post Office to let him have the last lot of some special sweets that Mike wanted—those striped bull's-eyes, I think they were. Mike turned up just as Hughie walked out of the shop with the bag—and a week later Hughie developed mumps." She brooded. "Oh, it *must* be coincidence, I know, but it's *queer*! It was queer, wasn't it, that Nannie's washing should have collapsed in the dirt only a little while after she'd lost her temper with Mike and shaken him? And today . . . well, Miss Truman, the Curtis's governess, was quite justified in taking the stick away from Mike. But . . . on the way out of the Hall some bees suddenly attacked her—only *her,* out of a whole party!—and the poor girl had to go home with a face swollen up like a cream puff from the stings!"

I stared at my sister, suddenly alert. "What's all this? What stick?" I said. "What happened this afternoon?"

"Well," said Clare. "It all started with Sylvia—Sybil's eldest girl—falling into the pond! Miss Truman wasn't there at the start of it—she was sitting reading and knitting some way away from them, letting them play as they wanted, and it wasn't until Sylvia fell in that she came into things at all. But it seems, from the children's confused stories, that they were arguing about fairy tales, and if they were true, and Mike said magic was true, and *he* knew how to make magic, and they laughed at him." She wrinkled her pretty brows. "Let's see, who was there? The two Cotter children from the Vicarage and Sybil's three brats, and my two, and the three Lett children and two or three others. Anyway, they were all

together, and apparently Sylvia jeered at Mike and he got nettled and pulled out a stick from inside his coat, pointed it at Sylvia and *said* something . . . and the children said that she simply walked straight to the pond and over the edge and in, as though she couldn't help herself! I . . . I don't believe it, of course. I'm sure she simply tumbled in, lost her balance or something . . . but it's odd that the children should all tell the same tale, isn't it? Perry Cotter said she ' went all wooden and didn't look at anything, just walked like a walking doll into the water?'—and Perry is thirteen, and I should imagine, as a parson's child, has been brought up to tell the truth as far as he knows it?"

" What happened then?" I demanded.

" Oh," said Clare. " Of course Sylvia woke up and yelled in a panic when she fell into the water, and Miss Truman rushed over and seized the stick from Michael . . . though she says he hung onto it and wrestled furiously to keep it, and was surprisingly strong for a mere baby . . . and she gave it to me. I made Mike say he was very sorry both to her and Sylvia, but I wouldn't give him back the stick, though he begged and begged—and now he's in bed with the sulks!" She laughed self-consciously. " Hope nothing's going to happen to *me* now!"

" Have you got the stick?" I asked. " I'd like to see it."

Clare nodded. " I'll get it. It certainly is unlike anything else I've ever seen." She rose, and going into the lounge, returned in a moment with a slender black rod in her hands. " What do you make of this?"

I examined it curiously. It was certainly an odd thing, and I likewise had never seen anything quite like it before. It was about a foot and a half long—roughly the length of my forearm—and as big round as a slim walking cane. It was more like the old-fashioned round blackwood ruler than anything else . . . but it was plainly *not* a ruler. Round the middle of it were two metal bands, one of copper and one of zinc, inscribed with curious characters, and at one end there was fitted a polyhedral prism cut to triangular shape, and at the other a similar figure in black resin. The rod was gilded at the resin end and silvered at the prism end, and just below each end it was bound with fine black silk. I turned it over

and studied the queer characters engraved on the two central bands.

They were not hieroglyphics. They looked more like Nordic runes or early Hebrew characters than anything else, and yet I had an uneasy feeling they were neither runes nor Hebrew . . . I didn't know *what* they were. I studied the thing from end to end, balanced it, weighed it—then suddenly I felt the same sense of *grue* sweep over me that I had felt that unforgettable day in the kitchen garden, and again in the long attic; and with a shock like the touch of an electric wire, I knew what it was! I opened my mouth to exclaim but shut it again—for what was the sense of alarming my sister?—pulled myself sharply together and handed the rod back to Clare.

"I haven't any idea what it could be," I lied. "But I should keep it locked up." For a split second I hunted wildly for a good reason to give for saying that—invented wildly and—fortunately—convincingly.

"I believe the last tenant was an old professor of some sort—it probably belonged to him. I should keep it until we can find out where he's gone and can write telling him it's been found. Meantime it's obviously too valuable a thing to let a kid knock about as he likes. And—er—by the way, Clare, where on earth did Mike find it? And how did he manage to carry it to Sybil's without anybody seeing it? It's *much* too long to go into a small boy's pocket, and as he wears shorts he couldn't have carried it down the leg of his trousers, as I used to carry my airgun when I was a boy?"

Clare shook her head.

"He persists that it's Saloozy's stick and that Saloozy gave it to him!" she said vexedly. "I *can't* get him out of that idiotic way of talking, try as I may! He says Saloozy 'showed him where to find it' very soon after he came here, but he seems completely—or deliberately—vague as to how, when or where. And as far carrying it, I found he'd cut a hole in the lining of his jacket just above the breast pocket so that he could slip it in there—the length of the jacket just takes it, with a bit to spare. That's how he managed to take it about with him. And as to how long he's been doing it, I don't know!" She frowned. "Miles, I'm getting worried, honestly

I am! In so many little ways Mike's altered—he's so much less open and frank and honest than he was, and it's getting worse instead of better. I don't know what to do . . ."

But this was getting on dangerous ground, and I had no intention of letting Mike's mother draw me into a discussion on the general situation! I sent her off to bed with a kiss and a few reassuring generalisations about children going through various odd phases, and that she mustn't worry . . . the usual sort of stuff . . . which comforted her somewhat, and we parted for the night. But as I undressed, stealing a sidelong glance at Mike's small sleeping face on the pillow of his bed by the window, I too felt worried. Where on earth had the child got hold of a real magician's wand—and what was far worse, some definite notion, fantastic as it seemed, of how to use it? " Saloozy's stick "—who and what *was* Saloozy? Dimly behind the growing mystery loomed a dark and sinister Somebody, but just how to track down that somebody, incarnate or discarnate—the latter, I felt sure—I could not think!

With an exasperated sigh I turned out the light, slipped into bed and composed myself to sleep . . . but sleep would not come. I tossed and turned from side to side, pondering, worrying, analysing, alternately telling myself that Clare and I were fools and that all we were doing was to allow a set of odd coincidences to build themselves into a bogeyman that had no existence in fact, and telling myself bluntly that the damn house had a jinx on it, and that whatever the reason, Clare had better cut her losses and get out of it, like the other tenants. But—how was I to explain myself to her, if I gave her this advice? I'd nothing definite to go on—and the poor little soul had sunk every penny she possessed in the place and was so happy and contented there, settled for the first time in years, and looking forward to a future in which I was already beginning to suspect Alan Hemingway would play a part. If I could only " lay " the jinx, release the house—and Mike—from the presence that was looming over both! I was still awake, worrying and fretting over the problem, when I was conscious of a faint movement from the direction of Mike's bed.

I all but called out " Mike, are you awake?" but something held me back and I remained silent, watching and listening.

The room was not wholly in darkness, as the curtains were not fully drawn and there was a bright moon.

A shaft of moonlight lay across the foot of Michael's little bed and extended along the floor to the door, and as I watched I saw the small figure of the child cross the strip of moonlight as he went towards the door. Beside the door he paused, one small hand on the handle, and looked back in the direction of my bed as though to assure himself that I was sleeping—he was standing then full in the moonlight and I saw that he was fully awake, though the first idea that had flashed across my mind was that he might be walking in his sleep. But the look he was directing towards where I lay in the shadows was the look of someone fully and vitally conscious, a look both cunning and triumphant, and I suddenly realised that he had been awake all the time, probably ever since I came up to bed, merely biding his time until I went to sleep and he could creep out of the room! He must have exercised the most unchild-like patience and self-control to have feigned sleep so successfully for so long, and I felt an odd little shiver touch me.

He waited a full minute, then softly opened the door and leaving it open, went off down the moonlight passage outside —and I was out of my bed in a flash and peering after him! The small blue pyjama-clad figure was just turning the corner of the attic stairs that led to the mysterious top floor, and pausing only a moment to thrust my feet into soft slippers, as I knew the rough, splintery surface of those uncarpeted stairs, I stole after him. What on earth could be taking the boy up to that great empty room at this time of night . . . what was he going to do? With the feeling strong upon me that if I were wise and cautious I might at last be given a chance to solve this dark mystery, I waited a few minutes to let the child get well ahead of me, and softly followed him.

As the attic stairs ran directly up in one long steep flight, if he had turned his head he must have seen me, so I hung back for a few minutes to let him get to the top of the stairs, and then followed swiftly. As I reached the top of the stairs, there was no sign of Michael—he had gone on into the long attic, luckily leaving the door ajar—and I noted thankfully that the closet door was open likewise, which would be useful in case I needed a quick retreat and had no time to get down-

stairs. I tip-toed down the passage and peered through the crack of the attic door into the long room.

I could hear the murmur of Michael's voice, and presently I saw that he was sitting on the sill of the dormer window nearest the fireplace—the one where he had been sitting when Sybil and I had seen him from the garden—clear in the bright moonlight, that paved the floor of the old attic with oblong sections of alternate silver and black. And he was talking—talking, volubly, anxiously, to—nothing at all!

That is, *I* could see nothing—nothing and nobody—but that *Mike* could see somebody was plain. It was also plain that he was hearing somebody speak, though I heard nothing. In between his eager talk he paused, plainly to listen to some response, nodded, frowned, protested, exclaimed, then took up his tale again, precisely as though he was talking to a palpable living person . . . yet the pauses in his speech were simply pauses to me. It was as though the boy were talking to himself, " making pretend " to be answered, as we used to say in our childhood. Yet—*was* it pretence? I listened with painful intensity. The child was talking about the Curtis tea party.

" They *laughed,* Saloozy . . . and it made me mad! I told them I knew how to make magic . . . that you'd taught me and you were going to teach me more, *much* more, and they laughed at me . . . serves me right for talking! Oh dear, I *know* you don't like it, but it's so difficult to help it when silly people laugh and won't believe you're real! I got mad and pointed the stick at Sylvia and said the words you taught me, and it worked! She got stiff all over, and her eyes went blank and queer, and she just walked right into the water, and I called out ' now you see I was right ' to them all! Only they were scared and crying out, and Sylvia woke up when she got into the water and started screaming and that Miss Truman came running and she was so angry when they told her that she smacked me—*hard*!"

There was a pause. The child's head was bent as though listening intently—I could hear nothing, but after a moment he nodded his head as though assenting and chuckled in a manner curiously unpleasant to hear.

" Oh yes, she took it away . . . called it a ruler and said I was playing at being a magician and trying to frighten the

children with it. She gave it to Mummy—but before she took it away I held onto it hard and *wished* inside myself that something nasty could happen to her soon, and it *did*!" The sinister little chuckle came again. "You never let me down, do you, Saloozy? You ought to have seen her hopping and squealing when those bees stung her . . . they had to put her to bed and send for the doctor. Ha, ha, ha!"

The chuckle expanded into a shrill titter of unholy mirth, and now I felt that I could—almost!—see the Something, the Someone whom the child, with his keener psychic sight, saw whole and complete. I knew without the shadow of a doubt now that Someone old, old and hideously evil, wise not only in all the wickedness of this world but in the dark and unholy knowledge of another world as well, had for his own ends fastened on this innocent child, and my whole heart rose in disgust and revolt, resolved somehow to save him! I controlled myself with a huge effort, though my head was whirling with disgust and horror, and I remained rigid behind the door, watching and listening as Michael went on.

"Yes, and that's what I'm worried about, Saloozy. Mummy's got your stick, your magic stick that you lent me, and she's locked it up and I can't get at it to use again! And I was getting on so well with it! And I'm practising looking in that bit of mirror I found, though the pictures aren't coming *very* clearly just yet—it'll be better when you let me use the Ball. And I'm learning that Latin you wanted me to learn so that I'll soon be able to read the Black Book and learn all the spells that control Them when They come, and then I shall want your magic stick more and more." He paused a moment and then drew a sigh of relief. "Oh, I'm so glad . . . you'll get it back for me? I'll hide it in the ash tree again—I can't carry it about with me any more 'cos Mummy found the place where I hide it in my coat; or if you think the ash tree isn't safe any more, will you tell me a place to hide it—a real secret place? And when I'm ready to use them you'll show me where to find the Book and the Ball? Oh, that will be lovely . . . thank you, thank you! Now I'll go back to bed and to sleep, shall I? Good night, Saloozy . . . good night!"

Slipping off the window sill the child made a curious sort of salute, waited a moment as though to see whether this

invisible companion had truly gone and came running down the long room towards the door—I stepped hastily into the little closet and drew the door to, and heard him go past and down the stairs. After waiting a few minutes I went down myself and going softly into the bathroom next to my room, emerged making a great clatter with the door handle so that had he, on entering the room, noticed my absence I would be ready with an excuse. But when I went in he was—apparently, at all events—sound asleep. But *I* had precious little sleep that night . . .

I didn't feel any better next morning when I asked Clare to let me have another look at the curious stick or ruler that young Michael had been carrying about, and she found—though she swore she hadn't touched the drawer of her writing-table in which I had seen her lock the stick—that it was no longer there! Neither was it—for I went to look—in the hollow at the base of the ash tree where at one time Mike had been in the habit of keeping it—where (I gathered after) he had first found it. It had simply disappeared.

Clare was puzzled, I could see, when I asked her to take Mike out to tea somewhere that afternoon. But she asked no questions, and said she would take my car and drive over to the Vicarage to call and take Mike with her. He pulled rather a long face—it took a great deal of persuasion or a direct command to get him to leave the Farm these days—but they duly set off, and the moment they were out of sight I went upstairs hot-foot to the attic. Having had some experience by now of Mike's uncanny prescience, with him in the house I could never be sure of having a good long time to myself up there undisturbed. But today I meant to explore that room—the core and centre, I was sure, of the house's " queerness "—and I shut the door behind me and advanced down the long dusty, sun-dappled room with a curious feeling of trepidation, as though I were going to meet a mortal enemy . . . and truth to tell, by this time I was by no means sure I was *not*!

One thing I *was* sure of—that the main focus of the Force that Mike called " Saloozy " lay somewhere at the far end of the room, by the old fireplace. It was there I had felt that first instinctive sense of " withdrawal " and there I had always

lingered longest—and it was at the far end, the fireplace end, of the room that I had twice seen Michael talking to somebody. Standing before the gaping, blackened hollow that had been the old fireplace, staring at it and the fragments of rusted iron that projected from the wall beside it, my eyes travelled up to the brick mantelpiece that ran along the projecting chimney breast above the fireplace, and the square carved wooden frame containing the silly "Christmas Annual" picture that was fixed to the brickwork above it.

I found myself staring again at this picture and wondering afresh why such a cheap and stupid print should have been considered worthy of a handsome carved wooden frame, a frame that had—unless my eyes deceived me—even once been gilded? I leant forward to examine it closer and saw with a start of surprise that the print was not, as on a cursory glance I had thought, actually *enclosed* in the frame. The original picture was still in the frame—the print had merely been pasted over it. Pasted on neatly enough, with its edges cut flush with the frame, but age had made the paper begin to dry and break away, here and there bits had cracked and curled up, showing the foundation to which it had been stuck. Curious and interested, I took out my pocket knife and did a little prising, and found the paper so brittle with age that without difficulty I tore several large pieces away, and found that underneath the paper was an oil painting of some sort. A portrait, it seemed. I could see part of a hand resting on a desk or table, the fragment of a velvet dress or cloak of some sort.

Much thrilled, I dashed down to the kitchen for some warm water and a soft cloth, and in a few minutes the last shreds of paper were rubbed away and the hidden picture exposed to view.

It was a carefully painted portrait—not a work of genius, but vivid enough and, one felt, probably a good likeness of the original, an elderly man in Elizabethan dress, starched ruff and dark green velvet doublet, with a pointed grey beard and moustache, long grizzled hair and small piercing dark eyes that stared straight out of the canvas. It was an old painting, dark and cracked here and there with age, but otherwise undamaged—the subject stood three-quarter length, rest-

ing one hand on a table, on which could dimly be seen what looked like a glass ball on a stand, an open book and a skull. Over one shoulder a black cloak hung, half concealing the other hand, which was placed on his hip—but in that hand could be seen a slender dark stick, with a curious triangular tip and about the middle double-ringed with metal. The Wand! The Wand I had handled, the Wand that had so mysteriously vanished from my sister's writing desk! With a confused sense that somehow I had uncovered, or was in process of uncovering, something that while strange and dreadful, did not surprise me, I stared, transfixed, at the painted face, narrow, evil, wrinkled, with those rapier-like black eyes that bored into mine . . . and there came a flurry of steps into the room behind me and Michael, breathless, furious, flung himself fiercely upon me, fighting, biting, pummelling like a wild creature!

"I knew it, I felt it . . . Saloozy brought me back to stop you! That's him—that's Saloozy! Look how he's frowning, how angry he is! You shall not, you mustn't—get away Uncle Miles! This is Saloozy's place . . . Saloozy . . ."

The child was utterly hysterical, almost foaming at the mouth—despite his frantic fighting I picked him up, clipping his arms firmly to his sides, and carried him downstairs, where Clare, shaking her head with bewilderment, administered a bromide tablet and hot milk and put him to bed. It was only when I promised that I would not go up to the long attic again without him that at last he consented to settle down, and exhausted with excitement, fell asleep—and it was only then that I found time to ask my sister what had happened to bring them back so early. I was frankly furious! I *knew* that I had had my fingers on the very brink of prying open this mysterious Saloozy business when Michael had rushed in, and Clare's explanation did nothing to clear things up—except that it confirmed my suspicion that something more than mere coincidence had brought Mike back in time to stop my explorings in that upper room!

It appeared that halfway to the Vicarage the car had stopped dead and refused to move! Clare, who was as capable a driver as she was many other things, had climbed out and tinkered with the engine, tested the petrol supply, done every-

thing she could, but failed to find anything wrong; and as just then somebody came along and offered to give them a tow Clare decided it would be better to return home—when lo, just before they reached the Farm the car suddenly reasserted itself and they had come home under their own steam! Whatever had gone wrong had suddenly decided to go right . . . *directly they were almost home again*! And the moment they turned into the gates, Michael had flung himself pellmell out of the car and without a word to his mother, had run into the house and upstairs like a wild thing . . .

I made light of the scene in the attic, for Clare's sake, pretending that the child had merely been in a panic for fear I had interfered with some of his possessions left up there; and as it was now getting on for seven o'clock I left her to put Baby to bed and cope with the preparing of the dinner, thanking the gods as she did so that Nannie was returning on the morrow. I was quite determined to complete my search of the attic room that had been so rudely interrupted! But in order to do it in peace I would have to see that I was not disturbed again . . .

Michael was still sleeping when I went softly into my room, and my heart contracted with pity as I looked at him—he was palpably thinner and paler than when I first came, and there were dark rings under his eyes and traces of tears on his cheeks. As I rummaged in my suitcase I sent up a mental prayer to the Higher Powers that I might be helped to rescue this child from the dark and alien Entity from the Outer World that he called " Saloozy "—that Entity who had, I was certain, once walked the earth in the person of the subject of that old portrait. I soon found what I was looking for—a little silver chain from which hung a silver Crucifix. It had been given to me by a woman I dearly loved—the woman for whose sake I had remained a bachelor. She took the veil and disappeared from the world of men, and I never moved without the last present she gave me. I slipped the chain through the buttonhole of his pyjamas—not daring, for fear of waking him, to raise his head to put it round his neck—and tied it fast. As I did so I had to pull back the bedclothes a little, as he had burrowed like a little mole beneath them—and I gasped with astonishment. For there, gleaming sullenly up at

me like a slim black snake, close to the child's body, lay the Wand! "Saloozy's stick!"

Saloozy had been as good as his word, and given it back to his pupil. Even somehow drawing it out of a locked drawer to do so . . . what do the experts on psychic phenomena call it?

"Dematerialisation". The passage of matter through matter . . .

As I drew the evil thing out it felt cold to my touch, cold and deadly, though it had been lying close to the warm body of the sleeping child.

I held it firmly in my left hand, for I was taking no chances of its being spirited away again if I laid it down for a moment! I bent over Michael and drew the fingers of my right hand softly over his forehead, over and back, over and back . . . I was no novice, thank God, at hypnotism, and though I knew I was pitting my still-young knowledge of magic against Something cunning and powerful in the extreme, whose knowledge of that same magic had been perfected through centuries of experience, yet I could not help feeling that with the forces of good on my side, I would be helped to succeed.

As I stroked the child's forehead I *willed* as hard as I knew how for him to lie still until I had done what I meant to do. I willed him to lie and sleep, under the protection of the Cross, to sleep peacefully until I bade him awaken, and as I stroked I felt that cold and horrible *grue* steal round me, as Something hovered near, furious, baffled . . . sensing, or so I hoped, defeat and banishment ahead . . .

As I straightened up, satisfied that I had put Michael to sleep until I chose that he should waken, I turned a ring I always wear—one I got in the East, in Persia, that is inscribed with the Seal of Solomon, which is potent against Evil—three times, and holding firmly to the Wand I mounted the stairs again towards the attic.

The air was charged with menace as I went in—menace clear and unmistakable. The very tensity of the dead silence proclaimed it—Something awaited me! Something was going to fight—and I was going to accept the challenge! I would not let myself think what might happen if I lost . . . but I did

not intend to lose. Within the last ten minutes a new and amazing confidence had come to me, and with a firm step I entered the sinister attic, walked up to the picture and tried to drag it from the wall. That damned portrait for so long safely hidden behind the silly print pasted over it, but exercising its dire influence in secret from behind—that portrait was the heart of the curse that plainly hung over Wichart's Farm, and I was determined to get rid of the thing, if I had to chop it out of the wall piecemeal!

The frame was firmly clamped to the wall and I could not find a single place where one might insert a knife to try and prise it off, though I tried several places with the big blade of my pocket knife . . . wondering if I should go downstairs and get a chisel, I went feeling inch by inch round the edge of the carved frame, pressing and pulling, and somehow I must have touched a secret spring, for with a harsh click the picture swung out towards me! It swung out as the door of a small safe swings when it is opened, and I saw that the picture had been fixed to the door—which it most effectively hid—of a little shallow cupboard sunk in the thick brickwork of the chimney breast. A cupboard in where were three small dark bundles . . .

As it swung open there was a sharp grinding sound overhead and out of sheer instinct I sprang back, only just in time to miss a great lump of plaster that had detached itself from the ceiling and fell plump on the place where I had been standing. Had I not moved just in time the thing must have caught me full on the head and either badly damaged or quite possibly killed me! I was rather shaken as I stared at the fallen plaster. Plainly the Being I was fighting was desperate, but oddly enough, that realisation heartened me enormously. If he were desperate, then it meant I was " getting warm " as the children say! Nay, I was getting more than warm, I was on the very edge of unravelling the mystery . . . unless the mysterious bundles inside the little cupboard lied!

The room was silent, the Force exhausted for the moment by its tremendous effort of malice as I swept the bundles into my arms and carried them over to the fading light by the dormer window.

Wrapped in a tattered piece of old green damask was a

large book, its ancient black leather cover warped and damaged. It bore upon its back a curious Sign, and as I opened the yellowed pages I saw they were inscribed in heavy black-letter Latin, ornamented here and there with red capitals and interleaved with carefully drawn diagrams. I read a few lines and shut the book, shuddering. The Grimoire! The Black Book—I had suspected it. The Book of Spells, of evil magic, in the working of which a little child was to be trained! In the tense silence of the room I hastily unwrapped the two other bundles. In one was a human skull, coloured to the tinge of old ivory by the centuries that had passed over it; and last of all, in a battered leather bag that was falling to pieces with age, was a rusted metal stand, and beside it a round and shining glass ball—a crystal. I laid "Saloozy's stick" beside the three and looked soberly at them —I knew now what I had to face! The spirit, dead but still evilly, wickedly alive, of the old magician whose picture I had unveiled. The Ball, the Book, the Skull and the Wand . . . going up to the fireplace again I seized the loosely swinging door of the cupboard to which the picture was fixed in my hands and wrenched savagely. The hellish portrait should burn, and all the other things with it—only so would the Farm be cleansed and whole!

I wrenched and wrenched again, with all my strength—and I am a sixfooter, broad in proportion, and I flung all my weight into it—but it took every ounce of strength I could bring to bear on that frail square of wood before at last, with a creak and a groan that was like a cry of mortal agony, it parted from its hinges! Heaping the other oddments upon it, I ran like a hare out of the room and down the stairs, and only just in time, as with a roar of falling plaster and woodwork another part of the roof above the door gave way and came cascading down into the room just as I leapt out into the passage! It was only thanks to the fact that I wore the Ring of Solomon that I didn't get killed . . .

I was panting like a winded horse when I got downstairs —I'd had enough, and more than enough, but my task was not over yet. I didn't realise as I went through the kitchen, where Clare was fussing over the stove, how odd I was looking—she told me afterwards. White-faced, and streaked with

dust and dirt, and streaming with perspiration . . . she said something to me as I went through but I wasn't stopping for anybody now!

I knew there was plenty of rubbish—sticks, old papers, dry grass and weeds, straw bottle-covers, dead branches, cardboard boxes—all sorts of things that would burn quickly—round by the tool shed. I piled the stuff together as fast as I could though I could only use one hand—I held tight to those unholy things with the other, I literally didn't dare put 'em down for fear they might be swept away when my back was turned! I lit a match, and after several failures the heap blazed up and when it was really roaring high, I raked a hollow in it and stuffed the devilish things in amongst the flames regardless of singed eyebrows and burnt hands. And I didn't quit until everything except the crystal ball was burnt to ashes and I'd stamped and scattered every one of those—and the ball I dropped down the well and rejoiced to hear the splash that meant its end.

The fire burned oddly high and furiously, and more than once I was glad I'd lighted it on a wide empty patch of ground, as flaming brands kept leaping out and landing far and wide, as though in a futile endeavour to reach and set light to something—the house for preference! But though two or three landed on the roof of the tool shed, I managed to pull them off with the garden rake and beat them out before they got going, and more than one came leaping out in my direction with a fierceness that was more than chance. But luck—or maybe something greater—was my way, and those evil things, and the picture of their one-time owner, vanished forever . . . and as I had foreseen, the Farm was clean again.

Michael slept peacefully through it all. I awakened him when I went up to change and wash—I was as black as a sweep and as exhausted as though I'd run a mile!—and it was plain from the moment he woke up that the old Michael was back again. The old jolly, romping, ordinary little boy. Gone was his interest in Latin, his love of solitude, his talk of "Saloozy" . . . and Clare told me only two days later that she couldn't imagine why she hadn't liked the Long Attic! It would make a first-class playroom for the children in winter or for wet days. When the damage had been repaired she

was going to have it properly painted and done up and a stove installed and proper electric light, and put some plain furniture and all the children's toys and books in it. It would be a god-send to have a place like that to park them in when one really wanted peace . . .

But before I went back to London I walked down to Tanfield Post Office on the pretext of getting some tobacco, and found Mrs. Pressing working in her little garden. Leaning over the fence I looked her straight in the eyes and said:

"Look here, Mrs. Pressing, I know you wouldn't talk to me when I tried to make you once before, but I think you can now. The ghost—or whatever you like to call it—at the Farm, is laid! I've laid it."

She straightened up from the clump of purple phlox over which she was bending and looked sharply at me as I went on.

"I'm going back to London. It's all over, and I'm never going to say anything about it to *anybody*. Least of all to my sister, who's as happy as a queen there, and the children too. But . . . if you'd like to be nice enough to ask me in for a pipe and a glass of that good damson wine you once gave me to taste, perhaps you might like to hear what happened. And in return, perhaps you could tell me some of what you *didn't* tell me when I last tried to talk to you about all this!"

In the quiet little kitchen of the cottage, with a fat hand planted on each knee and her shrewd eyes fixed on my face, the old lady listened intently as I told my tale and when I came to the end she drew a long sigh of thankfulness.

"So, he's beat at last—the Lord be praised! And you too, sir." She looked at me almost reverently. "You was brave, sir—there was danger, I know. It's always had a bad name, Wichart's—we children used to go there sometimes in the daytime for 'dares', but not one of us 'ud go there a' nights, and it was never let for long at a time. We used to say the ghost chased 'em out—anyway, they went. When I got married I went away to live in London, and my husband laughed me out of believing in such things. So when I was widowed and came back here, I went as cook at Wichart's, to a right nice young couple who'd taken it—but it wasn't long before I knew I was right and he was wrong! I was sorry for them

two, and I stayed as long as they did—more for her than for him; she was a nice young lady. An artist and his wife they were, Mr. and Mrs. Abbott. Quite young, with three pretty children, and as happy as kings. But that old wicked one in the picture, he got into the husband and nothing ever went right after. Mr. Abbott took to learning Latin and trying to look into the crystal and studying bad old books, just like you say that blessed child did. And I used to hear Mrs. Abbott sobbin' in the night while he was up there in the Long Attic —that's where the badness stems from in that house."

"I know," I said. "But *who* started it all? You spoke of 'he'."

"I'll tell you in a minute, but don't hurry me!" She looked at me reprovingly. "I didn't rightly know the story, time the Abbotts was there; but I pieced it together as time went on, talking to the older folks and them as remembered the tales about Wichart's their granmas and granpas used to tell . . . So after a while I reckon I knew pretty well what set all the mischief going—but I don't talk about it—t'ain't a pretty story. Poor Mr. Abbott! Poor young gentleman, learnin' the devil only knows what, with *That* standing over him teachin' and urging him, so that the awful things *He* knew about could go on bein' done. So that He could go on workin' through somebody . . ."

She drew a long sigh.

"They parted company at last, Mr. and Mrs. Abbott—poor young folks. She couldn't stand it no more, she was that scared, and she up and went away and took the children; and Mr. Abbott, he went away and joined some sort of dreadful Brotherhood, I heard tell, that goes in for this kind of stuff. If there *is* such Brotherhoods, that is, which I'd hate to believe . . ."

"I'm afraid there *are* Black Brotherhoods as well as White," I said. "What about the other tenants? Were they all 'influenced' in the same way?"

"Well," said the old lady. "*Somebody* out of every lot o' people that ever went to live there seemed to turn queer and bad, no matter how nice they might be to start with—I suppose *He* found some easier to get hold of than others. When Mr. and Mrs. Abbott left, there was two young ladies come.

One didn't feel anything at all, but the other used to talk to me by the hour about how she hated the place and how scared she was, though she didn't know what of; and finally they took to quarrelling and fighting, them that was the greatest friends, and if it hadn't been that one of them's mother fell ill and they had to leave I don't know how it 'ud have ended. I heard tell afterwards that when they got away they was fast friends again, so they left in time. And then a Professor took it—a 'coach' they called him—with a bunch of pupils. And with the Professor and his young gentlemen, the taint touched several of *them*—maybe because they was young and easy to influence. They say they got up to trying witch-stuff together in the Long Attic, and scared one so that he jumped out o' the window and broke his hip and got lamed for life, and another tried to hang himself. So the Professor got scared and they all left, and I don't wonder!"

"Nor do I," I said. "But, tell me, Mrs. Pressing, why 'Saloozy'. That's what the child always called him."

"His name was Sir Lucian Fairfax," said the old lady. "But the villagers, they called him 'Sir Lucifer' because they said he sold his soul to the Devil for power to do wickedness. And I make no doubts that's what young Master Michael's meaning to say with his 'Saloozy'."

"I see," I said, "Sir Lucifer—'Saloozy'—ah yes, that's plain enough. Now go on and tell me about Sir Lucifer. Has he ever been *seen*, do you know?"

Mrs. Pressing shook her head.

"Not that I've ever heard about," she said. "There's noises and shadows and *feelings*, if you take my meaning—but it's mostly the effect on people that lives there that gives the place such a bad sort of name. I suppose it's his wicked spirit working on people somehow to make 'em serve the Devil that he served all his life."

"And he lived when?" I hinted.

"Well," said the old lady, "I misremember my dates, but it was in the reign of the Queen who had the other Queen's head cut off—and a dreadful thing that was to do to a Queen, to my mind."

I nodded. Elizabeth I . . . well, well, Saloozy dated from a long time back, that was certain! Mrs. Pressing went on.

"Well, they say this Sir Lucian was a big figure at the Court then; but tales went round about his playing with Black Magic and consorting with those who had to do with it and he was banished here down to the country. He had a fair young wife, too, it's said, but because of his wicked ways she fled from him and went back to her kinsfolk—and none said her nay or sent her back to her husband—so it looks as though she'd good reason to leave him, don't it, sir?"

"It does indeed," I said. "Go on, Mrs. Pressing? This is *most* interesting."

"Well," said the old lady, "he sent a message after her saying that she could go to hell for all he cared, but that he'd see to it that no man ever found her beautiful any more! And sure enough, within a year the poor lass fell ill of a mysterious disease that left her pretty face all twisted up one side so that she looked like one of they masks the children use to frighten each other on Guy Fawkes' Night. And so his words came true! And of course the whisper went round he'd done it with his evil spells. Maybe so and maybe not—but there it is, it happened just as he'd said.

"Then he filled her place with one painted poppet after another, and the Hall with boon companions from God knows where—and in the Dower House, where my lady his mother had lived until a year or two earlier, he built himself what they call a—lobar—laboratory where he could go in secret and carry on his ugly experiments, and nobody would know. I think he did that because there was a lot of talk about him now, and he maybe thought it 'ud be safer to move his wizard things out of the Hall in case there was an accusation made, and a search—anyway, that's what he did. He put an old deaf and dumb woman in to look after the Dower House, and her young grandson he paid to help him in his work—to light the fires and blow the bellows and run errands and all that—and after his drunken friends had fallen into their beds he'd creep down from the Hall and lock himself into his sorcerer's room at the top of the Dower House and work away at his wicked tricks . . . but the Lord got on his track at last, and serve him right!

"This poor lad—Martin was his name—was mortally afraid of him; but he was a sharp lad and couldn't fail to see

that what he was doing was against God and man. So at last he couldn't bear it no more, and decided to run away and take the magician's wand with him, thinking that without it he couldn't do no more harm. He stole it all right, and he hid it—but Sir Lucian was on his track, and caught him and thrashed him to within an inch of his life and left him lying bleeding and half-dead in a ditch because he wouldn't say where the wand was hid—and there his old grandmother found him. And deaf and dumb as she was, she made shift to let the villagers know what had happened, and they rose in a body, they did, and marched up to the Hall and set fire to it that very night! They'd suspicioned the lord for a long time—and with poor little Martin bleeding and dying on their hands, they'd got the excuse they were looking for. I've heard it was a sight to see, the painted women and their drunken men coming running screaming out of the doors and windows like rabbits being bolted from a wheat field at harvest time——but it wasn't them the villagers was after! They let 'em run—and waited for the lord; and when he come out, blazing mad with rage, they chased him back into the fire, and so he died, cursing to the last. Seemingly they didn't know about that—lab—laboratory though, or the Dower House 'ud 'a gone up in flames too. Martin couldn't tell 'em, for he died a couple days after the Hall was burnt, and his grandmother went queer in the head and was taken off to a lunatic place—so there wasn't anybody to tell about it.

"But all the same, there must have been a sort of whisper about it because it was always called the Wizard's House; and that got twisted into 'Wichart's'—do you see, sir?"

"Indeed I see," I said. "Yes, that falls into place all right—it does indeed!" I stared before me, for I was thinking deeply, and I was startled when my old hostess put my thoughts into words.

"You know, sir, when I heard about this queerness of Master Michael's—which he never had when he first come here, that I swear!—I began to think of that other boy, little Martin, who'd worked for the wizard Sir Lucian, and died through him. It seemed queer, Master Michael finding the wand that has been hid all those years—and I wondered if that old devil had been biding his chance and fastened on the

child's mind, to sort of infect him with his old wicked knowledge, and maybe train him to his own old ways?" She looked at me reflectively. " I don't know what *you* think, sir, but I've heard that some clever people think as we come back to live on earth many times. Maybe Master Michael was that village lad that worked with Sir Lucian once, and maybe that made him sort of easier to get hold of . . . what do you think?"

I thought a good many things, but I had no time to spend discussing them with the worthy soul. I thanked her for her excellent wine and for her interesting story, which had cleared up many points for me, and drove away, very thoughtful. Some people often have a surprising gift for getting at the heart of things; and her suggestion—it was scarcely sufficiently developed to be called a theory—would certainly explain Michael's curiously clear memory of an ancient laboratory. Thank goodness, though, it was all over, a thing of the past. But truly, " there are more things . . ."

CIRCUS CHILD

THIS CURIOUS adventure began one evening when I had gone down to dine with my friend Pennoyer at his flat in Blackfriars. He was still out when I arrived, but I made myself thoroughly at home, stretching my long legs out on the velvet-covered window seat and drinking a glass of the excellent sherry with which Pen's old Bavarian servant, Friedl, had immediately provided me.

It was a lovely summer evening, warm and balmy, yet with breeze enough to ruffle the surface of the Thames into dancing wavelets that curled and slapped the sides of the countless boats that ploughed the waters of the grey old river, going about their business as they had done for so many hundreds of years past. Heavy coal barges, tied nose to tail, sliding weightily past; nippy little boats of the Thames Patrol dodging in and out, lumbering freighters, so loaded that the gunwales rolled almost at water level, sleek privately-owned craft, and now and then one of the Thames " taxis ", the neat double-decker boats that carry passengers from the Pool up to Hampton Court and back for a mere shilling or two. Being summertime, these were crowded with people lining their upper decks and hanging over the rails; and from one, as it slid by, there came the faint echo of a rollicking chorus sung by the light-hearted travellers aboard.

I watched the busy scene for some time. The view from Pen's high-placed eyrie never ceased to fascinate me, and I was so absorbed that I did not hear Pen come in until an affectionate onslaught from his wolfhound Hans almost knocked me out of the window. I am one of Hans' few favourites, and a greeting from him is, to say the least, impressive!

Laughing, my friend hauled Hans away from me and shook hands warmly after I had got up and dusted myself down. I had not seen Pen for some time, having been away for a holiday in Italy, and we burst into eager talk over another glass of sherry for me—and an orange-juice for Pen, who never breaks his rule of teetotalism.

We had a great deal to discuss. Although I am no great occultist like Pen, I have been deeply interested in psychic matters for many years, and Pen has paid me the compliment of letting me work as his assistant in certain cases when he needed one. I knew he had some interesting problems on hand when I went away, and was of course eager to hear all about them. Dinner was served, and we talked nineteen to the dozen through the meal; but I knew that Pen would not start discussing his cases until we had finished and Friedl was safely out of the way in her cosy kitchen. So for once I was glad to get through dinner and settle again in the lounge—and my annoyance can be imagined when just as Friedl had brought in the Cona coffee machine and set a match to the lamp, I heard a ring at the door bell.

I had just been watching Pen, sitting with his chin on one long hand, his eyes on the little flame, dancing blue and gold below the round glass globe full of bubbling coffee, and I knew that he was in the very mood I wanted—brooding, reminiscent, full of fascinating talk as an egg of meat. Talk that, once started, would come pouring out of him as freely as the coffee, a little later, would come pouring out of the glass globe.

So I barely suppressed a bad word as the bell rang; but Pen shrugged his shoulders.

"It may not be a caller—may be a late post or a parcel or something," he said as we heard Friedl's heavy step go past. I hoped so. If it were an appeal for help, I knew my friend would never turn anyone in trouble away . . .

So when Friedl came into the room bearing a bit of paper with a scribbled message on it, I knew this meant an end of the cosy evening I had planned. Yet, had I known it, this was the opening of one of the most exciting adventures that I had ever known with Pen; and I had known many . . .

Pen read the message and nodded to Friedl.

" Tell him to come in. Sorry, Jerry, but there's trouble here —and trouble has to come first, as you know."

He rose to his feet as a young man came into the room. A stockily-built young fellow of the respectable working-class type, in a blue serge suit that fitted only where it touched, large boots that creaked, and thick red hands. But the blue eyes that looked out of his otherwise quite ordinary face were steady and honest, there was character in the turn of jaw and chin, and though when he spoke it was with the accent of Bow Bells, his voice was pleasant.

He glanced uncertainly at me, and Pennoyer spoke as they shook hands.

" This is Mr. Latimer, my friend and frequent assistant," he said easily. " You can speak before him as freely as you like —and I want you to speak freely! Sit down and tell us what the trouble is—and incidentally, how you came to hear of me?" He indicated a chair and the young man sat down. He had kept his grey tweed cap in his hand when he came in, and as he spoke he turned it round and round in his fingers after the usual fashion of men when they feel shy or awkward. But his voice was resolute enough, and I knew as I listened that here was the sterling stuff, the blunt, solid, common-sense strength that is England.

" My name's Jack Holcroft, sir, and I'm head mechanic at the ' Owl ' Garridge, Hart Street. Marylebone. You won't remember me—but I've seen you before." Pen's fine brows rose slightly as the boy went on. " Last part of the war it was, when you came down to where I lived when I was a kid— Flagg Street, Camden Town. Hunting for a kid called Nicky, you were . . . kid whose mother got killed in the blitz down there and you was trying to find out something about her."

" Oh!" I exclaimed involuntarily. " ' The Case of the White Snake!' "*

Pen frowned at me and smiled at the boy.

" Of course," he said. " How interesting! I remember meeting a lot of people in Flagg Street when I was making enquiries about Nicky's mother—but I should never have flattered myself that a boy of your age would have remembered me!" He laughed softly. " Well, that makes us in a

*This tale is told, with others, in *Number Seven Queer Street.*

sense old friends, doesn't it?—and it will be easier to talk. Tell me, what did you want to see me about?"

The boy drew a long breath.

"S'like this," he said bluntly. "I got a girl, and we want to get married." He paused and twirled his cap again, a flush rising to his tanned cheeks as he went doggedly on.

"I got a good job with good prospects. My boss is a grand chap and he's promised to make me foreman and give me a flat above the garridge when I get married. Mitzi an' me, we been courting about six months . . . but I can't say as my folks like the idea of our gettin' married, and that makes things a bit awkward." He paused again and Pennoyer spoke.

"Why don't they like the idea of your getting married?"

The boy flushed again and looked embarrassed.

"Well," he said. "First of all Mitzi ain't English, she's Austrian—and she's a Jewess, and that ain't popular with my folks either! She came over with her folks when she was only a young 'un, on the run from the Nazis, and her father died over here and her mother brought her up—then her mother died and Mitzi was left alone. But she got by somehow—she's got guts, Mitzi has! She got work somehow at this and that, and finally got to working in a little caffy where I useter go for a snack sometimes, and that's where we met."

"Well," said Pennoyer, "I know, of course, the British prejudice against foreigners and Jews—but all the same, if your girl has proved herself to be as plucky and hard-working as you say, this shouldn't be impossible to get over."

There was a long pause. Pen looked at the boy in silence for a moment and then spoke gently.

"There's another reason why your folk don't want you to marry this girl, isn't there?" he said, and the boy nodded. Pennoyer went on.

"Go on, my lad, and tell me. I'm a doctor you know—a doctor of sorts at least—and you don't mind what you tell a doctor, do you?"

The boy named Jack Holcroft squared his shoulders and spoke suddenly with determination.

"No, of course—it was only—awkward-like to talk of, and sounds pretty silly really. But here goes!" He drew a long breath and started talking as though anxious to get it over—

and certainly it was a very queer tale that he had to tell.

He spoke of having fallen in love with Mitzi the first moment he set eyes on her and apparently she with him, though at first she was very shy and wary, having obviously had plenty of unpleasant experiences with men in the little snack-bar-cum-café where she was employed. Jack fished out a blurred snapshot to show us how pretty she was. A little creature of about his own age with dark curly hair, great dark eyes and the prettily-rounded figure typical of the young Jewess . . . that figure that, alas, runs to fat all too often in middle-age but is charming in its sensuous femininity in youth.

Pennoyer handed it back with a nod of approval, and the boy went on. It seemed that Mitzi held him off for some weeks, but in the end her love defeated her and she fell into his arms . . . and was apparently amazed and touched to find that his intentions were strictly honourable! When she realised that she was abandoning the hand-to-mouth existence that had been hers for so long and that she was in the future actually to become a wife, honoured, loved and protected, she was touchingly grateful; and the only fly in their ointment was the fact that Jack's parents, though they had to admit they could find no fault in the girl herself—whose manners towards them, shy, humble, grateful, were impeccable—still did not at all like their only son marrying anybody of whom they knew so little.

"One thing they didn't like—and still don't," said Jack, "was that Mitzi's folk were circus folk out there." He nodded vaguely in the direction of Europe. "Father was a sword swallower and her mother did a roller-skating act with her sister, and Mitzi herself was trained as an acrobat—tumbling head over heels, tying herself in knots, and all that. Used to work with her mother and aunt, too, in their act—got throwed from one to the other and stand on the top of their heads at the end—that sort of thing. You know. But when they had to bolt to England they couldn't get no more circus work and had to do all sorts of other things to live."

"Well," said Pennoyer, "it's a tragic story, certainly, but not one that reflects any discredit on Mitzi or her people. Hundreds of poor devils from Central Europe had to fly before the Nazi menace and take refuge in England. So your people

are not really being reasonable in citing that as a cause for objection to your marriage."

Jack fell once more to twisting his cap around, and his very ears were red.

" 'Tisn't only that," he brought out at last. " They don't *like* it, of course—my folks are Methody and think everybody in theatres or circuses belong to the Devil—but it's not the worst. It—you see, doctor, every day at a certain time Mitzi goes to sleep!"

There was a long pause, and Pen and I looked at each other, puzzled.

" Well," Pen said at last. " What about it? At a certain time we all go to sleep! Be explicit, my boy—I see this isn't the ordinary sleep. But give me more details."

" It's so difficult," muttered Jack. " It fair stumps me, and I've known Mitzi all of six months now! I thought to start with it was only she was workin' too hard, poor kid, and simply couldn't help dropping off to sleep, but now I'm not so sure. It's *queer*." He drew a deep breath. " You see, doctor, it don't happen like it ought to—at the proper time, I mean. It happens twice a day—and always at the same times! Four o'clock in the afternoon and again at eight o'clock—and she tells me it's only started happening since we got engaged! Wherever she happens to be she'll drop off instant-like, just where she stands—she'll sleep standing up, I've seen her, if she can't find somewhere to lie down. Sleep like a dead thing for maybe twenty minutes, and then wake up again bright as a button. And she won't even know she's been to sleep."

Pennoyer frowned.

" *What* a curious business," he murmured. " When did all this start?"

" Oh," said Jake, " not until some time after we'd got together and decided to get married. I'd been talking to her about it and how we could get round my folks—it was in my room. I've got a decent room near the garridge with a good old soul who likes Mitzi and doesn't look down her nose when she comes to see me—she knows we got nowhere else to go to be together a bit. We was cooking sausages for supper, and we was ever so happy. I left Mitzi to get on with the sausages and mash some spuds to go with 'em, and nipped out for a couple

of beers—and when I got back she was lying on the bed fast asleep and the sausages burning black in the frypan!" He shook his head in rueful reminiscence.

"I'd only been outa the room about five minutes, but could I wake her? Not on your life! There she lay, sound asleep, and I guessed she was tired out, poor kid, and let her lie. I rescued the sausages and did the spuds and by the time I'd finished she'd awakened—but she wouldn't believe me for ages that she'd ever been asleep! Thought I was pulling her leg."

The boy's round blue eyes, wide and troubled, roved from Pennoyer to me and back to Pennoyer again.

"Well, that was the start. I thought it was a rummy go but didn't worry much about it at first—but then it started to happen more and more often! Even when she was working it useter happen, and of course she got into awful trouble, and finally her boss sacked her when he found her asleep standing behind the counter with two or three customers bawling orders at her and her not moving a muscle to serve them!" He scowled. "I remember coming back and finding her at my place crying her eyes out, with old Mother Bunn trying to comfort her. That had happened at four o'clock in the afternoon—and dammit if she didn't go slap off to sleep that very night again at eight o'clock! Slept just twenty minutes— never sleeps more than that—and wakes up again, just like that."

He looked again from one to the other of us and meeting our attentive eyes went on apparently comforted by our obvious interest.

"Well, I thought she was overtired and I told her I jolly well wasn't going to have her work herself to death. I wanted a nice healthy little wife, I told her, who'd give me a bunch of fine kids and run my home like I'd like to have it run—and I asked Mother Bunn if she could give Mitzi a room, if I paid for it, and let her rest a bit until we decided what to do. Old Bunn was a trump! She gave her a room and said she could do with a bit of help in the house with her lodgers, and Mitzi could work there if she liked. So there we are, and we'd be as happy as two bugs in a rug if it wasn't for this—this queer business. And that's getting us both down now."

"It got no better, then, after she left the snack-bar where she was working?" asked Pennoyer. Jack shook his head.

"No. It got worse, if anything. Useter happen only now and then, maybe a couple of times a week; but after she came to live at Ma Bunn's its took to happening every day as regular as clockwork, and always at the same times." His hot unhappy eyes stared into ours. "It's got me beat—and she's scared to death. Can't make it out and talks about having a curse laid on her and all sorts of nonsense . . . but what worries me is she swears she won't marry me until she's free of it. And how do I know how long it's going to last?"

"Have you taken her to an ordinary doctor?" asked Pen. "I admit it does seem a very odd condition—but sometimes there is a physical explanation for the strangest things."

Jack nodded.

"Yes!" he said briefly. "And all the doctor said was that she was a bit run down and gave her a tonic, and that was that!" His tone was bitter. "So unless we can find out what's what about this, I don't know what we're going to do! She won't marry me while this is hanging over her, and of course my folks think she's half dotty and keep on at me to give her up . . . and then I remembered Flagg Street and you, sir. I looked you up in the telephone book and . . . well, here I am."

There was a moment's pause and then Pennoyer, rising, placed a hand on the boy's sturdy shoulder and gave it an encouraging squeeze.

"I'm glad you came, Jack," he said. "Whether I can do anything to help you and your little girl I don't know, but you can bank on it I shall try! The next step is for me to meet Mitzi. Here? No. I think if it's all right with you, I'll come one evening with Mr. Latimer up to your place at Mother Bunn's."

Mother Bunn's humble lodging-house was situated in one of the back streets lying off Marylebone Road, and humble as it was, was clean as hard work with duster, soap and scrubbing-brush could make it.

It was a tall lean house in a row, with a narrow so-called garden before it, filled with sooty grass and privet bushes, and a card stuck in the front window lettered "Bed and Brekfasts only". Behind it were close-drawn Nottingham lace curtains, darned but clean, and between them just showed the leaves

of the inevitable aspidistra. This was Ma Bunn's sitting-room, spy-hole, sanctuary, retreat, whatever you liked to call it; and when Pennoyer and I came up the narrow paved path between the privet bushes we caught a glimpse of the old lady peering through the folds of the curtain to take stock of us before we rang the bell.

She opened the door to us herself—a fat old lady with three chins and a wig of preposterously unreal auburn curls, wearing an old-fashioned " hugmetight " of purple wool over her ample bosom and a black satin apron protecting her skirt. I learned afterwards that she had been housekeeper for many years in many " good houses " as she would have described them, and marrying the butler, turned to running an apartment house in London, which until the death of her husband had done very well. Now she had sunk considerably in the social scale, but still made an honest living; the aura of Mrs. Rouncewell of Bleak House clung about her and probably always would do.

She stood back and gestured us in with a wave of the hand positively royal; but as we turned to mount the narrow stairs to the first floor, where Jack's room, he had told us, was situated, she shook her head and laying a hand on Pennoyer's arms literally pushed him—gently but firmly—into her sitting-room with a conspiratorial whisper.

" Come on in here, doctor—I got something I want to tell you before you go upstairs."

Rather mystified, we followed her into the little front room and took the chairs she indicated to us. It was a typical " front parlour " of such a house, crammed with furniture far beyond its capacity to hold, mostly Victorian stuff. There was a heavy wooden overmantel above the black iron grate that bore an endless array of small shelves set against a mirrored background—shelves that were laden with scores of little ornaments of china, glass, carved ivory, enamel, and what have you. There was a sideboard laden with silver-framed photographs, conspicuous among them that of a woman in the train and feathers of Court dress—plainly the photograph of one of Ma Bunn's early employers—a central table with a red plush cloth edged with bobble fringe, a black horsehair sofa and armchair to match, both bearing antimacassars

made of tatting in red and blue thread . . . and in the windows, as we had guessed, a little round table bearing the aspidistra. Planting herself heavily on the sofa, Ma Bunn squared her hands on her knees and spoke in the richly-unctuous voice of the typical London landlady.

"Doctor, I got to tell you something I think you oughta know before you go up to them two poor kids." Her keen little black eyes bored into Pen's, her fat hands were red and worn with a lifetime of work, but suddenly I knew that I liked Ma Bunn—liked her very much. Poor and hardworking as she was, she was not too poor to exert herself to help others—witness her generous action in making a home for poor forlorn little Mitzi, her obvious eagerness now to help. Pennoyer smiled warmly at her and I knew that he was reacting towards the old lady just as I was.

"I shall be only too glad to hear whatever you can tell me, Mrs. Bunn—one never knows what may be useful," he said. "Do go on please? It's so good of you to try and help them."

"Tcha!" said Ma Bunn, "that ain't nothing! It paid me to take in the girl, s'matter of fact. I wanted help with the lodgers, and her legs is young. Them stairs don't count to her, while to *me* . . . " She thrust outa pair of substantial ankles and for the moment I feared that she might be deflected from her original purpose to a discussion about varicose veins, from which she was obviously suffering. But I was mistaken . . .

"I been watching that girl since she come here, and there's something *queer* about her, doctor? Young Jack, he's out all day and I got her here with me and I been with her often when she goes to sleep—snap, off like that, right on the dot of four and eight o'clock, wherever she may be. And doctor, lately she's got to *talking* in them sleeps—and I don't like it. It ain't right."

"Talking, eh?" Pennoyer was plainly interested. He sat forward, his hands linked loosely between his knees, the slanting light of the late afternoon sun filtering through the lace curtains upon his keen lined face. "What sort of talk, Mrs. Bunn? Talk about her early days—you know she comes of circus stock?"

Ma Bunn shook her head vigorously.

"Might be," she said, "but she don't talk in English at all —she talks her own lingo—it's German, ain't it, as they talk in Austria? In Bunn's day I could scratch up a word or two of French, because he'd travelled a lot and spoke it, and now and then we useter have a French gentleman staying with us . . . but I don't know a blinkin' word of German, though I know the sound of it when I hear it. But that ain't the part that worries me, Doctor. It's that when she talks she don't talk like herself at all! She talks in a voice like a man—and she don't talk in German, either. It's some queer lingo I never heard before."

There was a long pause. Pennoyer stared squarely at Mother Bunn and she stared back at him; it was plain that she was in deadly earnest. At last Pen spoke.

"You're sure of this, Mrs. Bunn? And what sort of voice has this man?"

"I'm as sure as I'm sitting here at this minute," retorted the old lady. "And as for the voice, it's a rough-like, sort of order-you-about-and-don't-talk-to-me sort of voice. It only started a week or so ago, and s'matter of fact, it was because it started that I egged Jack on to come and see you. He told me about the Flagg Street business and you, and when I went down one Sunday to see his folks, they told me some more. So I knew a bit about you."

Pen exchanged an amused glance at me. Truly, despite its immensity, London is only a little village.

"Go on," he said. "This is most interesting," and nothing loth, Ma Bunn took up her tale.

"First of all it was just muttering-like and I didn't take no notice . . . though it was just the girl talking to herself in a dream, sort of. And then suddenly one day she was lying asleep here on this very sofa and I was knitting, waiting for her to wake up and make me a cup of tea, when suddenly a great loud man's voice come bursting outa that little thing, and nearly startled me outa my skin! Great rough voice it was —sounded angry too, and I'm pretty sure he was using cuss words, though I didn't understand a word . . ."

"Hm," Pennoyer said thoughtfully. "Pity he didn't speak English. I'd have given a lot to know just what he was saying . . ."

"Only one thing I'm sure of," said Mrs. Bunn, "and that is, he didn't speak the same language that Mitzi does. I got her when she woke up to say some words in her German, and it wasn't that, I'll swear. Don't know what it was."

"Did you tell her about it," asked Pennoyer. Ma Bunn shook her wise old head.

"No. I didn't want to frighten her, and God knows the poor kid's scared to death as it is. But she knows now all right—guess it happened when Jack was there, and he blurted it out. He asked her who it was and if she knew who it was and she swore she didn't . . . but I dunno doctor, I got a hunch somehow that she *does* know who it is, but daren't say so."

Pen rose to his feet, towering in his long lean height almost to the low ceiling of the little room. He was smiling.

"You're a wise woman, Mrs. Bunn, and what you have told me may be a very great help," he said. "I'll let you know how things go on—and meantime we'll keep this little talk to ourselves, shall we, just in case the two youngsters upstairs are sensitive about being discussed, even in the kindest way? All right! Come on, Latimer, we'll go upstairs."

A cheerful voice shouted "Come in" to our knock on the door that faced the stairs on the first floor, and we entered a cosy little room facing onto the street over the garden. It boasted a shallow iron balcony along which somebody—probably, I thought, Mitzi—had placed a row of pots with flowering plants, geraniums, nasturtiums and marigolds, and though there was a bed in one corner it had been carefully covered with an old blue coverlet and the pillows thrust into covers of vari-coloured cretonnes so as to give the little place the effect of a bedsitting-room. There was a worn piece of carpeting in the middle of the floor, an armchair with a faded cretonne cover, carefully washed and mended, and two upright chairs—a table in the window and a pleated pink paper "fan" filled up the little grate. On the hearth was a gas-ring on which a kettle was already boiling, and on the table a battered tin tray bore four cups and four saucers, a brown teapot, milk-jug and sugar basin plus a willow-pattern dish of fancy biscuits, a second dish bearing cheese and butter, bread and three bottles of beer. It was evident that Jack Holcroft and his

future wife, humble folk as they might be, had all the true instincts of hospitality.

Jack came eagerly forward to greet us as we entered and Mitzi, rising shyly from her perch upon the bed, held out her small hand to each of us in turn as Jack introduced us.

She was fully as pretty if not prettier than the snapshot we had seen, and spoke, it was soon plain, quite good English, though with an attractive foreign accent. She wore a plain little navy blue cotton frock; but her foreign blood peeped out in the round gilt ear-rings that swung for her ears, and the triple row of twisted glass beads of many colours that ringed her neck. Pen greeted her with his usual charming courtesy and seated himself, as invited, in the large armchair while Mitzi busied herself making the tea and Jack fussed hospitably about making talk—for he was palpably nervous, though trying manfully not to show it—handing cigarettes, matches, ash-trays and so on while Pen, refusing beer, accepted a cup of tea. He and Mitzi sipped tea and munched biscuits while I companioned Jack in a glass of beer and some bread and cheese; and then without a sign or hint of warning, Mitzi, who was standing beside the table ready to pour Pen another cup of tea, stiffened suddenly and stood rigid, motionless!

Jack sprang to his feet with a muttered curse, and went over to her; guided her gently to the bed and made her lie down upon it . . . and Pen and I, looking at each other, glanced at the round-faced alarm clock on the mantelpiece. It was eight o'clock . . .

I noticed as the girl moved towards the bed that her eyes were closed, her movements mechanical as those of a sleep-walker. When Jack made her lie down she resisted faintly at first, then relaxed and lay still—and as he drew the coverlet gently over her he said bitterly.

"Well, gents both, there you are! Was I right or was I?"

Pen rose, and coming over to the bed, sat quietly down on it, studying the face of the sleeper. It was still peaceful, remote —and I was opening my mouth to ask Jack a question when with a suddenness that made us all jump, the girl's mouth opened and a voice came bursting through. A man's voice, as Ma Bunn had said. A voice loud, assertive, strong, speaking

in a tongue that was strange to me but was plainly not strange to Pen, with his flair for foreign languages.

He spoke to the entity, whoever he was, that was controlling the girl, in its own tongue—spoke forcefully and at length, and the Entity replied in kind. It was plain, though I could not understand the words being used, that whoever was speaking was angry, boastful, threatening, and I listened eagerly while poor Jack, agog with anxiety and excitement, sat on the very edge of his chair hungrily watching his sweetheart as she lay unconscious on the bed while this strange and terrifying Being talked through her—watching Pennoyer as he talked with the Unknown, asking questions, pressing points, arguing, denouncing . . .

For a full twenty minutes the strange interview lasted, and then, with the same abruptness with which he had arrived, our unknown visitor withdrew and Mitzi sat up, pushing her hands through her ruffled hair and looking vaguely round the room. Her eyes fastened on Jack and her face fell, seeing the expression on his. Slipping off the bed, she ran to him and took his head between her hands, crooning to him, kissing him, shedding tears in the most artless and touching way. I must confess there was a smarting at the back of my throat to see them together, these two poor young things, caught up in a force strange and evil—for evil I knew well it was—of which they had never dreamed . . .

Johnny held her tightly in his arms for a moment until he had his emotions once more under control, but it was the girl who spoke first. She addressed Pennoyer.

" So, *mein Herr,* you have heard him—the Thing that speaks now through me." Pen nodded and she went on " Only lately has he come, and always do I know when he has been here because of the look on my poor Johnny's face."

" Do you know who he is?" Pen asked, and she shook her head vigorously.

" Nein, nein!" Yet I could have sworn that she did not speak the truth, for as he asked the question, for a split second there had been a fleeting look of fear on her eloquent little face . . .

Pen nodded and turned to John.

" The Entity who was speaking through Mitzi was speaking

Greek," he said—and again I thought I caught that look on Mitzi's face, though it was gone in a flash, so quickly that I might have been mistaken. Though I knew that I was not . . .

" I suppose," said Jack gloomily, " that means my Mitzi's a medium, don't it? Can't say I cotton to the idea overmuch!"

" Well," said Pennoyer, " it certainly means that she has psychic qualities, and these are being deliberately used by this Entity for his own purposes, whatever they are. I don't know yet."

But Jack was persistent.

" Being a medium means that all sorts of dead folks can come through and talk doesn't it?" he asked. " Could anybody who wanted to come and do it?" His expression was one of strong distaste.

" Oh no, I don't think so," Pen said quickly. " I don't think that Mitzi's psychic sensitivities lie in that direction at all! But obviously this Being has somehow sensed Mitzi's psychic gifts and has forced his way through, for his own reasons. Plainly he must be got rid of and Mitzi must be freed . . . and I hope I shall be able to do it."

He was writing as he spoke, making notes on the small pad he always carried in his pocket, and when he had finished scribbling he slipped the pad back in to his pocket and turned to Mitzi, watching wide-eyed and troubled from the shelter of her lover's arms. Pen's voice as he spoke was warm and kindly and reassuring.

" Now Mitzi, I want you to trust me—trust me fully, and believe I am your friend and want truly to help you. But I must ask for your full co-operation over your cure? You understand? I want you to come over as soon as possible to my flat in Blackfriars—Jack will bring you, but I don't want him with us when we talk together, as there are a lot of things I must discuss with you alone. When you are there I can explain all this to you more easily so that you will understand and—I hope—give me your full confidence. You will come?"

The girl nodded, though I seemed to see something wary, guarded in her eyes even as she nodded. Pen made a date for his next free evening, and with thanks for our drinks and fresh

assurance that in the end all would be well, we took our way homeward.

We drove to Blackfriars via Regent Street and Whitehall so as to go home by way of the Embankment which we both loved—the long road by the river with its lights reflected in the moving water—the long black shapes of the barges gliding by and the serried wall of lights on the further side, and as we went we discussed the events of the evening.

I told Pen what I had noticed about Mitzi's reactions to his questions about our mysterious visitor, and he nodded. He had observed them too—I might have known that nothing would have escaped my friend's keen eyes.

"It may take me some time to dig out the facts behind this possession—for possession it is," said Pennoyer as he steered the car skilfully through the traffic of Trafalgar Square into Whitehall. "It's obvious that it stems from something in Mitzi's past that she has not told Jack and doesn't want him to know. Poor kid! I hope she will trust me enough to be honest with me, otherwise my task will be a very hard one."

"Who *was* it?" I asked curiously.

"A figure from her circus days," said Pennoyer. "An old lover, I suspect. Young as she is—I should think not more than twenty-six or seven—abroad, girls mature early, and many are married and mothers by the time they are seventeen. He's a Greek—possibly partially Bulgarian; his Greek was fluent but with an ugly accent that I think was Bulgarian—and he told me quite a lot about himself, boasting and bragging and saying how great he was. Name, Gene Markos—I wrote it down here—and according to him he was the greatest conjurer, the greatest magician, the greatest hypnotist that ever lived! I must check up on him as soon as possible—and here you may be able to help me, Jerry, with your journalistic contacts. See what you can find about one Markos, who according to himself was—is—a big figure in the circus world?"

"How do you mean 'is'?" I demanded. "If he were speaking through Mitzi he must be dead, surely?"

"It doesn't follow," said Pen. "What you don't realise Jerry—and what very many people don't know and would never believe—is that under certain conditions, it is possible

for a *live* person to take possession of a living medium and speak through her! When this takes place the person speaking is as a rule either in trance or asleep; but it *can* be done by somebody who possesses the knowledge and the capacity to project themselves while still awake and conscious of what they are doing—and this, I think, is what was happening tonight. It argues a considerable amount of occult knowledge and training on the part of Markos to have done it, though—which is rather disquieting. It is plain he is a good deal more than a mere circus conjurer."

I was so astonished that I had no reply, for this idea was utterly novel to me. Yet I knew that Pen's knowledge of the unknown powers of man was so great that nothing he said could be dismissed as impossible, no matter how fantastic . . .

"That's the most extraordinary thing I've ever heard," I said at last. "But if it's possible . . ."

"It *is* possible, though it's not at all common," said Pen. "But I can't say off-hand whether tonight I spoke to a dead person or a live one—though I saw him standing behind poor little Mitzi quite plainly."

"You *saw* him?" I was incredulous. "What did he look like? And if you saw him, how is it you can't tell whether he was a ghost or an astral projection?"

"Because they look just the same," explained Pen. "That is one of the many traps in psychic work. Quite often a genuine and perfectly honest medium will see the astral form of a person and say it is the spirit of somebody dead, when it isn't at all, but a projection of a living person, which leads to all sorts of confusion sometimes. As to what he was like—he's a man in his late forties, I should say. Tallish, black-haired, good-looking in a flashy way, with a heavy black moustache and black eyes . . . wearing colourful baggy trousers and a red sash with a short gold-embroidered jacket and a cap to match with a tassel . . . effective circus-ground sort of dress. A bad fellow, I know—and undoubtedly dangerous, though just *how* dangerous remains to be seen. I shall be interested to find out the connection between him and Mitzi—but from her obvious anxiety to keep it from Jack's knowledge I should say it's a pretty close one."

"What if she's scared and won't talk?" I asked as we

swung up from the Embankment into the quiet little square where was Pen's flat. Pen smiled.

"If she won't talk voluntarily I shall find some way of persuading her," he said. "You know my methods, Watson!"

It took quite a bit of ferreting before I could discover anything about the Great Markos—for he was, of course, nothing like as Great as he would have had Pennoyer believe!

The most astonishing part was that I found he was still alive! So the shape that Pennoyer's clairvoyant sight had seen had been not, as usual, the semblance of somebody who had left the earth behind him, but the shape of somebody who was still very much there. He was a conjurer travelling with this and that and the other circus and sometimes doing a turn on the smaller music halls as well.

His turn was a mixture of things. Sawing a woman in half, making her disappear, clairvoyance, trick-shooting—done, I've no doubt, by means of mirrors and clever sleight-of-hand—a little hypnotism and so on, all accompanied by clever patter and a showily handsome presence.

I hastened with this information to Pennoyer, who nodded his head thoughtfully.

"I rather thought it might be so," he said. "But I can't do anything more until I've seen this girl Mitzi and had a talk with her. I only hope she will be frank—but I may have difficulties with her."

"Why?" I asked curiously. "Surely she wants to be cured of this obsession? She's dying to marry Jack, but she says she won't until she is cured—so why do you think she may not be willing to play ball with you to help the cure?"

"Because she is terrified of some disgraceful secret of her past life leaking out to Jack," said Pennoyer. "It's plain she has had a tough time and had little reason to trust men, so why should she trust me not to betray her, poor little soul? She's madly in love with Jack. But if this business stems from some period in her past life of which she is ashamed, she will do all she can to hide it lest Jack grow to know of it and repudiate her—as, of course, some men would do."

I glanced at my friend's serene face, mirror as it was of the utmost honesty and sincerity.

"How she could ever dream that *you* would betray her is beyond me," I said bluntly. Pen smiled.

"Many men have let that poor little girl down," he said quietly, "and after all, she has only met me once and has no reason to trust me, any more than any other strange man. Jack is her sheet-anchor, her refuge from the storm, her haven of peace from the stresses of a cruel world . . . no wonder she dare not do anything that might make a breach between them!"

"I don't believe that anything would do that," I said. "I think Jack's the type that even if there were some scandal and disgrace in her past life he would say it belonged to the past, and marry her all the same."

"I think so too," said Pennoyer. "But I doubt if Mitzi would. She is a foreigner and knows the jealously-possessive attitude of her own menfolk towards their women and how, if they found a girl they had meant to marry wasn't all she should be, they would refuse to marry her at once . . . and so, of course, would quite a number of Englishmen. But not, I think, in the case of Jack. However, I hope we shall not need to put him to the test. I hope to be able to release her from this without betraying anything of her past life! That after all, is her own business and should remain her own. We shall see."

When the date arrived on which Mitzi was to visit us, Jack brought her, but excused himself from staying while the interview with Pen took place. He would, he said, call for her in about two hours time—he was quite frank about his reason for not waiting, though Pen offered him papers and cigarettes and a drink in the cosy dining-room, if he chose to wait. He would be, he said, "too tee'd up." It was better to kill time in a movie and come back later . . .

With a final hug and kiss to the girl, he left, and she sat down between us in a deep chair, looking very pretty in a red-flowered frock and red sandals, trying her best to appear at ease but plainly both nervous and over-excited. However, Pennoyer was an expert at dealing with nervous people. He made coffee, produced a box of chocolates that made her eyes bulge with appreciation, told stories, joked and laughed, and showed her various little curios from his well-stocked cabinet

until her initial wariness began to relax, and she seemed willing to answer the tactful questions that after a while he began to put to her. But it soon became plain that she would not really "open out"—not as Pen had hoped, at least.

Did she know anybody called Markos? Yes, she had known him, but never very well. He had worked in the same circus in which her father and mother were engaged, but he was a star turn and they were only minor turns, so they didn't see much of him. Had she liked him? How could you say if you liked anybody, if you didn't know them? He was a big man in the circus world, and she had been only a young girl. She really didn't remember much about him, or when she had seen him last, or anything . . .

It was plain she was stalling, refusing to play, and after a while Pen abandoned any attempts to draw information out of her directly, and proceeded to go about it in a different way, while I watched, amused and interested. I rarely knew my friend to be defeated!

He dropped the subject of Markos and drew her on to talk of other things while he made coffee and produced a bottle of cherry brandy and some tiny green glasses that fascinated Mitzi; and while she was cautiously sipping her liqueur he steered the talk in the direction of glass and the wonderful glass makers he had visited in Italy, Murano, the Volveri works, the Salviati glass factories and so on. At first I was puzzled as to why he had chosen this particular topic, as offhand one would have thought it rather above the head of a little café waitress; but when he produced, among a group of round Victorian glass paper-weights with flowers and little scenes embedded in them, the crystal ball that I knew he occasionally used in his work, I began to understand the direction in which his talk was tending.

By this time Mitzi was completely at her ease. She had concluded that the examination she had dreaded was safely over, her wariness had vanished, and she was thoroughly interested in the lovely things that were being shown her. She had eaten plenty of chocolates and drunk two glasses of the cherry brandy, which despite its sweetness, was stronger than she realised, and now as she stared into the depths of the crystal ball trying to see the coloured pattern that Pen assured

her she would see of she looked long enough, I could see her relaxing more and more, going limp and sleepy as the hypnotic glaze filmed her dark eyes. As she relaxed Pen's voice went on, soothing, coaxing, low, an enchantment in itself . . .

" It's curiously made, that glass ball. You never see the pattern in it until you've looked into it for some time, but go on looking. It's a far prettier pattern than any of the others . . . worth taking a little trouble to see . . . that's right! Go on looking, but relax all you can while you look, and don't worry if you don't see it right away . . . it will come in time . . ."

Mitzi's hands dropped limply into her lap and her head fell back. The glass ball rolled downwards towards the floor, but Pen caught it before it fell and nodded, satisfied. It had worked. Mitzi was well and truly hypnotised . . .

With a soft little sigh she settled down into her chair. I rose and put the glass things back in their respective places and when I was once more installed in my seat, Pen began.

" Hullo Mitzi! You know me, don't you, and know that I'm your friend?"

She sighed again, but it was a sigh of relief, of confidence. She answered in her native German, which fortunately both Pen and I spoke fluently.

" Yes, I know now—but I wasn't sure at first."

" Well," said Pen. " You're sure now—and I want you to help me cure you by telling me the truth about yourself and this man Markos. You didn't tell Jack the truth, did you?"

Mitzi shook her head.

" No. I was frightened that if he knew all he might leave me, and that I could not bear."

" But you *must* tell *me* the truth, or I can't release you from this man," said Pen. She nodded.

" I know. I will tell now, because I have no fear that you will tell *mein leibling,* my Johnny." The curly dark head turned in his direction with a touching confidence.

" It was true what I told Johnny, but only up to a point. I and my father and mother were in the same circus with Markos. He was one of the big turns and they were only one of the smaller. It was true that when Hitler invaded Austria we all had to fly from Europe to England—but it was with my mother and Markos. My father had died some months before

and Markos had become my mother's lover. She was a pretty woman, and he had been after her for some time—and when my father died she gave in to him and became his assistant in his act. She broke with her sister over this—they had been a skating turn together—and my aunt left the circus; I think she married somebody, but I forget. I never saw her again." She sighed faintly and settled still deeper into the embrace of the deep velvet-covered chair.

"I was only very young then, about fourteen, but as I was pretty and could do a little dancing and tumbling and all that, Markos used to use me in his act to amuse the audience while he prepared his next item—and then it happened that he began to notice me, and it broke my mother's heart. I used to hear them quarrelling over me and cower in my bed—I hated Markos and feared him, but I dared not disobey him, for he meant bread to my mother and to me, and where could we go if we left him? Also he used to try experiments in hypnotism on me, and vowed I was the best subject he ever had—he was gifted that way. The circus folk whispered that he knew black magic, and maybe he did. He could do many strange things, I do know that. Well, the time came when he told my mother he wanted me as his assistant and she could go—and that night she took poison. She must have loved him, brutal as he often was to her . . ."

After that there was a long pause and a sigh and the girl went on.

"Well, you can guess what happened. I was only sixteen—scarcely that—and utterly alone in the world . . . at this man's mercy, and he had no mercy! I hated him, but at the same time he fascinated me. I know that the frequent hypnotic trances he used to induce in me had brought me so much under his influence that I could not have broken away then. I was too weak and too young. So I became his mistress, and for two or three years it went on. I was wretchedly unhappy but dared not break away—where could I run to and what could I do? We were working the music halls in England then, since there were few circuses in the war—the smaller, cheaper halls, of course—and though we made a certain success, Markos used to drink all the money he made, and when he was drunk he was a fiend. He used to knock me

about and often I used to think of following my mother's example . . . but then I found I was to have a baby, and that was something to live for. I even hoped that Markos would be pleased . . . but he was furious and swore at me, as though having the baby was my fault and he had nothing to do with it.

He tried to get me to get rid of it, because of course it meant that for several months I would be unable to appear on the stage with him, and he would have to get another assistant . . . but I would not do it, and that made him wilder than ever. One night he got even more drunk than usual and knocked me about so that I fell down the stairs and broke my arm and the landlady of the rooms where we were got the doctor, and she told Markos what she thought of him, and so did some of the other lodgers. I was taken to hospital unconscious and had a severe miscarriage in which I lost my baby and almost lost my life too. And Markos was hauled up before the magistrates and got a heavy sentence for ill-treating me—and when he was taken away to prison I knew this was my chance to get away. But I was faced with the question of how I was to live if I did? I knew nothing but circus life, but I was not a turn in myself—what could I do? I made up my mind to drown myself in the Thames, and I went down to Westminster Bridge to do it, one cold winter's night. But a woman who was watching me guessed what I was meaning to do, and spoke to me as I stood on Westminster Bridge and took me back with her to her little house—God bless her!—and there she fed me and comforted me and gave me courage to take up life again. I found afterwards that she was a member of a sort of Guild called "The Friends of the Poor" who go about trying to help people in need—and truly she was a friend in need then."

Hans stirred and barked a muffled bark in his sleep where he lay in his accustomed corner and the sound, slight as it was, seemed to disturb the speaker. Pen laid one hand softly on her head and after a moment she resumed.

"She used to work in a big office in the City and there was a cafeteria nearby where they wanted a girl. She spoke for me and said she had known me for a long time, and they knew her well and took me on her recommendation. So from

that day onwards I was able to keep myself and knew I need never again go back to Markos—and I was thankful!" She shifted her position a little in her chair and went on.

"Well, I worked there for two years, and then the café changed hands and they didn't want me, so I had to find another job. But by that time I had a good reference and had no difficulty in finding another post—and then I met Johnny, and the rest you know."

"When did this daily visitation first begin?" asked Pennoyer.

"It began soon after Johnny asked me to marry him," said the girl. "And I have a feeling that my great happiness and thankfulness at being free of Markos, or even the shadow of him, and looking forward to a life of peace where I could have a home of my own and perhaps another baby, and my darling Johnny coming home to me every evening . . . I don't know, but I have a feeling that a sort of wave of that might have reached Markos, who was out of prison and groping and fumbling to find me, and told him where I was. Could that happen, do you think?"

"Certainly it could," said Pennoyer, "after all, for several years you were constantly hypnotised by this man, besides being his mistress, and without doubt that establishes a strong link. But I fancy there must have been something more substantial that led him to you—something that has acted as a magnet, so to speak. Were you foolish enough to keep anything belonging to him? Anything, no matter how small—a handkerchief, an old glove, a bit of writing . . ."

The girl frowned and then nodded.

"Yes, I did keep something. Now I remember—I don't know why, but I kept the note he sent me after he was sent to prison. It is in my bag still, tucked down inside the lining . . ."

Pen reached down and picked up the shabby little black leather handbag that stood beside the girl's chair. He fumbled for a moment in its interior and fished out a crumpled scrap of paper covered with writing in a flamboyantly-arrogant hand.

I bent over his shoulder, and together we read the note.

Mitzi,

I know that when I am away you will try and run away —but I warn you that wherever you go you will never escape me! When I come back I shall remake my act and concentrate entirely on hypnotism, and I shall need you more than ever. I have imposed my will upon you too often for you ever to be able to break loose. Wherever you go, I shall find you and make you mine again. Do not think this is an idle threat.

Your Master, Gene Markos.

"Hm!" said Pennoyer folding the note carefully and placing it in his breast-pocket. "It's a great pity you kept that, my child, as it gave him a 'psychic scent' to follow so he was able to track you down on the Inner Planes. However, I think I may be able to make use of it, so forget about it now. But tell me—when did you begin to suspect that this sleeping trouble was due to Markos?"

"I guessed because of the times," whispered the girl. "You see, in a circus—in these smaller travelling circuses at least—they have to give two shows a day so as to make as much money as they can while they can—and four o'clock in the afternoon and eight o'clock at night were the times when Markos' act was on—when we used to appear. I fell asleep at the precise moment when he used to hypnotise me, and wake up twenty minutes later, just as I used to do in his act. So after it happened a few times I knew who must be behind it all—and I was terrified! He had found me! He had been hunting me ever since he came out of prison and found me gone—he was tracking me down, as he said he would . . ."

Even in her tranced state she shuddered, and Pennoyer laid a soothing hand on her fingers twisting together feverishly in her lap.

"Don't panic child," he said. "I can help you and I will —you will be safe, I promise you. But what is his purpose? It cannot be that he is in love with you, for I am sure that he knows nothing of love!"

The girl laughed a bitter laugh.

"Love?" she said. "The only thing Markos loves is himself. But he *needs* me. His act was first of all clever conjuring

tricks with a little hypnotism and clairvoyance thrown in—but as time went on he found that that was always the most popular part of the act. But he could not always find an assistant who was a good hypnotic subject—my mother, for instance, was little use to him, and with her he always had to fake—but I was the best subject he ever had; he always said so . . . and he wants me back! He means to force me into breaking with Johnny and come crawling back to him . . . to become the tool in his hands he always meant to make me . . ."

" Don't be afraid," said Pennoyer again. " Luckily, though he has managed to make contact with you on the Inner Planes, he does not know where you live on the physical plane, and it is to be hoped he never does. For plainly his power over you was very strong, and you might not be able to resist it did you meet him again."

" I think that I could," said the girl softly. " Because now I love Johnny with all my heart and soul, and love makes strong, does it not?"

" It does indeed," Pen said gently, " yet I hope we will not have to test your love in this way. Now I am going to tell you that when you wake you will have no memory of having been to sleep like this—and no memory of the scrap of writing that I have taken. You will remember only that you spent a pleasant evening with us here and answered various questions that revealed nothing you did not wish revealed—and you will go home happily with your Johnny and wait until I get in touch with you both again. And now I am going to wake you up . . .

After the two young people had left us with many expressions of goodwill and eager promises to come again, Pen said to me.

" Sorry I can't let you go home tonight, Jerry. We've got some work to do!"

" Okay," I said. " Lucky I keep the odd pair of pyjamas here in case of emergencies. What are we going to do?"

Pen tapped his breast pocket.

" See if I can run this chap to earth via his writing," he said. " I'm going into the Silence! We'll make some tea ready

for when I wake up. Come on! There are biscuits and cake and cheese in the sideboard, and you can make yourself some sandwiches if you like while I get ready. There's ham and smoked salmon, I think, in the fridge."

Smoked salmon being a weakness of mine, I duly made myself some sandwiches while the kettle was boiling, set biscuits and cheese and butter and a slab of the fruit cake Pen loved ready on a dish, and carried them with a thermos full of tea into Pen's bedroom. It was an austere little room, sparsely furnished, with a narrow divan bed in one corner, an old carved press for clothes in another, and a Queen Anne tallboy that served as dressing-table as well as chest-of-drawers in another. The single armchair stood beside the window, where I knew Pen sat each morning in his dawn meditation facing the sunrise; and on the polished floor was spread the lovely old silken Persian rug that Pen always used in these experiments of his that we called "going into the Silence"—when he left his tranced body and went travelling on God-knew-what strange journeys.

I fetched the carved ivory Chinese headrest that he always used, and as I was placing it in position on the rug he entered the room, freshly bathed and clothed in the long brown hooded woollen robe that was the only garment he wore on these occasions. He smiled and nodded his thanks as he saw my preparations, the thermos, the cake and the rest.

"Good for you, Jerry!" he said heartily. "Now, you can make yourself comfortable in my big chair—you can have a shaded light, as you know, as long as it isn't on my face, and there's plenty for you to read here. The only thing I *don't* want is for you to smoke."

"Don't worry," I said, "I'm well trained by now, and it doesn't worry me to do without a cigarette for an hour or two. How long do you think you'll be gone?"

Pennoyer shrugged.

"Impossible to tell," he said. "But I have a hunch, not too long. I don't think, somehow, I shall have to go far afield to find our quarry—I believe he's somewhere in England."

"*Really?*" I said. "I'd have thought that when he got out of prison he'd have headed for the Continent and oblivion as fast as he could."

"It may be," said Pen equably as he lay down on his rug and composed himself, hands folded and ankles crossed for his vigil. "But I'm not at all sure! Now so long for the present, old man—I'm off."

"Do you want me to do any 'protecting' tonight?" I asked, for on occasions when my friend had to go into the Silence, I had had to go through some quite elaborate protective measures to guard his tranced body while the spirit was away from it. Pen shook his head.

"No thanks. It isn't necessary. This room—this whole flat, indeed—is permanently protected. I see to that—and believe me, it's necessary sometimes when Those of the Dark whom I've cheated of their prey are after me!" A dry smile creased his lean features, and he opened one hand to disclose the scrap of paper covered with Markos' handwriting. "This brute used his writing to hunt down that poor child. Now I'm going to use it to hunt *him*!"

His eyes closed and he composed himself to sleep. I turned the red-shaded lamp down to a glimmer just strong enough to read by, settled myself comfortably in the armchair, and buried myself in a book. Slowly the time passed, one hour, two —and then Pennoyer stirred, breathed deeply and awoke. For a moment he lay staring vaguely at the ceiling, then turning to me, smiled and curling himself into his favourite position, cross-legged on the rug, held out his hand for the cup of tea he so badly needed after these expeditions. He always looked worn and white when he returned, but soon the hot tea brought back his normal colour, and as we ate and drank he told me what had happened.

Markos was in England, as Pennoyer had thought. He was working the halls now, and called himself an "illusionist", not a conjurer—he had altered his name too to "Markandos", probably wisely. The case against him had been an ugly one; and the British have a strange prejudice against men who beat pregnant women almost to death . . .

"I ran him to earth in a third-rate music hall, somewhere, I think, in the North of England judging from the look of the town," said Pen. "Drab grey cobbled streets and drab grey little houses in rows—slanting rain and high smoke stacks and cranes and slag heaps outside—mining town of some sort, I'm

sure. He was in his dressing-room, taking off his make-up after the show and talking to a scared-looking little woman, cursing her and swearing at her—I suppose his present assistant in his act. He's just as I saw him, but without his make-up looks older—a bad one if ever I saw one, Jerry! But I think I've found his heel of Achilles!"

The hollowed eyes in his thin face were bright with satisfaction. "Now listen to me. This is what I want you to do . . ."

Two days later I was travelling resignedly up to the North of England where, in one of the minor suburban halls on the outskirts of Manchester, a certain Markandos was billed to appear. It was plain that our quarry had abandoned circus life for the moment at any rate, probably from sheer necessity, since in England since the War there were few of the itinerant circuses such as he was used to on the Continent; and his act would scarcely be good enough for the few really first-class circuses such as Bertram Mills'.

However, this made it easier to run him to earth; and after a little trouble, with the help of a friend who was a theatrical agent, I had succeeded in doing so. I arrived in Manchester late in the afternoon, had a meal at the Midland, and clad in the shabby raincoat and battered felt hat that is the virtual uniform of the reporter, I made my way to the "Grafton" Music Hall. There I sent in my card to Markandos by the stage doorkeeper—or rather Pennoyer's card, as he had instructed me—though why Pennoyer should have chosen to pose through me as a talent-scout for one of the larger music hall circuits I did not yet know, and knew my friend too well to ask.

However, the hint of anybody linked with the larger halls acted like magic, as I knew it would, and the stage doorkeeper showed me up at once to a shabby little dressing-room up countless winding stone stairs, where by the light of a flaring unshaded electric bulb the Great Markandos was making up for the show.

He was facing the flyspecked mirror in the white-washed wall behind the narrow littered table that served as a dressing-table when I was ushered in, and I caught a glimpse of his

face before he saw me and swung round with all the smiling charm and urbanity at his command—and I disliked what I saw more than I can tell! Here was a bad man in every sense of the word. Raddled, lined, with heavy blue pouches under his eyes—one could see how rakishly handsome he must have been, was still in a way, but with the good looks ran coarseness, viciousness, cruelty, and my soul sickened at the thought of what that poor child Mitzi must have suffered at those ruthless hands. But there was no denying that well made-up as he was, wearing the handsome gold embroidered jacket and cap, scarlet sash over wide trousers, all the rest that Pennoyer had described, he was a dashing and picturesque figure enough; and his gushing welcome to me was a tribute to what he felt was my importance.

"My dear sir—Mr. Penner, er—Pennoyer—I am too flattered to feel you have taken the trouble to come all the way up from London to see my act!"

I seated myself on the battered upright chair beside the dressing-table and accepted the whisky and soda he was already pouring out—I noticed that he drank his practically neat—and responded with the casualness that I felt belonged to my adopted role.

"Well, it wouldn't be strictly true to say I came up to Manchester simply to see your turn, Mr. Markandos! I had to come anyway on business for my boss Benyon." I saw the gleam in Markandos' eyes at my casual mention of the name of the head of "Benyon's," the most famous group of music halls in England—"but he had heard of your work and told me to take time off to see your act. So here I am."

"And how pleased—how delighted I am!" Between his excitement and the whisky he had drunk—for plainly the tot he was putting away was by no means his first drink that evening—Markandos' hand was palpably shaking. It was obvious that he visualised my visit as the Open Sesame, so to speak, of his entry into the world he longed to invade, the world of the London theatre. "Mr. Benyon, what a name and what a man! How joyful I should be for the chance to work under his banner. You cannot fancy Mr. Pen . . ." again he boggled over the name, "how weary an artist of my calibre gets of this eternal touring!"

He flung out a hand bearing a huge seal ring in a gesture of disgust; and I must say I could not but agree with him as I glanced round the grubby little room with its single light, its cracked washbasin with one dripping tap, the battered chair in which I was sitting and the high-placed shelf piled with cardboard boxes from which a dirty cretonne curtain hung that served as a wardrobe. He went on, sipping feverishly at his drink as he talked.

"Ah, what I have suffered since the war drove me out of Europe, where I was so famous and so successful! Doubtless Mr. Benyon will have heard of me from my Continental reputation?"

Knowing precisely how "famous and successful" he had been, I confined myelf to a nod, and he went on.

"You have yourself seen my act, yes?"

"Some considerable time ago I saw you," I said glibly. "Somewhere abroad—it was when you were working with a circus."

A shade fell across the man's face and the hint of a frown —then he laughed bluffly.

"Ah, I remember—but I was poor and little known in those days, and forced to work as and where I could in order to become known. I was a conjurer then, but now my act is changed. I am a magician! An illusionist—I do telepathy, clairvoyance, hynotism—you must see me tonight, sir. I am the greatest hypnotist in the world, me!"

That you certainly are *not,* I thought to myself. But you may well be a very good—or rather a very bad—one. There is something about your eyes . . . aloud I said carelessly:

"Do you still work with a girl assistant? I seem to remember a girl . . ."

Again that shade crossed his face, and his answer was evasive.

"Oh yes—always a girl or a woman. It appeals to the audience, you understand."

"Are you working with one now then?" I asked. He nodded.

"Oh yes—but she is not very good. I am training her, and she will do—until I can get back another girl, an assistant I once had. Ah!" he kissed his fingers and wafted them

ecstatically to heaven. "Ah, there was a girl—gifted in her way as I am in mine. Never had I so good a subject—I cannot wait until she returns to me, which soon she will do."

Like hell she will! I thought, and nodded, taking out my notebook as I did so.

"I should like to take down a few notes of your life story before you go if you can spare me a minute," I said, waving my fountain pen professionally. "I shall go back and make my report to Mr. Benyon, and if he makes you the offer that I feel sure he will, we shall need some preliminary puffs in the papers—news about you, you know. Your life, your adventures, your career and all that."

Markandos glanced at the cheap "Bee" clock on his dressing-table.

"There is but little time," he began—but I was prepared for that.

"Oh, that doesn't matter," I said arily. "We can start now, and then I'll come back, after seeing your act, and get the rest. Okay?"

Again he glanced dubiously at the clock which pointed to ten minutes to eight o'clock—I knew that he was due on the stage at eight, but I did not put two and two together then as I might have done, or I would have guessed why he plainly wanted to get rid of me before he went on. But I merely looked back at him blankly, and after a moment he nodded and began to talk.

If his life had been one half as dramatic and exciting as he was making it out to be, Markandos would have merited the entire front page of the *Daily Mail*. I knew he was making more than half of it up, but pretended to be busy taking notes when a tap came at the door and the voice of the call-boy, "Five minutes, Mr. Markandos!"

Markandos muttered a curse under his breath, but instantly suppressing it, turned a smiling face on me. Pushing me before him out of the room, he called the boy back and instructed him to show me the way down to the front of the house where he assured me that a seat—one of the best in the house!—would be found for me, and then disappeared in the direction of the wings, where I caught a glimpse of a pile of props

and a depressed-looking little woman wearing Eastern costume waiting for him.

The manager was waiting for me at the entrance to the stalls—the news that an emissary of the great Benyon was present had evidently gone the round of the theatre like lightning!—but I refused the seat he offered me, on the pretext that I preferred to roam the theatre as I chose and see the show from various points rather than from one fixed. Actually, of course, my reason was a very different one.

I proposed to see only a few minutes of Markandos's act, and then slip back into his dressing room for purposes of my own—and if I had been seated where he could see me from the stage that purpose might well have been defeated! So I stood beside the manager at the back of the stalls for a few minutes only while I watched the man's performance—and it was a good show of its kind, there was no doubt.

Markandos was a polished and experienced showman, and though plainly much of his act was fake, it was extremely clever fake and got the audience completely puzzled. I caught his glance one or twice directed at the seat I was supposed to occupy, and knew that he was puzzled not to see me there—but I had no intention of giving him time to wonder and grow suspicious! When the manager left me, as he did after a few minutes, I slipped quietly round the back of the stalls to the door at the side of the stage that led into the wings, went through it and up the stone stairs to Markandos' dressing-room. Here I did what I had been told to do, went down the stairs to the stage door, slipped a handsome tip into the stage doorkeeper's hand, and at the same time gave him a note to Markandos to the effect that I had found myself, after all, unable to wait to the end of his excellent performance to see him again; but that I had already quite sufficient material for some preliminary "pars" about him, and that I had little doubt that Mr. Benyon, after hearing my report of his excellent work, would offer him a contract and that he would be hearing from him shortly. With that I left the theatre and managed to catch a late train to London.

I was still staying with Pennoyer, and found him sitting up for me with a tempting little supper keeping hot on the stove and some coffee, which by that time I badly needed; and as

we ate I reported the happenings of the evening and gave him the object he had sent me to get from Markandos' dressing-room.

Together we examined it with interest. I had noted it where Pennoyer had said I would see it, hanging over the dressing-table from a nail driven into the wall above the mirror—a round gilt medallion affair on a chain, about the size of an old-fashioned five-shilling piece. It looked like an outsize version of one of those Victorian lockets made to hold a piece of somebody's hair, a mourning emblem, or a miniature portrait, and the front of it was an elaborate chased and embossed oval with, in the centre, the four-armed Greek cross. At the back there was a piece of glass inset, and behind it was what looked like a scrap of dark brown leather or bark or wood of some sort.

"Markandos is, like so many of his people, madly superstitious," said Pen, "and this is his mascot. He has had it for many years—it was probably in his family—and he believes that all his luck and his future depends on it. He is never without it—and now it is in my power I believe I can save Mitzi!"

"But what *is* it?" I asked.

"It's a reliquary—and that bit of brown stuff behind it is supposed to be a fragment of the true Cross," said Pennoyer. "Though, good Lord, if all the bits and pieces of wood that are going about the world enshrined in these things and in the churches and what-have-you were put together, you would have enough material for scores of crosses! It's fake, of course, but he thinks it's real, and it is the most precious thing in his life. The only thing he reveres." He weighed the shiny thing thoughtfully in his hands. "Here we have, I think, a worthy bargaining piece—and the price I shall ask for its return is Mitzi's freedom."

"Do you think he values it as much as he values regaining possession of Mitzi?" I asked doubtfully.

Pen nodded.

"I'm sure," he said confidently. "Don't forget that I watched him that night when I was out of my body and sitting in his dressing-room—thanks to that bit of his writing that made it possible for me to contact him so quickly and

easily. I watched him concentrate on Mitzi—and I know how he has managed to establish such a hold on the poor child; I watched him kiss this reliquary before he went on the stage. He's never without it, and when he finds it missing he'll go raving mad and be ready to promise anything to get it back. You wait. He's cute enough to connect you with its disappearance, and within a matter of days he'll come here to me—that's why I made you use my card to introduce yourself. Then you will have a dramatic scene to watch through the peep-hole! I'd have you here in person, but I think better not—he'll be easier to handle if I have him alone."

"Thank goodness for the peep-hole," I said fervently. "I wouldn't miss the last act in this drama for worlds!"

Markandos did not wait even a few days. It was only the next evening when Pen and I were dining quietly together when a ring came at the telephone and Pen went to answer it. The conversation was plainly a short one and to the point, and Pen came back with a satisfied smile on his lean face. I looked at him as he resumed eating his *tortilla*—that delicious mixture of eggs and vegetables that he had learnt to make in Spain and taught Friedl along with many other toothsome Spanish dishes—and he nodded.

"It's Markandos, half daft with fury and coming round to murder me! Couldn't you hear him shouting down the telephone, calling me—or rather you—thief and liar and a dozen other choice names?"

"I heard a tremendous crackling and cackling," I said, "and I guessed who it was." I looked at my friend rather nervously. "But do you think it's wise for me not to be there, Pen, when he comes? He's a big chap and, as you say, mad with rage—what if he lugs out a knife or something like that? I wouldn't trust these half-breed Mittel-Europeans further than I could see 'em!"

"Don't you worry," said Pen tranquilly. "But hurry up and finish your dinner. He spoke from some hotel in Bloomsbury—I gather he's been let off appearing tonight on the plea of ill-health—but he's coming here as fast as a taxi can bring him and you don't want to miss Friedl's cheese soufflé, do you?"

"I don't indeed," I said looking hungrily at the steaming

dish that Friedl was just bringing into the room. "Friedl is the queen of soufflé-makers. I'll hurry—but don't forget, at any sign of trouble I'm coming in, Pen."

"That's all right," said Pennoyer. "You'll be able to see all right via the peep-hole and a comfortable chair behind it. We'll have coffee when he's gone and a liqueur for you by way of a celebration."

"You're so sure of success then?" I asked. Pen nodded again.

"Quite sure," he said quietly. "I shall return the reliquary to Markandos—at a price—and he'll pay the price, make no doubt of that. But it will be a high one . . ."

Within a quarter of an hour Pennoyer was sitting quietly waiting in his comfortable lounge and I was ensconced in an armchair close to what we called "the peep-hole". This was an old food-hatch between the dining-room and the lounge through which the dishes used to be passed, and Pen had had it filled up with what seemed to be a picture, seen from the lounge side, but was actually a sheet of clear glass through which everything that happened in the lounge could be plainly seen. I don't know how this was done—I fancy it was Japanese—but the peep-hole served a very useful purpose, since through it Pennoyer could study quietly, unseen, any of the strange visitors—and believe me, some of them were more than strange!—that came to him for help. A man drops all his defences when he is alone—or thinks he is alone; and Pen often told me he could learn more about a person from watching him quietly for a few minutes through the peep-hole than he could learn from half an hour's questioning.

There I sat in the warm dusk and waited, and watched my friend turning and twisting his amber *kombologia* between his lean fingers, and marvelled afresh at the wonderful powers contained behind that keen lined face, those nervous powerful hands. It seemed ages that we sat thus, but it was really only about a quarter of an hour—and then a loud ring at the door bell announced our visitor.

Pennoyer rose to his feet and Friedl ushered in Markandos, who was dressed in an ordinary lounge suit and so lost much of his gipsyish good looks.

It was a coarse-featured, heavy-jowled middle-aged roué

that I looked at, with dyed moustache and hair that badly needed both cutting and washing, bloodshot eyes and an incipient paunch . . . he came striding furiously into the room, and when he saw Pennoyer he stopped short with a blank stare of surprise.

"Mr. Pen—Pen—" he scowled furiously as he stumbled over the name. "I do not know you! I want Pen . . ."

"My name is Pennoyer," said Pen smoothly. "Yes, I know that you are puzzled at seeing me, because I am not the man who came to see you in Manchester and sent in my card. He is a friend of mine who called on you for special reasons—and I told him to use my name."

The man looked blank still.

"Use your name? But I do not understand . . ."

"The reason why I sent him to you," said Pennoyer, "is twofold. First, I wanted the gilt reliquary that hung over your dressing-table. Second, I wanted you to come and see me. Having my name and address on the card my friend gave you, I knew that following on your loss you would come to me. As you have done."

This calm matter-of-fact statement plainly staggered Markandos—I shall now call him Markos—and he blinked, confounded.

"You mean you sent a man to steal from me—you admit this?" His rage was rising again. "But this is an outrage! I miss my reliquary—and it is of my family, much precious to me . . ." in his fury and agitation his English was getting out of hand—"and why for you do this . . ."

Pen held out one hand, and the authority in his gesture was such that the man fell silent, gaping, before him.

"I see that I shall have to explain myself," he said easily, "it will not take long, but perhaps you will take this chair? I would offer you a drink, but to be honest, I will neither eat nor drink with a man of your type, Markos—yes, I know your true name as I know your history. I have made you come to see me for a special purpose, and as soon as that purpose is accomplished you will leave my flat, and the quicker the better. Do you understand?"

Markos was plainly bewildered and more than a little intimidated.

"I do not understand," he snarled. "I—you admit you sent a man to steal—you wish to see me—but say quick the reason for all this?"

"I propose to tell you now," said Pennoyer. "I know of your connection with the girl Mitzi Streicher, and I know what you are doing, or rather trying to do to her. I have watched you at work . . . and I mean to force you to release her, to leave her alone!"

There was a silence in which you could have heard a pin drop. I peered closely through the glass of the peep-hole and saw Markos gaping at Pennoyer in utter astonishment mixed with fear—then with a palpable effort he pulled himself together and burst into a well-simulated guffaw of laughter.

"Well, well! My good friend, what nonsense are you telling me? What rubbish has the girl, this Mitzi, been trying to put over on you, eh? Certainly it is true she was at one time my assistant, but she left me . . . it is a long time ago."

The bluff was not a bad one. But in the gleam of light from the lamp at Pen's elbow I could see that the man's forehead was beaded with the sweat of fear.

"Certainly," said Pen, "it is some time ago. You were sentenced to quite a long spell in prison for half-killing her when she was pregnant by you. And you left her a letter when you went inside—a letter that threatened that when you came out you would hunt her down and force her to come back to you. Not because you loved her, but because she was a malleable subject that you could bend to your evil will . . ."

"It is a lie, an infamous lie! I am not Markos. I am Markandos," stuttered the man, but Pen swept ruthlessly on.

"Don't lie to me! When you failed to find her on your emergence from prison, you used the magic that you knew to track her down through your letter that, through your hypnotic influence, you had made her keep. Then, once you had found her and forged a link between you on the Inner Planes, you concentrated twice a day, at the hours when you used to appear together, on sending her once more into the hypnotic sleep you used to induce in her! You did this knowing that it would mystify and—you hoped—at last disgust and put off the young man she hopes to marry, and terrify her

by proving to her that your power over her was still strong. And to do this you used yet another link with her that you possessed, believing that in the end you could make that link so strong that she would break with the young man who loves her and return to you and once again become your slave!"

Pen's voice rang through the room like a silver trumpet, and the wretched man before him cowered and shook in his chair . . . yet he would not yield as yet. His voice came as a harsh croak.

"I tell you it is a lie! I not know magic. I not know girl—I am honest conjurer . . ."

"And I am a magician!" said Pennoyer. "But I use *my* magic knowledge, which is far greater than yours, to try and help others, while you use yours for your own evil and selfish ends. To prove that I can work magic, I will tell you that I have seen, while out of my sleeping body, how you link up with the girl and what you use that belongs, or rather used to belong, to her."

Now terror, naked and unashamed, began to show in the wracked face of the monster in the chair. He peered up at Pennoyer, jaw fallen, eyes suffused, incredulous, yet shaken with craven fear . . .

"Out of your sleeping body? You can do that, and bring back the memory of what you do and where you go? By St. Spiridion, I have known it done and tried to do it . . ."

"But you did not know enough to succeed," cried Pennoyer. "You could project your thought-body only, not your true self—but I, *I* can project my true self in all its conscious strength! The night before my friend called on you I was sitting in your dressing-room and watched you concentrate on this girl, consciously, deliberately, holding the link in your hands." He flung out one hand in a gesture, royal, commanding. "You have that link with you now! Give it to me."

Markos moved, but it was to draw himself together as it were—to shrink into himself, his hands and arms curved inwards as though to guard or shelter something. His face was horrible to see, a squared grin of evil like that sometimes seen on the devil masks of the "No" dancers, and his voice came breathless with terror, yet still defiant.

"I will not—I will not! Without it I cannot contact her—and I will have her! She shall be mine . . ."

There was a flash of gold in the lamplight as Pennoyer snatched out the reliquary from his pocket and swung it by its chain before the cringing man. With a gasping cry of recognition Markos made a wild and ineffectual snatch at it, but Pennoyer backed swiftly as he spoke, holding the gleaming thing out of reach.

"Here is your treasure—the price against what you hold! Give me what I demand, and you may have it back. But refuse me—and watch me grind it into pieces now beneath my heel!"

There was a trenchant pause—and suddenly I knew the victory was ours. Springing to his feet Markos dragged from his pocket a long dark thing that looked like a snake and flung it furiously on the carpet at Pennoyer's feet . . . and I knew what it was. It was a length of plaited hair! Mitzi's hair, that she must have cut off, probably at his bidding when he was her lover—hair that he had hidden and guarded all the years, knowing that with his knowledge of magic he could use it to bring her back to him whether she would or no!

I looked at the two protagonists and saw that Pennoyer was holding out the gold reliquary to Markos. The Greek snatched it with something like a sob of relief and kissed it fervently before thrusting it into his breast pocket; then he swung on his heel to go—but as he did so he turned upon Pennoyer the most sinister face I think I have ever seen, and God knows I have seen a good many.

"You!" he croaked out. "You have beat me this time! But maybe there will be another time when I, *I* will beat, I Markos! I do not forget my hates—and of all the world you, you Pennoyer, I hate with all my heart and soul! And so some day . . ."

But I had slipped out of the dining-room and was standing in the open doorway. I had not liked the way in which his right hand was fumbling in at his hip pocket.

"I suggest you stop making threats, Markos," I said, "and clear out as fast as you can! Yes, you can stare—it was I who posed as coming from Benyon, and I who took your

reliquary—so you can add me to your hates too. And now—get out, and do it quickly!"

For a split second he hesitated, eyeing me evilly. But I am a pretty stalwart sixfooter and still in my thirties, and Pennoyer lean and muscular and plainly in good condition—and two to one was more than he could face.

The front door closed with a vicious slam behind him and Pen and I looked at each other.

"Whew," said Pen wiping his forehead. "What a party for a hot night! Do you know, though I held all the aces, I had quite a fight for it mentally now and again to hold my ground? The chap has a dangerous knowledge of magic, like so many Greeks—so I'm glad I've managed to put a permanent spoke in his wheel via his reliquary!"

"How did you find out what he was using to get control over Mitzi?" I asked curiously.

"That was simple," said Pennoyer, "as I told him, I saw it all being done. I knew that Mitzi's possession of his writing had led him to her—I think she would have destroyed this, but I'm pretty certain he had told her the last time he had put her under hypnosis that he intended to send her this letter, and that she was not to destroy it. So she kept it, and it led him to her—but it was not strong enough to enable him to establish *real* power over her; and that he knew and had already provided for! I knew he must possess, and know how to use, something peculiarly personal to her—perhaps a garment she had worn, a bit of jewellery or something like that—on which he could concentrate, that would bring him into really close *rapport* with her. So when I went out to visit him, I chose the time close on eight o'clock, when I knew he would be sending out his will to her to go to sleep; and when he was all ready, made-up, for his act I saw him glance at the clock—it was ten minutes to eight. I saw him kiss the reliquary—imagine, Jerry, the blasphemy that could invoke the Blessing of the Most High upon the invoking of Evil—and then, then he brought out this pitiful rope of hair. Sitting down, he shut his eyes and held the plait firmly between his hands—and do you know, I positively *felt* the power radiating from him towards her? Fierce, brutal, determined . . . I managed to break the link that night, though, for by the use of my will I

caused the failure of the electric circuit, and the shock and subsequent excitement of this broke the ray he was sending out, and he had no chance, before he went on, to get it going again. You will find, I'm sure, that that night, though Mitzi showed signs of falling asleep she did not actually do so, and both she and Jack were delighted, feeling sure that her cure was on the way; and the same thing must have happened the night when you were interviewing him. He had no chance to do his evil willing." (I may add here that subsequent enquiries proved my friend right in both these instances.)

"Odd how strong the power of the human hair is," I said thoughtfully. "I remember how you used two entwined locks of hair in the 'White Snake' business, when you were trying to solve the problem of the child Nicky." Pen nodded.

"*Any* part of the human body carries the radiations of that particular person," he said. "Skin, bones, hair, nail parings, even sputum and excrement—the savages who burn or bury these fragments to prevent their being used in magic against them know something, I assure you! And hair is especially powerful, since it is a growing thing, part of the actual body itself—and this hair was cut off while it was still alive; not mere dead hair, such as might be brushed or combed out of the hair." He stroked the glossy black rope. "I've not the least doubt that when she came to work for him and he found her value he got her to cut her hair short—she was probably willing enough to do it, since short hair was fashionable among the young things—and kept this, knowing what a signal hold it gave him over her."

"What are you going to do with it?" I asked. "Give it back to Mitzi?"

"Good God, no," said Pennoyer. "That would be to revive all sorts of memories in Mitzi and serve no purpose whatever!"

"You won't tell Jack even how she has been freed?"

"I don't think so," said Pennoyer. "Again, it would serve no purpose. All that either of those two need know is that Mitzi is cured—that she will no longer fall asleep except at the normal hour at the end of the day. Now as Friedl will have gone to bed I propose we make some more coffee . . . and I shall burn both this hair and Markos' letter in the stove

while we are doing it. So the link will be well and truly broken."

A little later while we were drinking our coffee and discussing the whole amazing adventure, I suddenly remembered Pen's remark about " putting a spoke in Markos' wheel " by means of his reliquary, and asked him what he meant by it. He smiled.

" The thing's a fake," he said, " but he believed in it, and so it held power for him. If he had not been so essentially evil a soul I would have let him have it back as it came to me—untouched. But . . . it was not right to allow him to roam the world planning and preparing more and more evil. So . . . I saw to it that this time what the glass locket at the back of the thing contained was not fake, but real."

For the moment I was puzzled.

" What do you mean?" I asked.

Pennoyer looked at me gravely.

" You know that those of us who tread the Right hand Path do not take life lightly," he said. " But my Masters told me when I consulted Them about this case, that this man's time was come, and the earth would be better without him. Therefore, with the help and permission of a priest I know who is also a Master of Occultism—there are such priests, as you know, and great men they are—I inserted a tiny fragment of the Blessed Host in the back beside the bit of wood under the glass; and since evil cannot live in the presence of holiness, I think it will not be long before Markos joins his brigand forefathers."

And as so often happens with my wise friend's prophecies, it was so, as I shall tell at the end of this story.

From that moment all Mitzi's troubles cleared up like magic. Jack Holcroft's parents capitulated, since now there was nothing in the least wrong with the girl's health they could find no other reason for objecting to the marriage, and gave in with a good grace. The two young people were married, Mitzi in white satin and net, looking as pretty as a picture, and Jack stalwart and proud in blue serge, with Ma Bunn, Pennoyer and myself and a horde of friends to cheer them—a wedding breakfast with a three-tiered cake from me and a case of champagne from Pen in which to drink

the bride's health. To our considerable relief, neither Jack nor his bride made any enquiries as to how her release had been effected—and some time afterwards Jack admitted to Pennoyer that he had a hunch that if too many enquiries were made something queer might come out that would upset Mitzi. Himself, he was all for letting sleeping dogs lie. As long as she got well, that was all that mattered . . . in which he showed himself a singularly wise young man!

We had a blissful card from them on their honeymoon in Blackpool—and it was on that same evening that we read in an evening paper of the sudden death of Mitzi's ex-lover and deadly enemy.

The great Markos had been found lying dead in his dressing-room just before the evening show with his reliquary clutched in one hand. Heart failure was the verdict at the inquest. Once again Pennoyer had been right. Evil could not live in the proximity of holiness . . .

THE WOMAN ON THE STAIRS

I HAVE ALWAYS been fond of my sister-in-law. My brother Arnold had been something of a connoisseur of women when he was a young man, and I had helped to pull him out of one or two rather spectacular affairs—so when he ultimately married a plump, ordinary-looking little woman a few years his elder, without even a handsome income behind her to compensate for her ordinariness, I was surprised, and tempted to wonder how long the marriage would last. But though Arnold had proved a fool over his lights o' love, he was wiser than I had dreamed of when he chose a wife; for Dolly Forster was a dear in every sense of the word. Not clever, but sound and sane as a nut; sweet-tempered, kindly and as capable as they come.

The marriage couldn't have been a more successful one, and when they had two children, first a boy—who has nothing to do with this story—and then a girl, their cup, to write dramatically, was filled to the brim with happiness. Yet it was through the girl, some years later, that that cup was so imperilled that it was almost broken, and if it hadn't been for Miles Pennoyer . . . but I am going to the end of the story before I have even begun it. So I will go back to where I started, and tell things in due order as they came.

Arnold was a very successful barrister, and he and Dolly had a pretty flat in a tall block at Amherst Court, Kensington. Not a very modern one, but the rooms were larger than most of those new box-sized flats; which was one of the reasons why, when Arnold's practice improved and his income with it, they remained there instead of moving to a more modern apartment. Dolly had made it extremely comfortable and they had a good " general "—an old personal maid of Dolly's, who was

devoted to her and to the family as a whole. They stuck the war out there and were lucky to escape with only a few broken windows. Arnold was an air-raid warden and Dolly worked in canteens and hospitals and refugee centres and God knows what-all, while Lance and Pamela were packed off to relatives in Scotland, where they had a thoroughly good time; being, luckily for them, too young to understand anything about the war.

When it was all over, the children came back—not too eagerly, I gathered—and life, as Dolly put it, got back into shape again. She and Arnold were popular and went out a good deal, and in return did a certain amount of modest entertaining. They went to occasional shows or films, concerts and so on, and played golf, bridge and canasta well enough to be invited out quite a lot on the strength of their playing. Arnold drove a smart little Humber and altogether one could not have imagined a pleasanter or more average sort of middle-class couple than Arnold and his wife; yet to this very average pair happened one of the most extraordinary adventures on record in my list of strange cases.

When the children returned from Scotland they went back to school, of course, and Lance, the boy, was at Stowe when this story really started—he was about fourteen and Pamela three years younger.

I was fond of both children, but especially of Pamela, who was my godchild. She was as pretty as Dolly was plain, and as she grew older she showed signs of growing prettier still. Even as a baby she was small-boned and slender, lint-haired and fair as mother-o'-pearl, with long narrow hands and feet and throat. She got these from the Latimer side—the Forsters were all like Dolly. Solid, chunky little people with stubby capable hands, short-necked and square-built as Highland cattle.

Pamela had eyes the colour of an aquamarine—all of which may sound insipid, but somehow she wasn't. I think it was her spirit, her sense of humour, and the irrepressible gaiety that was an essential part of her, that offset the delicate pallor of her colouring . . . for even as a child she was brimful of fun and laughter, for ever on the go, an electric spark if ever there was one.

She and I were the greatest of friends, and when Arnold and Dolly decided that things in Europe had quieted down sufficiently to send her over to France to school to learn the language, at the tender age of eleven, I missed the child badly and treasured her occasional letters—letters as full of fun and vitality as she was herself, though shockingly badly spelt and punctuated. She spent two years in France, and then she went to Austria, to learn German. I saw her only occasionally during those years when she was at home for the holidays, and saw that she was shooting up into a slender reed of a girl with even greater promise of beauty than I had expected. But she was still so much the child I had known and loved beneath the surface veneer of sophistication that she was acquiring with so many pains! Eager, impulsive, emotional—just at the stage of life when a young thing is reaching out towards maturity, yet still teeters uncertainly on the borders of adolescence. I know its *vieux jeu* to quote the outworn phrase that starts " standing with reluctant feet "—and yet it describes that stage of a girl's life better than anything else I know. The stage where she is still partly a child and partly a " teenager ", yet just beginning to grow up into a woman.

I had no idea that she had returned from Schloss Marhausen until one day I had been in court listening to Arnold defending a case—he was a fine advocate, and even had he not been my brother I would have gone to hear him—and meeting him outside, he invited me to go back to the flat with him to dinner. Thank goodness, even with post-war difficulties of food and drink, Dolly never went temperamental on him if he brought back an unexpected friend to dinner!

It was in his car, as we were driving back to Amherst Court, that Arnold mentioned casually that Pamela had come home. I was surprised, as it was not the end of term by any means—only about halfway through November—and I asked, " How come?" Arnold shrugged his shoulders.

It appeared there had been a sudden epidemic of some fever or other—very infectious—and Dolly had panicked and wired for Pamela to come home; a suggestion with which the headmistress of the Schloss had been only too glad to comply, as

apparently half the school was down with this disease, whatever it was, and some of the staff as well, so she was thankful to have at least one pupil taken off her hands.

Pamela had been home several days, and Arnold said that he did not think they would send her back again. She had been there eighteen months, and was speaking passably good German now, and it did not seem necessary. I nodded my head and agreed with him, and when we arrived at Amherst Court I went up to their comfortable first floor flat in high spirits. Dolly was there, hospitably dispensing more drinks than were quite decent to display, I felt, with gin at its post-war price; and so was Pamela, grown really tall now and prettier than ever, with her silver-fair hair darkened to a pale gold and done over both ears in two plaited wheels, German fashion, which may not have been smart but suited her wonderfully. She had put on a good deal of weight, too. She was positively chubby, and in the blue dirndl skirt she was wearing, and wide black belt with a short-sleeved white muslin blouse, she looked altogether like a real German *mädchen*.

She flung herself into my arms and hugged me fervently and we all talked nineteen to the dozen, before, through and after dinner, interrupting each other, disputing, laughing, teasing and generally making the cheerful din that means a family reunion.

Fourteen as Pamela was now, Dolly packed her ruthlessly off to bed soon after dinner. They had spent the last two days shopping, as Pamela had not only grown out of most of her clothes but those she had bought in Austria were so emphatically Austrian in style that Dolly said she couldn't possibly take about a child who looked like something out of *White Horse Inn*—if anybody remembers that charming musical show of pre-war days.

So off Pamela went, and both Dolly and Arnold looked after her as she disappeared with the smug approval of two thoroughly satisfied parents—and I must say, I couldn't blame them.

I lighted my cigar—thank goodness Arnold is a judge of both drinks and tobacco—and said what I was expected to say, though for once it was true.

"Well folks, I congratulate you! Pam looks grand—blooming and full of spirits and as pretty as paint. Some chap's going to be a lucky man one day." Dolly was staring into the fire. She smiled as I spoke and nodded her head rather wistfully.

"It doesn't seem possible, does it, to imagine one's children married?" she said. "But there it is. Lance is doing well at Stowe—his voice is just breaking and sounds so comic. Poor boy, he's awfully sensitive about it! And now Pam's back with us and halfway a woman now."

"But not quite," said Arnold, firmly clamping his teeth about the butt of his cigar. "I've no intention of letting Pam grow up before she needs to, and that's one of the reasons why I've decided not to let her go back to the Schloss. It was all right when she was still a child, comparatively speaking—but now she's growing up I want her to be more with her mother." He smiled across at Dolly and patted her plump little knee as he went on.

"If she's half as good as Dolly here when she grows up, Jerry, I'll say some chap's going to be lucky." I laughed. Time had been when I wondered at Arnold's obvious affection for his plain little wife, but I had long given up wondering and tended to envy him instead.

"Is she really fluent in German now?" I asked, and Dolly looked over at me.

"That's the only thing that worried me a little," she confessed. "I wondered if I were doing the right thing in taking her away? Maybe she should have stayed there until her German was at least as good as her French—it isn't as yet, of course. She needed another year to get really fluent. But Arnold was so insistent—and anyway, now I'm not worrying. I've found a way for Pam to keep on with her German, right here in this very building!"

She nodded her neatly waved little head in triumph and I looked my interest as she went on.

"There's a foreign woman, a Russian, living on the floor just above us—at least, not on the floor itself, at the turn of the stairs it is—and she's willing to give Pam lessons in German for a very reasonable sum. We'd known her by sight for some time, but didn't know her name—we called her 'The

Woman on the Stairs' and found afterwards that the porters all call her that, as she's got one of those unpronounceable Russian names. She seems to speak a dozen different languages, so isn't it lucky Pam can stay at home and still perfect her German? And later on the Princess says she will take her in Italian if she likes—says that Pam has a natural flair for languages. Pam is delighted and so are we."

I elevated my eyebrows. One of Dolly's minor foibles is an innocent sort of snobbery, and she adores a title. I could hear her rolling "Princess" over on her tongue as a child rolls a lollipop.

"Princess, eh?" I said. "Moving in high circles, are we? How did you meet her?"

"Only the other day—as a matter of fact it was Pam who got acquainted with her," said Dolly. "The Princess had been out shopping—she's quite poor now, though she's been very rich, and she's still got some lovely things—and she dropped her shopping basket in the hall just as Pam was coming in. Of course the child helped her to collect the things, and she was so pleased that she took her back into her flat and gave her cakes and coffee and got talking to her . . . and well, that's how it all started."

I glanced over at Arnold. He met my glance, smiled faintly and nodded, and got up to bring in the whisky and soda, which was always left handy on a tray in the kitchen when the maid went to bed. As he carried it in he remarked:

"It's quite okay, Jerry. I've checked on the lady's credentials—she gave me enough to supply a whole corps of diplomats—and she's the real thing all right. Princess Olga Alexandra Euphemia Yourakoff-Stavosky, no less—a very old family, related to the Galitzines, and even more blue-blooded, if possible."

I accepted the drink he poured out for me.

"I suppose she's the usual refugee from the Revolution," I said. "If so, she must be a woman of a certain age, as the French so gracefully put it."

"Well, her family were ruined and driven out at that time, with so many others," said Arnold. "But she was only a child then. They went to Paris, where they had relations, and somehow managed to get along there until the Princess grew up

and married a Frenchman, the Vicomte de la Croye. They had no family, I gather. When the war came, de la Croye was with the Resistance lot and got caught and killed—she was working with them too till the Germans got wise to her, and then she had to get out as quickly as she could and came to England with only about what she stood up in. Oh yes, there's nothing phony about the fair Olga. You can bet your boots on that, or I would not have dreamt of consenting to let Pam take lessons from her."

"Does she give private lessons or take classes?" I asked.

"Oh, private," said Dolly quickly, "and she's got several pupils. But she's very particular whom she takes. Lady Erle's girl goes to her and Mrs. Hare-Lymington's Editha—and oh, several others—all private lessons. The Princess doesn't believe in classes—says she can't give individual attention to each pupil."

"Well, well," I said, "it all sounds excellent. How long has Pam been going to her?—oh, I forgot. She can only just have started, of course, as she only got back last week."

"She hasn't even started yet," said Dolly. "I only fixed things up two days ago. She begins on Monday . . ." There came a tap on the door and a rich voice spoke. A voice mellow, foreign, charming, the voice of a woman.

"May I come in, pleez?"

"Talk of the devil!" said Arnold in an aside as he went to open the door, and Dolly scrambled to her feet, smoothing down the front of her red brocade housecoat as she did so and giving me an eloquent glance. It was evident that she was as pleased as Punch for a Princess to prove herself sufficiently intimate with her to come knocking on the door without ceremony—and I admit that I was curious by now to see the woman who was destined to play Mentor to my pretty god-daughter's Telemacha. The door opened and in swept a tall and impressive-looking woman, white-skinned, red-haired, hook-nosed, clad in flying draperies of black, and carrying in her arms a bundle of books. She halted dramatically on the threshold and a pair of keen dark eyes swept the room—dwelt for a moment on me and came to rest on Dolly's beaming face.

"*Ach,* madame—you forgeev? I ring the bell and ring, but

no reply and then I try the door and lo, it open and I venture in and I hear voices and I venture more, and so . . ." She rustled forward to the fire, deposited the bundle of books on the small table that held Dolly's coffee cup, and sitting down on the settee beside her opened her first book in a businesslike manner.

"When we talk the other day, madame, I forget theez, *most* important! I haf marked the passages our leetle Pam should learn, if you will show?"

Her large capable hands turned the pages swiftly and showed pencilled markings, turned down pages, inserted slips of paper, and Dolly nodded eagerly as she followed the pointing finger. We men remained silent, watching her, and when she had finished Arnold interrupted Dolly's fervent thanks with the offer of a drink. She turned her red head and smiled engagingly up at him.

"But yes, my friend, with pleasure—especially if you have cognac! Yes? *Ach, wunderschön* . . . you have the taste and the knowledge of the drinks, one can see, as few Englishmen have. And who is thees?"

Her eyes raked me from head to foot, sharp, hard dark eyes beneath a bush of rusty-red hair arranged in a forehead fringe á la Sarah Bernhardt—a fashion so old that for all I knew it might have come in again. Dolly, who had plainly been too knocked all-of-a-heap by this unexpected arrival to introduce me, hastened to perform the presentation, and remembering my European experiences, I bent over the white hand extended to me and touched my lips to the handsome diamond ring that encircled the third finger. The lady smiled, plainly well pleased, and remarked appreciatively that few Englishmen had such graceful manners; accepted the glass of cognac that Arnold had poured out for her but refused to allow Dolly to make fresh coffee and proceeded to talk—but talk!

It had to be admitted that she talked well—and though in effect it was a monologue, it was so cleverly managed, with such adroit and tactful pauses for suitable questions, comments, exclamations and so on, that to many people it would not seem a monologue at all. I listened, fascinated. It was plain that here was a woman widely travelled, widely read,

more than well educated—a woman who had endured and surmounted adventures, experiences, dangers of all sorts without allowing them to affect her sense of humour, courage or tolerance; a woman who must have been a beauty once, and who still retained a measure of that beauty. A woman who had lived royally, and who still, poor as she was now, gave the impression of royalty . . .

I studied her under my eyebrows as she talked, and wondered what her age was. She was that curious ageless type that one sees sometimes in Europe, especially among the older generation of Russian woman—she might have been barely fifty or she might well have been over sixty. It was impossible to tell. The handsome imperious face was little lined, yet it had an oddly mask-like look, which might have been due to the heavy make-up she wore—pale powder thickly applied, eyelids darkened with purple fard and bordered with black mascara, and lips a vivid orange-red which, while theatrical, was undeniably effective with her tousled rust-coloured hair. She had the high cheekbones and faintly slanting eyes of the Russian, and she used her large white hands, with their nails painted the same orange-red as her lipstick, effectively to illustrate the points of her stories—altogether she was a picturesque and arresting creature, and obviously going out of her way to be charming to the family of her new pupil. Then why on earth did I have that faint sense of recoiling, as from something I did not altogether trust?

I watched her and listened to her, now and then contributing my small quota to the talk so as not to be conspicuous by my silence—yet in the end, when she rose to go, with a gracious bow to me and to Arnold and an affectionate pressure of the hand to the gratified Dolly, I found my impression not a whit changed. As Arnold went to show her out of the front door Dolly turned to me and said breathlessly:

"*Isn't* that lucky? I was dying for you to meet her! Now what do you think of her?" Arnold came into the room just as I replied.

"I'm sorry to disappoint you, Dolly, but I don't like her!"

"Not like her?" Dolly's voice rose to a positive squeak of disappointment and dismay. "What on earth do you mean,

Jerry? How *can* you not like her? Nobody could be nicer than she was to you!"

Arnold, pouring himself out a last whisky and soda, looked at me too with surprised disapproval—but I stuck to my guns.

"I'm sorry," I said firmly. "I can't give you any reason, so don't ask me, but there it is. There's *something* about the lady I don't like."

Arnold looked at me with raised eyebrows.

"If you were the ordinary dyed-in-the-wool Britisher, Jerry," he said, "I'd say it was just prejudice against a foreigner. But you aren't like that—you've spent years abroad and like foreigners." I shook my head.

"Don't ask me to explain it," I said. "I'm not suggesting she isn't a real Princess or anything like that—I know your thoroughness only too well, Arnold, to think that a fake would get past you. No, it's something else . . . something I can't account for. It's—she gives me a queer feeling that I don't want to get too close to her—any more than I would to a snake. Sorry, but there it is."

Dolly got up with a little vexed flounce.

"Oh well," she said over one shoulder. "All I can say is, Jerry, for goodness sake don't go saying anything about not liking her to Pam. You know how easy it is to prejudice kids of her age, and it's *most* important she should go on liking the Princess and wanting to study with her. At present she thinks she's marvellous and is awfully impressed, so leave it at that, will you?"

I nodded. Long afterwards I wished I had not given Dolly that implied promise, but had done my best to put Pam against her prospective mentor from the very first; but there was no way of guessing how things were likely to work out.

Now as it happened, it was some time before I saw Arnold and Dolly and Pam again. I went abroad with my old friend Pennoyer to Brittany for a holiday, and while we were there we ran into the strange adventure that I had described elsewhere in this book in the story of "The Twisted Christ"; so it was some two months or more before I went again to Amherst Court. Since I came back to find a sea of work piled up and waiting for me, I might not have gone then if it had

not been that I had run by accident into Pamela herself, coming back from doing some shopping in Kensington High Street for her mother, I thought. But I was wrong.

She was wearing the blue dirndl skirt and white blouse that I remembered—it was hot weather and probably the coolest thing she possessed—and had it not been for that, and the plaited wheels of hair over her ears I doubt if I should have recognised Pam, for she had changed so much! She had lost all the extra weight she had put on in Austria—not that that would have worried me, it was puppy fat anyway and would have come off as she grew out of adolescence—but it was something else that brought me up with a sharp turn. The look on the child's face.

She looked—*drained* is the only word I can think of. Dragged, white, exhausted—and my first reaction was both anger and alarm. What on earth could Dolly be thinking of to let the child get like that? Losing weight was all right, but she should surely not have lost it so quickly—and what on earth was behind that look of exhaustion?

"Pam," I called. "Hi, Pam, wait for me!" Pamela jumped, startled, and swung round and for a moment her old joyous self beamed out at me in her delighted smile.

"Uncle Jerry—I'm so glad!" She held her face up for a kiss. "We've been expecting you to drop in ever since you telephoned Dad last week saying you'd come back."

"I know," I said, tucking her spare hand under my arm. "I've got a lot to tell you—had a grand time with my old friend, Miles—come on, let's turn in here and have an ice, shall we?"

Pam's eyes gleamed as they were wont to do at the mention of ice-cream, but after a moment she shook her head.

"I'd love to, but I can't—I've got to get these things back." She indicated the laden basket she was carrying.

"Oh that's all right," I said blithely. "Your mother'll understand. You can explain . . ."

Pam frowned and spoke a little awkwardly.

"I—they aren't for Mother," she said. "They're for the Princess. I—she—I often do some of her shopping for her. She isn't very strong, you know."

I stared. Personally, I should have thought that that red-

headed six-footer was as strong as the proverbial horse. But maybe I was wrong . . .

" Well," I said. " Surely she can wait a quarter of an hour? You can always say they kept you waiting at the shops—come on Pam! I haven't seen you for weeks and weeks."

She hesitated for another moment, then nodded, and together we turned into the nearest café and ordered strawberry ice cream, cakes and coffee. Pamela ate with her usual good appetite and answered my questions and even asked a few of her own about my holiday in Brittany—but she was palpably absent-minded and barely seemed to listen to my replies. I watched her as she consumed her ice, ate three cakes and drank two cups of coffee; and while I was relieved to see that her appetite at least was normal enough, I was far from pleased with other things that I saw as I watched her.

She was so queerly quiet and subdued. There was nothing of her old eager ebullience, the fun and vitality that had been so essential a part of her—all that seemed to have faded out. Her eyes had lost their old sparkle and there was a curiously blank, unseeing look about them, and sometimes when she turned to me to respond to a question she looked at me almost as though she didn't see me. The action was a purely mechanical one, done out of politeness, that was all—she didn't turn to me out of interest or desire to hear what I was saying. In losing the extra weight I knew she had detested, her young figure had regained its old slender beauty; but the oval face was now peaked and pallid, and there were faint bistre-coloured shadows beneath the aquamarine eyes . . .

" Pam," I said firmly. " I don't like the look of you, my child. What have you been doing to yourself? Banting too strictly to get the weight down?"

For a second her old smile flashed at me again, but it faded as she shook her head.

" Oh no, I haven't been banting. Mother wouldn't let me, she said it would all come off naturally if I waited—and it did, quite quickly."

" Too quickly, I'd have said," I said with dissatisfaction. " You don't look well, Pam. Feel okay?"

She nodded in a listless sort of fashion.

" Oh yes, I'm perfectly all right."

"You aren't working too hard?" I persisted—for the more I studied the child the more concerned I was beginning to feel about her. There was something unnatural about this change—a change not merely in the body, but mentally as well. Where, in this lifeless, mechanically-smiling youngster was the vital, laughing, energetic Pam of old? "You're sure that new teacher of yours isn't letting you overdo it?"

Now she was roused to animation. The mention of the Princess was like touching a button that suddenly lighted up a darkened room, and I don't know why, but it didn't please me. Didn't please me at all . . .

"Oh goodness, no!" Her reply came as quickly as the lash of a whip. "I—she's the most marvellous person, Uncle Jerry. I never met anybody like her at all before. I—she—we all think so—all her pupils, I mean."

"Are you getting on with your German well under her teaching?" I asked. Actually I wasn't especially interested in her German, but I wanted to study the sudden light in her eyes at the mention of the Princess's name; the spurt of animation that had been infused into the listless apathetic creature that had been Pam until that moment.

A faint frown lined her smooth forehead between the twin wheels of flaxen hair.

"German?" she said and looked at me in an oddly questioning way.

"Yes, German," I said a shade impatiently." Surely that was what you were going to her for, wasn't it? To perfect your German?"

"Oh yes— yes, of course it was." Pam agreed, a shade over-eagerly I thought. "Oh—I'm getting on very well she says. Very well indeed."

"I looked at her sideways. I was getting very puzzled, and I didn't like being puzzled.

"Studying anything else with her?" I asked. Pam looked at me.

"I . . . she's teaching me deportment," she said slowly, "how to do a court curtsy and all that sort of thing. She says she'll get me presented at Court one day, she knows lots of titled people and she says it's only a question of pulling strings . . . oh she's marvellous, Uncle Jerry! You have no idea . . ."

She was off again, her eyes alight, her voice fervent—it was plain that the little fool had a bad case of heroine-worship such as besets most teenagers, and I was annoyed. I don't know why, but somehow I would have preferred her to have an emotional fixation on the games mistress at the Schloss or on the Mother Superior of her convent in France rather than have fastened on to this theatrical Princess-with-a-past—and a past-and-a-half, I would have betted! She might well be a right-down regular royal Princess—she might even have been a heroine of the Resistance—but she had been other more murky things as well, or I missed my guess.

"Well," I said discontentedly, beckoning the waiter over to pay my bill, "she may be the cat's whiskers to you, my dear, but you don't look well, and my own opinion is that she's working you too hard. I shall tell your mother I think so, too—and anyway why should you run her errands for her in this hot weather?"

Pamela's hands clutched more tightly the handles of her basket, and her lips took on a mutinous line, but she said nothing—and I made up my mind it was time I saw Dolly.

I invited myself to dinner again at Amherst Court shortly after my encounter with Pam—but I got little satisfaction out of either Dolly or Arnold.

Arnold withdrew into his study soon after dinner, he was working on a tough case that had to be prepared practically overnight and I tackled Dolly at once about Pam, who had not dined with us. She was, Dolly said importantly, having supper with the Princess, who amongst other things was a wonderful cook and had promised to show Pamela how to make an omelette.

Dolly talked Princess practically all through dinner—that is, when Arnold and I were not talking our respective shop—and it was plain to me that if Pam was besotted on this confounded woman, her mother was not far behind her.

It was the Princess this and the Princess that. Some marvellous little dressmaker she knew who had made Dolly some clothes that were simply wonderful, and *so* cheap. Some brilliant doctor or dentist who, at a word from the Princess,

would treat her friend for next to nothing. Some shop or agency or office that would do the same—and regarding Pam, how kind the Princess was to Pam! She singled her out above all her other pupils—no other was ever asked to have supper privately with her—taught her to cook and embroider, showed her how to make a real Court curtsy—it was really marvellous how she had taken to Pam and how Pam had taken to her, and what a chance that was for Pam! Poor as she might be, the Princess was an aristocrat to her fingertips, and knew everybody who was anybody in London; and when it came to the time for bringing Pam out into the world . . .

So it went on and on, and when Arnold left us I interrupted the spate very firmly.

"Look here, Dolly, do you know you've talked nothing but this confounded Princess since I came?" Dolly looked a trifle confounded and bit her lip.

"Have I?" she confessed. "Maybe I have—but you see, she is really rather an absorbing sort of person. She's not like anybody else I've ever known."

"That's all right," I said, "but she needn't become an obsession with you as well as with Pam."

Dolly's eyes flew wide and she shook her head protestingly.

"I really think, Jerry," she said, "you're making a mountain out of a molehill. It's quite natural for girls of Pam's age to get a crush on older women. It was bound to happen with somebody or other, and I'm glad its happened with the Princess, because under her influence Pam can learn so much that will be useful to her later on in life."

"Well," I said, "I don't like the change in the girl—she's lost all her old fun and gaiety, and she's got so thin."

Dolly laughed outright.

"You are really not going to suggest, are you, that her getting thin again is due to the Princess?" she asked. "Really Jerry, isn't that rather silly? It was only puppy fat due to all that rich food in Austria and it came off just naturally." Her blue eyes met mine squarely. "You see, Jerry, I'm very ambitious for Pam. She's going to be a lovely girl, and Arnold and I spent a lot on her education and on Lance's—it's all we can do for our children to launch them in the world, as we haven't got a lot to leave them in the way of money. We're

just quiet middle-class people, Jerry, and I don't know anybody influential in Society, while the Princess does, and if she chooses she can help Pam a lot later on. She can give her useful introductions, get her in touch with good families, see that she meets men worth meeting, maybe help her to get some sort of job where her looks can get her really noticed . . . Pam wants to go in for dress-modelling, herself, and of course that's one of the best ways to get noticed now. It's like being one of the Gaiety girls in father's and mother's day. Most of them married into the peerage."

I had to stem the torrent again, for Dolly, in her efforts to justify her own obvious cultivation of the Princess, looked like emulating Tennyson's Brook and running on forever.

"I see," I said dryly. "You mean you see the Princess as a useful leader by which Pam may climb into society. Isn't that rather old-world Dolly—after the war and all its experiences?"

Dolly squared her stubborn little jaw.

"Things don't change as much as all that," she said, "and every mother in the world wants the best for her daughter and tries every way to get it. *I* want the best for my Pam, and I believe the Princess is going to be a very worthwhile social asset—so I'm going to use her for what she's worth, and I don't care what you say!"

"Even if she's not good for Pam?" I ventured. "Must she be forever in the woman's pocket?"

"I honestly don't know what you're driving at Jerry," Dolly said irritably. "Pam goes there every day for a German lesson, and quite often the Princess asks her in either to supper or to coffee after supper, and supervises her homework or gives her hints about all sorts of things like manners and how to talk to people and interest them and all that. And about Pam's being quieter in her manners," a hint of defiance crept into her tone, "well, maybe that *is* partly due to the Princess, as she told me she thought it would be a good thing to tone down the child's exuberance a little! It wasn't good style to bounce and laugh and shout and get excited as she used to do."

"Good style be hanged," I said rudely, "I liked Pam better left as she was, a jolly natural kid! And how far is this refining process going, do you know?"

"It's going on until Pam's really polished, as she ought to be," snapped Dolly, losing her temper. "I don't care what you say, Jerry, I think this is a marvellous chance for the child. Arnold and I can't afford to send Pam to a really expensive finishing school in Paris as we'd have liked, and to have her "finished" here by a woman like the Princess while she's still under our roof is simply a miracle. I'd be mad not to seize the chance."

I compressed my lips. It was plainly no use arguing. Between her natural desire to seize every worldly advantage for her child and her equally strong desire, that sprang from her innocent snobbery, to cling to the most aristocratic woman she had ever known, Dolly was hell-bent on going her own way —and I was not going to quarrel with her.

"Well, it's your pigeon," I said, "but I don't like it, all the same. Where's that whisky of Arnolds? I need a drink!" Dolly went to the kitchen and brought in the tray. As she put it down she looked at me, and her blue eyes were plaintive.

"I know you think I'm being a fool over this," she said sadly, "and I can't get you to understand. I wish you knew the Princess better and you'd take a different view of her— wait a minute!" While I poured myself out a drink she went to her desk, extracted a minute diary from it and read out a date about two weeks ahead.

"She's giving a little cocktail party in her flat—six to eight, just a few friends getting together—and she wants us to come. I'm sure she'd be delighted to see you as well—an extra man's always welcome. Why don't you come? It you could get to know her better I'm sure you wouldn't have this silly prejudice against her."

I brightened. This was a good idea. I wanted to get next to the lady, though I doubted whether it would result, as Dolly fondly hoped, in my instinctive distrust of her giving way before a sudden rush of liking.

I made a note of the date in my diary, drank up my whisky and went off—and just before I left I put a question to Dolly. If the Princess would welcome an extra man, might she not welcome *two* extra men even more heartily? If I might, I should like to bring my friend Pennoyer with me.

"Pennoyer, your friend the spook doctor?" asked Dolly.

She knew and liked Pennoyer, though like many women she was a little scared of as well as sceptical about his work—such of it as she understood, which was very little. "Oh yes, I'm sure she would. But why do you want to bring *him,* particularly? There aren't any spooks in the Princess's flat?"

I hedged.

"Oh, he doesn't spend his entire life spook-hunting, you know," I said. "He's quite a social bird in his quiet way, and speaks as many languages as the Princess. I thought they might get on rather well together."

Dolly brightened and nodded her head.

"That's true," she agreed. "Well, do bring him and I'll tell the Princess . . ."

Pennoyer listened with interest when I told him my story—my impressions, that is, as there were scarcely anything sufficiently substantial to be called a story as yet.

In fact, some years earlier, I probably would not have ventured to tell him about it at all, fearing I was, as Dolly had said, making mountains out of molehills. But Pen had so often encouraged me to record and report to him my impressions, even very vague and fleeting ones, telling me that I sensed more rightly than I knew when things were psychically wrong that I had lost my old shyness and self-distrust, and made no bones of telling him in detail all I felt about the matter that was puzzling me, as this certainly was. He heard me out to the end and then nodded.

"I'll come with you with pleasure," he said, "and meet this good lady. But first I'll build a protective shell about myself so that she can't pick up any waves of my psychic powers and be on the alert!"

"Make yourself into an ordinary man, in fact," I joked, but even as I joked I knew that even with his psychic powers cloaked, Miles Pennoyer would never be an ordinary man. One look into those deep-set steady eyes, at that lean brown face with the strong chin and the tender sensitive mouth, told one that here was an exceptional man indeed—one of the great ones of the world who live only to serve their fellow men. Pen nodded and smiled.

"It may not be necessary, of course," he said. "The Prin-

cess may merely be a remarkably strong character before whom both mother and daughter are at the moment doing the hero-worshipping act—rather foolishly, but probably quite harmlessly—and in that case, one can do nothing but wait until it wears off and Pam and Dolly both come to their senses. On the other hand, I'm inclined to pay attention to your hunches. They are often a definite 'lead', and if there is anything in my line about this business I should obviously look into it, if I can do so quietly and unobtrusively. That's all I can say at the moment. Okay Jerry, I'll come with you on the 23rd."

The Princess's notion of a small and intimate cocktail party was not mine! As Pennoyer and I ascended the stairs of her flat we could hear the roar of voices high above us, and the clink and rattle of glasses. We looked at each other and Pennoyer grimaced—the last thing in the world he would normally choose to go to was a cocktail party. But today he was being an ordinary man . . .

The Princess's flat was one of those situated on the turn of the stairs that led from one floor up to another. The building was so constructed that there was one of these small flats at each corner of the block on each floor, reached by two or three odd steps that led up to the front door from the angle where the first flight of stairs turned sharply to the second flight. The door was propped open, and we could see from the mist of smoke inside that the place was crowded; however, we were in for it now, and pushed our way into the mob of men and women that seethed inside, looking around first for our hostess, then for a corner where we might possibly get a drink and smoke together. It was a larger flat than I had at first anticipated and consisted, I subsequently discovered, of three rooms. One large one in which we were all congregated, and two smaller ones that served the Princess as a bedroom and a pocket-sized dining-room.

There was a strong smell of some Eastern incense, and indeed the whole place was definitely Eastern in flavour. A pierced bronze lamp the size and shape of a football hung from the centre of the ceiling, there was a wide divan in one corner covered with a handsome Chinese shawl in purples, reds and greens; and on the wall behind it hung a shabby but

beautiful Persian rug in silk, the "Tree of Life" pattern, which must have been worth a good deal for all its shabbiness.

There was a piano, also draped with another Chinese shawl, but in orange and blue this time. This was laden with photographs in silver frames, and more photographs crowded the high mantelpiece—photographs mainly of women in elaborate Court or evening dress and men in magnificent uniforms, mostly of old Russia in the days of the Czars—the majority of them bearing sprawling signatures. There was a gilded Buddha on a carved and lacquered shelf and two incense sticks smouldering in a brass jar beside him, and a litter of Eastern curios and ornaments along the top of the bookcases which lined two walls of the room—and the door that plainly led into the Princess's bedroom was discreetly hidden behind a fine *mushrabiyeh* screen such as one may still pick up, if one is lucky, in the back streets of Cairo, Port Said or Alexandria. An odd room; a cluttered room, one might say, and yet a room that breathed personality as its owner did.

She was standing in a corner talking with great animation to a group of people and did not see us for a moment—which I was glad about, as it gave Pen a chance of sizing her and her surroundings up before she noticed him.

She wore her usual black, velvet this time, but it was brightened up today by a flaming scart of Italian striped silk in vivid crimsons and purples and greens, and she wore enormous dangling ear-rings of emeralds set in silver and a great oval-shaped brooch to match pinned in her breast—old Russian jewellery, one could see at once from its style. In her crest of henna-reddened hair there nodded and sparkled another piece of valuable old jewellery—a dragonfly with outspread wings, its body a serrated row of emeralds, its eyes made of rubies and its wings a lacework of tiny many-coloured jewels. Flamboyant as it was, it was a lovely piece of work of its kind, and though it would have looked appallingly *outré* on many women, somehow this woman, with her essentially dramatic quality, managed to carry it off.

Just then Pam's voice came at my elbow, eager, excited. She was carrying a tray of luscious-looking little snacks, stuffed eggs, prawns in aspic, anchovies sitting on cucumber

slices, sections of celery filled with cream cheese—you know the sort of thing. She was plainly playing waitress to help the Princess's little maid, and though this fresh proof of her servitude to her teacher annoyed me, I was pleased to see her for once bright and animated as of old, and congratulated her on the excellent quality of the *canapés,* many of which, she proudly told us, she had prepared herself. Pennoyer, whom she knew and liked, smiled at her as he accepted one, and I followed his example when suddenly a voice rich, mellow, delightful spoke in our ears—our hostess had spotted us at last.

"Ach, it is Meester Latimer, I theenk—the brother of *chére* Madame Latimer—and your friend, no? *So* charmed—*so* pleased . . ."

I hastily performed the necessary introduction and saw the hard dark eyes dwell reflectively on Pen, pass him over with, in effect, a shrug, and turn again to me. It was plain that Pennoyer had made himself with eminent success into an ordinary man! The Princess went on, one large hand resting possessively on Pam's slender shoulder as she stood close to her.

"Thees child, see how she helps me—I cannot do wit'out her at any of my parties. See, she made wit' me most of these things to eat! So nice . . ."

She chose a prawn *canapé,* popped it into her large mouth and went on talking as Pam beamed her pleasure at the praise. Pennoyer accepted another *canapé,* shook his head at the tray of cocktails that had just appeared and asked for a glass of fruit juice or soda water and listened as the lady continued.

"You weel not find your brother and hees wife as yet, Meester Latimer—they come later on, they say—but I beg of you, eat and drink all you will and amuse yourself. Here are some of my dearest friends—we get together now and then, as you call it, those of us who are still alive, and talk over old times."

"Like the play 'Reunion in Vienna'," remarked Pennoyer in German, and the Princess beamed delightedly.

"*Ach so!* You are a linguist—how wonderful! So few Englishmen speak any language but their own, though since

the war it is better, *nicht wahr?* So many years on the Continent, even Englishment had to try and learn a little of other languages." Her keen eyes bored into Pennoyer's. " You speak my own tongue perhaps, professor, Russian? You *are* a professor—or perhaps I mistake?"

Pennoyer said that perhaps one might fairly call him a professor, of the mind rather than of the body—and yes, he *did* speak Russian. The Princess screamed out the information at the top of a delighted voice, at which several compatriots of hers turned and came over to us, and presently we found ourselves the centre of an interested group all rattling away in Russian. Pennoyer was plainly the success of the evening!

I wandered away when Dolly and Arnold arrived—I can't speak Russian, so I left things to Pen. Dolly and the Princess fell on each other's necks, as women do, and Dolly, finding a spare chair—she had a genius for finding somewhere to sit where nobody else could possibly do so—sat herself down and looked about her with great satisfaction.

She might well be satisfied, as the air was positively dark with titles, though it was plain they were mostly Continental titles and their owners, poor devils, pretty poor and shabby. But there was much foreign talk and foreign manners—hand-kissing, shoulder shrugging and gesticulating and introductions of " Madame la Comtesse " this and that, " The Margravine " and so on, and most of the crowded photographs were signed with Royal, or at least near Royal names. So Dolly was in high feather, and looking as nearly pretty as she could look in a becoming navy and white printed shantung frock and loose coat and little hat to match.

She greeted me with a beaming smile and a meaning glance towards Pam, still standing beside the Princess with the latter's hand on her shoulder.

For a moment we watched the two, the young girl and the tall imperious woman whose hand lay possessively on her shoulder. Pam was wearing a beige frock and beige coloured sandals, and it struck me then that she seemed even thinner than when I had seen her last, though excitement had lent a spurious touch of colour to her cheeks and the Princess's obvious approval had brought a sparkle to her eyes. But somehow, somewhere, that odd sense of doubt, of distrust was still

working within me, and not all the Princess's graciousness—and she had gone out of her way to be gracious—could do anything to remove that feeling.

I glanced over at Pennoyer, still talking to his group of Russians; met his appealing glance and knew what it meant. "Haven't we stayed long enough? I've got all I wanted!" I nodded and said to Dolly mendaciously:

"What a shame you and Arnold came so late . . . because I'm afraid it's a case of 'hullo and goodbye' for Pen and me. We've been here a good while, and we'll have to go now—Pen's got an urgent case waiting."

Dolly's face fell.

"Oh, but—" she began, but I was having no buts. I was too keen to hear what sort of an impression Pen had got out of the Princess and her set-up.

"Sorry," I said firmly. "It's been a nice party, but you came very late, you know. Let me see, it's Pam's birthday party next week isn't it—on Thursday? Right! Then I'll be seeing you then. Now I'll say goodnight to our hostess and collect Pen, and we'll be on our way . . ."

I waited until Pen's car had pulled away from the entrance to the flats and then burst out with the question I had been dying to ask for the past hour.

"Well, what do you think of her?"

Pennoyer smiled as he skilfully steered the car into the crowded length of Kensington High Street.

"You always want to rush your fences, Jerry," he said, "leave me alone until we get back to the flat. I want to sort my impressions out quietly—and after dinner I'll tell you the summing up of those impressions."

I felt dashed and subsided.

"Can't you tell me at least the general atmosphere of those impressions?" I said at last. Pen smiled again.

"All I'm prepared to say at the moment is that your hunches are generally correct, and this one I'll swear is correct too," he said slowly at last. "Correct in that there is *something* here I don't like—something that smells bad, if you know what I mean—but further than that I can't go. Whether that bad smell arises from a thoroughly nasty mental condi-

tion or from a nasty spiritual one I don't yet know—now shut up until we get home. I want to think!"

I lighted a cigarette and sank back into my seat, knowing it was useless to try and pump my friend further, and we swept smoothly past Derry and Tom's, past Barker's, down Gloucester Road into Chelsea and so via Chelsea Hospital onto the Embankment. Pennoyer drove fast and well, his soft hat pulled down over his deep-set eyes, his face grave and preoccupied; but though he was driving like a master I knew that his mind, the major part of it at least, was not even in the car with me. It was concentrated upon the Princess, and how desperately anxious I was to know what the result of that concentration was going to be!

However, I knew better than to interrupt again, and said nothing until the car was safely parked in its accustomed corner of the quaint old-fashioned square where Pen lived and we had entered the flat, where Friedl had already laid the table and set out the accustomed tray of drinks.

"Hullo!" I said as I saw two places laid. "How on earth did Friedl know you were going to bring home a guest?"

"I told her mentally," said Pennoyer, throwing his hat into a corner and pouring himself out a glass of iced orange juice. "She's been with me so long that without realising it she picks up mental messages or instructions I send her with surprising success." He drank off his orange juice thirstily. "She'll tell you she felt it likely that *mein Herr* would bring home a friend with him—that's all she knows. Pour yourself out a drink, my boy—that is, if you think plain sherry or whisky and soda will mix safely with those rather doubtful-looking cocktails you were drinking at the Princess's party."

"I'll risk it," I said with a grin and followed his advice—followed it twice, to be exact—and then Friedl brought in the dinner. It was good as usual. Omelette—*fritto misto,* for my benefit, though as usual Pen contented himself with the vegetables that accompanied that delectable dish—and caramel custard, a particular weakness of mine, to follow; and when we were settled in the sitting room with the coffee before us and one of the excellent cigars that Pen keeps for his guests clamped between my teeth, I said firmly.

"Now I've been a good boy and obeyed orders, Pen, but time's up. Out with your conclusions about this damned Princess!"

Pen stirred his coffee and dropped an extra piece of sugar into it. He had so few ordinary weaknesses that I found his love of sweet things rather appealing—it seemed to bring him a little nearer to the commonplace human being that was myself!

"I'll tell you this," he said at last—"that for a time I was puzzled as to whether the bad psychic smell I picked up was simply a case of a supremely clever and ruthless Lesbian having fastened her tentacles on a malleable young girl. But on your way back things began to get sorted out in my mind—and I'm certain it's not that. Anyway, we can make sure very soon—as soon as we've finished our coffee."

"How can you make sure?" I asked with interest.

"We'll use the Globe," said Pennoyer. "Having been to the lady's flat, I can tune in to her atmosphere without difficulty, and as it's more than likely that Pam will be staying behind when the rest of the guests leave in order to help her beloved teacher clear up, we should be able to sit comfortably back here and watch what happens there! As the Princess had no suspicion whatever that I am other than a quite ordinary man who was brought in as a make-weight, she will not try to 'protect' herself or her flat in any way. So we should have a clear run-in, so to speak."

I looked at him with interest.

"Then you think she's not unacquainted with occultism?"

He nodded. "I'm sure she knows a good deal about it!" he said briefly.

I sighed.

"You talk about 'us' looking into the Globe," I said, "but you've forgotten, you old brute, that I haven't the 'sight' that can see things in the Globe. All I ever see in it is the reflection of my own face—and I'm thoroughly tired of that."

Pen grinned.

"Drink up the rest of your coffee and come on," he ordered. "Don't you know yet that your old friend is a miracle worker? Dump this tray out in the hall for Friedl to take away, and draw the curtains close, and we'll get busy."

While I put the tray outside and drew the soft tobacco-coloured velvet curtains Pen unlocked the corner cupboard and drew carefully out a large round glass globe twice the size of the crystal ball he had used to hypnotize Mitzi, on a carved blackwood stand. He placed it on a small table, drew up two comfortable chairs beside it and turned out all the lights but a single lamp at the far end of the room; this he draped with a red silk scarf so that all the light it gave out was a blurred rosiness in the dusk, and felt his way back to the table. Then, while I waited, bursting with curiosity to see what he was going to do to me, he came behind me, placed one palm flat across my forehead and the other at the back of my neck and held them there for a few moments.

"This is where I open the Eye in the middle of your forehead—what some people call the pineal gland and others say is the last vestige of what was one a Third Eye," he said. "They are both right in one way and wrong in another—but I haven't time to go into that now."

"Why your hand on the back of my neck?" I asked. Pen tutted at me.

"You ask me that, Jerry, with your knowledge? You know the five psychic centres well enough—the Eye on the forehead, the heart, the navel, the genitals, the base of the skull. There is a close link between the two head centres and I am opening them both so that you may see all there is to be seen. Now, sit still, and let the power flow through."

I sat still, and as Pen's strong hands pressed on my head and at the back of my neck I did indeed feel the flowing of some mysterious power like a faint but distinct electric current, tingling, stimulating—and when I opened my eyes at last it was something of a shock to see the room and its furniture just as before, clear in the dim red light, the Globe poised on its stand before us on the little table. But Pennoyer gave me no time to wonder and question.

He moved over to the Globe and held his long hands outstretched for a moment over it, muttering under his breath some words that I could not distinguish, then withdrew his hands and returned to his seat.

"Now," he said under his breath, "we shall see what we shall see!"

For a few moments the Globe remained dark with only the far gleam of the lamp reflected in a blurred patch of reddish light on its rounded side—then suddenly a tiny flame seemed to dawn in the very centre of it. The flame grew rapidly larger and brighter and at last it seemed to fill the Globe as though it was hollow and lighted from within; then it mellowed to a soft glow, and leaning forward I began to see in it various odd things, seen as through a shifting mist; a chair and a table, the long shape of a divan piled with cushions and two figures moving about . . .

The mist cleared and I saw that I was looking into the sitting-room of the Princess's flat—the room I had so recently seen filled with people drinking, talking, laughing—but now it was empty but for two figures. The figure of young Pamela, busy clearing away what were evidently the remains of a picnic supper, and that of the Princess.

She had changed her dress and put on a sort of lounging robe, I suppose it was—a handsome thing of black and green Chinese brocade with wide sleeves and a collar fastened high to her neck with jade buttons—and she was sitting cross-legged on the divan surrounded with cushions, watching Pamela at work. It struck me at once how oddly right both her robe and her attitude were—plainly, like so many Russians, she was of Mongol blood, and in that dress somehow she seemed to fit far better into this setting than into any other. She was smoking a cigarette in a foot-long jade holder and plainly talking to Pamela as the child moved about. I watched Pamela finish her job of clearing the table and setting the room to rights and saw her turn to the elder woman and ask a question—probably as to whether she should wash up the supper things. However, whatever it was, the older woman vetoed it, and motioned Pamela to sit down at the table, open a drawer in it and get out a pile of exercise books. I saw Pamela look towards the divan with rather a rueful pout—evidently she was in no mood to tackle German now!—and for some odd reason I felt disappointed; surely my hunch and Pennoyer's sensings were not going to peter out into a mere conscientious teacher giving a promising pupil an extra lesson? But I had jumped to a hasty conclusion.

Obediently Pamela drew up a chair and settled herself to work. I had known that she often did her homework under her teacher's eyes, yet somehow I had not expected it to happen this particular night, after the excitement of the party. The room grew quiet and in the background the Princess still sat upright, cross-legged on her cushions, smoking, motionless as a carved image—motionless as the gilded Buddha perched high up on his lacquered shelf against the wall. The absurd thought struck me that she looked very much like the Buddha! The attitude, the poise, were exactly the same, but that the Buddha had one hand raised in blessing and she—yet even as I looked she laid her cigarette carefully in the ash-tray on the little table beside the divan and raising her hand, even as the Buddha had raised his, held it steadily, palm forward, with her eyes directed at the unconscious girl as she bent over her books.

There was a moment's pause, and then I saw something more than curious. I saw what seemed like five threads of silvery light begin to ray out from the tips of the Princess's fingers and stream towards Pamela! They were no thicker than a silk thread, yet I could see them clearly, silvery in colour, but with a curious greenish sheen that somehow I did not like at all—and they streamed out sheer across the room and fastened on Pam. One attached itself to the back of her neck, another to the top of her head, another to her forehead, another to the base of her throat and the fifth to her heart—and once attached they seemed to swell and grow and pulsate like living things! The sight was so uncanny that I gave a sharp exclamation of revulsion—and Pennoyer's hand came firmly down on mine. He spread his left hand over the Globe and at once the picture faded—the glass became dull and I was back in the normal present, glaring at Pen in fury mixed with anger, and completely bewildered!

"Pen—what on earth *is* it?" I burst out. "It was horrible! Those rays or threads fastening on to Pam . . ."

"Tentacles, I would rather call them," said Pen calmly. "You're right, it *was* horrible, for the woman is drawing vitality from Pam to keep herself alive. She knows plenty about magic, for only a magician can do what we saw her doing—set a psychic pump to work on a younger being in

order to provide herself with the vitality that she no longer possesses. They knew about it in Biblical days, of course—remember giving the aged King David a young virgin to lie in his bosom to give him back his strength? There was nothing sexual about that—and nothing actually magical such as we have just seen. Just the knowledge that the aged can and do draw vitality from the younger, only too often, to prop up their weakening powers."

"I know something about that," I said, "because nowadays doctors won't have children sleeping in their grandparents' room, as so often used to happen—they know it is bad for them."

"Of course it is," said Pen. "Thank goodness, in that respect at all events, we have learnt a little wisdom. But this—this is a thousand times worse. This damned woman—if she is a woman at all . . ."

I was startled and interrupted.

"Oh, surely?" I began, but Pen swept on.

"Oh, I don't mean she isn't a woman, physically speaking. I mean that the Entity who is incarnated in her body is essentially male, and that is one of the reasons why she—*he*—is able to handle and attract women so successfully. Again, there is nothing sexual about it, in the Lesbian sense I mean—it's a psychological matter. Psychologically, women sense the male, and a strong male, within the Princess and so gravitate towards her . . . that's the reason why both Dolly and Pamela and doubtless a lot of other women before them have fallen under this infernal woman's spell. I must break it—for without it . . ."

"Yes?" I prompted him. He hesitated a moment, then faced me squarely, seriously.

"Look here, Jerry, I don't want to be a gloom-merchant—but this is serious! You saw this psychic pump at work—sucking out the very life-force of this child, to be drawn into and used by this evil Thing on the divan. You've seen how changed and white and listless Pamela had become since she met this so-called Princess—well, unless we can stem this flow of vitality from her to the Princess, sooner or later she will die for sheer lack of strength to keep alive. She'll be sucked dry. I've no manner of doubt that the Princess has done this

before—possibly many times before—she's a psychic vampire and there is no viler magic than hers. There is no knowing her real age, but I'm positive she is vastly older than she seems. But don't despair, Jerry. Go home and get to sleep—and tomorrow I will see you again and tell you what I think we may be able to do."

"It's no use your talking to Arnold and Dolly, I suppose?" I said. Pen shook his head.

"Not a scrap," he said firmly. "Arnold would only laugh and think me crazy; and Dolly—who's completely under this woman's spell—would be offended, and we should get nowhere. No, I must handle this alone—and now get along."

I could not go to Pam's birthday party after all, as a few days after my talk with Pennoyer I went down with a nasty chill and had to stay in bed for several days with a high temperature, feeling very sorry for myself. I sent a cheque to Dolly to spend on a present for my goddaughter, and she bought her a red suede handbag that she assured me she envied most heartily, and twice I tried to get Pennoyer to come and chat to me to beguile a few of the weary hours I had to spend in bed; but old Friedl told me that my friend had departed to Paris on some mysterious errand the very day after we had seen the Princess and her pupil—her victim rather, I now realised—in the Globe. So I had to possess my soul in patience until I got on my feet again, and the first night I felt fit enough I went to Amherst Court to dine.

Pam greeted and thanked me for her present very sweetly, though without that old exuberance that she used to show, and I scanned her young face as I kissed her, with more than my old anxiety. She looked, I thought, even whiter and more listless than before, and now I knew what she was being used for—what that devil in female form was trying to do—everything in me was up in arms with fear and anger both, and I was wild to find some sort of an excuse to break off these damned lessons, separate the teacher and the taught . . . but what on earth could I do?

With Dolly, poor darling, smiling smugly on the situation, I simply hadn't a hope—and for the first time since I had known her, I felt I could have shaken the little woman for

her stupidity, for her obstinacy . . . yet even as I felt the impulse I dismissed it as unfair. How could she be expected to understand? As Pen had said, if I had tried to explain she would simply have considered the whole idea crazy, as Arnold would do likewise . . . so I stifled my feelings as best I could, and we sat down to dinner as usual.

Needless to say, after touching on various other subjects such as my recent illness and Pen's visit to Paris—which, since to Dolly Paris meant clothes and to Arnold women, neither of them could understand what should take Pen there!—the talk gravitated to that damned Princess; but this time Pam had something really interesting to say.

"You know, Mummy," she said, "*I'm* not the only one that's been having presents. The Princess had one today—and she's so intrigued with it because she can't think who it's from!"

Dolly's eyes were round with interest.

"Can't think who it's from?" she repeated. "But how very odd! Did it come by post?"

"Oh yes," said Pam, eating her grilled chicken with relish, "it came from abroad—Rome, I think—all corded up in a wooden box with seals and things and stuffed inside with shavings."

"Wasn't there a card inside?" I asked. Pam shook her head.

"No, I suppose the person who sent it meant to put a card in and forgot. Isn't it maddening? The Princess and I unpacked it together and went through every inch; but there wasn't a sign of a card or a note, and she's going nearly mad trying to find out who sent it!"

"Well, is it worth all that careful packing?" asked Arnold.

"*I* don't think so," said Pam frowning. "It's an old metal thing—like a sort of wheel stuck on a long metal stem with a foot to it—some antique thing or other. I never saw anything like it before and can't imagine what it's used for."

"Can the Princess?" I asked.

"I think she knows what it is, but can't make out why its been sent to her," said Pam, and her eyes suddenly lighted up. "*I* know! Will you come round to her flat with me after dinner, Uncle Jerry, and have a look at it? I'm sure the Princess would love you to come?"

"I'll come with pleasure," I said—which was true, for some inner instinct told me that it was important I should see this thing. Somewhere behind this mysterious present moved Pennoyer, I was sure. Certainly Rome puzzled me, as Friedl had said Pen had gone to Paris; but it would not be the first time that Pen had deliberately confused his tracks, and that this thing, whatever it was, had come from or via him I felt positive.

After we had coffee Dolly telephoned the Princess to ask if it would be convenient for me to come over and see the curio about which Pam had told us. I was (she said) a connoisseur of such things. The Princess welcomed the idea enthusiastically and Pam and I went up to the little door at the angle of the stairs. The flat was filled with the smell of incense, as before —the Princess had a passion for the heavy musky scent, which I personally detest—and she greeted us eagerly.

"But how charming of you, Meester Latimer, to come and try and explain my mystery? Behold it as it stands!"

She threw out both hands dramatically towards the object standing on a small round table just below the Buddha . . . and I recognised it at once. It was a small Tibetan prayer wheel. One of those used by the high Lamas in the monasteries of Tibet—and plainly an ancient and, I should judge, very valuable one. It was of bronze, turned greenish with age; the rim and the spokes of the wheel were pierced in patternwork and the stem was covered with a close ornamentation of hammered and embossed metal. I picked it up, touching it delicately, and at my touch the wheel whirled instanter. Old as it plainly was, it had been so well made that not even years and tarnishing and the inevitable battering it had undergone—for it was dented in several places—had sufficed to upset the beautiful balance of the wheel upon its supporting stem. I replaced it carefully, glancing up as I did so at the poker-faced Buddha on his lacquered shelf above; I remember thinking as I did so how well the two seemed to belong together . . .

"It's an old Tibetan prayer wheel—and a valuable one I should judge," I said. "What a very interesting present to receive, Madame! And yet Pam tells me you do not know who sent it to you."

The Princess shrugged and spread out her hands.

"No! But this is fantastic! There is nothing—no card, no message—and yet I would give *anything* to know who sends me so wonderful, so thrilling a present!"

Her long fingers touched the wheel and set it twirling again.

"One is supposed to say a prayer for each turn-round, eh? But how exciting! I must read up something about this in the encyclopaedia. I know so very little, and yet this fascinates me more than I can say." She touched it again and the touch was almost loving. "Oh, *who* could have sent it to me? I think I shall really die of mortification if I cannot find out!"

I picked up the paper wrapping of the box that still lay on the floor and studied the big red blob of sealing wax that had fastened the stout string round it. The blob had been broken in two pieces, but so solid were they that it was possible to put the two bits together and see the design of the seal that had been used to stamp the wax. It was a double-headed bird of some sort, with a shield held in its claws; there was a flamboyant crest on the shield and a motto below it I held it out.

"Perhaps this seal might give you a clue, Madame. Is it one you recognise? I should think it Austrian, or perhaps Russian?"

She clutched it eagerly, studied it for a moment, then relaxed with a smile of gratification.

"I should have thought of that," she ejaculated. "But of course I know it! This is the crest of the Galianov family—one of the oldest in Russia. Ruined and driven out like so many others in the Revolution. But I used to know many of them in Paris."

Her hooded eyes studied the seal closely. "I—yes—it must be that one of them has remembered me and found out where I live. I wonder who it could be? There were three brothers I used to know when I was young, Ivan and Mikal and Serge—and they were all in love with me!"

"It looks," I said guilefully, "as though one of them at least is still in love with you!"

The woman tossed her rust-coloured head and smiled the smile of a woman whose vanity is pleased, though with her expressive hands she made a gesture as though disclaiming my

compliment. Then she patted me on the cheek and cried out that she was delighted—delighted!—and that we must now drink some coffee with her and have perhaps a tiny drink of *anisette* or Pernod to toast the new treasure?

We stayed another half hour—it would have been difficult, if not discourteous, to refuse—and much of the time, of course, was taken up in gleeful speculation by both the Princess and her pupil as to how the donor of the present could have discovered her address, which brother it was, and whether he was likely to follow up his present with a personal visit—which the infatuated Pam was quite positive would happen. We took our leave, and the moment I found myself back in my own rooms, tired as I was by that time, I rang up Pen's flat. His voice answered me and he laughed as I threw out my challenge.

"Yes, of course," he said, "I *went* to Paris all right; but as it was essential that my hand in this matter should never be suspected, when I'd got the thing I went for safely in my possession I flew to Rome with it and despatched it from there. I sealed it with an old Russian seal I picked up in a junk shop, hoping she'd recognise it—as you say she did. When I'd sent the box off I hopped into a plane and here I am!"

"But how on earth did you get the thing? Tell me!" I demanded.

"Not over the telephone," said Pen firmly. "It's a nefarious tale and I'm not going to broadcast it. Come and have dinner with me tomorrow night and I'll tell you all about it—and later on we'll have a look at you-know-what. Good night!"

Though Friedl's English is still very rudimentary, in spite of the years she has spent in Pen's service, Pen refused to discuss the matter that was so intriguing me until after dinner, and I was so excited that I must confess to bolting my food without my usual appreciation of its excellence. Directly we had adjourned to the sitting-room and the coffee was placed before us and the door closed behind Friedl's substantial form, Pen began.

"First, I must confess to having done a spot of burglary over the prayer wheel! I knew there were several in the

British Museum but that was too hard a crib to crack; so I telephoned to a Buddhist friend of mine, and he told me of a small temple in the heart of Paris, of all places. It belonged to a Buddhist brotherhood but was closed and locked except when they gathered there about once a month—and only the *concierge* of the building where it was located ever went in to clean or dust it. I went over and found this place, and to my relief found the *concierge* both old and decidedly bibulous. I put on a French working-man's clothes and *béret* and took a big basket of vegetables to sell; got acquainted with the old boy, who was alone, his wife had gone to the country; jollied him along with plenty of doped wine and when he was snoring stole the keys from his pocket! Walked in, lifted the prayer wheel, hid it under the vegetables in my basket, locked it and replaced the keys, and walked out."

"How on earth will you explain it to the brotherhood if they have a meeting and miss it?" I said. Pen shrugged.

"Let's hope I can replace it as I removed it," he said, "but the need was so urgent that I had to risk that."

"Why did you need it—and what has it to do with the Princess?" I asked.

"I told you," said Pennoyer, "that in essentials she is a man—and I am right! More, I knew when I was looking in on her that night what sort of a man she was. She was a Lama in one of her previous incarnations—and a great one, though an evil one. She is drawn to this wheel because of her ancient inner memories that know a prayer wheel's value; but what she does *not* know is that this particular wheel once belonged to the great Nam Penh, one of the great Lamas—but as white as she was once black."

"And you think?" I prompted, as Pennoyer paused.

"Once again, as I've done many times before," he said, "I am pitting the forces of Good again the forces of Evil, and praying that they will win. If this woman had had her old knowledge of magic—which luckily she has not—she would never have allowed the prayer wheel into her flat, for it is the thin edge of the wedge—the spearhead inserted into a crack that I hope will burst right open. Now, tonight, once again, we will look into the Globe and see what we shall see!"

Once more Pennoyer placed his hands on my forehead, at

the back of the neck and then over my ears—for a reason I did not understand until later—and in the dusked room we sat watching the Globe as it misted over, cleared and showed us as sharply as though we actually sat there in our bodily selves, the sitting-room of the Princess at Amherst Court.

The room was dimly lighted, with a red lamp before the Buddha and blue curls of fresh incense were rising lazily into the air from the metal vase on the shelf beside it. The Princess, clad in the Chinese robe I had seen before, sat cross-legged on the divan against the richly coloured spread of the ancient carpet that hung on the wall behind it. Her tousled red head was bent as she studied the prayer wheel, held cupped in her two strong hands. For a long time she stared at it, and then with an exasperated sigh put it down on a small table beside the divan, chose and lighted a cigarette. It was plain that though the thing fascinated her she was still at a loss to understand either its arrival or its fascination; and as her head, bending over the flame of her cigarette lighter, was temporarily averted from the prayer wheel, I saw what was happening before she did.

It seemed that a tall column of silvery mist was forming itself against the dusk of the room just behind the shape of the prayer wheel. Swiftly the column took shape and substance and before I could blink a tall man stood there—a man wearing the yellow robes and the curiously-shaped red headgear of a Tibetan Lama of one of the highest orders—the Li Tam Quoy. His lean ascetic face was worn and lined, his lips thin and firmly set and his eyes set in deep hollows. It was a face weary with years and experience, a face learned and sad both—yet as he watched the bent head of the woman on the divan there was no harshness in his eyes, only pity and sorrow. Her head was still bent when he spoke to her—and then I knew that Pen had unclosed my psychic hearing as well as my sight, for I could hear their voices as clearly as I could have heard my own.

"Well, Lom Chang? So you are at your tricks again?"

The red head shot up with a cry of mortal terror and she sat rigid, hands gripping the rug each side of her, her blazing eyes, wide as lamps, staring at the priest who faced her, one long hand resting lightly on the prayer wheel.

"*You!* You!" she managed to sob out hoarsely, and he nodded.

"You remember me—and my warning to you," he said quietly. "In the old days of the monastery that we both remember so well, you used the blood of the living young to keep your fading body alive and vital! Here again I see you robbing the young—but now of the life force itself, not merely the blood. Oh Lom Chang, Lom Chang, will you never learn?"

As he spoke I was staring at the Princess, and my eyes bulged, amazed—for as I stared, lo and behold, she changed! From a russet-haired, haggard yet handsome woman she changed before my eyes—and in her place I saw a hawk-faced, shaven-headed priest! Crouched together, his narrow eyes filled with fear and hate both, he sat motionless on the divan, his hands buried in the sleeves of his robe, his bloodless lips a thin line in the yellow mask of his face . . . yet terrified as he plainly was, he did not lack courage as he snarled out:

"Life, life—is any price too high to pay for it?"

The tall priest, confronting him, nodded his stately head.

"It is indeed—yet you have not learnt that, it seems. From afar on the Other Side of this life we have watched you, Lom Chang, through many incarnations, and seen you, alas, at your evil work again and yet again—anything to keep the life flame burning in the wretched physical body that you prize so highly—anything! We have watched you fasten on this English child with sorrow and amaze—but thanks to the wise man who brought this Holy Wheel into touch with you and so gave me the opportunity I needed, your evil project is vain. The child shall be freed—and you, Lom Chang, will go to your own place, there to meet your fellows and your judges and have the doom meted out to you that you have, alas, so well and truly earned."

Even in the dim light of the room I could see the beads of the sweat of terror that pearled the high bald forehead of the Thing on the divan, and I could see him shaking as he tried fiercely to master his fears. His voice came in a harsh croak.

"No, no—I will not let her go! It is only the strength I draw from her that keeps this physical body alive—I dare not let her go!"

"You have no choice," said the tall priest, whom now I knew to be none other than the great Nam Penh, the White Lama of whom Pennoyer had spoken to me—the original owner of the prayer wheel. "Prepare, Lom Chang, for your span of time on this earth is over!"

He raised his hands on high, reverently holding the prayer wheel, and I saw him set it spinning furiously as his lips moved in a strange unearthly sound, half chant, half prayer. The figure in the Chinese robe sprang convulsively to its feet, trying to snatch at the upraised wheel, but even as it moved it collapsed, falling together like a mechanical doll, the springs of which had suddenly given out. The yellow-robed figure seemed to swell and grow to giant size, the chanting rang and boomed in my ears—and suddenly the scene vanished, the globe was once more an ordinary ball of crystal, and in the dimness Pennoyer and I sat staring at each other.

Pen rose to his feet and went to fetch the tray of drinks from the sideboard.

"So that's the end," he said. "I wondered how it would come—but I never dreamed that the White Lama himself would come to deliver punishment and take back his prayer wheel. So Lom Chang has gone to his account—and thank the gods your little goddaughter is freed."

"You mean he—she—the Princess is dead?" I said. Pen nodded.

"Oh yes! Dead, thank heaven as she—*he* can be—like you, I really don't know what to call her. You saw her tonight in her true colours—She who was once a very great Lama until she took to twisting the laws of magic to suit her own evil ends. What she was doing to Pamela she had done many times before in earlier lives to other young people—but in a cruder way."

"Do you mean—actually drawing their blood?" I asked. "It seems—well, almost impossible to believe."

"'For the blood is the life'," quoted Pennoyer as he poured me out a whisky and soda. "You may or may not know, Jerry, that to this day there are certain extremely advanced souls inhabiting human bodies who know how, by conserving their vital energies in various magical ways, to lengthen the physical life of those bodies to an inconceivable

extent. Only in the remote corners of the world do you find these men—chosen souls who after long and arduous training in their far-off cells or monasteries, know how to turn the lamp of physical life so low that it is almost extinguished, so that they can leave their bodies motionless, lying for months at a time, cared for and guarded by a few devoted young disciples while their freed spirits rove the earth ever further and further afield. Some of these men can and do visit other planets and confer with the wise folk there, and bring back vast stores of knowledge with them. Thus, when at last they awake to full physical life on this earth again, they share and discuss with their fellow workers and use for the benefit of mankind until such time as the Call comes again to them to leave their bodies and go journeying . . ."

" What an amazing idea," I said wonderingly. " You mean the bodies they leave need no food or drink—or anything?"

" They need nothing, for the flame of life has been turned so low they can live on almost indefinitely in that semi-cataleptic state," said my friend. " But in order to do this—to learn to draw only on the Spirit for the force that keeps that flame alive—takes much arduous and exhausting training of many years; and it is also, alas, possible—and much easier—to keep life alive for many years beyond the normal span by drawing on the actual lifeblood of others. Which was the sin for which you heard Lom Chang sentenced." He poured himself out a glass of lime juice, added sugar and took a long drink. " Too impatient to go through the bitter training he should have faced, he took the easier way, and for long lived on the lifeblood of the young disciples who thronged about him to learn of him—for he was famed for his learning then and many young people came from far parts of Tibet to study under his wing. But gradually here one and there one grew oddly weak and pale and at last died—and those in charge of the monastery set a watch and found out what was happening."

Pen drew a long breath.

" Lom Chang died—died very horribly, as he deserved to die—but as you have seen, his spirit is still rebellious, still bent on its evil ends. He has grown subtler since those days, certainly—now he no longer draws the blood from the living

body, but works on the psychic life-force, which is worse still. Your Pamela does not know, thank God, what she has escaped . . ."

I shivered.

"I don't know and I don't want to know. But I can't tell you how grateful I am to you, Pennoyer, and how grateful Pam's mother and father ought to be—and won't be, since they don't know anything about this!"

Pen smiled.

"I don't want thanks," he said gently—and I know he spoke the truth. "I'm only so thankful—and so grateful to the Great Ones I serve—that my ruse has turned out so wonderfully successful. And now I'm going to send you home to bed, Jerry, a wiser and a much happier man than when you came; and look out for the announcement of the Princess's death in the papers. I rather think you'll find something interesting there."

I did indeed.

The Princess's maid discovered her body lying prone in death on the floor beside the divan and raised a frightful screech which brought in the police almost at once—to my great relief, in time to prevent Pam's going into the flat and finding the body, which I had been afraid of, knowing how often she ran in and out. But as luckily the Princess never got up until eleven o'clock, the body and the flat had both been examined and the body removed before Pam and her parents knew what was happening.

The news came as a great shock to both Pam and her mother, of course, and on Dolly's agitated phone call I went round to do what I could to steady them both up; but there was little to be said. The inquest brought in the cause of death as a sudden apoplectic stroke—and it was one of the smaller, more sensational rags that printed a 'par' about the deceased that gave me, as the saying is, furiously to think. It ran something like this:

"A curious feature of the recent death from an apoplectic stroke of the Princess Olga Sophia Alexandra Euphemia Yourakoff Stavosky emerged at the inquest. Though those who knew the Princess in life refused to accept her as being more than fifty-eight or sixty at most, the doctor who

examined the body gave the dead woman's age as incredibly old—so old that it was beyond him to understand how she had been kept alive. And further, he was by no means certain that she was a woman at all! Certainly, to use his own discreet words, 'not a complete and normal woman' by which possibly the good doctor means she was a hermaphrodite. The whole matter remains a considerable puzzle."

When I consulted Pennoyer about the paragraph he smiled.

"I rather thought that would happen," he said. "No, I don't mean that in this life she was physically a hermaphrodite—I should very much doubt it. But I do think that since at the moment of her death—which was from sheer fright, of course, and no stroke at all—she was wearing the semblance of her old maleness, that left an imprint, as her actual age also did, on the physical body she was wearing. The body appeared to the good doctor—who must have been puzzled to a degree, poor chap!—as both semi-male and incredibly old. Actually, I'm surprised the physical body even held together, struck as it was at the moment of death with the repercussion of the actual years she had kept it alive. I've no doubt that woman was probably well over a hundred and fifty—and if we could only know her history, has kept herself alive and vital and comparatively young for untold years by using young things as she was trying to use Pamela . . . pumping them of their lifestream in order to renew her own. Brrh! It doesn't bear thinking of . . ."

"Another thing that's odd," I said. "There's nothing about the prayer wheel, and I gather from Pam that it had disappeared."

"Nam Penh took it with him," said Pen, "and I'll bet anything you like it's now reposing where I took it from, in the Buddhist Temple in Paris—and that it's never been missed. Next time I go over I'll get in touch with my friend the *concierge* and find out. But I'm sure I'm right."

And of course—he was.

"THE TWISTED CHRIST"

THIS STRANGE adventure came about during a holiday that I spent in Brittany with my friend Pennoyer.

It was rare for Pennoyer to take a holiday at all, to tell the truth. How he managed to keep up his vitality during the constant strains and stresses of his strange and arduous life I simply did not know, for he ate little. No meat or fish or animal food of any kind, though he would eat eggs, since the life that was within them had not, so he put it, "blossomed into active expression". Dairy stuff he would eat, like cheese and butter; and he had a pleasantly human weakness for such things as cream and fruit, home-made jams and sweets, and the delicious Viennese breads and cakes that old Friedl, his Bavarian cook, made so often for him: but otherwise he ate nothing but vegetables and fruit and such (to me) unsatisfactory foods as rice, spaghetti and so on. Likewise he refused to drink alcohol, saying that like meat foods, the vibrations of strong drink coarsened the vibrations that it was essential he kept clear and unsullied in his system, or he could not do his mysterious work; yet there had been many times when I had longed to give him a good heartening dose of brandy or whisky when he returned, sometimes in the small hours, to the flat which I was now sharing with him, white and drawn and almost speechless with fatigue from the strain of the case with which he had been dealing. But I never did, knowing it was useless.

Yet spending himself as he did without ceasing in the service of humanity, sleeping little and, as I say, eating and drinking in the entire day less than would make one good meal for the average man, he was still at fifty-seven or eight

the fittest man I knew for his age, and both looked, and plainly felt, as a general rule, years younger than his actual age.

It was the month of October, and late to take a holiday from most people's point of view. But we had to seize the chance that came our way—the first for a very long time—and as sometimes happens, we struck a glorious spell of autumn weather. We had taken full advantage of it, and as we lay relaxed and at ease on the pine-clad slopes of the wild ground that stretched outside our little hotel down to the golden rock-studded sand below us, with the soft aromatic scent of the tall pines in our nostrils, the warm air all about us, and in our ears that sound, the most soothing the world knows, of the lap and ripple of little waves on a sandy beach, I thought again how young and strong my friend looked; and how much better for the ten days we had just spent together in the adorable village of Beg Meil, a few miles from Quimper, where we had fled to recover from the shock and horror of his last case, the matter of the Moonchild.*

Pennoyer was reading a sheaf of letters, and the last, a thin sheet covered with the fine pointed handwriting in purple ink that is so typically French, was plainly absorbing him. He was relaxed, at peace, happy—but I might have known it was all too good to last. I was lazily debating within myself whether to suggest a sail with our friend Jacques Lambrenec in his red-sailed boat after our siesta, or whether we should go for a tramp in the depths of the Forêt de Fouesnant, that enchanted wilderness close by, taking some bread and cheese and fruit with us for our dinners, when Pen threw over to me the letter he held.

"Read that, Jerry, and tell me if you've the heart to refuse?" I glanced over the letter and looked at Pen. Our pleasant lazy afternoon—our entire month's holiday, in fact—had plainly come to an end. Here was work to do—and I knew my friend too well to imagine he would refuse. I sighed in resigned acceptance and went back to the letter.

It was from a French priest, the *curé* of a small village called, if I read the spidery handwriting correctly, Lenant; it was written in English of a precise but stilted type, but good

*See "The Case of the Moonchild", from *Number Seven Queer Street.*

enough English of its kind, and was an appeal for help. It had come to his ears (wrote Père Claude) that the good Dr. Pennoyer was staying at Beg Meil, and he knew something of the *Docteur's* wonderful gifts and something of the work he had done. He, Père Claude, scarcely dared to hope that Dr. Pennoyer would take notice of his humble appeal, and yet for the sake of his beloved flock he made it . . . for there was serious trouble in his beloved village, hill-perched Lenant! A very grave situation had arisen, and he could not hope to cope with it himself. He had done his best according to his poor lights; but matters were going from bad to worse, and he appealed in the name of all that was holy for Dr. Pennoyer to consent to visit him and give him his advice.

Pennoyer scrambled to his feet and took a reluctant last look over the lovely scene before us.

"I'm sorry, Jerry, to cut our stay short here," he said. "But the letter rings true, don't you think? There's real trouble there—must be, for a Roman Catholic priest to be driven to beg help from a professional occultist! As a rule it's the last thing they would consent to do. Lenant—I've an idea it isn't very far off, so we might get there in a few hours. Let's get cracking, shall we? I'll go and talk to Pantin while you start the packing—I'll arrange to keep on our rooms here for the moment, and if we can do this job quickly, whatever it is, we might come back for a few days afterwards before returning to London."

My spirits rose, and I turned towards the hotel with a better heart and went upstairs to pack our suitcases while Pen made enquiries of the proprietor of the hotel, plump, fussy little M. Pantin, regarding Lenant and how to get to it.

He came up to me in a few minutes with the news that Lenant was a small village some fifty or sixty miles away, lying high up in a pocket of the mountains. Difficult to reach, as the road that led to it was scarcely worthy to be called a road; and where *les messieurs* were to sleep M. Pantin did not know, as there was nothing in Lenant in the shape of a hotel. Scarcely even an inn! It was *un vrai trou sauvage,* and why the good *docteur* should wish to go, to leave the Hotel Beaufleur and its comforts for such a place, M. Pantin could not imagine . . .

However, despite our host's protests, we set out in Pen's battered little Austin directly we had swallowed our lunch, taking care to take with us one of the local maps we had bought in Quimper, some sandwiches, fruit and a thermos of hot coffee, along with our flashlamps, overcoats and a rug or two. We had lost ourselves before on these trips into unknown country; and a night, even a summer night, spent in the car high up amongst the frowning and inhospitable peaks of a strange mountain range, was an experience we were neither of us anxious to repeat. We were all set to start when the little proprietor, who had been standing on the steps watching our preparations with an anxious frown, seemed suddenly to make up his mind about something, came down the steps and laid one fat hand on the ledge of the window beside the driving wheel. Pen looked up at him with a questioning smile—for the little man's face was troubled.

"*M'sieur,*" he began diffidently. "*M'sieur* will forgive me —but it is truly your intention to go to Lenant?"

"It is," said Pennoyer frankly. "Is there any real reason why I shouldn't go there?" Again M. Pantin hesitated, then took the plunge.

"It is perhaps that you laugh at me for the big fool," he said nervously. "But I assure *m'sieur* that I would advise him *not* to go to Lenant—nor this gentleman either! There are stories . . ."

"What sort of stories?" asked Pen bluntly. M. Pantin hesitated.

"How can I say? Nothing definite—it is difficult, *m'sieur* will understand—people whisper and are afraid, but of what, who can tell? All one hears are the whispers—and for a long time now there have been whispers of very strange things happening at Lenant! Things—things that are not good—that are evil, *m'sieur.*"

Pen looked at me and nodded. Here was plain confirmation of Father Claude's letter—proof that there was something gravely wrong at Lenant, if the echoes had reached Beg Meil sixty miles away.

"I have heard so," he said gravely, "and it is for this reason—to probe these stories and find out the truth of them,

and if possible, put right whatever is wrong—that I am going."

M. Pantin's jaw dropped, and he stared at Pennoyer in silence for a moment. Then he shook his head helplessly, and fishing out a small object from his waistcoat pocket dropped it into Pen's hand.

"So? You are brave, *m'sieur,* though I think far too rash—for what do you know of what you may find? But since you insist on going, wear this, I beg of you, for safety's sake, and never go about without it. It is strong for good, this—it has been blessed at Lourdes."

He stepped back as Pen with a smile and nod of appreciation accepted the little gift, let in the clutch and the Austin drew away—and as we settled into our seats he held out his hand to me. In the palm lay a little silver crucifix on a chain.

"A nice gesture," he said, "and timely! For though I'm never without mine, I don't think you've got one, have you, Jerry? Slip it round your neck, and mind what old Pantin said—don't ever be without it. He's right—we don't know what we may find in Lenant."

I did as he advised, and we were off on our journey. A wearisome and exhausting journey it was, too, for the road was every bit as bad, if not worse, than it was reputed to be, and soon degenerated into a mere cart track in many places, almost to a field path in others; and as it had numerous offshoots and none of them were labelled with any sort of name, we lost ourselves countless times and had to find our way back to our real path in the old way—by guess or by God! We had few chances of asking our way, as the magnificent mountainous country through which we were climbing was so sparsely populated one could scarcely call it populated at all; and though we met a stray shepherd here and there, guarding his flock, he could only speak Breton, of which Pennoyer, good linguist as he was, had no knowledge.

We were thankful for our sandwiches before we finally reached our destination and found ourselves entering a small hamlet of perhaps some twenty or thirty houses ranged along each side of an uneven little central street that led up to a small and ancient church set at the far end, with great yews spreading sombrely beside it and the moss-grown gravestones

of many centuries scattered beneath them. Both church and graveyard stood high above the village, as the ground rose steeply at the end of the street—and beside the church, on the same high level, stood a house that was plainly the priest's; for in the garden before it a tubby little figure in a black cassock was pacing anxiously up and down watching the road. It was drawing on towards evening when we trundled down the cobbled street and pulled up at the foot of the uneven steps that led up to the bluff on which stood the church and its attendant house; but little Père Claude was down the steps and shaking both Pennoyer's hands before we could climb out of the car—indeed, he all but embraced Pen, and his voice as he greeted us was fairly shaking with emotion and excitement.

"*M'sieur le docteur*! I can scarcely believe it! I write you but two or three days ago, and already you are here? How can I thank you for this kindness, this understanding . . ."

I thought the poor little man was going to cry out of sheer relief, but Pen knew how to treat him. Laying one hand on his shoulder he smiled down at him.

"You've nothing to thank me for yet, *mon père,*" he said, and his mellow voice was as soft and comforting as a mother's. "My friend and I were staying not so far away, as you know, and when I got your letter we packed up and came along at once. I hope you can manage to put us up?"

Père Claude nodded importantly and led the way up the steps to his little house—a whitewashed, steep-roofed, small-windowed building like most of the other houses in the tiny place, but perhaps a little larger than most, and picturesque enough, all embowered in climbing roses, with its garden gay with a score of typical cottage flowers.

"I can, as you English say, put you up, *M'sieur le docteur,* with the greatest pleasure in the world, for I have a spare bedroom here in my house, and I shall be honoured—honoured! For your friend, if he will not mind, my housekeeper who comes in each day to look after me, she has a house but three doors away and can give him a room there, and he can join us for his meals. Mère Bouzeau is my sexton's wife—an excellent cook and very clean. He will be satisfied with this arrangement?" His pudgy little face, the face of a

Luca della Robbia cherub grown elderly—peered anxiously up at me, and I hastened to assure him I was more than content. I had already taking a liking, as I could see had Pennoyer, too, to this eager, child-like little priest . . .

We had supper cooked by my future hostess, a plump and smiling soul from Plouvenec, wearing the wide-skirted black dress with velvet bodice and epaulettes and the high starched white *coif* of her district—and it was certainly excellent. *Soupe à l'oignon,* omelette, a *plat* of fresh trout caught in the mountain streams and served with a herb sauce that was something out of this world—a delicious curd cheese made of sheep's milk, with radishes and lettuce out of Père Claude's garden, and a dish of wild strawberries to finish that would have graced any millionaire's table. We, or rather I, shared a carafe of light but excellent *vin rosé* with our host; and when we settled down after our meal in three comfortable chairs set about a blazing log fire, in a cosy low-ceilinged little room lined with books and lighted by well-polished brass oil lamps, I could not help thinking that though Père Claude might have to live out of the world, he had had both the chance and the taste to make himself very comfortable indeed in his exile!

Mère Bouzeau brought in the coffee and poured it out for us; and when I had lighted the excellent cigar that our host offered me, he began. It was certainly a strange story that he told us . . .

"I have been in charge of my flock here in Lenant," he said, "for many years, *messieurs,* and for all those years I have found it a kind and pleasant place to live in, and the people of the village on the whole good-living, honest folk, sincere in their following of religion.

"Certainly there have been and are, weak members of any flock—foolish, easily-led backsliders, which community does not have them?—to whom I have had to speak severely now and then; but on the whole these upland folk are decent folk, and the many confessions I have heard over the years are not such as to disquiet any priest's heart. The usual small sins—drunkenness, slackness in their religious duties, gossip and back-biting, petty lying, cheating each other over buying and selling or bartering—in these isolated villages, *messieurs* will

understand, there is little money, and much of the buying and selling of goods or food is done by barter.

" Most of my people are small farmers, shepherds, herdsmen and the like, and there is much intermarriage—too much, I fear, but what would you in so isolated a place? So many of the families are related to each other, and the links are close; but on the whole it was a happy village, and the people liked each other well and lived at peace with each other—and for many years I have lived quietly here with my books and my collection of fossils, for I am a keen amateur of geology, though only in a small way. I have lived caring for my humble flock as best I could, marrying them, burying them, christening them—supervising their business affairs and settling their quarrels—attending their festivals and feast-days and all their little private celebrations—and I think I may say without undue vanity that they have loved me and heeded my words. My little church has been well filled with worshippers, reverent and heedful of my preaching and of the sacred Words of the Scriptures—that is, it was filled *once*. But now . . ."

He threw out his hands with a gesture that expressed despairing resignation. " Now, *monsieur,* all is changed! Few come to church any more, and fewer make confessions—and when they do my ears burn with horror at the secrets that I hear! I do assure you, my friends, with my hand on my heart, that in all my years as a priest I have not heard such things as recently I have heard in confession from some of my best-known and best-loved parishioners! Confessions made, moreover, not, as they should be, with grief and bitter shame and repentance, but made with a gleeful relish and enjoyment, as though made for the joy of re-living in mind the sins described and of seeing my horrified face as I listened to them!"

He paused for effect, and seeing our interested faces, went on.

" I think the first of these was when a man I had known for many years—a local farmer, a man of some substance and greatly respected in the village—came to me for confession. For years a young niece of his had grown up in his household as a sort of adopted daughter, as an aid to his wife, who is an invalid. The child had called him ' father ' and looked upon

him as such—and lo, he told me with a grin that made my blood run cold, that he had debauched young Yvonne, who is with child by him—and she is not yet quite fifteen! When, outraged, I began to speak, he bade me save my breath to cool my pottage, as the saying goes, and coolly said he would obey no penance I might lay upon him, as he had every intention of continuing to use Yvonne as his mistress . . . and he added that she herself wished this! As I knew Yvonne was betrothed to a steady young man, Jean Bertrand, from a farm farther down the valley, I could not believe this; but when I spoke severely to her on the subject, she tossed her head and assured me that Farmer Georges had spoken nothing but the truth! She had broken with Jean, as he was drinking —and she preferred an older man anyway. They had more material advantages to give . . . and she had the insolence to add, 'and they knew more about making love, too!'

"I reminded her of the virtuous way in which she had been brought up, and of the example she had had before her of the chaste and holy sisters who had taught her in their convent school, and she merely laughed and assured me that had those sisters ever known the thrill of earthly passion as she now knew it, they would have followed her example! Imagine my horror to hear a mere child voice such shameful words! I implored her to forget this madness and break with her lover, but she flatly refused—you can picture, *messieurs,* what I felt! I found that between them they had packed Georges's poor old wife into an upstairs room, presumably to die quietly as soon as might be; and these two, Farmer Georges and his child-mistress, were living openly and shamelessly together despite all I could say!

"I soon found out, too, that what Yvonne had said concerning Jean was, alas, only too true, though I had not believed it. Jean was one of the steadiest young men in Lenant—yet suddenly he had taken to drink, and this before the tragedy of Yvonne happened! I was told he had been drinking steadily now for some weeks, and with him several others of the younger men—and alas, some of the older ones too, wasting their time and the money they should be taking home to their wives . . .

"Well, from that day—ever since—things have been going

from bad to worse. In the old days folks were honest in little Lenant. You could leave your shop or your house with the door unlocked and money or goods lying about, and be sure that on your return you would find everything as you had left it . . . but not now any more! There are only a few small shops in the village, as you saw on driving through—but these were broken into one after another and money or goods stolen, so that now all lock their doors and regard each other with suspicion, and the old happy confidence in each other has gone from Lenant! The very clothes that are laid out to dry on the bushes after their washing in the streams are stolen! The women now have to stand guard over them while they dry, or set their children to watch them, and all grumble most bitterly, poor souls—who can blame them?"

He paused and Pennoyer put a question. Père Claude raised eyebrows and shoulders together as he replied.

"When did it start—why, it is difficult to tell! The whole thing has been so insidious, so gradual that it seems now that the change in the life of the village—in the people themselves—must have been well established before I realised quite how great was the change! First, I think, over a year ago, if not longer, it must be—I began to be uneasy and worried about a strange *slackness* that seemed to be creeping over my parishioners—a lack of interest in church matters, in the duties that used to be a joy to them—a certain sullenness, even a shade of impertinence to me, their father and their friend! I remember that two of the three women whose duty is was to wash and mend the altar linen began to grow lazy and negligent in their work, and first one and then the other made excuse to drop it, so that I was forced to seek other help—only Mère Bouzeau remained faithful; and she and her good husband, thank God, have never swerved from their duty to me and to their Church. I was mystified beyond words at the attitude of these two women, for I had known them for many years—seen them wed and brought their children into the world—and they had always showed such pride and pleasure in their work with the lace and linen! And then it was the turn of their husbands to turn surly and disobliging. One, the carpenter here, the other my gardener, who cared also for the churchyard, since Bouzeau is too old

to do all that should be done—and you will see, from the overgrown state of the churchyard, its weeds and nettles, how little indeed *has* been done there this past year! Again, it was an utter mystery to me to see these men, who once had taken such pride in their work for God, lose it completely almost overnight!"

He paused again and we were silent until he resumed.

"That was the beginning! Looking back, I can see it now—the first time I noticed a change in the attitude of my people; and the change continued. From this slackness in the church duties that were once carried out so cheerfully, slackness—lack of the old interest, the old enthusiasm—seemed to spread throughout the village, and attendances at Mass and Benediction and confession dwindled steadily, despite my exhortations! Various reports began to reach me concerning bitter quarrels between those who were once good friends—tales of shady deals and mean little dishonesties committed by those on whose honour I would once have staked my life—of drunkenness and debauchery where once uprightness and clean living used to rule—yes, even amongst girls and women I knew who had once been the souls of virtue and goodness! One by one these ugly reports reached me, and one by one I fought them and refused to believe—until these terrible confessions began to trickle into my horrified ears! Oh yes, on looking back it seems that for the best part of a year at least it must have been gathering power and speed, this dreadful change in my beloved Lenant—and now, *monsieur,* it has invaded even my church! Not even the Holy Place, the sanctuary of the Lord, is proof against this evil power!" The little man's eyes were round with horror.

"Imagine it! Lights are seen there when I know well no lights can be—no earthly lights, at least—the sound of music and evil laughter, of steps and even voices at times, though no words can be distinguished—and while now, alas, when I say Mass or Benediction the church is empty but for the few who still love me and come to worship for my sake, there are those who swear that after darkness falls and all God-fearing folk should be peacefully asleep in their beds, the church is filled, and the sound of chanting heard therein as though in mockery of the Holy Mass!"

"Do you know anything of this from your own personal observation, *mon père,* or are you merely quoting from what you have heard from others?" Pennoyer's voice was gentle, for it was plain the little priest was wrought to a high pitch of emotion. His voice had trembled and his eyes been full as he told of the disaster that had befallen his beloved village, and as he replied he wiped away a tear with the back of one fat little hand.

"Once—once only, I did see and hear something—though before, I admit, I had tended to dismiss the stories I had heard from the villagers as born of superstition only. But listen! I awoke one night some time between midnight and one o'clock in the morning. It was a wild night, with the wind howling and shaking the great trees outside my window, and I rose and went to see if the window catch was properly fastened. For though Lenant lies in a valley of these uplands, the great winds that rage across the mountains come tearing through the valley with terrific force, and any loosely-hung doors or windows can be swept off their hinges and flung away before one can blink an eyelid! All were well fastened and I was about to return to my bed when I glanced over at the church—and lo, there was a light there! I stared and stared and could not believe my eyes at first. A light where no light should be, a light in the darkness in which I had left my church after saying Benediction—to how few, alas—that evening! Only the sanctuary light were ever left burning, the single red lamp hanging before the altar—and this was far too small for the light to be seen from the outside. Yet a light there was, a yellow light that moved as I watched it! I was thunderstruck, and scrambled into my shoes, flung my cassock and cloak over my nightwear, pocketed my electric torch and went downstairs and out into the night. It was gusty indeed, and the wind tore at my skirts, and buffeted me back and forth as though to try and hinder me as I went towards the church, and as I fought against the tearing gusts of wind I wondered if perhaps a thief had crept in and my precious altar treasures were in danger? I did not think it likely, as the upland folk are honest and devout—at least they *were*—and it has never been necessary to lock my church at any time. Always it has been left open for the passer-by to enter

and pray for a few moments, or to sit in peace and let the holy calm and tranquillity of the place seep into his spirit . . . yet things had changed sadly of late, and there are valuable things in my little church here, *messieurs*! It is an old church, and many wealthy folk who own large estates in the mountains around have given beautiful things to it, and the people of Lenant have been generous. There is a solid silver cross and a silver monstrance, both heavily jewelled; and the Tabernacle that stands on the altar, and the pyx and the chalice and the great alms dish are all gilded and enamelled, old Italian work, and the two censers are gilded also. Only last year these censers were gifts of our generous benefactor, the Vicomte de la Pontevécque. And there is the wonderful figure of Christ . . ."

Pennoyer interrupted, since the little man showed signs of giving us a complete catalogue of the treasures possessed by his beloved church.

"Certainly enough to tempt a thief!" he said briefly, "but go on, Father. What did you find when you went into the church?"

Père Claude looked at him in silence for a moment.

"But *nothing*!" he said at last. "Nothing at all! The moment I laid my hand upon the door to push it open, the light in the church blinked out, and when I went in all was dark and quiet as I had left it. And yet—not *quite* as I had left it! I had the feeling that on my entrance certain Things that had filled it had—withdrawn; I say Things rather than people, for I had the feeling that whoever had been there—was not, somehow, as we are. As though they were Beings of a different order. Neither human nor ghostly, but *different*, so to speak!"

He paused, frowning as though to find words, and Pennoyer glanced meaningly at me. Plainly Père Claude had more instinctive knowledge than he realised . . .

"I cannot put it into exact words, but perhaps Monsieur will understand? I had the feeling, I say, that a split second before I entered the church had been filled by a multitude of strange folk! But of what kind I did not know, save that they were alien and—I felt—inimical to us—and on my entrance they fled into retreat. Yes, I felt that they were still

there, but in hiding—watching me with bright mocking eyes from the shadows that shrouded them, waiting until I went away to emerge and continue whatever strange matters had been occupying them before . . . I waited a moment to summon up my courage, for I admit, Monsieur, I was frightened, and I walked steadily up the central aisle towards the high altar above which hung the Cross . . . the Cross that carries the wonderful statue of Christ . . . again, the gift of our gracious Vicomte to our little church. All was quiet and still and the sanctuary lamp burnt steadily, a red eye guarding the shrine—yet I noticed two things! Cast down on the altar as though flung there before They had fled were two things that I *knew* had not been there when I left the church that night! A wreath of fading leaves of vine and laurel and olive, and a *censer*—one of our own censers—*that was still warm*! A censer, *monsieur,* that had been used for burning incense—but *not* incense that was used at our holy service of Benediction, or for any service of the Church at all!"

"How were you so sure about that?" I asked, for to me one sort of incense was much the same as another. Pére Claude looked at me pityingly.

"Do you think I do not know the incense that is used for our services?" he asked. "I would know its scent from a thousand others! Our church supplies are sent to us—again, by the Vicomte's orders—once a month from the same house in Paris; the house that has supplied our humble needs in candles, brass-polish, embroidery silks, thread for repair of the altar-linen, all the rest, for many years past. I should know the smell of my own incense by now, indeed! I picked up the censer, which after Benediction had been left hanging, *messieurs,* in its usual place at the back of the altar, and smelt the ashes that were still hot inside it, and my head went all strange and dizzy as I smelt it! An odd smell—fragrant in its way, but strongly aromatic, and heady as good wine—not at all the fragrance that belongs to holiness! Though this is difficult to express, nevertheless I felt it very strongly. I laid the censer down, removed the wreath and put both on a seat in the aisle, and then I took up the asperge and sprinkled the altar and all about it carefully with holy water. Then I knelt down and said a prayer for protection for my church, my

people and myself—and when I rose from my knees I was at peace. I felt that for the first time the church was *empty*—and after I had emptied the censer and hung it up in its usual place, I flung the wreath into the ditch and I went back to bed and to sleep, hoping that that was the end. But alas . . ."

He sighed and again spread out his hands.

" I have seen and heard nothing since—but I had not, as I had hoped, defeated evil! I had merely given it a temporary setback—and it returned in full force, and now Lenant seems utterly in its grip. So, *m'sieur,* I sent for you . . ."

He paused and for a long moment there was silence in the pleasant room, mellow with the golden light from the oil-lamps and warm with the glow from the heart of the wood-fire. Then Pennoyer rose to his feet and laid a friendly hand on the shoulder of our host.

" I'm glad you did, *mon père,*" he said, and there was no mistaking the sincerity in his deep voice. " Aud I hope and pray I may in time find a way to explain this strange situation and to put it right. Now we should all go to sleep I think—and in the morning we will discuss our next step."

I found my quarters with Madame Bouzeau, the sexton's wife, fully as comfortable as Father Claude had said they would be. She gave me a room, small and furnished with extreme plainness, truly, but the narrow bed was not too hard, and the flax-woven linen sparkled with cleanness and smelt of the green grass and herbs on which it had lain to dry after its washing in the mountain stream that ran through Lenant. My hostess brought me a large can of hot water for washing and shaving, and diffidently mentioned that there was a *salle de bain* at Pére Claude's, though she, alas, did not possess one; and my breakfast of *café au lait,* home-baked bread and farm butter dewy with freshness, could not have been bettered anywhere. So it was with high spirits that I went over about ten o'clock to the priest's little house to find my friend.

Like me, Pen had slept and breakfasted well, and greeted me with enthusiasm. He was pouring over a tattered map of the district in the little parlour when I entered, but he was alone. It appeared that Père Claude had been called out early to the bedside of a dying parishioner . . .

"I'm not altogether sorry in a way," said Pen, as he scanned the map. "I'd rather we two went scouting alone. I want to keep our minds as free and empty as possible to receive impressions; and the whole affair is so much on the dear little man's mind that he *will* keep on talking about it incessantly—which is just what I don't want."

"What's the programme?" I asked, warming my hands at the fire. Though outside the sun was bright, there was still a strong wind—I was later on to learn that in these high mountainous regions it was rare to find a windless day—and one was glad of a fire to come home to and a hot brick in one's bed at night.

"We'll take the car and go exploring," said Pennoyer. "Ask that good lady who's housing you to put us up some cold food, will you? I'll write a note to Père Claude while you arrange things, and we'll go off. I want to get the feel of the countryside in general as well as finding my way about."

I felt oddly disappointed, for some reason.

"Aren't you going to explore the village and the church first?" I said. "I should have thought . . ."

"*I* know what you'd have thought!" said Pennoyer briskly. "But according to Father Claude, the—the psychic infection in this place—came from *outside,* and took possession of the village. I can sense it very plainly, can't you? And I want to try and trace the source of it—find where it starts from—before I study the results. Again, because I want to keep my mind uncoloured—and it might get very much coloured if I studied the village and its people first."

"Oh," I said, "then you've picked up a scent already, have you?" Pennoyer nodded.

"Oh yes! It came at me like a cloud of mental smoke as we drove down the village street last night—and I don't mind telling you that it stinks! A smell of ancient evil—*very* ancient evil . . ."

I shook my head regretfully.

"I didn't smell anything at all!" I said, "either physically or psychically. You ought to know by this time I'm not really sensitive to these things. I only wish I were, I'd be more use to you."

Pen smiled at me, his sudden radiant smile that gave his

lean, serious face with its faint trace of the Red Indian ancestry that lurked in the background of his family an unexpected and heart-melting charm.

"You don't know how much use you are to me, Jerry, bless you!" he said. "Those who are content to stand by and serve the gods without the thrill and excitement of seeing and knowing what we mediumistic folk see and know, are amongst the salt of the earth indeed, and should never be underrated. Don't forget that 'they also serve who only stand and wait' . . . and now go and get busy with Madame Bouzeau!"

A bare half-hour later we were in the car, well wrapped up against possible cold or wet weather, armed with rugs, maps, torches, field-glasses and a lavish basket full of picnic food; and for a good four hours or more we went exploring the wild and mountainous regions that lay around and about Lenant. It was grandly beautiful country, but austere and lonely in the extreme, as is much of the wilder parts of Brittany, and more than once we found ourselves in considerable difficulties with the car. The roads on which we had travelled up from Beg Meil were *autobahns* compared with those we now encountered, and time and again we got bogged in unexpected patches of marshland, or found ourselves at the end of a path on the edge of an abrupt drop that would have written "finis" both to ourselves and to our mission had we travelled a foot or two farther. Time and again we lost our way and had to retrace our steps, and once the branch of a giant tree fell right across our path and Pen only jammed on our brakes just in time to avoid driving right into it. Once the car slid bodily sideways on a steep slope into a ditch full of nettles, and it took all our strength to heave her out again. Once we had a tyre punctured, and once we ran out of petrol and found that our spare can had leaked—which looked grim for a moment, as we were just then stranded on a bleak exposed moorland where I for one would not have liked to spend the night; but I might have known Pen would not have been defeated—nor was he! He produced with a grin of triumph from the back seat, a jerrican of petrol he had bought that very morning from the village garage in anticipation of just such a possibility . . .

We found a sheltered spot in the lee of a small copse of fir

trees, and as we ate our excellent lunch of sliced ham, tomatoes and home-made *pâté,* with cheese and fruit for Pen, we discussed the situation. I rather felt we were simply wasting time and petrol trundling about this extremely primitive countryside, but Pennoyer did not agree.

" It's true I haven't yet got a definite line on the situation," he said, as he munched his cheese. " But all the same, I'm conscious of an *awareness* of our presence here, which means I'm on the scent—and I'm also being scented!" He nodded at the empty jerrican. " Hasn't it struck you that there's something significant about these trivial accidents that are happening to us this morning? These absurd slips and skids—the falling of that tree, and getting stuck in the mud and in the ditch, and the petrol can leaking? I've looked at it carefully and there certainly isn't a hole in it! *Something's* trying to hinder us—something is both angry and frightened!"

" It didn't strike me that there was anything unusual about these accidents, but now you suggest it, it does seem odd," I agreed. " I can't remember any time when we had such a string of irritating little hindrances or near-accidents, and God knows we've been in some funny places with the car! More coffee? Thank God Mère Bouzeau has remained one of the faithful, as Père Claude says—she's a tower of strength."

We finished the coffee, and Pennoyer said as we stacked the used plates and cups together, " You know, this psychic attack on Lenant started from somewhere quite near here. I can sense that quite plainly. I've been following a line with great care ever since we left Lenant, and the scent's getting stronger and stronger. When you're ready, we'll follow it to its end—or rather to its beginning."

I knew what Pennoyer meant by " following a line ". In his psychic work in some ways he was curiously like a bloodhound. His trained senses would go seeking, seeking, " smelling out ", so to speak, until he picked up what he called the " scent ", and then he would follow it steadily, relentlessly, until it led him to his goal. Those who were fighting against him on the Other Side would try to mislead him, throw him off the scent, sidetrack and delay him, and often they would succeed—for a time. But after a time he would see through the trick, whatever it might be, and return to the right path—

and I was thrilled and heartened to find he was already set on what I was sure would lead to our first goal. The point from which stemmed the strange and dreadful influence that had invaded little Lenant.

We packed up, and I smoked a cigarette—though a non-smoker himself, Pen was most indulgent towards smokers and always allowed me time for a cigarette after a meal—and then we set out once more; and lo and behold, after half-an-hour or so we found ourselves upon a road that at least had some pretensions to be called a road. A narrow but decently surfaced track that wound away over the hilltops in a twisting white line like a flung-down length of apple-peeling, and at last dipped and was lost in the deep valley lying in a fold of the hills that was almost filled with a heavy copse of pine trees. Following the steep descent of the road into the copse, we found ourselves driving through what seemed like a tunnel filled with the green gloom of the great trees that made a roof over our heads, and set some way back from the road on one side we saw a long wall; evidently the wall of a large estate, though beyond the wall the trees of the park or garden surrounding it were so thick that we could not catch a glimpse of the great house we knew must be there somewhere behind them. Pennoyer, who was driving, slowed up to a snail's pace, and as he scanned the long line of the ancient wall, he nodded his head with satisfaction.

"Here we are at the beginning, Jerry—the place from whence this trouble all started," he said quietly in my ear; for in the grim silence of the woods sound might well travel far, and who knew who might not be listening? "Now I wonder who this property belongs to? It's a huge place, evidently—no sign of any gateway yet—and I wonder . . ." he paused, for there was the hooting of a car behind us and Pen drew over to the side of the road. A long, low, black Renault swept past us with a uniformed chauffeur at the wheel, and as it passed us we just caught a glimpse of a huddled figure sitting in the back seat, wearing a fur-collared coat topped with a French beret. The figure of a small man with a pointed grey beard and a salient nose.

As the car swept past, Pen quickened the speed of our car and followed, only to slow up again within a quarter of a mile

as the car ahead of us slowed up and turned left into an unseen gateway. When we drew level with the gateway we saw it was a great double gate of wrought iron, and that beyond it lay a wide and well kept gravel drive. But again we could catch no glimpse of the house, as the drive was so designed as to wind away in a manner that effectively prevented anyone at the gate seeing more than a few yards into the garden.

Pen pulled up the car and sat back.

"You can have another cigarette if you like, Jerry," he said. "This is our journey's end, I may tell you—the source of this plague. I know that, but at present that's *all* I know, so don't ask questions, for I can't answer them! I'm going to wait here until someone comes out or passes by who can tell me the name of the owner of this place—I suspect our bearded friend in the Renault. Hope we shan't have to wait long!"

We sat chatting in desultory fashion for half-an-hour, and then Pen's patience was justified. We heard a whistling coming down the driveway beyond the gate, and the chauffeur appeared, no longer in uniform, but wearing a smart blue suit, the inevitable *béret* on his sleek dark head, and the inevitable dirty mackintosh belted round his slim waist. He was obviously going for his afternoon off—on his way, we subsequently discovered, to visit his favourite girl friend, the daughter of the owner of the only inn in the neighbouring village, Desmarins—and seeing us parked at the side of the road, he came up and asked for a cigarette. I gave him one and Pen started talking; I have never known anybody as good as this friend of mine for melting the ice, conversationally speaking, and luckily there was little ice to melt here!

Young Charles Clibaut was from Paris, and enchanted to find anybody who spoke French. He was, he assured us, bored to tears in these remote uplands—he had only accepted the post because the money was so good, but, *mon Dieu*, he was beginning to think even good money could be too hardly earned, and he was thinking of giving in his notice very soon. He was a good driver and mechanic—but good, he assured *m'sieur,* there was none better!—and if he could only find another job with reasonable pay he would quit, *ma foi,* and the old *chameau* he was driving now could look for another driver! That is, if he could find another man *imbécile* enough

to bury himself here, where everybody spoke a language no civilised person could understand, and there were no bars and no *cinès,* no papers and no girls but these thick ankled peasant wenches! And when a fellow had been used to the girls of Paris, *m'sieur* would understand . . .

In fact, it was hard to stem the flow of young Charles' flood of discontent, and it was not until Pennoyer had assured him that he would bear him in mind if he heard of a suitable situation and I had filled his case with my cigarettes that he turned aside, satisfied at last; and as Pen let in his clutch I heard him ask casually. "By the way, what is the name of your employer? I take it he is the owner of this estate? The little bearded man you were driving in the Renault?"

Charles made a grimace. Oh yes, that was the owner all right—and rich and powerful as Croesus, for all he lived alone but for the servants in that great house like a little spider in the middle of a monstrous web!

"And his name?" Pen's voice was colourless, but I held my breath. Charles opened his eyes.

"*Ma foi,* I thought everybody knew the old fool's name—they know it well enough hereabouts, anyway. He's a little king to these pigs of peasants—they're scared to death of him. It is the Vicomte de la Pontevècque . . ."

We were both rather silent as we set out on our return journey to Lenant. I glanced once or twice at Pennoyer's lean hawk-like profile, and at last voice my thoughts.

"What's puzzling *me,* Pen, is this! If—as we suspect—this trouble in Lenant stems from this Vicomte, how is it that Père Claude talks of him as Lenant's *benefactor?*

"That," said my friend, "is just what is puzzling *me*!"

The next day dawned bright and sunny and the wind had somewhat abated, so after breakfast I wandered out, leaving Pennoyer to finish some urgent writing that must, he said, be sent off before the midday meal.

I did not tell Père Claude that I intended to explore the church; I didn't want the dear little man to accompany me as guide, as I was sure he would do, given the smallest possible excuse. I wanted to pick up my impressions myself, uncoloured, as I knew Pen would wish; and I began by wandering around

and about the little churchyard that spread like a green table cloth about the church itself. It was sadly overgrown and neglected, as Père Claude had said, for the weeds grew thick and tall, burdock, mallow, nettles, groundsel, amongst the coarse grasses—so thick that they almost obscured many of the more ancient headstones, the crosses, plaques, urns and monuments of every type and kind that jostled each other cheek by jowl, from the sombre square-topped family vault of the Pontevècques to the tall obelisk that marked the resting place of the Delahayes; and everywhere spread the shadows of the magnificent old yews, their sable branches lightened by the rose-coloured berries called by the children *roseperles*.

I meandered about apparently at random, aware as I meandered of interested sidelong glances from an occasional passing villager in the street below. I knew that Père Claude had given out that Pennoyer and myself were friends of his, antiquarians, who were staying in Lenant to study the ancient tombs and relics of the church; and I did my best to play the part by making notes and pretending to take sketches of some of the tombstones. When I decided that I had got out of the churchyard all that it had to give me, either personally or in the character of an antiquarian, I went quietly up to the church porch, pushed open the door and went inside.

It was a dark little church, and the smell of dust and incense almost stifling. I stood still for a moment to get my bearings, and then saw that I faced directly up the central aisle towards the High Altar, where the single guardian lamp of the sanctuary burnt like a crimson eye before an old reredos of carved wood against which hung a great cross that bore a figure of the Christ. I saw at once that the main body of the church must have been built in the fifteenth century—but built on the ruins of an earlier church still, as the bases of the column and arches were many of them Roman work. I knew that in the time of the Holy Roman Empire there had been many an outpost in Brittany, and that somewhere on the nearby hills there were the remains of a large Roman encampment . . .

There were several handsome windows of old painted glass, though one beside the porch was filled with clear glass—large modern panes—for which a little later we were to be very

thankful. Later we learnt that this also had been filled with coloured glass—Lenant had prided itself until now on having, owing to its isolation in the hills, managed to preserve all its ancient glass intact. But in a storm the previous winter the upper part of one of the great yew trees had broken off and crashed through the window, which had later been filled in with clear glass pending its full restoration. The pulpit was of marble, like the font—also, I judged, old Roman work—and the tesselated pavement of the chancel, though badly broken and defaced, looked like mosaic . . .

I moved slowly up the church and stood staring up at the Christ, and suddenly became aware of somebody else, standing quietly before me at the altar-rails, likewise staring up—a small man huddled into a dark fur-collared overcoat and wearing a beret. I stepped aside into a pew and knelt down, covering my face with my right hand for a moment as I muttered a short prayer—purely mechanical, I fear, but a church-going childhood has left its mark on me; and for some reason I slipped the fingers of my left hand inside the front of my shirt and touched the little silver cross on the chain that on Pennoyer's instructions I now wore always about my neck.

The significance of this purely instinctive gesture did not strike me until afterwards; but as I made it, the man in the dark overcoat turned and came down the aisle, passing me quite closely as he made his way out of the church. I glanced at him through my fingers and felt an odd little sense of shock—for it was the man we had seen in the Renault, the Vicomte de la Pontevècque! The benefactor of Lenant, according to Père Claude . . . but not according to Pennoyer! What was he doing here? Taking stock of his last gift, the great figure of Christ that hung before the altar? On the saturnine little face that had passed me there had been, it seemed to me, the trace of a faint malicious smile—and what should the benefactor of Lenant have to smile about in that way?

The church door swung to behind the Vicomte's disappearing figure, and immediately I rose from my knees and went up to where I had seen him stand looking up at the Cross.

I saw a cross of heavy dark wood to which was nailed a figure a little less than lifesize—a figure sadly mutilated, made of time worn grey stone. One arm was missing, and the face

was so battered that the features were almost indistinguishable; all one could say for certain was that it bore the remains of a light curling beard and hair and that on the hair had rested a wreath of some sort. That must have been intended for the Crown of Thorns . . .

The body was that of a lightbuilt muscular man of perhaps twenty-eight or thirty years old, and was in much better condition than the face and head; both feet were lightly crossed at the ankles, but again, the feet were badly mutilated, and the one that was uppermost broken off halfway across the instep. It was an impressive figure—but quite different to any I had ever seen of the Christ as He hung on the cross! Such figures are generally represented as hanging limp and inert from the nailed hands—but this figure gave a definite and painful impression of *writhing,* as though suffering unendurable agony! The body was twisted sideways, and the single arm that was left seemed to be flung outwards, the hand clutching at the air in extremity of pain—and what one could see of the broken mouth seemed to be set in what looked like a grin of mortal anguish. I frowned. There seemed something indecent in thus representing the Saviour of Mankind in the throes of a shameful and agonising death, and I wondered at the mind of the sculptor who had conceived such a picture, and even more at the mentality that had chosen to portray it and present it to any church. I was still staring, fascinated and repelled when I heard steps behind me and turned, to see Pennoyer, accompanied by Père Claude, behind me.

The little priest was voluble. He had not known, he said, that I had come to look at his beloved church or he would have come with me! It was Mère Bouzeau who had told him she had seen me enter, and he had called Pennoyer and was following me, when lo, they had met the Vicomte himself, leaving the church as they entered it! He had introduced Pennoyer to him and they had talked for a few moments—how good, how kind it was of the Vicomte to spare a moment to look into the church where hung his last and greatest gift. So wonderful a piece of antiquity! Hundreds, maybe thousands, of years old . . .

Pennoyer was staring like myself up at the motionless figure of the writhing Christ that hung, a lean grey twisted shadow

silhouetted against the dark wood of the cross to which it was nailed.

"I don't like it!" he said abruptly. "It may be a wonderful piece of antiquity, as you say, Father, and I don't deny its power . . . and I daresay it is a more exact picture of how Christ actually *did* die on the Cross than the generally-accepted figure. But all the same, it affects me very unpleasantly . . . Where did the Vicomte pick it up?"

"Why," said Père Claude, "it was dug up on his own property—close, he told me, to the side of the Roman camp on the hills near-by. It was not, he said, on a cross then—perhaps it had been originally, but the wood had perished with age; he had the cross made himself, and fixed the figure to it. It was found buried in a ditch under piles of earth and stones—found when the Vicomte was having a road cut to one of his farms nearby. It is very ancient, he says, and very valuable—and how generous, how wonderful to give it to Lenant! And that is not the only thing that he had done for us! Figure to yourself, *messieurs* . . ."

Once again he went through the list of the Vicomte's varied gifts to his church and his parish and we listened courteously until suddenly Mère Bouzeau's voice came from the church door, "*Mon père le téléphone!*"

With a hasty apology Père Claude bustled away, and left alone, Pennoyer and I looked questioningly at each other.

"Well, *I* don't know," I began dubiously. Pennoyer made a face.

"Methinks the little man doth protest too much!" he said. "Jerry, there's something very queer about this twisted Christ—and something queerer still about the Vicomte and his aims! Père Claude keeps on singing his praises industriously to us—but somehow it doesn't ring *true?* For all he lauds his generosity and his kindness, *somewhere* at the back of his mind I'm positive that he fears and distrusts our little friend with the beard—and with the coldest, nastiest snake's eyes I've ever seen! Jerry, there's something very odd here—as twisted as that figure there. The Twisted Christ . . ."

It was true enough. Not only the situation puzzled me, but

something about the figure of the Twisted Christ puzzled me also—puzzled and worried me like an aching tooth—and more than once as the slow days passed I found myself wandering into the little church and standing staring upwards at the mutilated shape on the cross. Pennoyer seemed—though I knew well enough it was only seeming—to be doing nothing much but amuse himself, prowling about the village and its immediate neighbourhood, copying some of the old inscriptions on the tombstones or prying loose an occasional odd piece of stone from wall or road—all, of course, in the character of an antiquarian. I could see that little Father Claude was puzzled and faintly worried also, about my colleague's seeming idleness. But he was far too courteous to make any comment—also he was deeply anxious about his sinner-in-chief, young Yvonne, whose illegitimate baby was well on the way towards being born and who showed no signs whatever, I gathered, of either regretting or repenting the behaviour that had led to its conception!

He had gone down one evening to try once more to persuade the girl to leave the lover who had led her into such mortal sin—and I had wandered once more into the church. I was standing in the shadowed chancel before the carved reredos, looking up at the statue hanging there, a grim grey shape in the gloom, the gilt and enamel of the Tabernacle on the altar at its feet, the tall candles in their silver sticks and the red spark of the sanctuary lamp before it . . .

I stared at it in silence for a long moment, and then a step came at my elbow and I heard Pennoyer's voice.

"Hullo, Jerry—here again? What brings you here so often to study the noble Vicomte's gift?" I looked at him and then back at the statue—and all of a sudden I knew what had been puzzling me so long about it!

"Pen," I said excitedly, "look at that statue—there's something *wrong* with it! Look carefully!"

Pennoyer stared up at the grey figure, twisted so painfully and convincingly as though in the last throes of the death agony. His brow was furrowed, puzzled.

"I don't understand," he began, and I interrupted impatiently.

"Look at the place where the missing arm is broken

off—the left shoulder! Look at the way the muscles are dragging—*upward,* not outwards—and try and visualise the position the missing arm must have held? I'll swear it wasn't stretched out, nailed to the crossbar of the cross, as the other was. It was flung *upwards* in some way!"

Pennoyer glanced sharply at me, and going close to the statue examined the lines of the twisted body, and especially the shoulder that I indicated. I was so excited that I went on talking.

"You know that I was trained in an artist's studio as a boy—I wanted to paint, but I wasn't good enough—but the training has always been useful, and my teacher was a wow on anatomy in every detail. So I knew when I looked at that statue that there was *something* wrong with it—something that didn't square with the traditional attitude of Christ nailed to the Cross—and now I know what it is! Pen . . . *are you sure that that is a statue of Christ?*"

There was a silence so sudden and complete that it seemed as startling as a loud noise. Pennoyer and I looked at each other without speaking—and it seemed to both of us that Something that was there held still too, watchful, startled, angry . . . Pen broke the silence at last.

"Don't you ever say you aren't a help to me, Jerry," he said quietly. "I've been fumbling and wondering about this damn thing for days and days, and it needed your trained eye to put me on the right track. My God—you are right! That arm that's missing must have been flung *up,* not stretched out—could it have been that the sculptor designed a figure in an attitude clear away from the usual accepted one, with one arm torn away from the nail and flung up in agony? The idea is untraditional—but then so is the whole conception of the figure! . . ." He pondered, and I interrupted again. I was too excited to let him go on.

"I don't believe it's that—look again, Pen! You can see from the pull of the muscles that the missing arm was more than just flung *up*? It must have been *curved* over the head, as a—as a dancer might hold it in dancing. Do you see? And when you see it in that light, the sideway curve of the body falls into place, too—not writhing in torment, but bending as a dancer might bend in a graceful dance—and how

do we knew what the feet were represented as doing when the figure was whole? Because the traditional attitude of the nailed feet is with the ankles crossed like that, we've *concluded* it represents the Christ—but haven't you often seen a dancer poised on his toes with ankles crossed, just like that? The feet are mutilated, certainly—but think it over! That statue could, with a little imaginatiion to overcome the mutilated state of it, be taken for that of a dancer—and what sculptor in the world would carve a statue of Christ in the attitude of a dancer?"

Pen glanced about him—and suddenly I was aware of Something that was about us, and aware that it was angry! Menacing, dark, furious, it hovered somewhere in the background, growing stronger every minute yet held back by something stronger than itself—instinctively my fingers felt again for M. Pantin's little cross, and I saw Pennoyer's hand go to his neck as with the other hand he pushed me up the aisle towards the door of the church. As we closed the door behind us, he said to me.

"Don't mention anything about this to Père Claude, Jerry? But when you go to your quarters for a wash before supper, just slip behind Père Claude's house and find the sexton's ladder. He keeps it in an old lean-to there—it isn't locked. I was spying out the land and saw it there the other day. Take it round to the front of the church—you won't be seen; it gets dark early these nights—and lay it flat among the weeds and grass just below the west window by the porch—the one with the squares of modern glass in it."

"What's that for?" I said, mystified. Pen smiled.

"You'll see!" he said briefly. "But have you forgotten tonight is October 31st—All Hallows' Eve, when the Powers of Darkness are allowed full swing for once? I've an idea that there may be something doing in the church tonight—anyway, if you'll get that ladder ready, we'll see!"

I'm afraid I paid but little attention to the conversation of our kind little host at supper—I was far too excited. All Hallows' Eve! The night when witch and warlock, ghost and demon, sprite and ghoul and spirit of every kind is abroad! I had no idea the date was so near of the ancient and unholy festival, famed and dreaded down the ages, and now and

again I glanced at my friend as he sat chatting with Père Claude and marvelled, as I had often marvelled before, at his unmoved expression. We might have been looking forward simply to another quiet evening spent chatting over our coffee and liqueurs instead of facing what I knew would be a night of thrill, excitement, suspense and—more than likely— dangers for which we had no name . . .

Père Claude was sadly depressed, poor little man, for his errand to try and persuade young Yvonne to leave her lover and take refuge with the good sisters of the local convent—where, like so many other of the village girls, she had been educated—had entirely failed. Challenged by the scandalised priest about her coming child, she had simply shrugged her shoulders.

"Wasn't it in the Bible that we were told to multiply and replenish the earth?" she wanted to know, and Père Claude was silenced as she airily told him that Farmer Georges was daft with pride that she was with child by him, and when his wife died he said he would marry her. But she—she was not sure that she *wanted* to marry him, or to marry at all! She liked her freedom—and what did marriage matter? There was no priest in the Garden of Eden that she had ever heard of!

I listened in astounded silence, for though I did not know France and the French as did Pennoyer, who had spent years of his boyhood there, I knew that these sentiments, coming from a simple peasant girl living in a remote village in the hills, was something utterly unprecedented! If I had heard them voiced by a modern young thing in pants and sweater living the existentialist life in Chelsea or Bloomsbury, I shouldn't have turned a hair; but as it was, I did not wonder that Père Claude shook a bewildered head and looked with despairing eyes from me to Pennoyer and back again. He was completely out of his depth! Faced with this clever modern sophistry, this acute, world-wise cynicism, born of a way of thinking that was completely alien to his simple creed and teachings, he was reduced to helpless silence . . .

I was desperately sorry for him and hoped with all my heart that the ultimate outcome of this would be the salvation he prayed for. But I thought of the twisted figure hanging in the

church and of the dark menacing shadow that had followed us as we went out of it, and I wondered . . .

The evening seemed interminable, but actually it was only eleven o'clock when Pen looked at the clock and rose to his feet.

"I have some work to do—yes, on this problem of yours, father—with my friend here," he said. "So will you forgive me if we leave you now? Don't on any account wait up for me, as I may be very late. Perhaps you would allow me to leave your front door open—or else lend me your key?"

Without a word the little priest opened a drawer of his desk, extracted a key and handed it over to my friend.

"In the ordinary way," he said grimly, "I should never dream of locking my door, nor would anybody else in Lenant! But of late . . . well, too many strange things have happened here for me to feel safe without my door locked! I will go to my room now, *messieurs,* and pray—pray both for help for Lenant, for its people and for myself—and above all, for you in your efforts to help me. God bless you, and goodnight."

We went over to Mère Bouzeau's and had some coffee while we waited until eleven forty-five. Though I knew there was no certain set hour in which the powers of evil abroad *must* manifest, still, by all tradition twelve was zero hour; and it lacked only ten minutes to the hour when we donned our overcoats over woollen sweaters and warm scarves—for in these uplands the autumn nights struck chilly—slipped torches into our pockets and made our way across the silent and deserted graveyard towards the church.

For once it was a still night, and warm rather than cold. The moon was riding high in a sky thickly dotted with stars and with tattered rags of clouds, relics of a storm on the previous day, and against the sky along the horizon ran the line of distant hills, a sharp-cut black silhouette of grim peaks and crags and hollows. As we passed beneath the low-sweeping branches of one of the ancient yew trees, Pen paused a moment, then motioned me to hush and drew me close beside him till we stood together, pressed against the immense trunk of the tree. Where we stood we could not be seen by anybody passing even quite close, unless they bent low and came to join us in our shelter; I glanced inquiringly at Pen, and he put

one finger to his lips and gestured over his shoulder towards the village street—and then I understood!

Lights were glimmering far up the street—lights coming towards the church! Scattered lights like the gleam of torches or candles—and with the lights came the sound of many footsteps, the sound of a crowd approaching. A crowd trying to walk silently, muffling its footsteps as best it could—walking on tiptoe, stepping on the grass verge of the little street, whispering, making as little noise as possible—but no large group of people can possibly walk together without making *some* sort of a sound! The people of Lenant, at least the vast majority of them, were coming in pilgrimage to their church! On pilgrimage—and on All Hallows' Eve! What sort of pilgrimage could it be that brought them to the church on that unholy night?

I shrank against the trunk of the tree and held my breath; but peering through the branches I could see the people quite plainly as they streamed up the steps across the churchyard and one by one into the church. Men and women of all and every age—youngsters giggling and shouldering each other, old gaffers and gammers trudging along—middle-aged folk, following each other as though going to Mass in the most respectable way—and I saw that each and every one of them carried a bundle or armful of something. One man was hugging a basket from which protruded the necks of two or three bottles; another carried a great flat cheese. A woman carried under one arm several of the long French loaves one knows so well, another a cloth from which the legs of a cooked chicken stuck out; another a cake and a rush basket that brimmed with eggs; everyone was bringing *something* with them to eat or drink, as one brings food or drink to a picnic, and my eyes widened with astonishment—for who in the world ever heard of having a picnic in church?

But nothing about it seemed to surprise Pennoyer; and when the last straggler had entered the church and the door was shut behind them, he stepped quickly out from the shadows of the tree and made for the ladder—luckily hidden from the sight of the people entering the church by the high-growing weeds and grass that, thanks to the neglect of the recent months, now surrounded the base of the church walls. To-

gether we raised and set the ladder against the wall, its topmost rung just level with the base of the window, and Pen mounted it while I scrambled hastily up in the branches of the yew tree that grew nearest to the church—so near in fact, that its branches brushed the walls. I had spied out this vantage point when I placed the ladder in its hiding place before supper. I knew that the ladder, though a stoutly-made country affair, would scarcely be able to support the weight of two full-grown men; and it would have been more than I could bear to miss seeing whatever there might be to see in the church that night!

As I settled myself astride a stout limb on a level with the window, Pen, hearing the rustle of the branches, turned and grinned at me, then busied himself with something he had taken from one of the capacious pockets of his overcoat. I could not see what it was, and craned eagerly forward to peer into the church—and started, for lo, here and there lights were beginning to gleam out! Mere sparks and flashes in the gloom, as though candles and home-made torches were being placed about by the assembled congregation—and then suddenly a strange chanting began. A chanting of many voices, solo and response, strophe and anti-strophe, accompanied by a curious and haunting music, reedy, thin, uncanny—music unpleasing to the ear, yet with a strongly *magnetic* quality about it. It made the hairs at the back of my neck rise uneasily in alarm, and yet it held me with a curious fascination, and I leaned forward to try and see the player, but could not. From where I sat the organ was hidden from me—yet I knew, even as I stared, that this music came from no organ! There was nothing about it in the least like the deep and sonorous tones of that noble instrument. It was more like the sound of flutes or some strange wind instrument—it was music not of earth, I knew, and most certainly not of heaven, with that shrill enticing hint of evil that throbbed through every note . . .

I tried to fold the skirts of my overcoat under me to soften the roughness of my perch, and I whispered to Pen, "This is the worst gallery seat I ever struck! Wouldn't we have done better to have hidden ourselves somewhere in the church and been able to see everything in comfort instead of perching here like a couple of crows?"

Pen smiled, but shook his head as he fumbled with his preparations, and I saw now that he was cutting with a glazier's diamond the outline of a circle in the clear square of window glass before him. This seemed to me to be a rather odd proceeding, and I watched curiously for a moment as he carefully fitted a round cup-like disc—a rubber suction cup, I learnt later—over the circle he had outlined in the glass with his cutting diamond; but I did not pause to watch, for the activity within the dim-lit church was increasing! From where I sat my view was clear down the central aisle of the little church to the High Altar above which hung the figure of the Twisted Christ—and there I saw an amazing sight.

In spite of the scattered candles and torches that were placed here and there, the church was dimly lighted; but it was light enough for me to see that the altar was littered with food and drink and the neighbouring pews crowded with people sitting huddled together, staring up at the altar and at the Figure that hung above it. Before the altar another figure, wearing a black robe of ecclesiastical type with a cope of lurid red—the dark red that is the colour of spilt blood—moved about, pouring wine into a shining chalice, placing something on what looked like a communion dish, raising its hands on high, kneeling, genuflecting—and all the time that strange heady music went on. I could not see the face of the Ministrant before the altar, for its back was towards me; but there was something oddly familiar about the small hunched shape . . .

The music rose higher and higher, and now I saw—or did I?—Shapes beginning to emerge from the shadows behind the columns and in the corners of the church and move silently amongst the congregation. Shapes, male and female, inhuman, yet not wholly beast-like—but yet shapes that raised my very hackles in hate and loathing! Shapes of Things that maybe existed before Man took possession of his heritage the Earth, but that fled before his advent—Things that should never have emerged from the limbo into which he had banished them—these Things came out slowly, stealthily, never emerging quite into the light, yet there for me to see, sneaking, horrible—and lo, these debauched and deluded people knew and welcomed them!

I saw a Shape insinuate itself beside a handsome young woman whom I knew to be happily married and the mother of two fine children, and she smiled at It lasciviously and slid away with It into the shadows, unbuttoning her bodice as she went—and her husband grinned as he watched her go, and in his turn turned to greet another Shape with flying hair and oblique green eyes set in a fox-shaped face above a body that was neither woman nor animal, but both together. I saw young Yvonne, below the pulpit where Père Claude had preached the Word, mouth to mouth with a hairy-legged horror that pawed at her half-naked body, swollen grotesquely with the coming child, and the sight made me want to weep and vomit at the same time; and I saw . . . but it would take too long to tell in detail all that I saw and be far too horrible as well. The very memory makes me shudder and feel shame that man should descend to the level of the beast one had hoped he'd left far behind him—and indeed, far lower even than that level.

Swiftly, as the music rose higher and faster, the Shapes crowded in and mingled with the people, so that my eyes seemed confused and I could scarcely tell the human from the non-human—and now the travesty of the Sacrament began! Crowding, laughing, mocking, singing, the people surged to the altar, seized the Chalice and drank it to the dregs, snatched greedily at the food that was offered them and rushed off with it into the shadows with their loathsome companions; and the man who was officiating at the altar smiled and watched them go, and held out the Chalice and the Dish to the next comers, tempting them, urging them on, and his eyes shone like red sparks in the dimness—though still I could not see his face, for the altar was too heavily dusked in shadows. As the orgy rose higher and higher and its participants abandoned themselves more and more wildly to the lusts and passions of the flesh, against the dimness above the altar I now saw a strange and awful thing—the outline of the Figure etched, so to speak, in lurid green light against the dusk! In my experiences with Miles Pennoyer I have seen many strange and awful sights, yet I think in many ways that was the most awful of all!—that silent twisted Figure watching, in effect, the scene below it, hanging in the air,

and all outlined in that horrible pulsating green! As I watched the green outline, it seemed to glow and brighten and grow wider, like an evil aura that was being fed and strengthened by the evil about it—for now the orgy was in full swing and as the music shrilled higher and higher the cries of lustful ecstasy, of evil triumph, of wild laughter and drunken shrieks and singing rang high above it . . . I turned to look at Pennoyer, and my eyes flew wide.

Pressing the rubber suction disc against the hole he had outlined in the glass, he jerked it sharply away, bringing with it the circle of glass and leaving a neat round hole in the window, large enough, perhaps, to take a cricket ball. But he was not preparing to throw a cricket ball through it! Droping the rubber cap and the disc of glass into the grass below him, he extracted from his pocket a forked stick that held a long strip of rubber—a catapult, but one far stronger and better made than the twig-and-elastic affair beloved of boyhood! Deeply interested, I craned to watch, feeling grateful for the great yew that reared its ancient dark head high behind us, as thanks to that, it was impossible for any of those within the church to see our two heads peering in upon them—although truly, they seemed far too busy with their own evil concerns to have any attention to spare for anything else! Then I saw Pen draw from inside his collar the silver cross and chain that he always wore about his neck. Carefully he drew it out and over his head—and suddenly I realised the answer to the rather silly remark I had just made about concealing ourselves in the church. Of course! Acting under Pen's instructions I now also wore a crucifix, the Sign of Protection—and had we entered the church wearing these, we should have defeated our own object.

The evil we sought to bring into the open and destroy would have sensed our presence and retreated . . .

I watched eagerly as Pen held his treasure up for a moment in the moonlight. It was a heavy silver cross, given him during his sojourn in Tibet and had been used, I knew, in countless experiments against the Powers of the Dark—I saw his lips move as he uttered a fervent prayer for strength and power to descend upon the Holy Symbol. For a moment he swung it loose from its heavy chain; then he removed the cross from

its chain, placed the chain in his pocket and set the cross carefully in the "pocket" of the rubber sling. He poised the catapult precisely in the mouth of the hole in the window, drew back the strip of rubber and let it go. There was a flash of metal and a sharp metallic clink—and the cross lay shining on the stone floor of the central aisle of the church! I have never been able quite to understand how I heard, above the sound of the infernal squealing of that infernal music, the small crisp crash of its landing on the stone, yet hear it I did—and so did Those who filled the church!

There was a moment's dead silence—and then all hell broke loose! With shrieks and screams of terror the men and women who had been fighting and roistering, drinking and making love in gross abandonment in the shadowed aisles and corners of the church they were dishonouring, sprang to their feet and came rushing madly towards the door—and Pen, swinging himself like a monkey from the ladder into the branches of the yew beside me, sent the ladder sliding sideways into the long grass. With the people in their present hysterical state of terror, it would scarcely have been wise to let them see him perched on high, surveying their disgrace . . .

Everything happened so quickly then that it is difficult for me to say precisely in what order they happened! All I know is that even as Pen swung himself up into place beside me, I saw the church emptying itself of its fleeing people, of the Shadow-shapes that seemed to flow, like things fluid, not of flesh and blood, back into the shadows behind the columns and the arches from whence they had sprung—and I saw the Ministrant left alone before the altar! With blazing eyes and crooked hands clawing the air with impotent fury, he cursed in a frenzy of savage defeat—and lo, I recognised him! It was the Vicomte de la Pontevécque, the "benefactor" of Lenant—and even as I recognised him, the vengeance of the God he had outraged overtook him! The lurid green-fire outline of the Figure above him, the Twisted Christ he had given to the church, blazed suddenly wide in a blinding flare of fierce viridian light—and with a crash the entire Cross fell forward, crushing the altar and the man who stood before it in its fall!

There is little more to tell.

For the rest of the night Pennoyer and I worked like demons to clear up the frightful mess in the church, so that in the morning it should look as neat and orderly as usual—for what was the use of telling poor bewildered little Père Claude the details of the hideous scenes that we had witnessed in his beloved church?

The evil had fled, we knew, before the advent of the Cross, and the place was purged and clean—and Lenant was free again. We would merely tell him that we had taken the necessary steps to clear away the evil and that all was now well—there was no need to say more. Regarding the collapse of the cross, we agreed that between us we would replace it with a more conventional figure—and we both felt pretty sure that within himself little Père Claude would be profoundly relieved to hear that the Twisted Christ he had always instinctively disliked had fallen and been broken in pieces—too many pieces ever to be mended! That was true enough, anyway. The ancient stonework was old and friable and the fall had shattered it pretty successfully; but anyway, that night Pen and I saw to it that far too many bits were missing from it for it ever to be pieced together again!

By the time we had cleared everything up and made the little church its normal neat self again, the boot of our car was crammed and its back seat also with the scattered fragments of the night's orgy! We locked the boot and the car-doors and drew down the blinds, and left it till the morning—and next day we dumped all the stuff in a deep tarn we had discovered some distance away, high up amongst the mountains. I could not help thinking as we dumped it, that it was a pity. There was so much stuff, from fragments of food and endless bottles, bags and baskets, to odd shoes and coifs, berets, belts and scarves—even trousers, bodices and pieces of underwear, recklessly discarded in the madness engendered by that ghastly night's contact with the lust and evil of the Satyr and his followers! But apart from the fact that we had no earthly idea as to which garment belonged to which person—and it would have been too shame-making to restore them even if we had!—everything that had been used in that frightful night's debauchery was psychically "infected". So in every-

thing went, and the dark waters of the silent tarn closed over them forever; and as we drove thankfully back to Lenant I mentioned to Pennoyer what was to me the greatest puzzle of the whole affair.

With my own eyes I had seen the Vicomte de la Pontevécque struck down and killed by the falling cross—yet when we went into the empty church there was no sign whatever of any body lying there! He had vanished as completely as though he had never been . . .

"Which," said Pennoyer, "is probably the truth! With your experience, Jerry, you should surely know that it is perfectly possible for an advanced occultist to project himself anywhere he wishes to go, and to do this so well that to the ordinary eye he appears as solid as any normal man! I have not the least doubt that that was what happened, and that the Vicomte's body will be found in his private rooms at his *château*—and possibly other proofs of his pretty little activities as well! Later on I vote we drive over and see if we can find out anything about it!"

I was eager to go, and after an early lunch we drove off, leaving Père Claude, bewildered but utterly thankful, dealing with the first of the long queue of shamed penitents who now began to call on him, to beg his forgiveness, to confess and receive absolution for the sins they could not imagine why they had committed! A queue headed, I may say, by poor little Yvonne, panic-stricken and shame-faced, and loathing her lover, Farmer Georges, as heartily as she had once desired him . . .

I wondered whether we would find the Château de la Pontevécque barred and shuttered against us—but it was not so. We found our young friend, Charles Clibaut, in the hall, trying to sooth a hysterical old lady who, he told us, was the housekeeper—the other servants had deserted in a body the night before, she said, terrified by the extraordinary sounds that had been emanating from the Vicomte's rooms! Only young Clibaut, whose curiosity had been aroused, had remained, and as we arrived he was trying to get into the rooms, which were locked. Pennoyer, assuring the old woman that we were old friends of the Vicomte's, produced a set of skeleton keys that made young Clibaut's eyes bulge with sur-

prise, and together we entered the shuttered rooms—still blazing with electric lights, though the sun was high in the sky.

"Just as I thought!" muttered Pennoyer to me as we surveyed the rooms, lined with books on magic and fully supplied with the usual paraphernalia of a practising wizard. The Crystal, the Wand, the Tripod, the Book, the Pentacle, the black robes with the blood-coloured cope flung on the ground . . . I stooped to touch the robes and drew back, startled—for the robes were not empty! Beneath them, huddled into a limp heap, was the shrunken body of the Vicomte, struck down precisely as I had seen him stricken in the church—and every bone in his body was crushed as though a great stone weight had fallen on him!

We did not, of course, inform little Père Claude of the cause of the Vicomte's death, which his mystified doctor gave out as due to an unexpected heart-attack; nor did we mention another strange discovery we made in his rooms. This was an upcurved stone arm—the arm that had belonged to a statue—the statue of a Dancing Satyr! I had been perfectly right, and preened myself not a little upon it!

We found a photograph—several photographs, in fact—of the statue, taken just as it had been when it had first been dug up near the Roman encampment, which was on part of the Vicomte's property. It was obvious what had happened. The arm that would have betrayed the Figure for what it was had been deliberately struck off, the hoof-feet and the goat's horns also, and the rakish wreath of grape and vine leaves had been hacked about until it might well have been intended for a crown of thorns. Certain further mutilations had been made to the figure until it resembled a strange and twisted version of the Holy Shape of tradition—and when this had been done, and the resultant cruel travesty nailed to a cross of wood specially prepared, certain spells had been performed about it that had roused and emphasised the ancient powers of evil that had undoubtedly hung about the Figure (though dormant till they were roused). This done, the resultant charming present had been made to Lenant—with what result we know. But *why*? It was plain that there was some reason for the Vicomte's evil plot . . .

But the truth about this did not come out until the night before we left Lenant, after eating, in the joyous company of Père Claude, one of the best dinners I ever ate in all my life!

Sitting round the fire afterwards, Pennoyer looked point blank across the glowing blaze at Père Claude.

"Now the curse is lifted from Lenant, Father," he said, "will you tell me *why* you told me that the Vicomte was the benefactor of Lenant, whereas you know very well—and you knew then!—that he was nothing of the sort? You must have known he was your enemy—and now you know that he used the figure of a false Christ to bring evil amongst your people. Be frank, *mon père!* You never liked the Figure—or the Vicomte? Did you?"

Père Claude shifted uneasily in his chair.

"*Monsieur,*" he began, "it is true that I never liked the statue—it was to me most distasteful—even horrible! But what could I do? It was given me as a treasure—a precious piece of antique art—I could do nothing but accept it and hope it was my old-fashioned taste that was at fault, and not the Figure. And regarding what I said about the Vicomte, I said this because it has been my habit for long to try and believe the best of people, even when I fear the worst. I . . ."

"I accept all that," said Pennoyer, "but the truth is that this man hated you and went to all this trouble in order to revenge himself on you—for *something*! What was it? I think I deserve the truth, you know? Especially as I am going to send you a beautiful new statue of the Christ to replace that horrible figure that is now—thank God—only a heap of fragments?"

Père Claude drew a deep breath and nodded.

"Yes, indeed, you deserve the truth, and I will tell it to you," he said frankly. "It was perhaps four or five years ago, that it happened. Now, you must know that the Vicomte has never married, and it was whispered that he did not marry because—because, *messieurs,* he did not like women, but he liked men, all too well! Young men, beautiful men . . . Alas, it is sad and terrible to have to acknowledge that this happens, but sometimes it does, and all one can do is to try and shut one's eyes and hope the stories are not true! So since his family is well-known and for centuries have been patrons of

Lenant, for long I tried to turn a deaf ear to these stories of his—his strange tastes in love. But one summer my sister's son came to stay with me here—a charming boy of about fifteen or sixteen years. Clever, handsome, artistic and as clean and innocent-minded as any boy could be . . . and when the Vicomte saw him I trembled, for there was a look in his eyes! A hunger, a greed . . . you will understand?" Pennoyer nodded and the little man went on. " He invited me to bring the boy over to see him. He lent him books, he petted and flattered him—he came here often, and at last my good Mère Bouzeau plucked up the courage to beg me to put young Pierre on his guard! Yet I hesitated, for to speak to an innocent boy of such ugly things might be to put ideas in his young mind that I was sure had no such ideas as yet, thank God—and then the Vicomte invited him to stay at the Château! He promised him a wonderful time and said there would be other young people there—and I sent a wire to my sister bidding her recall her son, on the excuse of her illness! She asked no questions—she is a wise woman, my sister—and she did as I told her, and young Pierre left Lenant. So the Vicomte was baulked of his prey . . . and though no word was ever spoken between us, I fear he knew what I had done, and never forgave me."

So that is the story of the strange evil that befell little Lenant—of its course, its cause and its final cure via my amazing friend. I may say that when we left the village on the following day, it was like a triumphal progress! Somehow—via Mère Bouzeau, I guessed—the fact had leaked out that it was thanks to Pennoyer and my humble self that " the devil " (as Père Claude phrased it in his first sermon preached in the newly consecrated church) had been banished from Lenant; and when we drove away to resume our interrupted holiday at Beg Meil, the car was so heavy-laden with presents, flowers and what-have-you, that Pen could scarcely drive! Embroidered tablecloths, napkins, table-runners, recklessly seized from the " bottom drawer " that every peasant girl starts in her childhood—leather pouches, home-made rugs and carved wood objects, from chairs to boxes of every kind—*terrines* of *pâtés* and *foiegras,* baskets of eggs and fruit, cakes and bottles of wine . . . God knows what the grateful peasants didn't

thrust upon us, and my eyes were smarting oddly, as I knew Pen's were, when at last we managed to draw away down the long village street and left Père Claude and his penitent flock, now once more his own, waving madly to us from beneath the shadow of the giant yews in the churchyard! Yet even to this goodbye there was a postscript, as it were . . .

As we turned the corner of the rough track onto the comparatively smooth surface of the main road that led back to Quimper, a woman stepped out from the side of the road—a comely red-cheeked woman called Mère Alèphe, whom I knew by sight. She was the village midwife, and in her arms she carried a bundle. A tiny crumpled red face peered from within the folds of white blanket she carried—and instinctively I knew whose child it was. Pen brought the car to a halt and Mère Alèphe approached us, holding out the child. She spoke breathlessly.

"*M'sieur le Docteur*—you have helped us, the folk of Lenant, beyond words to thank you! Now will you help this child—the child of Yvonne? She was brought to bed last night of a boy, *messieurs,* a fine boy and healthy—and she begs you to take the child and care for it! She fears that Farmer Georges will take it from her, as he wants a son and has none of his own. She dreads him, doctor, and does not wish him to have the child—yet she dares not keep it, as she wishes to marry young Jean and fears he will not take her if she has this child . . ."

Pennoyer looked gravely at the woman, and she dropped her troubled eyes.

"If this child had neither father nor mother," he said, "I would do as you ask, *ma mère*—but it would not be right, and you know that it would not. Tell Yvonne that though now she regrets her sin, if she wishes for forgiveness she must face the consequences—the innocent child—of that sin. She cannot shelve her responsibilities to my shoulders—or to anybody's. She must be brave and keep her child. Tell her to ask Père Claude to deal with Farmer Georges if he tries to take the boy from her—but anyway, he will not do it. It is an empty threat. Tell her also that if she is brave and strong now over this, she will marry Jean, and Jean will love this child and bring him up as his own, forgetting how he came to be born—

after all, Jean is not free from sin himself. If he had not deserted Yvonne for a time and taken to drinking, none of this might ever have happened! Take back the child to its mother, Mère Alèphe. Bid her take courage and face the world! If she lives a good and devout life and has this child brought up in the faith and knowledge of God, she will have nothing to fear, and know great happiness through him. I speak the truth—and you know it!"

And—as so often happens when my wise friend speaks—lo and behold, it was so . . .

THE END

Also by Margery Lawrence

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About the Author

MARGERY LAWRENCE needs no introduction to her wide circle of readers. Born of a well-known legal family, she had the arts at her fingertips from early childhood, and though at first drawn towards painting as a career, turned at last towards writing stories as vivid and colourful as her painting.

She married Arthur Towle, younger of the two Towle brothers famous in the world of international hotels, and so has seen and known many countries which have provided her with much material for her books. During the war she remained in London with her husband, defying the fates in a topfloor flat; and after his death in 1948 spent much time abroad, especially in Spain, which she used as the setting for her last book *Spanish Interlude*.

Miss Lawrence's work is varied in the extreme, ranging from stories of purely modern life (as in *Spanish Interlude*) to tales set in ancient times, as *Daughter of the Nile* and *The Rent in the Veil*, and an exciting novel she has just completed in which the background is Greece at the time of Pericles; and she is hard at work at the moment on the life-story of a late-Victorian servant-maid!

She is a woman of varied gifts and catholic tastes. A keen musician, a collector of books, curios and interesting friends; an embroideress of unusual gifts, a judge of good talk, good food and good wine, an inveterate traveller and omniverous reader. She loves the theatre, books and films, but has no taste for games or sports of any kind with the exception of sailing which she adores, being a foolproof sailor in any weather. She is also much interested in psychic science, which plays a part in many of her stories; and *Master of Shadows* is a sequel to her successful collection of uncanny stories published some time ago and entitled *Number Seven Queer Street*.

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