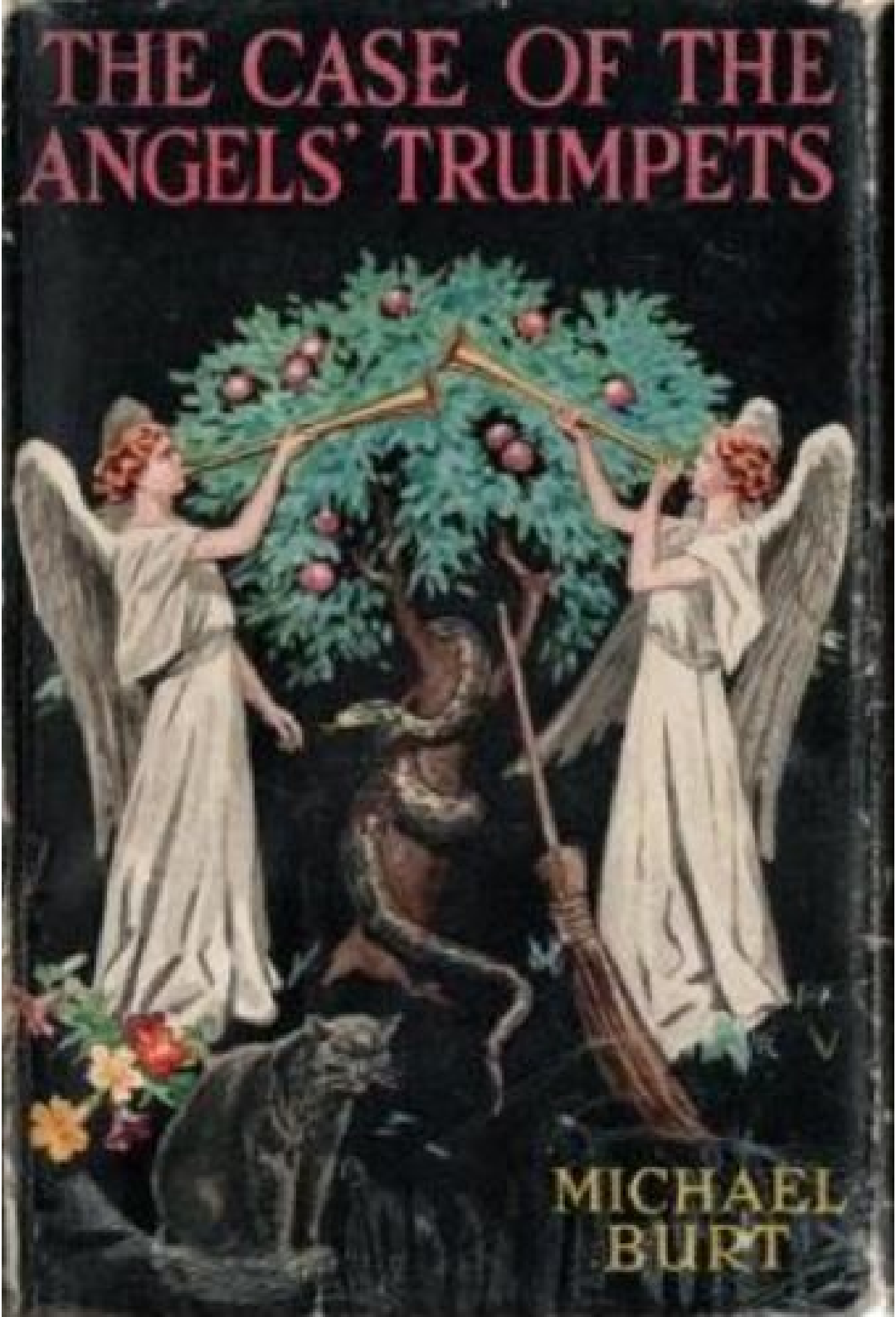
THE CASE OF THE ANGELS' TRUMPETS



MICHAEL BURT

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The Roger Poynings Stories

THE CASE OF THE FAST YOUNG LADY
THE CASE OF THE ANGELS' TRUMPETS
THE CASE OF THE LAUGHING JESUIT

THE CASE OF THE ANGELS' TRUMPETS

A Roger Poynings Story

BY

MICHAEL BURT

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For
THE DISTAFF
(BOTH OF 'EM)
With Love

NOTE

This is a work of fiction. The names of all characters and (with some obvious exceptions) all places are entirely imaginary.

I wish to emphasise in particular that although the story is told in the first person, the character of Roger Poynings, the narrator, is not intended as a self-portrait—indeed, I do not necessarily subscribe to all Roger's opinions or even associate myself with his general outlook; that 'Merrington' is not a projection of my own home village; that there is neither an Anglican see of Bramber nor a Catholic see of Arundel, and that the characters of the Bishop of Bramber and the Archbishop-Bishop of Arundel are not projections, portraits or caricatures of any living prelate of either Church; that the character of Field-Marshal Sir Piers Poynings is not based upon or related to that of any officer in the Army List; and that Chief-Inspector Thrupp has no existence outside the pages of my books.

This is, in essence, a detective novel; but it is not one of those finicky, painstaking 'whodunit' affairs in which every detail is carefully planned and written-up to trick the reader and secure a scrupulously neat and tidy ending. Certain elements of the fantastic pervade the plot and militate against an academic solution of the problem on strictly orthodox lines.

Caveat emptor!

MICHAEL BURT.

STORRINGTON,
SUSSEX.

CONTENTS

PART I

SUSSEX PUDDLE

By the twitching of my thumbs,
Something wicked this way comes;
Macbeth.

1

ONCE upon a time I heard a wicked man say (or maybe I read it in a book) that all men are equal: the which is not only a most damnable major heresy, but—worse—a very blatant absurdity. To contend that all men are equal is barely one degree less fatuous than to assert that all men are alike: a pitiable piece of fallacious empiricism which I can scarcely summon the patience to refute.

In any case, the handiest and most topical example will suffice; for it is only necessary to survey *ad hoc* the huge and unbridgeable chasm which stretches (or yawns, if you insist) between You, my reader, and Myself. For behold—you are manifestly rich, since you have bought or otherwise acquired this splendid but costly book; while I am equally clearly poor, since I am put to the incredible agony and labour of writing it for you. *Item*, your name probably is not Poynings; or, if it be Poynings, then it is probably not Roger Poynings; or if by some freakish and barely tolerable infringement of copyright it be Roger Poynings, then you are still not the identical Roger Poynings who is now setting out to relate this powerful tale. *Item*, you are probably bald of face, or at the best prinked as to the upper lip with that pusillanimous compromise called a moustache: I, by God's charity, wear a beard, whereof you shall hear a very great deal more in these pages, whether you like it or no. *Item*, you are potentially capable of having been born, and of now residing, anywhere in the world from Lhasa to Llandudno Junction (of which, having visited both, I hold the former to be infinitely the preferable location): while I, by special indult of my Creator, was begotten, born and bred under the northern escarpment of the Sussex Downs, as were ten thousand of my mighty sires and progenitors before me, not to mention a like number of dams and forebears on the distaff side. And I dwell to this day in that holy paradise that lies between Arun and Adur, those sweet and puissant streams.

And lastly, though it may well be that you are blessed or encumbered with uncles of a sort, it is vastly unlikely that you number among them, at

one and the same time (as I do), a Field-Marshal of the British Army and—an even rarer bird—a genuine, consecrated, purple-socked Archbishop-Bishop of the Holy Roman Catholic and Apostolic Church.

Nor, I will wager a million, have you a beautiful wife named Barbary, who is also, and simultaneously, your cousin.

It is therefore patent that, even in these few elementary respects, You and I are utterly dissimilar or unlike. And since dissimilar objects can in no wise be equal (as was postulated and proved once for all by the philosopher Euclid, *circa 297* B.C.), the whole argument of the aforesaid heresiarch falls to the ground with a sickly squelch, at the very first test.

So let us hear no more of it, or we shall quarrel; to avert which calamity at so early a stage of our association let us raise our communing to a higher plane and, blending interest with instruction, consider the best and traditionally most excellent method of creating a Sussex Puddle.

2

To make a Sussex Puddle by the Old Gumber recipe, you assemble on a well-scoured kitchen-table a bin of fine Petworth flour; a massive mound of Amberley dairy butter; a bowl of prime beef suet, finely shredded; a clutch of new-laid eggs; a very large crock of brown demerara sugar; a superlatively luscious lemon; a jar of Jamaica rum; and your penultimate keg of smuggled cognac. Then, intoning the antiphon *Propitius esto, Domine*, you select the required ingredients in their due proportion and make a very good rich suet crust, in the manner that should be well enough known to you all.

With the major part of this crust you line the largest pudding-basin you can find: a china basin, be it understood, and none of your newfangled utility contraptions of enamelled tin. And when the said basin is generously lined, you place in the midst thereof a gigantic sphere or bolus having as its core the lemon, whole and in its rind, and as its outer tegument a dense wall of solid butter, powerfully laced and impregnated with rum. This sphere or bolus should sit snugly on a thick cushion of brown sugar, with more sugar—mountains and lashings of sugar—pillowing it on every side and wholly submerging it, so that the entire bowl is filled right up with sugar to its brim. And when you have pressed it down and added still more sugar till you are positively unable to cram in another golden grain, you crown the basin with the remainder of your suet crust, tie it up in a clean linen cloth, and boil for two and a half hours by the kitchen clock.

But if you ask where the clutch of eggs and the smuggled cognac come in, I shall be compelled to reply that this is a secret which by law and

tradition may only be muttered privily by Sussex lips straight into Sussex ears, nor ever be committed to public print, lest some predatory Celt or a curly-tailed man of Kent (though, to be sure, few such barbarians can read, and those only from very large print) should pirate the recipe and usurp the power to make a veritable Sussex Puddle: a contingency too shocking to be contemplated.

You will also need, later, a quart or two of very thick rich cream.

And if you object, the wiseacres and quidnuncs among you, that it is not possible to make a Sussex Puddle in wartime, far less in the immediate slipstream of a war, unless one is a rogue grocer or a black marketeer, I shall applaud your discernment but reprehend your impetuosity, at the same time defending my literary integrity by declaring that this story opens in those silver-gilt days when Peace yet eked out a precarious continuance with excursions to Munich and so forth; when, in short, 10 Downing Street was still tenanted by the Old Boiling Fowl, with the Old War Horse as yet in vociferous if unofficial Opposition. Indeed, if you are one of those pestiferous precisians who must have everything fastidiously dated and docketed I will indulge your statistical libido by disclosing that it was on the eighth day of May, 1939, that Barbary Poynings made a Sussex Puddle of such royal dimensions and unsurpassed succulence that its flavour and bouquet linger lovingly in the memory of those who consumed it (every morsel of it) even to the present day. The sun rose at 5.21 a.m. (British Summer Time) and set at 8.33 p.m. The moon was a few hours past the full. Mercury was in superior conjunction with the Sun, and Earth was in aphelion. High water at London Bridge was at 11.38. And it was the Feast of the Apparition of St. Michael the Archangel, anyway, which in itself provides a more than adequate pretext for high living.

She made it, moreover, in the presence of notable witnesses; for, as she mixed and moulded, she was watched by two keen pairs of benevolent avuncular eyes. Against one corner of the high old-fashioned sink lounged the slim flannel-suited figure of Field-Marshal Sir Piers Poynings, O.M., G.C.B., G.C.S.I., G.C.M.G., K.C.V.O., C.I.E., D.S.O., a thin black cheroot between his lips and a fly-swat swinging lazily from his right wrist; while from a coign of vantage against the oaken dresser his brother, the Most Reverend Odo Poynings, D.D., PH.D., S.T.D., Archbishop-Bishop of Arundel, stopped fiddling with his pectoral cross just long enough to flick a blessing into the pudding-basin as Barbary knotted the cloth across and across.

“Oughter be a damn good Puddle,” opined the Field-Marshal, in the clipped, decisive tones of the enthusiast. “Yer can’t beat a Sussex Puddle, I tell yer. Glad ter see Roger’s keepin’ yer up ter the mark with yer cookery,

Barbary. Not like some of these young fellers that let 'emselves be fed out of a tin."

Barbary threw back her dark curls as she exchanged a grin with her military uncle and a wink with her archiepiscopal uncle.

"What I can't bear," the latter observed thoughtfully, "is a skimpy Puddle. The sort, I mean, that just gets you interested and then gives out before you've had enough. Sensible-sized basin you've got there, Barbary. . . . The only trouble 'bout a Puddle is that it's abominably conducive to psomophagy."

"Drip!" barked his brother tersely. "Yer must learn ter control yer appetites, Odo me boy. Need discipline in the Church just as much as yer do in the Army—more so, in fact. Psomophagy, my fetlock!"

"I often think psomophagists are born, not made," was Barbary's diversionary contribution. "It's a disgusting habit, anyway, and I won't have it in my house, so you'd both better watch your table-manners." It was noticeable that neither Barbary nor Sir Piers was at a loss to know what 'psomophagy' meant, and in this they showed themselves true and worthy members of the great house of Poynings. The family has unquestionably the most extensive vocabulary in West Sussex—and therefore, *a fortiori*, in the civilised world.

"Talkin' of Roger," said the Field-Marshal after a pause, "where the devil is he? Writin' another damfool book?"

"Not at the moment," his niece replied as, reeling under the weight, she lowered the pudding-basin into a gargantuan saucepan. "He's just finished one and posted it off, and now he's at rather a loose end. He'll be glad to see you both. I'll go and dig him out for you in a minute. When last heard of he'd gone into a huddle with the Vicar's daughter in his study."

Two pairs of bushy grey eyebrows shot vertically upwards.

"Vicar's daughter?" snapped Sir Piers sharply. "Cuddle? Ha-hum!"

"Huddle," corrected the Archbishop. "American for conference or discussion. Interesting, all the same. Now, I wonder which of 'em would be trying to convert the other—and to what?"

"I haven't the foggiest," Barbary said cheerfully. "She's a nice child, is Carmel Gilchrist, though I don't really know her awfully well. I don't think Roger does, either, though of course he's lived here longer than I have. Anyway, he seemed rather surprised to see her. She looked rather—well, under the weather."

"Gilchrist?" The Field-Marshal snorted like a charger. "That's a Scotch name, that is. What the hell's a Scotch parson doin' in Merrington, hey?

Why the devil can't——"

"Psst! Psst!" The Most Reverend Odo patted the air in deprecation. "My dear Piers, we have it on sound theological authority that even the Scots—it's rude to call 'em Scotch: they don't like it—are also God's creatures, though I must admit—ahem!——"

"Drip!" barked the soldier, his grey moustache standing angrily to attention. "God's creatures, my rump! I tell yer, Odo me boy, the Devil's a Scotchman and all the Scotch are his spawn—and all the Welsh and Irish and Celts and Kelts and things as well. Whole damn county's infested with 'em. They've snaffled every worth-while job in Sussex, I tell yer. Yer can't even be born without a damn Scotchman registerin' yer birth, and the bettin' is that yer mother's pupped yer in spite of an Irish doctor and a Welsh midwife. Every damn village school has a headmaster called Evans or O'Toole, and the feller that sends yer final notice fer income tax signs himself Menzies or Mackenzie or somethin'. One of these days, when I can find time, I'm goin' ter get up a league—'Sussex fer the Saxons' or somethin' like that—and start a purge. Have the whole damn lot outer their jobs and send 'em packin' back ter Scotland, or wherever they came from. That's what we need—a purge. I tell yer, Odo——"

"But that's sheer Hitlerism," the prelate objected mildly. "There's something in what you say, I agree; but surely we've only ourselves to blame for letting these foreigners come along and get all the jobs?"

"Hitler, my armpit!" roared the Field-Marshal, flinging his cheroot out of the window. "I'll thank-yer not ter compare me with that carpet-chewin' teetotaller: that double-crossin', sabre-rattlin' vegetarian: that——" Words failed him to describe further the Chancellor of the Third Reich. "Why, damme, Odo, did yer see what I saw when we were comin' through the village just now? A ruddy Scotchman in a blasted kilt, blowin' his blasted squealbags in the middle of the High Street, as bold as be-damned, and milkin' the people fer coppers! Hell's pit! It makes me blood boil——"

"Oh, our tame piper, you mean," Barbary put in. "Yes, you'd wonder what he's doing in these parts, wouldn't you, but I suppose the poor blighter's unemployed, like the gangs of Welsh miners who come round sometimes."

"No such thing as an unemployed Scotchman," Sir Piers declared didactically. "Contradiction in terms, that's what it is. Anyway, why the hell can't he pipe up in Scotland, hey? Why should he come down here, blowin' his blasted squealbags among civilised Saxons and takin' their money off

'em? Damn scandal, that's what it is. And as if that wasn't enough, yer seem ter've got a Scotch vicar, too!"

"But, my dear Piers——" the Most Reverend Odo began.

"Now, now, you two!" Barbary intervened pacifically, as she swilled her hands under the tap. "I've never known such a pair for flying off the handle over nothing at all. All this kafuffle because the local vicar happens to be called Gilchrist! What's it got to do with you, anyway? You're both supposed to be papists, and I'm damned if I see—sorry, Uncle Odo!—what the—I mean, what earthly concern it is of yours what the Anglican parson's name is."

"Tchah! Feller can call himself Dogsbody or Foxevil fer all I care," Sir Piers conceded handsomely. "But that doesn't make it right fer Scotch parsons ter go diggin' 'emselves inter good Sussex livin's, takin' the bread outer the mouths of decent Sussex heretics."

The Most Reverend Odo massaged his chin, as if uncertain of the ethics of this problem.

"But in any case," said Barbary, "it's stretching matters rather far to call Mr. Gilchrist a Scotsman at all. Of course, with a name like that I suppose his family did originally come from north of the Tweed, but that was probably two or three generations ago at least. They're English enough now."

The Field-Marshal sniffed scornfully.

"Yer can't get foreign blood outer yer veins any more than the leopard can change his spots," he objected. "Look at all those damn Normans who came bargin' over here in 1066 or whenever it was. Yer can still pick out their descendants a mile off, in spite of centuries of intermarriage with decent Saxon stock."

He sounded so much in earnest that both his hearers burst out laughing.

"Really, my dear Piers," his brother expostulated, "I thought I was a bit of a reactionary—in fact, the *Daily Shirker* called me one last week because I'd ventured to suggest that it wasn't in accord with the best Christian morals that doctors should be allowed to murder their patients, even at the latters' request; but I must say I think you carry your own particular brand of reaction to somewhat inordinate lengths. Anyway, as Barbary rightly observed, it's no earthly concern of ours what the local parson's name is, and I must confess I'm much more interested to know why Roger should be having such a protracted—er—huddle with his daughter. Er—what did you say her name was, my dear?"

"Carmel," his niece supplied. "And it's no use Uncle Piers trying to make out that that's a 'Scotch' name, 'cos you'll bear me out that it has a definite savour of Popery about it, if anything."

"Actually it's good Hebrew," the Archbishop amended; "but I agree it's unusual to find it given to any but Catholic girls in this country, because of its associations. Is Mr. Gilchrist—er—High Church?"

Barbary shrugged. "I wouldn't know exactly, Uncle. I think he tries to cater for all tastes, as a matter of fact, as so many of these country parsons have to do. All I know about him is that he's rather a dear to meet, though he's frightfully absentminded and can never remember anyone's name. I'm told, too, that he preaches the most shattering sermons, which shock all the old jigs and make the rest of the congregation rock with laughter. They say he picks on the most unlikely texts and does wonders with them. But, as I said, I don't really know the Gilchrists at all well. One runs across the girls in the village and passes the time of day with them, but that's about all. That's why I was rather surprised at Carmel wanting to talk to Roger this morning. She's never been here before, in my time. . . . Anyway, let's get out of this stuffy kitchen, shall we? It's lovely in the garden, and presently we could stroll round by the study windows, which might fetch Roger out. If not, we'll charge in and excavate him."

"Good idea," replied her uncles in unison, as they disengaged themselves from their respective perches. So, having reassured herself that her Sussex Puddle was safe in its saucepan and that no one had stolen the about-to-be-roasted cockerel from the meat-safe, Barbary led the way out into the warm, spring-scented garden.

3

Let me make it plain that Barbary's surprise at Carmel Gilchrist's visit was a mild and emasculated emotion compared with my own. In the normal course of events I am not very easily surprised, for considerable periods of my life have been spent in circumstances which left me in perpetual doubt as to what kind of rabbit would be the next to spring from Fate's top-hat. Even in the matter of visitors, now that I was leading a relatively smooth and unchequered existence, I had learnt to realise that it is most often the unexpected that happens, especially if one is a novelist whose books appear to appeal, not at all to the class of reader for whom they are written, but to the strangest assortment of individuals, from High Court judges to raving lunatics, that the most imaginative of minds could conceive in the most indigestible of dreams.

Curiously, too, I had had a premonition that I was to get an unexpected visitor that morning, and indeed had devoted a part of my after-breakfast ramble round the garden to wondering in a casual kind of way what manner of creature it would prove to be. Of the impending arrival of my two uncles I was already aware: Uncle Odo to carry out a canonical visitation of our local monastery, Uncle Piers (to the best of my belief) simply trailing round with him to kill time, in the manner of temporarily unemployed field-marshals with nothing more exciting to kill. But I had a feeling that I should be seeing someone else as well; and when, just as I was pronouncing a solemn malediction on all cats as I beheld their ravages in a promising bed of *Datura indica suaveolens*, I heard footsteps on the path behind me and turned to see Barbary leading young Carmel Gilchrist in my direction, I knew that my prognostication was being amply fulfilled.

My first sensation was one of relief, for if it was my destiny to receive an unexpected visitor at all, I could easily think of ten thousand people with whom I would less cheerfully hold converse than with Carmel. At least (I felt) she was young and sane and pleasant, with a freshness about her most aptly in keeping with the beauty of a spring morning; and though we had never been exactly intimate I had seen quite enough of her to make me feel passively desirous of getting to know her better. As a tolerably respectable married man of nearly twice her age I had never taken active steps to this end, but I cannot deny that a tiny ripple of pleasure went through me as Barbary delivered her into my keeping.

Carmel, younger daughter of the Reverend Andrew Gilchrist, was, when you came to look at her, an extremely attractive little wench. And if it be deemed unchivalrous to qualify my judgment with that phrase in parenthesis, I shall retort that it was not till you had looked at her for a second or third or even a fourth time that you began to perceive just how attractive she really was. She was not one of those blatantly beautiful girls whose faces are guaranteed spontaneously to launch a thousand ships or palpitate a thousand hearts, for hers was not that vivid Helenesque kind of beauty which, incidentally, might well have been ascribed to her own elder sister, Andrea. Possibly, indeed, that was half the trouble with Carmel: I mean, so often you met the two sisters together, and then the clear and immediately striking beauty of Andrea tended to overshadow the less obvious charm of Carmel. It was not till you encountered her alone and had leisure to let your eyes dwell on her in greater detail that you realised that she, too, was lovely, though in a subtler and more subdued way than her sister.

Carmel, on this Feast of the Apparition of St. Michael the Archangel in the year of grace 1939, was in her twentieth or twenty-first year—I forget which. She was what the man Cheyney, purposefully Americanising his mother-tongue, would label a strawberry-blonde: that is, she had fair hair (though not of the platinum, peroxide or ash-blonde type, nor yet the flaxen Saxon), the lustrous pale gold of which was noticeably shot with glints and shimmers of red. I don't know what colour eyes are considered correct for strawberry blondes, but Carmel's, unexpectedly, were of a very deep brown, such as you normally associate with brunettes. They were very lovely eyes, too, set well apart and adorned with long dark lashes. She had a naughty little nose, short and the least bit tip-tilted—and if you ask me how a young woman's nose can be naughty, I shall recommend you to sell this book for what it will fetch and read only the man Shaw in future (drastic though such an expedient may be). Her mouth was rather naughty, too: palpably wider than classical standards permit, with eminently kissable lips. As to the rest of her person, or such of it as could be descried through or beyond a simple linen frock of lupin-blue, it will serve to combine truth with delicacy if I say, with Lemmy Caution, that the dame had curves and that all her curves were just where you wanted curves to be. She had not entirely lost the fascinating legginess of adolescence, but her lower limbs held the promise of perfection to come. Her ankles were already a delight.

She was, in short, just the kind of young person you would be pleased to see on a bright May morning and I was duly pleased to see her—though, as I have said, considerably puzzled to know what fortunate breeze had wafted her in my direction. To add to my perplexity, even as I waved a welcoming hand I got a slight yet quite definite impression that she was (as Barbary said later) somewhat under the weather. There was, let me say, no question of the wench being in tears or looking openly distressed, far less dishevelled or hot and bothered. But there was a look of strain in her brown eyes as if she had gone short of sleep, and a suspicion of hesitancy in her walk. And the friendly smile she gave me was perhaps not wholly reflected in her eyes.

Barbary handed her over to me and then excused herself with a light remark about visitors for lunch and a cockerel waiting to be stuffed. Another woman might have had the curiosity to hang around in the hope of gleaning a clue as to the reason for this visit, but it was characteristic of my wife to display no intemperate interest in a matter that did not directly concern her. She knew, of course, that she would in all probability get a full report of the interview later on; but Carmel had specifically asked to see me, and Barbary had too much tact to intrude.

I also try to be tactful (though not always with success), and on finding myself left alone with my visitor it was my first concern not to let her feel that I had noticed any emotional disturbance in her bearing. Wherefore, after the usual inane but indispensable gambit about the weather, I brightly repeated—in a somewhat expurgated form—the weighty imprecation against cats of which I had been silently delivering myself before her arrival. Carmel frowned gravely at my devastated datura shoots.

"Too bad," she remarked, shaking her pretty head. "The cats round here are absolute fascists, I know. Our own garden suffers abominably, too: in fact, I'd be willing to bet that this little job owes something to Vicarage influence. I may be doing the old beast an injustice, but I seem to recognise Grimalkin's claw-work here. It's pretty distinctive."

"Grimalkin?" I echoed, preening my beard thoughtfully. "Never heard of her. One of your cats?"

"Not mine," Carmel said decisively. "My sister's. A ghastly brute—surely you know it? I thought everyone knew Grimalkin. A hefty great beast, sort of slate-colour, with a tail like a fox's brush and feet the size of saucers, and as full of sin and spite as an egg is of meat—if you'll forgive that absurd expression. I can't think what Andrea sees in her."

"Relations between cats and their owners are always dark and mysterious, to my way of thinking," I said. "Sometimes, as at present, one wonders what the owner can see in the cat. But equally often, in my experience, one wonders rather what the hell the cat can see in its owner."

She laughed; and her laugh betokened a welcome lessening of the strain under which she had been suffering a few minutes earlier, so I thought it well to pursue the emollient line that our conversation was taking. I had the morning before me, with nothing particular to do. There would be plenty of time to steer towards more relevant channels when the going had become easier.

"This particular patch seems to have a fascination for evil-doers," I remarked. "Last August, just when the datura flowers were at their best, some crook invaded the garden one dark night and got away with about a dozen of my best roots. I can't think why, except that this kind of datura is rather a novelty round here: I brought the seeds back from India ages ago. It's odd, though, that your sister's pusser should have elected to attack the same spot—that is, if it really was Grimalkin."

"She's an absolute thug," she returned, "and you won't go far wrong if you blame her for anything like this that happens in the neighbourhood. Whenever you hear hell let loose on the tiles at night you can be dead sure

it's Grimalkin on the warpath. And she's a devil on gardens. I feel I'd be pretty safe in apologising on my sister's behalf for the mess she's made of your border, Mr. Poynings."

"Name of Roger," I murmured tentatively, following up my get-together policy.

She shot me a quick glance from under her dark lashes. "Name of Carmel," she reciprocated quietly. "I think that's rather sweet of you—Roger."

"I have a notoriously sweet nature," I confided. "Sugar is my middle name. Cigarette?" I fished out my case and offered it.

"Thanks." We lit up, pleasantly conscious of useful progress. And then, still impelled by the best of intentions:

"Funny, but I've never actually met a cat by the name of Grimalkin," I declared, exhaling a helix of smoke. "There's something delightfully old-fashioned and sinister about it. In the old days, every self-respecting witch had a cat called Grimalkin—or rather, according to the best authorities, Grimalkin was usually the witch's 'familiar,' a demon spirit materialised in the form of a cat."

I had spoken facetiously, and with no other object than to put Carmel still more at her ease and give her some further breathing-space before we got down to business. I had been idly watching her face as I spoke, not in the least to observe her reactions to the piffle I was talking, but simply because she was supremely easy on the eyes and entirely worth looking at. Above all, I wanted to see the delightful smile that appeared on her too-wide lips when she was amused—but that was precisely what did not happen. To my amazement I saw the blood drain from her face and a look of something very like fear come into her eyes. White teeth bit deep into her scarlet-painted lips.

But these symptoms were of the briefest duration, and in a dozen seconds or less she had regained control of herself and was giving me that deliciously wide smile—it was almost a grin—for which I had been angling. The colour returned to her cheeks, the tension of her body relaxed, the uneasiness fled out of her eyes. And now she looked slightly ashamed of herself.

"Sorry!" she apologised with a little laugh. "I s'pose you think I'm haywire. I probably am. Sometimes I'm certain I am—as a matter of fact, that's just what I came to see you about. You must have been wondering . . ."

I nodded. “I’ve been wishing I could flatter myself that it was simply a pleasure call,” I admitted, “but naturally I didn’t really think so. On the other hand, I frankly can’t guess why you’ve come, and all I can say is that if there’s any way I can help you I’ll be delighted to do my best.”

“Thank you,” said Carmel gravely. “Roger, I’m most terribly worried about something: about lots of things, in fact, and among them—as I said just now—whether I’m going crazy or not. That’s the first thing I’d like your opinion about. I mean, if I *am* mental, all the rest of my worries presumably arise from that fact and you needn’t take them seriously.” She sighed. “I expect that is the answer, really,” she went on. “And yet I don’t feel mad, and nobody seems to have noticed anything odd about me, so far as I know.”

I emitted what was intended to be a reassuring laugh. “My dear girl, I’m not an alienist or even an amateur psychologist, except in so far as every fiction writer has to know a certain amount about human behaviourism, and so forth. But, speaking as one ordinary person to another, I feel that, if you’re crazy, then the entire village of Merrington and the whole noble kingdom of Sussex is populated exclusively by gibbering idiots. Perhaps I’m not a competent judge, for plenty of people are convinced that I’m an idiot myself. However, if it’s any comfort to you, I’d like to say I consider you at least as sane as I am.”

Carmel smiled. “Well, that’s something, anyway; though whether you’ll still be of the same opinion when I’ve told you what I want to tell you, is quite another matter. I mean that seriously, Roger. After all, I suppose it’s possible for a person to be normal enough mentally, in the ordinary sense of the term, and yet to suffer from delusions on one particular subject?”

I shrugged my shoulders. “I should say it’s not merely possible but quite common,” I replied. “How many of us are there who haven’t got ‘kinks’ about something or other? And these kinks are, I imagine, mostly based on delusions or illusions of some kind. But, I repeat, I’m not a doctor and I don’t think one should generalise too much. If for some reason or other you think I’m a better bet than, say, Doctor Houghligan to confide your troubles in, I’m very ready and willing to listen to you.”

“Thanks, Roger. I’ve no right to bother you, but I *can’t* go on much longer with things as they are. I’ve got to tell someone, or I definitely shall go haywire. It’s nothing I could go to a doctor about—yet; and still less would I dream of breathing a word to Daddy. Adam Wycherley’s with his Regiment at Aldershot, and I’ve no idea when he’ll be back here. Besides, though he’s a darling and I’m awfully fond of him, I’m not sure I wouldn’t rather talk to someone—well, someone a bit older and more experienced. And then I thought of you. . . .”

The clock at the nearby Priory chimed ten as Carmel's anxious voice trailed away. I laid a hand on her elbow and began to steer her towards the open french windows whereby my study gives on to the garden.

"Let's go inside," I suggested. "By an almost miraculous chance you have hit upon one of the very few days in the year when I'm visible at this hour and when, what's more, access can be gained to my study without scything your way through a breast-high harvest of papers, cobwebs and cigarette-ends. I don't allow anyone in there when I'm working on a book, but it so happens that I posted off my latest effort to my publishers the day before yesterday, and that Barbary and Mrs. Nye spent the whole of yesterday performing the mystic rite known as 'doing me out'—for the first time in nine months. The consequence is that I can't find a thing and the room fairly reeks of cleanliness, but on the other hand, there will at least be something for you to sit on. That is, unless you'd rather stay out here?"

"I'd rather go indoors. The garden's lovely, in spite of Grimalkin's ravages, but it's too distracting—and somehow too public, if you know what I mean. Don't laugh, Roger, but when I first got the idea of asking you for help I felt that the only way I could approach you would be to do a Nicodemus and come to you by night. Goodness knows what you'd have thought—or your wife—but that's just how I felt. It has taken me ages to screw up my courage to come along in daylight and say my piece face to face with you. And if you hadn't been so nice to me I should probably have lost my nerve as soon as I got here and run away without telling you why I'd come."

Her words, which though flippantly delivered were none the less quite obviously sincere, induced a curious unrest in my solar plexus.

"It all sounds damnably sinister," I chaffed her, as we strolled across the lawn.

"That's exactly what it is," she answered quietly. "It's sinister and it's damnable—but I wouldn't mind that so much if it weren't something else as well. What bothers me is that it's so utterly preposterous: so absurdly incredible: so—so fantastic. I've screwed myself up to the ordeal of telling you now, but I quite despair of making you believe me. I *know* you'll think I'm haywire," she ended almost tearfully, as I stood aside for her to pass through the french windows.

In the course of spring-cleaning Barbary had moved my huge leather sofa, which in winter stands before the fireplace, to its summer quarters just inside the windows, facing down the garden. This sofa is, without exception,

the most important piece of furniture in my workroom, for it has magic properties which I hesitate to disclose in print lest some unscrupulous rival (or, more obscenely, a reviewer with literary ambitions) be tempted thereby to steal or destroy it, of malice prepense. For if you picture me composing my powerful stories at a richly carved rosewood desk, or crouching round-shouldered over a typewriter like some god-awful Glasgow journalist, there is a defect in your mental vision which it is my plain duty to eradicate. It is, unfortunately, necessary to sit approximately upright while engaged in the hideous labour of committing my deathless prose to paper; but the actual creation of that prose—its procreation, gestation and ultimate delivery—takes place as I squirm and sprawl in a thousand ungainly postures on this thaumaturgical chesterfield, while the divine flatus soughs broodily through my brain, pollinating the little grey cells and performing the whole intricate process of thought-creation up to the point where what began as mere embryonic fancies stand forth at last as full-grown phrases and sentences, arranged in some sort of ordered sequence and with their naked crudity clad in the vesture of appropriate words. It follows, then, that whenever it is necessary for me to seek inspiration and guidance on some egregiously complex problem, whether of fiction or of real life, I betake myself as if my instinct to this blessed sofa and abandon myself to the ecstasy of truly fruitful thought.

It was to one corner of this sacred couch that I waved young Carmel, while I ensconced myself decorously at the other, some six feet away. She sank neatly but cosily into its alluring depths and, after a quick glance over her shoulder to take in the rest of the room, she accepted another cigarette and lit up. As an afterthought I got up again and switched on the electric kettle which I keep in my study so as to be able to make a pot of tea at need, without bothering Barbary; for though the morning was yet young and breakfast not wholly forgotten it seemed to me that a mild stimulant might benefit both of us before we were through. Then I returned to my seat, canted my beard to a philosophical angle, and invited her to proceed.

She sighed.

"You'd be amazed if you knew how often I've tried to rehearse this moment, Roger," she told me. "I don't know how you feel, but it always seems to me that the 'approach' to a problem is far stickier than stating the actual problem itself. As I said, it's such a fantastic business that I can't possibly plunge into it bald-headed, 'cos you'd almost certainly think I was stark crazy. I thought up all sorts of possible ways of leading-in—not to mention several bogus reasons for coming to see you at all. But in the end I chucked the whole lot overboard and didn't give Barbary any reason at all. It

seems to have worked all right, too, but in spite of all my plots and plans I still haven't any settled idea how to start." She tapped her cigarette nervously over the carpet. "I've been so hot and bothered lately that I don't seem able to put things into any kind of logical order."

"Never mind logic," said I. "Start where you like and end where you like—only don't leave out the middle. Don't hurry; and above all, don't over-simplify. Take your time. I've nothing else to do till lunch-time or thereabouts."

She nodded. "Thanks a lot, Roger. You're being awfully sweet to me. Incidentally, though, I mustn't be too terribly late getting home. We've got the Bishop coming to lunch, and Daddy will curl up round the edges if I'm not around when he arrives."

I raised my eyebrows. "Really! The Bishop of Bramber, you mean?"

"Yes. His Right Reverence in person, and also Sir John Wiston, the chancellor of the diocese. I tell you, Roger, we're moving in high society to-day!"

"Aren't we! But you know, this is really rather a remarkable coincidence. I mean, we're having guests, too, and one of them is a bishop and the other a knight. Actually, so far as high society is concerned, I'm not sure we don't leave you standing, because *our* bish is really an archbishop-bishop, and our knight is also a field-marshal. Beat that if you can!"

Carmel emitted a silent whistle. "Seriously?"

"Entirely; though perhaps it detracts somewhat from the splendour of the effect if I add that they're both uncles of ours, so possibly they don't count quite so high. Uncle Odo is Archbishop-Bishop of Arundel—and it's no use pretending you've never heard of him, even if you are an Anglican vicar's daughter! And Uncle Piers, as I say, is a field-marshal of sorts. No job at the moment, but I suspect he's going to be the next C.I.G.S."

Carmel sighed and smiled. "You lick us hollow," she admitted whimsically. "Yes, I've heard of them both, of course, but I'd never connected them with you. By the way, Roger, what is an archbishop-bishop exactly? I've often wondered. You people go in for such extraordinary titles."

"Don't we? But actually there's nothing difficult about Uncle Odo. You see, he holds the see of Arundel, which is simply an ordinary bishopric; but he himself happens to be an archbishop *ad personam*—that is to say, his own personal rank is really too high for his job, but as you can't demote an archbish once he's been consecrated as such, he is now known as an archbishop-bishop. He used to be Archbishop of Meerut, in India, you know,

but his health broke down and he had to resign. Then he got better again, and as Arundel happened to fall vacant he was offered the job. And there he still is, all a-blowing and a-growing."

"I see."

"It's odd, though, that both he and your bishop should be in Merrington on the same day," I ruminated. "Uncle Odo's coming to 'visitate' the Priory. What's your old stiff coming for—Confirmation, or something?"

Carmel shook her head and an imp of laughter danced in her eyes. Our conversation, irrelevant as it might seem to have become, was clearly doing her good and I was disposed to encourage it.

"Something much more amusing than that," she replied. "He and the Chancellor are coming to pass judgment in what Daddy irreverently calls 'The Case of the Angels' Trumpets.' "

"The *what*?" I goggled at her in astonishment. The spontaneous image evoked by her last words was so entirely different from that present in her own mind that for a moment I was all at sea. For two glorious seconds I had a fantastic vision of a coped and mitred prelate of the Church of England, attended by his lay Chancellor, standing in a corner of my garden, peering and prodding judicially at the cat Grimalkin's claw-work (as Carmel had vividly phrased it) in my outraged patch of *Datura indica*. And if you think me insane, the chalk-faced city-dwellers among you, let me explain that the large cornute flowers of this plant are often referred to as Angels' Trumpets.

This malassociation of ideas, explicable as it was in the circumstances, did not survive Carmel's exposition of the mystery.

"It's really quite simple," she said, drawing at her cigarette. "Ever been in our church, Roger?"

"Lots of times, off and on."

"Then you must have noticed the angels, one on each side of the altar."

"I have indeed. They're old and they're quaint, but—without wishing to be offensive—they're also rather preposterous. The carving of their robes and wings will pass muster, but they've got mugs like the most revolting type of Victorian Sunday-school teachers, and the one on the gospel side looks as if it were going to be sick."

Carmel grinned, but hit back. "Considering they're pre-Reformation and were therefore installed by you papists, that was only to be expected!" she riposted. "However, the point about them is that, according to the parish records, they originally had golden trumpets, through which they were supposed to be blowing a fanfare, or something. These trumpets were valued at £80 each as far back as the fifteenth century, which was a heck of a lot of

money in those days—in fact, they must have been pure gold, or nearly. Incidentally, this explains why the angels' arms are stretched out in such queer positions and why their lips are pursed up and their cheeks puffed out. Anyhow, then came the Reformation with its purge of church ornaments, and the angels disappeared, trumpets and all. Nobody knew what had happened to them till about fifty years ago when the angels were discovered, rather the worse for wear, under piles of junk up at the old tithe-barn—but no sign of the trumpets. Not surprising, if they really were gold!"

"Exactly," I agreed drily.

"Well, the then Vicar apparently thought it rather a shame to leave them to rot, especially as they were genuine antiques, so he gave them a wash and brush-up and bunged them back in the church, minus their trumpets of course. And there they've been ever since, looking pretty scatty to anyone who didn't realise what was missing—till the other day, when their new trumpets arrived."

This was news to me. "Oh, so they've got new trumpets, have they?" I murmured meekly.

Carmel gaped at me—not realising, obviously, that it was possible for such an event to pass unnoticed, even by a papist. "Have they not! D'you mean to say you really hadn't heard about them? Good lord, yes! And, what's more, they're gold of sorts—not 22-carat, I imagine, but definitely gold and not just silver-gilt."

I whistled. "They must have cost a pretty penny," I opined wonderingly. "How big are they?"

She stretched out her slim arms on either side of her body in the manner of an angler describing the fish that got away. "Daddy hasn't got the final bill yet, but I know the estimate ran into thousands. You know, of course, that this is part of old Ma Beeding's bequest?"

"I remember Mrs. Beeding, and I heard she had left all her money to the church, but I don't recall anything about trumpets."

"But, Roger, that was the main idea of her will. These trumpetless angels had been getting in her hair for years, apparently. They irritate lots of people, of course, but whereas some thought they should be got rid of altogether, Ma Beeding maintained that if only they had trumpets they'd be O.K. So she left all her money to Daddy for the church, on condition that the first charge against the estate should be a pair of gold trumpets; and as she left over £60,000 Daddy obviously had to get cracking, or lose the lot. He got cracking and, as I say, the trumpets (so-called: they really look more like coach-horns) were made and have now been fixed up. They're a decided

improvement, though personally I think it's a scandalous waste of money. You ought to pop in and get an eyeful of them, Roger. I don't suppose they'll be there long, anyway."

"Why not?"

"There are two possibilities. First, that they'll be pinched. And secondly, that the Bish will order their removal as illegal ornaments. You see, Daddy (with his usual magnificent disregard for red tape) never even dreamed of applying for a faculty, as apparently he should have done. But someone must have told the Chancellor, and the Chancellor told Bloody Ben (that's the Bish, you know), with the result that a most frightful stench broke loose from the Palace, wanting to know what the so-and-so poor Daddy meant by it. I don't know if you know Bloody Ben? He's a jolly good bishop, as they come, and really quite a lamb when you get to know him, but he does fly off the handle now and then, and he doesn't mince his words. He and Daddy were at it hammer and tongs on the phone for about three-quarters of an hour, and it was pretty good value. As you may know, Daddy doesn't hesitate to call a spade a bloody shovel when he feels like it, and he doesn't give a blast for bishops, anyway. Net result: to-day's majestic descent by B.B. and Sir John, to decide whether the coach-horns shall stay and be duly blessed by his Lordship, or be cast into outer darkness as conducive to idolatry and popish superstition!"

Carmel's tone was gay, and for the time being at least she seemed to have regained her normal spirits. I laughed.

"And what's the betting?" I inquired.

"I hear they were offering six to four on Daddy in the Green Maiden last night," said Carmel. "Personally, I put it at nearer evens. It'll be a near thing, I'm sure."

"But why?" I demanded, genuinely puzzled. "You people don't really believe that we worship coach-horns and things, do you?"

"Of course not. At least, officially I suppose we still do, but in practice it's simply rather a useful sort of bogy to keep in the cupboard. The real point at issue in a case like this is that Daddy, by not asking for a faculty like a good little vicar, has affronted the Bishop's dignity (or more likely the Chancellor's), and they're a bit sore about it. The blah about idolatry would merely be the legal grounds for banning the trumpets if Daddy doesn't come to heel."

I nodded, and tugged at my beard. Though I had never met the Bishop of Bramber I knew his reputation as rather a tough guy, as bishops go. Incidentally, I also knew that he was considered exceptional among prelates

of the Church of England in that he had been ordained and consecrated by a bishop of one of the schismatic Eastern churches and that, in consequence, even the Holy See had to admit the validity of his Orders. In other words, should he decide to confer his blessing on these new gold trumpets instead of ordering their removal, they would be well and truly blessed. Not that it mattered much, but——

"For the sake of both Mr. Gilchrist and the angels I hope you've had the foresight to order a good lunch," I observed. "I know these old baskets. Whatever you do, don't let 'em go poking about in the church on an empty stomach."

"That's just what I told Cook," replied Carmel, smiling, "and she promised to do her best. Roast chicken and a Sussex Puddle, I think it is. . . ."

5

At that moment the electric kettle boiled, so I got up and made the tea. Carmel was visibly shaken when I mentioned the culinary coincidence, and we had a good chuckle about it. For a minute or two, indeed, as we sipped our tea, we discussed the niceties of Sussex Puddle making, and by cautious questioning I soon discovered that, as befitted a family which must have originated in the wastes of Caledonia, they had got their recipe all wrong. I liked Carmel so much that for a wild moment I was tempted to initiate her into the genuine Old Gumber method—which, if put into immediate operation, would have secured the survival of the angels' trumpets beyond a possibility of doubt—but mercifully I was saved from this treason. In any case, I reflected, even the inferior recipe they were using would produce a Puddle of sorts, and it is a truism that any kind of Sussex Puddle is better than none.

Carmel set down her cup and nodded towards the grandfather clock. "I must get on with my piece, Roger. I've been here more than half an hour and we haven't even started yet."

"Perhaps the time hasn't been wholly wasted," I said. "At least we've got to know each other better—which ought to help."

She nodded. "It *will* help," she agreed. "You're a curious sort of person, aren't you, Roger? You look so fierce and bristly in that beard, and you fairly swashbuckle in your books, and yet you've been as sweet as pie to me this morning. Honestly, when I first thought of coming to see you I was quite scared at my own temerity, 'cos I was afraid you'd roar at me and heave me out on my ear. Intentionally or not, that's the sort of impression you give, you know."

I considered the point rather self-consciously.

"It isn't exactly intentional," I protested; "but on the other hand, it would be dishonest to pretend that I do anything to discourage the impression. It may be anti-social, but it saves me the devil of a lot of trouble. I don't deliberately pose, but I suppose I'm too impatient by nature to conceal the fact that I don't suffer fools very gladly. That's all it is. I can't stand natterers, but I'm always ready to talk turkey with anyone who has anything to say."

"That's what I gambled on. I mean, I really have got something to say, though I seem to be an awful long time getting round to it. I've been nattering this morning—but that's largely your own fault, you know."

"You've not been nattering, and I take full responsibility for all the topics discussed," said I. "As I said before, I'm in no hurry and don't want to hustle you."

"No—but time's getting on, and so must I." She crossed her legs and pretended to examine the sole of a sandal. "Look here: suppose I start by saying that I've just been reading, or rather rereading for the third or fourth time, one of your books; partly because it has always thrilled me, and partly to convince myself that you were the obvious person to bring my troubles to. Can you guess which I mean?"

"Probably *The Case of the Fast Young Lady*," I diagnosed promptly, cocking a speculative eye at her.

"Yes."

"You're too young," I teased her.

"Am I hell!"—but nevertheless she coloured a little.

"Too young to understand it properly," I persisted, for purposes of my own.

"Oh, I understood it all right," she maintained, re-examining her sandal with added attention. "Remember, Roger, I'm a parson's daughter; and you know what they say, don't you!"

"I do—but these generalisations are pretty phoney when you come to test them."

"Which in itself is a generalisation," she countered shrewdly. "However, never mind that."

"And what did you think of *The Fast Young Lady*?" I asked.

She wrinkled her nose. "It scared me rather, but at the same time fascinated me," she replied. "You know, Roger, I'd never taken that sort of thing seriously before: I mean, the concept of Absolute Evil, and so forth."

"Very few people do nowadays," I said. "It's very much out of fashion in these days of quack psychology and general free-thinking. That's why I thought the subject might come up fresh, as a matter of fact."

"It certainly did. But—look, I want to ask you a personal question, Roger. Frankly, I didn't know quite what to make of your own standpoint with regard to this matter of Evil. At one moment you seemed to be taking it frightfully seriously, and all you wrote had a sort of ice-cold logic that was almost terrifyingly convincing; and then at the next you were being sort of cynical and facetious about the whole thing, as if you were deliberately descending from the sublime to the ridiculous—or perhaps I should say, ascending from the infernal to the ludicrous. And besides, there's the riddle of that Author's Note."

I chuckled. "You mean—'*With the possible exception of the Devil, all characters are entirely fictitious?*' "

"Yes. I can't tell you how that puzzled me, Roger. After all, the whole story rather depends on the existence of the Devil, doesn't it?—and you go to enormous trouble to prove that the Devil does exist, with, as I said, what appears to be sound logical reasoning which succeeds so well as to be almost frightening. I finished the book completely convinced (for the first time in my life, incidentally) that there really is a Devil and that there is such a thing as Absolute Evil; and then I turned back to that Author's Note, in which you calmly talk about 'the *possible* exception of the Devil'—as if, in spite of all you've written, you still had your tongue in your cheek." Poor little Carmel was terribly in earnest.

I clutched my brow in mock despair, wishing inwardly that the good God had not endowed young women, even the most charming and intelligent of them, with such plaguily metaphrastic minds. Even the prosiest-minded male (always excepting the solemn asses for whose especial benefit I had wickedly included it) must have assessed that Note at its true worth and significance. However——

"You weren't to know, of course," I explained, "but that Note was intended purely and simply as a leg-pull: a kind of little private joke of my own, maliciously designed to inflame the *odium theologicum* of certain Catholic reviewers who have the gravest doubts of my orthodoxy. It was in fact an out-and-out coat-trailing manœuvre, and the best justification I can offer for it is that it came off, far beyond my naughtiest hopes."

Carmel glanced up at me. "You mean—you do believe in the Devil?" she pressed me.

"Of course I do. Very firmly indeed—in which respect my orthodoxy is probably far less open to reproach than that of some of the scribes and pharisees aforesaid. And you?"

She hesitated. "Yes, I think so," she admitted at length. "In fact, I'm sure I do, inwardly, though I think hardly anyone else does nowadays—on *our* side of the fence, I mean. Most people poke fun at the whole idea, don't they? And I must say it isn't an easy thing to argue about."

"N-no. And yet—can one properly go on calling oneself a Christian if one rejects something that is—or was—an essential point of Christian doctrine? I'm not sure if Old Nick features in your Thirty-nine Articles, but with us he's still definitely in the picture. Anyway, the Bible's full of him."

Carmel nodded slowly, yet was not wholly satisfied.

"Yes—but don't you think times seem to have changed a lot since Biblical days, Roger? Then, I agree, the Devil seems to have been frightfully active and everyone was only too well aware of his existence—presumably because they could see for themselves what was going on. But now it's so different. One doesn't come across much evidence of the Devil's existence. One doesn't even hear of people being possessed by unclean spirits or anything, and theoretical arguments don't cut much ice unless one can back them up with practical examples. You even hear people admitting that there might have been a Devil in Biblical times, but that he's apparently gone out of business now—lost interest, or something, and scrammed back to Hell in disgust!"

I wagged a finger at her.

"My dear girl, that's the whole point. I don't know if you've ever read Baudelaire, but he spills a very good bean when he says: '*The Devil's cleverest trick is to persuade us that he doesn't exist!*'—which is just what he has succeeded in doing, and never more successfully than to-day. Someone or other put it rather neatly when he said that the Devil, like the Cheshire Cat, has succeeded in vanishing, leaving no trace but a grin suspended in the air, which isn't even noticed in the hurry and bustle of the present-day world."

"You mean, he deliberately lies doggo in the hope that his existence will be forgotten and that he'll turn into something on the lines of a rather far-fetched myth, while all the time he's carrying on 'business as usual'—only more secretly and less obviously than he used to do?"

"Precisely. Another cup of tea?"

"I'd love one." She passed me her cup and I got up to refill it, my mind uncomfortably pregnant with a whole litter of conflicting emotions and

suppressed speculations. Where was all this leading? What healthy interest should a young and pretty girl, and a parson's daughter at that, have in a subject so noisome and sinister. What ought I to do? Other considerations apart, we were of different faiths; which meant, amongst other things, that if we were to plunge any deeper into theological discussion there was bound to ensue a conflict of doctrines which in the circumstances seemed to me infinitely undesirable. Besides, I am not a theologian, and the chief effect of my amateur excursions into that field has been to convince me that its exposition and disputation are best left to the professionals. Nor, let me confess, am I obsessed by missionary hankerings. However, the situation was not yet critical and I could not decently call a halt.

"I quite like that theory," Carmel remarked presently. "In fact, as soon as we've got rid of the Bish I shall try it out on Slogger Tosstick and watch him squirm! (The Reverend Basil Tosstick was her father's curate, a rather pansy young man with weak eyes, no chin, and a high falsetto voice which evoked many a speculation. I fear the sobriquet of 'Slogger' had been bestowed in a reprehensibly derisive spirit.)"

"Doesn't Slogger believe in the Devil?" I inquired.

"Good lord, no! He doesn't believe in anything, really, except his own superiority over everyone else. I'm not even sure if he believes in the Bible: I hope he does, though, otherwise your argument will fall rather flat. Never mind him, anyway: he stinks. Where were we? Oh, I know. . . . Look, Roger. This is where the water gets muddier than ever, I'm afraid. So much for the Devil. But now—what do you think about witchcraft?"

I sat up with a jerk. "Witchcraft?"

"Yes." Carmel's voice seemed to hover between the hesitant and the decisive. "We—we're coming to it now, Roger: the thing I wanted to talk to you about. I didn't mean to be so horribly long-winded; but, honestly, the whole thing *is* so utterly fantastic that I just couldn't help it. What I'm going to tell you now is completely crazy—but I swear it's true. Or anyhow, I think it is." She gave a sharp sigh and threw out a wrist in a strangely eloquent gesture of uncertainty. "That's the hell of it, Roger. *I can't be sure.* If only I could be sure one way or the other it wouldn't be so ghastly—even if it meant facing the fact that I *have* gone scatty——"

"Take it easy," I adjured her quietly, thrusting my cigarette-case under her nose. She lit up and inhaled deeply. "You asked what I thought about witchcraft," I went on. "Frankly, I'm not so sure of my ground here as I am about the existence of the Devil. I've read lots of books on the subject—there are twenty or thirty of them on those shelves over there—but I've

never yet quite succeeded in making up my mind just what the truth of the matter is. Technically speaking, a 'witch' is a person (of either sex, incidentally, and not necessarily a female) who has made a compact with the Devil: usually the Devil gets a reversion on his soul in exchange for certain material or temporal benefits here on earth. Theoretically, I see nothing inherently impossible in the idea of 'selling one's soul to the Devil'—though I admit I wouldn't know how to set about it if I felt that way inclined. Candidly, I'm rather sceptical about all the lurid details one finds in the various versions of the Faust legend and in the ancient books on witchcraft. Altogether, I can't help feeling there may be a pretty good foundation for the things one hears about witchcraft, but I also feel that most of the traditional trappings and sensational mumbo-jumbo about demonology and witchcraft are too ludicrous to be taken very seriously. . . . But—I'm always open to conviction," I concluded invitingly.

Carmel bit her lip, gazing fixedly at the carpet. There was a moment's silence, and then she said: "You wouldn't believe, for instance, that witches can fly through the air on broomsticks?"

I gave a reassuring guffaw. "Of course not!" I cried heartily. "That's one of those things that——"

I broke off in mid-sentence as Carmel's right hand seized my wrist in a grip, the marks of which were still visible next day.

"But that's just where you're wrong!" I heard her gasp in a voice that I scarcely recognised, so distorted was it with fear and horror. "Wrong, Roger: wrong—*wrong*—WRONG! God help me, I've seen it happen. *Seen it happen with my own eyes, do you hear?* . . . You think I'm mad, don't you?" she went on fiercely. "Stark, staring mad! But—I've seen it, Roger: I swear I've seen it—as plainly as I see you now. . . ."

And then with a sob she let go of my wrist and buried her face in her hands.

"Oh, God!" I heard her wail softly to herself. "I can't bear it. . . ."

6

No one can justly accuse me of misogyny; but there are times when I cannot help wishing (perhaps unreasonably, and certainly unoriginally) either that women had never been invented, or else that the difference between the sexes was simply a matter of anatomy, and not of mentality as well. Alternatively, I wish I understood their psychological make-up more thoroughly and had thus schooled myself to be a more efficient squire of dames. None the less, I insist that I am in no way allergic to young women;

on the contrary I am generally disposed to like them, and some of them appear to like me. But, as I say, there are times . . .

And this was one of them. Quite definitely one of them. And if you microcephically demand why, I can only beg you to concede that it was (if I may coin a phrase) a very pretty kettle of fish. To coin another phrase, it went too far.

It is, after all, one thing to share a sofa with a personable young woman and engage with her in a friendly feast of Reason, or even a moderate flow of Soul, on matters of abstract or concrete interest to both parties. Worse things can happen on a sofa, a blonde once told me; adding cryptically that some of the things that had happened to her on sofas were nobody's business and worse than death anyway—(but I wouldn't know just what she meant by that, especially as she appeared to be still alive, at any rate from the neck downward). I have always maintained, however, that one of the prime prerequisites of enjoying such a discussion is that one's companion should be sane, or at all events free from the more violently misological delusions. And it is quite another thing to find oneself encouched with a girl, no matter how comely and nubile, who hysterically proclaims that she has seen with her own corporal eyes a sight which even the most convinced of modern occultists hesitates to claim as having been seen at all, except in the most frenetic visions of our hag-ridden forebears.

True, Carmel had been sane enough up to that point. She had indeed gone so far as to warn me that what she was about to tell me would cause me to doubt her reason: a contingency which I had taken so little seriously that I had entirely discounted it. I had not been unprepared to hear of some disturbing and mysterious experience which might smack of the supernatural, the occult. I almost believe I was expecting to hear of a personal encounter with the Devil; and had this proved to be the case I should have been far more inclined to extend serious credence. As I had already suggested to her, I hold (somewhat eccentrically to the modern way of thinking, no doubt) that one cannot be truly agnostic towards the Devil without being, *ipso facto*, agnostic also towards God; and though to the best of my belief I had never seen the Devil, I find nothing intrinsically impossible in the notion of a spirit being able to materialise itself and assume human form. Had Carmel claimed to have seen the Devil I should perhaps have been robustly sceptical; but, while difficult to convince, I should at least have been open to conviction. But this preposterous farrago about witches sailing the skies on their traditional broomsticks placed so intolerable a strain on my credulity that it simply snapped.

However, for the moment that was beside the point. The most urgent consideration was that beside me on my sacred sofa a young woman, my guest none the less because she had come uninvited, was in very great mental distress and so overwrought that she seemed likely to go off into hysterics at any moment. My first instinct, naturally, was to rush wildly to the door and yell for Barbary—not only because this seemed essentially a woman's province, but also because Barbary is one of those tranquil, even-minded girls whose mere appearance on a scene of incipient panic would suffice to restore calm and common sense. There is nothing passive or unemotional about her; on appropriate occasions she displays a full and brimming measure of vitality, verve, passion and what-have-you; yet even then there is something restful and remedial about her. Barbary would probably have cured Carmel's distemper simply by coming into the room and murmuring "What the hell?"—yet something restrained me from summoning her. I don't know why, unless it was that I feared lest Carmel, when she became normal again, should resent the intrusion and feel that I had somehow betrayed her confidence in allowing a third person to witness the temporary upset to her equipoise.

Besides, her condition was not truly hysterical. She was sobbing her heart out, yet she was doing it quietly and under some sort of control. Her distress, acute though it was, had not crossed the borderline into frenzy. I reckoned that, all things considered, perhaps the best course I could take would be to leave her to enjoy that sovereign female remedy, a good cry. So I quietly effaced myself from the sofa, squeezed the teapot till I was able to leave a fresh cupful before her, deposited my open cigarette-case and a box of matches on a nearby table, and silently let myself out into the garden. As an afterthought I turned back at the french windows and said, clearly and evenly: "I'll be back in ten minutes." And with that I left her.

My own mind was in a bit of a turmoil, and without noticing where I was walking I suddenly found myself back opposite that desecrated patch of herbaceous border where the cat Grimalkin had laid hell into my ill-fated Angels' Trumpets. It would be tedious if not impossible to detail all the thoughts and thought-particles which flashed, pranced or glided through my mind, for they were legion. What I chiefly remember is the uncanny sense of unreality that pervaded me, coupled with a conflicting, almost paradoxical, realisation that this sense of unreality was itself unreal: that the situation was in fact only too damnably real, and as such demanded to be faced.

I remember, too, trying to make sense of those two incongruous pairs of involved coincidences which had cropped up—first, that my bed of Angels' Trumpets should have been wantonly outraged by, in all probability, a cat

named Grimalkin: a name which, though no doubt playfully enough bestowed by Carmel's sister, was traditionally associated with old-time witchcraft; and secondly, that before making her preposterous claim to have seen witches riding their besoms through our holy Sussex air, Carmel should have regaled me with an amusing account of the trouble caused by the installation of a pair of *angels' trumpets* up at the parish church. Here we had a complex situation in which two simple words were used, and legitimately used, in two entirely divergent senses, one literal and the other nomenclatory—and the unusual topic of witchcraft had occurred in connection with each. There was also, of course, a third coincidence which in calmer circumstances would of itself have seemed moderately notable—namely, that on the same day both Carmel's household and my own should be entertaining one prelate and one knight apiece; but by comparison with the other concatenation this appeared so straightforward and uncomplicated as to have no more than an elementary amusement value. As for the trivial fourth coincidence that both pairs of visitors were to lunch off roast chicken and Sussex Puddle—well, there was not even anything particularly freakish about it. The menu was typical of the kind of luncheon we used to provide for guests in our part of the world.

It was inevitable, I suppose, that these and many cognate thoughts should skip through my mind, but on the whole I did not waste too much time over them. Absorbing as these coincidental factors might be, they could well be left to take care of themselves till I had coped with the top-urgent problem of Carmel and her mental condition. And at length, having glanced at my watch and observed that nine of my ten stipulated minutes had elapsed, I squared my shoulders, prognathised my beard, and started back to the house.

To my unbounded relief, however, I now beheld Carmel's slim figure standing easily against the frame of the french windows, a smoking cigarette between her lips and the cup and saucer in her hands. Even from a distance I could see that the threat of hysteria had evaporated, and as I came nearer I noticed a rather shamefaced, self-accusing light in her eyes and a flush of embarrassment on her cheeks.

"Better?" I inquired gruffly, as I came up.

"Much, thanks. Sorry I made such an ass of myself——"

"Oh, that's all right." Oblivious of the conventions, I placed a crooked finger under her chin and levered her face gently upward till her brown eyes looked straight into mine. There was trouble in them, and not a little surprise, but they were as sane as Barbary's. Indeed, a tiny glint of amusement began to flicker therein.

"Well—am I mad?" she asked, a couple of seconds later.

I snorted at her, and grinned. "You're crazy," I differentiated; "crazy as a coon, but you're not insane."

"Well, I warned you."

"You did; but—— Do you still stick to your story?"

"I'm afraid I must, 'cos it's true—whatever you may think." Her eyes were more serious now, and quietly defiant.

"Feel fit to discuss it?"

"Yes. I'm all right now. You won't believe me, of course. I don't expect you to. But even if I only confirm your suspicion that I'm mad, I'll feel better for getting it off my chest—and perhaps you'll tell me what sort of specialist I *ought* to see!"

I nodded amicably and steered her indoors again. We resumed our previous positions on the sofa.

"Listen, chum," I led off, before she could open her mouth. "I think I ought to state my own position a little more clearly. I don't want you to misunderstand me. In particular, I don't want you to think I'm one hundred per cent incredulous about everything to do with witchcraft. I've always been mildly interested in occult subjects and I've read all the standard books, and on the principle that there can't be smoke without fire, I'm convinced that there must have been far more in the witchcraft racket than modern sceptics are prepared to allow. But that doesn't mean I'm prepared to swallow the whole works hook, line and sinker. I believe the possibly true elements of witchcraft have become overlaid with a lot of sensational claptrap invented—or at any rate conceived—by the superstitious imaginings of generations infinitely more credulous than our own. I haven't much faith in the more spectacular manifestations of 'magic' that were commonly attributed to witches—such things as being able to transform their enemies into rats or frogs, or their alleged ability to be whizzed through the sky on broomsticks on their way to the Sabbat. I don't in the least deny that Sabbats were held—in fact, I dare say they're still held to-day in some parts, for Satanism always was, and still is, a live religion, and we have it on exceptionally sound authority that 'covens' of Satanists still meet in out-of-the-way spots to worship the Devil. That's possible enough; but where I do dig my toes in is at this conception of these people being transported to their secret meeting-places otherwise than by the normal means of locomotion. In short, this notion of witches having the power to ride the night air on besoms, or on any other kind of 'rod, pole or perch' for that matter, is one of the things that my reason turns down flat. I don't believe it ever happened,

even in the palmiest days of witchcraft and black magic. But even if it happened then, I should still reject the idea of its happening in the third decade of the twentieth century."

"Why?" asked Carmel mildly.

"My dear girl, the easiest reason, surely, is that it's no longer necessary. In the old days, when there were hardly any roads and you were dependent on either a horse or your flat feet for transport, there was a case to be made out for providing witches with some secret and rapid means of getting to the Sabbat and back. To-day that's an anachronism. What with cars and buses and push-bikes and what-not, where's the need of magic broomsticks?"

"I see." Carmel's voice was quiet and dispassionate now. "Look, Roger. Would it surprise you if I said that I absolutely agree with every word you've spoken? Honestly, I couldn't agree more! You've summed up my own position exactly—or rather, what *was* my position till—till it happened. Actually, it's still my position when I can think reasonably and forget—what I've seen. But that's the snag, Roger. I mean, what *can* one think when what you see with your eyes is utterly contrary to reason: when you see things that you know you *can't* be seeing—and yet you *are* seeing them?"

"But surely," I said gently, "you're only describing a not uncommon state of affairs popularly known as an optical delusion? Or—couldn't it have been a dream?"

She did not reply immediately. Instead she glanced at me, looked away again, hesitated, and then, with a pale ghost of a smile, looked me in the eyes again.

"I'm going to do something rather shocking, even for a parson's daughter," she said with a malicious little smile. "I'm not trying to—to vamp you or anything, but I want to show you something. Please look. . . ."

And with that the wench coolly proceeded to pull back the skirt of her linen frock higher and ever higher above her knees, till a drastic expanse of bare thighs, bounded only by the embroidered hem of a very brief pair of panties, was exposed to my startled gaze. The gesture was not indecent, but it was as immodest as it was unexpected. Her thighs were white and quite disturbingly shapely, having little or none of the adolescent immaturity of her lower legs. The texture of the skin was fine and without blemish, except for one solitary dark-red spot, as tiny as a pin's head, high up on the outer face of her right thigh. Still at a decorous distance from me, Carmel indicated this mark with a polished nail.

"It looks like a prick," I hazarded with a frown. There seemed to be a minute speck of dried blood clinging to the spot.

"It *is* a prick," she confirmed, standing up and letting her frock fall back to its normal knee-length. "I did it myself, as a matter of fact."

"Why?"

"Guess!"

"How can I? Unless—— My God! You mean, to make sure you were awake?"

She nodded. "To make quite sure, beyond the remotest shadow of doubt, that I wasn't dreaming," she agreed. She sank back on the sofa, turned troubled eyes towards me, and said: "So what?"

"But, Carmel," I pressed her anxiously, "that's a fresh prick. When did you do it—last night?"

"At about half-past three this morning." She gave a little shudder and then, impulsively, stretched out a hand and gripped my coat-sleeve. "Roger, don't get me wrong, will you? I know the whole thing stinks, but I swear that prick is genuine. I know it *proves* nothing, in either direction: not even that I didn't come up here with some sort of freudian urge to show you my thighs! I didn't—but I realise that it doesn't count for much in the way of circumstantial evidence, all the same. I could easily have done it to bolster up any kind of phoney yarn I wanted to stuff you up with—but I swear it's nothing like that. I did it because, at the moment, I was seeing something which I felt I couldn't possibly be seeing unless I were asleep and dreaming; and though I *knew* I was as wide awake as I am now, I not only pinched myself with my fingers (as I'd often done before, as a matter of fact), but I deliberately snatched a brooch off my dressing-table and stabbed it into my thigh till I nearly yelled. I could show you the blood on my nightie, if it would help to convince you."

One of two things was certain: either that Carmel was an incredibly brilliant actress, or else that she was speaking the truth—or at any rate what she sincerely believed to be the truth. And, having more than once seen her perform at the Village Hall with the amateur dramatic club, and having reluctantly concluded that, in all charity, she was more ornamental on the boards than histrionically inspired, I seemed to have no alternative now but to accept (though with ten million reservations) her assertion as being true. My reason shrieked in protest, but I had no other course.

"Let's get it quite clear," I suggested, massaging my beard. "You're telling me—and please note that I'm not laughing at you for telling me—that at half-past three this morning you deliberately drove the pin of a brooch into your thigh till the pain and the blood convinced you that you were awake, and that therefore a certain spectacle that you'd seen, or were

seeing, wasn't a dream or nightmare or anything like that. And further, you ask me to believe that this strange spectacle, which excited your incredulity to the extent of forcing you to inflict physical pain on yourself, was that of witches riding on broomsticks——"

"Not witches," she interrupted me. "Only one witch, this time. In fact, I suppose I've no right to call her a witch. What I saw was a female figure sitting astride an ordinary gardener's besom—a bundle of birch twigs bound round a pole—silhouetted against the moon and skimming over the tree-tops in the garden. I saw her quite close—thirty or forty yards away at the most, so I couldn't have been mistaken. The moon's full, and it was remarkably bright."

Her tone was so calm and circumstantial that the hair at the back of my neck bristled as reluctant belief conjured up some atavistically instinctive fear of the supernatural. But I managed to keep a firm grip on my emotions.

"All right," I said, throwing out my hands in involuntary acquiescence. "Do you mind if I ask a few questions?"

"Not a bit," said Carmel. "Please do."

"You say you saw only one witch this time, implying that you had seen more than one on some previous occasion."

"Yes. I once saw four or five of them at once, but that was exceptional. I've often seen two, but sometimes only one."

"Right. Since when have you been seeing these things?"

She wrinkled her brow in thought. "I think the first time was about last September," she replied eventually.

"And how many times has it happened since?"

"Unfortunately I can't say exactly. I haven't kept any record. I should say a dozen times, at least."

"Good God! And you've never told anyone?"

"No. How on earth could I, Roger? Who would have believed me? Even you don't believe me, though you're being very sweet about it."

"You didn't even tell your sister?"

"*No!*" There was something so sharp and decisive in her negative that I was momentarily taken aback. Without knowing the Gilchrists at all well, I had always had the impression that the two girls were, if anything, on rather better terms than many pairs of sisters contrive to be. While not inseparable, they were often out together and always seemed to behave like good companions. The tone of Carmel's reply now appeared to suggest otherwise; but it was no concern of mine. I continued my interrogation.

"When you saw this—this female figure at half-past three this morning, you were presumably looking out of your bedroom window?"

"Yes."

"*Why?*" I shot at her.

"Why?"

"Yes—why? What were you doing at your window at that unearthly hour? What made you get up?"

"But—I hadn't been to bed. At least, I'd lain down *on* my bed for a bit, but I hadn't got *into* it. Anyway, I'd been at the window for ages before she appeared."

"*Why?*" I asked again.

"I was waiting for her," said Carmel. "I couldn't sleep till I knew she had come."

I groaned, silently praying for strength. "How did you know she would come?" I inquired patiently.

"Because I'd seen her start out nearly five hours earlier," she answered with equal patience. Then she gave a dry little laugh, and went on: "Poor Roger! You're finding all this pretty far-fetched, aren't you? I'm sorry. I know just how you feel. It's bad enough for me, and I'm—well, not hardened to it exactly, but at least I've been through it before."

"My dear Carmel," said I, "if you were wearing a brooch now, or I had a tie-pin, I should take a dashed good stab at myself where it would hurt most! Alternatively, I might get you to pull a few hairs out of my beard, and then if I found myself landing you a straight left on your naughty little nose I should know I was really here, hearing all I am hearing. . . . But let's get on. You say you had seen this 'witch' set out nearly five hours earlier. About half-past ten, that would be?"

"Nearer a quarter to eleven."

"Oh, well. Alone?"

"No. There were two of them then. There often are, as I told you."

"But only one came back?"

"Yes."

"Anything queer about that?"

"Well, it has happened before, but it's unusual. As a rule, when two start out, they both come back."

"I see." Needless to say I didn't see at all, but I had to say something. "I'd like some more details about these witch-flights, Carmel. You say

you've witnessed about a dozen, so you must have gleaned some general impressions. First, how fast do they fly?"

"Speed variable," she answered thoughtfully. "It isn't easy to estimate, but pretty slow by ordinary standards. Nothing like an aeroplane, I mean. I'd put the maximum at thirty to thirty-five miles an hour, but I've also seen them practically hovering, or only just moving. I suppose it'd be against the laws of gravity to hover," she added with a faint smile.

"My dear child," I exploded, "the whole blasted business is against every blasted law of nature and science ever invented! Lord help us! If I'm to believe that people can ride about on broomsticks at all, without even an outboard motor to help them, I'm not going to boggle about their ability to hover! Which reminds me: do they make any noise in flight?"

"Not really, I think. Once or twice, on a very still night, I've thought I could hear an extremely faint *swish*, but I wouldn't even swear to that."

I grunted. "Altitude?" I demanded.

"Again, nothing like an aeroplane. Pretty low, when I've seen them. A couple of hundred feet at the maximum, but more often just skimming the tree-tops, as I said."

"You say you've seen them quite close-to," I reminded her. "Close enough to make out any details?"

"Naturally that depends on visibility. This morning it was pretty bright, but some nights I could hardly see a thing. Still, I've seen all I wanted to." Again she shuddered.

"Then tell me what they look like," I urged. "Are they like the traditional witches in kids' story-books—I mean, 'secret, black and midnight hags' with hooked noses and pointed chins, with conical hats and ragged cloaks streaming in the wind?"

"No," said Carmel decisively. "Nothing like that at all. Those I've seen were all quite young, and had nothing on at all. Not a rag. Even in the depths of winter they were stark naked!"

I gasped, and swore under my breath. That last question had been in the nature of a trap, or at all events a test to ascertain to what extent her visions were derivative. But she had taken the obstacle in her stride without even noticing that it was there. I steeled myself to pursue this grisly matter to the end.

"You've never been near enough to recognise any of them?" I suggested. "Of course, at night all cats are grey, but——"

"On the contrary." Carmel's voice sounded as if it were not far off breaking-point. "That's just the most hellish part of the whole business, Roger. I suppose I must tell you, but—— That night when I saw several together I *thought* I recognised two or three—well, perhaps 'recognised' is too strong a word, but at any rate they reminded me of various females who live round here. Just imagination, probably. . . . But there is one I always recognise, without any possibility of doubt. I recognise her only too well. I only wish I didn't. . . ."

Her lovely face was distorted now into a mask of grief and horror. My own hair was on end, too, and I simply had to force the next inevitable question out of my suddenly parched throat. I fumbled for her hand and squeezed it for reassurance.

"Who?" I croaked—though a shaft of prescience had already pierced my brain, making her answer virtually unnecessary. And sure enough:

"My sister Andrea," she breathed tensely; and burst into tears.

7

Without a word I got up from the sofa and stalked purposefully across to my desk. On it, amid a thousand other things, lies a little Pathan knife, no bigger than a skean-dhu, which I took from a mayhem-minded tribesman many years ago. Its nominal function now is for slitting envelopes, though I doubt if I remember to use it thus more than once or twice a year. Its blade is sharp and it tapers away to a very nasty point: a perilous toy altogether. I caught it up and, biting my lip, deliberately drove its point into the fleshy part of my left forearm.

It hurt. It bled.

And it was just at this fabulous juncture that the telephone chose to ring. So bemused was I that the sudden sound made me jump. With a conventional word of apology to Carmel I lifted the handset and said curtly:

"Roger Poynings."

The voice that answered me was that of young Sue Barnes, one of the operators at our local exchange. Sue and I have been friends since, as a flaxen-haired filly of five or six, she used to ride round on the box of her daddy's milk-cart and bandy cracks with me over the garden gate. Nowadays her friendship takes the form of warning me in advance, when possible, of impending trunk or toll calls with an indication of their source: a facility which gives one a few valuable seconds in which to orientate one's mind in the appropriate direction.

"London call coming," said Sue; and after a deafening miscellany of clicks and a brief wait in the course of which I could hear a distant radio moaning the sickly sacchariferous strains of *You Are My Heart's Delight*, a male voice said:

"New Scotland Yard here. Mr. Roger Poynings?"

I suppose I had already exhausted my stock of surprise for that morning. Had the caller announced himself as the Pope of Rome or the man Joad I doubt if I should have turned a hair.

"Roger Poynings here," I admitted, dabbing my bloody forearm with a handkerchief.

"Chief-Inspector Thrupp wants you, sir," said the voice. "I'm putting you straight through now."

Another volley of clicks, and a well-remembered voice said: "Good morning, Roger!"

"Good morning, Robert," said I with cordiality. "And how does yo' symptoms seem to segashuate?"

Once the call's point of origin had been disclosed I had, of course, felt sure it would be Thrupp, for I know no one else at the Yard likely to ring me up. Nevertheless I was surprised to hear from him. My friendship with Robert Thrupp is one of those pleasant, almost casual, affairs which is none the less firm for being distinctly intermittent. The same fate which originally brought us together has decreed that our relations should comprise periodic spells of intensive association, punctuated by considerable intervals when we neither see nor hear of each other for months or even years on end: when, as Barbary puts it, we take it in turn to send each other Christmas cards. As his crisp voice came over the wires on this May morning I reflected that roughly eleven months had elapsed since I had last heard it. Despite my preoccupation with Carmel Gilchrist I was pleased to hear it now.

"Roger, I'm in a hurry," Thrupp went on in a businesslike tone. "Been sent for by our old friend Superintendent Bede, of Steyning. I'm coming down by road, almost immediately. I'm not clear why, but I suppose I'll find out when I get there. The case is somewhere in your district, I gather: a place called Rootham, wherever that may be."

"Five miles over the Downs: nine or ten by road," I told him. "Why, what the devil's happened there?" Rootham is a mere hamlet tucked away in a hidden fold of the Downs, with a meagre population consisting almost exclusively of farm-hands and shepherds.

“Somebody’s dead,” said Thrupp laconically. “That’s all I can say for the moment. The point is, is there a pub there, or anywhere I can stay?”

“Bless you, no. I doubt if there’s even a vacant pigsty. My dear man, you must come and stay with us, as usual. Barbary’ll be thrilled. She still adores you secretly!”

“You’re sure it’s convenient, Roger? I don’t want to sponge. Are you on your own?”

“Not exactly, but as near as dammit.”

“Who’s with you?”

“No one at this moment, but we’ve a brace of uncles due any time now. No need to worry about them, though. They’re quite harmless.”

“Uncles?” Thrupp sounded a trifle disappointed. “H’m. I don’t know ____”

“Taken either singly or as a pair, they have a certain entertainment value,” I pursued. “One’s an archbishop and the other’s a field-marshal, so between them——”

“What!” Thrupp was obviously staggered.

“Quite respectable old baskets,” I continued. “They won’t get in your hair, I promise you.”

“Crikey!” breathed Thrupp, who is incurably addicted to vulgar ejaculations. “Book me a room at the Green Maiden, old boy.”

“But why the hell?” I persisted. “We’ve lots of room here. Even an archbishop can’t sleep in more than one bed at a time, and in any case Barbary would never forgive me—or you either—if you went to the Green Maiden. Moreover, I’m quite sure Uncle Odo would excommunicate me, and Uncle Piers would quite definitely horsewhip me, if they got to know they’d been done out of meeting a genuine dyed-in-the-wool Yard man. And if you say you don’t give a damn for my uncles, at least you might take pity on me. I’ve just finished a book and ought to be starting another, but I can’t even think of a title, far less a plot. Which being so, it is quite plainly your duty to come to my aid. I need you, my Thrupp. My soul cries out for you. As pants the hart——”

He interrupted me with a chuckle. “Have you still got that appalling beard?” he demanded irrelevantly.

“It’s a lovely beard,” I rejoined hotly. “Quite the best I’ve ever had, as you’ll be able to see for yourself when you get here. But if I hear any more about the Green Maiden I shall go straight up to the bathroom and shave it off, just to spite you, and then you won’t be able to see it at all.”

Thrupp emitted a cry of mock-terror. “I’d better come,” he capitulated. “I still wake up in a muck-sweat when I remember what you looked like when you cut it off last year. All right, then—if you’re quite sure I shan’t be in the way?”

“I’m positive.”

“Or in Barbary’s? She’ll have her hands full——”

“Have you ever known Barbary with her hands too full?”

“Can’t say I have,” he admitted. “But——”

“Will you be here for lunch?” I cut him short. “Roast cock and Sussex Puddle——”

I heard him smack his lips. “Can’t be done, worse luck,” he said regretfully. “I’m meeting Bede at Rootham at half-twelve, and I suppose I’ll be at it for the rest of the day. Expect me some time this evening—if you’re sure it’s all right for me to come. I’ll give you a ring from somewhere when I know what the case is and how it’s going. At present I know next to nothing. . . .”

And then, after a few valedictory quips, we hung up.

8

My conversation with Thrupp, while it had not made me entirely oblivious of Carmel’s presence, had at least diverted my mind for the time being from the fantastic business on which we had been engaged when the interruption came.

Carmel, after watching me open-eyed as I conducted my bloody experiment with the Pathan knife, had like myself been brought back to earth by the telephone bell. Then she had dried her eyes and politely made as if to step out into the garden to allow me to take the call in privacy; but I had waved her back, and she had since been passing the time by wandering round my bookshelves while I conversed with Thrupp. As I replaced the handset and gave the already congealing wound on my forearm a final dab I saw that she had taken down a biggish volume and was slowly turning the pages with fingers which fumbled nervously. And when she looked up at me I saw an expression in her eyes which reminded me of a bird fascinated by a snake.

I recognised the book at a glance, and wished she had not found it. At the best of times it was hardly suitable reading for a young woman; indeed, it was lodged in a glass-fronted bookcase which I usually keep locked, but which I had undone for Barbary’s benefit so that the case and books might be dusted and polished. It was Cyprian Tuckaberry’s rare *Way of the*

Witches, possibly the most detailed and outspoken treatise on the occult ever published.

I strode across the room, conscious that I must get it away from her; and I think Carmel herself, having by now divined what manner of book it was, would have been only too relieved to get rid of it but for one of those odd little accidents which (by leave of the poet Burns) so often upset the plans of mice and men. For, as I came up to her, the book by chance fell open at a full-page illustration, a reproduction of an old-time print entitled 'Return from the Sabbat.' It represented a flight of witches, airborne astride their besoms, against a melodramatically moonlit night sky of thunder-clouds and forked lightning. Intrinsically and artistically of no great merit, what made it startlingly relevant to Carmel's fevered story was that the witches pictured therein were none of your withered, toothless hags, sunk-eyed and lantern-jawed, with pointed hats and sinister floating draperies, but young and shapely girls, naked and superlatively shameless, with luscious, sensual limbs and faces that would have been beautiful but for the meretricious gleams of jaded debauchery in their sinful, hypersophisticated eyes, the whole obscene abandon of their bodies as they flew back, weary yet evilly exalted, from their unholy revels in some far-off secret spot.

Unpleasantness apart it was, as I say, astonishingly relevant. Despite my strong intentions, I found myself momentarily incapable of snatching the book from Carmel's hand, and for a few moments we stood in silent contemplation of this picture, at once absorbed and repelled. Then I took it from her and replaced it on its shelf, found my key-ring, and locked it up. By the time I had done these things Carmel had left my side and was leaning moodily against the frame of the french window, gazing out into the garden. Slowly and thoughtfully I joined her.

Her troubled eyes sought mine. "So, you see, I was right," she said, a mirthless smile curving one corner of her lips.

I fumbled for words. "You mean, about what witches look like?" She nodded. I went on: "You'd never seen that picture before, Carmel?"

"No, never."

"Nor any like it: on the same lines?"

"No. I don't think I've even seen any serious pictures of witches, as a matter of fact, except the stupid, childish, fairytale sort we were talking about. That makes it all the more—uncanny."

"I know. Tell me—did Andrea look like that, Carmel?"

"Yes, Roger." Her voice was low and unhappy.

"Poor you!" A wave of pity swept over me, and I rested a friendly hand on her shoulder. She responded presently by facing round and giving me a more natural smile.

"Does that mean you're beginning to believe this crazy tale of mine?" she asked me. "Have I convinced you that I'm not making it up as I go along, and that I'm not trying to pull your leg?"

"Listen, chum." I drew a deep breath and took the plunge. "If it's the slightest comfort to you, I hereby assure you that I don't think you are either making it up or trying to pull my leg. Actually, I believe you have only told me what you firmly believe to be one hundred per cent pure gospel truth. I mean, I believe you really did see all that you've told me you saw: that your whole story is soberly based on the evidence of your own eyes, with nothing added or exaggerated. . . . On the other hand, I'm bound to say this also: that whereas I believe that *you* actually saw what you've told me, I'm not convinced that if anyone else (myself, for instance) had been standing beside you in your bedroom at half-past three this morning, he would have seen the same things as you saw. Quite frankly, I don't believe he'd have seen anything unusual except the remarkable spectacle of you pricking yourself with a brooch!"

She considered this gravely.

"You still stick to your 'optical delusion' theory, then?" she inquired a moment later.

"Let's call it that, for want of a better term. I don't speak this psychological jargon very well, and my phraseology may be a bit old-fashioned. You maintain that you saw your sister riding naked on a broomstick. Well, I'm not saying you didn't—in fact, I quite believe you did. What I do say is that if I'd been there, too, *I* shouldn't have seen anything of the sort. What's more, I'm willing to bet that if you'd had the enterprise to take a peep into your sister's room you'd have found her tucked up safely in bed, sleeping the sleep of the fair!"

"I certainly should not," she returned quietly. "My hat, you don't suppose I'm such a dimwit as all that, do you? You don't imagine I'd be here, bothering you with this awful bogus-sounding spook story if I wasn't quite sure of my ground? . . . Listen, Roger. What I should have told you, and what you naturally don't know, is that Andrea and I to all intents and purposes share a room. Not quite, but the next thing to it, anyway. Till about two years ago we actually did share a room: a big room that used to be our night nursery when we first came here. The only difference now is that it's been divided into two halves by a partition, seven or eight feet high and with

a door in it—which as often as not is wide open. I ought to have explained this before, but I'm in such a haze that I can't even tell a story properly. Anyway, I'm telling you now, Roger, that both Andrea and I were in bed and had our lights out by a quarter-past ten last night—but that Andrea was missing from her bed from roughly a quarter to eleven till about twenty to four this morning. I can't guarantee the exact times, but those are near enough."

She paused, but I said nothing.

"I checked up on that at least a dozen times during the night," she went on. "I always do, on these occasions. Last night was the same as usual—bed empty, bedding thrown back, pyjies on the floor just where she'd stepped out of them, room deserted."

I groaned. Now, as ever, the wench was so damningly circumstantial: not of intent, I felt sure, but fortuitously and quite ingenuously.

"Yet by twenty to four, or thereabouts, she was back in bed—is that right?" I checked.

"Yes. She was asleep by a quarter to four, anyhow."

"Did you see her arrive back in her room?"

"No, but I heard her. Very faintly, but quite distinctly. I heard the door click, and her breathing, and the tiny noise of the bed-springs as she got into bed. She's as silent as a cat, but I can always just hear her if I'm expecting her and listening hard."

"You didn't think of taking a peep at her arriving——"

"My God, no! I daren't. Actually, it's the other way round. It's Andrea who always takes a peep at me on these occasions—the last thing before she goes and the first thing when she gets back, to make sure I'm safely asleep. I always pretend to be asleep. I think she—she'd kill me if she found me awake!"

"Kill you?" My voice reflected my incredulity. "My dear girl, surely that's the most utter rubbish? Dash it, this is still a free country of sorts, and even the Government doesn't yet claim to lay down the times at which we're to sleep or be awake. What right has your own sister to be peeved if you happen to be awake at half-past three in the morning? Surely she'd have no call to accuse you of spying on her if you were suffering from insomnia just as she was coming or going."

"Roger, I tried that once." For at least the fourth time that morning Carmel gave a shudder as some obviously distressing memory came back to her. "I tried it once, quite innocently—but never again. Back in the autumn, that was. It was the second or third time I'd heard Andrea get up and go out

after pretending to go to bed, and my curiosity got the better of me. So I tried to have a peep—and, well, she caught me at it, and—oh, never mind the details. She nearly killed me then and I've never dared try it again. . . . As a matter of fact, I didn't know then what I know now. I simply thought she was—well, going to meet a man, or something."

I gave her another cigarette. "If it isn't an untactful question," I said, as I held a match for her, "is she given to that sort of thing: surreptitious dates with men, and so forth?"

Avoiding my eyes, Carmel nodded affirmatively.

"Not that that worries me particularly," she went on a moment later. "In fact, I'd give the world to know it was nothing more than that. I suppose it's wrong, but I could be perfectly broad-minded about it and I'd never dream of giving her away. That's what roused my suspicions so badly, that night she caught me peeping at her. After all, she knew me quite well enough to realise that even if I *had* discovered she was going out to meet a man, I wasn't a bit pi or straightlaced about that sort of thing. We'd grown up together for something like twenty years, and slept together for eighteen of them, and I couldn't understand why she should get so fearfully steamed-up just because I'd found out she was being—naughty. It wouldn't have been the first time, anyway, and she'd often told me about her affairs herself. And it seemed so utterly out of character that she should fly into such a fury and do her best to murder me—as she very nearly did. Honestly, Roger, my first reaction was to feel *hurt* that she should ever imagine me capable of giving her away."

Even now, poor Carmel sounded quite indignant; and somehow I felt I could see her point.

"By the way," I put in, "someone once told me that you and Andrea are not full sisters—that your father was married twice, or something. You know how these bits of gossip get round. . . ."

"But that's quite true," she confirmed promptly. "We are actually only half-sisters, though a lot of people don't know it and we don't even always remember it ourselves. Andrea's mother died when she was born, and Daddy married my mother fairly soon afterwards—about a couple of years, I think—so to all intents and purposes Mummy was always Andrea's mother as well as mine, and neither of us really realised that we weren't ordinary sisters till we were told, ages afterwards. I'm nearly five years younger than Andrea, you know, and of course by the time I was born Andrea had grown to look on Mummy as the only mother she'd ever had. It was always the

same while Mummy was alive. She died ten or eleven years ago, while we were at Maniston. That was why Daddy gave up that living and came here."

"I see." I vaguely remembered having heard something of the kind when Mr. Gilchrist had first come to Merrington. "Tell me more about your own relations with Andrea, Carmel. What you said just now rather shook me, to tell the truth. I'd always had the impression that, as sisters go, you got on pretty well together."

She did not reply immediately. Then: "We always used to be pretty matey," she said rather wistfully. "In fact, up to a point, we're still on quite good terms with each other, and we don't often scrap openly. Even that scene I told you about didn't upset things half as badly as you might think. We've neither of us ever referred to it since, and I suppose we both pretend it's all forgiven and forgotten long ago—as I expect it would have been if we *had* referred to it, and had it out, and kissed each other well again. But that's just what we didn't do, unfortunately. I did almost succeed in screwing myself up to saying I was sorry for my part in the business, but I never actually brought it off—and Andrea didn't make any approach either. You see—how can I explain?—well, for one thing, the five years between our ages is a much bigger gap than it sounds, you know, and Andrea doesn't let me forget it. . . . Still, as I say, we used to be pretty matey." A sigh completed her exposition.

I pulled my beard thoughtfully. "And does the deterioration of relations date, by any chance, from the partitioning of the nursery into two separate bedrooms?" I hazarded.

She shot me a quick glance, then nodded in silence. "In a way," she admitted; "though you may have got it the wrong way round."

"The partitioning was primarily Andrea's idea, I suppose?" I asked. The deduction seemed eminently reasonable; for it was clear that if Andrea were indeed mixed up with any funny business which required facilities for getting out secretly at night, whether to meet a human lover or for any less ordinary reason, it must have been highly inconvenient to have an alert-minded young sister sharing her bedroom. But I was wrong, it seemed.

"On the contrary, the idea was entirely mine," Carmel said. "Actually, to begin with, I went to Daddy and demanded a room of my own: said I thought I was old enough to be entitled to one—I didn't give any other reason—and rather to my surprise he at once agreed, in principle, instead of flying off the handle as I'd half expected he might. The only trouble was that the New Vicarage, as you know, isn't very big, and Daddy pointed out that if I had a room of my own we should be left with only one guest-room, which

is a rather narrow margin when you're liable to have bishops and archdeacons and things descending on you out of the blue. Then again, the nursery was really much too big for Andrea to have all on her own, so in the end we compromised by putting up a partition and making a new door in Andrea's part of the room so that she could get in and out without coming through my side. It wasn't a bit what I wanted really, but it was better than nothing."

"And what were Andrea's reactions?"

"Oh, at first she was frightfully up-stage and indignant that I should have dared to go to Daddy without consulting her first. She bellyached so badly that the whole thing nearly fell through; but fortunately (and surprisingly) Daddy took my side and she gradually came round to the idea. Once the scheme got under way she became even more keen on it than I was—which shows, I imagine, that her original opposition was chiefly due to the fact that I'd taken the initiative. She's very much the elder sister, and I s'pose she thought it was a ghastly nerve on my part."

The ice was thin, but I delicately ventured a further tentative pace forward.

"And what was your real reason for wanting a room of your own?" I asked, as casually as I could.

To my relief she did not take my question amiss, though she seemed rather at a loss to find a short answer to it.

"I suppose it was what the divorce-hounds call 'incompatibility of temperament,' " she replied at length, with a faint smile. "I'm not saying that some of the fault wasn't on my side—it probably was. But the fact remains that for a long time past—a very long time—I'd been gradually realising that Andrea and I had quite different outlooks on life over—well, lots of things. Not that that necessarily matters a hell of a lot: it'd be a pretty dull world if we all thought the same about everything, wouldn't it? But at least I think it's only right that everyone should be allowed her own opinion, and the trouble about Andrea was that she wouldn't just agree to differ. She was always sneering at my ideas and trying to convert me to her own, and taking advantage of being older than me to try and impose her will on me, so to speak. And the older I got, the more things I found myself disagreeing with her about: some of them quite trivial, others—to my way of thinking—rather important. . . . I don't know why I'm telling you all this," she continued, after a pause. "I'm not in the habit of running round bleating about this sort of thing to everyone, but—well, I feel I've got to tell someone now, or else blow up. Even now, I don't know how to go on without giving you an

entirely wrong impression. It's largely a question of vocabulary, I think. I don't want to be unjust to Andrea, and still less do I want to make myself out to be any better than I am. I'm not a plaster saint. I wouldn't even call myself 'good.' Least of all am I a pharisee. . . ." She had been speaking with quiet vehemence, but now she broke off with a sudden little laugh.

"That word always reminds me of one of Daddy's brighter sermons," she explained, seeing my surprise. "He generally manages to pack a sweet little sting into the tail of his sermons, you know, and on this occasion, after trotting out all the usual blah about the Pharisee and the Publican, he ended up by saying that much as the Pharisee was to be blamed and the Publican praised on this particular occasion, the parable was liable to have a dangerous effect on unintelligent people who didn't realise that the Publican's humility could easily turn into a particularly noxious form of spiritual pride unless it was absolutely sincere. 'I can see whole rows of you down there,' roared Daddy in his most aggressive manner, 'telling your smug selves that this Publican had nothing on you when it came to humility —and I can almost smell your breath as you complacently say to yourselves, *Thank God I am not as that dreadful Pharisee*!' . . . You see what I mean, Roger? There's nothing more beastly than to pose as being better than one is, especially by comparison with anyone else—and that's why I hate seeming to suggest that I'm any 'better' than Andrea. It isn't my place to judge her, anyway—and yet, well, I felt I'd either got to break away from her, or else go under with her." Carmel gave a little stamp with a sandalled foot and spread out her hands despairingly. "My hat! Did you ever hear anything quite so smug as *that*?" she wailed.

"But I understand exactly what you mean," I consoled her. "At least, I'm almost sure I do. There are times in one's life, Carmel, when people like you and me—ordinary, decent, sinful, sensual, government-issue human beings who are neither very good nor very bad in our daily lives—find themselves up against someone of quite a different kind: someone who isn't just ordinarily decent and sinful and sensual, but who is either conspicuously better than ourselves, a kind of natural saint, or else conspicuously worse—that is, someone who seems to be definitely *wicked*, whereas we are only sinful. There are in fact a few people in this world who seem to be literally 'abnormal'—that is, either above or below the 'norm'—either for good or evil. Once you realise this perhaps you won't feel so embarrassingly 'smug' about trying to tell me that you discovered this kind of abnormality in your half-sister. That's what you're getting at, isn't it?"

"I suppose it is. Yes, I see what you mean, Roger. I simply hate to say it, 'cos in spite of everything I'm still quite fond of Andrea, and I can't forget

that she *has* been very sweet to me sometimes. But you're right. There is that essential difference between us. Lord knows, I'm liable to break all the Ten Commandments at once, or one after another—in fact, I've done practically everything but covet my neighbour's ox at some time or other!—but I think I can still say there isn't anything deliberately 'wicked' about me. Andrea probably hasn't committed half as many sins as I have, and yet—yes, she's wicked where I'm not. And it was when I began to realise that Andrea didn't do things simply out of weakness or self-indulgence, like me, but for the sheer joy of being wicked, that I got the breeze up and started to break away. Andrea never gave way to weakness, Roger. She's always been a far stronger character than I am, and far more capable of resisting temptation if she'd wanted to. That, somehow, was the beastly part of it."

"I can understand that," I encouraged her.

"I'll give you one tiny example of the sort of thing I mean, Roger. Quite a footling little thing in itself, yet completely typical of the difference between us—and, incidentally, much easier to tell you about than some later episodes. When we were kids—say, when I was nine or ten and Andrea thirteen or fourteen—we were always short of money. We got our pocket-money, of course, the same as other children, but it never seemed to go as far as we wanted it to. Well, when I ran out of cash and wanted something I couldn't afford, I used to go to Daddy and tell him; and though he used to growl a bit and call me a spendthrift (on a shilling a week!), I always got what I wanted without much trouble. Andrea, on the other hand, never by any chance bothered Daddy for money. Oh, dear, no. She used to steal it from him—which meant that not only did she always have as much money as she wanted, but she got it without the trouble of asking for it, not to mention the fact that Daddy in his innocence used to hold her up to me as a shining example of thrift and wise spending! But that wasn't all. You see, Daddy himself is frightfully careless about money: never knows how much he's got, or ought to have, and he's always leaving it lying about and can never remember where he's put it. So it would have been quite easy for Andrea (and for me, too, if I'd been that way inclined) to help herself without any risk of being found out—but no, that wasn't naughty enough for her. Instead, she always waited till Sunday evening, when Daddy would bring the day's collection money across from the church and park it in a big silver bowl on the dining-room sideboard till Monday morning, when he would count it and take it to the bank. By that time, of course, Andrea had helped herself to whatever she wanted—never anything much, you know: just a couple of bob or half a crown, which Daddy would have given her without the slightest hesitation if she'd had the decency to ask him for it.

But no, she had to steal it; and she had to steal it, not from Daddy's private money but from the church collections, *because it was wickeder*! Technically, I believe, it is a form of sacrilege, isn't it?"

"It sounds as if it might be," I murmured.

"We used to have terrific arguments and squabbles about it, Roger. You see, she was always trying to make me do it, too. Sometimes she'd tempt me by talking about all the lovely things I could buy if I had a couple of bob extra to spend. Other times she'd jeer at me for not having the guts to steal, and dare me to prove I had—which, let me say, was the more dangerous form of provocation in my case, 'cos I always prided myself on having guts and despised people who hadn't. All the same, I never gave in. I don't know why: it certainly wasn't just a question of morality, and it wasn't that I funked it. It was partly obstinacy—but an even stronger reason was that I couldn't see any *need* to steal, when I knew I could get what I wanted by just asking Daddy for it. . . . I needn't labour the point, need I, Roger? As I say, it was rather a footling business in itself, yet it really does illustrate the difference between Andrea and me. Frankly, if I needed something really badly and couldn't get it by any legitimate means, I doubt if I'd have any scruples whatever about pinching it—believe it or not, I'm definitely unmoral that way! But if you confront Andrea with the choice of getting what she wants by legal or illegal means, you can depend on her plumping for the illegal means every time, simply because she gets a kick out of being wicked. I'm afraid I've often done far worse things than pinching collection money—but at least I'm only naughty when I can't be good. Andrea would always *prefer* to be naughty than good, and says so quite openly—perhaps not to the world in general, but to me. She makes no secret of it where I'm concerned. It's her philosophy of life!"

"You really do amaze me, Carmel," I said. "Naturally I had no idea. It's pretty grim, isn't it?—especially her trying to lead you astray with her. You must have had a tough time."

"It used to be rather beastly when I was younger. You know, one can't help being pretty much under the influence of a sister who's older than oneself, and it isn't easy to resist suggestions—and orders. Quite candidly, I didn't always succeed in resisting. I did about stealing money, but there were plenty of other things and sometimes she got her way with me—more often than I'd care to admit, actually. All the same, even when she did manage to make me do what she wanted I somehow never quite lost my—my will to resist, I suppose you'd call it. And, what's more, in the end I won."

"You won?" I repeated, puzzled. "You mean, she's given up trying now?"

She nodded. "Yes, thank goodness. I don't have any trouble with her nowadays. I never have had, since that partition was put up. Funny, isn't it?"

"But——"

"Don't ask me to explain, Roger. I can't. I don't pretend to understand how it works: I'm just content to be thankful that it does. It may sound crazy (like everything else I've told you this morning!), but it was definitely the partition that did it. It doesn't even reach to the ceiling and there's a communicating door in it which we keep wide open as often as not, but in some mysterious way it does the trick. It may be only symbolic, but somehow it does mean that I've got a room of my own, and Andrea has long since accepted this and resigned herself to leaving me alone. I noticed the difference the moment the partition went up: a perfectly wizard sense of freedom came over me, such as I'd never known when I was actually sleeping with Andrea: a sort of freedom from her influence and—domination. I felt free and sort of self-reliant for the first time in my life. The funny thing was, Andrea seemed to accept this, too. From that night onwards she quite changed towards me: gave up trying to make me do things I didn't want to, stopped dominating me, and allowed me to go my own way without interference. The result has been that we've got on ever so much better since—far less intimate, of course, but much better friends. Naturally we still have rows and squabbles (what sisters don't?), but they've been pretty straightforward rows and, with one exception, of quite a different kind from the old sort. We had one absolute hell of a row a few months back—over a man, I'm afraid—but apart from that we've rubbed along quite well. Till this ghastly witch business started I was feeling far happier and at peace with life than I'd ever been as a kid."

Reluctantly, but because I felt that the importance of getting the data complete overrode the more delicate considerations, I grasped the obvious nettle and asked:

"This man you quarrelled about. I don't want to seem inquisitive, but was it Adam Wycherley?"

And I was genuinely surprised when, with a little start, she shook her head vigorously, blushed a little, and replied: "Oh, no. That was quite a different business. If you want to know, I meant Frank Drinkwater. . . ."

"The devil it was!" I breathed softly. And at that moment the telephone rang again.

This time it was a local call. Very local. Indeed, the geographical distance separating me from my caller was barely a couple of hundred yards. The deep growling bass, with its *ostinato* undertone of rather sardonic humour proclaimed the Very Reverend Father Placid, C.R.H., Prior of Merrington, and my very good friend and neighbour.

" 'Morning, Roger!"

" 'Morning, Father Prior!" I responded. "And how's the cloistered calm this merry May morn?"

"Not so calm," growled the Prior, with feeling, "thanks to the imminent onset of your most reverend uncle's visitation. That—and other things. I rang to ask if I could have a word with his Grace, if he's available. Or hasn't he arrived yet?"

"I wouldn't know," I said. "I haven't seen him, but he may be talking to Barbary. I've been here in my study for the past couple of hours or so, discussing—er—business with—er—someone." I threw a wink in Carmel's direction, but she had taken up her stand at the french windows again and was gazing down the garden, her back towards me. "If you'll hang on I'll find out for you. . . ."

And then, at the precise moment when I was laying down the handset, a dark triptych of shadows fell across the room and I became aware of footsteps and murmuring voices without. Turning round I beheld a group of newcomers at the french window—Barbary, with Uncle Odo on her right and Uncle Piers on her left. Already introductions seemed to be taking place; and even as I looked I was mildly startled to see Carmel, the vicar's daughter, bob a graceful genuflexion as she took the Most Reverend Odo's hand and implant, as to the manner born, a respectful little peck of a kiss on the huge amethyst bezel of his episcopal ring. His Grace himself appeared to be somewhat taken aback by this unexpected and unnecessary act of courtesy, but he beamed benevolently as he raised her up and tactfully converted the gesture into a handshake. As for Uncle Piers, he was regarding Carmel with that keen look of admiration and approval worn by elderly military gentlemen who wish it to be believed that they were once gay-dogs-by-gad-sir and that if only they were forty years younger, damme——

Carmel, despite her outward self-possession, looked, I thought, a trifle overcome by this sudden incursion. Partly to reinforce her, but also because Uncle Odo's arrival was so opportune as to be almost coincidental, I charged across the room and into the fray whence, a moment later, I retrieved the Archbishop and dragged him over to the telephone, where Father Prior was still holding on.

I rejoined the group by the garden door and politely resisted Carmel's protestations that she must be going, though it was plain that this invasion must spell the end of our discussion for the time being. Barbary and Uncle Piers joined their voices to mine; but Carmel, to my secret relief, insisted that she had already taken up an unpardonably large portion of my morning and that she must now hurry back to the Vicarage to oversee the preparations for luncheon, all the more so since—(and here she turned to me with a tiny flash of meaning in her eye)—she had left her sister Andrea, who normally supervised the domestic arrangements, still in bed with a strangely troublesome headache. Between us we trotted out, and raised a little laugh over, the curious coincidence whereby the Vicarage, too, was about to regale a bishop and a knight on roast cock and Sussex Puddle; and Carmel and Barbary, with the active interest of Sir Piers, were just beginning to compare their respective recipes for that succulent sweet, when the Most Reverend Odo rejoined the circle, all smiles as to the lips but with one eyebrow cocked significantly higher than the other, as if his phone call had left him with something unusual or unexpected to think about. And sure enough——

"Really, you know," he observed a moment later, rubbing his hands slowly together, "this is a most extraordinary world, and there are some most extraordinary people in it. Don't you agree, Miss Gilchrist? Or do you belong to the school which considers all papists automatically *queer*!" (Carmel laughingly denied any such imputation.) "In point of fact," his Grace went on, "I've always maintained that the one place in this rather mad world where you will almost certainly find true sanity of the highest order is in a well-conducted religious house, such as the Priory of Canons Regular here. In fact, I have always regarded Merrington Priory as an outstanding illustration of my contention. What do you say, Roger?"

"I entirely agree," I answered promptly. "If everyone was as sane as the boyos up there, His Majesty's Commissioners in Lunacy would pretty soon be on the dole. Why, what's the trouble, Uncle? Don't tell me anyone's gone crackers up at the Priory?"

Uncle Odo shrugged his broad shoulders and waved a hand in airy deprecation.

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," he said tolerantly. "Actually, I suppose dear old Father Pius must have had a particularly vivid nightmare, only he won't admit that he was asleep and insists that he was wide awake. . . ."

For at least the third time that morning the hair on the back of my neck rose up till it stood on end like a second beard. Avoiding Carmel's eye (yet I could sense the strain under which she, too, was labouring) I forced a guffaw

and exclaimed: “Not Father Pius, for the love of Pete! My dear Uncle, he’s the hardest-headed old——”

“I know,” the Archbishop cut in. “Hence my remark about its being an extraordinary world. Please don’t spread the story about—I’m sure I may rely on you, Miss Gilchrist!—but, believe it or not, the good Father Pius insists that in the small hours of this morning, while crossing the garth on his way to ring the bell for the Night Office, he saw a witch—or at all events a woman—sailing over the Priory on a gardener’s broom! He’s frightfully worked-up about it. Father Prior tells me——”

“Oh, God!” squeaked Carmel faintly—and fled.

10

The golden cockerel, surrounded by an inner circle of vegetables and sauces and by an outer ring of hungrily expectant lunchers, lay steaming on the dining-room table. At one end of the table stood I, Roger Poynings, carving-knife and fork at the ready. At the other, the Most Reverend Odo Poynings, Archbishop-Bishop of Arundel, rested his left hand on his pectoral cross and raised his right over the table.

“*Benedictus benedicat, per Christum Dominum nostrum*,” prayed his Grace, with commendable brevity; and everyone but myself sat down. Even as they did so, the telephone bell shrilled again in my distant study.

With a groan—for I was hungry and exhausted from my morning’s fantastic experiences—I turned over my utensils to Uncle Piers (who in any case maintains that the art of carving has not survived into any generation younger than his own) and strode from the room. In no very good humour I snatched up the instrument and snapped:

“Roger Poynings.”

“Oh, Roger!” I was astonished to hear Carmel’s voice, low and urgent, at the other end of the wire. “This is a frightful time to ring you, but I thought you’d like to know there’s the most ghastly kafuffle up here. *Somebody’s pinched the angels’ trumpets. . . .*”

11

And at about half-past eight that same evening, when we had just risen from the supper-table and were sipping our coffee in the covered porch, a dusty black car turned into the little drive and a few moments later decanted the squarely athletic person of Chief Detective-Inspector Robert Thrupp, C.I.D. Barbary and I hastened forth to greet him, relieved him of his suitcase, led him within, and duly performed the necessary introductions.

“Sorry to be so late,” Thrupp apologised, as he shook hands. “Couldn’t make it before. Rather a rum case, out at Rootham. Can’t make much of it so far.”

“Spotter murder?” Uncle Piers demanded with evident relish.

“Probably,” said Thrupp, with a shrug. “Unnatural death, anyhow. Very odd. Damned odd—— Er—I beg your Grace’s pardon.”

“My dear fellow,” murmured the Most Reverend Odo, with a tolerant wave of his hand.

“Young woman found dead on the roof of a barn,” Thrupp went on. “Stranger to the village. No one identified her yet. Stark naked. Not a stitch of clothing on her, or anywhere round about. Every bone in her body broken. Just as if she’d fallen from a skyscraper—only there’s nowhere she could have fallen from. The barn itself is the highest building in the village. No one heard her fall. Must have happened during the night. Cowman found her there first thing this morning. Very odd. . . .”

“Damn—er—dashed odd,” murmured the Most Reverend Odo, pensively massaging his chin.

PART II

SO WHAT?

Foul whisperings are abroad: unnatural deeds
Do breed unnatural troubles;

Macbeth.

1

IT will be generally conceded that I had had an eventful day. Certainly my mind had endured more varied and more violent exercise than usually comes its way in less than twelve hours of time.

The world had seemed fresh and simple enough when I rose, at a decent, leisurely, Christian hour; and as I hung my beard out of the bedroom window to dry (with my face attached, of course: pray let us have no misunderstanding on that vital point) I had neither inkling nor prescience of the bewildering succession of assaults that my nervous system was to undergo before bedtime came round again. At a quarter-past eight in the morning I had been conscious only that it looked a distinctly promising day; that it was the Feast of the Apparition of Saint Michael the Archangel (in whose honour Barbary had risen early and gone to church); that I was still in the midst of the brief lotophagous holiday which I allow myself between the conclusion of one novel and the inception of the next; and that the only respect in which this day was to differ from its predecessor was that two quite damnably distinguished but definitely tolerable uncles were to confer on our roof-tree a temporary status and dignity approximating to those of the Vatican and War Office rolled into one. And though I must confess that I am by nature indolently conservative and intolerant of change, it should be understood (lest by chance either of them should read this powerful book) that I looked forward to my uncles' arrival with pleasurable anticipation. True, archbishops and field-marshals may not be everyone's cup of tea, and in general a case can be made out for keeping clear of such exalted leaders of the Boss Class, if only because one cannot become an archbishop or a field-marshal and remain entirely normal. Nevertheless it makes some difference when these personages are of your own blood and stock, and especially when you are old enough to remember them as mere canons and lieutenant-colonels.

At all events it was in no spirit of apprehension that I remembered my uncles' impending arrival, and as I dressed I felt no more concern than could

be dissipated by a quick mental checkup on our existing stocks of wines and spirits. Robustly ignoring the revoltingly pansy pin-stripe suit which Barbary had left suggestively on view, I attired myself in my workaday ensemble of sweat-shirt and corduroy slacks and went downstairs with a mind as innocent of evil as the new-laid eggs which I presently consumed for breakfast.

But now, as I undressed myself for bed at the end of that fantastic day, I reflected that had I been vouchsafed even the scantiest foreknowledge of what it was to bring forth I should undoubtedly have stayed in bed, had the telephone disconnected, given instructions that I could see no visitors, and wired my uncles that I had been stricken with leprosy or mumps and that they must either defer their visit or seek lodgings elsewhere. But apart from the vague premonition, already noted, that I might have an unexpected caller, nothing had happened to cloud my horizon till—and this at first was a cloud no bigger than a gnat's finger-nail—I had noticed the cat Grimalkin's deletory claw-work among my Angels' Trumpets.

The cat Grimalkin! How unimportant, or at most how mildly amusing, that name had seemed when Carmel had first ascribed the havoc to the brute: certainly no more than a not unwitty conceit of Carmel's lovely sister, a name idly bestowed in much the same spirit as a man may call his dog Satan. And yet—— I have written much in my time on the theory and practice of lying (it holds a professional as well as a personal interest for me, for what is successful fiction writing but the faculty to tell entertaining lies?), and it is an elementary principle of this art that the best way to conceal the truth is to tell it. If Andrea Gilchrist were indeed a witch—and it was only by accepting some such hypothesis, no matter how absurdly improbable by normal standards of modern thought, that one could even begin to cogitate on the outrageous events of the day—it was only in keeping with orthodox tradition that she should have a demon companion or 'familiar;' and since medieval familiars (if abundant and copiously documented evidence was to be trusted) not infrequently took on the conveniently inconspicuous form of domestic cats, and since Grimalkin or Grey Malkin (properly, Maudkin) was one of the commonest names given to such creatures, Andrea could scarcely have found a more effective way of hiding her pet's true nature than by following the now discredited tradition.

But, of course, the whole thing was absurd.

And in any case this was only one of a host of different factors which, nearly all preposterous in themselves, somehow contrived to intertwine and coalesce in such a way as to demand more serious consideration than any sane person would accord them individually. The affair of the cat Grimalkin

was but the first link in a quite grotesque chain of events—if indeed they really were events, and not a mere concatenation of illusions. More than once during that day I had been tempted to retire to my study and there repeat, even more drastically, my masochistic experiment with the Pathan knife.

Anyone with sufficient intelligence to have followed this gripping narrative to its present state of pregnancy will scarcely need to be told that even after my long interview with Carmel had reached its abrupt and (on her side) blasphemous conclusion the rest of the day brought me little leisure; in fact, none whatever for solitary reflection, and next to none for private discussion with my wise and trusty Barbary. There was a brief interval in mid-afternoon when Uncle Odo had betaken himself to the Priory and Uncle Piers had departed for what he called a 'spotter leg-stretch' on the Downs, when I attempted, with pardonably indifferent success, to give Barbary some rough idea of why Carmel had come to see me; but I doubt if she gained any definite impression from what I said beyond a suspicion that Carmel had gone crackers—a solution which, I confess, I myself only discarded with reluctance, as being over-simple. Other considerations apart, I found myself in a bit of a quandary as to the extent (if any) to which I was at liberty to divulge, even to my wife, what Carmel had told me in the privacy of my study. She had not formally bound me to secrecy, but I could not avoid the feeling that this had been tacitly understood. On the other hand, I knew that anything I told Barbary would go no further.

Another trouble was that owing to the irruption of my uncles and Barbary, my talk with Carmel had come to an abrupt conclusion before she had been able to round-off her case. In particular, she had left without reaching the point of explaining just why she had brought her troubles to *me*. Barbary, with her usual acumen, discerned this vital omission as soon as I had finished giving her my first rough outline of the affair. Textually, her initial comment on my monstrous rigmarole about witches and broomsticks had comprised the two words "*So what?*"—and when pressed to amplify that over-terse remark she simply added two more: "*Why you?*" Let it not be inferred from this that Barbary is of a taciturn habit of speech or generally notable for economy of words. Ordinarily she can chatter and natter as volubly as any of her sex; but by something of a paradox, it is noticeable that the more important the matter discussed, the more frugal and concentrated her words become. In the present instance it seemed to me that she had, as usual, posed what was probably the key-question to the whole situation.

Why, indeed, had I been chosen by Carmel as a repository for her extraordinary confidences? Even more to the point, what was she expecting me to do about them? True, she had to some extent explained her choice of confidants by eliciting from me a confirmation of her own impression (gleaned from one of my own books) that, unlike the majority of her friends, I still believed in the Devil and refused to write-off everything savouring of the occult as so much pig's tripe without at least subjecting it to some form of analytical scrutiny. Perhaps that might be considered a sufficient answer to Barbary's supplementary question, but it left quite unsolved her original problem of "*So what?*" Though she had not actually said so, being neither a Civil Servant nor a military staff-officer, Carmel had implied that the matter was being passed to me for information and necessary action, please; but as things turned out she had left me without any indication as to the nature of 'such action as may be deemed necessary'—to quote that dire jargon again.

Indeed, had Carmel's story been an isolated phenomenon I might with some justification, though perhaps not without a qualm of conscience, have shrugged my shoulders and contented myself with echoing Barbary's "*So what?*"—at least till I had seen Carmel again and asked her point-blank what she wanted me to do about it. In this respect the onus, surely, was entirely on her. But, alas, her story was not an isolated phenomenon. On the contrary, it now appeared to be closely and even perilously inter-related with at least two other matters of by no means negligible importance—one affecting the sanity and eyesight of the excellent Father Pius; the other, touching the strange fate of the woman whose tragic and mysterious end my friend Thrupp had been summoned to investigate.

And it had to be faced that Thrupp, who is generally held to be one of the most discerning and sober-minded sleuths on the strength of the C.I.D., had specifically admitted that this was 'probably' a case of murder.

So what?

2

Spurning with proper contumely the lying propaganda of our enemies, it can be justly and positively postulated that no true Poynings of the genuine Sussex line is ever a total dimwit—not even the archbishops and field-marshals among us. From which it follows that no sooner had Thrupp, in the first minute of his arrival, enunciated in bald outline the main elements of the curious problem confronting him, than his all-Poynings audience became conscious, though in somewhat varying degrees, that the gruesome discovery at Rootham must—incredible though it might seem—stand in

some sort of relation, impalpable and inexplicable as yet, with at least one other event that had come within our cognizance only a few hours earlier.

So far as my uncles were concerned this relation, though obscure, was tolerably direct. The good Father Pius, normally as clear-minded and unfanciful a cleric as ever donned the red habit of the Canons Regular of Saint Hilary, had clearly and uncompromisingly asserted that in the early hours of that morning he had witnessed the bizarre spectacle of a nude woman riding over the cloisters on a broomstick, with no other visible means of propulsion or support; and two or three hours later, with the coming of daylight, the broken body of an unknown woman had been found grotesquely suspended on the roof of a barn at Rootham, only a few miles away. Fantastic as it might seem, it was impossible to regard these two events as wholly unconnected, for to do so would have been to stretch the limits of coincidence beyond all reason. Father Pius was an old man, but he was no mystic visionary and his mind and faculties were singularly unimpaired. Clearly Uncle Odo, who knew him well, was bound to give due weight to the testimony of so credible a witness.

But in my own case (and, at second hand, in Barbary's) there was the formidable added complication of the story that Carmel Gilchrist had told me that morning, with its ostensibly preposterous yet significantly circumstantial elements involving what occultists call the transvection of witches. I had not yet passed this on to either of my uncles, though I had in fact privately considered the idea of taking Uncle Odo into my confidence if the worst came to the worst. He was, after all, a theologian, a philosopher, and by his very calling a serious student of the supernatural; and, better than all these things, he was an old gentleman of profound common sense, with a notably high-geared brain. Up to the moment of Thrupp's arrival, however, I had taken no steps to this end. Neither he nor Uncle Piers had displayed any provocative curiosity as to the reason for Carmel's visit to me, and I had not volunteered any information on the subject.

We let Thrupp have his supper in peace before adding to his worries. Personally, I was in a state of great uncertainty whether to say anything about Carmel's story or not, for the reasons above noted; and Uncle Odo declared later that he, too, was reluctant to bring forward the experience of Father Pius, for he hesitated to give even limited publicity to a state of affairs that smacked so strongly of the phantasmagorial. Uncle Piers, for all his vehement manner and forcible directness of speech, is nevertheless in reality a man of considerable tact and diplomacy: outwardly a bit of a Blimp, but interiorly a pretty good Machiavelli. As for Barbary, it was

simply not in her nature to speak out of turn on any but the most frivolous subjects.

In fact, in our present state of doubt, we might all have gone to bed with our revelations still unmade had not Thrupp himself reintroduced the topic when his supper was done. Perhaps as a reward for our not trying to pump him, perhaps because he recognised the value of discussion as a means of bringing the elements of a problem into orderly perspective, he himself reopened the matter by asking whether any of us had happened to notice any low-flying aircraft in the neighbourhood during the previous night. The question naturally applied only to Barbary and myself, for our uncles had only arrived during the forenoon.

But we had heard nothing, and said so. Thrupp nodded in sombre resignation.

"Nobody seems to have heard anything," he complained. "On the face of it, you see, the only reasonable way one could account for this unfortunate woman being where she was would be that she had dropped there from an aeroplane. It seems the only way of explaining her position and the state of her body. Not that I'm very happy about that theory. I mean, the best people don't go up in a plane with no clothes on."

"Ha-hum!" Sir Piers cleared his throat sharply and frowned prodigiously. "Yer never know with these young R.A.F. fellers——" As an Army man, I fear he takes a rather dim view of the morals and discipline of the youngest Service.

Thrupp grinned. "Naturally, I'm having inquiries made at all R.A.F. stations to see if there was a specially wild guest-night or anything," he said, "but frankly I don't expect to get anything out of it. It might just as well have been a civil plane—if it was a plane at all. Trouble is, I don't see what else it can have been," he added despondently.

I caught Barbary's eye and found her looking unusually solemn and ill at ease. Then I shifted my gaze to Uncle Odo. He, too, was clearly in a state of hesitancy. His left hand was engaged in its favourite pastime of fiddling with his pectoral cross, while his right thoughtfully stroked the archiepiscopal chin.

"No—ah—clues in the neighbourhood?" he asked presently. "Nothing lying round about that might seem—ah—suggestive?"

"Nothing any good," Thrupp replied. "Nothing one could associate with the corpse. Not even her clothes, as I said."

Fortified by a deep breath the Most Reverend Odo took the plunge. "Nothing in the nature of a besom or—ah—garden broom?" he pressed, a

cherubic smile on his face and a deliberately casual tone in his voice. But I noticed he avoided the detective's eyes as he spoke.

This seemingly frivolous question had a remarkable effect on Thrupp. He sat bolt upright, blinked incredulously, and for a few moments said nothing. In the silence one could almost hear his clever brain working. Then his tense face relaxed.

"For a moment or two I really thought your Grace was serious," he commented. Then, with a chuckle, he added: "Of course, that would be a solution if—if——"

The Archbishop coughed.

"As a matter of fact, I was quite serious, Mr. Thrupp," he said quietly.

Thrupp's face was a study, and he was speechless.

"Don't jump to conclusions," Uncle Odo warned him genially. "I'm not really insane, but—— I'll explain in a minute. By the way, *was* there a besom?"

"There was," Thrupp answered flatly. "A besom that doesn't belong to the farm, apparently, and which nobody claims. I checked up on everything, as a matter of routine; but of course I didn't give a moment's thought to a thing like that. Nothing incongruous about finding a birch-broom in a farmyard, after all. At least, it didn't strike me that way. . . ." He fell silent, eyeing Uncle Odo curiously.

The latter very deliberately finished off his Benedictine and set down his glass. Then with a little sigh he twiddled his thumbs thoughtfully for a few moments.

"Don't let's jump to conclusions," he said again, looking round at all of us in turn. "A very curious thing happened to-day, Mr. Thrupp, and in view of your discoveries at Rootham I really think I ought to tell you about it. It may, of course, be quite irrelevant, but—well, you must judge for yourself."

And then, in cautiously unsensational words, he repeated the story of Father Pius.

3

As I climbed into bed beside Barbary, who was already asleep, I could not help smiling as I recalled the expression on Thrupp's face as he listened to Uncle Odo. Thrupp, let me assure you, is by no means an ingenuous or simple-minded sort of man; on the contrary he has a somewhat tortuous mind, developed no doubt through long years of probing the tortuous-mindedness of others. He is intelligent, well read, vastly experienced and wholly sophisticated. In other words, he is not an easy man to surprise.

But Uncle Odo had surprised him, even as Carmel had surprised me. And as I lay on my back in the darkness, with fingers interlocked under the back of my head and beard hygienically exposed to the cool night air, I could not help chuckling rather cynically at the reflection that the good Thrupp would have been still more surprised than he was already, had I followed my uncle's lead and contributed my own oblation to his growing fund of knowledge. But I had not done so, because it had conveniently occurred to me that it would be far better, in the circumstances, to see Carmel again on the morrow and persuade her, if possible, to talk to Thrupp herself, rather than anticipate this probably inevitable proceeding by giving him my own second-hand and possibly garbled version.

Fortified by these, possibly sophistical, reassurances that I had done right to hold my peace for the time being, I then lay awake for hours, going over and over the events of that astonishing day and, by a process of mental mastication, trying to assimilate and digest its several ingredients and assess the significance of each in relation to the general scheme of things—if scheme there was. What impressed and confused me most was the amazing sense of unreality about everything that had happened that day; the utterly fantastic quality of these odd events, and, even more, the abnormal foison of 'coincidences' which appeared to link them together.

At the risk of over-simplifying, by ignoring a whole wealth of subsidiary but not necessarily negligible detail, the main chain of these coincidences could be stated thus: first, that Carmel had quite seriously assured me that her sister was a witch, or at least had the power to ride the night skies on a besom; second, that an entirely independent and (one could have sworn) utterly reliable witness, Father Pius, had seen a nude woman flying over the sleeping Priory on a besom at an hour which corresponded well enough with Carmel's assertions; and third, that the broken body of a naked woman had been found a few miles away, lying in such a position that she could only have got there as the result of a fall from a height—though there was no topographical height from which she could have fallen—and that, significantly or not, an unclaimed and apparently extraneous birch-broom had been found not far away.

Laugh that off for a beginning, if you can.

But even that sequence, though it embraced three of the outstanding factors of the problem was still, as I have said, a drastic over-simplification; and when I began to take into account some of the many attendant details and to weigh up the innumerable permutations and combinations that a little imagination could adduce, my brain simply reeled. Whichever way I turned I seemed to be up against one or more of these double or triple coincidences,

some of them so trivial, seemingly, as to merit no serious attention—(to this class I instinctively relegated such whimsical accidents as the two pairs of bishops and knights being entertained on roast cocks and Sussex Puddles)—others of scarcely greater moment intrinsically, yet having about them a subtle aura of suggestiveness which seemed to hint that, unrelated as they might seem to the main issue, they could not be wholly or lightly discarded.

The prime example of this was what I mentally dubbed the Angels' Trumpets group, comprising a number of incidents which, though co-existent with the Witch-and-Besom group, had no discernible connection therewith, but which kept forcing themselves on my notice with a strange insistence. Thus there was, *imprimis*, the ravishing of my bed of Angels' Trumpets by a cat, and possibly by the sinister Grimalkin herself, who might or might not be the 'familiar' of the 'witch' Andrea Gilchrist. *Item*, this might, or again might not, have some esoteric relation to the assault on the same flower-bed in the previous August, when some person or persons unknown (but definitely human beings this time, and certainly not cats) had in a nocturnal raid carried off four-fifths of my lovely Angels' Trumpets—flowers, roots and all. *Item*, there was the strange business of the new gold trumpets for the medieval angels up at St. Saviour's: of old Mrs. Beeding's bequest, of the Vicar's too hasty compliance with its terms, and of the consequent wrathful descent of the diocesan Ordinary and his lay Chancellor. *Item*, there was Carmel's sensational phone call at lunch-time to say that the matter of damning or blessing the trumpets had, after all, been snatched out of the hands of the ecclesiastical authorities by the enterprise of a highly irreverent thief.

The list of strange happenings, of incidents and coincidences, of queer incongruities and still more startling congruities, though finite enough in reality, seemed to stretch away to remote infinity as I tried to catalogue and classify them in my weary brain. Even so, my data was far from being complete. There were still a myriad questions and supplementaries that I must put to Carmel before I could attempt a satisfactory assessment. The one reasonably complete decision I was able to arrive at that night was that I must see her again as soon as possible. Thanks to Uncle Odo she already knew of the affair of Father Pius, but there was no certainty that she would yet have heard of the fatality out at Rootham. If she had not, then she must be told of it at the first opportunity and thus be made to realise that her own evidence had suddenly assumed a new and vital importance. Whether she could be persuaded to repeat her story in detail to Thrupp himself was a matter on which I did not care to prophesy; as a matter of social conscience it was plainly her duty to do so, but it seemed rather a nice point in ethics

whether a girl could reasonably be expected to give evidence liable to involve her own sister, when by law a husband and wife are exempt from doing this. It seemed vaguely improper to expect it of her, for she had gone out of her way to insist that, in spite of occasional rows and disagreements, she still retained some degree of sisterly affection for Andrea. Yet it was of great importance that Thrupp should be told; and if Carmel refused to tell him (as she well might) just where did my own duty lie? To whom did I owe the greater loyalty: to Carmel who had done me the honour of confiding in me, or to Thrupp—and through him to the unknown woman who had been killed? Here again was a damnably nodulous ethical point, and I felt too tired and exhausted to solve it.

4

And, pondering on this matter of Carmel's relations with Andrea, I remembered with perplexity, not untinged with disquiet, that passing reference in the morning's discussions to a not far distant quarrel between the sisters—'over a man.' There had been no chance to elicit details at the time even if I had had the temerity to ask for them, for Father Prior's phone call had come through at the precise moment when such information might have been forthcoming and there had been no opportunity to return to the point before Carmel left. All I had learned about this quarrel was that the man concerned had not been (as I had at first feared) Adam Wycherley, but that very puzzling character, Frank Drinkwater. Relieved as I was that young Adam had not been involved, the unexpected substitution of Drinkwater's name had filled me with astonishment and something approaching alarm.

I am not of a socially inquisitive nature and have little use for all the gossip and tittle-tattle about one's neighbours' doings which, in Merrington as in other villages, constitutes the chief currency of local conversations and colloguings. I have the normal human weakness for a good juicy scandal, and I contrive to keep myself well enough informed on such items of hard news as births, marriages and deaths; betrothals, love-affairs and divorces; arrivals and departures; accidents, illnesses and surgical operations; and even the more outstanding fornications, adulteries and illegitimate pregnancies. On the other hand, it is perfectly possible for me to remain in ignorance of such events of major importance as the installation of the angels' trumpets up at the parish church, as I had already had to confess to Carmel; and there is no doubt that this particular instance of culpable nescience was only one of many. And if you deem it remiss of me not to take a more comprehensive interest in the day-to-day happenings in my village I shall retort that you yourselves are very largely to blame, by your

kindly and discerning persistence in making it better worth my while to write these masterly books than to squander my energies in prying into matters which are of no direct concern to me.

So, while I get to know quite a lot of the things that go on in my neighbourhood, I make no pretence of being omniscient. Some things I know, others I don't. I did know, however, that for some considerable time past Carmel Gilchrist had been (in the revolting parlance of the day) the 'girl friend' of young Adam Wycherley and, perhaps by some process of wishful thinking, I had vaguely presumed that, if they were not already engaged to be married, it was only a matter of time before this event would take place. In an equally vague kind of way this hypothetical union had my blessing—which is simply to say that I saw nothing wildly incongruous or undesirable in the match and even considered it mildly suitable. Truth to tell, my interest in this matter had hitherto been mainly confined to a mental concession that Carmel would make a pleasantly unobjectionable partner for Adam, rather than vice-versa; from which it may rightly be deduced that, until this very day, I had been rather more interested in the conjugal well-being of Adam than in that of Carmel.

And if I must explain this bias I must go back nearly twenty years and inform you that when, as a revoltingly pink-faced and possibly pimply subaltern all too newly hatched from Sandhurst, I had joined my Regiment in India, our second-in-command was a certain excellent fellow named Major Charles Wycherley and that his only son, Adam, was then a sturdy toddler of four or five. For half a dozen years or more I had shared a bungalow with the Wycherleys, who had been very kind to me and as good a pair of friends, philosophers and guides as any young man could hope to find. Even young Adam had succeeded in teaching me, what I did not know before, that all brats of that age are not necessarily ripe work for a Herod; indeed, we had laid the foundations of a friendship in those early days which was to endure surprisingly. Not that I had seen a great deal of him, for a year or two after my arrival he had been sent home to school.

Now Charles Wycherley was a man without roots in England, and when in due course he decided to take his pension it was on my recommendation that he explored the possibilities of settling in West Sussex. He had in fact ended up by purchasing a biggish house on the northern outskirts of Merrington; but by the time I myself shook the malodorous dust of India from my marching-boots, several years later, and settled down to write in my abode under the shadow of Merrington Priory, poor Charles was dead and only his charming widow and the now adolescent Adam were left. So far as was consistent with Adam's long absences at school and later at

Sandhurst we had to some extent renewed our friendship, and despite the considerable disparity in our ages we continued to see a fair amount of each other when he happened to be at home. It was a casual sort of friendship with nothing specially intimate about it, but I liked the growing lad as much as I had liked the toddler, and as he reached manhood I often found myself recognising in him the many admirable qualities and traits of his father. He had even consulted me once or twice on minor matters, and altogether it was not surprising that I took at least a passive interest in his doings and well-being.

He had still been a cadet when his growing predilection for Carmel Gilchrist's company had first come to my notice; and when the passing years revealed that this was apparently no mere boy-and-girl affair but something of potentially heavier calibre I had, as I say, given it my subconscious blessing and approval—not that it was any concern of mine, but Adam was a nice boy and I was glad to see that he had picked upon a nice girl. Of course, the spell might yet break and the whole affair fizzle out, but I rather hoped that it wouldn't.

Hence my relief to learn that Adam Wycherley had not, as I had half-feared, been the bone of contention in that 'hell of a row' which Carmel had had with her sister a few months back. Boys will be boys and girls will be girls; and there was an obvious danger in the fact that Andrea was undeniably a far more vividly beautiful wench than Carmel, and probably far more passionate and sophisticated as well. Also, though it must not be thought that I had indulged in any serious speculations on any such subject, I had always had an intuitive feeling that Andrea was possibly somewhat over-sexed—and Adam was an outstandingly good-looking young fellow, with just the fair colouring and brave blue eyes which might excite the intimate interest of the dark-as-night Andrea. There was in fact always the danger that either Adam might fall for Andrea or Andrea for Adam, with disastrous results for poor Carmel in either event. Wherefore I repeat that I was vastly relieved to know that the quarrel between the sisters had not centred upon Adam.

On the other hand, I felt an immediate mental disturbance when Carmel had let out that the man Drinkwater had been the *casus belli*; for Drinkwater was a man I couldn't stick at any price, and I must admit that it slightly sickened me even to know that Carmel was on speaking terms with the fellow, far less that she was sufficiently intimately associated with him to engender a 'hell of a row' with her sister about him. That there could be intimacy of association between Drinkwater and the vivid, sophisticated Andrea—yes, I could believe that, though I could not recall having heard of

any such; but between Drinkwater and the younger, fresher, more virginal Carmel—no, I couldn't stomach that at all.

And if you ask me, the pucksnouts and pedants among you, why I should have entertained such distasteful and uncharitable feelings towards the man Drinkwater (who, to do him justice, had never done me a dime's worth of harm), I shall be forced to snatch down from its shelf the *Epigrammata* of the poet Martial, and laboriously copy out that Epigram which reads:

> Non amo te, Sabidi, nec possum dicere quare:
> Hoc tantum possum dicere, non amo te——

—which, for the benefit of the unlearned, the poet Brown some centuries ago rendered into English as:

> I do not love thee, Doctor Fell;
> The reason why I cannot tell, *etc.*

and leave it to your own intelligence to gauge the relevance of the apophthegm to my own sentiments towards Frank Drinkwater.

In other words, my dislike of the man was perhaps instinctive rather than reasonable. I knew nothing positive against the fellow—indeed, I knew precious little about him at all and I felt no urge to increase my knowledge. He was a comparative newcomer to the district, having first appeared in our midst something over a year earlier, and therefore a 'foreigner' in the Sussex connotation of the term; and while you must not think that we are all as aggressively xenophobic towards strangers as is Uncle Piers towards Celts, it still cannot be denied that newcomers are always to some extent objects of suspicion and no-enthusiasm in our remoter rural districts till they have satisfactorily accounted for their presence and by their own efforts and virtues worn down the sharper edges of our native prejudice. I do not seek to excuse our idiosyncrasy: I merely state it.

And, speaking for myself, I must say that my own few fleeting contacts with the man Drinkwater had, if anything, had the opposite effect of making me like him even less on better acquaintance than I had on first meeting him. Actually, I had seen singularly little of him, for he had taken up his abode not in Merrington itself but in an outlying hamlet called Bollington, a couple of hours' walk over the Downs. Speaking with all the natural prejudice of a plug-ugly, I found the fellow's appearance very much against him, for he was desperately good-looking in a rather degenerate kind of way, and he cultivated the inch-long sideburns and the narrow fringe of moustache which one had learnt to associate with dago film-stars and trap-drummers. His complexion was beige, his lips full and sensual, and his

narrow eyes had the oblique slant of the god Pan. His figure was slim and lithe, and his clothes fitted him with a wholly unmasculine grace. History does not relate what Martial's *bête noire* Sabidius looked like, but if he looked anything like Frank Drinkwater it is not hard to understand how that Epigram came to be written.

True, it may be conceded within limits that a man cannot help his appearance. But such glimpses as I had had of his manners and customs did nothing to mitigate my antipathy towards him. The very first time I met him was in that small, dark department of the village stores which justifies the proprietor in describing himself as a wine and spirit merchant; I had looked in to see about a new cask of beer, and had to wait while Drinkwater (though I did not even know his name at that period) examined wine-lists and finally gave an order for some particularly revolting brand of rose-tinted sweet champagne—a nauseous tipple suggestive of sin and decadence in those far-off days when wicked baronets used to mash Gaiety girls in private rooms at Romano's. He was also smoking the most highly scented cigarette that it had been my misfortune to smell for a great many years, and I could have sworn that the exquisite nails of the fingers that held it had been treated with lacquer or varnish. We had not spoken on that occasion, but a very few days later I had been introduced to him at the village Flower Show—I believe by 'Slogger' Tosstick, but I cannot be sure. Out of common politeness I had felt bound to exchange a few banalities with the fellow, though a kind of cold revulsion attacked me as I did so. He had been civil enough, but I was unfeignedly relieved when a few minutes later he was gleefully pounced upon by a trio of giggling girls and swept away from my side. Incidentally, the identity of these wenches was revealing, not to mention the almost indecent appetency with which they fell upon him; for though these three daughters of the late Sir Jonathan Smudge had been prettily baptised Lucilla, Lavinia and Felicity, I grieve to say that they had long since earned the local nicknames of Lubricia, Lascivia and Salacity. I remember reflecting that they were just the kind of girls to whom Frank Drinkwater would appeal, and that the latter had lost remarkably little time in, so to speak, finding his own level.

Moreover, while I had never deigned to take any active interest in the man, all that I subsequently chanced to see and hear about him ran on much the same lines. Living as he did in that distant hamlet, it was not altogether surprising that he took little part in the social life of Merrington itself, yet whenever I saw him he seemed to have one or two young women in tow—and, whether by accident or not, they were invariably young women of much the same type as the Smudge girls. Nor, it seemed, did he object to the

odd amorous divorcée or neglected wife. Just how far these associations went, I neither knew nor cared, though Barbary once told me, not without malice, that a dozen females in the district were suffering from muscular enlargement of the calf through repeated pilgrimages to Drinkwater's house at Bollington. Barbary herself had only met him once, and had characteristically disliked him intensely.

All of which goes to show, I hope, why I experienced a kind of sickly dismay when I heard that Carmel and Andrea had had their 'hell of a row' about him. As I have said, I could well understand Andrea falling for Drinkwater, for there was probably a certain psychological kinship between them and it was only too possible that they would find pleasure in the same things. But Carmel—well, no matter whether I chose to view her as Adam Wycherley's girl friend or as a very delightful young woman in her own right, I don't like this idea of her competing against her sister in the Drinkwater stakes. Not only did it seem vaguely disloyal to Adam, who was away with his Regiment, but it also seemed quite out of character for Carmel herself, unless I had badly misread her.

Not that it was any business of mine; but I wished that Adam could come on leave more frequently.

5

It had been well after midnight when I got to bed, and by the time my treadmill cogitations and unfruitful brain-floggings had brought me to this point the luminous hands of my bedside clock were coming up to 3 a.m. Sleep still seemed far away; my body felt cramped and restless. The moonlight outside looked temptingly restful despite the occasional occupation of a cloud—yet I could not resist a stupid little shudder as there floated unbidden into my mind an imagined vision of how, twenty-four hours earlier, poor little Carmel had been fearfully scanning those same night skies through her bedroom window, dreading what she would presently see, yet unable to rest till she had seen it. And though the rational part of my intellect rebuked my own instinctive sympathy for seeming to give recognition and credence to the most irrational story I had ever heard, my heart nevertheless went out to her. For even if one granted that all she had seen was the merest optical delusion, that did not alter the fact that, delusion or no, she had undoubtedly seen something pretty horrific: something calculated to rack the nerves of people far better equipped to stand such shocks than a slip of a kid barely out of her teens. I fell to wondering how I myself should have reacted to such an experience. . . .

To wonder is to imagine—and imagination plays queer tricks, especially in the small hours of the morning and on the brain and senses of the jaded insomniast. It was, of course, imagination pure and simple which at this moment made me seem to see a white shape, airborne, pass quickly across the limited field of vision afforded by a window; yet so potent and insidious is this fanciful power that, pausing only to unhitch my heart from my tonsils, I was out of bed like a flash and pushing my head through the open window long before the object that I thought I had seen could have sailed out of sight at its observed rate of velocity.

But there was nothing to be seen in motion in the whole night sky but the flickering of leaves on the nearest trees. It might have been a bat I had seen, though one doesn't notice many of them so early in the year; perhaps an owl, or some other kind of night-bird—that is, if I had not imagined the whole thing, which I probably had. Certainly, there was no witch: for which I felt quite honestly thankful.

But if you imagine, the wiseacres and cynics among you, that I have only recorded this incident as a mercenary device for filling up space or trying to give you the creeps, then you are utterly wrong, as usual, and should in equity withdraw your libellous aspersions. For though I did not see that which I had expected to see, yet I certainly did see that which I had not expected to see—in fact I saw no less than three such things, which might be held to entitle me to an apology in triplicate. I saw neither a witch in the sky nor even a forgotten besom in the garden; but, just as I was beginning to evacuate my beard through the casement, I saw out of the corner of my near-side eye a tiny red glow, as of a cigarette in active eruption, a few yards away on my left and on the same level as myself. I could see nothing of the smoker himself, who was presumably sitting or standing a little way back from his window; but since my house is neither a palace nor even a mansion I was not in a moment's doubt as to who the smoker must be. And I found it interesting, to say the least, that my friend Chief-Inspector Thrupp, who had had a busy enough day out at Rootham and who had been yawning his head off by midnight, had either been stricken with unaccustomed insomnia like myself, or else had considered it worth his while to sacrifice his duty-sleep to a silent contemplation of the heavens.

The window from which I observed this spectacle faces south, but Barbary and I occupy a corner room with two further windows facing west. I cannot say what impelled me to glance through these before going back to bed. Suffice it that I did so, and that each enterprise was rewarded by another surprise. The nearer of these western windows stood open, and as I cautiously insinuated my head through the aperture I became aware that yet

another member of the household had elected to spurn the embrace of Morpheus and engage in the same occupation as Thrupp. For out of a window some little distance to my right there protruded the square, clean-shaven archiepiscopal visage of the Most Reverend Odo, together with a suggestion of most uncanonical pyjamas with a piercingly loud stripe. His Grace, on the contrary, was quite silent and motionless, though I could guess that his eyes were roving the moonlit welkin. But he didn't see me, and I quickly withdrew my head.

The third window was shut, and for fear of disturbing Barbary I did not propose to open it. But I padded softly across to it and took a peek through one of its diamond panes. Now this window, though facing west, stands at the northern extremity of our room and by craning your neck you can take in an area to the north-west which is out of view from the other windows. It is from this direction that our short drive leaves Monastery Lane and approaches the house, though in its later reaches it wheels round and proceeds towards the southern frontage. From my point of vantage I could observe some thirty yards of drive, and almost at once, as though the business had been nicely synchronised by some unseen master of ceremonies, a dark human figure stepped into my field of vision and advanced purposefully across the moonlit stage. It was a man, slim and upright in his bearing, fully dressed and with a light overcoat hiding his suit. He was walking, not on the gravelled drive itself, but on the yard-wide grass verge, as if he were anxious that his footsteps should not be heard. Strictly speaking he marched rather than walked, with a spring in his step and the hint of an old-time cavalry swagger about his hips. A shapely felt hat was cocked at an angle upon his head, an object which I recognised as a fly-swat depended incongruously from his right wrist, and a cheroot burned brightly between his lips.

It was, of course, simply Field-Marshal Sir Piers Poynings returning from a well-after-midnight stroll. Nothing in that. There's no law against field-marshals, or even unpaid lance-corporals, parading about the countryside all night if they want to, any more than there is against archbishops and chief detective-inspectors keeping watch from their windows at three o'clock in the morning when one would normally expect them to be asleep.

Perhaps they all had insomnia—though this is not a family failing of the noble house of Poynings, whose menfolk are, on the contrary, somewhat notable for the splendour and sonority of their snores. Nor, having housed him on several previous occasions, had I ever associated Thrupp with involuntary sleeplessness.

Anyway, with so many people on the watch I could see no conceivable reason why I should continue to swell their numbers. So I gingerly reparked my body in the bed, turned back and beard on my still slumbering helpmeet, and proceeded to sleep like a churchwarden till half-past eight by my bedside clock.

6

Notwithstanding his vigil, Thrupp had helped himself to a makeshift breakfast and quitted the house even before Barbary got downstairs, shortly after half-past seven. It was just after nine when I myself put in an appearance, by which time Uncle Odo, beautifully shaved and looking as fresh as a strawberry, had already returned from saying Mass in the Priory church and was sprinkling an absentminded little blessing into his bowl of puffed wheat, as a preliminary to submerging its contents in cream—(*eheu fugaces!*). Barbary herself, who at all times and in all circumstances always contrives to look beautiful, had reached the grilled kipper stage. The only other absentee, Uncle Piers, stalked lithely into the room less than a minute after myself. He, too, looked well-rested and fresher than the proverbial paint.

It is a salutary and very ancient Poynings custom that there shall be no nattering at the breakfast-table. We do not go to the other extreme of imposing a quasi-monastic silence, and it is always permissible to ask for the marmalade or even to utter some terse comment on the weather or the dogward progress of *The Times* newspaper. Letters may be perused, but it is straitly forbidden to quote them aloud, under pain of death or mutilation. Should any urgently pregnant passage meet the eye, the authorised procedure is simply to pass the document in question to the person chiefly concerned, indicating the location with a mute finger-nail. In short, we do our best to preserve the civilised decencies proper to this extremely critical hour: an hour at which any unnecessary indelicacy of sound or spectacle (such as a raddled she-Midlander telling you exactly how she slept, or—worse—a raw-boned kilted Scot striding barbarously about the room blowing on his salted porridge to the hideous cacophony of strident squealbags) can all too easily upset your equanimity and poise for the entire day.

It follows, then, that on this ninth day of May nothing was said at breakfast having even a glimmer of a bearing on such disturbing topics as murder or witchcraft, nor was any mention made of midnight excursions or vigils. It was not till I had risen silently from the table and withdrawn to the sunlit porch that I had any connected conversation with either of my guests.

Soon, however, I was joined by Uncle Piers. Contemptuously waving away my cigarette-case he lit one of his own noxious brand of black cheroots, puffed at it for a minute, and then said: "D'yer think yer could put me up fer another coupler dayserso, Roger?"

The request came as a pleasurable surprise. As I said before, field-marshals who bark like stage colonels may not be up everyone's street, but once you have pierced the Poona-by-gad-sir façade under which Sir Piers camouflages his true self you realise that he is an amazingly human, shrewd, kindly and intelligent old stiff, with a well-stocked brain in excellent working order.

"We'll be delighted," I assured him promptly. "Please stay as long as you like."

"Big of yer," barked Sir Piers. "Don't wanter make extra work fer Barbary, though. Could easily go to the pub."

"You needn't worry," I said. "Mrs. Nye is always available to give a hand, and Barbary's not the sort to make heavy weather of a guest or two."

My uncle grunted his thanks, and smoked silently for a while.

"Fact is," he vouchsafed at length, "I wanter have a good sniff round the Downs while I'm here. Promised Curley Antrobus I would. Business with pleasure, huh? Ideal spot fer airborne landin's ontopper the Downs. See what can be done, in caser war." (It may be recalled that Field-Marshal Lord Antrobus was Chief of the Imperial General Staff at this period.)

I looked up at him with interest. His postulate was indisputably correct, but I could not help wondering whether he had any reliable inside information as to the imminence or otherwise of war. Like many other people I was even at this time gloomily convinced that war must come sooner or later, notwithstanding the much-publicised confidence of the Umbrella School that the man Hitler wouldn't be such a cad. But—was this speculation about airborne landings mere force of professional habit, or did he know something?

"When's the war billed to start?" I asked casually.

"After the harvest," was the confident reply. "Ender August, beginniner September, somewhere round there. Middler September at the latest."

"The devil it is," I murmured. "No hope of avoiding it?"

"Not a hope in hell," he growled decisively. "Mighter been, if Joe hadn't played the bug or the Yanks'd take their blinkers off. Not a hope in hell, as things are."

"Oh, well." The world of those days was already so heavy with threats and uncertainty that it was almost a relief to have one's worst fears confirmed. "Incidentally, what does 'A' do about it?" I added.

"Stay put till yer get yer orders," he replied. "Don't go gettin' all patriotic and offerin' yer services ter the War House or any damfool thing like that, or I'll kick yer till yer nose bleeds, d'yer hear? Gotter job fer yer—somethin' in yer old line. Gotter have someone I can trust. Tell yer 'bout it one of these days. All in good time."

His words made me cock a speculative eyebrow. But just as I was opening my mouth to solicit a few details a broad shadow fell upon us and the Most Reverend Odo came up.

"Delightful morning," observed his Grace. "Going to be warm again, I believe. Not a cloud in the sky." He turned his face upwards and swivelled his head round the heavens like an astrolabe. "I was wondering," he went on tentatively, "whether it would be terribly inconvenient to you and dear Barbary if I stayed another night? I ought to be going, of course. In fact, I promised my Vicar-General I'd be back in Arundel to-night. But—well, not if it's at all inconvenient, my dear Roger. . . ."

Here was another surprise, though an equally pleasant one. I noticed that Sir Piers had glanced up sharply from the paper he was reading as his brother echoed his own request, suggesting that their action was in no way preconcerted.

"Nothing could be nicer," I boomed heartily. "As a matter of fact Barbary and I were bellyaching only the other day about the little we see of you both, considering that neither of you lives any distance away"—Uncle Piers inhabits a small manor-house on the hither side of Hurstpierpoint—"and I'm glad to see that you, as well as Uncle Piers, have awakened at last to a better realisation of your avuncular responsibilities!"

"What! Are you staying on, too?" the Archbishop demanded of his brother, who nodded silently. "Well, well, well. The more the merrier—that is, if you're sure we shan't be in the way?"

I gave the required assurance without hesitation. For a moment I dallied longingly with the idea of exploiting my position as their host and tweaking their elderly limbs by revealing what I knew of their respective nocturnal activities, and incidentally of discovering whether they were mutually aware of these, but I reluctantly decided that it might be tactless to broach the subject to both simultaneously. None the less I found their decision to stay on in Merrington as intriguing as the glimpses I had had of them in the small hours.

"I suppose I'd better go and phone my Vicar-General," Uncle Odo sighed with a noticeable lack of enthusiasm. "He won't be any too pleased—but, after all, I *am* the bishop, aren't I? He doesn't always seem to remember. . . ." His voice trailed plaintively away.

Sir Piers grunted sympathetically. "Same like that damn feller McFossick who was my C.G.S. in India," he growled. "Couldn't call me soul me own. Bloody Scotchman, that's what he was. Glad ter see the back of him. . . . Only trouble is," he continued querulously, "his mantle seems ter have descended on me present housekeeper, Mrs. Bartelott. Takes the same line. Bloody Norman, that's what *she* is."

I laughed. "Better let me do the phoning. Or better still, I'll phone them a wire each and not give 'em any chance to argue."

Both uncles emitted grateful grunts, and I left them settling down to their newspapers on the old oak bench in the porch. I paused a moment at the kitchen to acquaint Barbary with the change of plans and to note that the news pleased rather than perturbed her, and then went on to my study where, with the intelligent co-operation of Sue Barnes, I duly dictated the two telegrams.

And a couple of minutes later, as I was still lolling indecisively in my chair and trying to make up my mind as to which particular item on a somewhat formidable agenda should be tackled next, the telephone came back at me with a sharp, insistent ring.

7

I thought it might be Carmel. But it was Thrupp.

"I'm in a spot, Roger," he announced baldly. "Car gone on strike, and I may want to go places. Can't hire anything but a nineteen-eighteen Daimler with a body like a hearse. How's your Old Faithful, or whatever you call it?"

"*Semper fidelis.* She's a one-man car, though, and apt to be allergic to strange drivers. Better let me drive for you."

"I'd be very grateful, if you've nothing better to do. It's only a precautionary measure. I may not want to go outside the village."

"Where are you now?"

"Call-box, outside Merrington post-office. Can hardly hear myself speak. There's a blasted fellow with some bagpipes just outside, blowing like beggary. My own bus went bad on me four miles out on the Pulmer road. I got a lift in on a fish-van. Can you come now?"

"Five minutes," I promised; and indeed I tarried only to tell Barbary of this latest development before mobilising my elderly car and setting forth.

I found Thrupp scrutinising the cartons of cereals and tins of cocoa with which the window of our post-office is invariably furnished. Despite his misfortune he seemed as self-possessed and tranquil as ever. He is a rather good-looking fellow, well-built and athletic-looking for all his forty-odd years, with dark hair and a close-clipped moustache of the type which in my own soldiering days had usually been the attribute of a Gunner major. His dark eyes, seen through horn-rims, are by habit serene yet subtly eloquent of an active and analytical mind. His energy is often surprising, but he never rushes around or gets fussed. He rarely loses his patience: his temper, never.

He climbed in beside me, saying: "Let's get the hell out of here. I want to talk." I drove a mile or so out of the village and turned into a shady, unfrequented lane.

"Civil of you to come to the rescue," Thrupp said, as we drew up. "I purposely didn't want to bother Superintendent Bede for a car, especially as he's got his hands full with another case. Somebody's pinched something out of the local church, I gather. Bede seemed all steamed-up about it when I rang him."

"The case of the angels' trumpets," I said. And since Thrupp seemed to know nothing of the affair I gave him an outline, economically condensed from what Carmel had told me and taking care not to stray an inch outside the bare facts. Perhaps because of my parsimony, Thrupp was not particularly interested.

"Asking for trouble," was his main comment. "Anyhow, from a selfish point of view I'm not sorry it's happened, since it has diverted the attention of the not-so-venerable Bede. He's a good guy and means well, but I'd rather have my own team. I've sent for Browning and Haste—remember them? They'll be along soon."

"How are things going?" I inquired. "Identified your witch yet?"

"Not definitely—and I wish you wouldn't call her a witch. Don't let's complicate an already sticky case by dragging in all that fantastic poppycock." Thrupp sounded rather peeved, for him.

I wagged a reproachful finger at him.

"Fantastic poppycock now, is it?" I taunted him. "Quite a change from last night, my Thrupp—and, surely, from three o'clock this morning?"

He shot me a look and said: "Now what do you mean by that?"

I laughed. "I am Hawkshaw the detective and my spies are everywhere! You know, Robert, I don't believe you are being altogether candid with me. It's all very well to talk about poppycock now, but you were blown sky-high

by Uncle Odo's little story last night, and I don't believe you'd have sat up all night looking for witches if you hadn't been impressed."

"How do you know I sat up all night?"

"I don't—but you were on the watch at 3 a.m., so I thought it a good gamble to suggest that you'd made an all-night job of it."

Thrupp looked a trifle shamefaced. "I did, as a matter of fact," he admitted. "Very silly of me. I ought to have known better. Unfortunately, I've got a conscience." He sighed deeply.

"You don't believe Father Pius's yarn, then?"

"Of course not—now. It shook me when I first heard it, especially getting it from a real live archbishop, but in the cold grey light of reason I'm bound to reject it. Mind you, I'm not casting aspersions on jolly old Father Hoojah's veracity or suggesting that he made it up. He quite probably did see a witch on a broomstick, but the poor old chap was probably asleep when he saw her, even if he didn't realise it. A shame, I call it, making an old man like that get up to ring bells in the middle of the night."

"Have you seen him yet?" I asked, avoiding that issue.

"No. I'll go up to the Priory later and get the yarn at first hand, but I'm not going to clog my brain up with a lot of bogy-bogy stuff when I've a serious case to look into. Anyhow, I no longer need any supernatural explanations. The girl *must* have dropped out of a plane, and the only uncertain point is that old, old question: 'Did she fall, or was she pushed?' I now have two separate witnesses who heard a plane overhead that night, flying pretty low, too. That settles it, I think. There's nothing else she can have fallen from, and so long as there *was* an aircraft about I feel quite justified in assuming that she fell out of it."

"Naked?"

"Can't help that. Girls will be girls—and anyway, she needn't have started off naked. She might have stripped in the plane—or been stripped."

"And the birch-broom in the farmyard?" I murmured maliciously.

"Pah! Baloney! These farm-hands aren't what you'd call bright-witted, Roger. It must have belonged to the place, whatever they say."

"But a birch-broom is first and foremost a garden implement, my Thrupp," I argued, more to annoy him than anything else. "They use quite different sorts of brushes and brooms for farm-work."

"I don't give a hoot what they use," he retorted with a good-humoured grin. "I admit I did pretty well fall for that witch story last night, Roger, but now I know there was a plane about I'd be crazy to consider any other

solution. Have a heart, laddie. Can you imagine me going to the Assistant Commissioner and telling him, with a straight face, that the deceased was a witch who had taken a toss from her broomstick?"

I saw his point, of course. And indeed, had the witch theory depended on Father Pius's story alone (as Thrupp still believed) I should certainly have been as confident as he was. But then, he didn't know what I knew: that, a couple of hours or so before Father Pius's story had first broken forth from its monastic seclusion, Carmel Gilchrist had been telling me—quite independently and without possibility of collusion—how she had seen her own sister Andrea riding the skies in that manner.

And here my dilemma began goring me again with its ugly horns. Obviously, in the interests of justice, Thrupp must hear Carmel's story—but ought I to unleash it upon him without prior consultation with Carmel: or better still, trying to persuade her to give Thrupp her tale at first hand? Sooner or later it must come to that, for my own evidence, being second-hand, was technically no more than hearsay. Yet it seemed rather-a-cad's-trick-and-definitely-not-cricket (as they say at Transport House) to confront Carmel with Thrupp suddenly and without warning, or even to drop the detective a hint that Carmel was in possession of important information with an unquestionable bearing on his case.

And then I had a flash of inspiration, and a way became clear how, without involving Carmel herself for the moment, it should be possible to clear up one knotty but vital point. Thrupp had said that the dead woman had not yet been 'definitely' identified—whatever that might mean—and it was obvious that the degree of weight that the witch theory might carry must depend first and foremost on who she was and where she came from. If it turned out that she came from some place hundreds of miles away and had no connection with West Sussex, then the odds would be overwhelmingly in favour of the aeroplane theory. But if it could be established that she lived somewhere round about (though obviously she did not come from Rootham itself, otherwise there would have been no difficulty in getting her identified), *and particularly if it could be shown that she was intimately associated with Andrea Gilchrist*, then, preposterous as it might seem, it would be essential to consider whether she might not have been the second witch observed by Carmel in her sister's company on the latter's outward flight. Two witches had set forth that night, while only Andrea had returned. . . . Therefore, the one person who might be able to identify the dead woman beyond a possibility of doubt was Andrea herself. And while I realised that it would be necessary to walk with great delicacy in trying to

bring this about, it seemed to me that a perfectly sound, ready-made pretext already existed.

The problem was to apply this pretext in such a way that, for the time being at any rate, neither Thrupp nor Andrea would suspect any deeper motive than that which lay on the surface.

"What did you mean about the woman not being 'definitely' identified?" I asked presently. "Too bashed about to be recognisable, or what?"

"Lord, no. Actually, her face is just about the one part that's comparatively undamaged. Wherever she fell from, it was a simply amazing accident that she should have fallen just as she did: one chance in fifty million, I should say. She was lying slick across the ridge of the roof—tummy against the ridge itself, with her head and arms hanging down one side and her legs the other. I suppose hitting the ridge with her tummy first must have saved her face to some extent. Extraordinary state of affairs."

"You're sure she did fall there? She couldn't have been killed elsewhere and then put on the roof during the night?"

"That occurred to me at once, but the doctor says he thinks not. I think he knows his onions, and his firm opinion is that she died through falling how and where she did. He showed me certain—signs"—Thrupp gave an unhappy shudder.

"There are no flies on Mike Houghligan," I said. "Pretty sound bloke for a country g.p. He didn't find any other suggestive signs and portents about her?"

"Not on the spot; but I looked in on him this morning, just before I rang you, and he had some very interesting news. It seems that she'd been given something to drink not long before she crashed."

"How d'you mean—booze or dope?"

"Both. In fact, doped booze, in all probability. She'd been drinking some kind of white wine and there was also some kind of soporific or narcotic—I forget just what the doctor called it. Seems to suggest that she was dumped out of the plane unconscious rather than that she fell of her own accord."

I grunted. "Murder rather than accident or suicide, you mean?"

"Looks like it. . . . As regards identification, the position is that Doctor Houghligan himself and at least two other people have said they felt they *ought* to know her, but they can't put a name to her or suggest where she lived. Face vaguely familiar—but no more. I think she must have lived hereabouts, but either some distance out or else she kept very much to herself. Doesn't look the recluse type, though," he ended thoughtfully.

"No?"

"Devil a bit. She's youngish—twenty-eight at the outside, I'd say—and was probably very attractive. Upper or upper-middle class, obviously, and spent lots of time and money in looking after herself. Hair expensively permed, face very well made-up, finger- and toe-nails blood-red and well cared for, and the doctor says her whole body had been quite recently massaged with a rather complicated kind of herbal ointment or beauty-cream or something. Funny no one should have been reported missing so far. Makes you wonder if she lived alone."

"Married?"

"No ring—but the doctor thinks she habitually wore one. He showed me the mark. Anyway, he says she definitely ought to have been, even if she wasn't."

"H'm. In that case it's odd, as you say, that there haven't been inquiries. . . . Look, my Thrupp. The sage is in labour. It's obvious you can't get far till she's been identified—can't dig into her background, and so forth. What you want is someone with a pretty extensive knowledge of the whole neighbourhood. The doctor himself is one such person, but as he can't go beyond saying her face is vaguely familiar you'll have to try someone else. And in a country district like this, there's one obvious person."

"The parson?"

"Exactly—though in this particular case I'd recommend his elder daughter rather than himself. The vicar's notoriously absentminded—a good scout, but they say he can't remember anyone's name and in any case he doesn't get round much. He's a widower with two daughters, and I'd say that from the social angle they know a sight more about the parish than papa. The younger one, Carmel, is still only a kid; but Andrea must be twenty-five or six, and having been a sort of *ex-officio* Vicar's Lady for the past ten years or so she probably knows everyone there is to be known."

To my relief, Thrupp reacted with an approving nod.

"Thanks, Roger. Good idea. Let's snap into it straight away, shall we? . . . One other thing," he added, as I restarted the engine. "Before we trouble anyone else, I'd rather like you to take a look at her yourself. You're one of the oldest-established inhabitants of this village, and there's just a chance ——"

"Must I?" I protested feelingly. "I'm a bit allergic——"

"It's only her face you need look at," he reassured me. "And I've already told you there's nothing horrible about it. I'd be grateful if you'd just make sure you don't know her."

So in due course we drew up at the little mortuary which lies discreetly hidden away behind one of Merrington's multifarious dissenting chapels, and I found myself following Thrupp inside with more apprehension than enthusiasm. Still, he had told me the truth. The dead woman's face was sadly bruised by her fall, but it was still a face; and despite the patches of discoloration I could see that Thrupp had been right in describing her as attractive. Her short hair was of darkish brown, and her fashionable permanent wave had survived her. Her face was rather heart-shaped, coming down to a delicately pointed chin with a little dimple in it. Her nose was short and straight, her lips curved and rather full.

But I didn't know who she was. As I told Thrupp when we had got outside, I found myself in much the same position as Dr. Houghligan in that I had a faint impression that I had seen her before, but no idea where or when. Perhaps she was simply a type. But I felt reasonably confident that she was not a Merringtonian, for though ours is a biggish village embracing a number of outlying hamlets and little colonies of houses I felt confident that I knew all the regular inhabitants, by sight at least.

"On the other hand," I went on, as we climbed back into my car, "you must remember that I write for my living, which means that I don't get out and about as much as I might. Also, Barbary and I aren't what you'd call social lights. Barbary sees more of the village than I do, having to do all the shopping and so forth, but I still think Andrea Gilchrist is your best bet."

"Okay," said Thrupp. "Let's go and try our luck."

I turned the car and we drove slowly back through the village. Speech was impossible till we had won clear of the little square, for in addition to Old Faithful's roars and rattles the bright-kilted piper was marching up and down the gutter outside our only drapery stores, his lean cheeks puffed out like twin tennis-balls and his drones and chanters in full blast as the eldrich shrieks of his instrument defiled our decent Saxon peace. Secretly, let me confess, I am not so utterly averse to bagpipe music as my patriotism would seem to demand, and against my better nature I can even find something noble and heart-raising in a quickstep or strathspey well played. But even to my untrained ear this particular piper was no great shakes at his craft and the cacophony was little short of bestial.

"You may be interested to know that what he's playing now is 'Maggie McFootle's Farewell to Loch Diddle,' " bellowed Thrupp, as we lurched round the corner of Church Street. "Or is it 'The McFuggery's Farewell to Skulduggery?' Those are the only two tunes he knows, anyway, and it's rather hard to tell t'other from which."

"How do you know?" I roared back. "You're not a ruddy Scotchman, are you?" The very notion shocked me unspeakably.

"Good God, no! I'd be Chief Constable by now, if I were," grinned Thrupp. "No—I was talking to him just now, as a matter of fact, while I was waiting for you. Policeman's instinct to find out if he'd got a licence to make that foul din, I suppose, only I remembered in time that it wasn't my pidgin and I mustn't horn in on the West Sussex Constabulary's preserves. The poor basket's unemployed, of course. I gave him a bob and he told me the story of his life and the names of his pieces—though I may have got 'em wrong. Odd notions of gratitude the Scots have got. Seems to me that if you have one to stay with you, he repays your hospitality by composing a new bagpipe tune to celebrate his departure. Well meant, no doubt, but apt to be rather trying."

"It comes cheaper than tipping the servants," I explained. "However, here we are. . . ."

8

I shall not readily forget the circumstances of our arrival at the Vicarage.

Merrington Vicarage—locally known as the New Vicarage to distinguish it from the Old Vicarage, a vast and ungainly mansion now used as a guest-house—is an astounding edifice of a type which you would more confidently expect to find in some far-flung outpost of empire than in a West Sussex village. It was in fact built some fifty or sixty years ago by a vicar who had formerly been a foreign missionary, and while it is possible that the good man knew what kind of a house he wanted, he certainly did not succeed in conveying his idea too clearly to his builder, for the resultant erection was quite grotesque in its confusion of styles. Barbary, who has the gift of definition, describes it as a cross between a Victorian shoe-factory and a beachcombers' bar in the South Seas; and it is recorded that the late Sir Edwin Lutyens, coming upon it suddenly and without warning, uttered a *staccato* succession of sharp cries and fell straightway into a deep swoon from which he was only with difficulty revived. I shall not enrage you by attempting to describe it, beyond saying that the whole house is raised above the level of the garden by four or five steps, at the top of which a wide covered veranda runs right round the building. Age has done much to mellow what must once have been a pretty desperate effort, but even now it presents a moderately fearsome spectacle.

It is approached by a drive which curls between tree-bordered lawns to the front door. Owing to an intervening privet hedge the latter is only visible for the last twenty yards of the drive; and as Thrupp and I drove round the

last bend we beheld a scene which all but caused our wondering eyes to leap from their sockets.

For on that portion of the veranda which abuts upon the front door a most desperate and bloody fight was in progress between a very small bishop and a very large cat. The prelate (for such I judged him to be by his neat black breeches and gaiters, his pectoral cross, his purple stock and the curiously shaped shovel hat upon his head) was clearly getting the worse of the contest and was in any case labouring under the disadvantage of being unable to see his adversary, which with devilish cunning had sprung upon him unawares from behind and embedded its murderous talons deep in the episcopal buttocks—and since his lordship, though short in stature, was broad-bodied and notably steatopygous, the cat had plenty of depth (so to say) in which to develop her lust for mayhem. Indeed, all the unfortunate bishop could do was to spin round and round on his own axis like a punch-drunk teetotum, with his assailant attached to his rump like some monstrous smoke-grey tail. His shouts and objurgations were clearly audible even above the racket of Old Faithful's engine, and there was a look of frenzied agony on his rather Bellocian features all too reminiscent of the early Christian martyrs. In the relative silence which prevailed when I switched off my engine I could hear him vociferating with the full strength of his powerful lungs in some language which I took to be Hebrew or Aramaic, since it was neither English, Latin nor Greek. It was impossible to say for certain whether his ejaculations were sacred or profane, but I could hazard a guess.

This totally unexpected demonstration of Grimalkin's claw-work *in esse* so fascinated me that for a moment or two after bringing the car to rest I remained rooted to my seat, gaping and spellbound. I had no more doubt, of course, that this formidable quadruped was the ill-famed Grimalkin than that the suffering biped was the Lord Bishop of Bramber, irreverently known by his flock as Bloody Ben, though I could not remember having seen either of the protagonists before. Observing them now, I thought I understood how the bishop had come by his sobriquet; and even more clearly did I comprehend, for the first time in my life, just what is meant by a hell-cat. There was indeed something most appositely allegorical or symbolic in this sanguinary spectacle, as of the unending conflict between the Church Militant and the Devil. I reflected that if the cat Grimalkin were not a witch's familiar, then she jolly well ought to be. It was not only the savage animal ferocity with which she was lacerating her right reverend victim, but the look of utter evil in her bestial eyes, wherein one could all but see the sulphur-fires of Hell sparking and flaming very damnably.

And if you accuse me, the Sahibs and White Men among you, of shameful inaction and deplorable procrastination in not hurtling at my maximum velocity to the succour of a fellow man, I shall plead partially guilty—though not of intent—but at the same time advance the extenuating circumstance that others were before me and that too many cooks can well spoil the broth. For already the excellent Thrupp had leaped from the car and launched himself like a thunderbolt on to the veranda, where, after manœuvring for position, he gallantly seized the hell-cat by the tail and tried to pull her off the pontifical posterior by main force: a tactic in which, unfortunately, he was frustrated both by the fiendish tenacity of Grimalkin and the refusal, or inability, of the Lord Bishop to keep his stern pointing in one direction long enough for the disengagement to be effected. At this moment a hitherto unobserved gardener ran up brandishing (not inappropriately) a besom, with the business end of which he came smartly 'on guard' in the style proper to an Old Contemptible and proceeded to harry the cat with determined skirmishings from the flank—which, however, proved no more effectual than Thrupp's attacks from the rear, and for just the same reasons. I now bethought me of the starting-handle of the car, and was on the point of retrieving this from under the back seat and charging into the fray when a clear feminine voice smote my ears, saying: "Good God! What's happening? Grimalkin, you beast, leave go of his Lordship *at once*! How dare you? *Down*, Grimalkin!"

And even as she cried out, Andrea Gilchrist ran out of the door and without fear or hesitation seized the foul fiend by the head and ears; whereupon the animal, thwarted and outnumbered, submissively but with an ill grace withdrew her talons, wriggled fiercely free of her mistress's grasp, and fled swearing hideously into a clump of rhododendrons not far off.

At which moment the breathless silence that ensued was shattered by a loud booming voice coming from an open window at one end of the long veranda: a stentorian voice, rich, emphatic and solemn. In portentous and minatory tones it declared:

" '*Alexander the Coppersmith hath done me much evil. The Lord requite him according to his works!*' Words taken, my dear brethren, from Saint Paul's Second Epistle to Timothy, the fourth chapter, the fourteenth verse. . . ."

And when we four males on the veranda—bishop, detective, gardener and myself—began to reel under the impact of this new phenomenon, Andrea gave us a dazzling smile and said: "It's all right. It's only Daddy getting down to his next sermon. He's early this week, and I'm sure he's got

his text wrong, too. It ought to be ‘reward,’ not ‘requite,’ and ‘did’ instead of ‘hath done.’ . . . My Lord, how *can* I apologise——”

9

A couple of minutes later, when the Bishop had withdrawn to his bedroom stuttering and speechless with mingled pain, shock and (I verily believe) suppressed laughter, and the gardener had gone back to his bedding-out operations, I introduced Thrupp to Andrea and strolled discreetly away down one wing of the veranda. That she was surprised to see us went without saying, for I had never been a regular caller at the Vicarage and I attached no special significance to the startled look on her lovely face when I mentioned Thrupp’s rank and occupation. Such is the nature of us fallen humans that even the most blameless livers among us are apt to be attacked by a sudden sense of secret guilt on being confronted with an official from the Yard; and though Andrea had been visibly shaken for a moment, her symptoms were no more violent than might have been expected.

For myself, I was torn between two temptations—one, to hang around and surreptitiously observe Andrea’s reactions to what Thrupp had to say; the other, to find Carmel and try to arrange a further discussion with her in the near future. The latter was clearly the more urgent duty, for Thrupp was completely capable of making his own observations and it was essential that I should see Carmel as soon as possible. All the same, I could not resist the urge to turn round and take another look at Andrea before passing round the corner of the veranda, to see how she fitted in with Carmel’s fantastic story of broomsticks and witch-flights. And the longer I looked, the less credible it seemed.

It has already been hinted that Andrea Gilchrist was a singularly beautiful young woman. She was taller than Carmel, with a perfect figure in the slim modern style, and very dark, while her sister was fair. Her face was, as I have said elsewhere, Helenesque in that (if I may crave once more the indulgence of the poet Marlowe) even if it might find difficulty in assembling a thousand ships to launch in these less gallant days, could at least be relied upon to stop any one of ten thousand cars or lorries if she had ever been reduced to hitch-hiking. Her very dark eyes were, it is true, secretive; yet I had never felt this to be anything more than the veil behind which most young women contrive to hide the secrets of their inner selves from the predatory curiosity of the male. It might, of course, be a mask, behind which something evil and terrible lurked unsuspected; but it might equally be a modest screen for fastidious rectitude and purity. There was no telling which. Yet I had Carmel’s word for it (and I clung firmly to my

instinctive faith in Carmel's veracity) that hidden fires burned hotly behind that opaque veil. Had these been simply the fires of physical passion I might well have believed it; but perhaps because I am reluctant to associate beauty with evil, I found myself fighting back the notion that Andrea's hidden fires gave off any stench of sulphur.

Thrupp and Andrea were now deep in converse in a couple of wicker chairs near the front door. I could not hear what was being said, if only because from farther along the veranda there still came the resonant boom of the Reverend Andrew rehearsing and developing his sermon. Naturally I had never heard him preach, but his discourses were a byword in the village and his present surprising choice of texts seemed well up to sample. Rather absently I wondered what moral or precept he would draw from the dark deeds of Alexander the Coppersmith; and even as I wondered, a *crescendo* enabled me to distinguish the bellowed asseveration that '*Saint Paul, unlike some of you drowsing down there below me, was not an intellectual snob. . . .*'

I passed round the corner of the house and to my delight espied the strawberry-blonde head I had been seeking, bent earnestly over a bed of late Darwin tulips in a distant corner of the garden—too far away, apparently, to have heard the din of battle on the front veranda. I quickened my pace and came upon her unawares.

Naturally she was surprised to see me, but I gave her a brief account of the developments since I had seen her last and satisfactorily explained my presence in her garden. It seemed that she had already heard about the Rootham tragedy and the mysterious circumstances in which it had occurred, and it was scarcely surprising that the thought-train engendered by this news ran roughly parallel to my own. However, she was unable to make any suggestion as to the possible identity of the victim, beyond agreeing with me that, preposterous as it might seem by normal standards of reason, the dead woman might conceivably be the second 'witch' who had set forth with Andrea but not returned with her. But we were both anxious to avoid any possibility of being caught confabulating by Andrea, so we did not prolong our discussion. In response to my request for a more private interview, Carmel said she had the loan of a horse that afternoon and was proposing to ride on the Downs, so it was agreed that we would both endeavour to be in the vicinity of Burting Clump round about three o'clock.

With that we parted, and I resumed my stroll round the house. I was relieved by having made this date with her, for we had a good deal to say to each other and I was anxious to know how I stood with regard to the problem of passing on her story to Thrupp. I felt that unless the detective's

present approach to Andrea led to far more sensational results than I was hoping for, I could scarcely hold out on him beyond that evening; by which time I must either have persuaded Carmel to tell him her grotesque story in person or at least to authorise me to do so. In general, I am several light-years short of being what the pedagogues call a Good Citizen, but even my tensile conscience has a limited coefficient of elasticity.

Passing round the back of the house I described in the distance a tall, gaunt figure with grey hair and a dark suit, peering lugubriously at a bed of cabbage seedlings. I guessed that this might well be Sir John Wiston, the diocesan chancellor, so I effaced myself rapidly lest he should demand to see my faculties for being where I was. Stealthily regaining the creeper-screened veranda I flowed silently along the third side of the Vicarage, meeting no one on my way. As I approached the far corner, however, the bombilation of the Reverend Andrew's rehearsal swelled up and up until I was treated to yet another fragmentary audition of the gentle pastoral discourse on which he would feed his flock on the following Sunday.

"*. . . generations of blockheads and gibbering exegetists, tying themselves into knots and wallowing in a mire of unbridled speculation*—(Oh, God, my metaphors! Never mind—sort 'em out later)—*scavenging for mysteries where none exist, crazily confusing Paul the Mystic with Paul the Man*. (That's not too bad!) *Fools! Morons! Drivellers! Dotards! . . . Here we have Paul the Man finishing off an epistle—a letter: not writing a treatise on metaphysics. He means what he says, believe it or not. He's telling Timothy to come and see him: asking him to bring along the cloak and the books he'd left with Carpus at Troas—just as you might invite your nephew to come and stay with you and bring along the pink bed-socks you left behind at Aunt Polly's. And then he adds a warning: a warning to Timothy to watch his step where a certain coppersmith named Alexander is concerned. . . .*"

Tempted as I was to continue along the veranda and take a peep into the Vicar's study as I passed, I thought better of it and once more descended the steps to the garden path below. On this I completed my circuit of the house, arriving back near the front door barely five minutes after I had quitted it.

I found Thrupp and Andrea just where I had left them, but with this difference—that a silence had fallen between them and that Andrea was looking distinctly white and shaken. Her beauty was ineradicable and she had lost none of her poise, but she was clearly rattled. She threw me a little token smile as I came up, but there was no depth in it and her eyes looked more secretive than ever. I hovered uncertainly for a moment and was about to leave them again when Thrupp drew me in by saying: "I've been trying to persuade Miss Gilchrist that it's her duty to come along to the mortuary.

You've seen the body already, Roger, so perhaps you'll confirm that it wasn't such a dreadful ordeal."

I did so in a few words, whereupon Andrea sighed and made a little gesture of distaste. But she capitulated. "If I must, I must——" she began—and then broke off suddenly, gripping the arms of her chair and turning one ear towards the open door. "The telephone!" she exclaimed, rising with swift grace. "I'll just see who it is, and then I'll be with you." And with that she walked quickly into the house.

I myself had heard nothing, but that was scarcely surprising in view of the ever-mounting racket proceeding from the Vicar's study, where Mr. Gilchrist now appeared to be storming towards his peroration. Thrupp glanced at his watch and then at me.

"One minute past eleven," he murmured thoughtfully in my direction. "Hope she won't be long."

"What's the next item, after this trip to the mortuary?" I inquired.

"Depends entirely on whether Miss Gilchrist can identify the body, Roger. If she can, obviously I must get cracking on whatever she can tell me. If not, I must cast my net a bit wider."

We fell silent for a couple of minutes, each busy with his own thoughts. Personally, I felt thoroughly ill at ease, for I hated having to hold out on Thrupp. I was impatient for my interview with Carmel, and hoped she would not prove unduly obdurate.

And then, after a quick glance around, Thrupp did a surprising thing. Leaning his head towards me and beckoning me to do the same, he whispered against the frenzied *obbligato* of the Vicar's roars:

"Do something for me. While I take Miss Gilchrist into the mortuary, nip down to the telephone exchange and ask them, in my name, whether anyone rang the Vicarage between eleven and one minute past—and if so, who. Can do?"

Stifling my wonderment, I nodded. "If Sue Barnes is on duty I can probably fix it," I said. "If not, you may have to go yourself. You think this call is bogus? I didn't hear the bell——"

"Ssh!" hissed Thrupp, drawing away from me; and two seconds later Andrea came out of the door. She had apparently found time to do some running repairs to her complexion and looked more composed.

"Sorry to have kept you," she apologised. "I'm ready, if you are. I hate the idea, but——" She shrugged.

"I'm very grateful," said Thrupp politely; and, leading the way down the steps, he opened the door of my car. Andrea stepped in, and we followed. Even as I fumbled for the starter we heard her father burst forth again like some angry volcano:

". . . *What, then, did Saint Paul mean by this odd little passage? Nothing obscure: nothing mystical: nothing occult. He simply meant what he said. He meant*—'ALEXANDER THE COPPERSMITH IS THE MOST ALMIGHTY SWINE. GOD GIVE HIM HELL!' . . ."

10

We drove to the village and I dropped my companions at the mortuary. Then, leaving Old Faithful standing outside, I walked swiftly down the street to the post-office. I had never been into the telephone exchange, but I knew that access to it was gained by a little door round at the back. Disregarding the notice prominently attached thereto warning all and sundry of the dire penalties inflictable for unauthorised entry, I went inside and to my relief found myself looking into the outraged eyes of little Sue Barnes, who was juggling with plugs and cords at the impressive-looking switchboard.

She was too busy to talk to me, but she tried to *shush* me away with indignant noddings towards the notice on the door; but I stood my ground and she must have seen from my face that this was no mere social or frivolous visit. At length, however, dismayed by the passage of time and the never-ending succession of falling shutters and clickings of plugs in their jacks—(I had never before imagined how much telephoning goes on in a village the size of Merrington, and I mentally resolved never again to show impatience with the single hard-worked operator)—I seized a block of paper from the table and wrote: *Urgent—Secret. C.I.D. man wants to know who rang Vicarage between 11.00 and 11.01.*

Sue read it, raised her eyebrows, pursed her lips, and paused in the midst of the plugging operation on which she was engaged. Then she nodded, as if she had recollected the call in question, and, after a glance at the clock (it was still barely 11.15), she nodded again.

"It's against the rules," she admonished me severely. "Who is this C.I.D. man, and why can't he come here himself?"

"It's Thrupp, who was down here over the Bryony Hurst case, if you remember," I said. "He's busy and asked me to find out for him. Come on, Sue. It's really dashed urgent."

She looked at me doubtfully; and then, having meanwhile connected yet another pair of subscribers, said: “Okay. But you must have got the message wrong. No one called the Vicarage, but there was a call *from* the Vicarage at 11.01 or thereabouts.”

“My mistake, obviously,” said I, concealing my excitement.

“One of the girls called Bollington 2,” Sue went on. “Does that mean anything to you?”

“Not a thing.”

She made a long arm and threw me a shabby paper-covered volume which proved to be a numerical list of subscribers to all the exchanges in the zone. Turning to B, I found Bollington, which is a tiny hamlet, even smaller than Rootham, which lies in a distant fold of the Downs in a diametrically opposite direction. It boasted only three telephones in all, and opposite No. 2 of these I found the entry: *Drinkwater, F., Old Pest House*.

“Oho!” said I to myself, said I, while a curious little prickle ran up my spine. I kept my face immobile, however, and shut the book before Sue could satisfy her not unnatural curiosity.

“You didn’t happen to hear any of the conversation, I suppose?” I inquired hesitantly, knowing that the telephone people are inclined to be touchy on this subject.

“Do I look as if I have time to listen to conversations?” she spat back, as two more shutters dropped. “Actually, if you want to know, I did hear one word—a rude word, which you wouldn’t expect a vicar’s daughter to use. ‘Bloody busy’—or something like that. Being busy’s no excuse for using bad language,” Sue ended with righteous indignation, reminding me that her parents are prominent pillars of the local Bethel.

I nodded. Then, before she could divine my intention, I implanted two swift kisses on her saucy little face—one on her forehead, the other on the tip of her nose—murmured “Thanks, pal!”—and made my getaway before she could come back at me. I did not insult her by asking her to keep my visit to herself. Nor did I share with her my reflection that, in certain circles, the word ‘busy’ is the current slang term for a detective.

11

To provide myself with a visible excuse for having absented myself I turned into the tobacconist’s and bought a packet of Player’s before walking quickly back to the mortuary. I doubt if I need have bothered, however; for though Thrupp and Andrea had already emerged and were deep in conversation beside the car, the Vicar’s daughter was in no state or mood to

notice my purchase. She was very white, and the secretiveness of her eyes had been superseded by a look of sheer horror and dismay. Making every allowance for the inevitably disturbing ordeal of gazing on a corpse, I had no hesitation in deducing that she had recognised the dead woman.

With almost superhuman strength of mind I choked back my curiosity and forced myself to stand a little apart from them. Even so, I could not help overhearing a good deal of what was said. Thrupp appeared to have already jotted down the victim's name and address, but he had a query on them.

"Puella?" I heard him mutter. "Odd sort of Christian name, isn't it? Never heard it before. . . ."

"Nor I," said Andrea. "But that's what it was, all the same."

"Latin for 'girl,' if I remember aright," said the Yard man. "Rum idea, christening a girl just 'Girl.' "

"You miss the point," said Andrea. "In this case it means '*The* Girl'—'the only girl in the world' sort of business—and according to Puella herself it was meant as a sort of—well, a rather academic kind of joke on the part of her father, who was an Oxford don. Rather wet really, but dons have queer ideas of humour. Still, Puella doesn't make such a bad name. Rather pretty, in fact. And it suited her, somehow."

"In what way?" grunted Thrupp.

"Oh, I don't know. She was awfully feminine, if you know what I mean. Can't explain exactly. What does it matter, anyway?" Andrea was nervy and impatient.

"It's quite irrelevant," Thrupp admitted apologetically. "Puella Stretton, you say. What did you mean by 'married, but no husband'? A widow—or divorced?"

"Honestly, I'm not sure. She didn't like talking about it, so we never did. I just gathered that there was once a Captain Stretton—or was it Major?—but that something happened. Sorry: that's all I know."

"And she lived alone. Quite alone?"

"Well, yes—normally."

"Meaning?"

"She—she sometimes had people down to stay with her. But otherwise she lived alone."

"I see." Thrupp moistened his lips, as is his habit when angling for words. "These visitors: can you give me any idea who they were? Relations, or friends, or did you mean paying guests?"

"Oh, no. I think Puella had plenty of money. I think they were just—friends. I can't tell you much about them, I'm afraid. I only met them casually. I might remember a name or two—though they'd only be Christian names, probably—but certainly not any addresses or personal details. I didn't get to know any of them well. You see, she lived so far out and I didn't get there so very often. It was quite an expedition to go and see her."

"What I was really getting at," Thrupp confessed, "was something you may think impertinent but which is really rather—pertinent. In general, were Mrs. Stretton's visitors men or women?"

Andrea looked a little flustered; indeed, her looks went further than her words. "Well, either—or both," she answered rather cryptically.

"I see." Thrupp apparently found it unnecessary to press the point further. "When did you last see her alive?" he asked after a brief pause.

Since it was clear that a great deal might depend on her reply to this question—and even more on whether or not it was a true reply—I observed her carefully out of the corner of an eye. As I did so her eyes caught mine for a second and I saw a peculiar light in them, suggestive of agitation, flickering perceptibly beneath that constant veil of secretiveness—and in that second I knew that she was going to lie. But she answered calmly enough, and with no more than a reasonable interval for recollection.

"About ten days ago, I should think. I was trying to think of the actual day, but I can't. All I remember is that it rained while I was coming home and I got soaked."

"Anyone staying with her then?"

"No. We were alone. I rode out after lunch, stayed for tea, and got home in time for supper."

"Was she expecting anyone in the near future?"

"She didn't say so."

Thrupp nodded pleasantly, and put away his notebook. "I'm really infinitely obliged to you, Miss Gilchrist," he said cordially. "You've been a great help, and I'm only sorry to have had to bother you over such an unpleasant business. I'm afraid I may have to trouble you again, when I've thought up some more questions, but for the moment I don't think there's anything more except this: Were any of Mrs. Stretton's friends—her men friends—in the R.A.F.? Or connected with civil aviation, even?"

Andrea's eyes opened wide, then narrowed suddenly. I had the impression that in spite of her ostensibly open manner the girl was striving desperately to handle a difficult situation in such a way that not only would her answers seem convincing but that Thrupp should not even suspect that

there *was* any difficulty. I felt, too, that she was fighting largely in the dark: that, for instance, the death of Puella Stretton had been a genuine shock to her and that she was playing for time in which to assimilate the implications of the tragedy before committing herself unduly. She seemed anxious to give no information about the dead woman which might later lead to unpleasant repercussions for herself. It might have been simply that Puella had been leading a morally irregular life and that Andrea wanted to protect her dead friend's reputation; or it might equally well have been that too deep an inquisition into Puella's affairs might also involve herself. Carmel, under pressure, had admitted in general terms that her sister's relations with men were not always as chaste as they should have been; and if this were true, Puella Stretton might have been a useful friend and ally to Andrea. Sheer speculation, I admit, and pruriently uncharitable at that; yet there was something about Andrea which, the more I saw of her, suggested that her Helenesque beauty was not exactly a reflection of her inner self. There was something sly about her, and she was a better fencer with words than a vicar's daughter ordinarily has cause to be. I wondered if Thrupp, behind that blandly impassive manner of his, was getting the same kind of impression.

These fragments of thought stampeded through my mind in the very few moments of time during which Andrea was wrinkling her brows in consideration of Thrupp's last question. The delay in answering was a trifle greater than her previous average.

"I was trying to remember a name," she explained at length. "There was an R.A.F. man who came down a few weeks ago, but all I can remember is that Puella called him Bill, and that he was a Squadron-Leader. Sorry—his surname may come back to me, but it's quite gone for the moment. I only met him once or twice, anyway."

"I see." Thrupp nodded understandingly. "Well, you'll let me know if you remember, won't you? It might be important. And was this the only man you met at Mrs. Stretton's who was connected with flying?"

"So far as I know. By the way, I think I ought to say, in case you're imagining otherwise, that I don't think there was any—any funny business between Bill and Puella. I mean, he brought his sister with him, a girl named Rosemary, who I gathered had been at school with Puella. I wouldn't like you to think——"

"My dear Miss Gilchrist, I never jump to conclusions," said Thrupp with a friendly smile; "especially conclusions of that sort. Well, I needn't detain you any longer now. I'm afraid you'll be wanted for the inquest, but I can let

you know about that later. Meanwhile, you must let us run you back to the Vicarage."

"Please don't bother," she protested. "I've several things to do in the village, honestly. . . . I don't like the idea of this inquest, Mr. Thrupp," she added anxiously.

"It's nothing to bother about," Thrupp assured her. "I don't suppose you will have to do more than identify her—and if only we could track down a relation of some kind, you might be spared even that. If only you knew a little more about her background and her life before she came to these parts. . . . Anyhow, don't worry. I shall try to see that the Coroner lets you off as lightly as possible, for your father's sake as well as your own."

"Oh, thank you!" Andrea flashed a smile that would have twanged the heart-strings of a more susceptible man. And then, with conventional thanks and farewells all round, she set off towards the centre of the village, while Thrupp and I re-entered the car.

12

By then it was nearly a quarter to twelve.

"I could lower a cup of coffee," said Thrupp, as Andrea's delicious figure grew more distant. "I had breakfast soon after seven and the void is beginning to ache. Is there anywhere in the village——"

"There is, but we won't go there," said I, starting the engine. "It's a god-awful place run by two elderly virgins who seem to think they're conferring a favour by selling luke-warm ditch-water at sixpence a cup. Let's go home and get Barbary on to the job."

We shot forward like a mechanised gazelle as Old Faithful's aged clutch did its stuff. We lurched through the village square, past that infernal piper with his barbarous tootling, and turned into Hill-Barn Lane, which was the nearest way home. But I had barely negotiated the corner when Thrupp raised a finger and said: "Stop!"

I obeyed, and he was out of the car before I could ask for an explanation. Curtly desiring me to stay where I was, he walked smartly back the way we had come. Glancing through the rear window I saw him reach the corner and gaze with impassioned interest at the shop-window wherein Mr. Penn, our leading draper, had a particularly revolting display of baby wear. He took one or two casual glances into the square, and a few moments later rejoined me.

"One of these days I shall write a small monograph *à la* Sherlock Holmes on 'Instinct as a Factor in Detection,' " he grinned, as he motioned

me to proceed. “Funny thing: I hadn’t the slightest grounds for imagining anything of the sort, yet I *knew* that if I walked back to that corner I should see Miss Gilchrist in the call-box outside the post-office. I just had to make sure. By the way, what luck did you have at the exchange?”

I told him what I had discovered. He nodded approval and jotted down the number and name I dictated to him. “And what can you tell me about this man Drinkwater?” he inquired, as we turned the corner into Abbot’s Walk.

I frowned and stroked my beard with my free hand. “Some other time, if you don’t mind,” I temporised. “It’s rather a complex subject, and I’d like to sort out my ideas. I must warn you, though, that I really know very little.”

Thrupp grunted. “Before we come on to that I want you to do me another favour, Roger. As soon as we get indoors, ring your girl friend at the exchange and ask her if there’s been another call to Bollington 2 within the past few minutes.”

A minute later I was doing as he desired. Sue was a trifle tart, but confirmed Thrupp’s suspicion without undue demur. There had been such a call—not from the Vicarage this time, but from the call-box. So what?

So nothing. All the same, something was puzzling me.

“Listen, my Thrupp,” I said, as Barbary left us alone with our coffee. “Not for the first time in our rough island story, you and I seem to have got mixed up in a bunch of happenings that aren’t as crystal clear as they might be. That’s okay by me, and I know the rules of the game. I know I mustn’t speak out of turn or ask tactless questions, and you must admit I generally stick to the rules pretty well. What I would like to know, though, is just what made you begin taking an interest in Andrea Gilchrist’s phone calls? You know nothing about her, and the mere fact that she was able to identify the Stretton woman for you doesn’t necessarily make her a suspicious character. But even before she identified her, what made you get all steamed-up when she went away to telephone? I admit you were right, and that she was lying when she said she heard a ring. But with the Vicar kicking up all that shindy about Alexander the Coppersmith I wouldn’t have backed my ears against hers.”

Thrupp’s brown eyes gleamed with something like injured innocence behind his horn-rims.

“Sheer inquisitiveness, my dear Roger. Either that, or a mere shot in the dark, or simply my curious instinct again, if you like. Frankly, I don’t know which. Perhaps I just wanted to test her credibility as a witness—an unpleasant sort of habit we get into in my job. Mind you, I’d already formed

certain conclusions about her while you were wandering round the garden. To begin with, she wasn't at all the sort of girl you'd expect to find keeping house for her father in a country parsonage. Not that there's any reason why, in theory, a parson's daughter shouldn't be unusually smart and beautiful—Nature is unpredictable—but, well, she gave off the wrong kind of smell, so to speak. Also, I'd discovered that she wasn't altogether straight. She told me at least two fibs—I won't dignify them with the word lies—about things which, so far as I could see, didn't need fibbing about. Never mind what they were. But there are people in this world, Roger, who seem to make a point of fibbing on principle—or is it just a matter of habit?—when there isn't the least reason why they shouldn't tell the truth. Half the minor crooks in London do it, even when they have nothing to conceal. Miss Gilchrist's fibs came into that category: they were trivial and unnecessary, but they did a lot to destroy her credibility in my eyes. So when she pulled that telephone racket I thought I'd test it out, especially as that was her second attempt to get away from me on a pretext which I suspected of being bogus. She'd tried it before, while you were away: wanted to fetch a hankie, when all the time she had one hidden in the palm of one hand, as I rather unchivalrously pointed out."

"It was a lucky shot, anyway," I observed.

"It was. Incidentally, are you ready to talk about this fellow Drinkwater yet?"

"Could you give me till this evening?" I pleaded. For one reason and another I felt I should defer my exposition till after I had seen Carmel again.

Thrupp did not answer directly. He smoked for a minute in silence and then said: "Roger, you're holding out on me about something, aren't you?"

"Yes," I replied bluntly. "Sorry, Robert. I wish I needn't."

He didn't get peeved or rebuke me, but simply asked: "How long has it got to go on?"

I said: "Unless anything unforeseen occurs, I'll give you the lot to-night—including what little dope I've got on Drinkwater. I warn you, though, the whole boiling doesn't add up to much. If it did I'd tell you now, and damn the consequences. Honestly, you're not missing much."

"Possibly not; but every little helps. All right, then: I'll give you till after supper to-night. In the meantime I want a geography lesson. In the last half-hour I've been given two addresses in places I've never even heard of. Where is Bollington? And, more important, where is Hagham?"

"Is Hagham where the Stretton woman lived?" I asked, as I rooted in my map-drawer. I had missed a considerable portion of Thrupp's talk with

Andrea, outside the mortuary, and the inference seemed obvious.

"It is." Thrupp stroked his chin and grinned. "I suppose some people would call it a coincidence that a woman suspected of being a witch should live at a place called Hagham! I take it that's the derivation of the name."

"Probably." I found the local one-inch sheet and spread it out on the desk. "We seem to be getting involved in some rather out-of-the-way places," I pointed out. "Rootham, as you know, isn't exactly on the main road to anywhere, but Bollington and Hagham are in the back of beyond by comparison. Real downland hamlets, both of them, and miles from anywhere. Miles from each other, too. Look—here's Merrington and there's Rootham, where you've been already. Hagham is about four miles farther on in more or less the same direction: roughly south-west from here, and south-south-west from Rootham. Bollington's *here*: roughly south-east from Merrington and six or seven miles away over the Downs; almost due east from Rootham, and east with a shade of north from Hagham."

"I see. Thanks, Roger. I'll borrow this map, if I may. It looks unpleasantly clear, by the way, that the only satisfactory way to get round to Hagham and Bollington is on one's flat feet."

I chuckled. "The air is perfect, the weather lovely, and the turf delightfully springy," I comforted him. "You'll find walking a positive pleasure, and once you're up on the Downs distances don't seem to matter. It's quite remarkable."

"Since you're so enthusiastic I shall look forward to having your company," was his dry comment. "Or have you, by some curious coincidence, a prior engagement?"

"Your insight is uncanny, my dear Holmes," I bantered. "However, with my map and my blessing you can hardly go wrong. Tell you what," I added, suddenly inspired, "I'll take you up as far as Burting Clump and see that you get your landmarks right, and then I shall know you'll be all right. I take it you'll try Hagham first?"

"Obviously. I must go there this afternoon, as ever is. How's the time?"

It was just coming up to half-past twelve. "Hardly time to do anything before lunch," Thrupp muttered, "unless—yes, that's an idea. What would be going on up at the Priory at this hour, Roger? Any chance of a word with Father Prior?"

I considered the point. "Normally, I'd say 'Yes;' but with Uncle Odo bumming round I wouldn't know. I'll give Father Prior a ring, if you like. I take it you want to see Father Pius."

"Ultimately, yes. But I'd rather see the Prior first. At least I know *he's* sane—or at all events he was a year ago, when I was down here for the Bryony Hurst case. I suppose I'm rather a fool to worry about Father Pius's vision, or nightmare, or whatever it was, but this blasted conscience of mine will pester me till I've written it off properly. . . ."

I went to the telephone and gave the Priory number; but when after some delay my call was answered, the voice was not that of Father Prior. It announced itself as that of Brother Stephen—an elderly lay-brother whose duties, I knew, were mainly of a secretarial nature. And when I had stated my name and asked if it were possible to speak to Father Prior, he replied regretfully that it was not.

"We have just had a tragedy here," Brother Stephen explained, "and I'm afraid Father Prior is not available."

"A tragedy?" I repeated uncertainly.

"Poor Father Pius," was the grave reply. "He hasn't been well the last day or two, you know, and early this morning he had a stroke of some kind. He died about ten minutes ago. May he rest in peace."

"Amen," said I shakily. "But—this is terrible! He was such a grand old man——"

"Eighty-four last week, Mr. Poynings, and as hale and hearty as a youngster till forty-eight hours ago. I—I don't know if you've heard—his Grace may have told you—what happened the night before last?"

"Yes. My uncle did tell me. A fantastic business——"

"Fantastic or not, it has killed him," Brother Stephen broke in. "He was an old man, and he never recovered from the shock. . . ."

PART III

AT BURTING CLUMP

Look like the innocent flower
But be the serpent under it.
Macbeth.

1

MY own immediate reaction to the tragedy of Father Pius, apart from the purely human and personal side of the matter, was one of regret that death should have removed so inopportunely the one person whose independent and eminently weighty testimony would have tended to bear out the strange story that Carmel Gilchrist had told me. It should not be supposed from this that I had by now swallowed Carmel's evidence without reserve. It was altogether too bizarre for any reasonable being to swallow in its entirety, and I still had an inner conviction that there must be a catch in it somewhere. But I liked and sympathised with Carmel sufficiently to wish that her assertions need not go wholly unsupported, and Father Pius's support would have been of great significance. True, there were any number of witnesses at the Priory who could give evidence of the old priest's vision at second hand, but that was not the same thing. And I wished that Thrupp had at least been able to make the old fellow's acquaintance and thus gauge for himself the degree of credence that might be reposed in him.

To my surprise, however, I found that the death of Father Pius had made a greater impression on Thrupp himself than I should have supposed possible. He was still not within a thousand miles of taking the matter seriously; but at least he seemed to be immensely impressed by the fact that the priest's experience, whatever it may have been, had been so vividly realistic as to hasten his end. I had half-expected that the fatality at the Priory would have the effect of making Thrupp write-off the whole incident in his mind—and I was not particularly anxious that he should do this, since Carmel's story had yet to be told to him. But, as I say, he now showed rather less disposition than before to ignore the whole business.

Barbary, Thrupp and I presently lunched alone, for Uncle Piers had disappeared on a day-long expedition by himself, and Uncle Odo had phoned through to say that he was remaining at the Priory for the time being. Half-way through the meal Thrupp was called to the telephone, to learn that his assistants had reached Merrington and were even now

fortifying themselves at the Green Maiden and awaiting instructions. They had another car with them, which released me from my officiating appointment as Thrupp's chauffeur—though to be sure he had made precious little use of my services as such. It also meant, presumably, that I must lose my job as his Watson, which I should have resented more than I did had it not been for my assignation with Carmel that afternoon. However, I couldn't have it both ways or be in two places at once, and since it was vital that I should see Carmel I must at any rate be thankful that the arrival of reinforcements ensured my freedom from Thrupp's company at the appointed hour.

I think I have observed before that the best way to conceal the truth is to tell it. When, therefore, Barbary asked me what were my plans for the afternoon I simply replied "Gotta date with a dame!" and left it at that. Naturally she did not believe me, and simply took it for granted that I had my own peculiar fish to fry—which in a sense was true enough. Actually, since I presently left the house with Thrupp in order to drive him down to the inn, I think she imagined that I should be spending the afternoon in his company.

And indeed I did spend the next three-quarters of an hour with him. At the Green Maiden I renewed my acquaintance with the alopecoid Inspector Browning (who, as usual, appeared to be itching to arrest me on suspicion—or perhaps merely on principle) and with the debonair Sergeant Haste, with his immaculately creased grey trousers and loud-checked jacket which he presumably imagined made him look like a country gentleman with sporting tastes, but which in fact made him look exactly like a detective-sergeant with a country assignment.

Thrupp wasted no time in long explanations, rightly observing that he would have plenty of time to outline the case during their forthcoming trudge across the Downs to Hagham—a pilgrimage to which his assistants appeared to look forward with little enthusiasm. So we all piled into Old Faithful and I drove as expeditiously as possible out of the village and down the appropriate lane, which twists and squirms between high hedges to the chalk-pit which lies near the bottom of the steep scarp of Burting Hill. There we parked the car and took to our feet, climbed nearly four hundred feet up a grassy zigzag path, and eventually emerged at the top of the escarpment at the rear of Burting Clump. It was now barely half-past two, so I had no fear that Carmel would put in an appearance for some little time to come.

The puffings and pantings of the three Londoners afforded me no little malicious enjoyment, but they soon recovered under the influence of that sovereign air. I led them to a point of vantage beyond the Clump whence a

great expanse of downland can be seen falling away to the south and west. Hagham itself, their destination, was out of sight, hidden by more than one fold of the Downs, but I was able to point out a couple of landmarks which should keep them on the right course. Well to the west of this course I indicated a distant roof just visible on the horizon and told them that it belonged to the selfsame barn at Rootham on which the body of the unfortunate Puella Stretton had been discovered. Thrupp checked positions on the map, thanked me for my services as guide, and set out with his little party towards Hagham. I said nothing of my own programme, leaving it to be inferred that I was going straight back to Merrington.

Actually, I simply made a circuit of the Clump and presently entered it from the eastern side. Burting Clump is one of the many plantations of its kind to be found crowning the more prominent heights of the Sussex Downs: a compact assemblage of beech and oak trees, roughly ovoid in shape and perhaps forty yards long by twenty wide. These clumps mostly owe their existence to a craze for improving on nature which obtained among the landed gentry a couple of centuries ago, who presumably considered that the whale-backed skyline needed breaking up. Whether or not Burting Clump is really an improvement on nature it is at all events a useful landmark and capable of affording a certain degree of shelter to the traveller overtaken by bad weather. Generations of downland tramps, of a breed now all but extinct, have used the Clump as a bivouac, and on the south side, just inside the outer fringe of trees, there still survives a regular tramps' oven of turf and clay, under which fresh ashes appear from time to time, and if you care to look round you will discover vast quantities of roasted rabbit bones, showing that the place still entertains an occasional night's lodger. For some perverse reason I have rather a tender spot for these old tramps. They are unspeakably dirty and they are very naughty poachers —(though I hold this no crime since we began, in our economic frenzy, importing our rabbits from the Antipodes while untold millions infest our own Downs)—but ever since I was a boy it has been my shamefaced custom, whenever I visit the Clump, to leave a few coppers in the oven for the next tenant. By and large they are harmless old sinners who do no injury to their fellows, and I have sympathy with any man wise enough to choose a turfy bed under the stars to some verminous doss-house down below.

I still had twenty-odd minutes to spare before Carmel could be expected to appear, so I strolled across to the oven to pay my customary subsidy to the crime of vagrancy. I noticed that my previous donation had duly disappeared (which was not surprising, since I had not been there for weeks) but that there were no signs of recent use—indeed, the lower part of the oven was

piled high with dead leaves and beech-mast blown in, presumably, by the winter and early spring gales. Having regard to the scandalously enhanced price of beer I selected a silver coin instead of my usual coppers, pronouncing at the same time a major malediction on all rich and godly skinflints who justify their refusal of aid to tramps on the preposterous ground that their potential donations would only be squandered on beer. Money spent on beer is never squandered; and anyhow, who are we to dictate to our fellow men how they should spend their money?

With these improving thoughts in my mind I came forth from the trees on the south side of the Clump and let my eyes wander lovingly over the fair expanse of downland spread out before me. The glories of our Sussex Downs have been so loudly trumpeted by my literary superiors—notably the man Kipling (who was an Anglo-Indian), the poet Belloc (who is half-French) and even that chap Mais (who is by origin a Derby Bright)—that it would ill become a mere native to add his puny voice, so I will not enrage you by padding out this noble story with pages of descriptive matter. Suffice it that from Burting Clump you get a tremendous and heart-lifting view through some 180 degrees, with the distant sea winking on the south horizon (though by God's charity you cannot see, at this range, the sad drooping noses of the Israelites who infest its shores, nor yet the monstrous Scotch tartans of the children on the beach). . . . Half-right from where I stood I could see the rapidly diminishing figures of the three Yard men plodding on towards distant Hagham; they seemed to be the only living beings in sight, if you exclude a scattered flock of sheep grazing pensively in the middle distance towards the coast. Far away to the south-east I could see the dip beneath which lay the hamlet of Bollington, where dwelt the man Drinkwater; and the occurrence of his name to my mind started me off on a train of thought which it would not now be expedient to set down. . . .

Carmel was laudably punctual; indeed, it was barely five minutes to three when my ears caught the thud of her horse's hooves on the turf. I hastened to the east side of the Clump to greet her, and was in time to admire her seat as she cantered the last hundred yards towards me. She was clad in dark jodhpurs with a vivid turquoise jumper, her head bare and her strawberry-blonde locks prettily dishevelled with the exercise. Once again I thought she looked deliciously nubile.

For security reasons I did not leave the cover of the trees, but she spotted me at once and rode in towards me. There seemed to be no one else about, and even if there had been there was nothing to suggest that our meeting was not entirely fortuitous. Still, there seemed nothing to be lost, and perhaps something to be gained, by keeping our association as secret as possible.

Carmel's own manner, though outwardly calm and self-controlled, was subtly eloquent of an inner nervousness. I suppose that, ridiculous as it may sound, it is really rather nerve-racking to be convinced in your mind that your sister is a witch.

We wasted very little time. I tethered her horse to a convenient tree, well under cover, and we ourselves found seats on the ground not far away. Then I gave her a cigarette, allowed her half a minute or so in which to recover her breath and settle her mind, and then unleashed on her the series of questions which I had been marshalling in my mind for some hours past.

2

Our conversation lasted all but an hour: which fact in itself precludes the possibility of reporting it verbatim. The best I can do is to summarise the points covered, quoting our own words when this seems a good idea.

I began by trying to discover how much she knew already about the Rootham tragedy. The bare news had reached the Vicarage some time during the previous evening, it seemed, when a parishioner who had called to see the Vicar on business had mentioned the matter in passing. The Reverend Andrew, though shocked and mystified at the time, had with his customary absentmindedness forgotten all about it till just before bedtime, when, remembering it suddenly, he retailed the news to his daughters.

"It must have been a shock to you," I suggested. "After your experience of the night before, I mean, and the pretty obvious conclusion it invited you to draw from it."

"You're telling me," said Carmel. "Naturally, I saw the possible connection at once, and it just about finished me off. But I assure you, Roger, the effect on Andrea was even more terrific. She's not what you'd call a nervy sort of person, you know—rather on the cold-blooded side if anything, and it takes a lot to upset her like that. But for a few minutes last night I thought she was going crazy. My dear, she was *terrified*——"

"And what did Mr. Gilchrist think about that?" I put in.

"Daddy? Oh, he didn't notice anything. Didn't stay long enough—went straight off to bed after telling us, leaving Andrea and me to lock up. Just as well, really, I suppose."

"Andrea didn't say anything interesting while she was in this state? Nothing unguarded or suggestive?"

"I'm afraid not. Nothing one could get hold of. It didn't last long, anyway. She was quite soon under control again and trying to laugh it off. And then, if you please, she tried to turn the tables by asking what *I* was

upset about! But of course that was an easy one: I simply said that the way *she'd* been carrying on was enough to give anyone the willies. I got away with it, too."

"Good for you," I applauded. "Tell me: do you think she knew, or suspected, who the dead woman might be?"

"I couldn't be sure. I think she must have had some sort of suspicion—otherwise why should she get so steamed-up? After all, one doesn't go all hysterical every time one hears of some unidentified female being found dead, unless you have a pretty good idea who it is. My own case was different of course. Having seen two 'witches' set out and only one return the night before, I felt a sort of horrible inner certainty that this business must link up with it. How else could a naked girl have got on to the roof of a barn miles from anywhere, with every bone in her body broken as if she'd fallen from a height? Of course, there was that plane, but——"

"What plane?" I interrupted quickly. Though I had said nothing to Thrupp, I had already decided that Carmel would be a useful person to consult on this point, since she had been awake during the relevant hours.

"Oh, just a plane that was fooling about over the Downs," she said rather impatiently. "I didn't mention it yesterday, 'cos I didn't see what bearing it could have. I didn't know about the Rootham business then, of course."

"What time did you hear it, and what was it doing?"

"I wouldn't know. It hadn't any lights and therefore I couldn't see it, and I've only the vaguest idea about times. It was some time after Andrea had gone, and also some time before she came back. Between one and two, say; or anyhow between midnight and three. I didn't take much notice of it. Why should I? Planes often come over here at night. The only reason I happened to get mildly interested in this one was that it hung about so long. Usually a plane zooms up from somewhere, passes overhead, and then gets the hell out of it as fast as it can, whereas this one was circling over the Downs for nearly half an hour."

"Flying low?"

"So-so. As I say I couldn't see it, but it certainly wasn't very high up. Quite a way up from the Vicarage, of course, but it must have been low over the Downs."

"Right. Well, to get back to last night. Andrea didn't say or do anything significant at all?"

"She didn't *say* anything—to me. We both laughed it off and went up to our rooms. But a few minutes later Andrea went downstairs again and was

away about ten minutes. I think she was telephoning. In fact, I know she was."

"Telephoning whom?"

"How should I know? I didn't go and eavesdrop."

"But you could make a guess?"

"I not only might, but did. But I don't see what value my guess could be to you."

I stroked my beard and came to a quick decision.

"Not by itself, perhaps," I agreed. "But if I made a guess too, and my guess happened to be the same as yours, there might be something in it, don't you think?"

Carmel looked at me quizzically from under her long lashes. "This is interesting," she said quietly. "Tell me your guess, and if it is the same as mine I'll admit it. Otherwise I shall keep mine to myself."

"Okay," said I. "Frank Drinkwater."

There was puzzlement in her eyes as she acknowledged the correctness of my assumption. It must be remembered that she was ignorant of what I knew about her sister's two phone calls to the same gentleman only a few hours earlier.

"And what do you know about Frank Drinkwater?" she demanded suddenly, sitting up and facing me. "What made you so certain that he was the person Andrea phoned to?"

"I wasn't certain," I equivocated. "It was just a guess, as I said. Curious that your guess should be the same, isn't it?"

She didn't answer at once. Then: "It isn't at all curious that *I* should have guessed it," she said. "I can't help knowing a bit about my sister's affairs—and what I know makes my guess perfectly natural. What baffles me is how *you* should guess it. I had no idea you knew enough about us to guess that Andrea might phone him in an emergency. . . ." Then, as a new possibility flashed through her mind and reflected itself in her eyes: "You're not a friend of his, are you, Roger? You haven't heard anything from *him* about—about——"

"No!" I broke in emphatically, for it was clear that Carmel found this notion extremely disturbing. "My dear girl, I scarcely know the fellow and haven't spoken more than a couple of dozen words to him in my life. I only see him once in a blue moon, and to be candid I shouldn't weep if I never saw him again. For no special reason, I dislike him intensely."

"Thank God!" breathed Carmel, with a little shudder. "I couldn't have borne it if you'd been a pal of his, 'cos I hate him—*hate him*!" she ended with quiet emphasis.

The conversation was getting interesting. It was by no means following the sequence I had planned, but there seemed more to be gained from spontaneity than from a rigid adherence to a pre-arranged schedule. Delicate handling might be necessary, though.

"He strikes me as being a bit of a twerp," I angled mildly, "but I can't claim to know him well enough to hate him. . . . Don't think me nosey, Carmel, but I can't forget that you told me yesterday that you and Andrea had had a row about him once."

"Yes," she admitted briefly.

"I couldn't press the point at the time because the phone rang, but I rather took you to mean that it was the usual sort of squabble two girls might have if they were both keen on the same man—or perhaps if one of them had horned in and swiped the other one's boy friend (if you'll forgive that ghastly expression), possibly by unfair means: such as, well, offering him something he couldn't get from the other, if you know what I mean." My phraseology was admittedly atrocious, but the situation was not easy. Carmel, after all, was no more than a kid, and I couldn't bring myself to put things more crudely. Besides, it then seemed to me highly probable that something of the kind might well have happened: that the unscrupulous and perhaps less virginal Andrea had amused herself by spoiling her kid sister's budding romance with an older man and had succeeded by foul means rather than fair. (And if you accuse me of having a nasty mind, I shall retort that an actual instance of Andrea's tendencies in this direction was to come to my knowledge only a few hours later—as indeed it will duly come to yours if you will but continue your perusal of these engrossing pages.)

I looked up to find Carmel's eyes simply blazing with indignation.

"You must be crackers!" she cried angrily. "My hat, do you imagine that I could ever get that way about a gosh-awful specimen like that?" Then a softer look, almost of amusement, crept in and drowned the wrath in her eyes. "Sorry, Roger. I didn't mean to be rude, but you got me on the raw. You see, you're so completely wrong. I've never even *liked* Frank Drinkwater, far less been in love with him or anything of that kind. I've always been sort of repelled by him, ever since he came here, and now I simply detest him. He may be up Andrea's street, but he's definitely not up mine. I can't bear him. Ugh!"

I murmured my apologies and was rewarded by her old, friendly smile. I would have given a lot to leave the subject forthwith, but unfortunately a deeper probe was essential. To my relief, however, Carmel spared me the need to formulate another question.

"What we quarrelled about was something entirely different," she said, rather hesitantly. "I don't think I can tell you exactly what, but it certainly wasn't a question of anything like rivalry between us. He's always been Andrea's 'boy friend,' and you can bet I've never felt any inclination to cut her out. Andrea thinks he's wonderful—and she isn't the only girl round here who thinks that, either—but I think he's loathsome. But then, as I told you, Andrea and I have always looked at things in rather different lights."

I grunted sympathetically, but said nothing.

"Mind you, this loathing is quite a one-sided affair, Roger. Not mutual antipathy or anything: I've often wished it was. Frank has never actually tried to make love to me—but I've always felt it was only just round the corner, and if only I'd been a bit more pleasant to him it might have been another story. I've always taken jolly good care not to be left alone with him. The trouble is, I think he always rather suspects me of putting on an act. He's horribly vain, and I think he believes that no woman could possibly be impervious to his charm! I saw that quite clearly when he tried to—to get me to do something he wanted me to do. No—*not* what you're thinking," she added with a quick little grimace; "at least, not what I think you're thinking. Never mind that. The point is that unless he'd been secretly convinced that I *was* putting on an act, he'd never have dared suggest what he did. And that's why I had that hell of a row with Andrea, of course. She took his side and did all she could to persuade me, but I dug in my toes really deep and managed to keep them there—which infuriated Andrea, 'cos she's always rather prided herself on getting her way with me. Then, when they'd failed to persuade me, they tried to trick me into it—but fortunately I saw the trap in time. Since then they've left me more or less alone, though I never feel really and truly safe." She sighed, and carefully stubbed out her cigarette against a tree.

And if you ask me, the rationalists and simpletons among you, what in the name of Lucifer the wench was talking about, I can only assure you that she was speaking in riddles which were as incomprehensible to me then as they are to you now. It might have made some sense but for her assertion that she did not mean what I meant—which, if true, seemed to eliminate not merely the most obvious but virtually the only reasonable construction that one could place upon her words. In other words, if Sex had not reared its ugly head, then what the devil had? True, there were difficulties even in the

Sex theory; for if Andrea were already having an intrigue with Drinkwater, it seemed unlikely that she would welcome the intervention of her young sister. But, anyhow, that kind of solution was explicitly ruled out, so I was frankly at a loss to know what alternative interpretation there could be.

Carmel had fallen silent, so I shifted my ground a little.

"Who *is* this fellow Drinkwater, anyway?" I demanded. "Where did he come from? What's his racket? What does he do for his living? And why does he live like a hermit in the back of beyond? All I know about him is that he's quite revoltingly good-looking, and if he doesn't wear corsets I'll never touch beer again!"

Carmel wagged a playful finger at me.

"You should make sure of your facts before you make rash vows of that sort, Roger," she said. "Much as I'd hate to condemn you to a life of misery on lemonade, you're almost certainly quite wrong about the corsets. Actually, that was one of the more spiteful accusations I made during my cat-fight with Andrea about him; and the joke of it is that Andrea denied it so strenuously that, like a perfect little beast, I took the obvious but unsporting course of asking her *how she knew*! And she spat back —'Because I bloody well do!'—which was not only shocking language for a clergyman's daughter to use, but also either a downright lie or else a jolly good give-away! Never mind which I think, but I don't believe it was a lie."

I had to chuckle at this prime instance of feminine ethics, at the same time hastily revoking my vow about beer.

"And to who he is, and what he does, and where he comes from, I don't really know a lot," Carmel continued, nibbling a blade of young grass. "You know of course that he lives at the Old Pest House at Bollington—which I always think is a most appropriate address for him, though the one thing I can find in his favour is that he has at least stopped calling it Ye Olde Peste House as that ridiculous Gillespie woman did, who used to live there. It's quite a nice house. Ever been there?"

I shook my head. "Not inside. I remember when it was nothing more than a deserted ruin of what really was a pest-house once," I told her. "That was ages ago, of course, before Mrs. Gillespie bought it up and restored it."

"It could be lovely," said Carmel. "In fact, it's nice now, though Frank Drinkwater has furnished it rather too exotically. Rather bogus and a bit—decadent. Also, there's rather too much old wood about it for my liking. Very picturesque and all that, but it'd burn like blazes if it once got started. The Gillespie woman pulled down most of the grand old Sussex flint-work, you know, and had all the upper part timbered instead."

"You still haven't told me what Drinkwater does," I reminded her.

"I've an idea he writes, though I wouldn't know what about. Anyway, he's got a study or library full of books and papers and things. I've only been in there once. There were books lying open on his desk and sheets of manuscript all over the place, so I formed my own conclusions. He didn't volunteer any information and I didn't ask for any. I expect Andrea would know—she's always out there—but I've never asked her. We don't discuss him much."

I screwed up my courage and asked one final question on this topic.

"Don't answer if you'd rather not," I said, "but can I take it, from various things you've said, that Andrea is definitely having an 'affair' with him, in the most indelicate sense of the term?"

Carmel looked me frankly in the eyes.

"You certainly can," she replied slowly. "They aren't blatant about it in public, but Andrea herself has boasted about it to me, quite shamelessly."

3

I glanced at my watch. It was nearly half-past three.

"Listen, Carmel," I said. "You and I are not very orderly talkers, are we? You know, what I really wanted to see you about this afternoon was to try and finish off what we were talking about yesterday morning, when we were interrupted. You told me that fantastic story of yours, of your experiences the night before—by the way, you still stick to all that?"

"Absolutely, Roger. I must, because it's true. Sorry, but I can't help it!"

"All right. Well, I'm still not committing myself to accept it as literally true, because though I'm sure you are telling the truth so far as your senses will let you, I feel it stands to reason that there must be a catch in it somewhere. However, even if we take it as our hypothesis that it *is* true, the question now arises which we hadn't time to get round to yesterday—namely, what are you expecting me to do about it? Did you come to me simply to unbosom yourself and blow off steam, or had you any notion at the back of your mind as to how I might help you? Frankly, I don't really see what one *can* do about it."

For a moment Carmel sat silent and motionless, her eyes troubled and unseeing. Then she turned to me with that wistful, engaging little smile of hers.

"Honestly, I don't know the answer to that one, Roger. I think it was sheer desperation that made me come to you. I'd been bottling it up so long, and I couldn't bear it any longer. I had to tell someone, or go bats. If Adam

had been here I suppose I might have told him, though in a way I don't think he'd be as suitable a person to tell as you are. I told you yesterday what made me pick on you, but I don't believe I actually imagined you could *do* anything about it. Golly, what *is* there one can do?"

I tugged thoughtfully at my beard.

"So far as I can see, there's damn-all one can do about it," I agreed. "I'm not a lawyer, but I don't believe witchcraft is even still a criminal offence in this country. England repealed the old Witchcraft Laws ages ago, so I doubt if it's even against the law to ride about at night on broomsticks nowadays! Even if it were, what could one do? I'm not trying to be funny, Carmel; but I hate to think what would happen if you went to the local police-station and told the village copper that you wanted to lay an information against your own sister for being a witch!"

She laughed aloud. "I don't feel inclined to risk it, Roger!"

"Dammit, I doubt if she could even be summoned for 'indecent exposure,' " I went on, warming to my theme. "That's an offence, but if she only does it at night and the only prosecution witness is her own sister, I feel even the local beaks wouldn't convict! And there's another aspect, too. Witchcraft, as usually understood and as was provided against in the old Witchcraft Laws, was essentially a malicious, harmful sort of thing, by means of which the witch caused injury or damage to his or her neighbours and enemies—either directly, or else indirectly by causing their cattle or pigs or what-not to fall sick and die, and all that sort of thing. My impression is that it wasn't enough to go to the authorities and denounce Old Mother Pyewackett as a witch and say you'd seen her riding a besom or changing herself into a toad. The answer you'd have got to that was simply, 'So what?' No—you had to prove injury, either to yourself or to some possession of yours. You had to be able to say 'Old Mother Pyewackett has done the dirty on me——' "

"Like Alexander the Coppersmith," murmured Carmel, with a little giggle. " '*God give her hell!*' "

"Exactly! And the point is, you see, that Andrea doesn't seem to have injured you in any way, apart from giving you the jimjams and worrying you to death. And we've no evidence that she has injured anyone else, either, have we?"

"Of course not. Anyhow, it's quite absurd to think of going to the police about it. Naturally, I wouldn't dream of it."

"Which brings me to my next reason for wanting this talk with you," I said, more seriously. "Listen, child. You know, quite unwittingly you've put

me in a pretty considerable spot by coming to me with your confidences. In addition to my uncles, my household now includes a very good friend of mine, one Chief-Inspector Thrupp of New Scotland Yard, who is down here investigating this affair out at Rootham. Incidentally, Andrea identified the dead girl this morning—did she tell you?"

"Yes. Puella Stretton, she said it was. Andrea's very upset about it. They were great friends."

"Did you know her?"

"I'd met her—once. She was rather attractive, I thought."

"Well, I needn't labour the point, need I, Carmel? You know the circumstances of her death, of course, and it can hardly have escaped you that these circumstances take on a very peculiar aspect when considered in conjunction with your story of flying witches: possibly only a coincidence, but a somewhat hair-raising one, you'll admit. Right. And now for something you just heard the beginning of, but probably not the end: I mean what my uncle told us yesterday about old Father Pius up at the Priory having seen a 'witch' on a broomstick at just the time when—to link it up with your story—he might have seen either your sister on her way home, or else another one. That alone made a pretty suggestive train of circumstances."

"You're telling me," said Carmel, with feeling.

"And the end of that story is that poor Father Pius died of shock just before lunch-time to-day," I informed her. "Which, you'll agree, makes it more suggestive than ever."

Carmel, not unnaturally, was very shocked. I added the few additional details in my possession, and though she had not known the dead priest except possibly by sight she was clearly upset and horrified.

"But about this spot I'm in," I resumed presently. "You see, although you didn't bind me to secrecy about your story, I more or less took it for granted that you wouldn't want it noised abroad indiscriminately, for obvious reasons. So when Thrupp came back from Rootham last night with his extraordinary tale of a naked woman lying on the roof of a barn with all her bones broken, I very naughtily used my discretion and kept quiet about what you'd told me. I oughtn't to have done, but what salved my conscience to a certain extent was that the witchcraft *motif* was rather conveniently brought to Thrupp's notice by Uncle Odo, who rather reluctantly trotted out the story of Father Pius's experience. Up to that point Thrupp seemed to be working on the very natural assumption that the dead woman must have fallen from an aeroplane, and I argued with myself that so long as the

subject of broomstick-riding *had* been mentioned as a possible alternative, I could just about justify holding up your story till I'd seen you again."

"That was nice of you, Roger. By the way, how did this detective take the broomstick idea? I suppose he laughed like hell."

"Not exactly. You see, an archbishop is an archbishop, even if he's only a poor benighted papist, and Thrupp's too careful a man to overlook any possibility, however preposterous it may sound. Actually, he was devilish impressed—at the time. You could almost see his hair standing on end when the implications dawned on him. If only I'd felt at liberty to charge in and consolidate the position by adding your quota, goodness knows what mightn't have happened. As it was, poor Thrupp sat up all night looking for witches out of his bedroom window, which shows—well, that he didn't just dismiss the whole thing as so much baloney."

Carmel was impressed.

"However, he seems to have changed his mind this morning," I went on. "Pooh-poohs the whole idea and says it *must* have been an aeroplane—probably the same one that you heard, incidentally. Apparently other people heard it, too. But— Thrupp is nobody's fool, and he knows quite well that I'm holding out on him over something. He taxed me with it, and I owned up—I couldn't do otherwise. I've got till to-night to tell him what I know."

She made no comment, and presently I continued.

"Much as you may hate the idea, Thrupp will have to hear your story, Carmel," I said firmly. "But for the death of this Stretton woman I could have kept it to myself, but you don't need telling that something pretty sinister seems to be going on round here, and my duty is quite clear. Thrupp must be told—and the only question is, do you tell him or do I?"

She was biting her lip, but made no immediate reply.

"Naturally it'd come better at first hand from yourself," I went on. "On the other hand, I can quite see how you might hate the idea of telling a strange man a fantastic story which involves your own sister. In fact I should quite understand—and so would Thrupp, I'm sure, for he's a reasonable guy—if you decided you couldn't do it—voluntarily. Sooner or later you may *have* to do it—it rather depends on how Thrupp's aeroplane theory pans out; but it might be easier if, for the time being, I broke the ice for you. It wouldn't be necessary to cover all the ground we went over yesterday. All I need do would be to give him the bare facts about Andrea's witch-flights in general and the events of the night before last in particular, and then let him link them up with Puella Stretton's death and Father Pius's experience as best he can."

Poor Carmel was looking thoroughly miserable. She sat very still, and her eyes were far away. Her little chin looked remarkably obstinate, too, and I feared there was going to be trouble. Much to my relief, however, she presently relaxed and turned to me with a helpless little smile.

"Pretty lousy state of affairs, isn't it?" she exclaimed. "You're quite right, of course. It had to come to this—ever since Puella's death, I mean. I almost wish now that I hadn't come to you yesterday—no, that's not true, 'cos I do feel happier now I've got it off my chest, in spite of everything. Still——" She picked up my cigarette-case and absentmindedly helped herself. "Roger, I can't do it," she burst forth, as I held the match. "I can't possibly go to this detective and split on Andrea like that. It'd be—indecent. . . . Still, you're right. He's got to be told—or I suppose he has. . . . *You* tell him, Roger. Just the bare facts, as you said. And if he wants to see me himself—well, make it as easy as possible for me, won't you? Don't let him come round to the Vicarage and start questioning me in front of Daddy or—or Andrea. Andrea mustn't know, Roger!" There was a desperate urgency in her voice. "You must fix it so that she doesn't get to know. She—she'd kill me. . . ."

I gripped her slim arm and squeezed it reassuringly.

"Forget it, chum," I said quietly. "Tact is my middle name, and Discretion is Thrupp's. I'll give him a summary to-night, and bargain with him not to disturb you till the morning. He may not want you even then: as I say, it'll probably depend on how his aeroplane theory goes. But if he does—well, stick around near the telephone after breakfast to-morrow, and I'll give you a ring. . . . Don't worry too much, Carmel. It isn't pleasant, I know; but it's got to be done and I don't honestly see how you'd be getting your sister into trouble or anything. As I said, riding a besom is hardly likely to be a criminal offence, even if you could get anyone to believe it can be done, and nothing can possibly happen to Andrea as a result of your story—unless she gets to know that inquiries are being made, which might have the admirable effect of curing her of her peculiar habits. . . ."

4

We chatted a little while longer, till Carmel said she ought to be going. It was getting on for four o'clock.

"By the way," I said suddenly, detaining her as she was about to rise, "thanks to all this kafuffle I've completely forgotten to ask you about the angels' trumpets! Have they been recovered yet?"

She laughed. "Not a sign so far. Sunk without trace. It really is a most amazing affair."

"What happened exactly? I've been so mixed up with this other business that I haven't heard a single detail."

She brushed a few clinging leaves and twigs from her jodhpurs.

"My dear, nobody knows exactly what happened—except the thief! The trumpets were in position at eight o'clock the night before last, because I saw them there myself when I locked up the church for Daddy. And apparently they weren't there at eight o'clock the next morning, when Slogger Tosstick arrived to take the early Celebration. He and Daddy take it in turns on weekdays, you know. But the trouble was, you see, that Slogger never imagined for a minute that they'd been pinched, and the theft wasn't really discovered till nearly lunch-time."

"I don't get it," I put in, puzzled. "If Slogger noticed that they weren't there——"

"Ah, but that's the whole point. What happened, you see, was that the evening before, Daddy and Slogger had had an argument as to whether it mightn't perhaps be discreet to keep the trumpets out of sight the next day, to begin with, so that the Bish could see for himself how ghastly the angels looked without them—and then they could be brought forth and put in position, whereupon Bloody Ben would be so impressed with the improvement that he'd yell for bell, book and candle and bless them straight away. That was Slogger's scheme—he prides himself on being a helluva psychologist, you know—oh, and he also made the point that it might seem tactful to let the angels be trumpetless at first, in humble acknowledgment that we had no faculty for displaying them. Actually, I think it was this last point that put Daddy against the scheme: I mean, he was dashed if he was going to give Bloody Ben the impression that he'd climbed down or let it be suspected that he cared a hoot in hell for the Big Bad Bish or his tuppenny-ha'penny Chancellor. So he turned down Slogger's idea pretty flat—but when Slogger arrived to take the service next morning and found the trumpets missing, he not unreasonably imagined that Daddy had since changed his mind and seen the light. So he didn't say anything about it, thinking the trumpets were stowed away somewhere handy, ready to be bunged into place when the Bish arrived."

"But surely," I broke in, "you don't mean to tell me that these extremely expensive trumpets can simply be put up and taken down *ad lib.*, without any protective lock or catch?"

"You don't know Daddy, obviously. He never locks anything up—doesn't believe in it. He says locks and bolts simply act as a challenge to thieves and put ideas into their minds! I've already told you how he leaves

the collections lying about at home. Even the house would never be locked at night if Andrea or I didn't see to it—nor the church either, for that matter. The man who came down to see about making the trumpets simply implored Daddy to let him incorporate some kind of locking device, but he wouldn't have it. . . . Anyway, as I was saying, Slogger noticed that the trumpets were gone, but thought it more tactful not to make a song and dance about Daddy's presumable change of mind. Slogger may stink, but he knows which side his bread is buttered. So nothing was said or done till about twelve-thirty, when B.B. and Sir John arrived. And then the fun started."

Carmel threw back her head and gave a reminiscent laugh.

"There's one thing about B.B. He may be a bit of a basket where discipline is concerned, but he never keeps his victims on tenterhooks. Not that Daddy bore the slightest resemblance to a martyr on the rack—he's a tough guy himself—but anyhow, the moment B.B. arrived he only waited to shake hands and get outside a quick glass of sherry, and then he clapped Daddy on the back and growled, 'Well, let's go and see these infamous popish ornaments of yours,'—which was obviously a nasty little crack at Sir John, who looked quite murderous—'and then we can talk about a faculty afterwards.' So they all trooped across to the church—the Bish, Sir John, Daddy and Slogger Tosstick—while Andrea and I stayed to see how lunch was getting on. (It was awful the way we'd neglected things. Andrea had only just got up and was still pretty gummy-eyed and impotent, while I'd only just got back from seeing you. However, Mrs. Tee had coped, and there was nothing to worry about. . . .) Well, then, of course, hell broke loose in the church. You can imagine what happened—Slogger told me afterwards. There was dear Daddy pointing out what a terrific improvement the trumpets made, with Slogger nudging his elbow and trying to make him see that they weren't there at all! Then the Bish gave tongue and asked what the great idea was, and Sir John acidly remarked that he supposed this was Daddy's idea of a practical joke—and, well, there was a frightful kafuffle! I couldn't resist ringing you and passing on the news."

"A courtesy I much appreciated," I said. "Coming just when it did, it produced a profound effect on my already overwrought nerves. But what has happened about the trumpets?"

"Oh, once it was established that they really were missing and that neither Daddy nor Slogger had put them away for tactical reasons, we obviously had to send for the police and they've been buzzing round like bees ever since. The superintendent from Steyning's in charge, and he's been third-degreeing everyone in sight—without the slightest result, so far as I can see. B.B. and Sir John decided to stay the night and see what happened,

and the only person who wasn't thoroughly steamed-up was Daddy himself. Incidentally, I bet the Bish is wishing he'd gone back to Bramber yesterday instead of hanging on till this morning!"

I grinned. "You mean—Grimalkin?"

"Yes." Carmel laughed wickedly. "Oh, Roger, how I wish I could have seen it! It must have been *divine*. You did see it, didn't you?"

"I did. An uplifting, but at the same time a rather terrifying spectacle. I wouldn't know whether that cat is an 'imp of Satan' in the literal sense, but she surely is in the metaphorical. Allah, what a brute!"

"Isn't she dire? Honestly, joking apart, it makes one wonder, Roger." She frowned. "What on earth Andrea can see in her—unless she *is* something of the sort. . . ."

"How long has Andrea had her, and where did she come from?"

"Oh, she was a stray. Turned up quite suddenly about—oh, some time last autumn or late summer. It all fits in, you see. She just blew in from nowhere, and Andrea promptly adopted her. She even let the brute sleep in her room to begin with, till I raised hell and Daddy put his foot down. Grimalkin's hated me ever since, though she's never actually gone for me ——" She broke off suddenly. "Hullo! Who's that?"

I followed her finger, which was pointing half-left. Though well under cover, we were not far from the southern edge of the Clump, and through the outer fringe of trees we could see much of the downland vista to the south and south-east. Perhaps a thousand yards away a tall male figure was walking in our direction with long, easy strides. His face was indistinguishable at that range, but I recognised at a glance the lithe body and athletic movements of Field-Marshal Sir Piers Poynings, O.M., G.C.B., etc.

Carmel identified him, too. "It's your uncle, isn't it?" she asked quickly. "The thin one I met yesterday. Roger, I'm off. I'll nip round the back way, keeping the Clump between me and him."

"But why?" I demanded, restraining her. "He won't eat you!"

"No, but he'll think things, Roger. First he found me in your study yesterday morning, and now I'm keeping a surreptitious date with you on the Downs. Not good enough, my dear. *I* don't care a damn, but—— Look, Roger: there's someone else!"

I looked again, and sure enough beheld a second figure silhouetted against the blue-grey sky. This, however, appeared to be a woman, young and slim-figured and wearing a short, brightly coloured skirt. She was well to the rear of Sir Piers and slightly to the east of him. When first I saw her

she seemed to be following him up, but even as I looked she halted and, a second later, threw herself flat on the turf.

Almost immediately I thought I knew why. Until that moment the stretch of downland over which my uncle was striding had been ‘dead ground’ from the girl’s viewpoint, but a change in their relative positions had brought him into the other’s view. True, this seemed no very good reason for taking cover in so dramatic a fashion, unless she were either stalking my uncle or had some other obscure motive for not having her presence discovered. And my first impression was that it was a deliberate stalk, not incompetently carried out.

With a little friendly squeeze of my arm Carmel slipped away towards her tethered horse, and so intrigued was I by what was happening out on the Downs that I had no mind to detain her further. Subconsciously almost, I presently heard the chink of the bridle and the crackle of leaves and beech-mast as she mounted and rode off.

5

Sir Piers came on at a steady four miles an hour, looking neither to left nor to right. The watcher remained motionless on the ground; indeed, had I not seen her drop I should never have spotted her presence, for all I could now see of her was a tiny distant blob of colour against the green of the turf. My uncle, meanwhile, was getting farther away from her every minute, but still there was no sign of pursuit. Even when Uncle Piers reached and descended a deepish dip some six or seven hundred yards away from me, the bottom of which was ‘dead ground’ both from my position and from the watcher’s, the latter made no move to follow up.

I told myself that I had probably misread the position entirely. In point of fact there was no evidence whatever that the young woman was keeping my uncle under observation, and the mere fact that she had lain down at the precise moment when he had emerged from the previous patch of dead ground might well be the merest coincidence. In this spring of 1939 England was still, after all, a comparatively free country, and our Downs were open to anyone who cared to use them. With a mental shrug I decided that there was probably nothing at all significant in what I had seen.

Nevertheless I did not, as I might otherwise have done, leave the cover of the Clump in order to meet my uncle. Indeed, I even toyed with the idea of lying low and letting him pass without revealing my own presence in the neighbourhood—possibly to satisfy my curiosity as to whether the girl would follow up, possibly with some undefined idea of putting into practice Carmel’s suggested policy of keeping our meeting secret. Where matters of

propriety and convention are concerned, women have more subtle minds than men. It would never have occurred to me that my uncle might see anything suggestive in my colloguing with Carmel two days running, and though our association was innocent enough in all conscience, I now saw that the possibility of misunderstanding existed. For Carmel's sake as well as my own I supposed this should be provided against; but the trouble was that if I now disclosed my presence and proceeded forthwith to walk home with my uncle we could scarcely fail to catch sight of Carmel riding away in a direction which must indicate pretty clearly where she had come from. If this were to be avoided I must either hide or else detain Uncle Piers long enough at the Clump to give her time to get well out of sight.

In the event, I stood my ground and waited for the Field-Marshal to come up with me. I was standing motionless among the trees, but his keen eyes spotted me while still a couple of hundred yards away. Characteristically, he did not wave or make any of the customary recognition signals, but came straight up to me among the trees with a quizzical frown on his hard-bitten face.

"What the hellyer doin' here, hey?" he barked amicably, as he approached. "Didn't expect ter see yer in these parts, Roger. What-yer doin' up on the Downs, hidin' yerself like a ruddy collar-stud?"

"Getting a lungful of decent air," I replied as unconcernedly as I could. "Pretty good up here, isn't it? I spotted you some time ago, as a matter of fact, but I didn't come to meet you because you already seemed to have a girl friend in tow, and I wanted to see what she'd do."

If I had hoped to surprise my uncle with this assertion I was doomed to disappointment. Flies have little chance of settling on Field-Marshal Sir Piers Poynings, as his country's enemies have often discovered to their cost. His sole reaction was to glance up at me sharply from under his bushy eyebrows as he lit the invariable cheroot, growling: "What's she doin' now, hey?"

"Lying on her tummy, watching you out of sight," said I, switching my eyes to verify the situation. "No, by gosh, she's gone!" I amended, a moment later. "Dammit, she was there half a second ago, but now she's vanished. Must have gone back the way she came. I'll swear she hasn't come forward."

Sir Piers did not even trouble to look round.

"Ferget it!" he ordered briskly, flicking away his match. "Come on, let's go home. I want my tea."

For Carmel's sake I was in no hurry to comply. "You knew about her, then?" I asked unnecessarily.

"What the hell d'yer take me for?" he snapped contemptuously. Then, suddenly stiffening, he demanded: "Talkin' of girl friends—who the devil's yours, hey?"

"Girl friend?" I echoed, considerably startled. It was quite impossible that he should have seen Carmel's stealthy departure unless he had eyes like X-rays, capable of seeing through a barrier of trees nearly twenty yards thick.

"Don't tell me yer've started usin' lipstick like a goddam pansy," he chuckled, indicating several fresh cigarette-ends on the ground near by. They were all of the same popular brand which I smoke, but two or three of them bore telltale traces of pillar-box red. "Came mounted, too," Sir Piers added a moment later, pointing to a distant heap of equally fresh horse droppings. "Fresh air, my fetlock!"

I laughed, but did not dispute the matter further. "I came up here with Thrupp and his men to put them on their way to Hagham," I explained. "Then, having nothing better to do, I stayed on a bit. Some time ago a girl from the village did happen to ride past and stopped to pass the time of day. *Voilà tout!* So if you go trying to poison Barbary's mind against me I'll brain you with your own bâton—that is, if Barbary hasn't already done it with a rolling-pin."

Sir Piers snorted, and led the way slowly through the Clump towards its northern edge. I retarded the pace as much as I could, but in due course we emerged from the trees and began to slither down the same zigzag whereby I had ascended a couple of hours earlier. To my relief Carmel had already disappeared from view; presumably down the chalk road farther east, for the zigzag was no bridle-path for a god-fearing horse. My uncle went first, and in the intervals of keeping my own balance I marvelled at his agility and surefootedness. Not in vain had he fought over most of the North-West Frontier in his younger days, and his long wiry legs had lost none of their cunning.

On the broad grass slope above the chalk-pit he paused and waited for me to come up. Then:

"What d'yer know about Bollin'ton?" he suddenly asked. "Rum sorter place ter put a village, hey? Backer beyond. No rhymer reason."

If his question intrigued me, I tried not to show it.

"You might ask the same thing about several of these downland hamlets," I temporised. "Hagham, for instance, and North and South Stoke,

over towards Arundel. Bollington's a good Saxon name, so I imagine it isn't a recent growth. Originally I imagine it was just a little group of shepherds' huts built close together for security reasons; but of course Bollington's more noticeable than Hagham or the Stokes because of the Pest House. It really was a pest-house once—a primitive type of isolation hospital plonked in the middle of the open Downs so as to keep plague contagion as far as possible away from the villages below."

"Huh," said Uncle Piers. "Been restored now."

"Yes, rather. The place was a ruin while I was a boy, but just after the last war a crazy Scotswoman named Gillespie (who like most of her race was presumably incapable of standing the rigours of Scotland any longer!) bought it up and restored it. In fact, she rebuilt it almost entirely. In spite of its past, the place had a clean bill of health by then; and I suppose if you don't mind being cut off from the rest of the world it's a rather delightful position. Anyway, she spent a lot of money on the place and lived there till she died, about five years ago. Then it was empty for a while, till last year it was taken over by a man named Drinkwater, who lives there now. That's all I know, really." And then, in an attempt to conceal my interest under a veil of facetiousness, I added: "Incidentally, it's to be hoped that Master Drinkwater got his name as a legitimate legacy from his father, and that it hasn't too significant a meaning at the present time."

"How d'yer mean?"

"Only that water is the biggest problem of life in these outlying hamlets. You don't get company's water laid on, any more than you get electric light or gas. That's the snag. You have to use oil-lamps or candles, and your water has to be pumped up from miles below. That's why I hope the present occupier of the Pest House doesn't live up to his name too literally."

"What sorter feller is he?" Uncle Piers's tone was casual.

"Ask me another," I returned, equally casually. "I've only met him once or twice and then I didn't care for him enough to make me want to know him better. Educated man, apparently fairly well-off. Some say he's a writer, though I've never heard what he writes or that he's any relation to the famous Drinkwater, of pious memory."

"Huh. Age?"

"There you've got me. Curiously uncertain. One of those chaps who might be anything from thirty to fifty. Ageless sort of bloke. You can't imagine him ever having been really young, and he'll probably never show his age. Rather a dago type, and possibly a bit of a lecher. Ladies' man, anyway. . . . Why this interest, Uncle Piers?"

"Ferget it!" the Field-Marshal ordered again. "No interest at all, except that I'm professionally interested in anyone who lives in outer-the-way spots hereabouts—specially newcomers. Let's get on home. Want my tea. Belly flappin' 'gainst my spine. Notser tough as I was."

I laughed. "I was just thinking how revoltingly eupeptic you were," I said. "Anyway, I've got my car down below, so we'll be home in no time. . . ."

6

I had swallowed my first cup of tea and was stretching out a hand to grasp another of Barbary's succulent potato-cakes when I heard the telephone ring. Thinking it would probably be Thrupp, who was not yet back from Hagham, I rose with a groan and lurched into the study to answer it.

"Roger Poynings," I mumbled, my mouth full of hot potato-cake.

"Oh," said a distant female voice which I did not immediately recognise. "I'm awfully sorry to bother you, Mr. Poynings, but I wondered if my sister was with you, by any chance? This is Andrea Gilchrist speaking."

My brain (which in an emergency is capable of working pretty rapidly) clicked round at the rate of knots. But though, to give myself another couple of seconds, I innocently said "*Who?*" and made her repeat her name, I had still not decided just how this surprising call should be handled or even what its significance might be, when it was my turn to speak again. All I knew was that I must not seem to hesitate. Wherefore:

"Good lord, no!" I ejaculated promptly, with what I hoped was well-simulated surprise. "You mean Carmel?"

"Yes."

"She certainly isn't here," I asserted confidently. "Why on earth should she be?"

"Well, she seems to have disappeared," said Andrea, with an apologetic little laugh. "Can't find her anywhere, so I was just ringing the most likely places. She's wanted rather urgently."

"Disappeared?" I returned with polite incredulity. "Surely not! I expect she's around somewhere." Nevertheless I felt a trifle disturbed, for Carmel should have been home long before this. "Anyway, I'd hardly call *this* a likely place," I added. "We don't see half as much of her as we should like to, I'm afraid."

"You haven't seen her to-day?" Andrea pressed.

"On the contrary I saw her this morning, when I brought Thrupp round to see you. I passed the time of day with her in the garden."

"Oh, she was here long after that. She lunched here, in fact. She didn't happen to mention what she was doing this afternoon?"

I pretended to reflect for a moment. "As a matter of fact, I believe she did," I said at length. "I'm almost sure she said something about going for a ride—or would that have been for to-morrow?"

"I don't know. She didn't say anything to me about it. What a pest the girl is! You see, her boy friend has suddenly turned up, and wants her."

"Adam Wycherley?"

"Yes. And he's only got forty-eight hours' leave, so he doesn't want to waste any time, naturally. Oh, well: I suppose she'll turn up. Sorry to have worried you, Mr. Poynings."

"I'm only sorry I can't help. If I should catch sight of her riding past here I'll hurtle forth and break the glad news. My salaams to Adam. Good-bye."

"Good-bye," Andrea Gilchrist echoed; and rang off.

I replaced the handset and counted ten. Then I took it off again and waited with some impatience. There was an annoying little delay before:

"Number, please?" The pert little voice told me that Sue Barnes had not yet gone off duty, for which I was thankful.

"Sue, where did that call come from?" I demanded urgently. "Sorry to keep bothering you, but it didn't sound quite local."

"Aren't you monotonous?" purred Sue. "Can't you think up a new one?"

"You mean—Bollington 2?"

"Yeah. Sort of queer, isn't it?"

"You're telling me," I muttered. "Thanks a lot, Sue. Go on keeping this under your hat, won't you?"

"Don't wear one," said Sue. "But you needn't worry."

"I won't," said I. "By the way, you might give me the Vicarage now, will you?"

"Sorry," said Sue. "Number engaged."

"Hell!" said I.

"Guess who with?" teased Sue.

"Gosh! You don't mean——"

"Bollington 2, my dear! That's why I kept you waiting. Bollington just beat you to it, and I had to put them through to the Vicarage before I could

answer you. Sort of queer, isn't it? . . . Oh, they've just cleared. I'll connect you now."

With a commendable minimum of clicks she put me through. Almost at once a male voice said: "Merrington Vicarage."

It wasn't the Vicar, so I took a chance.

"Is that Adam Wycherley?"

"Yes." He sounded surprised. "Who on earth is that?"

"Roger Poynings here. What cheer, Adam? How long have you been here?"

"Oh, hallo, Roger! Didn't recognise your voice at first. I've been here since half-past two, as a matter of fact——"

"Is Carmel there?" I cut in.

"No, she isn't. Can't make out what the devil's happened to her. Did you want to speak to her?"

"I did rather. Doesn't matter, though. I take it she didn't know you were coming, Adam?"

"No, blast it! I tried to phone this morning but the line was engaged, so I sent a wire instead. Believe me or not, the damn thing wasn't delivered till nearly an hour after I'd arrived myself. I must have just missed Carmel, and now I suppose she's out for tea. She hasn't come back yet, anyway."

"Doesn't Andrea know where she is?"

"Andrea isn't here either. She was just going out when I arrived, and she's still out. She rang up a minute or two ago, as a matter of fact, to ask if Carmel had come back. I wish she'd get a move on. I'm getting a bit sick of my own company. It's all the fault of that blasted telegram."

"Tough," I murmured consolingly. I tried to keep any note of anxiety out of my voice, but inwardly I was feeling more than a little uneasy. Could anything have happened to Carmel? I had taken it for granted that she would ride straight home after leaving me at Burting Clump, and even making allowance for the rather circuitous route followed by the chalk road down the escarpment, she should still have reached the Vicarage well before Uncle Piers and I had got back to my house. It wasn't a dangerous road, either; or at any rate not as downland roads go. It would be decidedly unpleasant to take a toss and go over the edge, but the road was sufficiently wide to make this unlikely unless one were riding a singularly bloody-minded steed. But the horse Carmel had borrowed was an amenable, well-disciplined old stager, and she herself was an excellent horsewoman.

"Oh, well, I suppose she'll turn up," I heard Adam sigh into the phone. "Can I give her any message from you?"

"No, don't bother," I answered. "To-morrow will do just as well, or I could ring her later this evening."

We hung up, and I sat on at my desk for some minutes, revolving this latest development in my mind and wondering what I should do about it. And I had just decided that I would give things another hour in which to sort themselves out and that meanwhile I could not do better than resume my interrupted tea, when the telephone rang yet again.

Relief flooded through me as I recognised Carmel's voice. She was at the Vicarage, and must have been just about turning into the drive at the moment when Adam and I had ended our conversation a few minutes earlier. She could hardly have paused to greet her unexpected visitor before acting on his intimation that I had been calling her.

"You wanted me, Roger? Adam has just told me you rang."

"Only to make sure you'd got home safely," I prevaricated. "I was feeling quite worried when Adam said you hadn't turned up."

She was silent for a moment, and then asked: "Any particular reason?"

"No, not really. Only—well, the fact is, Andrea rang me up rather mysteriously to ask if I knew where you were, as Adam was waiting for you. She spoke as if she were at the Vicarage, but I had my suspicions and made inquiries which resulted in the discovery that she was speaking from a certain place we know of, beginning with B. So then I thought I'd ring the Vicarage and find out if you were back. That's all."

There was another little silence. Then: "Roger, it's almost a miracle that I *have* got back. I took a frightful toss coming down the chalk road and came the most imperial purler—right over the edge! Goodness knows what would have happened if I hadn't rolled into a gorse-bush—stern first, fortunately, so I'm not even badly scratched. But it was a near thing, and I'm in a frightful mess. . . ."

"Good lord!——" But she cut me short.

"Listen, Roger. I can't go into details now, 'cos Adam keeps coming and going just behind me and I don't want him to hear. But it wasn't my fault, and it wasn't Grey Lady's. Get me?"

"You mean——"

"Trip-wire, Roger. I found the ends of it afterwards, when I'd climbed back on to the road. Dirty white colour, like the chalk, and stretched about a

foot above the ground. It wasn't there when I rode up to meet you, but it was coming back. So what?"

And then, before I could even articulate a suitable oath, she hung up.

A couple of minutes later I gave up trying to think and went back to Barbary's potato-cakes. With these I proceeded to overload my stomach in a not too successful endeavour to draw some of the surplus blood away from my brain.

7

It was not far off supper-time when Thrupp reappeared, leg-weary and in full possession of a highly enviable thirst. He is not what one would describe as a heavy or even a serious drinker, but it is worthy of record that he now took down two quarts of bottled beer in just over seven minutes, as a mere preliminary to a couple of stiff pegs of whisky and a noble glass of sherry. As usual, however, these potations had little effect on his mind beyond restoring some of the energy dissipated by his recent physical exercise.

I had him to myself during this brief pre-prandial period, for both my uncles were bathing and Barbary was seeing about supper. Browning and Haste were being accommodated in the village. I myself had already bathed and changed my clothes.

As I may have said before, I make it a rule never to pump Robert Thrupp: a tactful act of self-control which usually yields pretty good dividends. It did so on the present occasion, for in reply to my no more than hospitable inquiry as to how he had got on he proceeded to spill a by no means ungenerous portion of beans.

After leaving me at Burting Clump he and his assistants had made a bee-line for Hagham, which thanks to my directions they had reached without major difficulty. They had located Puella Stretton's cottage easily enough, already sealed up and guarded by a police constable sent on ahead from Merrington for that purpose. It was a rather pleasant little building, of considerable antiquity and formed by knocking two semi-detached cottages into one. It had few amenities, but a modern artesian well system and modern cesspit drainage made life more tolerable than it would otherwise have been in so remote a hamlet. It was well and even luxuriously furnished and all the appointments were in excellent taste.

Thrupp himself took possession of the only sitting-room, while Browning and Haste divided the rest of the cottage between them. He began with a glance round the numerous books which stood on various shelves and ledges: the majority of them were recent novels (including one of my own),

but there were also quite a number of non-fiction works a few of which, Thrupp said, were 'not exactly what you'd expect.' Just what he meant by that I wouldn't know, and it seemed inexpedient to interrupt him to inquire.

Next, Thrupp turned his attention to a very beautiful antique bureau which stood across a corner of the room near the windows. This contained a considerable number of private letters in addition to bills and receipts, and Thrupp waded conscientiously through the lot, noting down the names and addresses of Mrs. Stretton's correspondents and the relative degrees of intimacy indicated by the matter and style of their letters. Unfortunately, as always happens in private correspondence, the more intimate effusions were signed only with Christian names or initials, often with no address given.

"She wasn't exactly a prude," was Thrupp's dry comment, in tones suggestive of meiosis. "And apparently she also believed in the 'safety in numbers' theory. It depends what you mean by safety. There were four or five of 'em running more or less neck and neck."

"Anything from Squadron-Leader 'Bill?' " I asked.

"Plenty, thank the Lord. No indication of his surname, but I've got the number of his squadron and the name of his station, so now I can get moving on that line—in fact, I've done so already. If the Yard do their stuff we ought to have him here in time for the inquest to-morrow."

Meanwhile the constable had been despatched in search of the young woman who had fulfilled the functions of daily maid to Mrs. Stretton. She arrived in a state of considerable mental distress and proved to be either unable, or unwilling, to provide much in the way of useful information. According to Thrupp, she was either 'simple' or else abnormally cunning, and he could get little out of her beyond the fact that she had clearly fallen somewhat under the spell of the dead woman's charm and was perpetually on the defensive against any suggestion that the latter was anything short of perfect. It came out, however, that the maid's working hours never extended beyond 2 p.m., at which hour, having washed up her mistress's luncheon things, she took herself off home till 7 a.m. the next morning. It should be mentioned that Mrs. Stretton's cottage stood well away from the tiny hamlet itself and was hidden therefrom (except perhaps its chimney-pots) by a sharply rising fold in the ground, and that her doings in the afternoons and evenings were therefore virtually unknown to the rest of Hagham's inhabitants unless they deliberately chose to spy on her.

All in all, then, Thrupp gained but little knowledge of the dead woman from his interview with her daily help; and Browning and Haste, who were presently despatched to prosecute similar inquiries in the hamlet, had no

better luck. Whether you account it a virtue or a vice, the Sussex peasant is not a particularly inquisitive soul and by habit tends to mind his own business rather than his neighbour's.

"However, I did manage to establish one thing fairly definitely," said Thrupp to me as I replenished his glass. "Rather an awkward sort of thing, too, in a way, though it doesn't necessarily invalidate my theory. No less than four independent witnesses saw Mrs. Stretton in the neighbourhood of Hagham as late as eight-fifteen or eight-thirty on the evening before she was killed, and this maid of hers testifies that when she went to the cottage next morning the supper things were still waiting to be washed up, though the bed hadn't been slept in. In other words, there seems no doubt that the deceased supped at home as usual, and was still knocking about there till half-past eightish. That knocks out my idea that she might have gone to a ladies' guest-night at some R.A.F. station, got badly tippled there, and gone up for an off-the-record flip with some boy friend. I still stick to my theory that she must have been up in a plane some time during that night, but I must admit I'd have expected her to have been away from Hagham before half-past eight. It's getting dusk at that time."

"Without prejudice to the alternative theory that she may have tumbled off a broomstick," I taunted him, "wouldn't it have been possible for an aeroplane to have landed on the Downs and picked her up?"

"Nothing whatever to prevent it so far as the topography of the place is concerned, Roger. The Downs are very nearly flat over Hagham way, you know. The only trouble is, though a plane *was* heard overhead during the night, no one heard it land or take off; and in any case I doubt if any pilot would care much about landing on the Downs in the dark unless he had to. However, that can all be gone into later. . . ."

Having at length extracted all the information they could from Hagham and its inhabitants, the three detectives started off on their homeward trek across the Downs. The expedition had not been a spectacular success, yet neither had it been a total failure. They argued and discussed their various discoveries as they went, and the undulating miles of springy turf were covered with less fatigue and discomfort than they had feared. Nevertheless, by the time they had got back to Burting Clump, the landmark on which they had naturally been marching, they had all begun to feel the strain on their unaccustomed legs, and Thrupp had decreed a brief halt before tackling the descent of the escarpment. They threw themselves down near the southern edge of the Clump, at no great distance from the tramps' oven which I myself had visited only three or four hours earlier.

And presently Inspector Browning (who is notoriously the most inquisitive sleuth in the C.I.D.) caught sight of this same oven through the fringe of trees and was characteristically unable to restrain himself from strolling across to satisfy his curiosity as to what it was. A lifelong city-dweller, he was at something of a loss to know just what to make of it. And then, stooping down to peer inside, he beheld with some astonishment a bright silver florin winking up at him from the upper ledge in the open cavity: that same coin, of course, which I had benevolently deposited there while waiting for Carmel to arrive.

This unexpected spectacle so amazed the worthy Browning that, pausing only to implore his Maker to strike him pink, he called out to his companions to come and share his discovery. Without much enthusiasm, but because it was time to be moving anyway, they joined him and duly marvelled together at this surprising find. And then Sergeant Haste, who was a bit of a wag, observed that they might as well make sure there was no more wealth lying about unclaimed, and began to probe with his hands into that deep pile of dead leaves and beech-mast which, as I have said, occupied most of the lower cavity of the oven.

At once his fingers encountered something smooth, hard and curved. The unexpected contact startled him so much that he withdrew his hands as if they had been bitten by a viper, at the same time announcing that he would be perverted. Then, recovering himself, he plunged both hands again into the pile and drew forth what appeared to his popping and incredulous eyes to be a pair of brass coach-horns.

Now, it will be realised that Browning and Haste had only arrived in Sussex that morning and had consequently heard nothing of the other mystery which was engaging the attention of the local police. Indeed, Thrupp himself had been so little interested in the theft from Merrington parish church that he did not react to his subordinate's astonishing discovery as swiftly as the intelligent reader will have done. It was only when he rather absently took the 'coach-horns' into his own hands that the inevitable impact occurred and rang the appropriate bell in his brain. And then it was because the metal of which the instruments were made was clearly not brass, but gold.

* * * * *

I tugged at my beard and wagged my head helplessly as I tried to assess the import of this remarkable discovery.

"I don't get it," I confessed at length. "It doesn't make sense."

“Does anything make sense in this damned case?” Thrupp retorted, rather peevishly for him. “I don’t get it either, if that’s any comfort to you.”

“No doubt about their being the same trumpets, of course?”

“None whatever. I knew there couldn’t be, but I brought ’em back with me, got in touch with the Super, and we’ve just been up to the Vicarage together. The parson identified them at once; in fact, he took us across to the church and showed us how they fitted on to the angels.”

“I’ll bet he was pleased to see them back.”

“So-so. Considering what they must have cost, the old boy wasn’t greatly impressed. Grateful and all that, but he said he’d been sure they’d turn up all right. What seemed to bother him most was that the Bishop should have gone away without seeing them—God knows why, but some blether about faculties, or something.”

I nodded, and gave him an outline of the situation. He listened rather absently, as if unable to work up much enthusiasm for matters which apparently were no concern of his. The incidental fact that in pursuing his own investigations he had chanced to perform the major part of Superintendent Bede’s work for him, impressed him not a scrap.

At this point Barbary entered with news of a vacant bath, whereupon Thrupp thankfully removed himself to his ablutions. He turned at the door to remind me that we were scheduled to ‘have a little talk’ later in the evening.

I grinned fiercely, and acquiesced. I could not help wondering just how grateful Thrupp would be for the many additional complexities that my story would impose on his already well-taxed mind.

PART IV

TALK OF THE DEVIL

Double, double toil and trouble;
Fire burn, and cauldron bubble.
Macbeth.

1

IMMEDIATELY after supper, Thrupp and I retired to my study with a bottle of whisky and a siphon. It was a light, warm evening with an unusually clear sky, so we sat in the gloaming on my old leather sofa and watched the dusk fall softly over the garden as we talked.

I shall neither enrage my intelligent readers (who will need no reminding) nor indulge the sloth of my lazy ones (who can remind themselves quite easily by turning back to the earlier pages of this magnificent book) by reporting in detail the story which I now proceeded to tell Thrupp. Suffice it that I gave him a careful, conscientious and unadulterated account of all the relevant aspects of my intercourse with Carmel—relevance being, indeed, the criterion by which I made my selection.

Most strongly of all did I labour to impress on him the importance of the chronology of events: for instance, the uncanny significance attaching to the fact that Carmel had come to me with her extraordinary story quite a considerable time before I had first got wind of the independent testimony of Father Pius, and a full half-day before I had learnt of the tragedy at Rootham. To simplify the issue I tried to confine myself to what I have elsewhere christened the Witch-and-Besom group of happenings: to show how Carmel's story not merely linked up with the vision of Father Pius and the discovery of Puella Stretton's body, but, chronologically speaking, constituted the starting-point from which I myself naturally viewed this mysterious sequence of events. I detailed my reasons for having kept silent so far and the steps I had taken to obtain Carmel's leave to disclose her evidence; and much to my relief Thrupp, instead of upbraiding me, acknowledged my confession with an understanding nod. I said my piece simply and soberly, abstaining from unnecessary comment and eschewing exaggeration or embroidery.

Long before I had done it was apparent that Thrupp was impressed, in spite of himself. I say 'in spite of himself' because, as I have tried to show,

he had by now succeeded in expelling from his logical, common-sense mind any tendency that might once have threatened to induce him to give serious consideration to the Witch-and-Besom theory as a possible explanation of Puella Stretton's death. He was honest enough to admit that when first he had heard of Father Pius's experience from the lips of the Most Reverend Odo, he had proved temporarily vulnerable to the startling and occult implications inherent therein; but, as he had said, the cold grey light of dawn had purged out this insidious temptation and left him, abashed, in the presence of his naked reason. Puella *must* have fallen from an aircraft. Any other explanation was crazy and untenable. And it needed only the discovery of witnesses who had heard an aeroplane during the night to make him write-off the whole business of Father Pius as one of those odd but dangerous coincidences arranged by the Prince of Evil himself deliberately to tempt honest, hardworking detectives from the narrow path of pure reason.

It follows, then, that my careful exposition of Carmel's evidence must have come as a kind of stab in the back: as a reinforcement to the powers of darkness who, for inscrutable purposes of their own, were more than usually determined to lead him astray. I have written elsewhere that Thrupp loses his patience seldom, his temper never. He lost neither that evening, but I could see that his patience, at any rate, was subjected to a barely tolerable strain as I introduced and developed this theme of broomstick-riding and witch-flights. But he controlled himself with an effort. I could see that he was following every word I said with the closest possible attention, his brain alert to pounce upon anything in the nature of weakness or inconsistency, yet all the time I was speaking he only found occasion to throw in two, or at the most three, widely spaced questions—and each of these was a mere request for elucidation on a minor point of detail which I had not made transparently clear in my original terminology. Major questions he had none. He scored no debating points. He simply listened gravely and thoughtfully, his forehead wrinkled, his fingers beating out little rhythms on the arm of the sofa, a cold pipe between his lips and his whisky barely tasted on the table beside him.

And when at last I had finished he remained so long wrapped in silent thought that, in sheer self-defence, I had to goad him into speech by pronouncing that pregnant monosyllable, "Well?"

Then he sat up, stretched, and turned to me with his engaging, almost boyish, grin.

"The police," he declared solemnly, "are completely baffled."

He laid down his pipe, lit a cigarette, and drained his glass at a draught.

"Seriously, Roger," he went on a moment later, helping himself to another peg, "that is very little short of the truth. I can't pretend I was particularly happy about this case when I entered this room; I didn't see much daylight, and I had to keep reminding myself that, after all, I'd only been on the job for a little over twenty-four hours, though it seems more like a week. At the same time I'm too old a hand at this game to give way to despair if I don't see daylight in the first few days of a case, and the one ray of sunshine in my life was that at least I'd succeeded in rationalising my mind and liquidating any temptation to connect what Father Pius thought he had seen with what had happened out at Rootham. That was quite a step forward, you know. Detection, after all, is largely a matter of elimination. You start off with a whole mass of facts and legions of attendant circumstances of which some few are, but most are not, relevant. Progress towards the truth consists to a great extent in whittling away the irrelevant factors. The more you can get rid of, the less you have to consider, and you have the consolation of knowing that, embedded somewhere in your remainder, lies the naked truth. The art lies, of course, in eliminating the right things, otherwise it will eventually dawn on you that you've gaily chucked away the truth and left yourself with a bunch of stinking irrelevancies. But if you can be really *satisfied* that every factor you discard is indisputably irrelevant, it follows that every such elimination is a step forward. . . . An hour ago I was *satisfied* that I'd done right to discard all this stuff about witches and broomsticks. Whereas now—— Dog bite me, it's impossible, though!"

"Is it?" I breathed provocatively.

"Well, isn't it?"

"I wouldn't know."

"Don't be a twerp, Roger. Tell me candidly what you really think about all this—and try not to be funny, for once. It's a damned serious matter."

"You're telling me," I assented grimly. "Listen, my Thrupp. Quite frankly, I thought Carmel Gilchrist was crazy when she told me all this yesterday—and yet that isn't altogether true, because she was so obviously sane and in such deadly earnest. What I mean is that I shouldn't have attached so much importance to her yarn if it had stood alone: I'd have put it down, in spite of what she said, to optical delusions or some pathological condition or psychological 'phantasy' or whatever the jargon is. But, taken in conjunction with what Father Pius saw and what you found at Rootham—well, what the devil *can* one think?"

"Exactly, Roger. It's the cumulative effect of the three episodes that counts so heavily. And yet—dash it!—you don't seriously believe for one moment that people can go whizzing about the sky on birch-brooms, do you?"

I could only shrug my shoulders: a singularly unhelpful gesture in the circumstances. Like Thrupp, I was worried. Nor could I derive any substantial comfort from the reflection that, officially, it was his headache and not mine.

"Quite honestly," I said presently, "I don't feel competent to give an opinion on that point at all. I'm only a poor bloody layman, and this is a case for a trained specialist. I admit I believe in the Devil, which most people think is a superstitious and reactionary thing to do nowadays; and I know—and so do you—that Devil-worship goes on even to this day, as witness the case of Bryony Hurst last year. But when it comes to all the trimmings and trappings, among which I include what is known as witchcraft, I'm out of my depths altogether. I've read plenty of books about witchcraft and demonology and magic and so forth—there's a pretty comprehensive selection in that locked case behind you—but I've never had the guts to ask myself precisely how much belief I put in them. I've always contented myself with that inane cliché about 'no smoke without fire' and left it at that."

"Same here," said Thrupp. "The trouble is, where does one look for one's trained specialist?"

"Uncle Odo," I said, pouring myself another drink. "In a sense, he's the professional while we're only amateurs—and unwilling amateurs at that. Every priest is to some extent a specialist in the supernatural, and Uncle Odo rather more so than the ordinary priest—not in the least because he's an archbishop, but because he's also a triple doctor in divinity, philosophy and theology. I don't know which of those subjects takes in witchcraft, but you can bet one of them does. Anyway, he'd be a dashed sight more competent to assess possibilities in a case like this than you and I."

"H'm." Thrupp rubbed his lower jaw pensively.

"What is more, it may interest you to know that Uncle Odo, like yourself, spent at least a part of last night at his bedroom window, when he ought to have been in bed. You can draw any deduction you like from that. But if you take my advice you'll try your luck with him. He's a knowledgeable old bird with a first-rate brain, and you needn't be afraid he'll stuff you up with a lot of popish superstitions, or anything like that. Of

all the men I've ever met, he is the most able to draw a clear line between faith and mere credulousness."

"He certainly gives me that impression," he admitted with a nod. "All right, Roger. It can't do any harm, anyway. Perhaps you'd go and ask him if he could spare us half an hour. . . ."

2

And so it came to pass that a few minutes later the Most Reverend Odo was added to the party. He took his place on the sofa between Thrupp and myself, accepted a drink and a cigarette, and announced that he was—metaphorically at least—all ears.

Thrupp said: "If it's all the same to you, Roger, I think I'll tell the story this time. That will serve the double purpose of allowing you to check that I've got my facts correct—or what pass for facts in this wretched case—and of giving his Grace an objective outline of the state of affairs to date. Pull me up at once if I hit a false note, won't you?"

As I dare say I have mentioned before, Thrupp has the priceless gift of an orderly and analytical mind, and the faculty of summarising a situation in a minimum of words, yet without omitting a single essential point. Whatever his private feelings may be, he can be trusted to sum up fairly and impartially. Never have I known him employ these gifts to better advantage than now. With infallible instinct and ruthless accuracy he tore the essential guts out of Carmel's story, serving them up on a plain platter, ungarnished with anything not strictly pertinent. And he performed this feat in less than a quarter of the time previously taken by myself.

The Most Reverend Odo made no effort to conceal his interest, which deepened perceptibly as soon as it became apparent that our revelations had a strong bearing on those of Father Pius. His face registered surprise amounting at times almost to consternation, but nothing in the nature of incredulity.

"I should naturally value any comments your Grace might care to make about this story," Thrupp added when his narration was done. "But, even more than comment, what I should really appreciate would be your simple, straightforward *opinion* as to whether or not this kind of thing is physically possible. Flying about on broomsticks, I mean. My own reason says definitely No, naturally. I certainly wouldn't have the face to put such a question to any of my own colleagues or friends. They'd think me quite crazy. . . ."

Uncle Odo stopped fiddling with his pectoral cross, rose from the sofa, and paced slowly about the room before replying. Then, coming to rest with one shoulder leaning against the frame of the open french windows, he began to speak.

"It's a pretty problem," he said quietly, "and I'm very much afraid I'm likely to prove a broken reed rather than the pillar of strength that you seem to hope I may be. However, I'll do my best; and first I'll try to give you that opinion you ask for—though I frankly don't see how I can possibly make it simple or straightforward. The question is too involved to admit of a straight yes-or-no answer, entirely without reservations. To say No would be virtually tantamount to heresy, while to say Yes might give rise to grave misunderstanding. Please don't think I'm trying to hedge, or avoid the issue. I'm not. I'll tell you what I believe in a minute, but I'm bound to warn you in advance that you may not be much forrader by the time I've finished."

"On second thoughts," said Thrupp, "perhaps it would be better if I reshaped my question so as to deal with first things first, which perhaps my original question doesn't. Could you give me a more categorical sort of answer if I simply asked—Do you, or do you not, believe in witchcraft?"

"Ah, that's better!" Uncle Odo rubbed his hands. "Yes, my dear Mr. Thrupp, I most certainly do believe in witchcraft—and I won't even qualify that by saying, *à la* Brains Trust, 'It all depends what you mean by witchcraft.' The only thing I ask you to note is that I don't necessarily accept as true all the multifarious legends and stories that have grown up round the subject. But I quite definitely do believe that what is commonly called witchcraft has been practised from the dawn of history till to-day, and I expect it will go on being practised till the end of the world."

"Even if belief in witchcraft seems to be utterly contrary to reason?" asked Thrupp.

"But—*is* it contrary to reason?" the Archbishop riposted mildly. "I don't want to split hairs, but personally I should have said—in fact, I do say—that belief in witchcraft is *dictated* by reason, rather than opposed to it! I speak, of course, from the Christian point of view—and when I say Christian, I don't mean an exclusively Catholic point of view. If you're not a Christian: if you're one of these modern rationalists and agnostics who make up such a high proportion of mankind to-day: then I can quite see that anything in the nature of witchcraft or the supernatural must obviously be dismissed as 'contrary to reason.' On the other hand, I don't see how you can reasonably profess to be a Christian, or indeed to believe in God at all, if you don't accept such consequential things as Satanism, demonology and witchcraft."

"I see," said Thrupp: none too truthfully, I suspect.

"I'll try to express it as a simple logical sequence," the Most Reverend Odo continued. "Let's start with the elementary fact that I believe in God—and in God's holy Word. Now, I can't believe in God and in His holy Word without believing in the Devil. Why? For a dozen good reasons, the chief of which is that the Son of God—the Second Person of that holy and undivided Trinity which constitutes God—Himself believed in the Devil: preached about him, warned us against him, even came into active conflict with him! Therefore: if Christ believed in the Devil, and I believe in Christ, it stands to reason that I must believe in the Devil, or else be guilty of heresy. To deny the existence of the Devil is the same thing as saying that God doesn't know what He's talking about, and that I know better than He does. Any snags about that?"

"I can't see any," said Thrupp gravely.

"Very well. Then let's take our reasoning a stage or two further. *Who* is the Devil? *What* is he? *How* did he come into existence? What is his *purpose*? What *power* has he to fulfil that purpose? Well, to answer all those questions convincingly, quoting authoritative sources, would take months rather than minutes and would presuppose an exhaustive acquaintance with a very wide range of literature, much of which isn't readily accessible to the man in the street. Apart from the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments you'd also have to study the Talmud and a lot of apocryphal and apocalyptic books such as the *Books of Enoch*, the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, and so forth; not to mention the works of the Apostolic Fathers—Clement, Polycarp, Barnabas, Justin Martyr, Theophilus of Antioch, Irenæus, Tertullian, and plenty more besides. However," Uncle Odo went on, throwing me a barely perceptible wink, "I won't advance the claims of the Early Fathers of the Church to know what they were talking about because, scandalous as it may seem, they are under grave suspicion of having been—er—Roman Catholics!"

It is only fair to record that Thrupp looked up with a grin as broad as my own. "Surely not!" he murmured, in tones of mock horror.

Uncle Odo chuckled.

"So we'll do without them," he went on, "and make do with the canonical—that is to say the 'respectable' books of the Bible, whose authenticity is admitted by all the major denominations. There are literally dozens of passages I could quote, but let's take just a couple for the moment. Take that incident in the Gospel of Saint Luke when the seventy-two disciples come back from their first teaching mission and say, 'Lord, even

the devils are subject unto us in Thy name'—to which Christ replies: '*I saw Satan like lightning fall from Heaven.*' And then connect that up with the Apocalyptic passage that everyone knows:

> " 'And there was a great battle in Heaven. Michael and his angels fought with the Dragon, and the Dragon fought with his angels; and they prevailed not, neither was their place found any more in Heaven.
>
> " 'And the great Dragon was cast out, that old Serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, who seduceth the whole world. And he was cast unto the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him. . . .
>
> " 'Woe to the Earth and to the Sea, because the Devil is come down unto you, having great wrath. . . .'

—and so on and so forth. Need I go on? Of course, Saint John was a mystic, and the exegetists warn us that we must only accept his version of the primal fall of Satan in what theologians call an 'accommodated' sense. But taken in conjunction with Christ's own '*I* saw Satan like lightning fall from Heaven' there doesn't seem any room for doubt. Anyhow, that's the orthodox answer to the question '*Who* is the Devil?'—and it also tells us what he is. He is a fallen angel—or some say an archangel—which means that he is a *created spirit*. He was created by God, but through pride he rebelled against God; tried to usurp God's unique omnipotence as 'Creator of Heaven and Earth, and of all things visible and invisible;' refused to serve God; sought to be self-sufficient as the source of his own power, the author of his own destiny, the motive force of his own being. And, of course, it didn't work."

His Grace paused to sip his drink.

"It couldn't work," he went on, "as Lucifer might have seen for himself if he hadn't been blinded by his own pride. He fell—and, as someone or other rather aptly put it, 'Cut the wire and the current fails!' That's what happened to Satan. But though 'fallen' he still remains pure spirit, with all a spirit's gifts and intelligence and powers. Though, as you might say, he suffered a change of status, he has suffered no change of nature. From being Lucifer, the Angel of Light, he has become the Prince of Darkness, but his spiritual powers remain unimpaired. That's why he's got to be taken so seriously: why my Church does take him so seriously. Angels—and perhaps *a fortiori* archangels—participate to some extent in the omniscience of the Creator, which gives them a tremendous pull over us mere humans; and Satan, though fallen and damned, is still an angel. In short, he's very much a Power to be reckoned with."

Thrupp and I grunted our recognition of this point.

"As to Satan's *purpose*, that is too well known to detain us long," Uncle Odo proceeded. "He's still the rebel against God; and just as he managed to involve countless other angels in his fall from Heaven—(and there must have been a vast number of them to sustain a 'great battle' against Michael and his host)—so his object ever since has been to ensnare the souls of men, to wrest them away from God and make them his own subjects in the everlasting Hell. He seeks to deprive us of our birthright as 'children of God.' . . . And how does he set about this? Why, obviously by the use of his powers—and remember, they are what we commonly call 'supernatural' powers—to tempt us into sin: which is simply another word for rebellion against God. These supernatural powers of his, this 'participation in the omniscience of God,' enables him to offer us material wealth and benefits which might never come our way in the 'natural' course of events. As a spirit, he knows more than we do. He can make things happen that we can't. He isn't omnipotent, by a long chalk; but he is a 'power in the land'—indeed the Bible calls him the Prince of this World. He's rather like a corrupt high official who can pull strings and 'wangle' favours for those who are ready to put themselves in his power: whence it follows, I think, that there is, to say the least, nothing the least bit illogical or fantastic in the idea that a man or a woman can make a compact with Satan whereby, in return for certain stipulated favours or material benefits in this world, the Devil gets their souls in the next."

"Sounds reasonable enough," Thrupp admitted, though rather grudgingly. "Theoretically, at any rate. But what about the practical difficulties? How would a man who wanted to make such a compact set about getting in touch with the Devil? You say he's a 'pure spirit'—which I take to mean that he's invisible to the human eye and intangible to the other human senses."

"Ah, now here we enter into the realms of what is usually called Magic," Uncle Odo returned; "and let me say at once that true Magic is not a bit amusing or entertaining, and has no connection whatever with the type of 'magician' who pulls white rabbits out of his hat at children's parties. Real Magic is a very dark and sinister business indeed. It embraces some of the most revolting and—yes—terrifying things you can conceive. Never mind the details: the essential point about Magic is that its root purpose is the establishment of contact between human beings and the world of supernatural spirits. And by contact I mean real sensual, or, shall we say, *sensory* contact. What is more——"

"Excuse my butting in," I said, "but would you include the modern craze for what we call Spiritualism under the general classification of Magic?"

"Quite definitely, yes," said Uncle Odo. "It's simply the old black art of Necromancy—that means, divination by consulting the spirits of the dead—which is one of the several recognised branches of Magic. Modern Spiritualism seems to be a rather emasculated and not too successful recrudescence of the ancient Necromancy, but in principle it's precisely the same thing. But I'm glad you brought that up, Roger, because it may help Mr. Thrupp to understand what I'm going to say. You know, of course, that even modern Spiritualists sometimes claim to be able to make spirits 'materialise.' I've never been near a séance, but I haven't the slightest reason to doubt that this is occasionally true, and that despite a certain amount of fraud the phenomenon known as Ectoplasm can actually be produced."

"I should say that's beyond dispute," said Thrupp. "There was a case —— I'm sorry. Please go on, your Grace."

"Well, ectoplasm is what you might call the embryonic materialisation of a spirit; and the point I want you to note is that this effect can be produced by people who literally don't know the first thing about true Magic. Believe me, the 'magic' of ectoplasmic materialisation stands in about the same relation to true Magic as does ginger-pop to Imperial Tokay. And there's no doubt whatever that a genuine 'adept' at Magic is capable of calling up spirits and making them materialise with a degree of perfection totally undreamed-of by your milk-and-water Spiritualist. That's one way in which a human being can get in touch with the Devil or with one of his demons, as a preliminary to entering into one of those compacts I was talking about just now. But quite apart from this, I see no reason at all why the Devil can't materialise of his own accord if he wants to, without having recourse to the services of a Magician. As I said, Satan participates to some extent in the Divine omniscience, and if it comes to his notice that a certain man or woman has the necessary predisposition to that sort of thing, I don't believe there's anything to prevent the Devil from becoming, *or seeming to become*, a creature of flesh and blood in order to enter into personal relations with his prospective client. Literally thousands of legends and traditions of this actually happening have come down to us, and it's the greatest mistake in the world to confuse tradition with myth and write both of them off as so much baloney. Besides, it isn't only a matter of legend and tradition. There are innumerable records in black and white left by witnesses whose veracity and credit seem beyond all doubt. But even if the whole lot could be proved false, I still couldn't accept the proposition that the notion of personal relations between the Devil and human beings is necessarily repugnant to reason or logic or common sense. Surely it's the most natural thing in the

world that Satan should do his utmost to make contact with evilly disposed men and women? That, after all, is his whole purpose in life, and it'd be quite out of character if he didn't. To my mind the amazing thing—you might almost call it a miracle—is not that he should sometimes attempt this, but that he should apparently meet with such little success. One can only attribute our comparative immunity from his attentions to the protective grace of the Holy Ghost and the unremitting (and, I fear, often undeserved and unappreciated) vigilance of our Guardian Angels. . . . I seem to be doing a shocking amount of talking," his Grace added apologetically.

"Please don't stop," Thrupp urged him. "I'm finding this extremely interesting, and I think it may prove useful, too."

Uncle Odo took another drink and lit a cigarette.

"I think we are now in a position to start defining our terms," he said. "What is a 'witch?' In passing, do you realise that, etymologically speaking, this word is *not* the feminine of 'wizard' and that a witch can be of either sex. 'Wizard' simple means a 'wise man;' 'witch' comes from the Anglo-Saxon *wicca*, and means a man (or woman) who practises sorcery, witchcraft, or magic. And the essential quality of a witch is that he, or she, has made a compact with the Devil. From all the evidence at our disposal it would seem that the terms of these compacts vary considerably, according to the particular gifts or favours which the Devil agrees to confer on his client in return for the latter's soul. That stands to reason. Different people want different things. There's the Faust legend, in which Satan undertakes to restore an old man's youth. Other men may prefer wealth, or success, or temporal power. Others again want simply to be revenged on their enemies. Some may aspire to share the Devil's own participation in the Divine omniscience—to probe the secrets of the Universe and reach unprecedented heights of scientific knowledge. The legendary quests for the Elixir of Life and the secrets of the transmutation of metals all link up with this sort of thing. Most of these aspirations seem to be actuated by one or more of what we call the Seven Deadly Sins—pride, avarice, intemperance, lust, anger, sloth, envy. But the point I want to bring out is that the stipulated return which the Devil gives in exchange for his client's soul may, but equally may not, involve the conferring of certain 'magic' or supernatural powers on the human partner in the bargain. It all depends what he wants. Some favours can be granted by apparently natural means: the desired situation can be made to come to pass without any spectacular or 'magic' process being involved. But in other cases the human client has to be endowed with certain 'magic' powers—that is, the faculty of causing certain things to happen contrary to the known laws of nature and human experience. In the opposite

sphere of life—what I may call the sphere of Sanctity—such happenings are known as Miracles. You see what I mean?"

We nodded assent.

"This is a terribly deep subject, and if I talked all night I shouldn't get beyond the fringe of it," said Uncle Odo, fiddling with his cross. "But it might help if I said a few words about miracles. Mr. Thrupp probably won't believe me and will think I'm so dope-sodden with Romish superstitions ——"

"I assure your Grace——" the detective broke in.

Uncle Odo laughed. "I appreciate your courtesy, my dear Chief-Inspector, but you mustn't shed your natural scepticism too easily, otherwise you may find yourself shortly in the same painful situation as was Simon Peter when the cock crew. . . . However, from my own point of view, the most miraculous thing about miracles is that they sometimes happen—and especially that they continue to happen to-day just as they did in the past. Actually, I'm only going to talk about one particular kind of miraculous happening—and that for a very specific purpose. I won't even mention such controversial matters as miraculous cures at Lourdes or the not infrequent cases of Stigmata that occur from time to time. In fact, it so happens that I needn't go beyond the boundaries of my own diocese for an illustration of the kind of thing that really does happen, though unknown to the world at large. Normally, one doesn't talk about these things, because in the rationalist world of to-day their revelation only gives rise to scandal, suspicions of fraud, and undesirable publicity of a most unedifying nature. Yet I can and do assure you, Mr. Thrupp, that here in my own diocese of Arundel, in a certain convent which shall be nameless but which is situated within, say, thirty miles of this house, there is a middle-aged nun who is a genuine mystic; and that not once, but a score of times, that holy woman has been seen, while at prayer, to go into an ecstasy so exalted and perfect that her kneeling body has been lifted by some unseen power right off the ground to a height of three or four feet——"

"Phew!" said I, whistling involuntarily through my teeth.

"Good God!" cried Thrupp, shaken to the depths of his being.

"It's an extremely well-known phenomenon in the history of sanctity and mysticism," said Uncle Odo. "Read any reliable work on hagiology, and you'll find plenty of cases so well authenticated that you *can't* disbelieve them, far less explain them away by any quack theory of mass hypnosis, or anything. It's the phenomenon known as Levitation, and it occurs, not frequently, but with sufficient frequency to give scientists and rationalists a

perpetual headache. They can't explain it away—which isn't a bit surprising when you realise that it is, in the strictest sense of the term, a miracle: that is, a manifestation or occurrence which, by definition, *can't* be explained by any amount of tampering with the natural law. I've told you about this particular nun because hers is the only case of which I myself have ever had personal first-hand knowledge, but I assure you that the same thing is almost certainly happening in many other parts of the world to-day. . . . And then there's that other miraculous phenomenon which has often manifested itself with mystics and saints—the thing we call Bilocation, or the power to be, *or to seem to be*, in two places at once. There are countless authentic cases of this on record, too: of a holy man or woman appearing unexpectedly, but apparently genuinely and physically, in a place dozens or hundreds of miles from the spot where his or her body was simultaneously observed to be situated. One presumes that either the distant apparition is really some kind of spirit-materialisation in human form while the true body remains elsewhere, or else vice-versa. All I do know is that these, and similar phenomena, really do happen, even to-day, as a result of mystical ecstasy. They're outside Nature—'against Nature,' if you like—and there is no physical explanation of them to be found; and yet they happen. By the way, I hope you see what I'm getting at?"

"You mean," I suggested thoughtfully, "that if these mystic manifestations or 'miracles' can happen through the agency of God and the sanctity of His saints, we ought not to be surprised at correspondingly inexplicable things taking place through the power of the Devil?"

"You've got the idea," Uncle Odo answered gravely.

3

"You see," he went on, a moment later, "this is really the nearest I can get to answering Mr. Thrupp's original question about the feasibility of witches riding about on broomsticks, and so on. My point is, roughly, that if I accept as true—as I am bound to do—the possibility of such mystic phenomena as Levitation and Bilocation, I must also admit that I see nothing absolutely *impossible* in the proposition that witches might be able to pass through the air on besoms! I don't *know* that they can, but judging from what happens in the supernatural realms of Christian mysticism, I should very much hesitate to say that comparable things can't happen in the arcane world of witchcraft and demonolatry."

"In other words," Thrupp put in shrewdly, "you argue that because a thing is possible to God, it is also possible to the Devil?"

"Psst! Psst!" The Most Reverend Odo threw up a hand in protest. "My dear fellow, that 'argument' would indeed make any self-respecting logician's hair fall out by the roots—not to mention a theologian's! I see what you mean, of course, but your terms are far too sweeping and over-simplified. The omnipotence of God is, and always must be, supreme, and can never be effectively challenged by any creature of His—and don't let's ever forget that God created Satan just as much as He created Michael or Gabriel or you or me. In the name of all that's holy, don't let's go all Gnostic and start deluding ourselves with any heretical nonsense about Co-Equal Principles of Good and Evil. Don't let's hop from the present fashionable error of underrating the Devil to the opposite but equally dangerous extreme of overrating him. The Prince of this World may have power; he may have power far greater than that of any human being; but his power is utterly infinitesimal and utterly contemptible compared with the omnipotence of the King of Heaven. . . . No—all I meant was this: that the Devil, by virtue of being 'pure spirit' and to some extent a participant in the omniscience of God, definitely *has* certain occult powers which may enable him in a lesser degree to counterfeit the miracles wrought by his Creator. After all, the phenomena of Levitation and Bilocation may seem utterly astounding to us, simply because they upset what we know of the laws of Nature; but I don't think there would be anything derogatory to the glory of God or the sanctity of His mystics to suggest that such 'miracles' cost Him, in His omnipotence, considerably less effort than it costs us to crook a little finger. In good American, they're mere 'chicken-feed.' God knows I mean no irreverence by that. But I see no palpable challenge to His omnipotence in admitting that Satan is able to give some of *his* creatures the 'supernatural' power to rise from the ground or be transported through the air in a manner not comprehensible to human scientists. Do you?"

Neither of us did, apparently.

"The only thing that bothers me a little is—why the broomstick?" Uncle Odo went on. "It seems so unnecessary! Unless, that is, it is maintained that it's the broomstick which possesses the magic faculty of flight, and not the witch who rides it. Of course, if you examine the records, you'll find that it doesn't necessarily have to be a broomstick. Any suitable object can be used, and in many cases witches have been alleged to travel to the Sabbat on various kinds of animals—cats, dogs, bats and what-not—which, in addition, were credited with being the witch's familiar imp or demon. But for this remarkable local case in which a besom seems definitely to be involved, I should have said that this was nothing more than a picturesque detail which appealed to the public imagination but which had no real

relevance to the general question of the transvection of witches. Incidentally, this same local case has another very interesting aspect which, if true, seems to militate against the arguments of a powerful school of thought which seeks to explain away the problem of witch-flights by a theory of delusion."

"I think I know what you mean," I said. "You mean, that these flights don't really take place at all, in the physical sense, but that the Devil causes his victims to have such vivid and realistic dreams that they really believe they *have* been carried through the air and taken part in the orgies of the Sabbat?"

"Exactly. The theory is a compromise, of course, between branding all the records of witchcraft as inventions, and accepting them as authentic. Quite plausible, too, in its way, and invaluable as a face-saving artifice for both those who uphold the ancient belief in occult phenomena and those who want to explain them away in terms of science and psychology. But if —as you say, Roger—this young woman, Carmel Gilchrist, can actually bear testimony to the fact that her sister was physically absent from her bed during the hours in question—well, it makes you think, doesn't it?"

"Carmel was quite definite on that point, Uncle. I accused her of being the victim of an optical illusion and said that if she'd had the sense to look into her sister's room she'd have found Andrea safely tucked up and fast asleep. Carmel was quite indignant with me for suggesting that she'd been fool enough not to take such an elementary step. And of course, when I said that, I didn't realise that their rooms communicated and were virtually only separate compartments of the same room."

"It's extremely interesting," said my uncle pensively.

"The whole darned case makes you think," growled Thrupp.

"About this question of 'familiars,' " I put in, in the silence that followed. And I proceeded to tell my uncle what had not been mentioned to him before, namely, the somewhat sinister facts regarding the cat Grimalkin: her sudden and mysterious arrival, the not easily explicable bond between her and Andrea, and—for full measure—her devastation of my Angels' Trumpets and her savage assault on the right reverend breeches of the Lord Bishop of Bramber.

Uncle Odo chuckled richly as I described the last-named outrage—not in the least from *odium theologicum* (for I knew that the two prelates, though in doctrinal schism, were on friendly personal terms), but simply because he is well endowed with a good Anglo-Saxon appreciation of the ludicrous.

"All the same, I shouldn't attach too much significance to this formidable pusser," he advised us presently, becoming more serious. "As

Roger says, plenty of people call their dogs ‘Satan’—indeed, when I was in India I had a horse which, I regret to say, was named Lucifer! No, I didn’t give it that name myself, but when I proposed to change its name to something more decorous after buying it, all my clergy begged me to let it stand—which I did. I’m not saying that Miss Gilchrist’s pusser may not be an imp-familiar, but I think we should go easy with such assumptions without further evidence.”

“What is the general theory about ‘familiars?’ ” Thrupp asked. “I’m rather hazy——”

“It’s quite straightforward, and even logical. You see, Satan isn’t a Prince without subjects. He didn’t fall from Heaven alone. A very large number of angels fell with him—it’s been estimated that not less than one-third of the Heavenly Host were involved in his revolt and were cast down after their defeat by Michael. That’s sheer speculation, actually, but, as I said before, it stands to reason that there were a vast number of rebels if it necessitated a ‘great battle’ to vanquish them. And these fallen angels, no less than Satan himself, must still exist somewhere. They are spirits, and therefore immortal and indestructible; and somewhere or other they are awaiting their destiny of ‘fire everlasting.’ Meanwhile, it’s plausible to suppose that Satan doesn’t allow them to be idle, and the theory is that when a human being makes a compact with the Devil one or more of these demons is allotted to the ‘witch’ as a kind of diabolical counterpart to the ‘guardian angel.’ Tradition says that these demons, or familiar spirits, often take on the form of flesh and blood, *or appear to do so*, usually that of some small domestic animal. In return for the services which they perform for the human witch, these familiars are said to have certain repulsive privileges, which I won’t go into now. More generally, their function seems to be mainly that of acting as ‘liaison officers’ between the witch and Satan. . . . Again, I see nothing intrinsically impossible in the theory, but I certainly wouldn’t commit myself to asserting that the tradition is true in every detail.”

Thrupp sighed deeply.

“That’s the whole trouble,” he complained. “So much of all this depends on traditions and legends which have come down from times when people were far more credulous and superstitious than they are to-day, and one can’t get any reliable estimate as to how much is literally true and how much mere nonsensical accretion. Doesn’t it strike your Grace as remarkable, to say the least, that cases of witchcraft should be so much less common nowadays than they were two or three centuries ago? What’s the reason for that? Is it that the Devil has slacked off, so to speak? Or isn’t it more probable that the

vast majority of cases of what passed for witchcraft in olden times just won't stand up to modern intelligence and modern means of investigation?"

The Most Reverend Odo nodded in prompt agreement.

"There's probably a lot in that," he admitted. "But on the other hand, I think there isn't the slightest doubt but that the Devil has rather drawn in his horns and gone underground in the last few hundred years. It's interesting to speculate why; but I myself would say you've only got to look round the world to-day to see that, far from going out of business altogether, he has simply changed his strategy to conform to the more 'enlightened' outlook of the present time. He's less crude and more subtle now; but, on the whole, considerably more effective! Still, this present case isn't exactly unique in modern times, you know. Cases of what we can call 'old-fashioned' witchcraft are admittedly pretty rare to-day, but they're not altogether unknown."

"For example?" I asked.

"For example, there was an apparently perfectly genuine case of it somewhere in northern France only two or three years ago. Somewhere in the Vosges, I think it was. And only a year or two before that there was a parallel instance in northern Italy. In each case it was discovered that a regular 'coven' of witches existed in secret, consisting of the traditional complement of one man (known as the 'devil'—with a small d to distinguish him from the Devil himself) and twelve female witches. There was only a bare mention of the French case in the papers over here, but I heard a lot about it from old Canon Flurry, who happened to be in France at the time. I don't remember all the details, but there were at least a dozen credible witnesses who claimed to have actually seen these witches flying through the air by night—whether on broomsticks or not, I couldn't say. If necessary, I'm sure Scotland Yard could get full details of the case from the French police, though in point of fact the 'devil'—whose name, I remember was François Boileau: that has stuck in my mind because I know some English people named Boileau, and I gently pulled their legs about it—was never actually brought to trial. Just as the police were on their way to arrest him, his house burst into flames and he disappeared in a way which naturally convinced everyone that he had magical powers. Whether he had or not, I couldn't say; but if he hadn't, he was certainly an excellent stage-manager!"

More than once in our rough island story I have been impelled to record, in my deathless prose, my conviction that the human brain is a very remarkable organ; and in particular that department of the brain which is concerned with what is called the subconscious memory. I shall not revolt you by dilating upon the matter again at length, but shall content myself

with saying that something or other (I didn't know just what) that my uncle had said in the past few seconds had, so to say, an obscure and highly tantalising relevance to something else (and again I didn't know what) that was stored away in metaphorical moth-balls in some remote pigeon-hole of my subconscious. To vary the metaphor, I felt that something Uncle Odo had just said ought to ring a bell in my mental telephone exchange as a preliminary to getting connected up with something I knew already—but for the life of me I could not make out what it was. . . .

Meanwhile, the Archbishop was still going ahead.

". . . when I was in Rome on my last visit *ad limina*. It was very much the same set-up, so far as I could gather. A man and twelve women were involved, and again there were reliable witnesses to testify to witch-flights. I know the case was making something of a stir with the Holy Office (which, in case you don't know, is the modern equivalent of the old Inquisition), but, once again, they didn't get as far as arresting the 'devil,' and though some of the women were intensively questioned by the police and the local ecclesiastical authorities, they didn't give much away except his name—which escapes my mind for the moment. Not that it matters. . . . I'm only mentioning these two cases to show that the old type of witchcraft is not quite extinct even yet, though one hears little enough about it nowadays."

"Amazing!" Thrupp frowned in deep perplexity. "And, I must admit, pretty suggestive. Of course, it'd be fatal to jump to rash conclusions, but I must say I'd like to know a bit more about this fellow Drinkwater. There's nothing solid to go on; but if it's a fact that Andrea Gilchrist rides broomsticks, and if she's having an affair with Drinkwater—— Do you happen to know, Roger, if Puella Stretton was also a friend of his?"

"I've been taking it for granted that she was," I replied. "I mean, she was apparently pretty matey with Andrea, and Andrea is obviously on very intimate terms with Drinkwater—I know that doesn't prove anything, but it shouldn't be difficult to find out for certain. Anyhow, if you want to know more about him, surely you've got a ready-made excuse for going to see him? The unfortunate Stretton woman is dead in the most mysterious circumstances, and I should think you'd be justified in questioning *anybody* in the district who may have known her. . . ."

"I'd certainly like to meet him and see how he strikes me," Thrupp agreed. "Not that I'm committing myself to saying I believe Puella Stretton died as a result of witchcraft, in spite of all I've heard to-night. I'm extremely grateful to your Grace—and to you, too, Roger—for everything you've both told me, and I don't mind admitting that I'm very much impressed by it all. You mustn't misunderstand me, though, if I persist in

completely exhausting the aeroplane theory before I abandon a material solution in favour of the supernatural!"

"My dear fellow, you'd be insane if you did," Uncle Odo declared promptly. "Still, perhaps it wouldn't do any harm to have a word with Drinkwater some time or other, as Roger suggests. I'd quite like to meet him myself, as a matter of fact."

"I'll see him to-morrow," said Thrupp. "And if," he added with grim humour, "I should catch a whiff of burning brimstone while I'm talking to him, I shall have no hesitation in calling upon your Grace to rescue me from his fiendish clutches!"

The Most Reverend Odo laughed good-naturedly. "In point of fact it would be far more significant if you suddenly felt cold," he remarked, rising and stretching his limbs. "If tradition is anything to go by, the Devil and his demons give off emanations rather like the feeling you get from standing in front of a frigidaire with the door open. . . ."

4

It was by this time something after ten o'clock. For another hour we talked, the three of us, discussing and probing and dissecting and chewing over a great mass of facts and possibilities—without, however, extracting any further matter of notably pabular quality. And then, very wisely I think, we decided to go to bed.

Barbary and Uncle Piers had been playing chess, and we poured forth from my study just in time to see my wife snatch her revenge for the trouncing which, we learned, the Field-Marshal had given her earlier on. We all had a final drink and then trooped upstairs.

A quarter of an hour later, when I had removed all my clothes and was casting round for my pyjamas as a preliminary to joining Barbary in bed, I heard a click down below from the direction of the front door. Moving across to the appropriate window I was in time to see Sir Piers set stealthily forth on another midnight stroll, moving silently along the grass border of the drive as he had done the previous night. I raised my eyebrows and tugged at my beard, but I was too tired, both mentally and physically, to do anything else about it. That my uncle was engaged upon some curious business of his own was as clear as the nature of that business was opaque. Nor was I in any mood to take a more active interest in it.

"No one," said a tuneful voice from the bed, "could say I've been getting in your hair through being unduly inquisitive, Roger darling. But I must say I'd give a lot to know what the hell is going on round here just now. Nobody

tells me anything. I'm beginning to feel like the Martyred Bride—or do I mean Bartered?"

I laughed. "Sweetheart, your halo will be plainly visible when I turn the light out," I prophesied. I reached for the switch and clicked it off. "There—what did I say? Or is that your nose? Something luminous——"

"Pig!"

"Sorry, love." I got into bed and we snuggled into our favourite clinch. "As a matter of fact I, too, would very much like to know what is going on round here. So would Thrupp. So would Uncle Odo. And so also, though perhaps in a different line of country, would Uncle Piers. Life since yesterday morning has been curling itself into one big question-mark. Shall I tell you all the latest developments?" I added with considerable nobility of character, for in truth my brain felt too weary to recapitulate the march of events yet again.

"In the morning," she replied, to my relief. "I want to know everything, naturally, but I couldn't bear any flesh-creeps now—of *that* sort! 'All that I ask is lurve.' . . ."

So, presently, we slept: Barbary without interruption, myself with one brief interval of waking during which I heard the ominous drone of a low-flying aircraft. But just as I was debating whether to creep out of bed and try to catch a glimpse of it I suddenly fell asleep again, and knew nothing more till Barbary roused me with a cup of tea just before seven.

As we sipped our tea and smoked our early morning cigarettes, I did my best to bring her up to date with all that had happened since our last brief talk. Being now some eight hours removed from the most recent of these developments I found I was already seeing them in better perspective, and was able to epitomise quite drastically without omitting anything essential. Barbary listened attentively but in silence.

Not only in the physical sense are male and female complementary. And if you remind me, the weasels and precisians among you, that less than a hundred pages back I was deploring the psychological, as opposed to the anatomical, differences between the sexes, I shall retort with that profoundest of all axioms, namely, that circumstances alter cases, as you should very well know for yourselves. For long years before I married Barbary I had been accustomed to take my knottier problems and difficulties to her, and had almost invariably found that her feminine intellect was quick to fasten upon some facet of the case which I myself had tended to overlook but which often enough proved to be of cardinal moment. In any case, there

is nothing to be lost and often much to be gained by getting a feminine slant on difficult questions.

And now she pounced unerringly on something to which I myself had paid but little attention.

She said: “I don’t believe you’ll get anywhere, Roger, till you’ve dug a good bit deeper into the relations between Carmel and this queer man Drinkwater——”

“You mean Andrea,” I interrupted.

“I mean Carmel,” she insisted.

“But they haven’t had any relations, to speak of.”

“That’s precisely what you ought to be looking into,” said the oracle. “The interesting thing is that they *haven’t* had any relations to speak of—that is, if Carmel is telling the truth. Why haven’t they—when, according to Carmel, Drinkwater tried to rope her into some funny business or other not long ago? What was the funny business? And why did Carmel put up such a strong resistance, even when her own sister tried to wear her down?”

“H’m.”

“Carmel goes out of her way to insist that the ‘funny business’ wasn’t what you naturally thought it was—and that may be borne out by the fact that Andrea herself was already Drinkwater’s lady-love and wouldn’t want her kid sister horning in. Then what on earth *was* it? You say Carmel was just as reluctant to talk about it as she would have been if it had been the other thing.”

“Lord knows,” said I. “This puzzled me at the time, of course, but I haven’t got round to working it out yet. Something criminal, do you suppose?”

“Possibly. I can’t imagine what, though. But I do think it’s important to find out. You ought to see Carmel again to-day and try to coax it out of her; and if you fail, Bob Thrupp should see her, officially, and turn on the heat till she melts. You see, darling, if you discover what this mysterious thing was, it gives you a clue to Drinkwater’s racket, whatever that may be. At present he’s simply a ‘mystery man’—which doesn’t get us very far. We don’t know whether he’s simply a sensualist with a taste for naughty girls, or a crook, or a magician, or the Devil himself! Whereas, if Carmel would tell us what it was he and Andrea wanted her to do . . .”

I nodded slowly. Barbary, as usual, was finding the eye of the needle as only a woman can.

"I believe you're right," I acknowledged. "As you say, it's a hold-up, not knowing just where Drinkwater comes in—if he does come in, which of course isn't certain. Thrupp is seeing him to-day, anyway, just on the off-chance that he may be able to throw some light on Puella Stretton's death, but it isn't likely that Drinkwater will give away anything likely to incriminate himself and I agree that we might find out a good bit more about him from Carmel, *if* she can be persuaded to talk. The question is, would she be likely to spill more beans to me, as a friend, or to Thrupp, as representing the majesty of the law? Incidentally, there's the inquest this morning, which Thrupp will have to attend."

There was a short silence. Then Barbary said: "Roger, would it be a good idea if *I* saw Carmel? She's a nice kid, I think, and even though we don't know each other well we've always got on pretty well together. I mean, it *might* conceivably be something she'd rather tell another girl about than a man, even if it isn't actually—sexy. I don't want to push my nose in where it isn't wanted, but it might be an idea. . . ."

It certainly was an idea. Barbary is one of those girls who go down as well with their own sex as they do with men. Young women confide in her, as if knowing by instinct that she is both trustworthy and *simpatica*. It flashed through my mind how, a year ago, in this very house, she had succeeded in gaining the confidence of poor little Bryony Hurst who, till then, had stubbornly refused to share her secret burden with even her most intimate friends. True, the revelation had come too late to save Bryony from her grave in the cemetery across the fields, but it had at least enabled her diabolical persecutors to be brought to justice. . . . I shuddered, as I always do when I remember that horrible business.

5

Immediately after breakfast we conveyed the sense of our talk to Thrupp, who at once gave his consent to the proposal.

"The omens are propitious, too," he added. "The inquest is at half-past ten and Andrea will have to be there, so it should be easy to get Carmel by herself. The inquest won't last long to-day—I've already squared the Coroner—but I'll see that Andrea is kept hanging about till, say eleven-fifteen at the earliest. If you haven't got Carmel to talk by then, Barbary, try to get her away from the Vicarage before Andrea returns. She mustn't suspect anything."

"Leave it to me," said Barbary.

We were standing in the porch, and at that moment a youth on a red bicycle scrunched up the drive and disinterred a telegram from his pouch. It

was addressed, regardless of expense, to the Most Reverend the Lord Archbishop-Bishop of Arundel.

His Grace, summoned from within, read the wire with a discontented pout on the archiepiscopal lips. It was from his Vicar-General and, though blandly sycophantic in tone, demanded his Grace's immediate return to duty in no uncertain terms. His good square Sussex-won't-be-druv chin thrust well forward, my uncle considered the text with mutiny in every feature.

Uncle Piers, appearing at this moment and glancing over his brother's shoulder, snorted indignantly.

"Bloody Scotchman?" he queried sharply.

"Welsh," his Grace amended sourly.

"Same thing," breathed the Field-Marshal angrily. "Ter hell with all these blasted Celtser Keltser whatever they call 'emselves! Tell him ter go and boil his snitch! What the hell d'yer mean by havin' a Welshman fer yer Vicar-General, hey? I'm disappointed in yer, Odo me boy——"

"I inherited him," Uncle Odo said unhappily. "Good man for the job, actually. Very hot on finance, which is a necessary evil. I expect it's only something to do with accounts that he wants me for, actually. I've a good mind not to go. I've no official engagements till next Sunday."

"Why not run over in the car and see what it's all about?" Barbary suggested. "It's less than an hour each way, and you could even be back for lunch unless you find it's something really important. Leave your kit here, and that'll mean you've *got* to come back to-night, whether the V.G. likes it or not."

"Excellent idea!" Uncle Odo agreed. "I suppose it really is rather naughty of me to be staying so long, but I couldn't bear to miss anything at this end. Besides, quite seriously, if what is happening here should turn out to be connected with—with what we think it might be, I consider it my duty, as Ordinary of the diocese, to be on the spot. Dash it!" his Grace expostulated in conclusion, "I *am* the bishop, and I reckon the Devil is a dashed sight more important than Owen's wretched balance-sheets."

"Hear, hear," said I; and so the matter was settled. Half an hour later the house was deserted but for myself, who remained behind to deal with some accumulated correspondence. Uncle Piers, for some undisclosed reason, had insisted on accompanying Thrupp to the inquest at the Village Hall—not, I suspected, so much because he was really interested in the extremely exiguous evidence likely to be adduced that day, but because he wanted a chance to have a private talk with the detective on some business of his own. Simultaneously with their departure Barbary had set out, across the fields, to

the Vicarage. The Most Reverend Odo had already left for Arundel, driving his own sleek black Talbot.

I dutifully tried to settle down to some work in my study, but I was in one of those disastrous moods, well enough known to every professional writer, when one seems utterly incapable of stringing the simplest sentence together. There was a trayful of letters awaiting attention, but I lacked the concentration necessary to answer them. Then I explored the large green box-file labelled 'Miscellaneous Notes and Drafts'—a kind of limbo to which I consign all those odds and ends of writings, varying from pencilled scribbles on old envelopes to nearly completed stories and plays, which I have at some time felt the urge to begin but lacked the energy or inspiration to finish. I go through them from time to time and am occasionally moved to seize upon one and finish it off, to the enrichment of our national literature and the dequantitation of my overdraft. But this morning I hurled them all back in disgust, resisting only with difficulty the urge to destroy them once and for all. Then I threw myself down on my magic sofa and tried to think things out.

In vain, however. It was definitely one of those days. Far from being able to think, I seemed incapable even of selecting a subject to consider from the jumble of mysteries and unexplained events that had disturbed the flow of life during the past two days. I am not, at the best of times, a really deep or careful thinker. For an Englishman I have a passably logical mind and can reason out most problems well enough, but I must own that I always depend to some extent upon some kind of instinct or intuition for my thought-sequences rather than upon a strictly syllogistic habit of mind. And to-day this inspiration was wholly absent. I felt baffled and impotent, and therefore wrathful.

I began to swear. . . . And I was still swearing, though not yet very loudly or obscenely, when I heard footsteps on the garden path without and a male voice asking, rather hesitantly, "Anyone at home?"

I leaped from the sofa and thrust my beard outside. A few yards away I beheld a fair-haired, blue-eyed young man in blue blazer and grey flannels, with brilliantly polished brown shoes and a Royal Sussex tie. He was about twenty-four years of age and undeniably good-looking in a pleasantly virile way. I was delighted to see him.

"What cheer, Adam!" I exclaimed heartily as we recognised each other. "This is big of you. Come right in and have some beer."

"Hullo, Roger! Hope I'm not disturbing you——"

"Devil a bit. Glad to see you. I was just wasting time. As a matter of fact Barbary's gone to see Carmel, and I'm all alone."

He followed me inside. "I know. I left them together. That's why I thought of coming round to see you, actually. Tit for tat, so to speak," he ended with a laugh.

"It's an unexpected pleasure," said I. "Carmel must have been glad to see you. I saw her yesterday, as a matter of fact, but she didn't say you were coming."

"She didn't know. I didn't know myself till the last minute and then, as I told you, my wire was delayed. Cigarette?"

"Have one of mine." We lit up, and I left him in search of beer. I remember wondering, as I filled the mugs, whether this visit was as straightforward as it appeared to be. There was, of course, no earthly reason why Adam Wycherley should not look in to see me; as I have said, we had been friends since he was four or five years old, and there was a kind of tacit affection between us. Yet even when he had been living permanently in Merrington he was never a frequent visitor, and I found it slightly peculiar that he should devote even a few minutes of his brief leave to looking me up. And when I had given him his beer his first words confirmed my thoughts.

"How did Carmel strike you yesterday?" Adam asked, with just a shade of concern in his voice.

"I thought she was looking pretty good," I said cautiously. I was in the awkward position of not knowing whether or not Carmel had taken him into her confidence—and if so, to what extent. And since, as I have said, these two were generally regarded as being virtually an engaged couple, I felt diffident about letting him feel that his beloved had come to me about something of which he himself might still be in ignorance. One has to tread warily in these matters.

"I didn't mean that exactly," said Adam. "She certainly looks fit—and yet she also strikes me as being a bit, well, worried about something. Perhaps I'm wrong. She hasn't said anything to me, but——"

I let out what I hoped was a reassuring guffaw. "Things seem to have been rather hectic up at the Vicarage the last day or two," I temporised. "You've heard all about the theft and recovery of the angels' trumpets, of course? Rather an emotional experience for those concerned."

"I know." Adam still seemed unconvinced. "You may be right, but . . . Look here, Roger. Keep what I'm going to say under your hat, won't you?"

"Surelye."

"It's damned difficult to know where to start, but I've got a queer feeling that there's something funny going on round here."

"Really! What sort of thing?" I asked innocently.

"Pete knows. That's the silly part of it. I haven't the foggiest, and yet —— Roger, you like Carmel, don't you?"

"Immensely," I said frankly. "She's the sort of kid it does one good to know."

He nodded enthusiastically. "She's wizard, isn't she? I—I suppose you know we—we—I'm hoping to marry her one of these days: as soon as I get my captaincy, as a matter of fact."

"I rather guessed as much," I admitted, "and though it's nothing to do with me, let me say I think it's a damn good idea. It can't happen too soon, for my liking. Roll on the third pip!"

"My God, yes! But—I say, Roger: what do you make of the others up there? The old man, I mean, and—Andrea?"

I took a deep breath, praying for guidance.

"Candidly, I wouldn't know," I replied as unconcernedly as I could. "I don't know them particularly well. From the little I've seen of him I quite like the Reverend Andrew, though naturally I don't know him as well as I might if I belonged to his church. Some people say he's scatty, but that's not my own impression. He's a bit eccentric, and extremely absentminded, but not enough to be called bughouse."

"He's nobody's fool, actually," said Adam. "And—Andrea?"

"She's very beautiful."

"I suppose she is. Not a patch on Carmel, though." The swain's enthusiasm charmed me, for he clearly meant what he said. True love may not be wholly blind, but it is apt to be myopic; and much as I admired Carmel it had to be admitted that she was not in the same street as Andrea where physical beauty was concerned. . . . Meanwhile I wondered what lay behind this rather ingenuous probe of Adam's. A little fishing seemed indicated, so I made a tentative cast.

"Andrea," I said, choosing my words with care, "always seems just a little too good to be true. Carmel looks good, and is. Her sister might easily be a bit of a bitch."

In defiance of the rules of polite conversation I had spoken my last sentence into my tankard. This may have accounted for the fact that Adam, looking puzzled, threw an ear forward and echoed: "A bit of a witch?"

I set down my mug, grinned, and said: "Bitch."

"Oh, I see. Yes, I think you're right there," Adam agreed. "To tell the truth, I don't like her at all, Roger; and the more I see of her, the less I like her. She—she scares me a bit. For Carmel's sake, I mean. . . ."

This was getting interesting. "In what way?" I inquired.

Adam threw out a hand. "Damned if I know, really," he said. "There's something about her—— Well, for one thing, I believe she absolutely loathes Carmel. Not openly, of course, but I'd swear she does, all the same. I've caught her looking absolutely poisonous once or twice, when she didn't know I was watching. Unfortunately Carmel doesn't seem to suspect anything—I wish to God she did. I can't very well say anything, can I? You see, Carmel's one of those kids who hates nobody and consequently can't imagine anyone hating *her*—and that's the trouble. I wish we could get married straight away. Honestly, Roger, I don't like leaving her under Andrea's influence a moment longer than I can help." Adam was clearly much in earnest. The absence of anything approaching melodrama made his words singularly convincing.

I preened my beard in silence for a space, my mind busy on a strange assortment of ideas.

"I don't quite know what you're talking about," I said presently; "but *must* you wait? If it's simply a matter of economics——"

"It is and it isn't. You know what a subaltern's pay is like, and I've very little of my own. Still, we might manage, if—— Trouble is, you see, Carmel isn't of age, and the old man might put his foot down if I tried to rush my fences."

I grunted. "What did you mean about Andrea's 'influence' over her?" I asked. "Anything special, or just a manner of speaking?"

Adam flicked the butt of his cigarette through the open window. "Well ——" He hesitated, and then went on with a rush. "Andrea *is* a pretty good bitch, you know, Roger: in more than one sense. When Carmel and I first began to—to get crazy on each other, you know, Andrea did something which—oh, hell, I can't very well tell you——" He looked remarkably pink and embarrassed.

"Suit yourself," I adjured him. "But I'd rather like to know, all the same. I'm interested."

"Promise not to tell Carmel?"

"Surelye. Tact is my middle name!"

"Well, it was pretty beastly, really," said Adam. "Heaven knows I'm not squeamish or puritanical or anything like that; but somehow, when you get keen on a girl, you get a rather different sort of outlook, don't you?"

"You do."

"Well, you see, when I first fell for Carmel and started haunting the Vicarage in earnest, Andrea tried to—to cut in, so to speak. Waylaid me one night on my way home. Said she wanted to warn me I was wasting my time running after Carmel. I asked her what she meant by 'wasting time'—I honestly didn't understand what she was getting at. And she said—oh, hell, she was pretty beastly, Roger. In words of one syllable, she obviously took it for granted that I was only chasing Carmel for what I could get, and she said it was a sheer waste of time because Carmel wasn't that sort of girl. . . . My God, I could have pushed her face in!"

"Nasty," I murmured, as he paused.

"But that wasn't the end of it. One could perhaps have pardoned a 'sisterly hint' if she had really misunderstood my intentions and wanted to—to protect Carmel from me, so to speak. But that wasn't it at all. In fact, she then went on to—well, to suggest that *she* hadn't any of Carmel's scruples and that—oh, you see what I mean. Pretty low trick, don't you think?"

"Revolting," said I—and meant it. This was no mere question of prudery or narrow morality, but a particularly despicable attempt by an outwardly decent and respectable young woman to seduce her kid sister's lover by shamelessly offering something which had not been sought. And besides ——

A question to Adam confirmed a conjecture that had suddenly come to me. If my mental chronology were correct, Andrea must already have been Drinkwater's mistress when she made this attempt on Adam. Coupled with what Carmel had reluctantly admitted to me regarding her sister's habits, this Helenesque beauty was beginning to take on the appearance of a Messalina.

"What was her attitude when you declined with thanks?" I asked Adam. "Was she sore?"

"I'll say she was sore. She was completely venomous. But of course she couldn't do anything. I was scared stiff at first that she'd get her revenge by cooking up some filthy yarn to poison Carmel's mind against me; in fact, I'm still not sure she didn't try on something of the kind. Carmel never said a word to me, nor I to her, but I do know that she and Andrea had a hell of a dust-up over something or other about then. If that was it, Andrea failed miserably. There's nothing of the frail hot-house plant about Carmel, you know. She's a sight tougher than she looks, and she can be as obstinate as seventeen mules if she really feels strongly about something. A deceptive sort of girl in some ways."

"I'm sure you're right," I agreed. "And that is just why I don't think you need be too bothered about Andrea's possible influence on her, Adam. Carmel *is* tougher than she looks, and I'd say she can look after herself pretty adequately. And needless to say, if ever she wants any help or moral support in an emergency, while you're away, I hope she won't forget Barbary and myself."

"Thanks, I'll tell her." Adam gulped down a mouthful of beer, and then went on: "By the way, Roger, there's something else I want your advice about: something I discovered more or less by accident, and miles out of my own depth. I've forgotten all the Latin I ever knew, whereas you're pretty hot on it, aren't you?"

"Latin?" I cocked an eyebrow in astonishment. "What on earth are you talking about, laddie? My Latin is—well, not so bad as it might be, but I don't exactly brag about it. What's the idea?"

"This." Adam felt in his breast pocket and drew forth a carefully folded wad of papers. "This is really what I came to see you about, actually; though I'm glad we had a word about Carmel as well. Now, look. I said I was sure there's something queer going on round here, and here's a spot of evidence—or I think so, anyway."

"What is it, and where did you get it?" I demanded, holding out a hand for the papers. Adam, however, shook his head and placed them on his knee.

"I'll show you in a minute, but I'd better explain first how I got hold of them. It was last night: Mother's away, you know, so I'm sleeping at the Vicarage for these two nights. Well, I was damned tired last night and dropped off to sleep straight away; in fact, I even forgot to switch off the light beside my bed. I don't know if it was that, or something else, that woke me up about an hour and a half later. Anyhow, I did wake and found the light burning, and it was then just after half-past twelve. I switched off the light and tried to get to sleep again, but this time there was nothing doing—you know how it is. So after a bit I thought I'd have a read, but there wasn't a book of any sort in my room. So I thought I'd creep down and burgle the library. I knew the old man had cleared off to bed quite early, before the girls and I did, so you can bet I was surprised to see a crack of light showing under the library door when I got down to the hall. . . . All in the best Crime Club tradition, you'll notice," he ended in a chuckle.

"Just what I was thinking," said I. "A shockingly trite situation."

"Exactly. And I'm afraid I proceeded to behave just like anyone would in a detective story," said Adam. "Not, of course, that I imagined I'd find a bloody murder in progress, or even the family silver being looted by masked

men; but I did think either that the old man had come down again to renew his inquiries into the misdeeds of Alexander the Coppersmith (who is apparently going to get preached about next Sunday), or else that our polyandrous Andrea might be keeping a midnight date with one of her guys —rather a risky thing to do on the premises, of course, but you never know with girls like that. Whichever it was, I didn't want to advertise my presence; but on the off-chance that the light might simply have got left on by accident—though I could have sworn we switched it out before going up to bed—I thought I'd better have a snoop. The door was just ajar and I hadn't bothered to put on my slippers, so it was perfectly easy." Adam paused for another swig of beer.

"I can't bear it," I cried in agony. "Snap into it, man!"

"It was Andrea, all right—but there was no one with her. She was in pyjamas, with a red silk dressing-gown on top; and I'd have gone away at once if I hadn't been so flabbergasted by what she was doing. Honestly, Roger, it was most odd."

"In what way?"

"I'll try and describe it as carefully as I can. She was sitting in an upright chair, turned to face about ninety degrees from where I was watching—in other words I was looking at her left profile. Two or three feet in front of her was a small table on which stood a cup-shaped brass vase (which usually lives on the mantelpiece) with a flat brass ashtray (also from the mantelpiece) placed across the top of it like a lid. On another chair, half-left and facing her, was this wodge of papers, open about half-way through and propped up against something so that she could read it from where she was sitting. In fact she was reading it, but not aloud: I could see her lips moving but she didn't make a sound. Oh, and when I first looked she was holding a rather hefty book in front of her, close up against her chest, but with the open pages turned away from her, as if she were holding it for someone else to read. . . ."

Once again a little patch of goose-flesh broke out on the upper reaches of my spine, and my back-hair tingled.

"Like this?" I interposed swiftly, snatching up a once-folded copy of *The Times* and holding it before me, my fingers grasping the lower edges, in the manner used by the Sub-Deacon with the Book of Gospels at High Mass.

"That's the idea," Adam confirmed promptly. "Your hands aren't quite right, though. Andrea somehow made a sort of triangle, pointing downwards, with her thumbs and forefingers—like this." He took the newspaper from me and demonstrated.

"Go on," I enjoined him steadily.

"Well, that phase only lasted a few seconds. Then she put the book down on the floor beside her—and incidentally, she was obviously play-acting and 'doubling the parts,' if you know what I mean. She gave the impression that in reality someone would take the book from her, and she sort of bowed to this unseen someone before putting the book on the floor. Then she turned over another page of this wodge of bumph on the chair and read a bit, and then she picked up the ashtray and vase from the table—ashtray in her right hand and vase in her left—and held them in front of her in a sort of—well, a sort of ceremonial or ritualistic way, if you get me. Then she went on reading for a bit, after which she put the ashtray back on top of the vase (which she was still holding in her left hand) and then picked up something from the ground that I hadn't noticed before: an ordinary alpenstock affair, like a very long walking-stick with an iron spike at one end. She held this diagonally in front of her and then, to my amazement, proceeded to kiss it, slowly, about a dozen times—actually I made it eleven, but I may have miscounted. Then she stood the alpenstock up in front of her, gripping it between her knees to keep it from falling, and took the ashtray back into her right hand, leaving the vase in the left. . . ."

Adam broke off with a self-conscious grimace.

"It was at this point that I decided to go back to bed," he continued. "I wish I hadn't now, but at the time it seemed the obvious thing to do. Don't ask me what I thought: I honestly don't know. I can't say why, but the one idea in my head at the time was that the sooner I got the hell out of it, the better. So I went back to bed. . . . But I hadn't been there long before I felt something drawing me downstairs again. I felt I *must* go and see what Andrea was up to now. What I'd seen didn't make any sort of sense to me, in fact I began to wonder quite seriously whether I'd really seen it or whether I hadn't dropped off to sleep again and had a damned queer dream. Anyhow, I felt I should never sleep till I'd satisfied myself; so eventually—by which I mean about twenty minutes or half an hour after going back to bed—I once again tiptoed downstairs. I got quite a shock when I saw there really *was* a light in the library, and knew that it hadn't been a dream after all."

"And was Andrea still at her—ritual?"

"No—she'd just finished, apparently, and was clearing up after it. When I first looked she was just putting the things back on the mantelpiece, and then she put the tables and chairs back in their places. The point is, though, that last of all she took the wodge of bumph from which she'd been reading—*this* wodge that I've got here—and stuffed it away behind a book in a

shelf on the far side of the room. I took a careful note of the position, I can tell you. And then, as the only other thing to be put away was the alpenstock, which I knew lived in the hall, I turned and legged it upstairs again before she caught me. I made it all right, and a few minutes afterwards I heard Andrea sneak up and go along to her own room. I'm sure she didn't suspect anything."

"*Bon!* And then you nipped down and pinched the book of words?"

"Yes. About an hour later, when I was positive she'd be asleep. Here it is. I tried to puzzle it out in bed, but I could only make out a word here and there. It's mostly Latin, with a sprinkling of Greek. Beyond me, but perhaps you can unravel it."

I grunted uncertainly, as I took the wad of paper. Amongst other things, I wondered where Andrea Gilchrist had learnt her classics—and then I remembered that she had indeed been up at Oxford some few years back, though I had an idea that she had come down without taking a degree. She was not the type of girl one would have suspected of reading Greek and Latin, but appearances are notoriously deceptive. However——

Like the discerning reader I had already jumped to certain conclusions in respect of the documents now tendered to me by Adam Wycherley, but my first glance showed that my conjectures had gone somewhat astray. The wad consisted of about a score of very thin quarto pages, typewritten in red and black but with some handwritten interpolations in Greek characters, for which a rusty brownish ink had been used. The sheets were clipped together and had been folded across and across. The top page contained only the title, which ran as follows:

LIBER DCLXVI

Arcanum Arcanorum Quod Continet Nondum Revelandum
Ipsis Regibus Supremis O.T.O. Grimorium Sanctissimum Quod
Baphomet X°.M. . . Suo Fecit:

MISSAM IN HONOREM DOMINI MAXIMI INGENTIS
NEFANDI INEFFABILIS SACRATISSIMI SECRETISSIMI

RITUS CELEBRANDI

Despite my modest disclaimer to Adam, my Latin is none so bad for a layman—though I must qualify that statement by saying, after the fashion of

the man Joad, that it all depends on what you mean by Latin. Classical Latin, and especially verse, holds as many difficulties for me as ever it did at school; but in the later incarnations of that tongue (dog- or church-Latin, call it what you will) I am very much more at ease—perhaps because it has by then lost its virgin fastidiousness and become at once less pure and more human. Thus, where I should still have to grope my way with impatient agony through Cicero and Tacitus I am quite happily at home with the rubrics and liturgy of my own Church and can tear the guts out of a papal encyclical with no more than an occasional check. . . . And this strange document which Adam had brought me yielded up a respectable percentage of its secrets at my first hurried scanning. What did hold me up were the interpolations in Greek, for I have always been unhandy and indeed antipathetic to that tongue.

Both from the title-page and from the sheets which followed it was clear enough that this was an Order of Mass, though of what particular church or sect I had no means of guessing. All I knew was that it was very queer stuff: that the rubrics, typed in red, described a ritual utterly unknown to me and seeming to bear only a faint tenth-cousin kind of relationship to the ordinary Christian Mass; and that the black-ink words of the liturgy itself appeared to be based on some extremely esoteric doctrine of which I could make very little. I was honest enough to realise straight away that it was well beyond my competence to interpret this ritual with any safe degree of certainty; that was a matter for a skilled theologian, such as Father Prior up at the monastery or, nearer home, Uncle Odo. It was clearly a document of no small significance, and one that might well hold the key to many things that were puzzling us. But it was equally clear that Adam had taken a risk in abstracting it from its hiding-place and that it must be restored at the earliest possible moment, before Andrea should discover its loss. I reflected that this might well be feasible, for she would scarcely take the risk of going for it during the daytime, when her father would normally be occupying the room. Still, there was no time to lose.

I said as much to Adam, who agreed. Obviously the Ritual must be copied and the original restored with as little delay as possible. I asked Adam if he could type.

“After a fashion—slow but sure. I only use two fingers.”

“Quite enough,” said I. “I’ve two machines here, a Remington and a portable Underwood. Take your choice, and we’ll split the script between us. If we get cracking we might get through by lunch-time. Leave blanks for the Greek. . . .”

Adam chose the portable and we got to work. “What do you make of it, Roger?” he asked, as I handed him a pile of paper.

“God knows,” I answered uncertainly. “Did you manage to decipher the title?”

“Not properly—a word or two here and there. I wish you’d tell me your translation.”

I grunted. “Crudely and incompletely, it runs something like this: *Book 666, which contains the Secret of Secrets, not yet to be revealed even to the Supreme Kings of the O.T.O.*—whatever that may be. The *most holy Grimorium*—I can’t translate that, but it smells suspiciously like that sinister word Grimoire, which is a Black Mass book—*which Baphomet*—and then there’s that symbol Xº, which looks as though it should mean Tenth Degree—*made with his own M*. . . I’ve no idea what the dots stand for, but I should have thought it might be *manu*—that is, *with his own hand*. But I wouldn’t know for certain.”

“Go on.”

“Well, the rest of it says, roughly: *The Rite of Celebrating Mass in honour of the Supreme, Highest, Unmentionable, Unspeakable, Most Holy and Most Secret Lord*—or words to that effect: some of those adjectives aren’t very translatable at sight. Very odd indeed, Adam. And did you notice this curious sort of Creed that comes towards the beginning of the Mass proper? If you know anything at all about Christian doctrine I think you’ll agree that it’s—well, suggestive.”

“I’m afraid I don’t know much,” said Adam. “I mean, I know the ordinary Creed, of course, and I used to know the Nicene——”

“They’ll do to go on with. Compare them with this one. Where the devil is it? Ah, here we are. The Latin’s a bit obscure in parts, and my English will probably be worse, but this will give you a rough idea:

> “I believe in one most secret and ineffable Lord; and in one Father of Life, Mystery of Mystery, in his name CHAOS; and in one Air, the nourisher of all that breathes;
>
> “And I believe in One, the Mother of us all, and in one Womb wherein all men are begotten and wherein they shall rest, Mystery of Mystery, in her name BABYLON;
>
> “And I believe in the Serpent and the Lion, Mystery of Mystery, in his name BAPHOMET;
>
> “And I believe in one Church of Knowledge, of Light, of Love, of Liberty, the word of whose Law is ΘΕΛΗΜΑ;
>
> “And I believe in the Communion of Saints;
>
> “And forasmuch as meat and drink are transmuted in us daily into spiritual substance, I believe in the Miracle of the Mass;

> "And I confess one Baptism of Wisdom whereby we accomplish the Miracle of Incarnation;
>
> "And I confess my life one, individual and eternal, that was, and is, and is to come. Amen, Amen, Amen.

That's the best I can do on the spur of the moment, Adam. I don't know if it means anything to you? It doesn't mean such a hell of a lot to me, but *I don't like it*!"

"Gosh, what a farrago!" cried Adam. "All that stuff about Babylon and Baphomet and what-not. Damn it, I always thought Baphomet was a goat, or something!"

"I wouldn't know just what he was—or is—except that the Templars were accused of worshipping him with quite unspeakable secret rites," I said grimly. "And as for 'our Lady Babylon'——" I strode across to a shelf, took down a Bible, and refreshed my memory. "Listen, Adam:

> "And I saw a Woman sitting upon a scarlet-coloured Beast, full of names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns. And the Woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet, and decked with gold and precious stones and pearls, having a golden cup in her hand, full of the abomination and filthiness of her fornications.
>
> "And upon her forehead was a name written—Mystery: Babylon the Great, Mother of Fornications and the Abominations of the Earth. And I saw the Woman drunk with the blood of the Saints, and with the blood of the Martyrs. . . .

Jolly sort of idea, what? I mean, Adam, if this sweet soul is the sort of person who features in this Creed, along with Baphomet and the 'one secret and ineffable Lord whose name is Chaos'—I somehow doubt if the Reverend Andrew Gilchrist would approve of this liturgy as light reading for his elder daughter!"

Adam wiped his brow. "You're telling me," he breathed. "By the way, what does that Greek word mean—you know, where it says something about the Church of Knowledge, whose Word of Law is something-or-other?"

"ΘΕΛΗΜΑ? Lord knows! My Greek is lousy, and I haven't got a lexicon." However, I delved rapidly into two or three English dictionaries for any word which might suggest derivation from the Greek *thelēma* and eventually unearthed a word 'thelemite,' which was defined as a 'libertine.' No etymology was given, but it seemed a reasonable assumption that, working backwards, one might easily arrive at a Greek noun, *thelēma*, which would presumably connote something in the nature of liberty, licence (in its more opprobrious sense) or libertinism. And then I recalled a phrase which seemed to recur at intervals, almost like a refrain, throughout this sinister 'mass'—a phrase which could roughly be translated as *'Do what thou wilt'*

shall be the whole of the Law. This generous and oft-repeated exhortation to obey the dictates of one's own will seemed to link up well enough with my conjectural interpretation of *thelēma*.

Scarcely a Christian concept, I reflected as I snapped into the task of copying my share of the Ritual. But then, the whole of this queer liturgy reeked of Something that was certainly not Christian and which yet defied analysis or definition. It was not (as I had half-expected it to be) a downright, antipodal, honest-to-Hell parody of the Christian Mass—the kind of blasphemy associated with straightforward Satanism that is usually known as the Black Mass, in which *credo* becomes *non credo* and unspeakable defilements take the place of adoration. No—this was something far deeper, more subtle, more significant, less obvious, more esoteric, occult. Older too, perhaps, than the ordinary Devil's Mass: in spirit as old as Sin itself. Indeed, *older than merely human sin*.

To know no Law but one's own Will—what is that but the Supreme Indiscipline: the Sin of Revolt for which Lucifer and his host were hurled like lightning from Heaven? . . . Yet this was the Law—*the whole of the Law*—of the 'Church' whose liturgy this purported to be.

Nor did I like the smell of the last two or three articles of that Creed: that cryptic bit about the transmutation of meat and drink into spiritual substance, for instance, or the claim that by the Baptism of Wisdom (whatever that might mean) '*we*' accomplish the Miracle of Incarnation. I noted, too, that throughout the whole of this 'mass' there appeared not to be one single mention of 'God'—and I felt instinctively that it would not be hard to find another name for that 'secret and ineffable Lord' in whose honour the sacrifice was to be offered. . . .

But then, the whole thing stank of evil: of obscure, arcane evil, to be sure, with none of the blatant abominations or blasphemies of the Black Mass, but somehow all the more insidious and significant for that very reason. There was something esoteric and unclean, infernal and sulphurous, about the whole caboodle. Notwithstanding my imperfections as a translator I could *sense* that the whole spirit behind this ritual was perverted and corruptive, redolent of Hell.

The liturgy was divided into eight sections or chapters, the titles of which provided a bare but comprehensive outline of the course and sequence of the 'mass.' The first two were entirely rubrical and concerned, respectively, the arrangement and furnishings of the 'temple' and the officers of the mass. Contrary to every genuine Christian precedent the latter included—in addition to a Priest, a Deacon, an Acolyte and a Thurifer—a Priestess, who must be '*young, beautiful, and virgin, or at least solemnly*

consecrated to the Service of the Great Order.' Nor did the arrangement of the 'temple' suggest any known Christian rite, for it involved not only a High Altar with a 'super-altar' above it (both of these 'enclosed within a great veil'), but also a small square black altar at some distance from the others, a circular font, and an upright tomb.

The remaining Chapters bore the following titles:

III The Rite of the Introit;
IV The Rite of the Piercing of the Veil;
V The Office of the Eleven Collects;
VI The Consecration of the Elements;
VII The Office of the Secrets;
VIII The Mystic Marriage and Consummation of the Elements.

Adam and I had divided the script between us and for a while there was no sound but the rattle of our two typewriters. Adam, I think, understood but little of his 'copy' and consequently, though not such a speedy typist as myself (who am a proud four-finger man), he managed to keep nearly level with me, for I was suffering from continual distraction as I construed what I was typing. It was 'fascinating' stuff—using the adjective in its original and rather sinister sense—and a thousand notions and theories chased helter-skelter through my brain. It was elusive stuff, too: for just as I was beginning to think I could perceive some recognisable trend or drift in the ritual, it would either change direction like a wild pig jinking, or else disappear altogether. Even at this second reading there was little that one could catch hold of.

Unlike the Black Mass proper, there seemed to be nothing overtly obscene or even unseemly. At one point, indeed, there seemed to be a hint that something of the kind might be imminent, for during the early part of the Rite of the Piercing of the Veil, the rubrics demanded that the Virgin Priestess, now enthroned upon the super-altar, should divest herself entirely of her single white robe and scarlet girdle; yet apparently this was to be done behind the shelter of the Great Veil, and she was directed to have assumed it again before the Priest ultimately parted the Veil with the Sacred Lance. But the rubric immediately following upon this apocalypse rang so loud and clear a bell in my mind that I paused in my typing to give Adam the gist of it:

> The Priestess is seated with the Paten (bearing the Cakes of Light) in her right hand, and the Cup in her left. The Priest presents the Lance, which she kisses eleven times. She then holds it to her breast while the Priest, falling at her knees, kisses them. . . . He remains thus in adoration while the Deacon intones the Office of the Eleven Collects.

Adam whistled, a look of wonder in his blue eyes. “So that was it!” he exclaimed thoughtfully. “I could see, of course, that Andrea was rehearsing something or other: learning her part, so to speak. And I was right about the eleven kisses, you see; and the alpenstock must have represented the Lance, whatever that may be. And the vase and ashtray—it all fits in, you see. My God, what the hell is all this? What’s going on round here?”

I looked at him speculatively for a moment, and then made my decision. After all, there are times when the end does definitely justify the means, and it seemed to me that this was one of them—even if the means involved a breach of confidence.

“I think, Adam,” I said slowly, “you’d do well to get Carmel alone as soon as possible, and ask her straight out what was the exact cause of the row she had with Andrea some time ago—not the row they may have had about you, but another one, on the subject of that fellow Drinkwater. Listen: I told you I’d seen Carmel yesterday. I saw her the day before, too, as a matter of fact, when she came to see me here, quite of her own accord. She came to me because she was extremely worried about something and wanted my advice. I know you won’t take that amiss, Adam. I imagine she wouldn’t have come near me if you’d been at home, but she didn’t know you were coming and she couldn’t think of anyone but me.”

He jerked his head impatiently. “That’s all right, of course,” he said. “But what’s her trouble, Roger? She hasn’t said anything to me. You don’t mean to tell me she’s got herself mixed up with—with all this stuff?” He indicated the Ritual beside his typewriter.

“Certainly not,” I answered firmly. “Get that right out of your head. I’m not very sure what this mumbo-jumbo adds up to, but I’ll bet Carmel would never touch it with the end of a barge-pole. All I know is this: that some little while ago Carmel and Andrea had one of their rows, this time because Andrea’s boy friend, Drinkwater, had wanted her, Carmel, to do something that she didn’t want to do. What, exactly, I wouldn’t know. Whatever it was, Carmel refused point-blank; and the row occurred because Andrea kept on pestering her to change her mind. As I say, Carmel didn’t tell me what it was that Drinkwater wanted her to do, and I didn’t care to press her. But reading this stuff has made me wonder. . . .”

“Go on,” said Adam.

I tweaked my beard. “I may be wrong, but doesn’t it strike you as suggestive? First, Drinkwater tries to get her to do something which she even refuses to consider, but which wasn’t, she assures me, the obvious thing that comes into one’s mind. Next, you accidentally find Andrea (who

had supported Drinkwater's plea) secretly swotting up the part of the Priestess in this beastly ritual. Lastly, from the stipulations in these rubrics about the essential qualifications of the Priestess"—here I read out my rough translation of the passage already referred to—"it looks as if Carmel would probably have filled the bill more suitably than Andrea ever can. You see what I mean. . . Of course, this is sheer speculation——"

"My God!" growled Adam viciously. "If Carmel confirms that, I'll go straight out to Bollington and break Drinkwater's bloody neck for him!"

"You can take me with you," I said; "but don't let's fly off the handle too rashly. This is a damned involved business, and you'll have to be told quite a lot before you can form a proper judgment. Meanwhile, let's get this typing finished. . . ."

But we still had not finished when I heard footsteps in the house. A moment later the door opened and Barbary looked in. And beside her stood Carmel.

There was naturally some surprise on both sides; for the girls were no more prepared for the scene of industry in my study than Adam and I were for Carmel's arrival with Barbary. To obviate complex explanations I acted promptly and resolutely. I went straight up to Carmel, confessed briefly that I had felt constrained to violate her confidence to some small extent, and begged her to make a clean breast of everything to Adam. To my relief, she did not demur.

"That's exactly what Barbary has been persuading me to do," she admitted. "I was hoping I'd find him here——"

"Good! Well, the house is at your disposal, or you'll find two very comfortable chairs under the sequoia in the garden," I said. "Tell him everything you've told me—and a bit more besides. I want you to tell him exactly what it was that Drinkwater asked you to do: the thing you quarrelled with Andrea about."

"But that's just what I've been telling Barbary," she answered, open-eyed. "As much as I *know*, that is. I can't go into much detail, 'cos I was never given any."

"Then tell him all you do know, while Barbary tells *me*. Remember, Adam doesn't know anything, except the little I've told him, so it'll save time in the end if we split up into sub-committees and then we can join up again later and discuss the whole business on equal terms. . . ."

So we paired off and exchanged information; and, naturally, Barbary found her task unexpectedly simplified by the fact that the full text of the mysterious liturgy had meanwhile come into my possession. For my

conjecture had been right enough, and the root cause of Carmel's dispute with her sister and Drinkwater had been her refusal even to consider participation in some exotic and occult-sounding ritual, the precise nature of which was never revealed to her but in which she was to have been cast for some quasi-sacerdotal rôle. Misjudging her nature and susceptibility to temptation, they had tried to bribe her with promises of some kind of mystic emancipation from the bonds of normal human restraint, and initiation into some new world of secret bliss under the ægis of what I think amounted nearly enough to that *thelēma* whose exact shade of meaning I had already been trying to determine. Another suspicion of mine had also proved correct: the reason why Carmel, rather than her more beautiful sister, should have been deemed worthy of enthronement on the super-altar as Virgin Priestess. It seemed odd that the schemers should have misread Carmel's character so completely as to believe that she would respond to any such stimulus, especially when one considers that Andrea was apparently as fully convinced of her persuasibility as was her lover. Perhaps it is as well to remember that Carmel and Andrea were, after all, only half-sisters; and that in any case Carmel was not the type of girl who wears her moral virtues on her sleeve.

Meanwhile, Barbary was installed at Adam's typewriter and our work proceeded apace. Barbary is an even better typist than myself, for she can use no less than six fingers to my four, and has even been known to operate the space-bar with a convenient thumb: a feat which excites my most sublime admiration and envy. The work was soon completed, and it then only remained to copy in the Greek words by hand. I did this while Barbary went off to make some coffee.

And later, when Carmel and Adam had come in from their *tête-à-tête* in the garden, our Council of Four was resumed.

7

According to Uncle Piers, who returned to the house for his midday beer soon after twelve, the inquest on Puella Stretton had excited only limited public interest. Nevertheless he was able to report a certain amount of new information about the dead woman's life and background.

New Scotland Yard had apparently done its stuff with its customary speed and efficiency, for when Thrupp and my uncle reached the Village Hall they found the hitherto unknown Squadron-Leader 'Bill' awaiting them with a certain nervous anxiety that was perhaps understandable in the circumstances. He introduced himself to Thrupp as Squadron-Leader William Peter Nadin-Miles, of No. —— Night Fighter Squadron, stationed

at Wrington Priors, Hants, and at first professed himself totally at a loss to know why he should have been picked upon to attend an inquest on a young woman whose tragic demise he admittedly deplored but who, in his own phrase, had in life meant nothing special to him.

About ten minutes remained before the hour appointed for the opening of the inquest, and these Thrupp devoted to a rapid but thorough questioning of the airman. According to Sir Piers (who quite shamelessly listened-in to the inquisition), Nadin-Miles, despite his initial protestation that he knew next to nothing of Puella Stretton's affairs, was in fact able to supply quite a number of facts of which Thrupp had hitherto been ignorant. He admitted having known Puella for a number of years; he would not commit himself to dates, but Puella Graham (as she was then) had been at school with his sister Rosemary and had often come to stay with her during holidays, and Rosemary Nadin-Miles had been a bridesmaid at Puella's marriage, five or six years earlier, to Captain Thomas Majendie Barkwood Stretton, of the Royal Engineers.

Unfortunately (Nadin-Miles added—though his tone suggested that he really meant 'fortunately') the marriage had not worn well, and a divorce had followed barely three years later. In spite of an outward attempt to show impartiality, the airman left his hearers in little doubt as to where his own sympathies lay, and while he let out that Puella had been the respondent in an undefended suit, he stoutly maintained that the 'poor girl' had been virtually driven into adultery by the frigidity, neglect and generally impossible attitude of her husband, whose connubial qualities she had sadly misjudged before marriage.

Much of the plausibility of this picture ebbed away, however, under the charming but relentless pressure of Thrupp's supplementaries. For instance, it seemed that Captain Stretton had cited no less than four co-respondents, and that there might have been others if only he had been able to discover their names. Nadin-Miles denied with hot indignation that he himself had been one of the four, yet a moment later Thrupp had smilingly chaffed him into admitting that, but for a lucky break, he might well have been a fifth. Probing this incision still more deeply, Thrupp painlessly extracted several more admissions relating to the Squadron-Leader's own intimacy with Puella. This intimacy, it appeared, was of very long standing, dating from well before Puella's marriage and recommencing after only quite a few months of unsatisfying life with her husband. The airman was emphatic in insisting, however, that there was not, and never had been, anything seriously romantic or exclusive about their association, and that in spite of all that had passed between them they were not so much lovers as good

friends. Nadin-Miles had felt misgivings, but certainly not jealousy, when Puella had become engaged to Captain Stretton. So far as he was concerned, there were plenty of other complaisant young women in the world, and his sole concern about her decision to marry Stretton was a feeling that a pleasant and obliging friend should be throwing herself away on a man who would neither appreciate her peculiar attainments nor himself prove capable of retaining her interest. Nadin-Miles had even gone so far as to deliver himself of a mild remonstrance to this effect, in rejecting which Puella had laughingly rallied him on having ignored his own plentiful opportunities to 'make an honest woman of her.' To which riposte there was no effective reply, short of offering himself in Stretton's place even at this eleventh hour —a course too drastically chivalrous to be contemplated.

"Puella," the airman summed up awkwardly, "was a damned amusing girl and a damned good pal, but not the sort of girl one *marries*, damn it!"

Time was getting on; and Thrupp, rightly deciding that he was likely to learn considerably more from this informal conversation outside the Village Hall than from the carefully pre-arranged inquest within, intercepted the Coroner on his arrival and begged for some slight delay in opening the proceedings. Fortunately our local Coroner is an intelligent and fairly malleable being who had made friends with the detective a year earlier during the Bryony Hurst case, and he consented to postpone his appearance in court for a quarter of an hour.

Given this respite, Thrupp thankfully continued to take advantage of the airman's present mood of self-protective candour. Half the secret of Thrupp's success as an interrogator lies, I am convinced, in the feelings of relief which his amiable, understanding manner induces in a person who, scared in advance by the supposed imminence of a grilling by a hostile, suspicious and bloody-minded sleuth whose sole aim in life is to obtain a conviction, finds himself instead enjoying an almost casual chat with a pleasant-faced, friendly man of the world, who neither bullies nor (apparently) seeks to trap his victim; a man, moreover, who gives the impression of knowing that there are plenty of things in life which, though they may be intrinsically discreditable or embarrassing, are none the less venial enough and probably irrelevant to the main issue. This comforting discovery evokes a reaction equal and opposite to the mood of grim defensiveness in which the interview begins, and Thrupp then reaps the benefit of his purposefully gentle methods.

All in all, the various items which Thrupp was able to extract from Bill Nadin-Miles were perhaps more interesting than actually valuable. Thus, he ascertained that Puella had had no near relatives of any kind since the death

of her father, Professor Graham, eight or nine years earlier. There might be distant cousins, but none with whom Puella had maintained regular contact. As to her own intimate circle of friends, the airman was able to promise a list of a dozen or so, of both sexes, which might be of use in reconsidering the dead girl's correspondence. Of Puella's local friends and acquaintances he mentioned half a dozen, all young women, whom he had met while staying with her at Hagham. Among these was Andrea Gilchrist, whom he reported as having been 'very matey' with the deceased. After some thought, he admitted that he might have heard of Frank Drinkwater—in fact, he was almost sure he had heard the name mentioned, but he had never met the man himself. He pointed out, however, that if it were really important to get full particulars of Puella's local associates, he was less well qualified to dilate on these than his sister Rosemary would be. He himself had only made two or three rather brief visits to Hagham, whereas his sister, who still retained much of her schooldays' status as Puella's bosom friend, had stayed there more frequently and for longer periods. Thrupp made a note of Miss Nadin-Miles's address and promised himself an early interview with that young lady.

It need hardly be said that both Uncle Piers and Thrupp had pricked up their ears when the Squadron-Leader had let slip that he belonged to a night-fighter squadron—and to a unit, moreover, whose headquarters were at no great distance over the Hampshire border. Characteristically—though much to Uncle Piers's anxiety—Thrupp at first showed no sign of recognising any possible significance in this. It was not till he had exhausted the airman's value as a purveyor of personal and social details that, apparently almost as an afterthought, he turned to professional matters. A couple of casual questions confirmed that not only did Nadin-Miles belong to a night-fighter unit, but that he was actually its commanding officer and therefore in charge of its administration and training.

Without laying too much stress on the point, Thrupp mentioned the theory that Puella might have fallen from an aeroplane, and the testimony that had been given about the actual presence of an aircraft over the Downs on the night in question; and tacitly invited the airman's comments on the proposition: Nadin-Miles raised his eyebrows and pursed his lips, but showed no sign of being impressed. He then produced his pocket-diary and slowly shook his head. No aircraft from his station had gone up on the night of the 7th/8th May; and in any case the Hagham-Rootham-Merrington district would be outside the normal training area for squadrons stationed at Wrington Priors. That particular section of the Downs came under the R.A.F. station at Tangmere, and poaching or trespassing was not encouraged.

Nadin-Miles also emphasised that station discipline was tolerably strict at Wrington Priors and that the possibility of a girl, whether clothed or nude, being smuggled aboard an aeroplane, even at night, was so remote as to be almost infinitesimal. No, there had been no ladies' guest-night, or indeed any kind of guest-night, on the evening of the 7th. Finally, all the aircraft then stationed at Wrington Priors were single-seater fighters without a square-centimetre of room for a passenger, unless she clung to a wing or sat astride the fuselage—both impossibly risky proceedings. . . . While he grudgingly conceded that inquiries should perhaps be made at Tangmere (where there was at least one squadron of two-seaters) and at other surrounding stations, he clearly deprecated even the remotest possibility that Puella could have fallen or been thrown from a low-flying R.A.F. plane. A civil machine, perhaps; but Service discipline was strict—a claim which caused the listening Field-Marshal to snort with scorn and contumely.

After this fruitful conversation, the inquest itself was sterile and uninformative. Public attendance was scanty. The three Smudge girls—Lubricia, Lascivia and Salacity—were there, as were one or two other young women presumably in search of a kick. Thrupp was pleased to note, however, that he would be able to dispense with a tiresome trudge over the Downs to Bollington, for in attendance upon Andrea Gilchrist was a good-looking but rather saturnine man of indeterminate age, who from my description, could be none other than Frank Drinkwater. He also noticed that the latter appeared to be taking a considerably keener interest in his beautiful companion than in the official proceedings. On the other hand, the Smudge girls and the other young females in the public seats failed to conceal their interest in Drinkwater and were continually exchanging nods, winks and smiles with him when they could catch his eye.

The proceedings were brief. An elderly cowman and a young farm labourer told of their early morning discovery of Puella's body on the roof of that Rootham barn. Andrea Gilchrist and Squadron-Leader Nadin-Miles gave testimony of identification, as did the dead woman's daily maid. Dr. Michael Houghligan supplied the medical evidence and politely declined the Coroner's half-hearted invitation to speculate on the circumstances in which the deceased met her end. Superintendent Bede of the West Sussex Constabulary described briefly the measures taken on the discovery of the body being reported, and intimated that the case was now in the hands of Chief-Inspector Thrupp of the C.I.D. Thrupp himself was even briefer, saying simply that investigations were proceeding and requesting an adjournment to permit of their completion. Our well-drilled Coroner suggested fourteen days, to which Thrupp gratefully assented.

The Coroner made it so, and the Court rose.

8

As Thrupp told us later, it was the most natural thing in the world that he should have a few words with Andrea as she left the inquest, and thus procure for himself, without appearing to seek it, an introduction to her companion. The latter, as the detective had foreseen, was presented to him as Mr. Drinkwater. Beyond a conventional 'How do you do?' as they shook hands Drinkwater seemed to show a completely negative reaction to the encounter.

Externally, too, Thrupp himself displayed no emotion and only a casually polite interest in Drinkwater's identity, addressing himself almost exclusively to Andrea and virtually ignoring the other's presence for the greater part of the interview. Interiorly, however, he found himself the prey of an assortment of sensations which, he said afterwards, were both novel and disturbing in the highest degree. Even in retrospect he was unable to analyse them beyond saying that they seemed to have both physical and psychical manifestations of an unusual kind. Mentally, he was conscious of an antipathy amounting almost to revulsion; or perhaps that sort of electrostatic repellency which under certain conditions make the twin leaves of a gold-leaf electroscope stand away from each other as if in disgust. . . .

But more curious still were the physical symptoms brought out by his proximity to Drinkwater. It was a very hot day for May—close, sticky and breathless, with more than a hint of thunder in the offing—and during both his conversation with Nadin-Miles and the brief sitting of the Coroner's court, Thrupp had felt unpleasantly warm in his dark London clothes and had even had to wipe the perspiration from his brow at frequent intervals. But now, though standing in the full glare of the sun, with considerable heat reflected from the asphalt forecourt of the Village Hall, a mystifying kind of chill took possession of him and made him want to shiver.

It was not, he insisted, simply that sort of psychic chill which we are all prone to experience in moments of sudden shock or fear: it was a definite physical chill such as comes off large blocks of ice in a fishmonger's shop on a summer's day—only more so. It was rather like finding himself suddenly in the presence of an iceberg when he least expected it—and it dated, Thrupp said, from that exact moment of time when he shook hands with Drinkwater. It was not that Drinkwater's hand had itself been cold or clammy; on the contrary, it had felt normal and of ordinary blood heat. Yet the effect of that handshake seemed like the injection of a stream of liquid ice which spread like a virulent infection through his whole system,

neutralising all his animal warmth and freezing his works. Only the higher, or reasoning, section of his brain remained relatively immune and enabled him somehow or other to control his physical economy and continue his not very important conversation with Andrea as if nothing were the matter.

But the longer he talked, the more did this strange chill threaten to stun his senses and paralyse his functions. And the threat begat fear: the quasi-mystic fear of the healthy animal for the supernatural; the fear of civilised *homo sapiens* that he is about to succumb to Panic.

Now, one does not become a Chief Detective-Inspector in the Criminal Investigation Department if one is of a preternaturally nervous or hysterical disposition; and in the ordinary course of events there is nothing the matter with Robert Thrupp's nervous system. As I have tried to make clear, he happens to be an unusually level-headed and tranquil-minded man, ever notable for his self-control and never more so than in the presence of a sudden emergency. Unless this is understood, it is not possible to appreciate the enormous significance of this sudden sense of imminent panic which overtook him at this moment.

"I can't describe it," he told me later, in the privacy of my study. "I've never felt that way before, and I hope to God I never shall again. It was—Hellish; and if I were writing that down I should use a capital H. I was always brought up to believe that Hell was a hot place, but now I know that it's paralytically cold. I feel warm again now. I began to get my warmth back half a minute after I'd made a supreme effort of will and torn myself away from him, and two minutes later I was wiping the sweat from my forehead again. But at the time . . ."

I tugged at my beard, and said rather unkindly: "Well, Uncle Odo warned you——"

Thrupp started as if he had been shot. Then, glowering at me fiercely: "Roger, he didn't mean it! He was pulling my leg——"

"Pulling my beard!" I retorted sharply. "My dear man, he was never more serious in his life, even if he did say it rather facetiously! It's a well-known phenomenon, mentioned by every serious demonologist." I strode across to my glass-fronted bookcase, unlocked it, and took down the *Demonolatry* of Nicolas Remy. I found the reference that had come into my mind and thrust it under his nose. "Read that—the passage beginning 'The physical coldness of the Devil——' Look—'*froid comme glace*' is how one self-confessed French witch describes him; and here are a couple of Scotch witches who call him '*as cold as spring-well-water*' and '*verie cold, as yce*' respectively. I assure you, man, the whole literature of witchcraft and

demonology is stiff with instances like that. . . . Uncle Odo, knowing you were a sceptic, didn't rub it in very hard, but he was perfectly serious in what he said."

Thoughtfully, Thrupp closed the book and placed it on the desk.

"Well, well, well," he murmured softly, his eyes fixed on space. "And where do we go from here? . . . Cor stone the crows, *won't* the Assistant Commissioner be pleased?"

PART V

IT MAKES YOU THINK!

> For our wrestling is not against flesh and blood: but against principalities and powers, against the rulers of the world of this darkness, against the spirits of wickedness in the high places. *Ephesians vi. 12 (Rheims).*

1

THRUPP'S strange metapsychic experience wrought not only a kind of forcible conversion in himself, but also, and perhaps consequentially, a notable change of attitude in the rest of us: a sort of stiffening of the spirit, if you know what I mean. And if you don't, I can only sympathise sincerely with your mystification and confess with my customary humility that there are just a few situations in life which not even the Poynings' vocabulary is adequate to describe. However, rather than admit defeat, let me elaborate somewhat.

With the coming of Adam Wycherley and his initiation into the minutiæ of the mysteries that were troubling our minds there were now, on our side of the fence, seven souls—Adam himself; Carmel, his beloved; Thrupp; Uncle Odo; Uncle Piers; Barbary; and myself. (I exclude Thrupp's assistants, for they were only conversant with the purely material side of the problem.) Now we seven were, by and large, a reasonably normal-minded collection of people. As individual creations of the Almighty, no doubt we all had our own little idiosyncratic deviations from that shadowy norm which, in theory, represents the average mentality of that hypothetical being, the average human; yet it is fair to claim that not one of us ranged so appreciably from this norm as to rank as 'ab-normal.' Uncle Piers, with his blimpish manner of speech and his reactionary views on Celts, was perhaps the most spectacular heteroclite, yet you did not need to know him very intimately to realise that his mannerisms were purely external phenomena and that beneath this rather bombastic façade he was as sane and sound as any man in the country—and considerably cleverer than most.

Amongst other things, we were none of us a whit more credulous or gullible than the average person, and we all had our fair share of what you might call ontological resilience—that is, the instinctive deployment of a healthy scepticism when confronted with some happening which smells so strongly of the fantastic as to suggest that its causative force is 'occult' and therefore repugnant to the ordinary laws of nature. Such a scepticism—

outwardly tempered by the canons of civilised courtesy, no doubt, but inwardly strong-burning and vigorous—had indeed conditioned the reactions of all of us to the grotesque events of the past three days, from that morning when Carmel, herself a natural sceptic, yet racked by the evidence of her own senses, had come to me with her 'incredible' story. Carmel's own resilience had for weeks and months succeeded in subordinating the testimony of her eyes to the sceptical dictates of her reason, persuading her that she had not seen what she had seen, and compelling her, if only through dread of derision, to sustain her barely tolerable burden in solitary silence. Not from courtesy alone, but because I liked Carmel and could see she was terribly in earnest, I had spared her the derision and done my best to find plausible and charitable explanations of her strange experiences. Yet within me, all the time, my innate scepticism was at work, restraining me from genuine acceptance of her tale.

And so it had been with all of us, in varying degrees. Perhaps Uncle Odo, with his professional erudition in matters supernatural and his personal contact with mystic phenomena, may have had his scepticism under more reasoned control than the rest of us, yet it had been clear that even he—the theologian, the philosopher, the prelate of a mystic Faith—had shown no haste or willingness to concede or suggest that we might be up against a veritable case of witchcraft. They wallow in abysmal error who imagine that my Church is over-ready to accept as true every or any claim that an apparently contranatural happening must of necessity be supernatural, still less that any supernatural event is a miracle. If the common man were one-thousandth part as cautious in accepting the claims of popular scientists as the Holy See is suspicious of alleged miracles, the result would be a most notable victory for truth and reason.

But the professional sceptic among us was, of course, Robert Thrupp. All detectives are *ex hypothesi* sceptics; for distrust of appearances and obdurate refusal to take statements and situations at their face value are among the prime qualities demanded of the efficient sleuth. True to his trade, Thrupp had been, of us all, the least willing to accord anything approaching credence to the more occult features of this case, the most anxious and determined to discover the *natural* significance of events which, though they might smack of the supernatural, must, in his conviction, be capable of rational interpretation. For all his patient tolerance, his readiness to listen, his admissions of puzzlement, his honest attempts at objectivity, there was in Robert Thrupp a hard central core of scepticism which did not fail to impress us all. However much any one of us might privately be tempted to succumb to the lure of an occult solution, he was

intuitively held back by the knowledge that Thrupp's own scepticism remained unconquered and unbowed.

And then—as casually and inevitably as winter succeeds autumn—Thrupp, the professional sceptic and defender of our faith in the natural order, had shaken hands with Drinkwater. . . .

2

Of the immediate effects of that handshake I have already written; and I have told how that strange bodily chill had worn off once he had broken away from the physical proximity of Drinkwater. But the psychic effect persisted; indeed it burgeoned and intensified and grew ever more compelling, till it broke down his resilience and laid its defences in ruins. It was, to be precise, at the end of an unusually silent luncheon on that day of the inquest that he stood up in our midst—(that is to say in the midst of Barbary, Uncle Piers and myself, for Uncle Odo was still in Arundel and the young lovers had returned to the Vicarage)—and said, soberly but with a little wry grin of resignation, "That man's a devil, or I'm a Dutchman!"

And by some inner impulse we recognised that he was not simply using a common figure of speech. We knew that he had spoken literally; that his wicket was down, or his towel thrown into the ring. And since he had, so to say, carried all our money, we could do no more than stand around, shocked and mute, while the clock ticked away the sultry seconds and a thrush practised her *glissando* through the open window.

Barbary was the first to recover herself. Shaking her dark curls like a diver coming to the surface she said, so softly that it was almost a whisper, "So what?"

And for the *n*th time in three difficult days that stupid catch-phrase proved itself the perfect comment, perfectly timed. The tension relaxed like a spring uncoiling, and all four of us grinned rather sheepishly.

"A pregnant question," said Thrupp, an unexpected twinkle in his eye.

"You're telling me," said I, wringing my beard.

Uncle Piers at first said nothing. He placed a small black cheroot between his teeth and lit it with slow deliberation. Then, exhaling smoke through lips and nostrils with the ferocity of a dragon, he suddenly shot out an arm and seized me by the button-hole.

"Send fer Odo," he barked incisively. "Get through to him *pronto*, and tell him he's wanted. This is Odo's pidgin, this is."

"He'll be back this evening, anyhow——"

"Will he hell!" snorted the Field-Marshal. "He'll try ter come, but that bloody Welshman'll try ter stop him, yer can bet yer life. *I* know these Celtser Keltser whatever they call 'emselves. Don't have any buck with that Welshman. Get onter Odo himself and tell him ter make it snappy. Say I've had a stroke, or somethin'." And, presumably to whiten the proposed lie, Sir Piers drew a hand across his cheek in a kind of stroking motion.

I duly got through, and with surprisingly little trouble found myself talking to my uncle in person. Without having recourse to the mendacious expedient suggested by his brother I contrived to let his Grace know that he was wanted, and received an assurance that he would be back with us before supper. From my uncle's blandly confident tone I deduced that he had already routed his Vicar-General on this point, and was feeling pretty good in consequence.

"I'd come straight away, Roger," he added, "except that I've got old Canon Flurry coming to see me presently, and I'm hoping to get some more details from him about that case in France. But I'll be with you this evening and then we can talk things over. A policy of—ah—masterly inactivity would seem to be indicated meanwhile. . . ."

We hung up, and I reported progress. We all agreed that Uncle Odo's interim policy was sound and that nothing should be done till he returned. Then Thrupp drew me aside.

"If you can fix it without arousing suspicion, Roger, do you think we could have Carmel along to supper to-night? I want a full-scale pow-wow afterwards, and I can't do without her. Young Wycherley could come as well, if necessary. But I don't want Andrea to know."

"Leave it to me," said I; and a moment later I was calling the Vicarage number. A female voice, probably the housekeeper's, answered me. In my best military drawl I announced that I was the Adjutant of the 1st Royal Sussex and asked to speak to Lieutenant Wycherley. Adam came to the phone and I at once revealed my true identity and the reason for my subterfuge, and asked if he could bring Carmel to supper—secretly. After a moment's thought he promised to fix it, and then went on to natter something about 'C' Company sports fund—from which I deduced that he was no longer alone. He told me later that in fact both Andrea and Carmel had drifted up to see what was doing, and after ringing off he quick-wittedly explained to them that the Adjutant and his fiancée were dining that night at the Spread Eagle at Midhurst and had suggested that he and Carmel might care to join the party. Andrea seemed to swallow the yarn without suspicion. So that was that.

I found Thrupp frowning prodigiously over a note that had just been delivered by a uniformed constable. Seeing me approach he uttered a little bark of a laugh and held it out for me to read. It was signed by Dr. Houghligan and was very brief.

With a notable economy of words it reported that the doctor had duly examined the two besoms marked ‘A’ and ‘B’ brought to him for inspection. Both bore traces of some herbal unguent not yet analysed in detail but apparently identical with that found on Puella Stretton’s body. To this laconic statement the worthy doctor, who was nobody’s fool, had added in red ink the two little words, “So what?”

“*Two* besoms?” I queried, looking up at Thrupp.

“The second is from the Vicarage,” was the reply. “I sneaked out and pinched it after you’d gone to bed last night.”

“The devil you did!” said I thoughtfully.

3

The Most Reverend Odo returned soon after six; not alone, as he had set out, but driven by an emphysematous young priest with a copiously pimpled face and companioned at the back of the car by a very aged little cleric whom he introduced as Canon Flurry. The Canon (my uncle explained) had been so intrigued by the archiepiscopal story of witch-flights and other occult happenings so close at hand that he had begged permission to accompany his Grace back to the scene, in the hope of having an opportunity of questioning Carmel himself. The Canon, a wizened little octogenarian with startlingly undimmed blue eyes gleaming keenly from the midst of a mesh of wrinkles, was courteously apologetic for his intrusion but assured Barbary that he and the emphysematous young man (who proved to be one of the Canon’s curates) had already secured rooms at the Green Maiden and would trespass to the minimum extent on her hospitality. He accepted on his own behalf an invitation to sup with us, but autocratically dismissed his curate to feed at the inn.

“As a matter of fact,” Canon Flurry went on presently, as he sipped sherry in the sitting-room, “I believe I have already to some extent justified my gate-crash”—the neologism tripped quite unconcernedly off his ancient tongue—“by being able to suggest a reason why those trumpets were stolen from the parish church.” He turned to Thrupp, as representing the official police. “I don’t mean that I know how they were stolen,” he explained, “but rather the motive behind the theft. Would it be indiscreet to inquire whether you yourself have formed any opinion as to the motive, Mr. Thrupp?”

Thrupp shook his head. “It isn’t really my case, you see. At least, I wouldn’t be surprised if there was some sort of cross-connection with my case, but the County police have been handling the theft and my own share in it is limited to the fact that one of my men accidentally found the missing trumpets. Frankly, the only motive I’ve considered is the very obvious and substantial one that the trumpets are made of gold and worth a very large sum of money.”

Canon Flurry nodded like a snowdrop in the north wind. “Why should you look further, indeed? I’m sure I don’t blame you. I thought that myself when his Grace first mentioned the matter, only it did strike me as rather queer that the thief or thieves, instead of rushing these extremely valuable objects to some safe destination where they could be melted down and thus be made untraceable, simply bundled them out of sight in a not very clever hiding-place on the Downs. It seemed—well, incongruous.”

“Exactly what I said to the Superintendent,” said Thrupp. “We agreed that it made it look more like an amateur job than a professional one.”

“An alternative motive occurred to me when his Grace happened to mention that the angels in question were pre-Reformation,” the Canon continued. “Rather a whimsical idea, I confess; but it started a train of thought, and to follow it up I took the liberty of looking in at the church on the way here. As a result, I almost believe my quaint idea is right.”

He drank off the rest of his sherry and allowed me to refill his glass.

“Has anyone here, with the obvious exception of his Grace, ever heard of Miriel and Tamael?” he inquired.

No one had; not even his Grace, it seemed, for Uncle Odo made a little grimace like a schoolboy who has neglected his prep.

“The good Canon is a distinguished angelologist,” he put in. “What he doesn’t know about angels isn’t worth knowing—and devils, too, for that matter.”

“No one knows very much about angels,” Canon Flurry corrected him mildly. “More’s the pity, for it’s an engrossing subject. There are plenty of references to angels in the Bible, but only a few are actually named—Michael and Gabriel in the Bible proper, and four or five more—Raphael, Uriel, Chamuel, Jophiel, Zadkiel—in apocryphal books. The last four come into the apocryphal *Book of Henoch*, more commonly known as Enoch. Now Enoch, if you remember, ‘walked with God’ and is therefore held to have been permitted to know the secrets of Heaven and the Celestial Host. However, the various books bearing his name are of extremely doubtful authenticity. No one suggests that he wrote or dictated them himself, and the

best that can be said is that they were written long after his day by someone anxious to preserve the various traditions that had come down with regard to his revelations. If that is so, it doesn't necessarily follow that these books attributed to Enoch are actually spurious. Tradition is often quite true, and there's always a possibility that tradition may here have been accurately committed to writing. Anyhow, it is in one of these old books, called *The Apocalypse of Henoch*, that one comes across the only mention of Miriel and Tamael—and you'll be interested to know that they are described therein as the Captains of the Trumpets of the Heavenly Host."

We were all duly interested.

"According to this tradition, it was the trumpets of Miriel and Tamael—*golden* trumpets, needless to say!—that gave the signal for battle between the hosts of Michael and those of Lucifer; and it was to the sound of their trumpets again that Lucifer and his followers eventually 'fell like lightning from Heaven.' Pure tradition, of course, and utterly incapable of authentication—yet in the medieval Church the legend of Miriel and Tamael being Captains of the Trumpets enjoyed as much respect as that of Gabriel being the Angel of the Annunciation. It was by no means uncommon in pre-Reformation churches to have statues of a pair of angels, one on each side of the high altar: angels with golden trumpets, whose symbolic function it was not only to salute the Consecration at Mass, but also—and mark this well!—to remind the Devil, should he be lurking round, of what happened to him a long time ago, when the trumpets sounded for the victory of Michael. In those days, when the Devil seems to have been more perceptibly active than he is to-day, these statues of Miriel and Tamael were considered of appreciable value in keeping him under restraint in any parish fortunate enough to possess them. To-day, of course, that sort of thing is apt to be dismissed as rank superstition. But I must confess that the more one delves into these rather occult matters, the more one suspects that the iconoclasts over-simplify the issue."

"And are the angels here the two you were talking about?" Barbary asked as the old priest paused.

"Oh, definitely. Extremely characteristic, my dear lady. Over a period of centuries these things become conventionalised, you know. There are plenty of contemporary woodcuts of Miriel and Tamael in books on the medieval Church, and I recognised the local pair immediately. To make assurance doubly sure, however, I took advantage of the fact that the church was empty to go up into the sanctuary to have a closer look. And I found what I was looking for—the name Tamael engraved quite clearly in Hebrew characters on the hem of the robe of the angel on the Epistle side, and less

perfect remains of the name Miriel on the other. The middle letters are damaged, but the initial M and the final EL are quite distinct. . . . Excellent sherry this, Mr. Poynings," the Canon added appreciatively, draining his glass again.

I refilled it, satisfied that the old boy was giving good value in exchange.

"Are yer tryin' ter suggest," Sir Piers intervened in somewhat doubting tones, "that if this feller Drinkwater's the Devil, or *a* devil, he'd take a dim view of havin' these trumpeters back on the job so close to his own stampin' ground?" Put that way, the proposition sounded grotesquely tenuous.

Canon Flurry hunched his frail shoulders.

"I don't want to appear didactic," he said, "especially since I haven't really had time to study the local position at all thoroughly. All I do say is this: you can't accept the concept of angels and reject that of devils, or accept the concept of devils and reject that of angels. The two are complementary and interdependent. And *if* there really is good reason to suspect that this man Drinkwater is—well, a flesh and blood materialisation of some evil spirit, I can well understand that he would be somewhat—ah—allergic to the refurnishing of his ancient adversaries, Miriel and Tamael, with the means of pursuing their traditional avocation. Without their trumpets they were harmless enough; indeed, he may even have derived malicious pleasure from their ostensible impotence. Nor is it valid to suppose that this argument falls down because he isn't actually up against the Captains of the Trumpets in person, but only their symbolic representations in carved wood. We mustn't confuse statues with idols, but at the same time we must remember that a solemnly blessed statue can, and under certain conditions does, rank as a 'sacramental' and that one of the most remarkable effects of sacramentals is the virtue to drive away evil spirits. You all know the old legends of the Devil's dislike of holy water—which is also a 'sacramental'—and you can take it from me that these medieval statues of Miriel and Tamael were blessed with a formula directed specifically against Satan and all his works and creatures. Of course, there's a good deal of scepticism about this sort of thing nowadays, even in the Church, but——" Another shrug wound up his sentence.

"It would be very interesting to know if the angels were re-blessed at the time of their reinstatement in the church after being hidden away in the tithe-barn for two or three centuries," mused the Most Reverend Odo.

I saw his drift. "At any rate it's interesting to note that the trumpets were stolen a few hours before they were due to be blessed—or chucked out!—by the Bishop of Bramber," I said.

Thrupp cocked an eyebrow. “You admit, then, that an Anglican bishop *can* bless things effectively?” he said tauntingly.

“I wouldn’t know about that proposition in general,” I retorted, “but in this particular case it hardly applies. Even the Holy See admits that Bloody Ben has valid Orders.”

Poor Thrupp buried his head in his hands and groaned. “Fantastic!” I heard him moan as he swayed slightly from side to side. “My sacred aunt! What wouldn’t I give to have the A.C. here to-night. . . .”

But at this point Adam and Carmel arrived in the former’s car, and shortly afterwards we all went in to supper.

4

We supped with every window and door wide open, for the morning’s promise of thunder had already gone far along the road to fulfilment. The atmosphere was sultry, the stagnant air full of menace. There were as yet no clouds to be seen, but the sun went down in an ominous glory of bronze and purple. Sir Piers, with one of his rare shafts of cynical wit, observed that had we thought of it in time, we might have asked Drinkwater to supper so that his cold emanations might serve to maintain a more equable temperature. With the fall of Thrupp, the Field-Marshal had now replaced him as big white chief of the school of sceptics.

There was a London call for Thrupp in the middle of the meal.

“Another nail in the coffin of reason,” he told us on his return. “Air Ministry regrets it can find no evidence of any aircraft, civil or military, having been over this section of the Downs between the hours stated on the night in question. For a Government department they seem pretty positive about it, too. It’s queer, though. I’ve now got three witnesses that there *was* a plane about, in addition to Miss Gilchrist here.”

“There certainly was one,” Carmel reaffirmed. “Whatever else may have happened that night, there’s no doubt about that.”

“Muster beener foreigner,” growled Sir Piers. “Either a Boche doin’ a spotter pre-war snoopin’, or a Frog smugglin’ rubber goods. . . . Yer can’t trust these foreigners, I tell yer,” our tame Xenophobe ended fiercely.

It would be both wearisome to the sage reader and disastrous to my meagre paper quota if I were to attempt a verbatim account of the long discussion which followed our meal. Poor Carmel had to tell her story all over again, for of all those present only Adam and I had actually heard it at first hand. It was odd to note how seriously it was taken now, by comparison with my own first incredulous hearing of it three days earlier. But the

contrast was symptomatic of the whole spirit of the conference. We were working and thinking now from a new hypothesis: a quite preposterous hypothesis by all modern standards, yet one to which we had been reduced by the irresistible logic of events. The man Doyle in one of his more inspired moments caused Sherlock Holmes to utter an irrefutable truth—a truism if you like, but none the less true for all that—when he posited the principle that *When you have eliminated the IMPOSSIBLE, whatever remains—no matter how IMPROBABLE—must be TRUE*; or words to that effect. And it was this inescapable conclusion which now conditioned our attitude.

Carmel had to stand up to a great deal of cross-questioning, but she emerged quite unshaken. Canon Flurry was her most persistent inquisitor, and it was easy to guess that he was mentally comparing her account with the details he had learnt of the mysterious witch-flights in France a few years earlier. And at last, satisfied that there was no more to be got from her, he shook his white head slowly and commented:

"Most extraordinary. The parallel is exact. It's the Boileau case over again, so far as one can judge from the necessarily incomplete evidence that Miss Gilchrist can give us. Indeed, one is tempted to speculate on the possible connection between Boileau and Drinkwater. . . ." And the Canon rambled on in the same strain, thinking aloud rather than making any constructive contribution to the discussion.

And it was just at this point that my subconscious chose to do its stuff. The right plug clicked home unexpectedly into the right jack, and the connection that had eluded me since the previous night was made. All at once, without any conscious mental effort, I knew what it was that should have rung a bell in my mind when Uncle Odo had first mentioned the Boileau case. So swift and strong was the flow of cerebral current that I shot to my feet with a shout, to the consternation of all present.

"Body of Bacchus!" I cried, as soon as I could articulate. "I believe I've got it! . . . Uncle Odo, you heard of a similar case in Italy while you were in Rome. What was the name of the 'devil' in that case?"

My uncle blinked at me in startled perplexity. "My dear Roger, I haven't the faintest idea," he returned. "I did know once, but after this lapse of time ____"

"Was it *Bevilacqua*?"

The name was scarcely out of my mouth before the Most Reverend Odo had smitten his right thigh a resounding smack. Clearly, recognition had been instantaneous.

"That was it!" he exclaimed wonderingly. "I remember now, without a shadow of doubt. This is very surprising of you, Roger. Yes, yes. Francesco Bevilacqua——"

"Francesco?" I cut in excitedly. "Yes, of course, it would be. That settles it. Blimey, this *is* fantastic——"

"Might we share your enthusiasm, do you think?" Thrupp pleaded mildly. "I don't see——"

"No, but you will," said I, standing before the company and preparing to tick off the points on my fingers, "Listen, chaps. I'm just about sick of coincidences. There's been a continuous spate of them for the past three days. But this is the last straw. It's breaking my back. I swear here and now, by the sacred beard of the man Shaw, that if *this* turns out to be no more than a coincidence, too, I shall make a bee-line for Colney Hatch——"

"Darling, do stop talking in riddles," Barbary implored.

"Sorry!" I restrained my ardour with an effort. "Well, look here. Doesn't anything strike you about all these names: Drinkwater—Boileau—Bevilacqua? Can't you see that *they're all the same name*?"

"What!" cried Thrupp.

"God bless my soul!" exclaimed Uncle Odo wonderingly. "Why, bless me, Roger—so they are!"

"I don't get it," said Thrupp. "Come clean, man, can't you?"

"It's obvious," said I. "Look—Christian names first. Frank (or Francis?) —François—Francesco. No need to say more on that, surely! And now the surnames. Drinkwater is an odd sort of name when you come to think of it: odd in itself, I mean, but a dashed sight odder when you realise that 'Boileau' and 'Bevilacqua' are the exact French and Italian counterparts of it —literal translations, as you might say. Boileau, surely, is simply a combination or elision between the root of *boire*, meaning 'to drink,' and *l'eau*, which is 'water.' And again in Italian, *bevere* means 'to drink,' and *acqua* is, of course, 'water.' . . . Now then: do I go to Colney Hatch, or do I?"

"Well, I'll be damned!" cried Adam and Uncle Piers together.

"God bless my soul!" breathed Uncle Odo again.

"Cor suffering archbishops!" Thrupp ejaculated thoughtlessly. "Er—I beg your Grace's pardon. . . ."

At length the flap subsided and we passed on to other business. It was now Adam's turn to relate his midnight adventure which had culminated in his unexpected glimpse of Andrea's peculiar conduct and his abstraction of the script from which she had been rehearsing the Ritual. He told his story well, demonstrating her gesture with such domestic ornaments as were available. I could see that Uncle Odo and Canon Flurry were both intensely interested, though apparently somewhat mystified as well. Finally the hurriedly made typescript copy of the Ritual was produced and passed over for their expert examination. Spectacles were hitched into position and two pairs of inquisitorial eyes peered keenly at the typescript.

They had not read beyond the foot of the first page when their venerable hackles began to rise. Scanning the farrago of Greek and Latin with as much ease as if it were a fourth leader in *The Times* they ploughed swiftly on through the script, the Archbishop blowing out his cheeks like a trombonist, while the Canon sucked in his breath like a Scotch guidwife who has been overcharged for a plate of porridge. Now and then one or the other would shoot forth a finger to indicate some specially significant passage, to the accompaniment of grunts and hisses and other sounds symptomatic of recognition, surmise or horror. They had not read more than half a dozen pages when Uncle Odo suddenly and cryptically observed: "The Gnosis of Valentinus, or I'm a Dutchman!"

"Valentinus? Oh, surely—— *I* was thinking of Basilides," objected the Canon, no less obscurely.

"Basilides, my foot!" argued the Archbishop. "It's Valentinus at the earliest. Possibly later. Look at the theogony, man. Basilides never got beyond his eight Eons—the Ogdoad. Here we have also a Decad and a Dodecad, adding up to the sacred number of thirty Eons. And this concept of *Pleroma*—look, 'propagation under the impulse of concupiscence.' It's later than Valentinus, even. Even Valentinus never got as far as this filth about Archontes seduced by the Virgin of Light. That's sheer Manichæism—or worse."

"And yet," the Canon remonstrated, "all this about the enthroned goddess-consort; the doctrine of *Thelēma* as represented by this 'Do as thou wilt' and its libertine concept that all carnal licence is allowed, because unworthy of consideration: surely that's a throwback to Simon Magus or beyond? If it comes to that, the whole lay-out of the temple, the whole phraseology of the liturgy so far, is redolent of Magic rather than even the most esoteric forms of Gnosis."

"It's sheer Magic," the Most Reverend Odo conceded, "but it's at least a century or two later than Simon. This 'mass' is offered to Archontes, the

Supreme God of Evil, coequal with the Supreme Creator—and Simon Magus had never heard of Archontes——"

"If I might butt in on this very learned discussion," I intervened, "I seem to remember that later on, in the Office of the Collects, there's a terrific list of names given, rather on the lines of the Commemoration of the Saints in our own Mass. I noticed Simon Magus was mentioned, and also Valentinus and Basilides, and all sorts of more modern people as well. . . ."

I crossed over and found the place for them, and presently Uncle Odo read out a quick translation, as follows:

> "Secret and ineffable Lord, that art the might of man, that art the essence of every true god that is upon the surface of the Earth, continuing Knowledge from generation to generation; Thou adored by us upon heaths and in woods, on mountains and in caves, in the secret chambers of our houses as in these other temples of our bodies: we worthily commemorate those Worthy Ones who did of old adore Thee and manifest Thy glory unto men:
>
> "Lao-Tze and Siddartha and Krishna and Tahuti, Mosheh, Dionysus and To Mega Therion;
>
> "With these also: Hermes, Pan, Priapus, Osiris, Khem and Amoun;
>
> "With Virgilius, Catullus, Martialis, Rabelais, Swinburne and many a holy bard;
>
> "Apollonius Tyanæus, Simon Magus, Manes, Basilides, Valentinus, Bardesanes, and Hippolytus, that transmitted the Light of the Gnosis to us, their heirs and successors;
>
> "With Merlin, Arthur, Kamuret, Parsival and many another, prophet, priest and king, that bore the Lance and Cup, the Sword and Disk;
>
> "And these also: Carolus Magnus and his Paladins, with William of Schyren, Frederick of Hohenstaufen, Roger Bacon, Jacobus Burgundus Molensis the Martyr, Christian Rosenkreutz, Ulrich von Hutten, Paracelsus, Michael Maier, Roderic Borgia Pope Alexander VI, Jacob Boehme, Francis Bacon Lord Verulam, Robertus de Fluctibus, Johannes Dee, Sir Edward Kelly, Thomas Vaughan, Elias Ashmole, Molinos, Adam Weishaupt, Wolfgang von Goethe, Ludovicus Rex Bavariæ, Alphonse Louis Constant, Karl Kellner, Forlong Dux . . .[1]

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[1] For reasons of discretion, though with great reluctance owing to their topical interest, I omit the last half-dozen names. At least two of the persons named are still alive, while a third is only recently dead.—R. P.

> "Sons of the Lion and the Snake! Slaves of our Lady Babylon! Servants of Baphomet, Mystery of Mystery! All these Worthy Ones we commemorate, that were, and are, and are to come.
>
> "May their Essence be here present, potent, puissant, paternal, to perfect this holy Feast!"

A troubled silence succeeded the calling of this monstrous roll-call. It seemed that no one knew what to say. Having myself typed out the list earlier in the day, I was perhaps less taken aback than the others by its surprising contents.

"When I was at school," I said presently, to break the spell, "one had to wrestle with things called Highest Common Factors and Lowest Common Denominators, and what-not. In the same way, I take it there's some sort of common factor or denominator among all the guys on this list, though at first blush I can't see much connection between, say, Priapus and Charlemagne, Dionysus and Ludwig of Bavaria, Goethe and Alexander VI, or Krishna and the poet Swinburne. From what you and Canon Flurry were saying just now, Uncle, I suppose the inference is that these queerly assorted people were all Gnostics?"

"Or magicians?" Barbary suggested. "I haven't heard of half of them, but Merlin and John Dee——"

"There's little essential difference between Gnosticism and Magic," Uncle Odo replied pensively. "Gnosticism was always what we should call a 'magic' cult; while the true underlying cause of the Church's unceasing condemnation of anything savouring of Magic has always been that, on its higher planes at least, Magic has its roots so deeply entwined with the most dangerous forms of Gnosis as to make participation in Magic a more or less certain passport to spiritual disaster. That's why Catholics aren't allowed to attend séances or consult fortune-tellers, even though it's realised that many of these are bogus and that very few purveyors of these pseudo-occult thrills have the knowledge or intellect to be Gnostics in the true sense. The Church can't afford to differentiate on matters of such enormous potential danger. Palmists and mediums *may* possess the uncanny powers they claim—I don't deny that some people can 'see' more than others—or they may simply be mercenary charlatans; but whichever is the case, the less one has to do with them, the better. And, you see, the less bogus and more genuine Magic becomes, the greater its progress towards the unspeakable blasphemies and errors of Gnosticism—until, as I said, in their most advanced stages the two are practically synonymous."

"And of course," Canon Flurry put in, as his superior paused, "Simon Magus himself was a convenient example of how the two things merge into one. He was not only a powerful Magician—a 'Magus' is the very highest rank in the hierarchy of Magic, with the exception of the 'Ipsissimus'—but also the leader of a Gnostic sect. All the same, I must confess I find this list —as Mr. Poynings says—surprising. Whether one takes it to be a kind of

martyrology of Magic or of Gnosticism, the names are very curiously assorted."

"What strikes me as odd," said Thrupp, "is that a lot of the names on that list are of people, or gods, whom I had always regarded as—well, mythological. In addition to real persons like Swinburne, Rabelais, Roger and Francis Bacon and so forth, it also includes names like Pan, Merlin, King Arthur and Parsifal, who are surely simply legendary? Perhaps I'm talking out of my hat, but that list smells phoney."

"And another thing,"—it was Carmel speaking now—"I couldn't help noticing that quite a lot of the names were what one might call pre-Christian. I'm no good at dates, but I'm sure Pan and Osiris and Krishna, and perhaps Lao-Tze, all belong to periods that were definitely B.C. And I always thought Gnosticism was a Christian heresy, if you know what I mean."

"Not a bit of it," the Canon corrected her promptly. "Of course, the later and better-known forms of it were what you call Christian heresies. The heresies of Marcion and Mani and so on *were* Gnostic, and *did* spring from the true Christian stock. But Gnosticism itself is many centuries older than Christianity. It was threatening the religion of the Jews long before the coming of Christ. It spread like a plague throughout the ancient civilisations of Greece and Rome and was deeply involved in the worship of Isis and Osiris in Egypt. Pagan Gnosticism flourished particularly at Alexandria and Samaria: it was the Alexandrian Gnosis which inspired Plutarch's famous treatise on Isis and Osiris."

"I see," murmured Carmel, wilting somewhat before this erudite bombardment.

"As for the points made by Mr. Thrupp and Mr. Poynings," Canon Flurry went on, "I think the answer is that this list of names, though it may be accurate enough in respect of some of the people mentioned, is also inspired largely by speculation, wishful thinking or shakily founded tradition as regards others—and perhaps even by malice when we come down to the last few. It's very hard to say, but I don't think we should take this list too seriously. You know, even in the Christian Kalendar there are some Saints whose very existence is extremely problematical: we have no knowledge of them beyond a vague tradition, and sometimes a very local tradition at that—Saint Cuthman of Steyning is the handiest example in this part of the world. And I dare say the same holds good in this list of Gnostic-Magicians, or whatever they're supposed to be. Some of the inclusions are certainly rather quaint. Swinburne was certainly a pagan, if not an atheist, but I think it takes him altogether too seriously to suggest that he was either an adept Magician or an initiate Gnostic. At the other extreme, though Alexander VI

was a shockingly bad pope and probably a very wicked man into the bargain, I very much doubt whether he dabbled seriously in Gnosticism or Magic. He was too interested in the carnal pleasures to bother overmuch with extraneous spiritual or supernatural matters."

Thrupp sighed deeply.

"I'm badly out of my depth," he said; and we all nodded in sympathetic agreement. "Unfortunately they don't teach theology at the Yard, though if this sort of thing goes on they'll have to start courses in Comparative Religion or else take in a few parsons as technical advisers! I don't know if I'm the only person here who doesn't know what Gnosticism is, but I must confess I just don't know a thing about it. Would it be possible, your Grace, to explain in two words what it boils down to?"

6

Uncle Odo chuckled sardonically, while the Canon threw back his white head and laughed aloud: not, I could see, with amusement, but with that supreme impotence which with seeming inconsequence brings the risible faculty into play when a patently impossible task is imposed.

"I might do it in two volumes," my uncle replied, "but in two words—no. My dear fellow, Gnosticism is one of the most involved subjects in the world, and even to-day you'll hardly find two theologians who see absolutely eye to eye about it. It's incredibly ancient, incredibly obscure, and deliberately veiled under all sorts of occult and cabalistic screens so as to make its true doctrines unintelligible to anyone who hasn't been initiated. However, I'll see what I can do for you—not in two words, certainly, but perhaps in a couple of thousand. The betting is," the Archbishop added with a little sigh, "that Canon Flurry will disagree with everything I say, though I shall try to avoid the more controversial issues and stick to general principles. I suppose if I had any sense I should take advantage of my position to delegate the job to the Canon himself, so that I could then disagree with him as violently as he will probably disagree with me."

Canon Flurry put his hands together in a prayerful gesture. "I implore your Grace——"

"You see!" Uncle Odo indicated his colleague with a smile. "Well, I'll have to do my best. . . . The Greek word gnosis means 'knowledge' and implies the possession of a secret and 'divine' revelation given mystically at the very beginning of time, and transmitted secretly through the centuries through a chain of initiated persons. Participation in the Gnosis was neither granted nor even offered to mankind as a whole. It was reserved for the initiates, who alone, after long periods of study and probation, were

considered worthy to share the secrets which claim to explain the ultimate mysteries of the Universe. I can only give you the sketchiest outline of this Gnosis, but at least I can tell you its outstanding characteristics—and effects. Perhaps the simplest way would be to use an astronomical analogy. You all know what is meant by the 'universe' as opposed to the 'solar system?' The solar system, of which our Earth forms a minor part, is itself only a tiny fragment of the total universe: the Sun is merely one star, and not even a very big star, among thousands of millions of other stars forming vast galaxies and constellations in an infinite firmament. In other words, our solar system is pretty small beer compared with the total universe, and poor little Earth is of very little account at all, relatively speaking: a mere microcosm of that tremendous macrocosm. All clear so far?"

There was a chorus of affirmative grunts and murmurs.

"All right. Now you all know, too, that according to the Christian, and indeed the Jewish concept, too, the creation of this universe, as well as of all forms of life on this Earth, is ascribed to a Supreme Being whom we call God. 'In the beginning God created heaven and earth'—those are the first words of the whole Bible, and, so to say, the foundation-stone on which the entire structure of our religion is built up. Well, in effect, Gnosticism destroys that very foundation-stone. The creation of the *material* world is ascribed, not to the Supreme Being or Sovereign God of all, but to a kind of inferior god, known as the Demiurge, who is entirely subordinate to the Supreme Being. Why? Because, according to the Gnosis—the secret revelation—*matter* is to be despised and hated, and the true Sovereign Deity is to be removed as far as possible from any contact with it. So our God—the God of the Christians and the Jews—is reduced to the status of a kind of tribal deity, or solar myth; and a rather sinister kind of tribal deity, at that. God, under his inferior title of Demiurge, is simply the creator of the world of sense and the senses, and the Gnosis maintains that by worshipping Him exclusively we obscure our minds and cut ourselves off from all connection with that infinitely higher spirit world over which the true Sovereign Deity reigns supreme. Conversely, by claiming our exclusive worship, our God prevents us from having knowledge—Gnosis—of higher things than Himself, and He may thus be regarded as partly if not wholly evil. That's the simplest way I can put this very complex matter, I'm afraid. But perhaps Canon Flurry——"

The aged Canon raised a deprecating hand. "I couldn't aspire to do half as well," he declared.

Uncle Odo continued: "So the first thing this Gnostic heresy does is to degrade Almighty God to the status of a mere demiurge, or 'chief

magistrate'—to strip Him of His omnipotence, His omniscience, and to deny, or at least to depreciate, all the attributes of perfection which we assign to Him. But now let's have a look at this mysterious Sovereign Deity of the higher spirit world whom the Gnostics worship and to whom they ascribe all the attributes proper to the Supreme Being."

His Grace paused to light a cigarette.

"The first thing to note is that the Gnostic doctrine is characterised by a very marked duality. The Sovereign Deity is not One, but Two—a Dual Principle of Light and Darkness: *of Good and Evil*! That's the whole point. This Supreme Being is not simply the Supreme Good. No: co-existent and coequal with him is Archontes, the Supreme Evil—a kind of spiritual counterpart to the material law of physics which states that 'to every action there must be an equal and opposite reaction.' And note, please, that this Archontes is *not* simply our old friend the Devil under another name. Archontes is as infinitely superior in evil to Satan, as the Supreme Being is superior to the Demiurge. Satan, after all, is yet a creature of God and still ultimately subject to Him. But Archontes is the Supreme Evil existing in his own right—not subject to, but coequal with, the Supreme Good."

We all sat very still.

"You can see what follows," the Archbishop proceeded. "This dual supremacy means that Evil is not simply the perversion or denial of Good, as in our philosophy, but that Evil has equal power and merit with Good. If the two principles, Good and Evil, are coequal and co-omnipotent there's nothing to choose between them, and you can follow whichever appeals to you most or happens to suit you best! '*Do what thou wilt*' *shall be the whole of the Law*—that's the leit-motif which runs through this liturgy we're considering now: it's the terrible Gnostic doctrine of *Thelēma*, which means 'Will,' in the sense of unlimited licence to do as you please—the doctrine of Libertinism. '*Do what thou wilt*'—and, you see, it doesn't matter a scrap whether what you do is good or evil, because the Supreme God of the Gnosis is himself both Good and Evil—the two Principles in perfect equipoise, so that whatever you do is bound to be lawful according to one of these principles! Nice idea, isn't it? In effect, of course, it simply abolishes all distinction between good and evil—that prime distinction on which all Christian doctrine, morals and ethics are based. . . . Incidentally, this liturgy we've got here is, as I half-suspected, a 'mass' to Archontes: that is to say, a 'sacrifice' to the Evil Principle of the Supreme Deity. I'm sure Canon Flurry will bear me out?"

"There isn't a shadow of doubt," the Canon assented gravely. "It—it's terrible stuff. . . ."

“More terrible, in fact, than the ordinary Devil’s Mass, or ‘Black Mass?’ ” I suggested.

“My dear Roger, it’s the Devil’s Mass raised to the *n*th degree,” said Uncle Odo, “and therefore infinitely more terrible. Yet note how utterly different it is from the Black Mass. Here we have no revolting obscenity or debauchery; no defilement of the Blessed Sacrament; no deliberate blasphemy or desecration of the Christian ritual. And why? Because, surely, the Black Mass is a negative and destructive thing: a sacrilegious mockery of the sacred mysteries of the Mass, a denial of the Christian faith, and a vile profanation of the Holy Eucharist. But this ‘mass’ to Archontes is positive and constructive. It recognises Evil as a Principle of the Supreme Deity, and contains positive and constructive, though characteristically occult, acts of worship of Evil. That’s the most terrible part of it. Participation in the abominations of the Black Mass implies, after all, a recognition of the omnipotence of Good and a deliberate defiance and desecration of God, who is the Supreme Good. But the worship of Archontes implies the elevation of Evil to coequality with Good: a denial that Good is superior to Evil, or preferable to it, or even distinguishable from it. It isn’t even mere sacrilege, because it denies or ignores the sanctity of everything that we hold holy. It’s a super-super-sacrilege on a scale so infinitely colossal that there really isn’t a word for it in our language. . . . But the Greeks had a word for it,” Uncle Odo concluded with a faint smile. “And the word is Gnosis.”

7

In the silence which followed I heard first a little sob, and then the sound of a girl weeping. Poor little Carmel! She was as white as a ghost and little crystal tears rolled down the lovesome curves of her cheeks. Her fingers were clutching Adam’s as in a vice, and her slim body was shaking with the intensity of her emotion.

“She—she can’t have known,”—her words were punctuated with sobs. “Andrea can’t—*can’t* have had any idea. It isn’t her fault. . . . It couldn’t be her fault. . . . She isn’t like that, really and truly. . . . It’s that damned man. . . . Andrea would never—never——” The poor kid showed every sign of being on the verge of collapse.

But already Barbary had flashed across the room to her side, and was big-sistering her as only my analeptic Barbary can. It was a tense experience for us all, and our halting voices tried to growl gruff words of sympathy and reassurance. And, as Barbary began to steer her patient towards the door, Uncle Odo said, for Carmel’s benefit and on behalf of us all: “My dear, I’m sure you’re right. I’ve never thought otherwise. Your sister can’t have

realised. . . . Poor child!" he ended softly, as the door closed behind the two girls.

Their departure eased the tension in the room, yet none of us who remained was in a hurry to break the silence. I glanced across at Adam. His comely features had set in a puzzled frown and there was a light in his eyes which, I thought, would have boded ill for Citizen Drinkwater had he suddenly appeared in our midst. For a moment of time our eyes met and lingered eloquently; subconsciously almost, his asked a question and mine gave an answer—in the affirmative. Whether or not Sir Piers had intercepted and interpreted our exchange I could not say, but when I looked across at him he gave me, quite spontaneously, the ghost of a nod, as if to indicate that some tacitly understood notion had his unhesitating approval and support, though at the moment I could not have defined what the notion was. More curiously still, when my eyes travelled round to Thrupp, he immediately nodded as definitely yet imperceptibly as my uncle had done.

A very odd little episode altogether.

It was Thrupp himself who at length broke that eventful silence. Shaking his head like a man dazed by a sudden punch, he turned to Uncle Odo.

"Might I trespass on your Grace's expert knowledge just a little further?" he asked half-apologetically. "You know, I'm in a very peculiar position about all this. I'm a detective, an officer of the law, and I was sent down here to investigate a case of violent death. The circumstances were admittedly mysterious, but really no more mysterious than half a dozen other cases I've handled in my time. The answer didn't leap to my mind, but I had no doubt that sooner or later I should find it. What is more, Puella Stretton's death is still capable of explanation by perfectly rational means. I don't suppose even the Air Ministry is infallible—or, as Sir Piers suggested, the plane that was heard that night might have been a foreign one. Anyhow, that is the only theory to which I, as a detective, can give any serious official attention. It's the only theory I can report to my superiors at the Yard. I'm a working man and I've got my living to earn; and if I were to go to the A.C. and give it as my opinion that Mrs. Stretton did not fall from an aircraft but that she was a witch who had taken a fatal toss off her besom, I'd jolly soon find myself earning my living, or trying to, in some other sphere of life! And quite right, too. . . ."

He gave a little hollow laugh, which we all echoed.

"No—it will have to be the aeroplane theory," he went on; "and even if I can't find the plane and account for Mrs. Stretton falling out of it with nothing on, that would still be better for me than spinning a fantastic yarn

about witches and broomsticks. We all fail sometimes, and my record at the Yard is good enough to stand an occasional set-back. Fortunately I'm not a particularly ambitious sort of bloke, and there's too much office-work about a Superintendent's job to make me covet it. So I'm really quite resigned to the prospect of leaving this case as an unsolved mystery. Officially, that's just what it will be."

He looked round at us with his infectious grin.

"Ah," murmured Uncle Odo. "And—unofficially?"

"Unofficially, and in the broadest outline, I regard the problem as already solved," said Thrupp. "Between ourselves, I'll state my position quite plainly. However much it may go against my reason to admit it, there are two or three seemingly preposterous 'facts' which I simply can't ignore. First, from that very odd psychic experience of my own, I'm convinced that this man Drinkwater is no ordinary human being. God knows *what* he is: he may be an incarnation of the Devil, or of this Archontes we've been hearing about, or of some minor demon, or he may be a man possessed by some evil spirit—but he's not just an ordinary human like you or me. He's—well, 'supernatural' is the only word I can find for him. Secondly, and equally preposterously, I believe Carmel Gilchrist's story about seeing her sister riding a besom; and I believe—though the evidence is less direct and more circumstantial—that the second 'witch' Carmel saw that night was the dead woman, Puella Stretton. Thirdly, though I unluckily had no chance of speaking to him myself, I believe the story told by the late Father Pius; I'm satisfied that there could have been no collusion between him and Carmel, and the mutual confirmation of their stories amounts, in my mind, almost to proof positive. Against every law of probability and reason I believe these three things—at least. And now the question is: where do we go from here?"

No one answered him for a moment. Then Adam, tempting him, said: "Officially, surely you needn't go anywhere, except back to London? You've told us the report you're going to make to the Yard. Unlike some of us, you should now be entitled to shrug your shoulders and get the hell out of Sussex at the rate of knots. As you reminded us, you're a detective and not paid to wrestle against 'principalities and powers'——"

"Officially," Thrupp confirmed, "the case is over and done with and I can, as you say, get the hell out of here as soon as I've made perfectly certain that I can't trace that plane. But unofficially, I just couldn't bear to clear out and leave things as they are. I may be only a poor bloody 'busy'—I beg your Grace's pardon—but I'm also a human being and curiosity is not the least of my besetting sins. So, unless you want to get rid of me——"

There was a general chorus of dissent, led by Adam himself. "For Carmel's sake, I want you to stay and see it through with us," Carmel's lover implored him earnestly.

Thrupp made a little gesture. "For all our sakes, I think the matter should be cleared up. We shall none of us know any peace of mind till it *has* been liquidated, and I could no more go back to the Yard and forget all about it than I could steal the Prime Minister's umbrella. You see, even allowing for the supernatural elements of the case, I still can't help being interested—I nearly said, professionally interested—in the 'mechanics' of what happened, if I may use that term in such a connection. I mean, even if we allow that Drinkwater (*alias* Boileau, *alias* Bevilacqua) is either a magician or a materialised spirit, and that he has the power to make people fly through the air, what exactly is the story behind Puella Stretton's death? Can anyone tell me, for instance, what sort of secret or magic process is supposed, traditionally, to lie behind the—the—what did you call it, Roger: the ability to fly——?"

"Transvection?" I suggested. "That's the technical term."

"That's it. Well, what is the ju-ju for causing the transvection of witches? Does the power to be 'transvected' reside in the witch herself, or in the broomstick, or in the 'devil' who controls her? When a witch flies to the Sabbat, is it an act of her own will, or is the power transmitted to her by the will of the 'Lord of the Sabbat?' "

"So far as my reading goes, there seem to be several theories," said I. "I've certainly read of a 'devil' having the power to make his witches fly through the air towards him, whether they wanted to or not. Then, in another book, I read the alleged details of the magic spell by which a broomstick or other suitable article could be endowed with the power of flight. On the other hand, lots of books mention that witches can give themselves this power by using some secret ointment with which they smear their bodies. One book, I forget which, actually gives the alleged recipe—the usual mumbo-jumbo about various herbs and flowers gathered by a waxing or waning moon——"

"Ah, the Unguent of Levitation," murmured Canon Flurry reminiscently. "Let's see—how does it go? Felon-wort, Frog-bit, Hag's Taper, Cock's Foot, Adder's Meat, Alleluia, Spikenard, Tormentil, Tamepoison, Weasel-snout, Wolfsbane, Wormwood, Yellow Rattle, Cat's-tail, Archangel, Betony, Bluebottle, Celandine, Black Bryony, Enchanter's Nightshade—— Dear me, I can't remember half of them. A most complicated concoction; and, as Mr. Poynings said, they must all be gathered at the right phases of the moon, with the sun in the appropriate house of the Zodiac, and the planets in

correct relations with one another. No wonder many a would-be witch failed to take off!—unless, of course, she was fortunate enough to have access to Indian Thorn-apple, which was so potent a levitant that it enabled her to dispense with three-quarters of the other ingredients."

"Indian Thorn-apple?" Sir Piers sat up and looked interested. "Damn dangerous stuff, that. The Thugs used ter use it ter dope their victims before throttlin' 'em, and God knows how many murders and dacoities happen through it in India, even ter-day. Puts yer ter sleep in two flicks of a duck's stern. Datura, the doctors call it——"

"What!" The penny dropped home, and I interrupted him excitedly. "Datura, did you say? *Datura indica suaveolens?*"

"Don't talk Greek ter me!" the Field-Marshal ordered brusquely. "All I know is that Indian Thorn-apple is called Datura. Why, damme, yer've got some of the stuff growin' out in the garden here, or yer had last year, anyway. Damn dangerous stuff ter have knockin' about, in spite of the pretty flowers."

"You mean my Angels' Trumpets?" I broke in again. "The big trumpet-shaped——"

"Angel Strumpets?" Sir Piers echoed fiercely, misled by the elision. "No need ter talk filth——"

Amid laughter the misunderstanding was cleared up, but the revelation left me with considerable food for thought. I am not much of a botanist and I had never connected my ill-fated Angels' Trumpets with even the English variety of thorn-apple which can be found in our countryside in early autumn. Canon Flurry's statement that *datura indica* formed a potent and valuable ingredient of the so-called Unguent of Levitation seemed to be suggestive, to say the least: not that I had ever believed, or believed now, in the real efficacy of the traditional witches' ointment, but I had lately been compelled to give unwilling credence to so many things that I had hitherto considered incredible, that there seemed little sense in straining at this gnat while swallowing so many camels.

The Canon was speaking again.

"Thorn-apple is also an essential ingredient in the Devil's incense, you know. Deadly nightshade, henbane, myrrh and thorn-apple are the standard mixture for use at the Black Mass, and though our native thorn-apple is adequate for the purpose, the Indian variety is greatly preferred because of its more pungent smell and greater potency. . . ."

Up to this point it had never occurred to me that the mysterious assaults on my datura patch could have any possible relevance to the case under

consideration. Barbary knew, of course, and I had happened to tell Carmel, but neither the theft of plants in the previous August nor the more recent raid by the cat Grimalkin had appeared worthy of mention to the others. Now, however, I broke in with a brief recital of the facts.

Canon Flurry rubbed his hands. "My dear fellow, if I were a betting man I would risk a few shillings on the present whereabouts of your plants, especially as I understand that this man Drinkwater lives in a remote and inaccessible part of the Downs. I feel quite sure his garden would repay inspection. . . ."

Another thought flashed into my brain; or more exactly, my subconscious released yet another idea which I had hitherto overlooked. Had not Carmel told me, quite unemphatically and almost *en passant*, of a rather stupid little squabble she had had with her sister over a jar of 'stuff that looked like toilet-cream?' Carmel had noticed it and asked what it was, whereupon Andrea had violently resented her inquisitiveness and locked the jar away.

And then I realised that Thrupp was speaking again.

"But surely, Canon," he was saying, "you don't believe that any ointment ever invented could possibly induce the power of flight?"

"Dear me, no. Certainly not! I was simply quoting from memory, and perhaps not very accurately, a part of the traditional formula for making this Unguent. It is a fact, of course, that the use of this Unguent is very commonly recorded in the ancient accounts of witchcraft, but frankly I don't believe it ever had more than a purely symbolic value. More likely still, it was a stratagem of the Devil's to deceive witches into thinking they could fly under their own power. Flattery has ever been one of Satan's most effective weapons, especially against women. No—I myself have never doubted that in genuine cases of witch-flights—and it seems beyond doubt that such phenomena *have* occurred from time to time—the true motive force resides neither in the witch nor in her broomstick, but in the 'devil' of her coven—who, remember, may be either a magician in his own right or else an emissary of the Evil One. One ought not to dogmatise without full data, but in my opinion it is this 'devil' who acts as a kind of *power-house*, and that it is through an act of will on his part, and not on the women's, that they can fly."

"I agree," said Uncle Odo. "Don't forget that these 'devils' may be nothing more or less than fallen angels, and that despite their fall they retain the powers and attributes of the pure spirit. They exercise a kind of psychic control over the members of their covens, and, fantastic as it may seem, I

see nothing inherently impossible in one of these materialised spirits being able to cause physical levitation or flight in much the same way as the R.A.F. can control the movements of pilotless aircraft by radio, and on much the same principle. Of course, there is also a school of thought which maintains that witch-flights never really occur in the physical sense, but only in dreams induced by the remote-control psychic or hypnotic powers of the 'devil'—in other words, he can hold a kind of telepathic Sabbat by a process of mass-hypnotism over the members of his coven. This theory would certainly clear up a great many of the physical difficulties of transvection, but on the other hand, it isn't really reasonable to ignore the great mass of outside, independent evidence in favour of physical transvection as opposed to psychological. And I insist on regarding Father Pius and Carmel Gilchrist as reliable independent witnesses in this particular case."

Thrupp mopped his brow. I could sense that his ill-used, essentially practical and rational mind was near the end of its tether, but he was still taking his medicine like a man.

"Let us take it as a hypothesis, then, that Puella Stretton was a member of Drinkwater's coven, and that by virtue of some supernatural power of his she was subject to his will in this matter of transvection. Acting as a power-house or 'remote-control,' he was able to make her rise from the ground and pass through the air. In other words, she was sustained in the air by an act of will on the part of Drinkwater, contrary to all the laws of gravity, aerodynamics and everything else. All right?"

No one contradicted him.

"The point I'm trying to arrive at is this," he went on. "If Drinkwater is able to sustain a girl in flight through his supernatural power, what would happen if—again by an act of his will—this power were suddenly cut off? You see what I mean? *Suppose Drinkwater for some reason or other wanted to kill one of his women: couldn't he—wouldn't he—do it, as well as any other way, by cutting off the power while she was in mid-flight? Without his will to sustain her, wouldn't she at once become subject to the normal laws of gravity and fall like a stone?*"

You could almost hear the silence.

"And that," Thrupp concluded a moment later, "is just what happened to Puella Stretton, if you ask me. . . . But I doubt if we'll ever know *why*——"

8

"So what?"

None of us had heard Barbary re-enter the room, though it seemed that she had in fact been standing at the open door for some moments past. Carmel had been revived with hot tea and a cigarette, and was now lying down upstairs.

"So what?" echoed Thrupp, making room for Barbary on the sofa beside him. "So nothing, officially, I'm afraid. If our reasoning is correct—and if indeed we have the neck to call these bizarre speculations *reasoning*—Puella Stretton was murdered by Drinkwater, just as surely as if he'd shot her dead or given her poisoned chocolates. But—well, it looks as if he's going to get away with it, doesn't it? Our dear old friend, the Perfect Crime! And we can't touch him for it—officially." His eyes met mine again, and then passed on to Adam and Uncle Piers. "There isn't a single thing I can bring up against him. The whole case is founded on the most outlandish sequence of conjectures and guesses I've ever heard, and we still can't blink the fact that it *may* be simply exotic flap-doodle without a word of truth in it."

"And yet," said Adam, "it all fits in, doesn't it? As you say, we don't know any motive for the murder—if it was murder. But——"

"We can't expect Drinkwater to make us a present of it," Thrupp cut in gloomily. "Andrea Gilchrist might know, but I've no authority to make her speak. She'd simply laugh at me for being crazy enough to suggest such a thing, and the devil of it is that she'd have right and reason on her side. Anyhow, the motive doesn't worry me overmuch. It isn't hard to guess the sort of thing it might be. No—we're bitched. I beg your Grace's pardon—and yours, Barbary."

The Most Reverend Odo chuckled. "I thought you said 'bewitched,' " he remarked indulgently. "Roger, give me a final drink, please, and then I propose to go to bed. I'm sure Canon Flurry won't be sorry to retire, either. It's getting on for midnight, and if we went on threshing over this business all night I don't believe we'd be any forrader. A night's rest may bring inspiration. . . ."

I began to serve out drinks all round.

"All the same, there are one or two points I'd like cleared up before we adjourn," I observed, as I squeezed a siphon. "For instance, where does the cat Grimalkin come in, if anywhere?"

"Nowhere, I should imagine," said the Archbishop, sipping his peg. "Don't let's clog up our minds with unessentials, Roger. In default of any positive evidence that Grimalkin is a familiar spirit, I'd prefer to regard her simply as a particularly ill-natured domestic cat. Short of trying to kill the

brute to find out whether it's mortal or not, I honestly don't see what one could do."

"But her raid on my Angels' Trumpets?" I persisted.

"You don't even know that she did raid your Angels' Trumpets. According to what you told us, it was simply a half-joking suggestion on Carmel's part. It might just as well have been any other cat."

I sighed. "All the same, she's a bit of a mystery. She appeared from nowhere just at the time when Carmel first——"

"Tchah!" Uncle Piers was up against me now. "Ferget it, Roger. Whole damn county's fuller stray cats, chucked out on their ears by Scotch families when the pricer fish goes up."

"Okay," I capitulated with a grin. "Just one more point for the experts. Let's assume that this Drinkwater-Boileau-Bevilacqua creature is not a human being but a demon or evil spirit of some kind. As Thrupp says, there's no official action that can be taken about it. But suppose I decided to take the law into my own hands and try to put an end to all the funny business that's going on round here: suppose I went out to Bollington to-night with a pistol in my pocket and peppered Drinkwater full of lead. What would happen?"

"One of two things would happen." Uncle Odo looked at me over the rims of his glasses. "Either you'd kill a human being and be guilty of wilful murder; or else your bullets would have no effect whatsoever, except perhaps to sting the foul fiend into turning you into a toad or a wood-louse or something. You'd be in a fine mess, either way. There is, of course, a school of thought which holds that the Devil can be shot clean out of the neighbourhood with solid silver bullets, but I take leave to doubt it and in any case I don't expect you have any silver bullets. Please, Roger, put the whole idea right out of your mind. This may well prove to be a case for solemn exorcism, but there's certainly no case for attempted murder."

"*Ja wohl*," I grinned back at him. "Incidentally, what is your own opinion about Drinkwater, Uncle? After hearing all the evidence, what do you think he is—human or spirit?"

His Grace spread out his hands.

"Before I attempt to answer that, let us sum up what we know about him and consider the possibilities, Roger. If we can trust our evidence, he certainly seems to have 'supernatural' powers; and if his name isn't simply a coincidence (which I feel it can't be) this is at least the third manifestation of those powers that he has given in different parts of Europe in the past five years. Notably, he seduces young women and either turns them into witches

or at least causes them to fly like witches. He also seems to dabble in advanced forms of Magic in its relation to a particularly debased and terrible form of Gnosticism as exemplified by this 'mass' to Archontes, the Evil Principle of the Supreme Godhead. Very well, then. It seems to me that he might either be (*a*) the Devil himself, or one of his demons, materialised in human form or the semblance of human form. Or (*b*) he could be a human 'possessed' by the Devil or one of his demons: that is, a mortal human with an evil spirit dwelling in him. Or (*c*), without actually being possessed, he might be that very rare thing, an absolutely genuine adept Magician who has attained to the highest degree of knowledge—Gnosis—and occult power, and who by constant spiritual union with the Powers of Darkness has himself acquired some of the superhuman faculties which normally appertain to the spirit world alone. Frankly, this last is my own belief. It seems to me the most probable, the most feasible, and at the same time the least sensational solution."

"In other words, you're convinced he's human?"

"Yes. And why? Because it seems to me that his actions, or such of them as we know about, are more characteristically human than demoniacal. For all his strange powers, he displays an essentially human fallibility."

"As how?" I pressed.

"Well, take this abominable 'mass.' Now, it's quite consistent for a *human* devoted to the worship of Evil to offer sacrifice to Archontes, the Supreme Evil. But is it likely that the Devil, or even a demon, would waste his time on what is, after all, a gravely imperfect man-made ritual? I call it imperfect, not only because the Gnostic heresies are themselves demonstrable errors of the first magnitude, but also because that list of names in the Office of the Collects is clearly bogus in several respects—the result, as Canon Flurry said, of conjecture, wishful thinking and possibly malice. Some of the men in that list *may* have been Gnostics or Magicians or worshippers of Evil—I don't doubt but they were. But others are fantastically out of place: Charlemagne, Roger Bacon, Goethe, the Borgia pope and others. In short, that list was drawn up by a man, not by a devil, for a devil's superior intelligence would have enabled him to avoid such pitfalls."

"That is a point," I admitted thoughtfully.

"Again, suppose Mr. Thrupp's theory is correct and that Drinkwater did kill Mrs. Stretton by 'cutting off the power' while she was flying home after a gathering of the coven—which she might well have been, incidentally, for you may remember that this was the Feast of the Apparition of Saint

Michael, and the feasts of those who have been the Devil's doughtiest opponents are often chosen for defilement. Grotesque as it may seem, I believe Mr. Thrupp's notion might be correct—but, if it is, doesn't this action smack more of *human* malice than of diabolical? You know, in all the literature of witchcraft and demonology there are very few cases in which the Devil is alleged to have killed a human being. It's the soul he's after, not the body. The flesh is of more use to Satan alive than dead. Alive, the body can be led on and on, deeper and deeper into the mire of sin and corruption, thus assuring the eternal damnation of the soul after death. Dead—and especially prematurely dead, as in the case of this healthy and attractive young woman—there is no certainty on the Devil's side that a human is finally qualified for Hell. Our God is an all-merciful God, and the briefest and most fragmentary Act of Contrition at the moment of death may yet contrive to cheat the Devil of his prey. . . . I can't emphasise too strongly, Roger, that I may be utterly mistaken in my reading of this case; but for what it's worth, and in default of further evidence, I should certainly say that Drinkwater is human. Whether he is technically 'possessed' or not I could not say; but in more figurative language the Spirit of Evil is certainly in him, and I believe this would be quite sufficient to account for Mr. Thrupp's sensation of unearthly chill when making physical contact with him."

"Just one last thing," I said, as his Grace levered himself out of his chair. "Writers on witchcraft often claim that a genuine witch can always be identified by certain physical peculiarities, such as the 'Devil's Mark' and—and other things." I turned to Thrupp. "You didn't hear of anything abnormal about Puella Stretton's body, I suppose?"

"Not a thing," said the detective. "Of course, she was terribly bruised and broken, but the doctor assured me that there was nothing out of the ordinary. When he examined her the body hadn't been identified, so I got him to write out a fully detailed description. The only distinguishing marks he noted were the scar of an appendix operation and a tiny mole below the right breast. He's a very thorough man, too, and he'd never have missed anything—queer."

So that was that.

9

It was now well after midnight and the conference began to break up.

We were all standing about chatting of this and that when I thought I heard a gentle knock at the sitting-room door. It seemed an improbable sort of thing to have heard, and no one else seemed to have heard it, but to satisfy myself I strode across to the door and opened it a few inches. At first

I could see nothing, for there was no light in the hall. But then I perceived the dim figure of Carmel, standing well back in the darkness and beckoning me with a crooked finger.

Mystified, I stepped outside, pulling the door to behind me.

Carmel spoke in soft, urgent tones: "Roger, I didn't want to come into the room, 'cos the curtains haven't been drawn and the whole room is visible from outside. Not that I think there's anyone about now—but there *has* been. . . ."

"What d'you mean?" I snapped. "Someone spying on us?"

"Yes—and listening-in to every word that's been said, I imagine! Roger, we were crazy to leave the windows open——"

All too late it dawned on me how criminally careless the thunder-laden heat of the night had made us. "You've seen someone?" I demanded.

"I've seen—Andrea!" Her voice was hesitant and full of emotion. "From upstairs—from your bedroom window. I got sick of lying down and was just thinking of coming downstairs again when I happened to look out of the window and there was a dark figure sneaking away from the house towards the shrubbery. Oh, Roger, she'd obviously come from just outside the sitting-room——"

"You're sure it was Andrea?"

"Positive. The moon's quite bright and I know her too well to be mistaken. I know her clothes, too. She was wearing her black and emerald ——"

"Just a moment!" Leaving her where she was I reopened the door and put my beard round it. I caught Thrupp's eye and beckoned him outside.

He joined us in the hall and Carmel repeated her story. With a grunt of "Hell!" he went back into the room, returning immediately with Adam and Uncle Piers.

"Let's make sure there's no one else," he muttered, having rapidly explained the situation. So, leaving Carmel, we four set out—Thrupp and Adam by the front door, Uncle Piers and myself by the back. Swiftly and silently we probed the moonlit garden, giving special heed to the shrubs and hedges. But we did not discover so much as a cat in ambush. In less than five minutes we had reassembled in the dense shadow of our big sequoia-tree.

Now it may be recalled that not once, but twice, during the evening's talk I had found myself exchanging momentary but oddly meaning glances with my present three companions. Not a word had been said, not a plan

proposed; yet an understanding had sprung up between us, undefined so far yet none the less explicit. And now, as we faced one another in the dark, there seemed no need of definition. Only a button remained to be pressed.

Thrupp was the first to speak; but it seemed that he spoke no longer as the natural director of operations, the professional among amateurs, but rather as a staff-officer seeking guidance from his commander.

"So what?" he inquired softly—(Barbary's catch-phrase was proving strangely infectious). And I noted, quite without surprise, that the query was directed to Sir Piers.

"Get the priests and women off ter bed, *pronto*," snapped the Field-Marshal. "Wycherley, yer've got yer car here—take Canon Flurry back ter the Green Maiden and then go on ter the Vicarage with yer young woman. And make it snappy. No stoppin' fer slap-and-tickle or neckin' on the way!"

"Really, sir——" the outraged Adam began.

"It isn't safe," I broke in urgently. "We daren't risk letting Carmel sleep within reach of Andrea after——"

"Tchah! Wait fer it!" Sir Piers commanded tersely. "When yer get ter the Vicarage," he went on, addressing Adam, "both of yer go in and make a reconnaissance, just ter make sure Andrea isn't there. She won't be, but I wanter be certain. Then come back here, the pair of yer, and don't waste time about it. Park Carmel with Barbary and pack 'em off ter bed tergether. Then get back in yer car and join us at the chalk-pit under Burtin' Hill as quick as yer can. We'll wait for yer. . . . Roger, tell Barbary ter leave some coffee and sandwiches ready fer us when we get back. . . . Thrupp, what about it? Are you in on this?"

"You bet I'm in on it," was the grim reply. "Unofficially, of course, but ____"

"Stout feller!" Uncle Piers landed him a hearty smack on the shoulder. "Well, let's get crackin'." He started to lead the way towards the house. "Roger—that pistol yer were talkin' about. Bring it along, and see it's loaded. Got any more?"

"I've a Service revolver as well," I said. "I'll bring them both—but I'm afraid I'm out of silver bullets," I added facetiously.

"Tchah! Plain lead'll do ter go on with," growled Sir Piers throatily, striding out across the grass.

"I wonder," Thrupp murmured in my ear as we followed behind. "I'd be happier if they were nickel, at least. . . ."

My uncle's injunction to get the women and priests off to bed was, in the circumstances, not quite so easy a matter as it sounded, yet its initial stages were soon carried through. Adam drove off into the night with his two passengers. Uncle Odo and Barbary showed some symptoms of mutiny, and for a few moments there was danger of a top-level clash between Church and Army, not to mention a sharp demonstration of uxorial insubordination in direct contravention of a famous precept of the Apostle Paul. The trouble about the Poynings family is that even its women and priests come of fighting stock and cannot bear to be left out of any potential skirmish. However, a compromise was at length effected whereby my wife and Uncle Odo reluctantly agreed to remain at home even if they did not go to bed—which was really all that mattered.

I unearthed my firearms and loaded them to capacity. I gave the revolver to Sir Piers and kept the pistol myself. Then I mobilised Old Faithful. Three minutes later our little expeditionary force was bumping along the appropriate lane towards our agreed position of assembly. I drove with side-lights only, relying on the luminosity of the night to follow the lane. A sinister veil of clouds was already obscuring the actual orb of the moon, and the breathless tension of the air gave warning that the long impending storm was not far off. Though it was long past midnight the heat was still overpowering.

We had scarcely finished parking Old Faithful behind a hazel thicket near the mouth of the chalk-pit when the lights of Adam's car became visible down the lane. He joined us shortly afterwards and reported, first, that there had indeed been no trace of Andrea at the Vicarage—nor indeed of any other living soul, the Vicar and the housekeeper having presumably already retired; and secondly, that Carmel had been safely restored to Barbary's care. Thrupp, who by now had cast off every remaining vestige of officialdom and taken on something of the aspect of a schoolboy setting out on an adventure, expressed to me in an abandoned whisper his pious hope that they kept a spare besom at the Vicarage, since he had not yet been able to return that abstracted for analysis. In much the same spirit I assured him that I had noticed at least a couple of birch-brooms lying about the garden in addition to that used by the gardener to harass the cat Grimalkin during her assault on the Lord Bishop. . . .

By this time we had begun to scale the steep zigzag path up the escarpment.

Not since the wenching days of my unregenerate youth had I been accustomed to infest the Downs by night, but as we climbed the old magic of the place began to flow back into my mind, and there came back to me

little inconsequent flickers of memory and echoes of long-forgotten scraps of dialogue whispered hereabouts on far-off nights when the world and I were younger. And if you accuse me of whimsy-whamsy efforts to create a suitably creepy atmosphere for the closing scenes of this very powerful story I shall ram the lie down your alimentary canals by inviting you all, male and female, young and old, to accompany me on a moonlight ramble on these our ancient Downs, that you may judge of this matter for your incredulous selves. For it is the commonest of knowledge with us local tribesmen that our blessed Downs are at night as full of sprites and spectres and sighs and whispers and little trills of forgotten music and fragmentary cadences of spoken words, as a Sussex Puddle is full of sugar—and these quite distinct from the sights and sounds of the myriad legions of Little People who dwell there, perceptible only to the pure in heart, and notably the Old Ones and the Pharisees (who are pronounced Fairieses and would doubtless be still so written but for the orthographical heresies of the man Kipling) and Those Others of whom our children know. . . .

By reason of these things it is not easy to talk loudly on the Downs at night, even when lying at ease on a tender slope of turf with only the caress of an ecstatic wench to make you breathless; and when these joys of youth are mere ghosts and already middle-age is crooking a flabby finger at you, abstention from speech becomes enforced by respiratory as well as by metaphysical compulsions. Of our male foursome who climbed to Burring Clump that night only Adam was young enough to have breath to spare, and he belonged to a Service in which subalterns are not encouraged to natter in the presence of field-marshals—and in any case he was not the type of youngster who nowadays seems to get vaccinated with a gramophone needle. Not till we reached the true crest of the scarp and, all panting somewhat, sought the dark shelter of the Burting beeches, did any coherent conversation ensue, and then only when our lungs had regained their normal tempi. Screened by a dense tangle of gorse and bramble and with half the thickness of the Clump between us and our destination, Sir Piers permitted the striking of a single match, whereat three cigarettes and one cheroot were cautiously ignited.

"Ten-past one," my uncle announced, peering at the luminous dial of his watch. "If we get crackin' soon and keep movin', we oughter make it by half-past two. Wanter say a worder two before we start. Gotter spotter confession ter make." The red glow of his cheroot lit up his hard-bitten features.

"Not really interested in devils and things," he went on shortly; "n'r yet in witches or bitches or besoms or bosoms or any o' that stuff. Not my

pidgin. Leave it ter Odo, and those it may concern. . . . Interested in Drinkwater, though. Very interested indeed. May be a wizard or a yogi or a spook or the Devil himself. Don't know. Couldn't care less. Dirty dog with the girls, apparently: couldn't care less 'bout that, either: modern girls can look after 'emselves: wouldn't say thank-yer if yer horsewhipped the beggar for 'em. Probably cut up rough: tell yer not ter interfere with their self-expression," he went on sardonically. "Good-lookin' feller. Maiden's dream, probably knows his turnips." Twin streams of acrid smoke poured from his nostrils as he snorted contemptuously.

"Reason I'm interested in Drinkwater is quite different," he resumed. "War comin' 'long, yer know. No use blinkin' it. P.M. talked through the back of his neck when he came back from Munich—or with his tongue in his cheek, which comes ter the same thing. Peace in our time, my foot! War after the harvest, sure as we're sittin' here. Nobody ready fer it, 'cept that thug Hitler. France rotten—Government corrupt, general post once a fortnight, army demoralised with neglect, General Staff think they're still livin' in 1066 with their damfool Maginot Line 'bout as much use as Arundel Castle 'gainst modern weapons. Low Countries hopin' ter keep outer it: too weak ter fight even if they have ter. 'Merica too far 'way ter be bothered—have ter come in later, but they can't see it yet. Russia—Joe Stalin playin' slap-and-tickle with Adolf: no love fer us: wouldn't raise a finger ter help us: nothin' ter be got outer it, anyway. We're in fer a sticky time, make no mistaker 'bout it. Pull through if we're lucky, but it's goin' ter be tough. Damned tough. . . .

"Gotter keep the Boche outer this country, though. Everythin' depends on it. Gotter reckon with modern weapons: modern methods. Invasion by sea—n.b.g., s'long as the Navy's afloat. Airborne landin's the new racket. Damn good racket, too. Gotter smash t'other feller's air force first: R.A.F.'d take some smashin', but it could be done. Gotter take possibility inter account. Gotter reckon on attempts at airborne landin's. No better spot fer 'em than the Downs, specially round 'bout here. South sider Downs slope up gently from the sea: flat as yer hat, no hedges or ditches, no big gradients till yer come ter the north scarp. Lander coupler thousand gliders 'tween Brighton and Cockin', easy as kiss-yer-hand. Touch down at dusk or dawn, seize north scarp, and Bob's yer uncle. . . ." Again Sir Piers exhaled smoke like a dragon.

"Been havin' a look round this last dayer two. Not my pidgin, strictly: got no job just now, but yer never know yer luck. Promised Curley Antrobus I'd have a sniff round next time I was this way. Curley's got several lads on the job already, doin' the detailed stuff: mostly subalterns and N.C.O.s,

Sappers and Signals, lookin' inter possible landin' sites and navigation marks, and smellin' out foreigners and unreliable elements who might help the Boche when the time comes—hidden landin' lights, radio beacons, and all that. Curley's boys workin' very hush-hush. Lad combin' this section of the Downs is a feller yer've all seen knockin' 'bout, but I'll lay ten quid to a kipper yer can't guess who it is. Not easy fer a stranger ter hang 'bout a village without excitin' attention unless he can fake up a good excuse. This feller's put on a damn good act. . . ."

Personally, I could think of no stranger, mysterious or otherwise, noticeable in Merrington of late. However——

"Yer'll meet him presently," my uncle proceeded, "and then yer'll all reckernise him. He don't look it, but he's a sergeant, Royal Signals, and his job is ter locate the source of any unusual radio impulses bein' put out in this parter the world. Gotter neat little portable equipment. . . . Cutter long story short, this feller's picked up somethin' of the sort comin' from over Bollin'ton way—an 'intermittent carrier' whatever that may be. Someone puttin' out some sorter wireless impulses. Sergeant says it might suddenly develop into a full-strength radio beacon—or might not. Probably wouldn't dare use it till zero-hour, anyway, fer fear of bein' spotted, but this carrier suggests he may be tunin' up fer Der Tag."

"Drinkwater, by God!" exclaimed Thrupp and I together.

"A spy!" growled Adam. "So that's his racket——"

"Let's get movin'," my uncle ordered, rising to his feet. "No smokin' from now on." He led the way out of the Clump on to the open Downs. It was darker now, and more oppressive than ever. The clouds had thickened and come lower, and already we could discern little distant flashes of lightning in the west. "Goin' ter be a storm," Sir Piers observed unnecessarily. "Good thing, in reason. Cover our approach, but damned uncomfortable if it rains too much, and the electric disturbance will bitch Sergeant McUik's detectin' apparatus——"

"McUik?" I could not resist a quiet gibe at the expense of my uncle's oft-flaunted xenophobia. "You don't mean to say you're collaborating with a 'blasted Scotchman' for the defence of the sacred soil of Sussex?"

Sir Piers chuckled gruffly in the dark. "Have ter use the weapons yer've got," he returned. "Savages often make good soldiers, yer know. No flies on the Highland or Lowland Divisions when it comes to a scrap. I'd say it's every British general's prayer ter have a good dollop of Scotch troops in his command. . . ."

We tramped on silently over the turf. It was growing darker every minute as the thunder-clouds rolled towards us, but there was still light enough to march on our proper bearing. For myself, I was trying to digest this new revelation as to Drinkwater's alleged activities and to see how, if at all, it could be fitted in with the more occult theories which had preoccupied us hitherto. Was there in fact anything fundamentally inconsistent in Drinkwater engaging simultaneously in witchcraft and espionage: in black magic and treason: in Gnostic rites and the maintenance of a secret radio beacon: in contemporaneous allegiance to Archontes and to Hitler? Well, even in 1939 there were not lacking those who confidently identified Hitler with the Devil incarnate, and even more believed him to be demoniacally possessed.

For a few hundred yards I could not put my finger on any specific reason why Drinkwater should not be, at one and the same time, a dabbler in the black arts and a secret agent of the Third Reich. Not even his previous incarnations as Boileau and Bevilacqua necessarily disproved such a theory. Indeed, it crossed my mind that in both France and Italy the mysterious witch-flights had taken place at no great distance from the respective frontier zones—which might or might not mean something. Against this, I knew of no local evidence to suggest that Drinkwater had engaged in any other activities which might lend colour to the espionage theory: his remote dwelling was nowhere near any defence installation and I had never heard that he was in the habit of visiting more significant areas. And the question arose, would even Germany conduct its intelligence activities on so lavish a scale that an able-bodied young man like Drinkwater would be installed on the Sussex Downs for so considerable a period before any invasion could be expected to take place, and with no other duties than to fix up some kind of apparatus for putting out a directional radio beam at some unspecified date in the distant future? It seemed uneconomical, to say the least. And then again——

I stopped dead in my tracks as the fallacy struck me. My companions halted, too, turning inquiring faces towards me.

"Where are we meeting this fellow McUik?" I asked my uncle.

" 'Bout a mile farther on. Gotter date with him. Why?"

"I want a word with him. Meanwhile—how much do you know about the technical side of wireless, Uncle?"

"Sweet Fanny Adams," was the terse reply. "Always twiddle the wrong knob. Why?"

"I don't know much either," I admitted, "but at least I've some idea of the elementary principles. You say Drinkwater's been sending out some kind of radio impulses—an 'intermittent carrier,' whatever that may mean. But I do know that you can't put out any sort of radio impulse without power—electric power. And power is just the one thing Drinkwater hasn't got!"

"What!"

"Of course he hasn't. There's no electricity supply within miles of these downland hamlets. Candles and oil-lamps are all the illumination you get in these parts——"

"There are such things as private plants," Thrupp put in. "Quite common in country districts. Oil-burning engines which work dynamos, or whatever they are."

"I'm quite sure Drinkwater hasn't got one," said I. "I remember Carmel told me only yesterday that one of the snags about the Pest House was that there were no proper lighting arrangements. Besides, where's his aerial? You can't transmit from here to Germany without a pretty hefty mast of sorts ——"

"Nobody said he was transmittin' ter Germany," Sir Piers corrected me. "If McUik's right, all this beacon would do would be ter guide an invadin' air fleet fer the last few miles of their trip. Yer wouldn't need much power fer that."

"But you'd need some," I persisted. "And——"

"Tchah! Let's push on and find McUik," my uncle growled. "Expect he's got it all doped out. Not far ter go now. . . ."

We tramped on. A few large drops of warm rain had begun to fall, and low rumbles of thunder were already reverberating the close night air. I calculated that it would be our murky fate to reach the Pest House about simultaneously with the storm.

Another thought occurred to me. I plucked at Thrupp's sleeve and drew him alongside. "I wonder if McUik was up here on 'the night in question?' " I said. "The night Puella Stretton was killed and Andrea was out on her broomstick. If so——"

I could see the gleam of Thrupp's teeth as he grinned in the darkness. "Just what I've been wondering, Roger. One would certainly think. . . . And yet, if he did see anything, surely a man in his position—a senior N.C.O.—would have come forward? If he's been living in Merrington he must have heard about the inquest. Of course, I know he's on a hush-hush job and wouldn't want to draw attention to himself, but at least he could have told Sir Piers."

"Rootham's five or six miles away from here, so he wouldn't have seen Puella crash," I remarked. "But if Andrea and the other 'witches' were at the Pest House that night, and if McUik was keeping tabs on it——" A clap of thunder finished my sentence.

A moment later it began to rain in earnest. Muttering imprecations, we turned up our coat-collars and plodded on as the roars and flashes of the celestial artillery swept on towards us. There was no shelter of any kind, even had we been minded to stop. Visibility was bad now, and navigation was chiefly by lightning flashes.

And presently, when we were already soaked to the skin, one of these flashes gave us a fleeting glimpse of a human figure ahead of us: a female figure, to judge by the momentary sight I caught of it, for I could descry the clinging lines of a sodden skirt. It was perhaps one hundred yards away, with its back towards us, crouching below the crest of a small hollow and apparently unconscious of our approach. Again my subconscious worked swiftly and I sensed rather than knew that not only was this the same 'girl friend' about whom I had twitted my uncle when I had seen her sleuthing him from Burting Clump on the previous day, but that the dip in which she was now standing was almost certainly the same depression from which she had watched Sir Piers on that occasion.

I began to hiss a warning, but it seemed that my uncle had spotted her too, for he stopped in his tracks, turned back to us, and said, "There's McUik. Stay here till I whistle yer up. He's expectin' me, but not the rest of yer. . . ." And with that he strode off by himself.

McUik? I could have sworn to that skirt, brief though my glimpse had been. . . . And then, in unison with Thrupp, upon whom comprehension must have dawned in the same split second of time, I ejaculated, wonderingly:

"My God! *It's the piper! . . .*"

11

And so indeed it proved to be, when at length a low whistle from Sir Piers ordered us to close up. An obliging sheet of lightning furnished a flashlight exposure of a slim, rather good-looking young man clad as to the torso in some knitted garment midway between a fisherman's jersey and a girl's jumper, and from waist to knees in a gaudy-looking tartan kilt in which yellow, blue and red predominated. On the turf beside him lay a leather-covered case not unlike a small and very portable radio set, and about his neck he wore a pair of headphones. Like ourselves, he was soaked to the skin.

"Been askin' McUik 'bout Drinkwater's power supply," Sir Piers snapped, after introducing the piper. "What's yer theory, Sergeant?"

"The question occurred to me as soon as I'd first located the point of origin of the carrier, sir." Despite his outlandish name and garb, this Scot spoke excellent English with something remarkably like a public-school accent. "You're quite right, of course, sir. He must have some source of power, but though I've been pretty close to the place several times I've seen neither mast nor any other kind of aerial, and I've heard nothing like a local power-plant at work. The house seems to be lit with oil-lamps, too. Very curious, sir."

"Camouflage," Sir Piers returned promptly. "If the feller proposes ter operate a radio beacon when the invasion comes, the last thing he'd wanter do is ter advertise the fact that he's got power. Probably got his plant cached away in a cellar. The oil-lamps are his best alibi, fer the present."

There was something in that. But——

"I don't see how you could install a whacking great power-plant in your cellar without people getting to know," objected Adam. "The firm that put it in would have to know, and the neighbours couldn't be kept in the dark. And it'd look pretty queer if he was known to have a plant and yet not use it for lighting."

"The plant needn't be very large, sir," said McUik. "And if he knows anything about the technical side he needn't have employed a firm to install it. He could order the parts separately at different times and through different distributors, collect them from different railway stations in his car, and get the whole apparatus rigged up by degrees."

"No need even fer that," Uncle Piers said suddenly. "The parts could be brought over from Germany by plane and parachuted down by night. That plane young Carmel heard the other night, fer instance. Why the hell was it bummin' about fer half an hour or so, if it wasn't upter some dirty work or other?"

"Foreign plane, too, probably," Thrupp murmured. "But——"

"If you mean the plane that was over here three nights ago, I can tell you that it didn't come near Bollington, sir," McUik intervened. "I heard it, of course, and wondered what it was up to, but it was much farther over to the west. Nothing came down near here, I'm quite certain, sir."

"We'll come back to that night in a minute," said Thrupp. "Meanwhile, are you dead certain that the 'impulses' you've picked up come from the Pest House? Is your apparatus as reliable as all that?"

"Sirrr," answered McUik, betraying his land of origin for the first time, "no detector in the worrld is one hundred per cent infallible, still less the man that uses it, and if this were a built-up area I wouldn't dare be so confident. But what's the alternative hereabouts? The Pest House is the only building in Bollington where a transmitter could be housed; the others are just shepherds' shacks and two-roomed cottages."

"When did you first hear it?" Adam inquired.

"That same night when the aircraft came over, sir. In fact, I wondered at first——" He hesitated.

"Whether the transmitter could have guided the aircraft here, eh?" Thrupp conjectured for him. "Well, what about it? It seems a plausible idea, if this is a kind of radio beacon."

"I know, sir; but there are difficulties. The plane didn't turn up till an hour or more after the first emission of the carrier had ceased, and had gone long before the second emission started up. There was no emission in progress when the plane was over the Downs."

"Tell us about these two emissions," Thrupp invited him. "What times did they happen, and how long did they last?"

The sergeant collected his thoughts before replying. "I couldn't say what time the first started, sir, because I just happened on it by chance when I was searching over that range of frequencies. I first discovered it a few minutes after half-past ten and it went on for something like thirty-five minutes. Then it went off. I was well away to the west when I first picked it up and I hadn't located the exact point of origin when I lost it again; but I knew the directional bearing, and by following this up I ended up near the Pest House. By that time I was afraid it had closed down for the night, but I hung about on the off-chance. Sure enough, at about 3 a.m., when I was just thinking of giving up for the night, I got it again—same frequency, same direction. Unfortunately, by this time I'd wandered off well to the south and was some distance away. I about-turned and worked my way closer in, but you can't get an accurate bearing on the move, sir. You have to halt and fix up your telescopic antenna—and by the time I got back near the Pest House it had gone off again. I hung about till nearly five, but I couldn't get it again."

"How long did the second emission last?" Thrupp asked.

"Roughly the same as the first, sir. Thirty-five to forty minutes. The only difference was that whereas the first emission sort of faded out gradually, the second was *cut off sharp*."

"H'm." Thrupp fell silent, deep in thought. I wondered what was passing in his mind. It could not have escaped his notice, any more than it had

escaped mine, that the times of these mysterious 'emissions' tallied surprisingly with those at which, according to Carmel, the witch-flights had been in progress. And the second emission had been *cut off sharp*. . . . Grotesque conjectures played hide-and-seek in my mind as the rain peppered my sodden body and the thunder rolled and crashed overhead.

"Heard it again since?" I asked McUik presently. "Anything doing to-night, for instance?"

"I—I don't think so, sir." Rather to my surprise, the man was hesitant. "You must understand, sir, that my detector is quite useless in a storm like this: the electrical disturbances in the atmosphere make it impossible to pick up any comparatively low-power impulses and I'd only ruin my apparatus and electrocute myself into the bargain if I tried to use it now. But if it hadn't been for the storm it might have been a different story. Can't say for certain, sir, but I thought I *was* beginning to pick up something earlier on. Very faint and intermittent, but that may have been due to the fact that either the transmitter or my detector was slightly off-frequency. And then the atmospherics got too bad. . . ."

I glanced at the luminous dial of my wrist-watch. "Say, a couple of hours ago?" I suggested.

"That, or a little less, sir. Why, have you reason——"

"Not really," I said with a short laugh. Nevertheless it was in my mind that rather less than two hours had elapsed since I had heard that soft knock at my sitting-room door and discovered Carmel waiting for me in the dark hall. And Andrea had already had a few minutes' start. . . . I shivered—and not wholly because of my wet clothes. I wished I dared ask McUik whether his detector were sensitive to any other kind of impulse-current besides purely electrical ones; but I lacked both the technical vocabulary and the moral courage to put the question.

I wrung out my beard as Thrupp resumed his inquisition.

"Going back to the night of the 7th/8th—I take it you didn't hear or see anything unusual, Sergeant? Apart from the impact of this mysterious 'carrier' on your detector, that is."

Once again McUik seemed to hesitate. Then he gave a rather self-conscious little laugh.

"Not in the sense that you'd mean, sir," he replied.

"I don't get you," said Thrupp.

"Well, sir——" Again that curious hesitancy. "The truth of the matter is, sir, it's sort of queer up here on the Downs at night, when you're all alone." His tone suggested that he might almost be blushing. "It's not entirely canny,

sir. Maybe I'm over-imaginative, sir, but I keep on thinking I can see and hear things that aren't really there at all. You'll think me a fool——"

"Devil a bit!" I cut in, laying a friendly hand on his arm. "My dear man, it's notorious. You're not a native of these parts; but I am, and I know exactly what you mean. You hear odd little voices and whispers, and the darkness takes on queer shapes which dissolve into nothing if you go up to them. And you see, or think you see, weird white shapes a long way away, all round you, and sometimes even above you——"

"Aye, that's it," McUik interrupted gratefully. "I'm glad you know what I mean, sir, for it's not an easy thing to describe. It's lucky I'm not as superstitious as some folks are in the Highlands, where I come from, for what with whispers and murmurs and eldrich sounds from a distance, and bogles and ghosties and shapes flapping overhead—man, I'd never have lasted out one night without going crazy!"

"Tchah!" exclaimed the Field-Marshal robustly. But his parade of scepticism did nothing to diminish the effect of this confession on the rest of us.

"Very trying on the nerves," Thrupp commented serenely. "Though all capable of quite natural explanations, I dare say."

"No doubt, sir," said the Sergeant, dashing the rain out of his eyes. "Aye, that night we were talking about, it was the seagulls that gave me the worst fright. Losh! but they gave me a turn. When I looked up and saw those big white shapes gliding above me like so many witches——" A soft laugh of self-contempt did duty for the rest of the sentence.

Thunder or no thunder, rain or no rain, I swear you could have heard a pin drop. Then:

"But, my dear good man, seagulls don't fly at night!" Adam burst forth with all the assurance of the amateur naturalist.

"White owls, then!" snapped Sir Piers.

"And white owls don't glide," Adam rejoined grimly.

Again there was a tense silence for a few moments.

"My ornithology doesn't seem to be very hot," said McUik, humorously apologetic. "I just took it for granted that they were seagulls, without thinking any more about it. They were certainly white and they certainly glided, and they gave me a bit of a fright for the moment. But I couldn't give much attention to them, because it was just then that I'd picked up the 'carrier' for the second time and I was trying to improve my tuning."

“How far away from the Pest House were you at the time?” I asked quietly.

“Oh, some distance, sir. A thousand yards or more——”

“And the ‘seagulls’ were flying from the direction of the Pest House?” I pressed.

He considered the point. “Well, yes, sir. Now you mention it, they were. You must understand, sir, that I was giving all my attention to the detector and only glanced up for a moment as they swished overhead.”

“So—they ‘swished,’ did they?” said I. “No other sound, Sergeant?”

Again that self-conscious little laugh. “Oh, they were crying a bit, sir, now and then. You know that rather eerie cry seagulls have. Almost human, sometimes. Like lost souls. . . .”

12

I have long held the opinion that the ancient Greeks, who by and large knew their garlic pretty well, nevertheless made a profound psychological error when they attributed the governance of thunderstorms to Zeus, whom the Romans called Jove. In my opinion, for what it is worth, Hera or Juno would have been a far more suitable choice, for if there is any natural phenomenon which is of unmistakably feminine gender it is surely the thunderstorm. There is a capricious, malicious, hysterical kind of inconsistency or inconsequence about thunderstorms that is all too reminiscent of an ill-tempered, neurotic female who, having felled her long-suffering husband with the rolling-pin, then proceeds to hurl pots and pans and other domestic utensils at the cat, the dog, the parrot and the neighbours. Like a punch-drunk woman, a thunderstorm is at once noisy, spectacular, irresponsible, frenzied, unaccountable, fearsome and lachrymose. As the hot, blinding tears flow spate-like from a woman’s eyes, so does the rain come down from heaven—furious, drenching and seemingly eternal. And then, in both cases, just as you have resigned yourself to the terrifying interminability of the cascade, it stops dead as if it had suddenly been turned off at the main. And the shock of cessation rocks you even more violently than did the shock of onset.

And if you insultingly demand that I should desist from such reactionary philosophisings and hasten to bring this powerful story to a suitably prompt and dramatic close, I shall utterly confound your aspersions of irrelevance by recording that it was precisely at the moment when the good McUik spoke his trite if imaginative simile about lost souls that the rain stopped so suddenly and completely as to suggest that some celestial stopcock had been

brought into play. The moon was still hidden; dense black clouds still lurched menacingly over the sky, their silver linings protruding at the edges as great forks of angry lightning snaked and sizzled between earth and empyrean; loud peals of thunder crashed and roared above us and around us like a drunken Gunner's dream. But the rain stopped dead. And though we all knew that it would be but an intermission, the cessation of actual physical contact with the storm lifted the spell of immobility that had rooted us overlong to that spot.

"Let's get crackin'," ordered Sir Piers for the *n*th time that night. And as we obediently began to squelch our way onward towards our objective, now barely a mile away, the Field-Marshal issued his operation orders in terse but succinct little phrases. As became a good soldier, my uncle still refused to allow himself to be deflected from the great tactical principle of Maintenance of the Objective by any considerations of the potentially occult. Whatever his inner feelings may have been (and I found it next to impossible to gauge these), outwardly he persisted in his purely material supposition that Drinkwater was an agent of the Third Reich. He might also be an agent of the Devil, but that was something of a side-issue to the matter in hand. Without being bombastic, I don't believe Uncle Piers would have been lured off the path of his military duty even if we had had irrefutable proof that his quarry was Satan himself, or Archontes. . . .

He defined the nature of the operation as a reconnaissance in force, the object of which was to penetrate into the enemy's lines and secure information as to the latter's forces, armament and dispositions. In less technical terms, the Pest House was to be searched from roof to cellar with a view to discovering the secrets of the hypothetical equipment whereby radio impulses, potentially capable of assuming the status of a radio beacon in time of war, were already emitted in sufficient strength to induce reactions in McUik's hypersensitive detector. If this objective could be gained by stealth —that is, without disturbing Drinkwater himself, should the latter be asleep like a law-abiding citizen—so much the better. But if, as seemed only too probable, he were found to be alert owing to Andrea's warning, either in person or by telephone, of our interest in his affairs as revealed by her eavesdropping, a more subtle tactic must be employed. In such an event a direct frontal attack was to be made by two units of our little formation—namely, Sir Piers and myself—while the remainder of our forces endeavoured to carry out the special mission allotted to them: that is to say, the frontal attack would be a feint designed to distract Drinkwater's attention from the explorations in progress elsewhere. Always an opportunist, the Field-Marshal pointed out that our sodden and bedraggled appearance

provided us with a more than reasonable excuse for openly claiming shelter from the storm. Rightly, I think, Sir Piers refused to particularise our several duties in great detail, for it was clearly essential that much must be left to personal initiative and the moment-to-moment adaptation of action to the unpredictable evolution of circumstances. Thrupp was appointed to command the main body of special-mission troops and entrusted with the task of employing his professional skill in searching suspected premises to its best advantage once my uncle and I had made the initial breach in the enemy's defences.

The hamlet of Bollington lies in a shallow amphitheatre of the Downs, opening broadly towards the south—that is, in roughly the opposite direction from that in which we were approaching. Owing to this conformation of the ground the place remains invisible to anyone coming from the north until he reaches the rim of the bowl; but once this position has been attained you can look down over the whole amphitheatre, while Bollington itself, which lies in the north-western segment of the circle, is almost immediately below you. The Old Pest House stands on a slight eminence or hillock, east and a trifle north of the hamlet proper, having perhaps been sited so that the prevailing south-west wind should carry infectious airs clear of the other dwellings. The westernmost edge of the Pest House is perhaps six or seven hundred yards from the nearest corner of the hamlet.

Sir Piers called a halt as we reached the rim of the bowl, and we all sank to the sodden ground about him. But for the irregular punctuation of lightning flashes it was very dark. The storm, which had seemed to ease off a trifle during the last stages of our approach march, now appeared to be entering upon a new and dire *crescendo*, as if it were working itself up to a final climax. The din was terrific. No longer could one distinguish the separate peals and claps of thunder or link them with individual lightning-forks; the rumble and clatter now had the continuity of a heavy barrage, as distinct from the salvo-fire that had gone before. Not once, but a dozen times, we heard about us the terrifying hiss and crackle of scorched turf as the great forked tongues made impact with the Downs. Let me confess without undue shame that I was feeling rather frightened.

Yet by an effort of will I compelled myself to keep my face towards our objective, as the others were doing also. Had it been daylight, we should have been in an ideal position to overlook the Pest House. Even now, at almost three o'clock in the morning, the lightning was so nearly continuous that we suffered only momentary interruptions in our view of it, perhaps eighty feet below us in altitude and maybe a thousand yards distant along

the surface of the slope. So near and yet so far. . . . And the storm was getting worse. The rain was still holding off, but any moment might see the beginning of another deluge.

I wriggled close to my uncle and bawled in his ear: "We can't go on in this. It gets more like hell every minute——"

"Drip!" Sir Piers retorted disdainfully. "Ideal conditions fer night operations. Gives us not only the initiative but the element of surprise as well. Wish the rain'd come on again. Help concealment. . . ." A gigantic peal of thunder blotted out whatever else he may have said.

There was something in what he said, of course, but—— In the ordinary course of events I am not scared of thunderstorms, but this was the most diabolical I had ever known. Without actually undermining my courage, the din was undoubtedly beginning to get on my nerves—and not on mine alone, I guessed.

"Can yer make out if there's a light in the Pest House?" Uncle Piers asked me presently.

"I can't," I replied. "That's what I've been looking for, but you can't expect an oil-lamp to show up against lightning, and it doesn't stay dark long enough for one's eyes to get used to the change."

"Nip down and have a dekko, Roger," the Field-Marshal, ordered. "Take McUik with yer as a runner. Get close in, under cover, and see if there's any sign of life. Send McUik back with a message, but stay put yerself. We'll give yer ten minutes' start and then follow up slowly, keepin' our eyes skinned fer McUik. Get crackin', now!"

So the piper and I slid over the rim of the amphitheatre and made our way as quickly as possible down the concave inner slope. The very fact of being in motion again, of *doing* something, had a tonic effect on my spirits and induced in me an almost mystic sense of elation—a feeling of adventure which quickly succeeded in counteracting even the revolting depression of sodden clothes. It was tricky going down the hillside, and my feet slipped and slithered on the little patches of wet chalk with which the turf was pitted.

For tactical reasons we steered well west of the Pest House, taking the hamlet proper as our initial objective. Cover there was none on the hillside, and it had to be faced that should anyone be watching from the Pest House he could scarcely fail to spot us in the lightning glare as we came down. But that risk had to be taken, and the most I could do was to give any such watcher the false impression that we were making for the hamlet rather than the isolated house on the hillock. Once among the cottages it would be easy

to change direction and wheel back on the Pest House from the west or south.

McUik, I sensed, was a trifle less happy and more strung-up than myself. There was nothing nervy or hesitant about him, but there was a difference in temperament between us which may have had its roots in the diverse racial characteristics of Scot and Sassenach. I quite cheerfully concede that, in battle or any kind of physical action against a martial foe, the Highlander would probably have given me points for dash and valour; but in this rather eerie advance through a thunderstorm towards the Unknown, his native cryptæsthesia was somewhat in conflict with his nerve.

Down, down, down; squelch, stumble, slip, slide, slither . . . and at last we gained the hamlet, gliding dankly on our tails down a steep eight-foot bank and wading through a ditch that was almost a brook to reach what passed for its solitary street. It seemed impossible that anyone could sleep through the unearthly racket of the storm and I half-expected to see white faces peering out through every bedroom window-pane; yet there was no sign of wakeful life. Either the Bollingtonians were preternaturally sound sleepers or else they had old-fashioned, unscientific notions regarding the efficacy of check gingham curtains against lightning. At all events we saw not a soul, and apparently not a soul saw us as we crossed the little 'street' and, at the third or fourth flash, found a narrow twitten running between two old flint cottages in the direction we wanted to go. At the end of this we climbed a stile and found ourselves once more on the open downland, with the Pest House now above us on its little hillock, and only a few hundred yards away.

In spite of our relative proximity, it seemed even less easy now than it had been from the rim of the bowl to discern whether any lights were burning, for in addition to the swift oscillations between blinding light and stygian darkness the westering moon now began to shine patchily through little galloping rifts in the storm-clouds, and to be reflected in such of the windows as were facing us. Once McUik plucked at my sleeve and whispered that he could see a permanent light on the ground floor, but there was no telling for certain at that range. The only thing to do was to close right in, as Sir Piers had directed, and reconnoitre on the spot. . . .

Five minutes later, breathing rather heavily from our climb, we were surmounting a low flint wall topped with euonymus and dropping into the garden beyond. We landed in the midst of what, in a few weeks' time, would be a flourishing herbaceous border—and, doubtless in conformity with that inscrutable Scheme of Things which under the guise of coincidence seems designed to keep alive the reluctant flame of our belief in the supernatural, a

lightning-flash revealed to me, as I stooped to tie a bedraggled shoe-lace, that my regrettably large feet had already wrought havoc in a most promising bed of young spring shoots of *Datura indica suaveolens*, more popularly known as Angels' Trumpets.

13

Even now that we were within the garden, with the house a bare twenty yards away, the ever-changing chiaroscuro of darkness, moonlight and lightning set our eyes so difficult a task that the only way to fulfil our mission conscientiously was to creep right up to the walls and, fetching a complete circuit of the house in the process, make an individual examination of each window in turn. I suppose the quick and sensible way of doing this would have been for us to divide, McUik going in one direction and myself in the other, joining up again on the far side of the house; but I will be quite candid and confess that such was the atmosphere of that place that I felt strangely unwilling to dispense with the Scotsman's company a moment before it should be necessary, and I am equally sure that McUik himself, though he would doubtless have obeyed me, would in no wise have relished a division of our forces at that moment.

I must explain that the Old Pest House, as restored by the late Mrs. Gillespie, was shaped like an E without its central stroke: that is to say, it consisted of a central block from each end of which a short wing protruded towards the south. Even including these wings it was by no means a large house, for it contained not more than half a dozen bedrooms on the first floor, with three or four decent-sized living-rooms and the kitchen quarters below. By reason of its shape and position, and in particular by comparison with the cramped little buildings in the nearby hamlet, it gave the impression of being somewhat larger than it really was. In relation to its surroundings it may have deserved to be called a house; but it is doubtful whether the least priggish of estate agents would have rated it as more than a large cottage. Originally built in the style of the old Sussex flint houses, it had been incongruously restored as to its upper storey with a prodigal wealth of crazy timbering in the manner which I have heard aptly denominated Jazz Tudor. There was indeed something oddly syncopated about the whole rhythm of its so-called architecture.

The house faced a little to the east of south, and McUik and I had entered the garden approximately opposite its western wing. The half-dozen windows of this wing were all dark, and we now passed cautiously round the southern tip of the wing so as to examine the front aspect. Here again, our first impression of total darkness was shortly confirmed by the closer

inspection we were able to give it as, keeping well into the shadow of the wall, we glided silently along the frontage. The main door, at the rear of a little built-out porch, was closed and fastened: I gingerly tried the handle, and later my questing fingers found the circular brass protrusion of a Yale lock. All the windows were of the casement type, and though we did not pause to try them individually, each appeared to be closed tight against the storm.

And so in due course we came up against the projecting east wing, the inner flank of which was equally dark and secure. So also was the outer flank when we reached it; and here we paused to take a few seconds' breather, being now for the first time for more than an hour in a position which afforded some little shelter from the ragings of the storm. Throughout our reconnaissance the thunder had never ceased to roar nor the lightning to flame, and now the moon had lost herself once more among the blanketing storm-clouds. And the rain was coming on again: not indeed in a blinding sheet as previously, but in slow heavy drops like a bead-curtain, which did nothing to improve visibility. I had a torch in one pocket to balance the pistol in the other, but of course I dared not use it and we still had to rely on the lightning. Fortunately, as I have said, the latter was not in short supply. On the contrary, it seemed to increase every minute in frequency and ferocity.

It was at the extreme northern tip of the east wall that we halted for our intermission, and when our lungs and heart-beats had slowed down to something like normal, McUik put his head round the corner of the house to take a preliminary glance down the only face of the building that remained unexamined. His instantaneous reaction was to stiffen as if he had been struck, at the same time gripping my arm in a vice-like clutch and emitting a sound reminiscent of the cautionary '*Hist!*' which so plentifully sprinkled the scripts of Victorian melodramas.

In response to his excitement I very gingerly eased my beard over his inner shoulder, between his head and the wall, and allowed my eyes to swivel west. Then I understood his tenseness, for barely a couple of feet away was a pair of tall french windows, hung with petunia-coloured silk curtains and illumined by a strongish light within the room. The curtains were drawn, but even as I stepped a couple of paces forward to get a better view I saw a vague shadow pass quickly between the light and the window, showing that the room was tenanted. But the curtains were generously full and hung down in flutes, distorting the image and making the figure unrecognisable. I could not even tell whether it was a man or a woman. To be utterly candid, nervous tension had inflamed my imagination to such a

pitch that for the first fleeting second I had the weird impression that the figure was wearing one of those tall conical hats traditionally associated with magicians and witches and the black arts. Which only goes to show—well, I wouldn't know what.

A second glance showed me that this was not the only patch of illumination on that face of the Pest House, though it was by far the larger. Farther along, in what I took to be the exact centre of the house, there was a dull yellow demilune some seven or eight feet from the ground—obviously the fanlight of a door. A moment later the lightning confirmed this supposition.

Hastily pulling McUik back into the friendly shelter of the east wall I put my lips close to his ear and whispered my instructions. Now that our mission had yielded these positive results he must lose no time in finding Sir Piers and the rest of the party, who by this time could be no great distance away, and reporting what we had seen. He must then guide the others—or at any rate my uncle—back to this spot, where I would keep the situation under observation till they arrived. McUik grunted, but didn't get cracking as promptly as one would have expected of a sergeant of the regular army. He seemed reluctant to leave me—chiefly, I think, from solicitude for my own well-being, though I also suspected that he did not altogether relish his lonely errand and would have preferred to retain my companionship. Truth to tell, I myself felt much the same on this point; never had I felt less inclined for a solitary vigil, but it was quite clearly my duty to stay where I was and maintain such tenuous contact with the enemy as had been achieved till reinforcements arrived.

We were still arguing in fierce whispers when something happened.

I suppose everyone knows what I mean when I speak of a freak of sound: how, for instance, contrary to all the laws of probability and reason, one can sometimes hear the ticking of a watch amid the roar of battle or the squeaking of a boot worn by a navvy who is operating a pneumatic drill. A scientist would probably laugh it off with some light backchat about decibels and frequencies and resonance and what-have-you, and for all I know and care he might be right for once. Suffice it that such phenomena do occur—and something of that sort happened now. For against the clatter of the thunder and the tattoo of the rain there came the sound, faint yet distinct, of some sharp report as of a door being slammed or a firearm discharged—and then, a fraction of a split second later, while the inertia of surprise was yet immobilising our members, something that might have been either a woman's laugh or a woman's shriek, followed by two or three syllables of speech, articulate but indistinguishable. . . .

Within another fraction of that same split second my beard was back round that corner, my eyes protruding about a yard from their sockets as they strove to pierce the darkness. But there was even less to be seen than before—less, because now the demilune of light over the central door had disappeared and only the petunia-coloured glow came from the nearby french windows.

The spontaneous deduction I made was that someone had just used that door, either to leave or to enter the house. The slamming of the door was the sharp report we had heard; and, the entry or exit having now been accomplished, the light had been turned out as being no longer required. It came to me that, on balance, entry was more probable than egress, for who would go forth into this fiendish storm at so unearthly an hour without, apparently, even a torch to guide their footsteps? With the notorious waywardness of Nature, the lightning was taking time off just when a good sustained flash would have been invaluable. Simultaneously, the rain began to step up its density. . . .

I could feel McUik's breath in my right ear—short, tense, repressed. I swivelled my head towards his and whispered: "Get cracking, man! I'll handle this end——"

But he didn't go. Instead, with a sharp sob, he called upon his Saviour. And then, with a convulsive upward jerk of a hand, he spat: "Look! Up there! Can't you see—— Oh, *God*!"

I looked—and saw. But I don't know what I saw. All I know is that somewhere above us, in those falling bead-curtains of translucent rain, something white floated and glided and wheeled like an airborne spectre. . . . It had shape, but I couldn't tell what shape it had. . . . It had some of the sweeping, dipping motion of a gull, but it was twenty times as large as any bird—and it had no wings. . . . And as it swept overhead, perhaps thirty feet or less above us, it uttered a high-pitched shrieking, wailing cry which might yet have been frenzied laughter. . . .

And by the time the next fork of lightning came it was no more than a little white speck far away to the south-east.

14

McUik got moving at last, sliding away like a shadow down the outer flank of the east wing. And I was left alone, my brow damper from sweat than from the rain. Yet my mouth was so dry that I could scarcely swallow: so dry that I had to think my almost involuntary snatches of prayer because I could not articulate them. . . .

A moment or a millennium later (for I was bereft of any sense of time) I became suddenly aware that I had left the shelter of the east wall and was standing in the open immediately outside those petunia-coloured french windows. I had no idea how I had got there, or why. I suppose the light had put the same kind of spell upon me as that which attracts moths.

Then, for the second time, a dark shadow loomed up within the room, as someone passed between the curtains and the source of light. But this time it was no mere transit from one side to the other. . . .

And even as I realised what was about to happen, my brain cleared and cooled as if by magic. I have always been pretty quick off the mark in an emergency, and a single leap sufficed to bring me flat against the wall. Provided that the windows opened outwards, I should be safe—— I held my breath and shielded the upper parts of my face with a coat sleeve. Beards have their uses.

The windows opened outwards all right; but——

Between two thunder-claps a voice said, pettishly: "Please come inside. You must be nearly drowned out there. . . ."

I neither spoke nor moved. Startled though I was, it flashed into my mind that he might well be drawing a bow at a venture. Unless he had faculties that were literally superhuman he could not possibly have seen or heard me——

"My dear Poynings, it's no use." The voice was still peevish, but there was now an undertone of mockery as well. "It would be just as well for you to come inside like a reasonable being, as to put me to the trouble—and yourself to the humiliation—of, shall we say, fetching you. Your companions cannot be here for another ten minutes at least, even if your messenger contrives to locate them immediately in this very inclement weather. And ten minutes would be just long enough for me to complete my preparations for—for what I have to do. . . ."

[*Human or superhuman? Sorcerer or spirit? Clairvoyance or partial 'participation in the Divine omniscience?' Wise guy or demon?*]

"Don't be a damned fool, Poynings!" The voice was sharp now, and full of arrogance. "There's nothing you can do by sulking out there, and it will be far less painful and humiliating for you to come in of your own accord than if I have to—fetch you. I am not looking at you, Poynings, but your right hand is now in your coat pocket, fingering the trigger of an automatic pistol. You are wondering how best to manœuvre yourself into position for a shot through your pocket. Please yourself, of course; but I must warn you that it's no good. You see, I am armed, too: not with anything so crude as

pistols or revolvers, Poynings, but with Power"—(I could recognise that capital P as clearly as if I had seen it written)—"and not even the most solid of hall-marked silver bullets could penetrate the invisible protective screen with which I have surrounded myself." The voice was mordantly cynical now. "I fear my views would not often coincide with those of your most reverend uncle, my dear Poynings, but in that respect, at least, he gave you sound advice."

[*Wise guy, huh?—if nothing else. Impressive, but very far from conclusive: for Andrea had eavesdropped, and Andrea had been in touch. . . .*]

"Yes, I have Power!" The fellow's arrogance was unbridled now: it was like an echo of the Primal Pride which went before the Fall. "Or rather, let us say, I *am* Power! Once again, Poynings, your uncle made a lucky guess when he compared me to a Power House."

[*Actually, it had been Canon Flurry—further evidence that Drinkwater's knowledge came from the fallible report of Andrea rather than from direct and infallible percipience of his own.*]

"In the face of Power, obstinacy is not merely foolish, Poynings. It can so easily be fatal. Can you not learn a lesson? Puella Stretton was obstinate, Poynings. She resisted my Will, pitted herself against my Power. And so, as your not altogether incompetent detective friend rather cleverly surmised, the Power which had been used to sustain her was—cut off: withdrawn. And that was only a little thing, Poynings. My Power is competent for far greater feats than that. . . ."

[*My ears were attuned to his voice with almost preternatural acuity. Was I deceiving myself, or had those four words 'my Power is competent' sounded more like 'my Bower is gombetent?' Wishful thinking on my part, or a slip on his?*]

"There are none so blind as those who will not see," the contemptuous, insolent voice went on. "You arrived here, Poynings, in the midst of a superlatively violent storm. It was fast approaching its climax. The thunder was incessant, the lightning all but continuous. Another two minutes, and the storm would have reached the summit of its fury. . . . Who shall control the elements, my dear Poynings? Who, indeed—unless he have Power? It has surely not escaped you, Poynings, that from the moment when I flung open these windows and began to speak to you—having first given a Sign, unseen by you—no thunder has rolled, no lightning flashed? Even the rain has stopped——"

It was at this precise moment that I took a deep breath, made a Sign of my own—the Sign of the Cross—drew forth my pistol and snapped off the safety-catch, lowered my head, and charged.

15

My pistol was a .32 eight-shot automatic—which means that once you have squeezed the trigger it goes on pouring out lead till either you ease up your pressure or the magazine is empty.

I squeezed the trigger exactly at the moment when Drinkwater's body came into view—(you must remember that so far I had seen no more than his shadow, for we had been round the corner from each other and the first motion of my charge had therefore to be a sharp left wheel)—and I went on squeezing it as I leaped across the remaining yard or two of space that was between us. I heard three shots ring out, and then—well, let's take the line of least resistance and say that the mechanism jammed (though there was no evidence of this when I made a test the next day: the other five shots poured forth with deadly haste the moment I pressed the trigger). All that matters now is that only three bullets sped towards Drinkwater as he stood framed in that softly illuminated entrance to his house, and that all three missed—though whether they went wide of him, or over his head, or between his legs, or through him, I utterly refuse to hazard an opinion. I have never been a great pistol shot, but the third of those bullets can scarcely have had more than a few inches to travel. . . . Still, it was a moving target, for, even as I charged, Drinkwater leaped backwards and rather to one side in an effort to escape the impact of my hurtling body.

But he was only partially successful. His side-step let him evade the full force of my charge, but my right arm, still gripping the useless pistol, crashed like a frenzied piston into his right shoulder, causing him to lose his balance and trip over backwards. My own initial velocity was such that I could not check myself, and I fell forward on top of him. And as we fell, our feet must have contacted the edge of a mat or rug, which promptly slid an appreciable distance over the highly polished wooden floor, pulling over the frail, top-heavy jardinière which supported the solitary old-fashioned oil-lamp with which the room was illumined.

I have said that I fell forward on top of Drinkwater—and so I believe I did, yet by the time I reached the floor he had rolled or wriggled clear and I came a most almighty cropper on the polished boards. I lashed out with my pistol in the direction in which I sensed him to have gone, but only succeeded in denting the empty floor. But I could hear his breath coming in soft, venomous hisses like an angry serpent. . . .

Then in that pitch-dark room came the first flicker of flame as the tongues from the overturned lamp ignited a long-piled rug over one corner of which the cretonne frills of a sofa hung in irresistible temptation.

This incipient fire was on my left and slightly to my rear as I lay in an ungainly huddle on the floor, winded and half-stunned by my fall. Drinkwater was not between me and the flames. That didn't surprise me, for his breathing had been on the other side, nearer the french windows. But now I could no longer hear it.

Wary and alert against attack, I levered myself up on to my knees and looked the other way. The oil-soaked rug was now well alight and flaming like a link. By now the cretonne had caught as well. I became aware of a great agony in my left ankle. I could scarcely bear to kneel, and knew I could not stand. . . .

Then I sighted Drinkwater again.

Had he been poised fiendishly above me, ready to strike me dead, whether with some mundanely lethal weapon or by the occult Power of his Art, I might well have been terrified, but at least I should not have been surprised. Or had he been speeding across the room to deal first with the peril of the licking flames as being a more immediately urgent consideration than my own extinction, that would have seemed quite reasonable, too. What amazed me so was that he was doing neither of these things: that he had turned his back as much upon myself as upon the fire, as if neither the flames nor I deserved a moment's attention by comparison with some other, and to me imperceptible, object that he had in view.

For the last fleeting glimpse I had of Drinkwater was thus: that he was standing where he had stood while he bragged to me of his Power, before I had charged into the room—that is to say, framed in the still-open french windows, with his face turned outward into the night, and his lithe, strangely angular-looking back glowing red and orange in the light of the flaming furniture. His whole body was tensed and he was standing half on tip-toe. And even as I looked, he slowly raised his arms above his head, fists clenched but with the thumbs pressed inwards between the index and middle fingers, like an orchestral conductor poised to deliver the beat of some stupendous *sforzando*. Every drachm and scruple of his strength seemed to have been packed into the gesture, for in the uncertain light I could see his muscles vibrating and trembling with the effort. He was the very personification of impending climax.

The suspense, though infinitesimal in actual duration, was so little tolerable that I wanted to cry out. But I couldn't. I could scarcely breathe, far

less utter a sound. I could do nothing but wait for that which was inevitable, yet unknown. . . . And outside, in the hot, dark, humid night, still silent, still breathless, the Unknown waited, too. . . .

And then, with a downward and inward movement as if he were literally pulling down the Cosmos about him, Drinkwater drew down his arms, enunciating as he did so some words in a tongue unknown to me.

And even as his clenched, pulsating fists sank to the level of his groin, the lightning struck.

Whether in Obedience, or in Retribution, I know not.

Let us play safe, and call it an Act of God.

All I knew at the time was that when, after a seeming eternity, that blinding, scorching, reeking discharge had gone to Earth, leaving the stunned and sightless world to the mercy of deafening peals of thunder, Drinkwater had disappeared from where he stood. Just where, or in what manner, or at which precise instant of time he went, I had no means of telling. Indeed, the matter remains a mystery even to this day. . . .

Nor, at that moment, could I have cared less. For within a few seconds of the flash I became most violently aware that the lightning had struck the Pest House and that the timbered superstructure was bursting into flames by comparison with which the conflagration in the lower room had the relative potency of a glow-worm's tail-light; that the ceiling was coming down on me; that the rafters were beginning to fall. . . .

And that my ankle was broken, or, at the very least, dislocated.

And finally that when, by God's charity, I had dragged myself in agony roughly half-way towards the open windows with no greater additional hurt than a beard singed like the King of Spain's, men boiled in from the black world without and lugged me to the wet security of the splashing rain—Sir Piers and McUik at my armpits, Adam and Thrupp at my knees.

Which was just as well; for, notwithstanding the rain, there was nothing left of the Pest House when dawn broke. Or, anyway, nothing but the blackened ruins of the outer flint walls, and a few obscenely twisted and indistinguishable lumps of molten metal among the still smoking ashes.

16

And so this fantastic and powerful story comes to a close. And if you disdainfully declare that you don't believe a word of it, I shall retort by tearing great handfuls of hair from my new-grown beard and ramming them down your hypersceptical gullets, at the same time demanding of you, with what remaining fragments of patience I can summon, how, if this story be

not sober and absolute truth in every particular, you can account for the fact that the nude body of Andrea Gilchrist was later that morning picked up in mid-Channel by the British trawler *Jezebel Cheesemonger* (2,875 tons g.r.t. —John Thomas Mustchin, Master), in circumstances related at inordinate length in the current issue of the *South Kent Cornet and Advertiser*? . . .

. . . Or, even more significantly (as some may think) for the fact that the monstrous cat Grimalkin has never again been seen by mortal eye, from that day to this, either in Merrington or in any other parish, hundred, or Rape of my great and immortal kingdom of West Sussex?

Personally, I should have said it Stood to Reason.

THE END

WITH COMPLIMENTS AND THANKS

I detest footnotes and similar documentative excrescences, particularly in a work of fiction. To dispense with these, and to avoid cluttering up the text with extraneous references, I have not always given credit where credit is due. Now that the story is done, however, I would record my general, rather than specific, indebtedness to the following learned works—which, incidentally, I commend to anyone anxious to follow up the subjects concerned:

Montague Summers: *A History of Witchcraft and Demonology; Witchcraft and Black Magic* (Rider, 1946);

Denis de Rougemont: *Talk of the Devil* (Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1945);

Edward Langton, D.D.: *Satan—A Portrait* (Skeffington, 1946);

Nicolas Remy: *Demonolatry*, edited by Montague Summers (Rodker, 1930);

Matthew Hopkins: *The Discovery of Witches*, with Introductory Study by Montague Summers (Cayme Press, 1928);

Fr. Herbert Thurston, S.J.: *Witchcraft* (Catholic Encyclopedia, 1912);

Fr. J. Lebreton, S.J.: *Gnosticism, Marcionism, Manichæism* (C.T.S., 1934);

Very Rev. Canon J. P. Arendzen: *Gnosticism* (Catholic Encyclopedia, 1912);

Fr. R. O'Kennedy: *The Holy Angels*, published under the Imprimatur of the Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster (Burns, Oates, *circa* 1887).

I have also had access to a rather terrifying work—a modern manual of Esoteric Magic written by a certain Adept (*Adeptus Exemptus*) for the enlightenment of his disciples, and published privately; but I feel it would be inexpedient to give publicity to this volume, which in any case is not accessible to the general public.

In telling his story of the Angels' Trumpets, Roger Poynings makes one or two incidental references to 'the Bryony Hurst case.' Details of this have already been published in an earlier novel of my own, The *Case of the Fast Young Lady*.

M. B.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *The Case of the Angels' Trumpets* by Michael Burt.]